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ENG 199 - Intro. to Ken Kesey
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Extra Credit Attempt

Sometimes a Great Notion
book versus film

The film version of Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion* focuses more on the logging and certain related aspects, rather than following the Stamper family and their interpersonal relationships more closely. While the book integrates the two successfully (though still leans more toward logging), such an attempt with film would have proved futile because of the technical and aesthetic limitations.

Notwithstanding, there are several Stamper family relationships that the film tries to touch on, including the tension between Hank and Lee, Henry's ruling of the household and Hank's treatment of Viv. Though it is implied that Lee may have feelings for Viv, he doesn't try to pursue a relationship. The true intent behind his return seems unclear, regardless of his revealing his suicide attempt to Viv. Unlike the book, revenge on Hank for sleeping with his mother doesn't appear to be Lee's motive for return; in fact, when the affair comes out into the open, Lee's resentment toward Hank, coupled with the exaggerated age difference between Hank and Lee's mother, makes the scenario seem nothing more than a couple of male ego trips. Lee, his plan for revenge omitted from the film, is reduced to little more than a kid feeling sorry for himself, while Hank figures the entire situation (the affair, Myra's suicide, Lee's unannounced arrival) as one more thing for him to swallow and move on – "Never give an inch."

The film version of *Viv* is just another reminder of the casualties that occur when a book is adapted to film. Though some of the original character's mannerisms and plot actions are similar

to those in the book, changing Viv's nationality as well as omitting her love affair with Lee, thus thwarting the literary ending, not only changes the scope of the character but a significant part of the story, as Lee's aforementioned revenge is nonexistent – sleeping with Viv to get back at Hank – especially since the film's Viv doesn't resemble the real Viv and, therefore, wouldn't resemble Lee's mother (but since the original ending wasn't used in the film, then it wasn't necessary for Lee to mistake his mother for Viv). Viv's film departure makes no sense; it seems that she's never able (or at least willing) to stand up to Hank, yet she leaves him when he needs her. In the book, she refuses to leave because, she says, Hank needs her; she leaves only when Hank tells her to go to Lee.

Such differences between the book and the film versions likely play into the preconceived gender roles of time, which had likely changed by the time the film was made – mainly that a woman was expected to stand by their man, do what he said, provide children and a household and more or less keep her mouth shut, and by the 1970s women were beginning to liberate themselves from the oppression of the household.

One subtle theme in the book is liberating oneself from oppression, which many of the characters accomplish in a variety of ways. Hank refuses to give in to the union's demands and continues logging anyway, regardless of the town's opinion/treatment of him and his family. Henry refuses to quit logging, which eventually costs him an arm. Lee refuses to live up to his brother's expectations of him (that he's a lazy, weak mama's boy) and plots revenge. Viv, with some prodding from Lee, remembers that there is a world outside Wakonda and, with further prodding from Hank, manages to escape the Stamper curse before she drowns. The film manages to play (sort of) to this freedom of oppression, providing a visual commentary to the book's detailed descriptions, at times overdramatizing scenes and combining them into a visual spectacle

(the logging accident).

While some may consider film adaptations a visual accompaniment, the book *Sometimes a Great Notion* reigns supreme over its Hollywood counterpart. It is, however, a unique adaptation, based upon what elements were included, what were left out and what were significantly changed. Many filmmakers would have overkilled the romantic plotline between Lee and Viv, while others would have avoided the project altogether because of the subject matter and the heavy imagery. It is important to note that what was left in the film reflects on Kesey's writing. Logging is the focal point of the film as it is in the book. The writing is reflective of an industry in an area of the country that many rely on for income. It is likely that many found the book self-reflexive, and, at the very least, the film achieves that as well.