

# Defense mechanisms in one flew over the cuckoo's nest



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Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, mainly takes place in an Oregon psychiatric hospital ward controlled by Nurse Ratched according to a precise schedule and strict rules. The narrator, Chief Bromden, describes many patients in this ward, all of which have different problems and reasons for being there. Among the characteristics of the patients, each person has a unique defense mechanism, which they used to shield themselves from their problems in outside society. Each individual's way of protection can be viewed as intentional or subconscious. Three characters that play an important role in this story, Chief Bromden, Dale Harding, and Billy Bibbit, each make their defense mechanisms apparent while they are in the ward. At many points in the story, Chief Bromden tells the reader that the ward is "fogged" to some extent. Chief, a paranoid schizophrenic patient, believes that his hallucinations of the clouded ward are real, and doesn't understand how something that he can see might be in his imagination. According to Chief, the fog is created by a machine and clouds the ward by coming in through the vents. We learn from Bromden that the images of fog that he generates originate from his days in the army during WWII. Machines similar to the one that is supposedly kept in the ward had been used while Chief was in Europe to produce a fog over Allied airfields so that German bombers would have trouble seeing their targets. The comparison is made that Chief's fog shields him from reality, as it had shielded him from enemies and danger during the war. Chief recognizes that if he stays still and keeps quiet when the ward is "fogged," he can be protected from the outside world, which has treated him cruelly in the past. This is evident when McMurphy is admitted into the ward, and begins to demand reforms and changes within the Big Nurse's schedule and rules. At this point, Chief is disturbed by the thought of

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reality, and describes the fog as being thicker. “ The last few days they been doing it more and more. It’s my idea they’re doing it on account of McMURPHY” (118), says Chief. As Chief becomes more comfortable with McMURPHY’s presence, the thickness of the fog and the frequency at which it appears decreases. We see this in the chapter after McMURPHY has rallied the men to watch the blank TV set during the World Series, “ we let McMURPHY lure us out of the fog” (130), says Chief. Finally, when McMURPHY has helped Chief regain his confidence and “ return to his old size,” Chief knows that he no longer needs to be protected from outside society, and the fog leaves him for good. Dale Harding, another patient who plays an important role in this story, uses his intellect as a defense mechanism. When McMURPHY enters the ward, Chief describes the conversation between Harding and McMURPHY, in which Harding provides some important information about the ward and its patients. By this conversation, and the fact that Harding is the president of the Patients’ Counsel, we learn that Harding takes leadership among the other patients. The reader soon learns that Harding cannot take such leadership outside of the ward, where his dominating wife, Vera, leads him to believe that he is incompetent. He is troubled and confused with other men taking interest in his wife, who responds to the men with the same attitude that they show her. Harding needs the ward, and voluntarily resides there because he is aware of his lack of leadership and control living with his wife in the outside world. When Vera comes to the ward to visit Harding, they immediately begin to act bitter towards each other and put one another down. While they exchange words, Harding shows that Vera degrades him and makes him feel incompetent by telling McMURPHY, “ You don’t have to apologize for my inadequacies, my friend” (159). Thanks to McMURPHY’s

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inspiration, Harding checks out of the ward on his own late in the book, just as he had planned. " I want my wife to be here in a car at a certain time to pick me up. I want them to know I was able to do it that way" (257), says Harding when he is sure that he has overcome what had been keeping him inside the ward. When Billy Bibbit is described speaking to someone, it is obvious that he cannot form a sentence without stuttering. Although Billy cannot help speaking with a stutter, this speech impediment serves as his defense mechanism. This problem allows Billy to voluntarily check into the ward, where he is not forced to interact with other people in normal society. Coming into the ward has been good for Billy, who was having problems with functioning in normal social situations, and possessed little to no self-confidence. Billy is able to express his desire for a normal life, and his belief that he is unable to achieve one when he says, " You think I wuh-wuh-wuh-want to stay in here? You think I wouldn't like a con-con-vertible and a guh-guh-girl friend? But did you ever have people l-l-laughing at you?" (168). The reader can soon trace Bibbit's problem back to his overbearing mother, and the way that she has treated him throughout his whole life. We see the extent to which Billy is affected by his mother's childlike treatment when Chief tells a story of Billy's mother taking her son by the hand and bringing him outside on the grass, where he lay next to her with his head on her lap. Chief says that when Billy mentioned he would like to go to college and get a wife someday, his mother simply " laughed at such foolishness" (247). Chief tells the reader that a moment like this involving Billy's mother " embarrassed the rest of us as much as it did Billy" (246). After Billy has sex with Candy, he gains confidence, and speaks clearly without stuttering. His stutter quickly returns though, at the very mention of Nurse Ratched calling <https://assignbuster.com/defense-mechanisms-in-one-flew-over-the-cuckoos-nest/>

his mother to tell her what Billy has done. Billy becomes frantic, and is so afraid of his mother's disapproval that he kills himself by slitting his throat with an instrument from the doctor's desk. At that point it had become obvious that the ward would no longer protect him from his mother, from whom he had come there to escape. Patients in the ward are shielded from the outside world and society in different ways. While Bromden has hallucinations of the fogged ward, Harding uses his intellect and Billy Bibbit speaks with a stutter. By the time Chief has escaped the ward, it is not necessary for any of these characters to continue to protect themselves with their defense mechanisms. Bromden and Harding are both able to return to normal society by the end of the story, and no longer worry about life in the outside world as they did before McMurphy arrived at the ward.