

Mccarthyism and the
"one flew over the
cuckoo's nest" by ken
kesey essay sample



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In the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey, the characters of Nurse Ratched and Bromden Chief both serve as social commentary of the government of the 1950s. Nurse Ratched represents the control and dominance of the government in the 50s, and Bromden Chief represents the oppression of non-white people by the government and McCarthyism.

McCarthyism was a tool that was used by the government at that time in order to scare and manipulate citizens. Similarly, Nurse Ratched symbolizes McCarthyism because she instills fear and exerts control over the patients in the mental ward. Nurse Ratched's character represents the famous senator, Joseph McCarthy. Specifically, Nurse Ratched's practice of rewarding patients who spy on one another is just like the practice of McCarthyism.

McCarthyism was the practice of arbitrarily accusing a person with any ties to the Soviet Union of being a communist. In the U. S., communists and some other popular liberals were marginalized in the 1950s. The government suspected that there were spies in the U. S. who sold the secret to the Soviet, resulting in the Red Scare. Moreover, people began to think that others around them might be Soviet spies, and there could be no trust among one another.

Since the Soviet Union was communist party, the U. S. government suspected that people who supported communist belief or talked about communism would be considered spy, and they would be ostracized or even persecuted. This persecution was fueled primarily by Senator McCarthy and the practice of McCarthyism. McCarthyism rewarded those who were "loyal" to America, and those who spied on potential communist. In the same way, Nurse Ratched's rewarding of patients who spy on another parallels this

aspect of McCarthyism. In the story, Nurse Ratched is a coercive and manipulative character. She controls the people in the ward including the patients, her assistant's nurse, assistant doctor, and the three black orderlies. She manipulates the people with subtle manner without them realizing that she is manipulating them. Chief Bromden, who is also a patient in the psychiatric hospital, is the narrator of the story. Through out the text, Chief refers to Nurse Ratched as " The Combine." What he means is that Nurse Ratched is the oppressive force of society and authority. He says that Nurse Ratched awards the patients that " spy on each other" by writing anything on the logbook that Nurse Ratched will want to know about. In return, this patient can sleep late the next morning.

This shows that she manipulates the patients in a way that give her control (Cuckoo's Nest P. 23). Another example of Nurse Ratched's behavior is demonstrated when she mentions, " Good evening, boys. Behave yourselves" (Cuckoo's Nest P. 78) every time she leaves the mental ward. This illustrates that she treats the patients like children, which in a sense shows that she has control over them. Later in the story, when the doctors discuss about whether they should send McMurphy back to the work farm, Nurse Ratched becomes the decision maker of the whole meeting. She suggests that they should keep him in the ward for a while because she is " certain his brashness will subside, his self-made rebellion will dwindle to nothing, and (Cuckoo's nest P. 149)". It seems that her suggestion is simply a demand, and that the doctors have to forcefully obey her even though they do not agree with her suggestion. What is important to understand about this

concept is the fact that Nurse Ratched's decisions override the decisions of her superiors.

Nurse Ratched's control over the doctors in many ways parallels Senator McCarthy's control over higher government officials, despite the fact that he was a subordinate. He defeated his opponent, Maryland's three-term conservative Senator Millard Tydings. After his victory, "the Republican Party took control of the executive and legislative branches for the first time in twenty-four years" (McCarthyism P. 74). This led to the victory of president Dwight David "Ike" Eisenhower. Because of this party connection, McCarthy was able to establish his own investigative committee—Investigative Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations. Because his committee gained the most media coverage, McCarthy became a "hero" in the public's eye. Aware of this, president Eisenhower gave significant support to McCarthy's committee. McCarthy was allowed to run his own agenda, and at time override the law due to his popularity and his support from the President. In the same way, Nurse Ratched was allowed to override the decisions of her superiors because of her relationship with the doctor's supervisor.

The log book also symbolize a significant part of the history. In the novel, Nurse Ratched reads out various hearsays of the log book that has been written by a patient who has been a "spy" on other patients. She says, "according to the notes listed by various patients in the log, Mr. Harding has been heard to say that she 'damn well gives the bastards reason to stare.' He has also been heard to say that he may give her reason to seek further sexual attention.'" Despite whether the fact that the information is true or <https://assignbuster.com/mccarthyism-and-the-one-flew-over-the-cuckoos-nest-by-ken-keseey-essay-sample/>

not, Nurse Ratched uses the various hearsays from the other patients to not only humiliate Mr. Harding, but also in a sense manipulate him. Obviously, Mr. Harding does not want people to discuss what he says in the public, but this is just what Nurse Ratched wants because she would have control over him. Nurse Ratched's logbook functions in a very similar fashion as Senator McCarthy's "list" from his Wheeling Speech. In February 1950, McCarthy gave his wheeling speech. At that time, "the news of Soviet atomic bomb and the trial and conviction of Alger Hiss were fresh in the public's mind" (McCarthyism P. 72), so his speech about anti-communist was very effective.

In his speech, McCarthy claimed not only that he had a list of the names of 205 State Department Communists, but also that the administration in the State Department knew who they were and approved what they did. He used this imaginary list to criticize his opponents that they were complicit in treason or maybe traitors themselves. This list functions in a very similar way as the log book. Nurse Ratched uses the log book as a tool to collect the hearsays from the patients. Then, she sets up meeting, which she claims is a "group therapy" (Cuckoo's Nest P. 134), with the patients to discuss about the hearsays and humiliate individual patient who has bad hearsay. Thus, the log book functions in a way that gives her control over the patients. The character that is initially able to fight against Nurse Ratched is McMurphy. His arrival and uprising gradually influences the other patients to challenge Nurse Ratched's authority. She tries to retain her authority by using a number of ways. First, she confiscates the patient's cigarette (used as money in the ward) and the tub-room privilege. But then her tactic fails

because McMurphy and the rest of the patients are unsatisfied and seize to get back their cigarettes as well as the privilege of the tub-room.

Because of the failure of this tactic, Nurse Ratched decides to utilize electro shock therapy as her next manipulating weapon. In the novel Nurse Ratched mentions, " it might be beneficial that he receive some shock therapy— unless he realizes his mistakes" (Cuckoo's Nest P. 253), indicating that electro shock therapy is used as a punishment. Similarly, lobotomy is also a punishment tool, but it functions more intensely, as this surgery turns the patient into " vegetable." The relationship between Nurse Ratched and McMurphy directly relates to the relationship between Joseph McCarthy and Alger Hiss. Alger Hiss was a government official of the U. S. State Department and official in United Nations, and was accused of having been a spy for the Soviet Union while working in the U. S. State Department. Although Alger Hiss claimed that he was innocent, it demonstrated that Communist party engaging in high position in the U. S. government was possible. People thought that if government official like Alger was suspicious, then anyone could be a communist. Hiss was also accused of perjury under oath earlier. During the discovery process, Chambers provided more evidence indicating that he and Hiss were members of the communist party. Finally, Hiss was judged guilty of perjury, and he was put into jail for three and a half years (Alger Hiss).

But he claimed that he was innocent until his death. Even though there was no definite evidence to prove that Hiss was a Soviet spy, people were afraid of another outbreak of Soviet spy, and thus eventually led to the anti-

Communist—McCarthyism. Likewise, Nurse Ratched indicates McMurphy as
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an insane person, but in fact he is one of the most normal person in the mental ward. Nurse Ratched's use of electro shock therapy and lobotomy to McMurphy parallels with McCarthy's use of accusation and imprison to Hiss. McMurphy believes that he is not insane parallel to Alger Hiss's claim of innocence in trial. As Nurse Ratched serves as coercion in the novel, Chief serves as a victim who is coerced under Nurse Ratched's authority. He suffers from paranoia and harassment from the black workers and Nurse Ratched. The fact that he is frequently put into a room full of hallucinated fog demonstrates his weakness and intention of escaping reality, as he says, "They start the fog machine again and it's snowing down cold and white all over me like skim milk, so thick I might even be able to hide in it if they didn't have a hold on me."

From the quote, one understands that Chief is weak in the inside because he always wants to hide. The fog room in many ways can symbolize the relocation of Native American peoples during the 1950's, as Chief is put into this space without his consent. In fact, Chief's speechlessness in many ways represents the loss of the Native American voice in American history, and specifically in the process of relocation in the 1950. Both Nurse Ratched and Chief serve as an important role historically; Nurse Ratched becomes the symbol of the oppressive government and McCarthyism, and Chief represents the Native American in the 1950s. During the Cold War, many non-white citizens were more easily abused and oppressed by government policies. An example would be the Native American. Policy-makers in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in an attempt to liberate Native Americans from the

constraints of federal trust restrictions, passed an act called the Termination Policy of the 1950s.

This was a relocation program that relocated Native American, ranging from eighteen to forty-five years old, to urban areas with federal assistance.

Essentially, many Native Americans were forced from their land and their homes into cities without their consent. In addition, the policy would " nullify the special minority status that Native American held because of their 389 treaties and agreements made with the United States between 1778 and 1871" (Termination and Relocation). Furthermore, the three black orderlies treat Chief very badly. Even though Chief appears to be a strong man, they bully him as much as they can. For example, they " stick a mop in my hand and motion to the spot they aim for me to clean today" (Cuckoo's Nest P. 11). Also, they make fun of him by calling him " Chief Broom" (Cuckoo's Nest P. 11). Moreover, they eat the breakfast that is supposed to be for Chief and lock him in seclusion. It is interesting to note about the relationship between Chief and the black workers.

This relationship is interesting in the context of history because it represents in many ways the relationships between Native Americans and African Americans. Despite both groups being heavily oppressed by the government, Native American voices and histories had been silenced much more than African Americans. However, African Americans still faced serious oppression and silencing, but it was not the same as Native Americans. Nurse Ratched's relationship with the black workers and their relationship with Chief all parallel these relationships in history. Nurse Ratched has control over the workers and Chief, but Chief as a character does not speak at all, and the <https://assignbuster.com/mccarthyism-and-the-one-flew-over-the-cuckoos-nest-by-ken-keseey-essay-sample/>

workers to some degree have control over what he does. The fact that they call Chief "Chief Broom," force him to wipe the floor, and steal his breakfast demonstrates that they have more power than Chief. Similarly, in history, slavery ended with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 (Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation). So in 1950s, the African American had more freedom than they had before. But comparing the treatment to African American and to Native American, Native American was treated worse. This is demonstrated in the novel where Chief is bullied by the black orderlies.

Another important aspect of Chief's character in relationship to the government in the 1950's is his childhood. His father's name is Chief Tee Ah Millatoona, meaning "The Pine That Stands Tallest on the Mountain" (The mixed heritage of the Chief). His mother, Mary Louise Bromden, is a white woman who plays a dominant role in the marriage. We can see that because Chief's last name follows his mother instead of his father. Chief tells the story about his childhood, which he emphasizes that it is one of the elements that weaken him. He says that when the government officials come to speak to his father about buying the tribe's land, he is the only person at home. They ignore him when he tries to talk to them. Later on, his mother also helps some members in the tribe to force Chief's father to sell the land. His father's powerlessness implicitly effect Chief in his childhood, causing Chief to become even weaker in the mental ward. The fact that the white government officials ignore him demonstrates that the white's systemically had more power than other races.

In addition, Chief's mother plays a dominant role in her marriage also

explains that in reality, white Americans wield more power than the Native
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American. Essentially, most government officials in the 1950s were white, thus had the most power in the U. S. They were able to relocate the Native Americans to their cities with just the termination policy. Also, they forced the Native Americans to sell their tribe lands for government usage. This illustrates that they dominated Native American freedom. Chief represents not only the public, who are controlled by the Government and McCarthy, but also the Native American people.

From the historical background, one can see that the government forced the Native American into a life that was not their own without taking into consideration their thoughts and feelings. Relocation of the Native Americans has consistently been happening throughout American history, but *Once Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* specifically deals with Native Americans in the 1950's. This can be seen in Chief's childhood and the time when he is in the mental institution. Overall, Kesey's novel *One Flew Over Cuckoo's Nest* serves as a strong commentary on the government's control over the people during the 1950s. As we can see through the character of Nurse Ratched, Kesey directly talks about the domination of government in the 1950s. Likewise, we can see through the character of Chief that Kesey speaks about the oppression of Native American peoples in the 1950s. What I really wish I could have explored further in my paper is the character of McMurphy and his relationship to Chief. I am very interested to know what it is that Kesey is trying to make commentary on with this relationship.

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