

Bromden's
perspective: one flew
over a symbolic nest



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Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is set in a mental institution, where the characters' mental illnesses reveal much to the reader. Kesey enlightens the reader by characterizing the reticent Chief Bromden, who narrates the main events of the story, as a mentally ill man. In particular, the novel succeeds in revealing the symbolism in Bromden's delusions and in writing the harrowing tale in Chief's stark point of view.

Chief's original characterization portrays him as very mentally sick, and his delusions help further the plot. Kesey starts the book off by revealing the reader multiple layers of information, saying that Nurse Ratched has "let her arms section out long enough to wrap around" several misbehaving aides (Kesey 5). By doing this, not only is he describing what her character is like and how she is viewed on the ward, but also telling the readers that Chief's narration may be unreliable. Additionally, Chief is obsessed with what he calls "the Combine", which he defines as "a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside as well as [...] the Inside" (Kesey 22). Chief constantly rants about the combine, but he actually has a point. One night, he swears he sees a "whole wall [slide] up" (Kesey 67). This happens after a dramatic ward event because he's worried the nurse will win, giving insight into how the actions of the Nurse and McMurphy are affecting other in the ward. Chief's delusion of the combine reacts and adjusts to the real world, cluing the reader in to what each action means in the context of the plot and its symbolic importance.. Therefore, his delusions give the reader a broader understanding of the text and the world outside of it.

Chief Bromden's delusions and hallucinations color the perspective from which the otherwise perspicuous story is told: "They don't bother not talking
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out loud about their hate secrets when I'm nearby because they think I'm deaf and dumb" (Kesey 4). This gives him a fly-on-the-wall, insider's view on everything going on in the ward behind the scenes, especially as the crass McMurphy begins to subvert Nurse Ratched's authority. Chief describes Nurse Ratched as a "real veteran at adjusting things" (Kesey 22). This information seems reliable; as far as one can tell, there is no disparity between Chief's account and the attitudes of the other patients. The nurse is shown to manipulate and engineer circumstances to get what she wants. Conversely, some of Chief's delusions are less literal. After believing a group of men killed a patient on the ward, Chief says he thinks that "somebody'll drag me out of the fog" and erase all evidence of what went on (Kesey 69). All of this makes Chief's life quiet and somewhat choleric and lugubrious, yet chaotic, which flavors the story.

Likewise, the Combine is a symbol for the conformist pressure of American society, yet it has a dual role in that it also symbolizes Chief's madness since he legitimately thinks there is a combine. The "Combine" is a symbol for power and control, an extended metaphor used throughout the book. Chief defines the combine as a "huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside as well as she has the Inside" (Kesey 22). Chief constantly writes about the control beyond the combine, saying that the patients all "breath [sic] in ... and out ... in perfect order; hearts all beating at the rate the OD cards have ordered" (Kesey 25). The monotony in the ward symbolizes the lack of freedom in the ward, and, outside of the book, in the daily lives of Americans, which is contrary to the author's nonconformist ideals. Similarly, when a patient, Mr. Taber, asks what medicine he is being given, he was

treated as though it was a presumptuous declaration: the Big Nurse says that if the patient “ chooses to act like a child, he may have to be treated as such.” (Kesey 26). Kesey does this to show that people cannot rebel if they're being undermined and treated like fussy children, which corresponds to how the hippies were treated. He relates the symbolism in the story with control in the real world, since he brazenly identified as a hippie and clashed with authority.

Kesey enlightens the reader by characterizing Chief as a mentally ill man through potent turns of both perspective and symbolism. The author's work also illustrates how the moribund culture at the time was unnecessarily stacked against free-flowing spirits longing leave a dint in the world and against mentally ill people alike. Only through a work such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, perhaps, could a man such as Chief Bromden attain a voice.