One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest by Ken Kesey
Part 1 Chapter 6

#### AnnotationsMake 3 connections. Label ©Ask 3 questions. Label (?)Highlight 3 quotes that reveal characterization. O-/-< Discuss what each quote says about the narrator.Define the vocabulary on the line. Write a summary of this chapter. Label (S)

 One Christmas at midnight on the button, at the old place, the ward door blows open with a crash, in comes a fat man with a beard, eyes ringed red by the cold and his nose just the color of a cherry. The black boys get him cornered in the hall with flashlights. I see he's all tangled in the tinsel Public Relation has been stringing all over the place, and he's stumbling around in it in the dark. He's shading his red eyes from the flashlights and sucking on his mustache.
 “Ho ho ho,” he says. “I'd like to stay but I must be hurrying along. Very tight schedule, ya know. Ho ho. Must be going…”
 The black boys move in with the flashlights. They kept him with us six years before they discharged him, clean-shaven and skinny as a pole.
 The Big Nurse is able to set the wall clock at whatever speed she wants by just turning one of those dials in the steel door; she takes a notion to hurry things up, she turns the speed up, and those hands whip around that disk like spokes in a wheel. The scene in the picture-screen windows goes through rapid changes of light to show morning, noon, and night—throb off and on furiously with day and dark, and everybody is driven like mad to keep up with that passing of fake time; awful scramble of shaves and breakfasts and appointments and lunches and medications and ten minutes of night so you barely get your eyes closed before the dorm light's screaming at you to get up and start the scramble again, go like a sonofabitch this way, going through the full schedule of a day maybe twenty times an hour, till the Big Nurse sees everybody is right up to the breaking point, and she slacks off on the throttle, eases off the pace on that clock-dial, like some kid been fooling with the moving-picture projection machine and finally got tired watching the film run at ten times its natural speed, got bored with all that silly scampering and insect squeak of talk and turned it back to normal.
 She's given to turning up the speed this way on days like, say, when you got somebody to visit you or when the VFW brings down a smoker show from Portland—times like that, times you'd like to hold and have stretch out. That's when she speeds things up.
 But generally it's the other way, the slow way. She'll turn that dial to a dead stop and freeze the sun there on the screen so it don't move a scant hair for weeks, so not a leaf on a tree or a blade of grass in the pasture shimmers. The clock hands hang at two minutes to three and she's liable to let them hang there till we rust. You sit solid and you can't budge, you can't walk or move to relieve the strain of sitting, you can't swallow and you can't breathe. The only thing you can move is your eyes and there's nothing to see but petrified Acutes across the room waiting on one another to decide whose play it is. The old Chronic next to me has been dead six days, and he's rotting to the chair. And instead of fog sometimes she'll let a clear chemical gas in through the vents, and the whole ward is set solid when the gas changes into plastic.
 Lord knows how long we hang this way.
 Then, gradually, she'll ease the dial up a degree, and that's worse yet. I can take hanging dead still better'n I can take that sirup-slow hand of Scanlon across the room, taking three days to lay down a card. My lungs pull for the thick plastic air like getting it through a pinhole. I try to go to the latrine and I feel buried under a ton of sand, squeezing my bladder till green sparks flash and buzz across my forehead.
 I strain with every muscle and bone to get out of that chair and go to the latrine, work to get up till my arms and legs are all ashake and my teeth hurt. I pull and pull and all I gain is maybe a quarter-inch off the leather seat. So I fall back and give up and let the pee pour out, activating a hot salt wire down my left leg that sets off humiliating alarms, sirens, spotlights, everybody up yelling and running around and the big black boys knocking the crowd aside right and left as the both of them rush headlong at me, waving awful mops of wet copper wires cracking and spitting as they short with the water.
 About the only time we get any let-up from this time control is in the fog; then time doesn't mean anything. It's lost in the fog, like everything else. (They haven't really fogged the place full force all day today, not since McMurphy came in. I bet he'd yell like a bull if they fogged it.)
 When nothing else is going on, you usually got the fog or the time control to contend with, but today something's happened: there hasn't been any of these things worked on us all day, not since shaving. This afternoon everything is matching up. When the swing shift comes on duty the clock says four-thirty, just like it should. The Big Nurse dismisses the black boys and takes a last look around the ward. She slides a long silver hatpin out of the iron-blue knot of hair back of her head, takes off her white cap and sets it careful in a cardboard box (there's mothballs in that box), and drives the hatpin back in the hair with a stab of her hand.

 Behind the glass I see her tell everyone good evening. She hands the little birthmarked swing-shift nurse a note; then her hand reaches out to the control panel in the steel door, clacks on the speaker in the day room: “Good evening, boys. Behave yourselves.” And turns the music up louder than ever. She rubs the inside of her wrist across her window; a disgusted look shows the fat black boy who just reported on duty that he better get to cleaning it, and he's at the glass with a paper towel before she's so much as locked the ward door behind her.
 The machinery in the walls whistles, sighs, drops into a lower gear.
 Then, till night, we eat and shower and go back to sit in the day room. Old Blastic, the oldest Vegetable, is holding his stomach and moaning. George (the black boys call him Ruba-dub) is washing his hands in the drinking fountain. The Acutes sit and play cards and work at getting a picture on our TV set by carrying the set every place the cord will reach, in search of a good beam.
 The speakers in the ceiling are still making music. The music from the speakers isn't transmitted in on a radio beam is why the machinery don't interfere. The music comes off a long tape from the Nurses' Station, a tape we all know so well by heart that there don't any of us consciously hear it except new men like McMurphy. He hasn't got used to it yet. He's dealing blackjack for cigarettes, and the speaker's right over the card table. He's pulled his cap way forward till he has to lean his head back and squint from under the brim to see his cards. He holds a cigarette between his teeth and talks around it like a stock auctioneer I saw once in a cattle auction in The Dalles.
 “…hey-ya, hey-ya, come on, come on,” he says, high, fast; “I'm waitin' on you suckers, you hit or you sit. Hit, you say? well well well and with a king up the boy wants a hit. Whaddaya know. So Comin' at you and too bad, a little lady for the lad and he's over the wall and down the road, up the hill and dropped his load. Comin' at you, Scanlon, and I wish some idiot in that nurses' hothouse would turn down that frigging music! Hooee! Does that thing play night and day, Harding? I never heard such a driving racket in my life.”
 Harding gives him a blank look. “Exactly what noise is it you're referring to, Mr. McMurphy?”
 “That damned radio. Boy. It's been going ever since I come in this morning. And don't come on with some baloney that you don't hear it.”
 Harding cocks his ear to the ceiling. “Oh, yes, the so-called music. Yes, I suppose we do hear it if we concentrate, but then one can hear one's own heartbeat too, if he concentrates hard enough.” He grins at McMurphy. “You see, that's a recording playing up there, my friend. We seldom hear the radio. The world news might not be therapeutic. And we've all heard that recording so many times now it simply slides out of our hearing, the way the sound of a waterfall soon becomes an unheard sound to those who live near it. Do you think if you lived near a waterfall you could hear it very long?”
 (I still hear the sound of the falls on the Columbia, always will—always—hear the whoop of Charley Bear Belly stabbed himself a big chinook, hear the slap of fish in the water, laughing naked kids on the bank, the women at the racks… from a long time ago.)
 “Do they leave it on all the time, like a waterfall?” McMurphy says.
 “Not when we sleep,” Cheswick says, “but all the rest of the time, and that's the truth.”
 “The hell with that. I'll tell that coon over there to turn it off or get his fat little ass kicked!”
 He starts to stand up, and Harding touches his arm. “Friend, that is exactly the kind of statement that gets one branded ***assaultive***\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ . Are you so eager to forfeit the bet?”
 McMurphy looks at him. “That's the way it is, huh? A pressure game? Keep the old pinch on?”
 “That's the way it is.”
 He slowly lowers himself back into his seat, saying, “Horse muh-noo-ur.”
 Harding looks about at the other Acutes around the card table. “Gentlemen, already I seem to detect in our redheaded challenger a most unheroic decline of his TV-cowboy ***stoicism***\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”
 He looks at McMurphy across the table, smiling, McMurphy nods at him and tips his head back for the wink and licks his big thumb. “Well sir, ol' Professor Harding sounds like he's getting cocky. He wins a couple of splits and he goes to comin' on like a wise guy. Well well well; there he sits with a deuce showing and here's a pack of Mar-boros says he backs down… Whups, he sees me, okeedokee, Perfessor, here's a trey, he wants another, gets another deuce, try for the big five, Perfessor? Try for that big double pay, or play it safe? Another pack says you won't. Well well well, the Perfessor sees me, this tells the tale, too bad, another lady and the Perfessor flunks his exams…”
 The next song starts up from the speaker, loud and clangy and a lot of accordion. McMurphy takes a look up at the speaker, and his spiel gets louder and louder to match it.
 “…hey-ya hey-ya, okay, next, goddammit, you hit or you sit… comin at ya…!”
 Right up to the lights out at nine-thirty.
 I could of watched McMurphy at that blackjack table all night, the way he dealt and talked and roped them in and led them smack up to the point where they were just about to quit, then backed down a hand or two to give them confidence and bring them along again. Once he took a break for a cigarette and tilted back in his chair, his hands folded behind his head, and told the guys, “The secret of being a top-notch con man is being able to know what the mark wants, and how to make him think he's getting it. I learned that when I worked a season on a skillo wheel in a carnival. You fe-e-el the sucker over with your eyes when he comes up and you say, ‘Now here's a bird that needs to feel tough.’ So every time he snaps at you for taking him you quake in your boots, scared to death, and tell him, ‘Please, sir. No trouble. The next roll is on the house, sir.’ So the both of you are getting what you want.”

He rocks forward, and the legs of his chair come down with a crack. He picks up the deck, zips his thumb over it, knocks the edge of it against the table top, licks his thumb and finger.
 “And what I ***deduce*** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ you marks need is a big fat pot to temptate you. Here's ten packages on the next deal. Hey-yah, comin' at you, guts ball from here on out…”
 And throws back his head and laughs out loud at the way the guys hustled to get their bets down.
 That laugh banged around the day room all evening, and all the time he was dealing he was joking and talking and trying to get the players to laugh along with him. But they were all afraid to loosen up; it'd been too long. He gave up trying and settled down to serious dealing. They won the deal off him a time or two, but he always bought it back or fought it back, and the cigarettes on each side of him grew in bigger and bigger pyramid stacks.
 Then just before nine-thirty he started letting them win, lets them win it all back so fast they don't hardly remember losing. He pays out the last couple of cigarettes and lays down the deck and leans back with a sigh and shoves the cap out of his eyes, and the game is done.
 “Well, sir, win a few, lose the rest is what I say.” He shakes his head so ***forlorn*** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. “I don't know—I was always a pretty shrewd customer at twenty-one, but you birds may just be too tough for me. You got some kinda ***uncanny*** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_knack, makes a man leery of playing against such sharpies for real money tomorrow.”
 He isn't even kidding himself into thinking they fall for that. He let them win, and every one of us watching the game knows it. So do the players. But there still isn't a man raking his pile of cigarettes—cigarettes he didn't really win but only won back because they were his in the first place—that doesn't have a smirk on his face like he's the toughest gambler on the whole Mississippi.
 The fat black boy and a black boy named Geever run us out of the day room and commence turning lights off with a little key on a chain, and as the ward gets dimmer and darker the eyes of the little birthmarked nurse in the station get bigger and brighter. She's at the door of the glass station, issuing nighttime pills to the men that shuffle past her in a line, and she's having a hard time keeping straight who gets poisoned with what tonight. She's not even watching where she pours the water. What has distracted her attention this way is that big redheaded man with the dreadful cap and the horrible-looking scar, coming her way. She's watching McMurphy walk away from the card table in the dark day room, his one horny hand twisting the red tuft of hair that sticks out of the little cup at the throat of his work-farm shirt, and I figure by the way she rears back when he reaches the door of the station that she's probably been warned about him beforehand by the Big Nurse. (“Oh, one more thing before I leave it in your hands tonight, Miss Pilbow; that new man sitting over there, the one with the garish red sideburns and facial lacerations—I've reason to believe he is a sex maniac.”)
 McMurphy sees how she's looking so scared and big-eyed at him, so he sticks his head in the station door where she's issuing pills, and gives her a big friendly grin to get acquainted on. This flusters her so she drops the water pitcher on her foot. She gives a cry and hops on one foot, jerks her hand, and the pill she was about to give me leaps out of the little cup and right down the neck of her uniform where that birthmark stain runs like a river of wine down into a valley.
 “Let me give you a hand, ma'am.”
 And that very hand comes through the station door, scarred and tattooed and the color of raw meat.
 “Stay back! There are two aides on the ward with me!”
 She rolls her eyes for the black boys, but they are off tying Chronics in bed, nowhere close enough to help in a hurry. McMurphy grins and turns the hand over so she can see he isn't holding a knife. All she can see is the light shining off the slick, waxy, callused palm.
 “All I mean to do, miss, is to—”
 “Stay back! Patients aren't allowed to enter the—Oh, stay back, I'm a Catholic!” and straightaway jerks at the gold chain around her neck so a cross flies out from between her bosoms, slingshots the lost pill up in the air! McMurphy strikes at the air right in front of her face. She screams and pops the cross in her mouth and clinches her eyes shut like she's about to get socked, stands like that, paper-white except for that stain which turns darker than ever, as though it sucked the blood from all the rest of her body. When she finally opens her eyes again there's that callused hand right in front of her with my little red capsule sitting in it.
 “—was to pick up your waterin' can you dropped.” He holds that out in the other hand.
 Her breath comes out in a loud hiss. She takes the can from him. “Thank you. Good night, good night,” and closes the door in the next man's face, no more pills tonight.
 In the dorm McMurphy tosses the pill on my bed. “You want your sourball, Chief?”
 I shake my head at the pill, and he flips it off the bed like it was a bug pestering him. It hops across the floor with a cricket scrabble. He goes to getting ready for bed, pulling off his clothes. The shorts under his work pants are coal black satin covered with big white whales with red eyes. He grins when he sees I'm looking at the shorts. “From a co-ed at Oregon State, Chief, a Literary major.” He snaps the elastic with his thumb. “She gave them to me because she said I was a symbol.”
 His arms and neck and face are sunburned and bristled with curly orange hairs. He's got tattoos on each big shoulder; one says “Fighting Leathernecks” and has a devil with a red eye and red horns and an M-1 rifle, and the other is a poker hand fanned out across his muscle—aces and eights. He puts his roll of clothes on the nightstand next to my bed and goes to punching at his pillow. He's been assigned the bed right next to mine.
 He gets between the sheets and tells me I better hit the sack myself, that here comes one of those black boys to douse the lights on us. I look around, and the black boy named Geever is coming, and I kick off my shoes and get in bed just as he walks up to tie a sheet across me. When he's finished with me he takes a last look around and giggles and flips the dorm lights off.
 Except for the white powder of light from the Nurses' Station out in the hall, the dorm is dark. I can just make out McMurphy next to me, breathing deep and regular, the covers over him rising and falling. The breathing gets slower and slower, till I figure he's been asleep for a while. Then I hear a soft, throaty sound from his bed, like the chuckle of a horse. He's still awake and he's laughing to himself about something.
 He stops laughing and whispers, “Why, you sure did give a jump when I told you that coon was coming, Chief. I thought somebody told me you was deef.”