

"The resulting danger," Erikson concludes, is "creating, instead of individualism, a mass-produced mask of individuality" (*Childhood* 323).

The parallels with *Cuckoo's Nest* are striking and obvious. Nurse Ratched is the ultimate "Mom," per Erikson's description, devoted to suppressing individuality and sexuality in the name of social propriety and the common good. While there are no explicit "bosses," the machine they supervise is clearly the Chief's Combine. The Chief and McMurphy both hark back to the wild frontier of their forefathers, a world of rugged lumbermen, gamblers, roughnecks, cowboys, and Indians—Leslie Fiedler's American landscape of extended masculine adolescence. And both characters grow from narcissism to social commitment over the course of the novel: McMurphy from self-serving trickster to warrior-hero to martyr, the Chief from his autistic landscape of powerlessness to mastery of his own life and ultimate responsibility for McMurphy's.

I regard it as a bit of Jungian synchronicity that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* appeared between the 1960 publication of Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* and the 1963 second edition of Erikson's *Childhood and Society*. I do not believe that Kesey was writing specifically to either of them, although they all reflect the same Zeitgeist, premised on the widely held and sometimes great notion embodied explicitly or implicitly in nearly all of the developmental theories of the century: to wit, that progress in modern society depends on the rebellion of the young against received norms and the heroic impulses of those who think young.

The early sixties provided a healthy environment for such ideas. The Kennedy era represented a culmination of a half century of political liberalism, literary modernism, and psychological theory. Despite the repressions of postwar McCarthyism and the bland conformity of the Cold War Eisenhower era, cultural centers like the media and the university remained committed to liberal humanist metanarratives. Many had lamented the political and social withdrawal of the "Silent Generation" of fifties youth, seeing in their conformist apathy the adolescent version of David Riesman's "lonely crowd." Others found significance in the cult of rejection that gathered around Salinger's character Holden Caulfield or the Beat Generation; Leslie Fiedler regarded both as continuations of the urge for eternal adolescence, the

desire to flee from mature sexuality and the feminizing effects of civilization (*Love and Death* 271).

At the end of the fifties, Norman Mailer described the hipster as the new urban rebel in his famous essay "The White Negro"; as a "psychopath" who "has shifted the focus of his desire from immediate gratification toward that wider passion for future power which is the mark of civilized man," the hipster speaks "a language most adolescents can understand instinctively for the hipster's intense view of existence matches their experience and their desire to rebel" (Mailer 281). Mailer's advocacy of a bond between the black American and the white rebel suggests Fiedler's assertion that "we find it easy to believe that our black-skinned beloved will rescue us from the confusion and limitations of a society which excludes him" (*Love and Death* 368) as well as psychologist Kurt Lewin's observation that all "marginal men" are eternal adolescents (Muuss 90).

Although few members of the Silent Generation chose to drop out and join the Beats and hipsters, American culture agonized over juvenile delinquency and youthful alienation in the fifties, while the popular culture of the young responded with its own heroes, all rebels without a cause, whether rock 'n' rollers or James Dean. It only helped Dean's reputation as romantic icon that he died young and recklessly. Such romantic heroes, Harold Lubin tells us, multiply in societies "in which certain traditional values are beginning to crumble, societies which have exhausted their potential for decent development, societies which are rigid and totalitarian [. . .]" (211).

Although the Beats had little broad social effect in their own heyday, by the early sixties the hero as hipster or rebel had been embraced by a new generation of young avant-gardists, among them Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, and Ken Kesey. Kesey stands as the most interesting case because he began his career by delineating the rebel in his first two novels, only to assume the literary myth in his own person as head of the Merry Pranksters and prime mover in the San Francisco countercultural revolution. As critic Tony Tanner observes, Kesey's sojourn "on the bus" became his third novel (390). In Kesey's case, life imitated art: the creator of Randle Patrick McMurphy became himself bull goose loony of his acid-driven hip psychopaths, which led in turn to the Merry Prankster mission to transform American society through changing consciousness. Kesey ran in McMurphy's

footsteps even to leading the FBI on a merry chase that ended with a three-month stint in a work farm in 1967.

According to Tom Wolfe, Kesey reported that during an LSD-inspired vision he had reached the conviction that "it was in us to be superheroes" (27). As an avid reader of superhero comics, he often stage-managed his famous Acid Tests in tights and cape. And like many another superhero of myth and pop culture, Kesey eventually paid a price for his outsider status. The superhero is himself, after all, a version of the super-adolescent, testing the norms of society. As Kesey later said of his time as leader, "I love power [. . .]. For one thing, I think it is not corrupting, like some people think; it is purifying. People who think they have power yet do not are corrupted. People who really have power are humbled by it" (Whitmer 199).

Retrospectively evaluating Kesey's radical social experiment, one commentator compares him to other heroic prophets or "demiurges" of social philosophy like Plato, Rousseau, and Marx, all of whom not only created "grandiose visions of alternative social realities" but "actively sought to shape the political world in closer conformity to their vision [. . .]" (Zashin 202). Again like McMurphy, Kesey followed the parabola of the warrior-hero laid out by Lubin:

The hero, in his exultation of his youthful prowess, usually begins his career exuberantly. But in most myths—unless he dies young—he gradually deepens in awareness. His heroic mission links him to humanity but it also sets him apart. (12)

By the time he retired from his mission in 1968 at the archetypal age of 33, passing along his role as hell-raiser and consciousness-raiser to other bull goose loonies like Timothy Leary and Abbie Hoffman, the Gospel according to Tom Wolfe had appeared, turning Kesey into living legend. The influence of his mind-expanding campaign had already been widely felt across the country—indeed, across the seas—as far as the lifestyle of the liberated consciousness could spread via the media and the music of the youth culture.

Kesey left the scene just as the conflict of the generations was reaching its climax. The idealism of the Kennedy era evolved to the sometimes violent activism of the later decade, especially in the areas of civil rights and the Vietnam War. Theorists of adolescence, who as a body had lamented the apathy of the previous

decade's young, were quick to offer explanations for the rebellion, once again in familiar terms of the generational battle for social change. As one theorist of adolescence noted at the time, "[a]bove all else the adolescent and young adult apprehend the inconsistencies between the actual and the possible [. . .]. Usually they strive to modify the actual" (Peel 13). Erik Erikson observed in his 1968 book *Identity: Youth and Crisis*,

if youth could not overcommit itself to danger it could not commit itself to the survival of genuine values—one of the primary steering mechanisms of psychosocial evolution. [. . .] For healthy individualism and devoted deviancy contain an indignation [. . .] without which psychosocial evolution would be doomed. Thus human adaptation has its loyal deviants, its rebels, who refuse to adjust to what so often is called, with an apologetic and fatalistic misuse of a once good phrase, "the human condition." (248-249)

Dr. Benjamin Spock, the pediatrician and child psychologist who had overseen the Baby Boom and who faced trial in 1968 for his own principled opposition to the draft, wrote in his 1970 book *Decent and Indecent* that rebellion "has vital functions to serve. [. . .] It provides the power behind [the young person's] impatient drive to make changes in the world: to put an end to injustice, to introduce reforms, to discover new truths that supersede old concepts, to change the form of the arts" (14). Perhaps the best known encomium in the United States to the new youth dispensation was Charles A. Reich's 1971 best seller *The Greening of America*, wherein Reich declared the arrival of "Consciousness III," a revolutionary moral and social outlook rooted in the liberation of the self and the exploration of new cultural forms. Explicit in all of the above is that it is the heroic role of the young to take charge of cultural change, to risk everything to wipe away the old order and bring on the new.

The sixties was indisputably a period of rapid social evolution, though not as revolutionary as many anticipated. For related reasons, the decade marked the climax of a century of theorizing about human institutions and human potential that extended backward through the likes of Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx, who in turn looked back to the Enlightenment. Although the notion of the adolescent as rebel and the rebel as hero emerged during that century, it may in fact be, as the theorists addressed above

surmise, that the archetype of the hero has always resonated with our psychological experience of adolescence. As one who is willing to forge forward—first for himself, then his peers, then his chosen people—the archetype is our own internalized ideal of youth.

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