Symbolism In Whale Rider: Movie Review

Niko Caro, Director

Nikola Jean “Niki” Caro was born in Wellington in 1967. In 1997, her first feature film, Memory and Desire, received international approval (Niki Caro Biography…).

Whale Rider was an even larger success. Based on The Whale Rider, it was broadcast and praised all over the world. The most remarkable award it won was the worldwide People’s Choice Award (Wald).

The only criticism which is occasionally made is that Whale Rider might not be an authentic film since Caro is not a Maori but a Pakeha. In an interview, she openly admitted she can only look at Maori culture differently than the natives of New Zealand as she is “not inside the culture” (Mottesheard).

In the movies produced under her direction, “Caro shows a distinct style, a keen eye for striking imagery and a strong sense of storytelling” (Dujsik).

Characters

Paikea Apirana (henceforward Pai to avoid any confusion with the legendary whale rider) is the twelve-year-old protagonist.

Koro Apirana is Pai’s grandfather, Porourangi’s and Rawiri’s father, and the leader of Whangara. He puts enormous effort into finding a successor among the first-born local boys.

Nanny Flowers is Koro’s wife. She loves her husband but does not mind arguing with him if it is for the good of another family member, especially Pai.

Rawiri is Porourangi’s younger brother. He is lazy and hedonistic at the beginning.

Shilo is Rawiri’s girlfriend.

Porourangi is Pai’s father and Koro’s and Nanny’s eldest son. He moves to Germany after Pai’s birth, works there as an artist, and falls in love with Anna.

Rehua is Porourangi’s wife. She dies while giving birth to Pai.

Hemi is one of the first-born boys of the village who are in the same age as Pai.

Anna is Porourangi’s German girlfriend. The reason she is German could be that the movie is a product of collaboration between Germany and New Zealand.

Summary

Whale Rider follows the communal life of Whangara, mainly focusing on Pai. Pai's voice retells Paikea's myth before Rehua and Pai's twin brother die during the childbirth. Shocked Porourangi leaves New Zealand while Koro is raging about the girl being named Paikea which was Rehua's death-bed will, and only cares about the boy.

The plot continues twelve years later. Pai is raised by her grandparents. Koro has started loving her. They are both serious about keeping their culture alive while many other locals are not, including lazy and hoggish Rawiri.

Several character traits of Pai hint at her being a suitable new leader, but to Koro, assigning this position to a female would be incompatible with the tribe's traditions. When Porourangi visits the family, Koro tries to pair him off since he hopes for a male grandson who can become the new leader. Porourangi then reveals Anna is expecting a child from him but wants to stay in Germany. Koro reacts furiously and tells Porourangi to take Pai with him. The girl initially agrees but decides to return to Whangara on the way to the airport. Her grandfather opens a traditional school for the first-born boys to find a leader among them. Pai, to Koro's displeasure, spies on the lessons and asks her uncle for help. After starting teaching his niece, Rawiri steadily regains the energy he once had when he was a brilliant taiaha fighter.

When Pai defeats Hemi who had been demonstrating some promising skills before, in a taiaha fight, Koro ramps. The other boys then fail at retrieving a whale tooth from underwater which was the final task of Koro's school, and the leader becomes depressed. A little later, Pai finds the item but nobody tells Koro. Pai invites her grandfather to a ceremony at her school but Koro heads to the beach instead. Simultaneously, Pai gives a contest winning speech she wanted to surprise her grandfather with. Koro finds himself surrounded by numerous stranded whales. The alerted locals try to keep the creatures alive all night. When the largest whale, Paikea's mythic whale, needs to be rescued, Koro excludes Pai from helping.

The rescue mission fails, and the disappointed locals leave the animal while Pai secretly approaches it and rides it back into the ocean. Soon, the others realise her and the whale's absence. Nanny hands the whale tooth over to Koro who, finally, understands his granddaughter is his chosen successor. Pai is in a coma since she nearly drowned. When she wakes up at the hospital, she is alone with Koro who makes her the official new leader.

In the finale, Porourangi has returned with Anna and finished working on his waka which had been standing unfinished on the coast for years. It is released for its maiden voyage, and local men and women rowing are together under Pai's command.

Symbolism

Symbolism is a central element of the film. Objects like the ropes, Koro's rei puta, Porourangi's waka, or Koro's walking stick have a symbolic connotation. This section will focus on these items and the depiction on Whangara.

Koro is wearing the rei puta around his neck at 7:41 while cycling home with Pai who is playing with the item. This indicates a special connection between her and the object marking Koro as the leader (Forester). Since during the final task of Koro's school, all the boys fail at retrieving the item, it sinks to the ground and is covered by kelp (Caro 56:31) which means no new leader

is in sight. When Pai dives underwater though, the kelp uncovers the whale tooth again which indicates the girl is the chosen leader (Caro 1:01:58). At the hospital, the object is hanging around the girl's neck (Caro 1:29:24) which marks the official beginning of Pai's leadership.

The rope plays a key role at 17:26. Koro uses it to explain strength results from a firm connection to the past, reaching back to Paikea and his whale. He wants to start a boat engine with the rope but breaks it. Pai fixes the rope which exemplifies the tribe's lost connection with the ancestors under Koro's leadership, and Pai's potential to restore it (Haenni 594). Koro, however, refuses to assign leadership to her because of her gender (Dodd 3). Another plausible interpretation is that the identical strands of the rope indicate gender equality among the tribe in the past. The present leader strongly rejecting this philosophy may have caused the fraction (Hepi 112).

The motif of the broken connection is seized again when the rope the locals are trying to pull the ancient whale around with snaps (Caro 1:19:48). Pulling the rope symbolises an identity shared by everybody participating in this operation and fundamentally based on strength through ancestry. The locals pulling unsuccessfully while completely wetting themselves through standing amid the incoming waves indicates they are struggling to maintain this identity, and they lose the struggle when the rope breaks.

In this scene, the locals rely on chanting while pulling the whale, i.e. tradition, and strength to accomplish the rescue mission; however, primarily strength causes the fracture which implies the tribe will not remain connected with the whales under Koro's leadership, and the sacred knowledge of Paikea's descendants cannot be handed over and will be lost. The tribe's identity will, consequently vanish (Choy). The whale separating from the rope (Caro 1:23:20), however, has a positive connotation. By breaking free from this item, the whale which was supposedly doomed to die shakes the old identity off and becomes free for a new one. The animal is reanimated. Due to the close connection between Whangara and Paikea's whale, the image of dislodging bonds after being immobilised can be directly applied to the community which had appeared as frozen in time since an outdated identity had been maintained for centuries without any adjustments. At 1:23:20 though, a new identity can emerge, introduced by Pai (Hannah H 3:01-3:42), the female saviour the community needed when the rope snapped and Koro's patriarchal guidelines failed.

In the finale, all the ropes releasing Porourangi's waka onto the beach stay solid (Caro 1:30:54). This indicates the retrieval of unity and the connection to the past.

The depiction of Whangara is symbolic since the village is portrayed as an isolated and remote place at the border to the Western world which is represented by the nearby sea (Hokowhitu 57); however, until the finale, there is apparently no instrument to access this world. Then, when the locals are rowing out to the open sea and, thus, to the future – exploring new horizons – on the waka, the image of isolation is dispersed (Hepi 120) which makes Porourangi's canoe the desired instrument. These people will continue living in Whangara, but the scene suggests they will "create a new world in the place where they live" (Hokowhitu 66).

Before, the waka is repeatedly displayed unfinished which mirrors the inefficacy of Koro's search for his successor (Haenni 594), and means the canoe cannot be released into the ocean. This symbolises the inability of the tribe to explore new horizons and dispose of its isolated existence (Hepi 114). Thus, the waka is symptomatic of the community as both are not

in a sound condition, and almost nobody seems to care about them (Hepi 118). Pai calls to the whales from the canoe (Caro 1:00:10), probably because the item makes her feel connected to the sea and its inhabitants.

Otherwise, a connection between Paikea's myth and the finale seems obvious since the new whale rider has effectively reclaimed her predecessor's sunken canoe after saving the whale which had once rescued him. This adds to the connection between Pai and Paikea, and completes a cycle.

Koro's walking stick becomes interesting when he finds all the stranded whales at the beach. He drops the stick out of shock, and the incoming tide washes the item away (Caro 1:11:04). This symbolises his loss of power, both physically and in terms of influence. The weather reinforces this image. Koro is standing in the pouring rain without an umbrella and surrounded by darkness and numerous helpless whales (Caro 1:13:13). This sequence suggests Koro's time is over, and his leadership has led to the abysmal whale stranding which is later confirmed by the breaking rope later.