The Dog Chief and the Nature of Mobility in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

(A Scholarly Essay by Cody Fricke)

When considering the state of Native Americans at the time of Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest*, one word immediately comes to mind: estrangement. Torn from their former lives decades before the writing of this novel, the Native American people were forced to abandon their once-proud heritage, forever alienating themselves from the natural world in which they once lived freely. In choosing to provide the narration of his novel from the perspective of not only a Native American, but a Native American inmate of a mental hospital, Kesey is able to place the reader directly into this disheartening perspective. The confinement of the ward is acutely felt through the Chief’s commentary, and as a result, the mobility which has been taken away from his people is at the forefront of the story. Through the use of symbolism, specifically that of a wild dog, the novel brings to light not only the narrator’s call to escape the confines of his prison in favor of the outside world he once knew, but the call of all Native Americans to return to their natural lives and rediscover the mobility which they so desperately crave.

Kesey’s story tells the tale of a group of inmates in a mental ward who find themselves powerless at the hands of the ward’s tyrannical overseer, Nurse Ratched. Although the story’s protagonist would be considered the rebellious and charismatic R.P. McMurphy, the narration is instead from the perspective of “his most devoted disciple, St. Bromden” (McComb 385). In the introduction, the novel almost immediately associates Bromden with the symbol of a wild dog. By comparing the Chief with a lost and fearful animal, Bromden is implied to be wild at heart, much like the wild dog: “A bluetick hound bays out there in the fog, running scared and lost because he can’t see. No tracks on the ground but the ones he’s making, and he sniffs in every direction with his cold red-rubber nose and picks up no scent but his own fear, fear burning down into him like steam” (Kesey 13).
Much like the bluetick hound, Bromden has allowed fear of captivity to take from him one of his innate senses, although it is his speech rather than his sight which is sacrificed. It is important to note that “while Bromden’s disability makes him different, it is not debilitating for him as a narrator, nor, more importantly, as a man” (Leach). This loss of sensory ability due to fear could be likened to that of all Native Americans. Over time, the Native American people, through acclimation into the unforgivingly modern world of the white man, have lost many of their innate abilities which served them for centuries in their former lives, lives which were snatched away, lives deemed vulgar and animalistic: “Kesey looks to dormant Indian values...for answers to problems of modern culture” (Sherwood 402). Bromden states that his self-imposed silence is “gonna roar out of me like floodwaters,” implying that this silence will soon come to an end, and further clarifying that the information which he has been keeping to himself for so long, the story of his estrangement, might very well be thought of by the reader as “too horrible to have really happened,” and furthermore, “too awful to be the truth” (Kesey 13). These passages serve to immediately build tension and excitement for the events which are to unfold in the novel, drawing in the reader’s interest. The novel, by ending the opening section with the idea that Bromden’s story could be considered “the truth even if it didn’t happen,” creates the possibility of the Chief’s story being falsified, yet simultaneously deems this possibility as irrelevant in the grand scheme of the story (13). Through this creation of doubt, the novel calls into question the relevance of the facts of the tale in relation to the underlying themes of isolation and estrangement. Due to the fact that we, the reader, are only being invited into this perspective rather than forced into it like Bromden and so many of his Native American brethren, there will undoubtedly be an air of uncertainty surrounding the validity of his story, regardless of whether this doubt is brought to light through this opening section or not. By
creating the doubt itself, and acknowledging its potential, the novel strengthens its apparent goal: to place the reader into the perspective of a Native American, with the wildness of nature within his heart, who finds himself an alien in the modern world of the white man.

The symbol of the wild dog reappears later on in the book as Bromden gazes out of a window at the natural world surrounding the mental hospital. Upon realizing that he was indeed looking at a dog, Bromden describes it as “a young, gangly mongrel” (142), a stark contrast to the bluetick hound he dreamed of at the beginning of the novel. Rather than associating himself with a proud, beautiful breed of dog, Bromden now associates himself with the mongrel, reflecting the drastic change of perspective from the beginning of the novel, which seemingly takes place following the stories conclusion, and this moment, which finds the Chief in the midst of his incarceration, signifying his self-perceived frailty in the ward, and by extension, in the hands of Nurse Ratched: “Chief Bromden believes he is little, too, what was left in him of fight and stature subdued by a second mother” (Fledler 389). The contrast between the bluetick at the beginning of the novel and this young, gangly mongrel can be likened to the contrast between the proud, elegant Native American people of the old west, an image now only real within the confines of a dream, and the bitter reality of the state of modern Native American culture. Bromden sees the wild dog “sniffing digger squirrel holes, not with a notion to go digging after one but just to get an idea what they were up to at this hour” (143). This passage serves to further develop the theme of estrangement, emphasizing the longing which Bromden has for the simple freedom to explore, the freedom to live on his own terms, the freedom of a wild animal. Through the way these passages detail the Chief’s view of the wild dog, the novel makes the life of a wild dog appear to be more fulfilling than the life of captivity faced not only by Bromden, but by extension, readers can think of the Native American experience as a whole. Kesey makes the most obvious association between Bromden and the wild dog as
the orderlies accost him: “The dog was almost to the rail fence at the edge of the ground when I felt somebody slip up behind me” (143). In this moment, the narrative ties together the lives of Bromden and the wild dog, connecting them inherently and with much purpose. As the dog nears his escape, Bromden is discovered, eliminating his fleeting dream of freedom. By blending these two situations, the escape of the dog and the apprehension of Bromden, into one sentence, the novel creates an association between the two.

The novel eventually reaches the mercy-killing of R.P. McMurphy, the ward’s rebellious leader, at the hands of Chief Bromden, due to the lobotomy which was imposed upon him at the hands of Nurse Ratched: “Chief Bromden, after a mercy killing of his savior, McMurphy, makes a dash for freedom: it is he who flies over the cuckoo’s nest” (Clurman 453). Bromden, through his unwillingness to allow his friend to continue living as a shadow of his former self, reflects the disgust he feels for the seemingly inhumane practices of the ward. The act of this mercy killing could be considered “the defiant assertion of one’s humanity in the face of overwhelming forces that dehumanize and destroy” (Miller 413). This assertion of Bromden’s strength in the face of the cold, cruel sterility of McMurphy’s lobotomy further serves to contrast the inherent innocence and humanity of the Native American people and the culture of the modern white man, and further highlighting the importance of mobility in the novel. When faced with the prospect of his friend being unable to function on his own accord, forever trapped within the confinement of his mind, Bromden decides that death would be a better fate than an existence of complete and total restraint. In killing his friend, Bromden allows him the freedom of mobility which he would have otherwise lost, the mobility which is so sacred to Bromden: “Bromden’s mentor is dead, but Bromden has become a hero who may provide fertility in the land” (Pearson 514).
The final page of Kesey’s novel returns to the idea of the wild dog, morphing it into an even more powerful association with Chief Bromden, through the description of his escape from the ward: “(Panting), I thought for a second about going back and getting Scanlon and some of the others, but then I heard the running squeak of the black boys’ shoes in the hall and I put my hand on the sill and vaulted over the panel, into the moonlight” (272). Bromden’s panting evokes the image of the dog in the mind of the reader, further likening him to the wild animal. An even more blatant connection between Bromden and the dog comes during Bromden’s escape from the ward, stating that he “ran across the grounds in the direction I remembered seeing the dog go, toward the highway (272). Not only is Bromden physically associated with the wild dog, because of his panting, but he even follows the very same path taken by the animal as it escaped towards the highway: “Bromden’s escape from the control of the hospital follows the path of the dog and is pictured as a baptism from the earth” (Pearson 514). This connection between Bromden and the wild dog can be likened to the connection between Native Americans as a whole and the wild, mobile world that once embraced them. Within the confines of the ward, Bromden is essentially a caged animal, but in the outside world, the natural world, Bromden is free. This inherent connection of nature and man is fundamental to Native American culture, and Bromden’s escape down the same path taken by the dog is representative of the need for the Native American people to abandon their reservations and return to the land, the land they once shared with the wild animals. The novel concludes with two powerful sentences that allude back to a previous section of the novel: “Mostly, I’d just like to look over the country around the gorge again, just to bring some of it clear to my mind again. I been away a long time” (272). This conclusion offers yet another association between Bromden and the wild dog, depicting his urge to explore the country around the gorge for no reason other than to remember, much like the dog was sniffing “digger squirrel
holes” earlier in the novel for no reason other than “to get an idea” (143). This meticulous connection between Chief Bromden and the wild dog parallels the relationship between Native Americans and the natural world, a connection that remains relevant even at the very end of his novel.

Chief Bromden’s connection with the symbol of the wild dog throughout the novel reflects an appreciation for the relationship between the Native American people with the natural world, the world from which they have been unmercifully removed. By associating the Chief with a wild animal, the novel illustrates the inherent longing of the Native American people to return to the land; to escape the white-walled seclusion of modern man’s institutions. Kesey’s first person narrative places the reader directly into this perspective, feeling every bit of Bromden’s longing, fear, and sadness. Through careful word use and sentence structure, the images and associations throughout the story take on a life of their own in the mind of the reader. Although the symbol of the dog is far from the only example of this methodological manipulation, it stands out as one of, if not the most powerful example. For Bromden, and Native Americans as a whole, the importance of mobility cannot be denied, nor can the debilitating nature of constraint.

Works Cited


