

“It’s not a will-power thing any more when they get to my temples. It’s a ... button, pushed, says Air Raid Air Raid, turns me on so loud it’s like no sound, everybody yelling at me, hands over their ears from behind a glass wall, faces working around in talk circles but no sound from the mouths. My sound soaks up all other sound. 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. I can’t see six inches in front of me through the fog...” (Kesey, 7)

Throughout the beginning of this book up until this point, we knew that Bromden was instituted for *something*, but we didn’t know what exactly. As such, we --- or at least I --- are likely to think of him as fully sane at first. However, at this moment, you realize the extent of his mental illness, it’s acuity, and general presence. This adds the first real depth --- in my opinion --- to Bromden’s character, past the flatter, less “deep” character we’ve been presented with in the beginning. This is the first true defining moment of his character, where you get a sight into his personality deeper than “faking being deaf and dumb.”

“We got to install an Indwelling Curiosity Cutout in some nosy booger. Hurry-up job, she says, and I’m not even sure we got one of the gizmos in stock.” (Kesey, 27)

We’re starting to see Bromden’s symbolic delusions of hidden machinery manifest more apparently. Additionally, this passage further plays with the idea of Bromden as an unreliable narrator. While there is never anything that’s a truly false detail that isn’t easily distinguishable from Bromden’s delusions, the reader does not know of this, forming an idea of apprehension.

The flock gets sight of a spot of blood on some chicken and they all go to peckin’ at it, see, till they rip the chicken to shreds, blood and bones and feathers. But usually a couple of the flock gets spotted in the fracas, then it’s their turn. And a few more gets spots and gets pecked to death, and more and more. Oh, a peckin’ party can wipe out the whole flock in a matter of a few hours, buddy, I seen it. A mighty awesome sight. The only way to prevent it—with chickens—is to clip blinders on them. So’s they can’t see. (Kesey, 44)

His whole body shakes with the strain as he tries to lift something he knows he can’t lift, something everybody knows he can’t lift. But, for just a second, when we hear the cement grind at our feet, we think, by golly, he might do it. Then his breath explodes out of him, and he falls back limp against the wall. (Kesey, 98)

“I believe if he were sent to Disturbed now it would be exactly what the patients would expect. He would be a martyr to them. They would never be given the opportunity to see that this man is not an - as you put it, Mr. Gideon - ‘extraordinary person.’” (Kesey, 121)

This quote from Nurse Ratched is primarily relevant simply per the fact that it’s a continuation for much of the rest of the plot. The author is in a tricky situation before the staff meeting, in that McMurphy has gotten away with much more than he should be able to. However, through this staff meeting comes exposition on Nurse Ratched’s “master plan” to strip down McMurphy and expose him as merely mortal to the other patients, as opposed to the godlike figure they see him as. This is one of the first time we’ve seen a soliloquy from the Nurse that isn’t in earshot of any of the patients or lower level employees; hearing insight into her inner thoughts both gives exposition on the plot and her character.

“Climbs on the table without any help and spreads his arms out to fit the shadow. A switch snaps the clasps on his wrists, ankles, clamping him into the shadow... Put on those things like headphones, crown of silver thorns over the graphite at his temples. They try to hush his singing with a piece of rubber hose for him to bite on.” (Kesey, 218)

This is an excerpt from the (long) electroshock scene. McMurphy jokes of a crown of thorns, a biblical reference. However, the references to the story of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ are more widespread than just this. Physically, McMurphy “spreads his arms out to fit the shadow,” a detail meant to further allude to a crucifixion. He’s essentially sacrificing himself, being made an example of in front of the patients in an attempt to encourage them to rebel, with the spirit of his philosophy living on even after his death. For instance, Bromden directly attributes his ability to escape to McMurphy’s guidance. One could even link the motif of McMurphy’s continuous return from the electroshock as a slight allusion to the story of Jesus’s resurrection. However, this is very much a stretch.

“The swelling had gone down enough in the eyes that they were open; they stared into the full light of the moon, open and undreaming, glazed from being open so long without blinking until they were like smudged fuses in a fuse box. “ (Kesey, 249)

This quick simile is, in my opinion, a pretty important detail. It’s actually the first ever time (to my knowledge) that Bromden has referred to McMurphy using any sort of likening to mechanical parts or machinery. He’s continuously described the patients as being essentially just cogs in the machine --- what he calls the Combine --- and following rigid instructions and constraints. However, he always viewed McMurphy as an independent, free body, sometimes reacting with wonder as to how he has remained independent from “the Combine” his entire life, that is to say, how he has remained his own man. Here, post-lobotomy, the McMurphy has turned into a machine in the eyes of Bromden, signifying the departure of the “McMurphy” from McMurphy; asphyxiating him now would be no different from asphyxiating a vegetable rather than the legendary McMurphy.

“I remember the fingers were thick and strong closing over mine, and my hand commenced to feel peculiar and went to swelling up out there on my stick of an arm, like he was transmitting his own blood into it. It rang with blood and power: It blowed up near as big as his, I remember ...” (Kesey, 19)

More biblical/Jesus references! In fact, in retrospect, we get them from the very scene that McMurphy is introduced. Touching Bromden, there is a very definite indication of McMurphy almost strengthening Bromden. We also start to notice the symbolism of Bromden’s size. Despite being much physically larger than McMurphy, Bromden sees himself as smaller, and only growing bigger under McMurphy’s direct influence. There are many references in the bible to Jesus’s touch healing the sick; McMurphy’s touch strengthening Bromden is shown to be a direct allusion once we factor in the myriad of other symbolism in the book.

9.

“Mr. McMurphy ... my friend ...

I’m not a chicken, I’m a rabbit. The doctor is a rabbit. Cheswick there is a rabbit. Billy Bibbit is a rabbit. All of us in here are rabbits of varying ages and degrees, hippity-hopping through our Walt Disney world. Oh, don’t misunderstand me, we’re not here because we are rabbits - we’d be rabbits wherever we were - we’re all in here because we can’t adjust to our rabbithood. We need a good strong wolf like the nurse to teach us our place.” (Kesey, 48)

Here, Harding is describing his and the other patients’ current situation. McMurphy has been lambasting them for their lack of autonomy and expression of free will. However, now is when he realizes that they’re content with that being the case. They fully recognize their status as passive, submissive recipients of the Nurse’s will. And they feel comfortable this way! McMurphy wants this to not be the case, and for them to have the seed of rebellion already implanted in them, where there is none. However, this *is* the case, and as such McMurphy feels he must devote himself to freeing the patients from their self-imposed emasculation, marking an important turning point in the book’s plot.

“And we’re all sitting there lined up in front of that blanked-out TV set, watching the gray screen just like we could see the baseball game clear as day, and she’s ranting and screaming behind us. If somebody’d of come in and took a look, men watching a blank TV, a fifty-year-old woman hollering and squealing at the back of their heads about discipline and order and recriminations, they’d of thought the whole bunch was crazy as loons.” (Kesey, 113)

This marks a turning point in the plot. Nurse Ratched realizes that McMurphy isn’t a normal man and won’t be deterred by consequence, punishment, or any tool in Ratched’s normal toolbox. Throughout the rest of the book, her punitive style regarding him shifts fairly drastically.

She rubs and rubs and hails Mary to beat thunder, but the stain stays. She looks in the mirror, sees it's darker'n ever. Finally takes a wire brush used to take paint off boats and scrubs the stain away, puts a nightgown on over the raw, oozing hide, and crawls in bed. But she's too full of the stuff. While she's asleep it rises in her throat and into her mouth, drains out of that corner of her mouth like purple spit and down her throat, over her body. In the morning she sees how she's stained again and somehow she figures it's not really from inside her - how could it be? a good Catholic girl like her? - and she figures it's on account of working evenings among a whole wardful of people like me. It's all our fault, and she's going to get us for it if it's the last thing she does. I wish McMurphy'd wake up and help me." (Kesey, 128)

Personally, I just really like this quote because of the imagery and diction, as well as the undertones by Bromden. He's imagining one of the junior nurses's --- the one with the large birthmark --- routines involving desperately trying to scrub away her imperfections in the name of religion. Believing she wonders how this could happen to *her*, believing that she wants to impart malice on the ward of patients. Bromden's inner sentiments are truly showing here. He's rationalizing his inner sentiments by projecting them onto the junior nurse --- the patients are corrupting her, the staff are out to get them. Finally, he shows his reliance on McMurphy. Overall the imagery is also extremely vivid, and combined with what it speaks about Bromden's character, this passage is important.

"Not a thing but the dorm floor moves, and we're sliding away from the walls and door and the windows of the ward at a hell of a clip - beds, bedstands, and all. The machinery - probably a cog-and-track affair at each corner of the shaft - is greased silent as death. The only sound I hear is the guys breathing, and that drumming under us getting louder the farther down we go. The light of the dorm door five hundred yards back up this hole is nothing but a speck, dusting the square sides of the shaft with a dim powder. It gets dimmer and dimmer till a faraway scream comes echoing down the sides of the shaft - "Stay back!" - and the light goes out altogether." (Kesey, 67)

This is one of Bromden's hallucinations of machinery. This passage is primarily notable due to its extremely, extremely strong imagery. Everything is conjured in a vivid light, and sets a paranoid, claustrophobic tone, leaving the reader emphasizing with Bromden. This also perhaps marks a low point in Bromden's mental health, with it only taking a turn for the better in Part II of the book, but before that, fog and machinery.

"Billy, this girl could not have pulled you in here forcibly." She shook her head. "Understand, I would like to believe something else - for your poor mother's sake." The hand pulled down his cheek, raking long red marks. "She did." He looked around him. "And M-M-McMurphy! He did. And Harding! And the-the-the rest! They t-t-teased me, called me things!" (Kesey, 243)

Let's go back to biblical symbolism! If we're continuing the theme of McMurphy as Jesus, then Billy is obviously Judas, betraying McMurphy the day after his "last supper." Additionally, this plays into the theme of emasculation. Through losing his virginity, Billy has been almost "remasculated" from the effects that being under Nurse Ratched's care imparted. His stutter is gone, and he looks more comfortable and confident. However, Nurse Ratched immediately berates him and strips away his newfound confidence through shaming his sexuality. His stutter returns, and he's newly emasculated once again.

“The ward is a factory for the Combine. It’s for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the churches, the hospital is. When a completed product goes back out into society, all fixed up good as new, better than new sometimes, it brings joy to the Big Nurse’s heart; something that came in all twisted different is now a functioning, adjusted component, a credit to the whole outfit and a marvel to behold.” (Kesey, 31)

Introducing the concept of the Combine and a basis for Bromden’s delusions of a hidden mechanical backing to the world, this passage sets up themes and concepts for lot of the rest of the book. It also sets up Nurse Ratched’s motivation to be a pursuit of uniformity and order.

A guy sitting in the room someplace I can’t see is talking about a guy up on Disturbed killing himself. Old Rawler. Cut both nuts off and bled to death, sitting right on the can in the latrine, half a dozen people in there with him didn’t know it till he fell off to the floor, dead. What makes people so impatient is what I can’t figure; all the guy had to do was wait.” (Kesey, 101)

This passage ties back to the theme of emasculation. Throughout the book, Nurse Ratched is described as a “ball-cutter,” taking men’s confidence, autonomy, self-determination, and many traditionally “masculine” traits. However, Bromden’s comment is probably the more important part, remarking that “all the guy had to do was wait,” implying everyone in the ward eventually has their personality and spirit stripped and removed by the institution, the Combine.