Oppressive Environment in Raise the Red Lantern and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's nest: Comparative Essay

In Raise the Red Lantern and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's nest, Yimou Zhang and Ken Kesey, respectively, establish an oppressive environment in order to explore the controlling means used to maintain superiority. Zhang constructs a 1920's Chinese household, the Chen family, and through it explores the oppressive nature of a system where a single male figure, the Master, degrades women to positions of subservience; Kesey creates a late twentieth-century, autocratic, psychiatric ward in which an authoritative figure, Nurse Ratched, controls patients through a strict and inexorable regime. Both Zhang and Kesey present those in control as fascistic antagonists who, through their tyrannical domination, subjugate others to positions of inferiority. Th authors both introduce an 'outsider', into this dictatorial system, and explore the way in which they challenge the authority within the society. However, whilst both protagonists are subversive in their attitudes towards the systems, the texts differ in their view on how much an outsider can transform an oppressive system: the novel being much more optimistic than the film. Compare the ways in which Yimou Zhang's Raise the Red Lantern and Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's nest, introduce an outsider into an oppressive environment in order to explore the nature of society

Zhang and Kesey set their respective texts within oppressive societies, in which a single officious figure manipulatively maintains power through sly means: in the film, the Master surreptitiously dominates his household whereas in the novel, Nurse Ratched overtly dictates patients in the asylum. In both texts, the nomenclature reinforces the authoritarian nature of these figureheads. In the film, the label of 'Master' suggests a hierarchical influence and a dominance over others, whilst the objectification of the mistresses relegates them to mere 'playthings'. In the novel, Nurse Ratched's name is indicative of her mechanical, brutal nature with its homonym 'ratchet'; a device that uses a twisting motion to tighten bolts in place, symbolic of how she manipulates the patients to turn against each other. Both authors physically embody the characters in order to reinforce the imposing nature of their authority: whilst Nurse Ratched’s imposing presence is integral to her exploitation of individuals, the Master is conversely depicted as a visual enigma, a symbolic representation that uses anonymity to emphasise his power. Kesey presents Nurse Ratched as physically imposing with her 'big, womanly breasts' and an omnipresent nature, as she voyeuristically observes the patients from her nurses' station. With her domineering influence, Bromden observes that she even enters the room with a 'gust of cold.' Where the Nurse is potently visible, Zhang deliberately creates a visual enigma of the Master by choosing camera shots that obscure his facial features for the entirety of the film. Through positioning the Master out of the frame, using long or profile camera shots and ornamental features of the household as a barrier device to obstruct the view, Zhang maintains the Master’s mystique. In both texts those characters that have control of the environments are dictatorial figureheads in a totalitarian society in which they use punitive means.

It is into this despotic environment that both Zhang and Kesey introduce an outsider, an individual who comes from a greater place of autonomy with a feisty individuality. In the film, it is Songlian who enters the household as the fourth mistress and, in the novel, it is McMurphy, a criminal who is cheating the Legal System by pretending to be insane. The characters' initial

'gutsy' nature is evident in both texts: Songlian is presented, at the beginning of the film, in asymmetrical, natural outdoors scenes as she independently walks to the Master's house; McMurphy is a 'redheaded,' 'loud' and 'devilish' man who acts 'like he's sailing fifty yards overhead, hollering at those below on the ground.' It is immediately obvious, however, that both have entered a repressive environment. Zhang establishes a prison-like atmosphere, through the high walls that loom over the human figures within the compound and a labyrinthine structure with a series of courtyards, doorways and rooftops that all create a maze-like complexity to the house, symbolising a sense of captivity. Kesey highlights this similar feeling of internment through the constant emphasis upon the rigidity of rules and confinement within the hospital, as the patients are trapped by the 'delicately balanced' regime that Nurse Ratched enforces, and confinement from all the locked, 'heavy steel doors.' Both protagonists also quickly come into conflict with the antagonist, when they attempt to subversively change the oppressive system. Songlian and McMurphy act out in rebellion in order to defy the system in which they have been trapped. In order to maintain her superiority within the household, Songlian is deceptive in her approach for she feigns pregnancy, giving her the power to manipulate the daily meals and receive the lavish attention from the Master. McMurphy, on the other hand, is more direct in his subversive behaviour in that he smashes through the glass of the nurses' station and violently attacks Nurse Ratched, '[ripping] her uniform' with his 'heavy red fingers'. In attempt to quash these dissident actions, the antagonists respond with means of punishment. For Songlian, after her deceit is discovered, she loses her dominance within the household as the Master orders for all her red lanterns to be covered in black, signifying the power she may no longer have. In McMurphy's instance, he is punished by Nurse Ratched for his aggressive outbursts with electroshock therapy, a method also used to scare the other patients in the hospital. The potent antagonists establish their authority within those locations to maintain total supremacy and order.

Both texts contrast in their view on how much an outsider can change an unjust system and thus end in differently: in the film, Zhang indicates the inexorable nature of the environment through the structural use of seasons, the omission of spring and the inclusion of the fifth mistress; in the novel, Kesey suggests the possibility of being able to escape the restraints of a system through Christ-like allusion of McMurphy's sacrifice for the other patients and the newfound confidence in the patients. Zhang begins the film in Summer, progresses to Autumn, Winter and then finishes in the next Summer; an epilogue where the fifth mistress is introduced to replace the executed third mistress. By intentionally skipping Spring - a season that represents new hope and renewal – Zhang implies that all hope can be destroyed when trapped within a relentless system that has a cyclical structure. However, Kesey implies through the Christ imagery of McMurphy that there is a sense of hope as his act of mercy has empowered the other patients. As the twelve apostles were embraced by the Spirit of Christ after his resurrection, McMurphy is able to instil his spirit within the patients. Even after receiving a lobotomy, and being rendered mentally retarded, 'McMurphy’s presence' could still be felt 'tromping up and down the halls and laughing out loud in the meetings and singing in the latrines.' The men became more assured and as a result 'everything was changing': Harding signs out, George transfers to a different ward and the new nurse “gave the guys a chance to change a lot of the ward policy.” However, the tone of the texts end quite differently: while both have a tragic element – McMurphy dies and Songlian has gone insane – the novel ends on a more hopeful tone whereas the film on a despondent one. Though both protagonists end up losing cognitive function, McMurphy is the only one able to change the circumstances not only for himself but for the other patients as well. Kesey suggests that, in spite of his flaws, McMurphy is willing to sacrifice himself and although at a cost of his mental capacity and his life,

as he acts selflessly and is therefore able to bring about change, not for himself, but for the sake of others. On the other hand, Zhang suggests at the conclusion of the film that in order change a ghjk environment, a concerted effort to achieve that is required. As Songlian's prime motivations were self-centred, she could not bring about change for herself, and thus was not able to bring about any change at all.

Through both texts, the oppressive nature of each system, which is epitomised in a single figurehead, is explored through the central character who enters a microcosmic environment. Whilst the settings of the texts differ in historical and cultural contexts, both reflect on there being a tendency for people once they are in positions of power, to create an advantage for themselves to the disadvantage of many. Both texts then explore a crusading outsider and their ability to bring about change in this system, in both that effort comes at significant personal cost; madness in the case of Songlian and a loss of cognitive function and even his life for McMurphy. However, what makes a difference is that the sacrifice of an individual, made as a contribution to the greater common good, does produce change. Yet, when the focus is merely on a self-centred use of that environment to one’s own benefit, it in fact makes the protagonist no different to the antagonist, as selfish motivations will not produce change.