

# **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest Study Guide**

**One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest by Ken Kesey**

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# Plot Summary

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is a classic novel by award winning author Ken Kesey. In this novel, R. P. McMurphy has himself committed to a mental hospital from a work camp because he thinks the stay will be easier. However, McMurphy quickly discovers that life in the mental hospital is not what he thought it was. At first, McMurphy tries to behave so that the head nurse will not extend his stay, but he soon realizes that most of the patients are there voluntarily. This makes him want to help them come out of their shells. To this purpose, McMurphy fights for the rights of the patients. He takes them on a fishing trip. Then, one night, McMurphy invites a couple of girls for a night of partying. The fallout destroys his future. One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is at times funny, at others dramatically sad, but always an insightful look into the world of mental institutions.

Chief Bromden is a patient at a mental hospital. Chief has been at the hospital for so long that he has been there longer than most of the patients and all the staff with the exception of the head nurse on his ward. Therefore, when R.P. McMurphy arrives on his ward, Chief has no reason to think anything will change. McMurphy proves him wrong from the first moments.

McMurphy is a petty criminal who decided that a mental hospital would be easier than a work camp, so he pretended to be psychotic so that he would be committed. McMurphy marches onto the ward and begins to assert himself, announcing to the patients that he plans to become the top dog and refusing to let the staff do the routine admission shower. This immediately puts the head nurse on the alert. The other patients try to warn McMurphy that he should not irritate the nurse because she can have an impact on his stay, but he does not believe them. Instead, McMurphy bets the other patients that he can get the better of her within a week. McMurphy wins the bet when he encourages a rebellion among the patients for their inability to watch the World Series.

One day while swimming in the therapy pool with the other patients, McMurphy speaks to the lifeguard, who is also a patient. The lifeguard tells McMurphy that the head nurse can have his commitment extended if she feels he is not ready to rejoin society. This makes McMurphy rethink his actions, and he begins acting politely to everyone, including the head nurse.

For several weeks McMurphy acts properly, irritating some of the patients who had come to look up to him. One even dies during this period. Then McMurphy learns that most of the patients on his ward are there voluntarily. This changes McMurphy's behavior. He suddenly begins to stand up to the nurse again, breaking the glass in her nurse's station on multiple occasions. McMurphy also gets permission during this time to take a group of nine other patients on a fishing trip. McMurphy even manages to convince Chief to go with them.

The fishing trip is a wild success, and it introduces the patients to a young prostitute McMurphy had escorted them. This gives McMurphy the idea to help this young patient



experience intimacy for the first time. McMurphy arranges for the girl to sneak into the ward in the middle of the night for the visit. Before this happens, McMurphy and Chief get into a fight with some of the aids and are moved to another ward where they are given electroshock therapy. McMurphy stands up to this stoically and is soon returned to the ward in time for the girl's visit.

The girl arrives in the middle of the night with a friend. They bring alcohol with them. The men break into the medicine room to add cough syrup to their drinks. Soon they are all very drunk. One of the patients suggests that McMurphy leave with the girls before the head nurse comes on duty because they know she will blame him for what has happened. McMurphy agrees, but he oversleeps. Soon after the head nurse arrives, one of the other patients commits suicide. When the head nurse blames this on McMurphy, he attacks her.

McMurphy returns to the ward weeks later after having had a lobotomy. Chief can see that McMurphy is no longer himself and that he would not want to live this way. Chief kills McMurphy with suffocation. Then, he escapes the ward by breaking a window in the tub room. Chief goes home to the area where he grew up. Most of the other patients have also left the hospital.

# Part 1, Section 1

## Summary

Chief Bromden wakes early in the morning, as he has done most mornings since coming to the hospital. When he comes out of his room, three aides are in the hallway doing what Chief believes to be sexual things. They hand him a broom and assign him a place to clean. Mrs. Ratched, the big nurse, comes in a few minutes later with her big purse full of items she uses to keep the patients under control, including vials of medication and syringes. Soon after, the little nurse, a young woman with a pronounced birthmark, comes in.

The aids and nurses rouse the rest of the patients to prepare for breakfast. Chief misses breakfast this day, however, because the nurse decides he needs a haircut and Chief dislikes haircuts. When he protests, he is heavily medicated. When Chief becomes aware of his surroundings again, he finds himself sitting in the day room with the other patients. There are the Acutes, a group of patients who are still mobile and still communicate with those around them. There are the Chronics, the patients who have been in the hospital a long time and most of whom who are no longer connected with reality. Chief is considered a Chronic because he has been at the hospital the longest of all the patients. Chief is thought to be deaf and mute.

As Chief sits and watches the activity around him, a new patient is brought on the ward. The new patient is R.P. McMurphy, a young man who has been committed after developing psychopathic tendencies at a work farm where he was serving out a prison term. The doctor at the work farm believes McMurphy was faking to get out of the farm, but Nurse Ratched believes him to be psychopathic.

Upon arriving on the ward, McMurphy immediately sets out to find the patient in charge and warns him that he plans to become the top dog. McMurphy identifies this man as Harding, a young man who is on the ward for treatment of depression and social anxiety. Not only does McMurphy convince Harding of his superiority as a leader, but that he can get the better of Miss Ratched, whom all the patients are afraid of. Harding and the others try to warn McMurphy against agitating Miss Ratched, but McMurphy is determined. Soon most of the Acutes take McMurphy's bet.

## Analysis

The first part of the novel introduces the main characters and the conflict that will propel most of the plot. The narrator of the novel is Chief Bromden. Chief is a large man who has been in the hospital for many years. In fact, Chief claims the only person who has been in the hospital longer than him is Miss Ratched. It is not clear what Chief's medical problem is, but it is clear that he cannot always differentiate between reality and the effects of his over active imagination. It is clear, however, that Chief had a complicated



childhood that was made bad by the interference of the government against his home tribe and the resulting alcoholism his father and many of the elders of his tribe suffered after being pushed from their home. Chief is often confused in this first part of the novel, making some of his narrative unreliable.

R.P. McMurphy is a petty criminal who has decided it would be easier to serve his sentence in a mental institution than a work farm. McMurphy is a bigger than life kind of guy who brings his love of life to the hospital. McMurphy does not seem like the others, like a man who needs to be in this institute. Due to this, McMurphy brings a breath of fresh air into the hospital.

## Discussion Question 1

Who is Chief Bromden? Why do the aides at the hospital think he is deaf and mute? Is he? Why did they not do more testing to make sure of Chief's condition? Why is Chief called Chief? What does this refer to?

## Discussion Question 2

Who is R.P. McMurphy? Why has he come to Chief's ward? What is his health issue? Does he have a real health issue? Why would someone choose to go to a mental hospital instead of a work farm? How does McMurphy shake up the normal routine of the ward?

## Discussion Question 3

Who is Miss Ratched? Why does Chief think she carries instruments of torture in her purse? Does she?

## Vocabulary

Recriminations, ranting, discipline, polishing, queer, warning, jurisdiction, defeated, constitution

# Part 1, Section 2

## Summary

That evening, McMurphy approaches Miss Ratched behind her glass nurse's station and asks her if they could turn down the music that plays constantly over the loud speaker. Miss Ratched refuses, suggesting that if they turn it down, the patients who are hard of hearing will not be able to hear it. She claims the music is soothing and everyone should hear it. McMurphy then suggests that those who are not hard of hearing be allowed to move to another room during the day, suggesting the abandoned tub room, but again Miss Ratched refuses, claiming there are not enough attendants to watch two rooms of patients. In an attempt to outsmart Miss Ratched, McMurphy brings the matter up with the doctor at his intake interview the following day and wins the right to use the tub room.

McMurphy is assigned the bed next to Chief. Chief misses getting his nightly sleeping pill because McMurphy frightens the night nurse and makes her forget. For this reason, Chief has odd dreams all night that he believes are real. In the morning, Chief wakes to find McMurphy in a towel, trying to get some toothpaste from the aides. When Miss Ratched comes in, she demands McMurphy get dressed, but he claims his clothes are missing and he has no new ones. Miss Ratched has one of the aides get him some and is shocked when McMurphy takes off the towel and reveals a pair of boxers underneath.

A short time later, McMurphy, the Acutes, and Chief are in the tub room. McMurphy and most of the Acutes are playing cards. McMurphy is winning. McMurphy begins talking about escaping. McMurphy starts asking about ways to get out, but everyone tells him there is no way out. McMurphy then suggests they break a window in the tub room. The patients tell McMurphy that the windows there are not breakable with the chairs or furniture in the room. The attendants showed this to them when they first came to the facility. McMurphy focuses on a control panel for the tubs and suggests it would break the windows. The others say the panel is too heavy to lift. McMurphy bets them he can lift it, but in the end he only cuts his hands.

As the World Series approaches, McMurphy suggests at a group meeting that the time the television is turned on should be changed to afternoons rather than evenings. Miss Ratched refuses, saying that afternoon is work time. However, she allows a vote. McMurphy loses the vote because most of the Acutes are too frightened to vote. Despite this, McMurphy and all the Acutes, as well as Chief, sit down at the time the World Series's first game is due to start even though the television has been turned off at the nurse's station.

## Analysis

The Acutes, the patients who are still able to communicate and participate in social situations, quickly rally around McMurphy and become less introverted around his boisterousness. It is clear the affect McMurphy has on these patients. Before McMurphy, these men were quiet, took their medicine, and never complained. However, McMurphy begins to show them how oppressed they are and encourages them to fight for their rights. This could only lead to trouble for McMurphy.

The novel is set in the sixties. The knowledgeable reader will know that care of mental health patients prior to the sixties was often inhumane. Chief refers to this prior time in his narration, remarking on the intended use of the now abandoned tub room and discussing the restrictions now placed on Miss Ratched that clearly make her unhappy. This suggests to the reader that Miss Ratched can be a cruel woman who believes that mental patients need to be treated cruelly in order to get better. This foreshadows a time in the plot when Miss Ratched will use unconventional means to get her patients to behave.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Miss Ratched resent McMurphy's disruption on the ward? How does she handle it? Why does McMurphy make a bet that he can undermine Miss Ratched?

## Discussion Question 2

What indicates to the reader that Chief might be mentally unstable? How do his dreams and other perceptions underscore this idea? How does this affect Chief's ability to tell an accurate story to the reader?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does McMurphy want to see the World Series? Who supports this desire? Who does not? How does this set up tension on the ward?

## Vocabulary

majority, relinquishing, evidence, important, proposing, revote, purpose, grievances, adequate.



## Part 2

### Summary

Miss Ratched has called a meeting of the staff to discuss McMurphy. Chief suspects that Miss Ratched wants McMurphy to undergo electroshock therapy. For this reason, Chief goes to the meeting to clean the room as he does each time they have a meeting. The staff still thinks Chief is deaf, so they speak openly around him. The meeting proceeds as Chief expected, with most of the staff suggesting McMurphy have electroshock therapy. However, Miss Ratched says that she does not want McMurphy to have the therapy because she is concerned that by punishing McMurphy now, they will make him something of a hero to the other patients and encourage the continuing disruption. For this reason, Miss Ratched convinces everyone to wait and try to control McMurphy in other ways.

Over the next few weeks, McMurphy continues to be outrageous, refusing to clean the latrine properly and leaving notes for Miss Ratched under the rim of the toilet bowl. McMurphy also continues to fight for patient rights at the daily meetings, fighting the rule that says a patient cannot leave the ward without eight other patients or the fact that Miss Ratched has been rationing their cigarettes because the Acutes have been gambling with them.

One day at occupational therapy, McMurphy begins talking with the patient who acts as the lifeguard. This man, a football player with a head injury that has left him unpredictable and violent, tells McMurphy that he thinks serving a sentence out at a work farm over a hospital is better because the staff could always extend his commitment if they feel it is necessary. McMurphy had not known this and begins to realize that Miss Ratched could make him stay much longer than the few months he had left on his sentence.

McMurphy begins behaving on the ward and at the meetings. The other patients are confused by his sudden change in behavior. One day, one of the Acutes named Sefelt, has a seizure, and the nurse accuses him of not taking his pills. Another day, the Acutes are at the library when Harding receives a visit from his wife. It is clear to the reader and McMurphy that this young woman is sexually promiscuous and cares little for her husband. A few weeks later, the patients are taken to another section of the hospital to have x-rays. While waiting their turns, the other Acutes tell McMurphy that most of them are there voluntarily. McMurphy is shocked by this news. Back on the ward during the daily meeting, Miss Ratched announces they have decided to take away the privilege of the tub room as punishment for the patients' revolt over the World Series games. McMurphy stands, walks to the glass nurse's station, and breaks a window to help himself to his own cigarettes.

## Analysis

McMurphy has made a significant change on the ward where Chief lives. The other patients have come alive around him, making demands for themselves and getting out of bed each day with a purpose. Even Chief has begun to think clearer and to acknowledge some of the things in his head that are not really there. It is clear that what these patients have needed was some change and compassion. Many of these patients are clearly not mentally ill, but they suffer from things like depression, epilepsy, and brain damage from injuries. These patients should be treated in a different way and would be in the modern world. In this time period, however, it was common to lock these people away from society for many years.

McMurphy learns that Miss Ratched has a big say in whether his commitment to the hospital will be lengthened or not. This makes him realize that he is not doing himself any favors by making the nurse his enemy. For this reason, McMurphy begins to behave the way he is expected to, much to the disappointment of the men around him. By doing this, McMurphy is better able to observe what is going on around him. He is able to see the things that are wrong in the treatment of these patients. Therefore, when he learns that most of the patients are voluntary commitments, he is shocked. This knowledge inspires McMurphy to begin fighting the system again, but not for himself or for fun. He wants to help the people he has begun to think of as friends.

## Discussion Question 1

What is a commitment to a mental hospital? What is a voluntary admission? What is the difference? Why does McMurphy think that most of the patients are committed? Are they? Why does this information surprise McMurphy?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does McMurphy start acting nice to Miss Ratched and stops standing up for patient rights at the meetings? What does this say about McMurphy's priorities? What changes McMurphy's mind?

## Discussion Question 3

What is epilepsy? Why does Sefelt have a seizure? Why does the nurse blame him for it? Why does this disorder have Sefelt and Fredrickson in the mental hospital? What treatment are they given for it? Could this be handled in the outside world?

## Vocabulary

Brawling, gambler, delirious, discipline, privilege, rebellion, consideration, features, establish, committed, convertible, technicians, gripes, forgotten, solution, mental health, machinery, compassion, mercy, buzzards, discharged.

## Part 3

### Summary

McMurphy begins to plan a fishing trip for the patients. McMurphy claims to have two aunts coming to escort the patients. They have already rented a boat. McMurphy needs nine others in addition to himself to go. However, he has trouble getting the others to sign up because Miss Ratched keeps posting news stories about the dangerous seas that season. On the night before the trip, McMurphy and Chief wake to the sound of one of the aides scraping gum from under Chief's bed. After the aide leaves, McMurphy begins talking to Chief and is surprised when Chief answers back. McMurphy convinces Chief to go on the fishing trip with him. The next morning, McMurphy convinces George, another patient, to go along, making it ten. At one time, George was actually a fishing boat captain.

Only one aunt who will accompany the men shows up, and she is late. This leaves them short of a vehicle to take all the patients. McMurphy needs to find another vehicle before Miss Ratched can put an end to the trip. Finally, McMurphy talks the doctor into going along with his car. The patients pile into the two cars and head out, stopping less than a mile from the hospital to get gas. At first, the gas station attendant does not want to serve them because he can see they are from the hospital, but McMurphy stands up to him and convinces him to serve them. This lifts the spirits of the men, and they have a marvelous time as they drive to the harbor.

At the harbor, McMurphy is told by the ship's owner that the patients cannot board the boat until he has a written release of liability from each of their families. McMurphy takes the man into the office and then rushes off, getting all the men on the boat and taking off before the owner can discover he has been tricked. George takes the boat to a prime fishing area. Soon, all the men are catching one fish after another. They have a wonderful time. When they return to the harbor, they find the police waiting for them; but, McMurphy manages to talk their way out of it. Billy, one of the younger patients, flirts with McMurphy's girl on the way home. McMurphy takes a drive down memory lane by driving past the house where he grew up.

### Analysis

McMurphy has picked a fight with Miss Ratched, and she tries to fight back by making the patients think badly of McMurphy. However, it does not work because McMurphy has become something of a hero to the men. McMurphy manages to arrange a fishing trip for the group, the first time many of them have even left the hospital in several years. It is a very exciting trip with McMurphy standing up for the men several times, making them feel big and important. McMurphy is showing these men what it is like to be a man in the real world. Many of them admire him for it, especially Chief.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does McMurphy arrange a fishing trip for the patients of his ward? Why do many of the men refuse to go? Why does McMurphy invite Chief to go along? Are McMurphy and Chief friends?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Chief choose McMurphy to be the first person he speaks to in many years? Why has Chief pretended to be deaf all these years? What does this stem from? Why does Chief feel small? Why does McMurphy promise to help him grow to his full height again?

## Discussion Question 3

Who is Candy? Why did McMurphy claim her as his aunt? Why does McMurphy need Candy to help with the fishing trip? Who takes a special liking to Candy during the trip? For what reason?

## Vocabulary

Expedition, conquering, excitement, insisted, appeared, opposite, coloring, forward, looming, rudder, loafers, collapsed, painful, pressure, exception, underfoot, cranking, assistance, flickered, straight, scales, torpedo, direction, scattering.

## Part 4

### Summary

After the fishing trip, Miss Ratched begins to spread rumors that McMurphy has been stealing money from the patients by gambling with them while knowing they cannot play cards as well as he can. Miss Ratched tells the patients that McMurphy is only out to better himself, not to help anyone else. Miss Ratched even holds a daily meeting without McMurphy present to discuss his behavior and selfish motivations. Miss Ratched soon has most of the men questioning McMurphy's motives.

One day, the attendants take a group of the patients into the shower room to treat them for parasites that Miss Ratched is convinced they must have picked up while on the fishing trip. When the attendant approaches George, he refuses to allow them to touch him with the salve they are using. When the attendant pushes George and upsets him, McMurphy steps in to protect him. A fight breaks out between McMurphy and the attendants. Chief joins in, and two attendants end up seriously injured. McMurphy and Chief are taken up to the disturbed ward where they find a much more compassionate nurse in attendance.

On the first morning on the disturbed ward, McMurphy and Chief are taken to have electroshock therapy. Chief feels guilty for McMurphy having to go through it, but McMurphy faces it bravely. Chief is moved back to his own ward soon after the treatment, but McMurphy is forced to have the treatment over and over again because he refuses to be remorseful. Eventually McMurphy returns to the ward. The other patients, especially Harding, want McMurphy to escape so that he will not be tortured by Miss Ratched anymore. However, the night McMurphy returns to the ward happens to be the same night he has arranged for Candy to come and spend the night with Billy.

Candy arrives late in the night and brings with her a friend. The two ladies have also brought a large amount of alcohol. The men decide the alcohol would go better with the cough syrup kept in the medicine room, so they convince the night attendant to help them break into the medicine room. The men become very drunk and very rowdy. Sefelt has a seizure while sharing an intimate moment with Candy's friend. Candy and Billy then go into the solitary confinement room to be alone. Toward dawn, Harding sobers enough to try to convince McMurphy to leave with the girls. Harding assures him that no one ever goes looking for mental hospital escapees and by leaving, McMurphy will keep the blame from falling on any of the other patients. McMurphy agrees, but insists on sleeping for a few hours first.

The patients all oversleep and are still sleeping when Miss Ratched arrives. Miss Ratched is shocked by what she sees. She rounds up the patients and the attendant. She insists on knowing what has happened. No one tells her. Miss Ratched misses Billy and goes in search of him, finally locating him in the solitary confinement room. Miss Ratched is shocked by what she sees and threatens to tell Billy's mother, who is a



receptionist at the hospital and a good friend of Miss Ratched. Billy becomes distraught. Miss Ratched instructs him to wait in the doctor's office.

When the doctor arrives, Miss Ratched sends him to speak to Billy. The doctor finds Billy has committed suicide. Miss Ratched openly accuses McMurphy of being responsible for Billy's death. McMurphy attacks Miss Ratched by breaking the glass of her nurse's station again and attempting to strangle her.

McMurphy is taken away. Several of the patients begin to sign themselves out against medical advice, including Harding, Sefelt, and Fredrickson. The rest worry and wonder about McMurphy. Finally, McMurphy returns to the ward, but it is clear he has had a lobotomy. McMurphy cannot communicate, and Chief knows he will probably remain in this vegetative state for the rest of his life. For this reason, Chief smothers McMurphy with a pillow and then, on the advice of another patient, escapes the ward by throwing the control panel at the window in the tub room.

## Analysis

McMurphy continues to be a problem for Miss Ratched, causing her to begin a campaign of misinformation against him to try to get the other patients to stop looking up to him. It begins to work. Some of the patients begin to wonder if McMurphy cares about them or is just trying to have some fun while locked up. In the end, however, McMurphy proves his loyalty to the men by standing up for George and taking multiple electroshock therapy sessions as a result.

Clearly, McMurphy has a good heart. He is trying to give these patients what the staff does not, a sense of self-worth and some compassion. However, the staff has all the power, and McMurphy soon discovers that fact when he is caught having thrown a party for the patients that results in one patient committing suicide. McMurphy is given a lobotomy because of his uncontrollable behavior. This operation takes away McMurphy's wonderful personality and his free will. McMurphy is no longer the same man. He has been transformed into a Chronic. A Chronic is a patient who is little more than a vegetable. For this reason, Chief kills him.

McMurphy's failure at trying to lessen his punishment by going to a mental hospital and then attempting to make things better for the patients there has taught many of the other patients what it means to live. Many of the patients check themselves out of the hospital after McMurphy disappears. Even Chief, the narrator, breaks himself out of the hospital and returns to the world to try and start fresh. The reader has to wonder, however, if this unreliable narrator is telling the whole story of McMurphy's death and his own impact on society.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Miss Ratched begin to tell the patients about McMurphy? For what reason? Why does she purposely do this at a time when McMurphy is not around to defend

himself? Is what she says about McMurphy true? Is it the whole story? How does it impact the way the patients see McMurphy?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does McMurphy attack two of the attendants on his ward? What is the result? What is electroshock therapy? Why is McMurphy administered this treatment again and again? What is the intended result? What does the nurse on disturbed say about Miss Ratched? What does this suggest about Miss Ratched's way of treating her patients?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does McMurphy throw a party on his ward? Why does he not escape during the several opportunities presented to him? How might things have been different if McMurphy had escaped when given the chance? What happens to Billy? Why? Whose fault is it?

## **Vocabulary**

Latrine, supervisor, furious, medicine, temperature, label, codeine, coloring, phrenic, phobic, wandering, daydreams, stingy, provocative, pleasant, surprised, activity, embarrassed, overheard, peaked, understood, technicians, treatments, electroshock treatment, disturbed.



# Characters

## Chief Bromden

Chief Bromden is the narrator of the novel. Chief is the son of an Indian chief who was pressured into making the decision to sell their ancestry homes in favor of a dam the government wanted to build on their property. In the aftermath of this sale, Chief's father became an alcoholic. This had a profound impact on Chief's life.

Chief has lived in the mental hospital for longer than all of the other patients. The reader never learns why Chief is in the hospital, but it is clear from his narration that Chief has delusions. These delusions, however, appear to get better the more time he spends with McMurphy. At the same time, everyone believes that Chief is deaf and mute because he never speaks and he appears to not hear when people talk to him. This is actually a manifestation of Chief's mental disorder, as Chief feels that no one sees him, hears him, or notices him.

Chief becomes fascinated with McMurphy from his first days there. It is to McMurphy that Chief says his first words in years. Chief admires McMurphy and comes to think of him as a friend. In the end, when McMurphy is lobotomized, Chief feels he is doing McMurphy a favor when he kills him with a pillow. Chief then escapes the mental hospital, confident no one will ever care enough to chase after him.

## R.P. McMurphy

McMurphy is a gambler and petty criminal who has found himself serving six months on a work farm. McMurphy decides the work farm is too hard for him and decides a mental hospital would be better, so he pretends to have a psychotic break. However, McMurphy discovers that the mental hospital is not as easy as he had thought.

McMurphy arrives at the hospital determined to have a good time and make the head nurse bow to him. Unfortunately, McMurphy does not realize how much power the head nurse has over his ability to leave the hospital. When McMurphy learns this, he begins to behave, but the realization that most of the patients are in the hospital of their own choosing, he begins to fight the system again. The reader senses that McMurphy feels for these men, and he wants them to have better than their getting. In this way, McMurphy throws away his own future in favor of bringing some sanity to a group of hospitalized mental patients.

In the end, McMurphy makes multiple mistakes, allowing the head nurse to get the better of him. When this happens, McMurphy is given a lobotomy that takes away the man he was and turns him into something of a vegetable. The reader will never know if McMurphy might have recovered some of his old energy and personality because the narrator, Chief Bromden, kills him the night he returns to the ward.

## Harding

Harding is an intelligent man with a social anxiety. Harding is something of a leader among the acute patients on Miss Ratched's ward before McMurphy comes along. When McMurphy comes to the ward and immediately sets out to find the leader so that he can displace him, McMurphy is sent to Harding.

Miss Ratched likes to discuss Harding's case with the other patients during daily meetings. For some reason, Miss Ratched finds it amusing that Harding feels inadequate with his young wife and that he feels that his wife has been unfaithful to him. This seems to be a strong basis for why Harding felt the need to commit himself to the mental hospital. The reader later meets Harding's wife and finds her to be promiscuous and unkind toward Harding, giving him just cause to feel as he does.

Harding becomes more of a leader under McMurphy than he was before McMurphy because McMurphy gives him confidence that was missing before. Therefore, at the end when McMurphy leads a party that destroys much of the ward, it is Harding that comes up with a plan to hide the evidence and get McMurphy out of harm's way. Unfortunately, McMurphy does not take Harding's advice. In the end, Harding checks himself out of the hospital.

## Billy Bibbit

At thirty years old, Billy Bibbit is the youngest patient on Miss Ratched's ward. Billy's mother is a good friend of Miss Ratched's and a receptionist at the hospital. It seems that Billy's mother allows Miss Ratched to talk her into placing Billy in the hospital although he seems to have nothing more than a mild social anxiety brought on by his relationship with his mother.

Billy becomes close to McMurphy during his time on the ward. Billy is shy, but he admires McMurphy's strength and social confidence. When McMurphy suggests the fishing trip, Billy is one of the first to sign up. During the trip, Billy meets Candy and falls quickly in love with her. For this reason, McMurphy arranges for Candy to come spend the night on the ward in order to spend time with Billy. Unfortunately, Miss Ratched catches Billy and Candy together. Afterward, Miss Ratched threatens to tell Billy's mother, Billy commits suicide.

## Miss Ratched

Miss Ratched is the head nurse on the ward where Chief and McMurphy are assigned. Miss Ratched was a nurse in World War II and got the job at the hospital through a friend from the war. Miss Ratched has worked for the hospital for more than twenty years. For this reason, Miss Ratched began her career in a time when care for the mentally challenged was less than compassionate. Times have changed, but Miss Ratched is having a hard time changing with them. Miss Ratched often punishes



patients by sending them to have electroshock therapy or by recommending them for a lobotomy.

Miss Ratched is the supreme commander of the ward where the main characters live. She is not pleased to have her authority challenged by McMurphy. She tries to outsmart McMurphy every step of the way, but he manages to stay ahead of her, partly because he quickly wins the trust and affection of the other patients and the trust of the doctor. However, Miss Ratched has the final say when McMurphy is lobotomized for physically attacking her in the wake of Billy Bibbit's suicide.

## Washington

Washington is one of the attendants who works on Miss Ratched's ward. Washington and his friends often torture the patients with Miss Ratched's blessing. McMurphy comes up against Washington on several occasions, most notably in the showers when Washington tries to force George to accept a check and some salve for parasites after the fishing trip. McMurphy and Washington fight, resulting in injuries for Washington.

## Candy

Candy is a friend of McMurphy's. Candy is a prostitute McMurphy knew before he was sent away to the work camp. McMurphy enlists Candy's help with the fishing trip, telling Miss Ratched that Candy is his aunt and she will be escorting them. When McMurphy discovers how much Billy likes Candy, he arranges for Candy to come spend the night with Billy.

## Cheswick

Cheswick is one of the patients on Miss Ratched's ward. Cheswick is the first to befriend McMurphy, and he spends most of his time in McMurphy's company, supporting McMurphy in all of his crazy schemes. Unfortunately, Cheswick dies not long after McMurphy comes to the ward, but there is little explanation as to the manner of death. The reader suspects Cheswick committed suicide.

## George

George is one of the patients on Miss Ratched's ward. George has a cleanliness fetish that causes him to be obsessed with dirt and avoiding dirt. George was once a captain of a fishing boat. When McMurphy learns of George's experiences with fishing, he talks him into going along on the fishing trip. George ends up piloting the boat for the group when the owner refuses to allow the patients on board without a waiver of liability. Later, when George balks at having his body invaded by a salve to kill parasites, McMurphy comes to his defense and ends up fighting with two of the attendants alongside Chief.

## Mr. Turkle

Mr. Turkle is the night time attendant, a man who comes in to watch over the patients while they are sleeping. Mr. Turkle spends most of his nights cleaning the ward. On the night McMurphy arranges for Candy to come spend the night with Billy, he pays Mr. Turkle to let her in and keep her visit secret. However, they all become so drunk that they never clean up their mess or make any attempt to disguise what happened during the night. Mr. Turkle loses his job over the situation.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Control Panel

There is a control panel in the tub room of the ward that controls the water flow into the bathtubs that were once intended to be used as punishment. This control panel is so heavy that McMurphy cannot lift it. At the end of the novel, Chief not only lifts the control panel, he breaks a window with it to escape.

## Ledger

Miss Ratched has a ledger that she encourages the patients to write in about the things they have heard other patients discuss. The overheard discussions are then used as topics at daily meetings. These topics are often outrageous or highly personal. The person who writes the notes can have special privileges as a result. Most of these entries stop after McMurphy comes.

## The Machinery

Chief speaks often at the beginning of the novel about the machinery in the walls and the machinery implanted in each patient that make the hospital function. Chief was once an engineering student. These delusions must come from his past experiences.

## The Fog

Chief refers to the fog a few times at the beginning of the novel. The fog is artificially made. It encompasses Chief at times while he is in the hospital. Chief talks about how he once would lose himself in the fog for days at a time. When McMurphy comes, he begins to fight the fog. The reader might assume the fog is actually the mental fog of the medications Chief and the other patients are often given at the hospital.

## Occupational Therapy

OT, or occupational therapy, is a type of therapy that has been newly implemented in the hospital. During OT, the patients often go to the swimming pool to exercise.

## Chest X-Ray

Miss Ratched orders all the patients on her ward to have chest x-rays to rule out tuberculosis. It is while waiting for these x-rays that McMurphy learns most of the men are voluntary admissions at the hospital.

## **Electroshock Therapy**

Electroshock therapy is a therapy by which electricity is sent through the brain of a mental patient in the hopes of offering temporary relief for difficult behavior by resetting the brain. Both McMurphy and Chief receive this treatment as punishment for fighting with the attendants in the showers.

## **Lobotomy**

A lobotomy is a surgery where part of the brain is damaged or removed in order to alter a patient's behavior. McMurphy has this operation at the end of the novel.

## **World Series**

Shortly after McMurphy comes to the hospital, the World Series begins. McMurphy is shocked to learn that they will not be allowed to watch it and brings up the issue at a daily meeting in hopes of convincing Miss Ratched to change the time at which the television is turned on. When Miss Ratched refuses to adjust the rules, McMurphy leads a revolt against the staff by arranging a sit in to block the television screen.

## **The Lark**

The Lark is the name of the boat McMurphy has arranged for himself and nine other mental patients to use for a fishing trip.

# Settings

## Hospital

Most of the novel takes place in one ward in a hospital. This ward is where the stable mental patients are kept. The ward is run by a nurse named Miss Ratched. Miss Ratched was trained during the time when care of the mentally disturbed was less than compassionate. She enjoys still using these methods when she can get away with it. Many of the patients are over medicated and given too many electroshock treatments and/or lobotomies.

## Tub Room

The tub room is an unused room on the ward that was originally designed for use as a water torture room. The room is not used, so McMurphy manages to convince the doctor it would be good for the patients to open the room for use as a game room. It is from this room that Chief later escapes the hospital.

## Disturbed Ward

The disturbed ward is the ward directly above Miss Ratched's ward. This is where the mental patients who have become unmanageable are sent. McMurphy and Chief are sent to this ward after a fight with the attendants. The nurse on this ward is younger and much more sympathetic to the men than Miss Ratched, but she has no power to see Miss Ratched replaced.

# Themes and Motifs

## Treatment of the Mentally Ill

This novel takes place in a mental ward. The patients on this ward are often mistreated and over medicated. Some of the patients on the ward are not really mentally ill, but they have medical conditions that cause them to behave oddly, such as the two men who have epilepsy. One man comes to this ward with no mental disease at all, but is treated as though he is psychotic, eventually suffering a full lobotomy.

The novel attempts to address changes that have taken place in the care of the mentally ill in recent years to the publication. The mentally ill were often hidden away and treated like animals in the early years of the previous century. As time passed, people began to learn more about the treatment of mental illness and attempt to come up with more humane ways of dealing with it. For this reason, the mental ward where this novel takes place has recently undergone a great number of changes. However, the woman in charge of the ward is still a part of that previous time, and she tends to want to do things the old ways instead of the new.

This novel seems to show the reader how easily it would be for one person who stands out from others to change the way everyone else perceives the world around them. Yet, that person can suffer the worst society has to give. This one man changes the patients on the mental ward, showing them there is more to life than the fears that drove them there. However, he pays for this with his own life. For this reason, and those mentioned above, treatment of the mentally ill is a theme of the novel.

## Friendship

McMurphy develops a friendship with each of the men he comes to be locked up with on the mental ward. McMurphy pulls these men out of their own heads and engages them in card games, practical jokes, and rebellion against the leadership of the hospital. By doing this, McMurphy not only draws these men out of their shells, he makes friends with them, giving them something many of these men have never really had before.

The most important friendship in this novel is the one that develops between Chief and McMurphy. Chief is a man who has felt invisible most of his life. Chief feels as though he has shrunk from his great height to that of a puny man that no one can see. To add fuel to Chief's sense of invisibility is the fact that everyone believes him to be deaf and mute. No one has ever bothered to find out if this is true, they just assume.

When McMurphy comes to the ward, Chief begins watching him and finds him fascinating. Therefore, when Chief decides to begin talking again, he turns to McMurphy. McMurphy is bigger than life, and this has helped draw Chief out of himself and back into the real world. Chief begins having fewer delusions and begins to connect with the real world again. Friendship is an important theme of the novel.



## Government Oppression

When Chief was a child, the government decided it wanted to buy his ancestral lands. They began coming to his home, harassing his father, who happened to be the tribal chief. They encouraged the tribe members to take their money and leave their land. Chief's father fought this intrusion onto his lands, but in the end even his own people turned against him. Chief's father became an alcoholic in his depression over losing the ancestral lands.

When Chief is an adult, he becomes committed to a mental ward at a hospital for delusions. Chief stays in the hospital so long that he has been there longer than any of the other patients. When McMurphy comes, he sees in McMurphy some of the strength and determination he saw in his own father. Chief also sees the role of the government oppressors in Miss Ratched, the head nurse of the ward. McMurphy fights the oppression for as long as he can, but in the end he loses.

For Chief, the government has taken everything he has to give and then some. Chief lost his ancestral home and his father, as well as his neighbors and friends. In this loss, Chief began to feel smaller and smaller until he was convinced that he had physically shrunk down to near invisibility. McMurphy came along and helped Chief regain his old stature. In this way, they beat the oppression that has been pushing Chief down all his life. For this reason, government oppression is a theme of the novel.

# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. The narrator is Chief Bromden, a patient on Miss Ratched's ward in a state run hospital. Chief is the son of an Indian chief and his white wife. Chief watched as the government bought up his father's ancestral home and caused his father to turn to alcoholism. Chief has been in the mental hospital for nearly twenty years and continues to have delusions as the novel begins.

The point of view of this novel has the interesting twist of being written from the mind of a mentally ill man. The reader cannot be sure what part of the narration is true and what part of it is part of the delusions of the narrator. There are parts that are clearly delusions, such as the times when Chief talks about the machinery in the wall that runs the place or the fog that smothers everything on the ward for days at a time. However, there are other parts of the narration that are logical, but with elements of bizarre that leave the reader wondering how much is true and how much is simply delusion. This makes the novel more interesting, making the point of view work well with the plot.

## Language and Meaning

The main character of the novel is a young Indian man who has some college education. For this reason, the highly sophisticated language of the novel is appropriate to his education level. The language is filled with strong, sophisticated language, a language that is that of an educated person. However, it is also filled with slang that comes from the speech of some of the other characters who are less educated than the narrator.

The language works with the plot because it is authentic to the characters. It is sophisticated enough to leave the reader with little doubt about the education level of the main characters. However, it is simple enough so that the reader does not feel intimidated. It does not seem too perfect for a bunch of men living in a mental ward at a state hospital.

## Structure

The novel is divided into four parts. Each part is separated into different sections, but each section does not have a chapter or section name to differentiate itself from other parts. For the most part, the story is narrated with dialogue scattered throughout. It is told from the point of view of a mental patient who is looking back on events that have already happened, giving the reader a sense of foreshadowing throughout the novel.

The novel has one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows the antics of a petty criminal who comes to be committed on a mental ward in hopes of having an easier sentence. One of the subplots follows McMurphy's attempts to get the better of Miss Ratched. Another subplot follows the developing friendship between McMurphy and Chief. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.

## Quotes

They don't bother not talking out loud about their hate secrets when I'm nearby because they think I'm deaf and dumb.

-- Chief (Part 1 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** This quote describes how Chief is treated on the ward due to the fact that everyone believes him to be deaf, playing into his own delusions.

But there are some of us Chronics that the staff made a couple of mistakes on years back, some of us who were Acutes when we came in, and got changed over.

-- Chief (Part 1 paragraph 51)

**Importance:** This quote illustrates how the patients are treated. Chief is informing the reader that some of the Chronics are that way because of the treatment they received for their mental illnesses. This also foreshadows what happens to McMurphy at the end of the novel.

Nobody's sure if this barrel-chested man with the scar and the wild grin is play-acting or if he's crazy enough to be just like he talks, or both, but they are all beginning to get a big kick out of going along with him.

-- Chief (Part 1 paragraph 64)

**Importance:** This describes the reaction of the other patients to McMurphy, the charismatic new patient.

The Big Nurse tends to get real put out if something keeps her outfit from running like a smooth, accurate, precision-made machine.

-- Chief (Part 1 paragraph 118)

**Importance:** This quote describes Miss Ratched, the head of the ward where Chief lives. This quote shows how tough Miss Ratched can be. It also alludes to her initial reaction to McMurphy.

There's no more fog anyplace.

-- Chief (Part 2 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This illustrates that Chief is beginning to come out of the fog of mental illness and the drugs they keep him on to control it. Chief's mind is becoming clear, and his narration begins to reflect it.

The length of time he spends in this hospital is entirely up to us.

-- Miss Ratched (Part 2 paragraph 61)

**Importance:** This illustrates the amount of control the staff has over the patients and Miss Ratched's clear understanding of this power. It is a threat to McMurphy.

After McMurphy doesn't stand up for us any longer, some of the Acutes talk and say he's still outsmarting the Big Nurse, say that he worried she was about to send him to Disturbed and decided to toe the line for a while, not give her any reason.

-- Chief (Part 2 paragraph 137)

**Importance:** This quote is Chief's understanding of the reaction of the other patients when McMurphy suddenly stops making trouble and behaves in front of Miss Ratched.

For one thing, she wasn't about to recommend release; the fight could go on as long as she wanted, till he made a mistake or till he just gave out, or until she could come up with some new tactic that would put her back on top in everybody's eyes.

-- Chief (Part 3 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This is Chief's assessment of the new battle that has begun between Miss Ratched and McMurphy as he begins testing her patience one more and she refuses to respond.

Not a one of the three acts like they heard a thing I said; in fact they're all looking off from me like they'd as soon I wasn't there at all.

-- Chief (Part 3 paragraph 39)

**Importance:** This is part of a memory Chief has of some white officials who come to his childhood home to make an offer to buy the Indian land to build a dam. This is the beginning of Chief's feeling that no one can see him, that he is invisible.

It didn't sound like much because my throat was rusty and my tongue creaked. He told me I sounded a little out of practice and laughed at that. I tried to laugh with him, but it was a squawking sound, like a pullet trying to crow. It sounded more like crying than laughing.

-- Chief (Part 3 paragraph 76)

**Importance:** This is Chief describing the first time he speaks to McMurphy, revealing for the first time in years that he is neither mute nor deaf.

She knew that people, being like they are, sooner or later are going to draw back a ways from somebody who seems to be giving a little more than ordinary, from Santa Claus and missionaries and men donating funds to worthy causes, and begin to wonder: What's in it for them?

-- Chief (Part 4 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** This is how Chief describes Miss Ratched's scheme to discredit McMurphy in the eyes of the other patients.

I was sure of only one thing: he wouldn't have left something like that sit there in the day room with his name tacked on it for twenty or thirty years so the Big Nurse could use it as an example of what can happen if you buck the system. I was sure of that.

-- Chief (Part 4 paragraph 340)

**Importance:** This is how Chief sees McMurphy after his lobotomy. Chief makes the decision to kill McMurphy based on this assessment of his current situation.