No work of art is an island. Every artwork, whether a poem or a painting or a play, was created by someone at a particular point in his or her lifetime—a lifetime that falls within a particular historical period in a specific location. As much as we might valorize the originality of a particular artist, the work is not created in a vacuum. Even if the artist’s creation manages to be so impersonal as to reflect nothing of its creator’s life, it still appears within the context of the artist’s time and place. Additionally, unless someone invents an entirely new art form, the work also appears within the history of the creator’s chosen art.

Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is no exception. Published in 1962, the novel was written in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Its narrator, Chief Bromden, is a veteran of World War II, and its protagonist, Randle McMurphy, was a prisoner of war during the Korean War. Both the novel as a work of fiction within American literary history and its contents are rooted in postwar American society, and the novel both reflects its literary, historical, and cultural contexts and offers a message of opposition against certain elements of postwar American culture.

Considered as a work of fiction, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is more traditional than it may seem at first. The narrator, certainly, is somewhat unorthodox. Chief Bromden, a longtime patient in the psychiatric hospital where the novel is set, suffers from schizophrenia and is thought to be deaf and mute, but in reality is neither. His account of how life on the ward changes after McMurphy’s arrival is filtered through his particular point of view, including his hallucinations, his paranoid delusions, and his impressionistic stream of consciousness following his shock treatment late in the novel. In this respect, he is something of an unreliable narrator. However, he is hardly unique as a narrative...
voice. Mentally ill narrators can be found in earlier American works such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), and Chief Bromden resembles the narrators of those two stories in that he tells his story mostly as if he were unaware of his illness, as though everything he says is perfectly sane and reasonable. In this way, Kesey as author presents Bromden’s narrative almost entirely in the realistic mode—in contrast with another mentally challenged narrator, Benjy, in William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury (1929), who follows neither the rules of grammar and syntax nor the constraints of chronological time. Nor is Bromden’s own lack of grammatical correctness unique in American fiction; indeed, one of the major works of American literature, Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), is narrated by its title character, a semi-literate boy from rural antebellum Missouri. Also, just as Huck “light[s] out for the Territory” at the end of Twain’s novel, Bromden escapes the constraints of the ward and its “sivilizing” influences.

Another way in which One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest follows in the American literary tradition is that its narrator is not its protagonist, but instead provides a firsthand account of a figure who not only dominates the story but also impresses the narrator with the force of his character. Similar to how Ishmael recounts the driven quest of Captain Ahab in Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick (1851) and how Nick Carraway describes his encounters with Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (1925), so Chief Bromden tells of McMurphy’s magnetic personality and his responses to McMurphy’s challenge to the Big Nurse. Similarities can also be found in the ways these three protagonists all challenge forces larger than themselves. Just as Ahab opposes the white whale and Gatsby struggles to reclaim the past in opposition to the divisions of social class, so McMurphy (whose boxer shorts sport white whales) fights against not only Nurse Ratched, but also the forces Bromden calls “the Combine.” In all three novels, there is something valiant about these characters and their aspirations, but all of them ultimately fail.
Kesey thus touches upon a key theme in much of American literature, one extending beyond his novel as well as Melville’s and Fitzgerald’s. America has long celebrated the ideal of individualism, from the stories that accumulated around the boyhoods of presidents, like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, to the fictional exploits of James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking to the adulation heaped on inventors, like the Wright Brothers and Thomas Edison. As Theodore Roosevelt, another rugged individualist, put it in a 1910 speech, “credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly,” whom he contrasts with “those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.” America has long made heroes of figures who assert their individuality, whether it be soldiers, athletes, or entertainers. Yet many American novelists, from Nathaniel Hawthorne in The Scarlet Letter (1850) to Kate Chopin in The Awakening (1899) to Ralph Ellison in Invisible Man (1952), have written about characters whose individualism is at odds with the societies around them—societies, in most cases, whose rigid adherence to social norms and conformity to those norms oppose any deviations from expected attitudes and behaviors. Such authors, like Kesey, point out that while America often praises the individual, American society nonetheless often oppresses those who run counter to the majority. Such ideas are expressed in earlier American writing by essayists such as Henry David Thoreau, who, in “Civil Disobedience” (1849), contrasts individual conscience with the tyranny of the majority and who, in Walden (1854), praised the man who “does not keep pace with his companions” because, perhaps, “he hears a different drummer,” as well as poets like Emily Dickinson, who in 1863 wrote:

Much Madness is divinest Sense –
To a discerning Eye –
Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
’Tis the Majority
In this, as all, prevail –
Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you’re straightway dangerous –
And handled with a Chain –
Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* includes an epigraph from the nursery rhyme that provides the novel’s title, but it could just as easily have been Dickinson’s poem.

So why did Kesey write a novel about an individual in opposition to the oppressive forces of society in the late 1950s and early 1960s? Part of the answer lies in the realities of American society after World War II. The war effort galvanized the American economy and pulled it from the depths of the Great Depression into a period of postwar prosperity for white middle-class Americans. This corresponded with a host of social changes, such as increased suburbanization, the Baby Boom, and the rise of television and a youth culture that was increasingly distinct from the world of teenagers’ parents. The image of American life conveyed by television shows, such as *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960) and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963), was one of traditionalism and stability, in which fathers exuded the same calm confidence displayed by Dwight D. Eisenhower, the United States president between 1953 and 1961. It wasn’t for nothing that a later sitcom set during this period was called *Happy Days*.

However, this period was not nearly as tranquil as later nostalgia would suggest. The Cold War raised the specter of nuclear war and involved the United States in a military conflict in Korea in the early 1950s. Fears of communist influence at home as well as abroad led to McCarthyism and destroyed numerous careers. Even though America made significant strides toward racial equality in the late 1940s and the 1950s, such as the integration of the US military in 1948 and the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1954, racial inequality remained a significant problem. The civil rights movement, which included events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–1956) and the sit-ins of the late 1950s and early 1960s, reflected the desires of African Americans for fair treatment and justice. Similarly, many middle-class white women, who had been relegated to domestic life after men returned home from war, felt frustrated by their restriction to the roles of wife and mother, a frustration given voice in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The 1950s also saw much attention given to the problem of “juvenile delinquency,” inspiring,
among other things, the creation in 1953 of a United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (which even investigated the influence of comic books on children the following year) and the Broadway musical *West Side Story* (1957). Even if young people weren’t joining gangs or committing crimes, there was a strong sense of dissatisfaction among many young people, reflected in novels such as J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and the new sounds of rock and roll.

This sense of discontent on the part of even privileged young people found its most potent literary expression in the Beat movement. Celebrating nonconformity and criticizing materialism, Beat writers, such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, provided a counterpoint to the dominant cultural messages of the mass media. They attracted numerous young people through books, such as Kerouac’s novel *On the Road* (1957), and lay a foundation for the hippies of the 1960s and 1970s. There is more than a casual resemblance between Dean Moriarty, the charismatic troublemaker of *On the Road*, and Kesey’s McMurphy. Incidentally, Kerouac’s model for Moriarty, Neal Cassady, drove the psychedelic bus in which Kesey and his friends, calling themselves the Merry Pranksters, celebrated the publication of his second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964), with a drug-fueled cross-country road trip.

The Beats, however, were not alone in questioning authority through the written word, as demonstrated by two other American novels, both published in 1961, a year before *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*: Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* and Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Set during World War II, *Catch-22* concerns the efforts of American airmen not to be killed in warfare and the military machinations that consistently thwart this desire. Like in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the protagonist of *Catch-22* is a trickster-like anti-authoritarian figure, and both novels contrast the real or feigned insanity of individuals with the authoritarian insanity that oppresses them. Heller’s *Catch-22* and Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* are also similar in their juxtaposition of humor and horror, fitting into a style of writing known in the 1960s and
1970s as black humor—a style found later in the decade in works such as Edward Albee’s play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) and Kurt Vonnegut Jr.’s novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969).

Compared to *Catch-22* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* is a very different work. A science-fiction novel about an earthling raised by Martians who challenges human social and religious conventions when he is brought to Earth, *Stranger in a Strange Land* nonetheless resembles *Catch-22* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* in presenting readers with a charismatic protagonist who questions the status quo and who stands for the autonomy of the individual as opposed to the conformity of dominant cultural discourses. Both Kesey’s novel and Heinlein’s book were best-sellers, especially among young adults, who identified with their central characters.

Heinlein worked on *Stranger in a Strange Land* for more than a decade before its 1961 publication, noting afterwards that he did not hurry to finish it because he knew that, with its embrace of concepts such as free love and its critique of organized religion, it could not be commercially published earlier than it was. Similarly, there are aspects of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* that could not have been found in commercially published American literature prior to its publication in the early 1960s. As with Heinlein, one such aspect concerns sexuality. Literature that had depicted sexual activity had long faced censorship challenges in the United States, with books such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), and Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) being denied admission into the country by federal authorities. The ban on *Ulysses* was lifted in 1934 because of a legal challenge raised by an American publisher, but censorship on the basis of sexual content remained in place for many other works of fiction. It was not until 1957 that the United States Supreme Court declared, in *Roth v. United States*, that “obscenity” was limited to material “utterly without redeeming social importance.” This ruling cleared the way for previously banned literary works to be published in America, as happened with *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in 1959 and