

# The Whale Rider Themes

## Sacredness of Nature and Corruption of Man

A key theme of the story is the sacredness of nature. The world and its creatures are often described using religious terminology. The beginning of the story introduces the idea that man and nature are supposed to work and thrive together, and that nature has been consciously waiting for man's arrival. Man is supposed to be a steward of nature, the story suggests: he ought to take care of the creatures and the environment. Instead, man became arrogant and broke off his connection with nature. That is why, Koro claims, only a select few can still speak with animals, while in the past everyone could. In response to man's growing arrogance, the earth has become increasingly hostile to mankind and will continue to do so until he changes his ways.

## Tradition vs. Modernity

The story is all about how the Maori people will hold on to their tradition while navigating the strange tides of modern times. All of the main characters are impacted by the dynamic between tradition and modernity. [Kahu](#) finds herself trapped by traditional gender roles; Koro feels alien in the changing world and struggles to find someone to carry on the Maori banner; [Rawiri](#) faces the choice of maintaining his cultural identity or travelling to the big city and just falling into the crowd.

## Racism and Cultural Identity

The story features the individual's struggle to choose what identity to live by. This choice is best exemplified by Rawiri's story. He comes very close to leaving behind the Maori way of life when he travels to Australia. There, he has an opportunity to become a city man, far away from the small town of his youth, and also distant from the rules and norms of his Maori culture. He could settle in the city and become a new person with a new cultural identity. Other relatives of his have already done so, changing their names, appearances, and lifestyles. Eventually, though, he decides his heart belongs to the Maori people and he cannot give that identity up. He further understands this in Papua New Guinea, where he encounters racism full in the face.

## Love

Love is what binds the main characters to each other, and it is the underlying emotion guiding almost all of the action within the story. It is Kahu's love for Koro that drives her to learn so much about the Maori culture and to remain so devoted to it. It is her love for him that also prevents her from becoming resentful or jealous. It is Koro's love for his people that impels him to find a capable leader to successfully bring the Maori people through modernity. It is Nanny's love for Koro that forces her to constantly attempt to show him the error in his stubbornness, and it is her love for Kahu that enables her to play the role of mother to this orphan. It is Nanny's love for Rawiri that pushes her to call him back home and it is his love for those back home that eventually brings Rawiri back. It is Rawiri's love for Kahu that brings him to show the qualities of bravery and determination in always looking after her.

Finally, it is the old bull whale's love for his master that drives him to cross a distance of thousands of leagues, and which drives him nearly to insanity with nostalgic obsession.

### **Female Role Models vs. Misogyny**

The story is all about strong-willed female characters. The main protagonist of the story—Kahu—as well as many of the other protagonists, including Nanny and Muriwai all are brave, independent female characters. Their stories are meant to empower young women by giving examples of heroines, brave, strong, and dedicated who can do just as much as any male. This is particularly poignant in the setting of Whangara, whose chief Koro refuses to see women as potential leaders in Whangara's future. As the author explains in his introductory notes, the inspiration of this story came from his two young daughters, who were seeking female role models in a male-dominated literature. This work is meant in part to fulfill that desire by being, in a way, an expression of the "Girl Power" trend of the 90s.

### **Rigid Literalism vs. Lenience**

Another theme related to that of tradition and modernity is the tension between a rigid and literal understanding of rules and a flexible, purpose-driven understanding. This dynamic underlies the core conflict between Nanny and Koro over Kahu's ability to lead her people. Koro adheres strictly to the dictated cultural rules. To continue this legacy he hopes to find a future young leader for the Maori, yet in doing so he is unwilling to bend any of the rules. Thus he cannot accept Kahu as a candidate, even though she is the most capable to lead in the future. On the other side, Nanny encourages that rules be broken when the general purpose of one's action is for good. She is not opposed to breaking a few rules here and there in order to bring about a greater good.

### **The Cyclical Nature of Time**

One of the underlying frameworks of the story is that of the nature of time. The story emphasizes that nature is cyclical, as referenced by the naming of the four sections of the book after the four seasons. Time can also be traversed, as the old bull whale does with his herd, and as Paikea does with his spear, casting it into the future. This understanding of time stresses the interconnectedness of everything, even those things separated by time. Between Kahu and Paikea are many generations; yet despite that passage of time, they are able to interact and they remain connected. Despite the number of years that have passed, the old bull whale lingers on. Kahu's story begins with a birth and ends with a near-death experience, referencing the cycle of life and death common to all.