

# Through Chief Bromden's Murky Lens: Deconstructing Sanity in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

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**Abstract:** *The novel "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," which was written by Ken Kesey and published in 1962, continues to be a powerful investigation into the complexity of mental illness, as well as the influence that institutions exert over individuals. The novel encourages us to re-examine the very idea of sane through the eyes of Chief Bromden, the seemingly quiet behemoth. While numerous analyses dissect the power dynamics and rebellion within the psychiatric unit, this article gives a distinct perspective via the lens of Chief Bromden. Through the investigation of his fractured story and warped views, a horrifying reality arises, in which the "sane" staff, lead by Nurse Ratched, exemplify a twisted type of craziness. Meanwhile, the patients who are branded "crazy" by the hospital, cling to shreds of human authenticity and sanity.*

**Keywords:** Ken Kesey, Cuckoo's Nest, Chief Bromden, Murky, Sanity, Crazy, Mental Illness

## 1. Introduction

"One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," a classic of American fiction by Ken Kesey, delves into the complex relationships between institutional power structures, mental illness, and the illusive nature of sanity. Chief Bromden, portrayed as a silent and paranoid schizophrenic inmate, narrates the book, providing a window into the unsettling world of the mental facility. This study aims to explore the complex layers of Chief Bromden's viewpoint as a literary device and how his warped vision works as an effective means of dissecting the idea of sanity. Kesey's 1962 novel was released amid a time of social unrest and a rise in mistrust toward traditional establishments. In light of this, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" is an indictment of both larger societal norms and the degrading methods seen in mental hospitals. Chief Bromden challenges readers to consider the fundamental basis of reality, sanity, and the systems by which society categorizes and imprisons those who are considered to be 'mentally ill' given his keen awareness of the oppressive forces at work. Kesey purposefully chose to give Chief Bromden a particularly hazy perspective on the world, making it difficult for readers to separate illusion from truth. The purpose of this study is to decipher the meaning behind Chief Bromden's hallucinations, delusions, and seemingly paranoid observations. It also looks at how these aspects relate to the main issue of sanity and its frailty. Looking through Chief Bromden's eyes forces the reader to confront the arbitrary nature of normalcy and invites a critical analysis of the hazy lines separating sane from insanity. In addition, this study looks at Nurse Ratched's position as the dictatorial leader of the mental health facility and how it represents social norms that establish and uphold conformity. The narrative perspective of Chief Bromden illuminates the coercive methods used by those in positions of authority and provides a biting critique of the power systems that uphold the marginalization of people who are considered mentally unstable.

This study essentially attempts to break down the complex layers of Kesey's narrative artistry by analyzing Chief Bromden's viewpoint to undermine popular ideas about sanity. Through an analysis of the literary devices and thematic complexity found in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," the article aims to further the conversation about mental health, institutional criticism, and the lasting value of Kesey's masterpiece concerning our modern conceptions of sanity and social norms.

### The Fragility of Sanity and the Arbitrary Nature of Normalcy

As a foundational work of American literature, Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" has left a lasting impression through its profound examination of mental illness, institutional power relations, and the complex nature of sanity. Chief Bromden, the schizophrenic narrator who is supposedly silent and paranoid, is a prominent and mysterious person inside the narrative. Kesey deftly places Bromden as the narrative's lens, using his warped yet insightful viewpoint to illuminate the intricate details of the mental health facility and its occupants. Hassan Abootalebi discusses the relationship between paranoia and Kesey's novel in his paper *Paranoia and its ensuing effects in Ken Kesey's One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest (2017)* as he notes the impact of the ensued paranoia by the staff on the patients, to embed a form of insanity within them (2017:377). Moreover, Chief Bromden is more than just a plot element; he represents the oppressed and downtrodden in symbolic form. His alleged stillness serves as a potent allegory for the silence enforced on people who are thought to be mentally ill, reflecting the larger social tendency to silence voices that don't fit the mold. The symbolic significance of Bromden's quiet goes beyond the person to represent the quiet of all those imprisoned in the facility, highlighting the structural problems embedded in the mental health care system. Additionally, Dorst, A. G. notes the importance of symbolisms and metaphors through translation in the article *Translating metaphorical mind style: machinery and ice metaphors in Ken Kesey's One*

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*Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (2018), as changing the metaphor in translation tend to change the mind style, hence the whole narrative world (2018:13). Furthermore, the story is made more ambiguous by Bromden's delusional schizophrenia. The overwhelming fog and the approaching Combine, among other hallucinations he has, provide an ambient tension that reflects the psychological problems of the individuals in the mental facility. Kesey purposefully blurs the boundaries between reality and hallucination, making readers doubt the story's veracity and forcing them to face their assumptions about what constitutes sanity and insanity. Chief Bromden's hazy lens thus serves as a vehicle for a more extensive philosophical investigation into the fundamental nature of reality and the subjective experience of mental illness, rather than only serving as a narrative device. Chief Bromden's point of view serves as a tool for dissecting both the social structures that define and restrict sanity as well as the individual experiences within the institution as the analysis makes its way through Kesey's maze-like story. As layers of Bromden's story are peeled, what's found is a journey that transcends the traditional critique of institutional practices and instead becomes a profound meditation on the nature of: humanity, the frailty of sanity, and the social structures that marginalize people who are struggling with mental health issues.

### The Story of Chief Bromden as a Subversion of Power Dynamics

Chief Bromden's function as a storyteller goes beyond convention; it becomes a subversive act of resistance against the authoritarian powers that are ingrained in the mental institution. His deliberate use of pretending to be deaf and silent offers readers a novel perspective, by enabling them to surreptitiously see the complex power relationships and subdued acts of rebellion, which otherwise would go unnoticed behind the institution's totalitarian exterior. To provoke readers to re-evaluate ideas of agency and resistance in the face of institutional domination, Kesey purposefully presents Bromden as an atypical hero. By pretending to be disabled, Bromden can defy the expectations that society and the institution subtly have of him. His seeming adherence to the institution's rules belies a complex inner life and a sharp understanding of the power relationships at work. Readers are given insight into the internal resistance tactics used by people traversing the oppressive institutions of the mental health care system employing Bromden's perspective. This subversion develops into a nuanced but potent commentary on the tenacity and resourcefulness of people who are considered mentally ill. It dispels popular misconceptions and highlighting the need for a more compassionate understanding of mental health issues. Because of his Native American ancestry, Chief Bromden's effects from institutionalization are much more complex. The power relations are further complicated by this extra layer, which arises from the intersection of cultural marginalization and the larger subject of oppression within the mental facility. Because of his history, Bromden feels more alone, highlighting how racial and cultural prejudices are part of societal biases that go beyond the stigma associated with mental illness. However, Robert P. Waxler's article *The Mixed Heritage of the Chief: Revisiting the Problem of Manhood in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1995) argues that the author did not tackle the issue of the

mixed heritage of Chief as a cause for his conflicted self (1995:234). By illuminating the complex difficulties experienced by those who live at the crossroads of mental health vulnerability and cultural marginalization, the investigation of these intersections strengthens the narrative's critique of institutional power. Ashley E. Reis discusses the connection of the self and space in her article *The Wounds of Dispossession: Displacement and Environmentally Induced Mental Illness in Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (2016) as she notes the interconnection of the physical and mental state of a person to the space they're within, whenever there's damage in one, the other suffers the same (2016:712). Chief Bromden is essentially a rebellious figure who questions not only the immediate authority within the institution but also raises issues with society institutions in general. By delving into the intricate interplay of power dynamics and cultural identity, Kesey's narrative encourages readers to acknowledge the resilience of marginalized individuals, and the need for a more inclusive understanding of mental health that considers the complex intersections of identity and oppression. The story emphasizes the agency and difficulties faced by those battling mental health within a societal context, contributing to a thorough investigation of the human condition through Chief Bromden's subversive resistance (Kesey, 1962). In another study concerning Kesey's novel, Schopf, W. compares in his article *Blindfolded and Backwards: Promethean and Bemused Heroism in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and Catch-22* (1972) between the representation of Chief and McMurphy within the context of resistance to the authority, as Chief is capable to slip back into the society as an invisible, yet successful resistant force (1972:95). Yet Andrew Foley reminds in his article *Allegories of Freedom: Individual Liberty and Social Conformity in Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (2001), that although Chief's story counts as a victory over the oppressor, it only acts as a reminder that the fight for individual freedom over the powers of authoritarianism is a never-ending battle (2001:53)

The narrative of the Chief, which at first appears to be unreliable and illogical, gradually exposes itself to be a smart critique of the ward's mask of normalcy. When it comes to Nurse Ratched, his perspective is particularly illuminating. He portrays her as a hideous "Combine," (1962:6) a mechanical being that is devoid of empathy and is driven by an unquenchable need to exert control over one's environment. Her ability to maintain a calm attitude is nothing more than a façade, her therapeutic sessions are nothing more than power plays, and her medication is utilized more as a tool to dominate than to heal. The portrayal of the patients by Chief, on the other hand, demonstrates true human connection, humor, and resiliency, even though they are diagnosed with various conditions and experience anxiety. His exuberant laughter and humorous defiance serve as a beacon of sanity in Chief's eyes, and McMurphy's appearance catalyses the event. Due to the dramatic contrast between McMurphy's vibrancy and genuine concern for people and the staff's sterile obedience to routine, McMurphy's "craziness" becomes a challenge to the dehumanizing powers of the Combine.

"Treatment" in the ward is another evidence that the staff has a distorted understanding of what constitutes sanity. In the process of destroying individuality and stifling opposition, electroconvulsive treatment, lobotomies, and medicine become instruments of control. The tragic end that befell McMurphy, which was brought about by a lobotomy that was carried out under the direction of Nurse Ratched, is a horrifying demonstration of the ward's ability to crush individuals who refuse to submit. However, even when he is in a subdued state, McMurphy motivates Chief to act. His departure with McMurphy's body, which also serves as a symbolic execution of the Combine's feared "fog machine," becomes an act of defiant emancipation, a reclamation of self, and a rejection of the perverted sanity of the Combine (1962:162).

## 2. Discussion and Conclusion

When *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is investigated via Chief's warped perspective, a thorough examination of the very underpinnings of understanding what constitutes sanity and what constitutes unsoundness is achieved. The novel enforces the notion that the institution itself, with its strict control and dehumanizing activities, maybe the source of a subtler form of insanity than the psychological stresses and traumatic experiences that the patients go through. Does Chief's point of view, which is founded on individualism, empathy, and resistance, ultimately provide a definition of sanity that is more representative of the real world? Because the patients are portrayed as victims of a system that is obsessed with conformity and control, how does the novel defy the traditional power dynamics that have been established?

A critique of institutional control and the effect it has on the human spirit, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* continues to be a powerful piece of literature. Through analysing the novel via Chief Bromden's unique perspective, the study obtains a better comprehension and a clearer grasp of the complexity of sanity and the potential for crazy, to exist not in the disenfranchised, but in the very systems that aim to define and govern. Even in the face of enormous institutional power, McMurphy's disobedience and Chief's escape offer a glimpse of light, reminding us that true sanity resides in: embracing individuality, opposing oppressive structures, and reclaiming the freedom to define the self. This is true even when confronted with situations that are overpowering.

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