

# Whale Rider

## I'm Back

This superficially modest and seemingly unpretentious film is in certain practical respects almost too small. But, as explained presently, such modesty need not impede even arbitrarily large thematic aspirations. Ultimately, this film is well served by its economies and proves worthy of its ambitions. In addition to being recognized with the Humanitas Award, it has collected audience awards at so many film festivals that it may as well be titled *Crowd Pleaser*.

Like Wagner's *Ring*, the film begins in water, linking it with those creation myths involving the emergence of humanity from subterranean realms. The sea itself becomes something of a structural device. The legend of Paikea recounted by Pai in her voice-over provides context and orientation, and also immediately works to diminish the potential for the title to function as a spoiler. As explained on the DVD commentary track, the main title music foretells Pai's destiny. Interpolated within the obstetrical crisis of Rehua, who is named in the credits and in the DVD's scene-selection menu but not in the film, there appears in the oceanic depths a southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*). (Perhaps not surprisingly, southern right whales are also featured in Zakes Mda's novel *The Whale Caller*.) Whales, like fish, are said to represent forces dwelling in the abyssal waters of the unconscious. As Joseph Campbell says, "Noah did not have to take fish into the ark."

The action of *Whale Rider* (*Te Kaieke Tohoro* in Maori, and a title that recalls the Rider-Waite tarot deck) occurs within a culturally and historically specific environment. The particular Maori tribe being depicted is specified in the *waka* featurette as the *Ngati Konohi*, which are words sung by Pai in a deleted scene. The Maoris are shown as a quasi-autonomous minoritarian community. But in the process of collision and accommodation, cultures coexist in tension, resulting in a complex ethnoscape in which some groups may be perceived as internal others and subjected to assimilationist pressures, with partial assimilation yielding diverse affiliations and conflictual discordances. Nonetheless, this film's minimal and delicate social commentary treads lightly on the matter of cultural marginality, only the broadest contours of which are sketched.

One critic claims that though the film "bends over backward to convince its audience that these people are incredibly noteworthy, the characters we meet feel just like the generic people in every other ethnic drama and seem to have little distinctive local color about them." If the effort fails so completely, then on what grounds is the existence of such an effort even to be suspected? Furthermore, this account ignores an earlier statement in the same review, where the critic explains this absence of "distinctive local color" by observing, "The encroaching tide of globalization threatens to expunge the last vestige of the Maori way of life."

Postwar Italy reconstructed its national identity partly through cinema. But regional films need not be so narrowly construed that their implications are not seen to extend beyond local borders. Fredric Jameson insists that the individual always symbolizes the collective. In *Whale Rider*, the protagonist's problem in the microcosm reflects a crisis of legitimation experienced by the whole ethnic group in the mesocosm, which in turn is but a sampling from among the totality of imperialized, marginalized, disempowered communities in the macrocosm. Given the

supposed identification among such groups, this film may be seen as a modest, local instance of a universal liberatory project. If the discussion is deprovincialized, then the film's heroine may be regarded as speaking for all the oppressed and culturally dispossessed peoples of the world. Similarly, as discussed in due course, an affinity could be postulated among all frustrated, neglected or suppressed voices, whether suffering under ethnocentric colonial oppression or patriarchy or whatever. Richmond Lattimore writes, "By the time Orestes leaves the stage, he has become an issue, a Dred Scott or Dreyfus, more important for what he means than for what he is." So may be the case here. Those interested in the political issues so understatedly unpacked in this film are directed to the article by Paula Morris in *Cineaste* vol. XXIX no. 1 (Winter 2003). Those seeking wider political engagement are referred to Héctor Tobar's 1/28/04 *Los Angeles Times* article on the threatened Rapa Nui language.

The chanting in the hospital gives the impression of the Maori language (*te reo*) as a ritual language like Hebrew or Latin. Most of the Maori terminology encountered in the film is fairly self-explanatory. For instance, *timata* means "begin" and *moko* means "grandchild," though some glossaries give it other meanings. *Paka* may be freely translated as "codger" in preference to the translations offered elsewhere. Pai will prove to be a true Maorist and appreciator of Maorica. These are the things that she will know best and want to know better.

Maria Garcia (filmjournal.com) explains that the name *Paikea* "is a symbol of determined survival," as when it is applied to certain tenaciously clinging crabs. When Pai's mother intones that name, clinging to life is an issue for both her and her children. After his wife dies with *Paikea*'s name on her lips, Pai's father follows through and gives the name to his surviving child, for whom it will prove eponymic. In several of the trailers for the film, Pai says of the ancestral *Paikea* that "in every generation of my family, the first-born son has carried his name." It is unclear in what sense this might apply to Koro or Porourangi. In the novel on which the film is based, Porourangi, like his daughter, is named after a distinguished ancestor in the manner of Abraham Lincoln. (Incidentally, the warrior Arthur of the fifth century on whom the legend of King Arthur is based was named after a Celtic god.) The novel makes *Kahu* the given name of both the protagonist and her legendary forefather, with *Paikea* being a title to be earned. This other name may be featured in some of the film's chants, as may be that of *tangaroa*, the god of the sea. (Incidentally, Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, is also associated with horses, which are to be found on a skirt that Pai wears in several scenes. A drawing of a horse is also seen on Pai's bedroom wall as Nanny stands in front of it folding that very skirt.)

In the novel, *Kahu* is named after *Kahutia Te Rangi*, which is a man's name. Koro feels "that naming a girl-child after the founder of our tribe was belittling *Kahutia Te Rangi*'s prestige." Nanny sabotages Koro's boat so that he cannot protest this naming. Rawiri says, "I suspect that Nanny Flower's action only helped to harden Koro Apirana's heart against his firstborn great-granddaughter," the novel including an additional, narratively unutilized generation. Koro considers Pai a problem rather than the solution that stares him in the face, often literally. Thus he offers encouragement to the boys and discouragement to Pai, whose rebellion aggravates him further. With Koro's contempt never very distant, Pai occasionally seems pessimistic or even defeatist, but always rebounds to be as implacable as Koro in her seemingly Sisyphean struggle.

The salesman's credo holds that the sale begins when the customer says no. Moreover, the Persian Sufi mystic al-Hallaj is supposed to have said that the function of the orthodox community is to give the mystic his desire. Koro's hinderance of Pai amplifies her deep and pronounced ambition, and has the unintended consequence of tempering her and laying the

groundwork for her reign by making her all the more worthy to be the steward of his legacy. In a sense, this is the Oedipal story in its most fundamental sense: the conflict of law and desire. Also evident are the Arthurian issues of honor and duty against love.

With Porourangi now a widower, the expectation of further chiefly issue seems to cease, at least for the time being, as he resists the pressure to “start again.” Koro’s concern may not be particularly exaggerated or irrational. As noted in previous essays, ambiguity of succession or threat of an unstable interregnum can have such dynastic import as to provoke civil war. Porourangi’s exit contributes to creating circumstances like those in *Like Water for Chocolate*, where the heroine’s family situation is fixed early.

The hero’s journey is a search for wholeness prompted by some deficiency. Like many heroes, such as Siegfried, Superman and Luke Skywalker, who are orphans or of uncertain parentage, Arthur is raised not by his parents but by the shamanic Merlin. Pai is raised not by her parents but by her grandparents, one of whom is her tribe’s leader and the possessor of shamanic gifts. Significantly, the nascent, impatient Pai reaches for Koro’s *reiputa*.

Pai says, “My Koro wished in his heart that I’d never been born.” Though destined for gender stigmatization, Pai fortunately finds herself in a society and a place in history where she is not so tainted at birth as to be subject to infanticide. Borrowing an expression from Graham Robb, Pai may live under a cloud, but it seldom rains. Similarly, Keisha Castle-Hughes at least manages to get top billing, unlike Lumi Cavasos in *Like Water for Chocolate*. Nevertheless, during the campaign to solicit acting awards, Keisha was preposterously submitted as a *supporting* actress. The Screen Actors Guild fell for it. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences did not. (Also, at [thenativitystory.com](http://thenativitystory.com) in August 2006, Shoreh Aghdashloo is characterized as an Academy Award nominee, but Keisha is not.) Whatever the taxonomic technicalities, Keisha Castle-Hughes enacts her role with serenity, sobriety and passionate sincerity. She carries some scenes with her face alone, and during vococentric episodes, she proves oddly, improbably phonogenic.

Unlike Henry Hulme in *Heavenly Creatures*, who at least starts off as more feckless than menacing, the doctrinaire Koro appears formidable right from the start. However, transitioning from the prologue to the first act proper, an encouraging indication of his potential is given when Pai says that “he changed his mind.” Taken together with the preceding statement about Koro’s wish, this summarizes the entire plot. It is also too good to be true when reported in this oversimplified manner, for there must be more to it than that, which there is.

The first shot of the first act proper is a rich, pregnant constellation of convergent symbols bristling with implication. The camera tilts up to Pai’s face, but does not quite begin the shot with her bare feet, which, as explained in due course, would have been a fitting image. Pai’s bare feet will be emphasized repeatedly, as at the start of the scene in which she practices her chant before the first concert, when she interacts with the stranded whale on the beach and when she is discovered riding it. The propriety of the absence of Pai’s shoes is matched by that of the presence of another article of her clothing, which will be considered in greater detail momentarily. Pai is discovered grasping Koro’s *reiputa* (notably with her left hand), as if laying claim to her inheritance. This is equivalent to the incident in the novel when Kahu bites Koro’s toe. The online teachers’ resource on this film’s official website also makes much of the bicycle itself, directly beneath which the center line of the road can be seen. The symbology of the middle path considered in the discussion of *Heavenly Creatures* explains why any instance of Pai situated in the middle of a road would be welcome, though this seldom occurs quite as

unambiguously as with Fergus and Dil in *The Crying Game*. The reader is also welcome to refer to the *Heavenly Creatures* essay if an issue is to be made of colors. (Note, for instance, that when Hemi is seen smoking, his shirt is “physical” blue, while Pai’s is “spiritual” red. Later, Pai is in red as she cycles past the blue school bus. She is also sometimes seen wearing red and blue simultaneously. Pai and Hemi are both in blue when they first handle *taiahas*, which represents brute, earthly, physical concerns. The next such time, when they are at cross purposes, she is in red and he is in green.)

The significance of numbers composed of digit the sum of which is nine was touched on in the discussion of *Barton Fink*. (In cases where initial sums are greater than nine, addition is to continue until multidigit intermediate sums are reduced to one digit.) Joseph Campbell offers many of the following examples in support of his claim that nine is ultimately the number of the goddess and signifies being in accord with a universal rhythm he sees reflected in a grand mythological, biological and astronomical harmony. His discussion is to be found in the video version of *Transformations of Myth Through Time* during the segment titled “And We Washed Our Weapons in the Sea: Gods and Goddesses of the Neolithic Period,” though it is not included in the derived book.

- Hindu cosmology involves cycles of time, such as the *yuga*, consisting of 432,000 years, and the *mahayuga*, consisting of 4,320,000 years.
- In the poetic Edda (specifically the *Grimnismal*), at the end of the world, 800 warriors emerge from each of the 540 doors of the hall of Odin, for a total of 432,000.
- In Babylonian mythology, there are 432,000 years from the formation of the first city until the Flood.
- The Bible reports 1,656 years from Adam to Noah, which is 86,400 weeks.
- The axis of the earth completes a full cycle of precession in 25,920 years, which, divided by 60 (the basis for division of both time and space) equals 432.
- A well-conditioned human heart beating at one beat per second yields 43,200 beats in 12 hours.
- In India, at the new year, the 108 names of the goddess are recited four times per day, for a total of 432.
- In Catholicism, the recitation of the angelus is signaled by the ringing of a bell nine times and then another nine times.
- There are nine muses in classical Greek mythology.
- Dante first saw Beatrice when she was nine and again when she was 18. He said that she was a nine because her root was in the trinity.
- Medieval Europe recognized Nine Worthies.
- There are (or once were) 108 beads in a Catholic rosary and on the Buddhist equivalent, the *japa mala* (as well as 108 stitches on a baseball).

Appropriately then, Pai is seen wearing an athletic jersey featuring a number that complies with this model: 72. This number marks her as an example to be followed. Additionally, the license plate of her father’s car includes the number 486.

Pai’s bicycle excursion ends with the circumnavigation of a bush, one of many events that will become underscored by repetition. Another microcosmic summary of the plot occurs when Koro jettisons Pai from the bicycle and she refuses to be gotten rid of so easily. Pai

displays chiefly concern for tribal welfare and adds to her authority when she forthrightly and repeatedly discourages smoking.

Koro does not recognize Pai as the prophet that he seeks, though he and others are inadvertently prophetic about her destiny. Long before Pai describes Koro as “the boss,” it is said of her, “She’s bossy, that one.” Pai’s undeniable talent at the first concert prompts Nanny to say teasingly to Koro, “No good to you, you reckon?” (By a *trompe-l’oreille*, the first part of this statement sounded like *rangatira*, the Maori word for “noble” or “chief,” which would have functioned equally well as sarcasm in a positive form.) Koro himself will speak to Pai of “that whale *of yours*,” never guessing that he is already in the presence of something more significant than a mere successor.

The lesson of Alfonso Cuarón’s film *A Little Princess* is that every girl is a princess, though even this may be far too modest an assertion. In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell invokes a Polynesian saying metaphorical of the underestimation of possibilities: “Standing on a whale, fishing for minnows.” In *Transformations of Myth Through Time*, Campbell tells the story of the woman who told Sri Ramakrishna that she was unmoved by and felt no love for god. When he asked if there were anything that she *did* love, she replied that she loved her little nephew. Ramakrishna then said, “There he is.” Thus is Pai a perfectly sound potential manifestation of wisdom and divinity.

Campbell also quotes Daisetz Suzuki as saying that all babies, when they cry at birth, proclaim their Buddha nature, the only difference being that Queen Maya’s *knew* he was a “Buddha baby.” In the novel, flying fish tried “to be the first to announce the coming.” When Pai practices her chant of “*Ko Paikea*” while walking down the road, she is in effect announcing herself as well as her namesake. The essence of this proclamation will later be implied when she heralds her return from the aborted trip with her father.

Many commentators perfunctorily classify this as a coming-of-age film. The concept of coming of age is not obviously applicable to Pai, who experiences no sexual awakening, and who, from her bare feet to her sitting in the front ranks of Koro’s students to her casual retrieval of the *reiputa*, seems to understand her role and destiny from the start (*fait accompli*) and must magnanimously wait for everyone else to catch up to her. The community in general and Koro in particular are the ones who need to be persuaded and who ultimately undergo a far more drastic transformation, but, as later emphasized, of spirit. And thematically, it would be strange for age to matter in a film a central focus of which is the irrelevance of gender. Pai’s own dialogue addresses the issue. Her father returns from his travels and she tells him, “You look different.” He says, “So do you. Must be growing up.” She replies, “Am not.” Also, as with the seemingly mandatory description of the Coen brothers’ films as cold or heartless, many reviews were predictably unable to avoid words such as *feisty*, *spunky* and *plucky* in describing Pai. It is left to others to make what they will of the descriptions of Pai as a tomboy.

In his *Mythos* video series, Joseph Campbell recounts the virtues of the various stages of life as given by Dante in his *Convivio*. Those of youth are “obedience, a sense of shame, . . . comeliness of appearance and sweetness of conduct.” Pai is not always obedient, but her defiance is ultimately redemptive. The virtues of midlife are given as temperance (such as not smoking), courage, love, loyalty, courtesy. It is at this stage that one is to understand one’s culture by realizing the connotation of its symbols. The virtues of later life are wisdom, justice, generosity, cheerfulness and gratitude. Pai arrives at most of these virtues rather early. Koro takes his time, but eventually makes a breakthrough.

The filmmakers go to the trouble of showing shoes that have been left outside by people attending a concert. Those people are then shown emerging and putting their shoes back on. The shoes are left outside because the concert takes place on holy ground, which is not to be trod on by shoes. Putting one's shoes back on presupposes the profanity of everything outside the sacred precinct. But this could be seen by a saint or a bodhisattva as falsely dichotomous. One who regarded the entire universe as sacred might demonstrate this by remaining perpetually barefoot, even outside the realm canonically designated as sacred. The only time Pai is seen wearing shoes is when she leaves home to live with her father. This denial of the sanctity of nature compounds the wrong of abandoning her home and the people who need her leadership. These wrongs are rectified when she cannot resist the siren song of the ancient ones.

Recalling her aversion to smoking, it could be said of Pai that she wears shoes once but "does not inhale." The only other time Pai is seen with shoes is when she is holding sandals. In the novel, Kahu "was wearing a white dress and sandals." But in the film, Pai is only seen using them for digging, not wearing. This also recalls the incident in the novel when Nanny "began to scoop a hole in the loose soil" in order to bury Kahu's afterbirth and umbilical cord in the earth on the *marae*, as Kahu's mother wanted. This links Kahu to the land so that, like Arthur, she and the land are one. Related to this is the fact that it is not until Koro jettisons Pai from the bicycle that she is first seen in contact with the ground. She is like the elephants in Hindu cosmology that once were aerial beings and now support the world.

Also in the novel, after sneaking Kahu into a movie featuring a whale being hunted, Rawiri says, "my bonding to her was confirmed that night. I felt I should look after her till the world ended." A helicopter pilot observes stranded whales and says, "this is like seeing the end of the world." Joseph Campbell describes the Mahayana realization, in which the distinction between the secular and the transcendent vanishes, as the end of the world as it was previously perceived.

Pai also tends to avoid motor vehicles. She rides in her father's car, but only until she recognizes the impropriety of the situation. She is seen in a powered boat, but not with the motor running and only so that she may duplicate the ordeal experienced by the boys. She otherwise travels by foot or bicycle, declining Hemi's invitation to ride the bus. Ironically, the boys take a bus to the *marae* to learn the old ways. In a deleted scene, Pai no longer has a computer given to her by her father.

Pai says of her father, "He went away. Everybody did." This is also true of Rawiri in the novel. But, as this is clearly not true of everybody in the geographical sense, it must be in a spiritual sense that all have strayed and are, metaphorically, not carving their *wakas*. Pai is an exception. She does leave with her father, but only briefly and physically, not spiritually.

Nanny tells Porourangi that he is "too skinny." But, as emphasized above, a book cannot be judged by its cover. As illustrated by Arthur Rackham, Brünnhilde is quite slim, with lean, slender limbs. This is credible because big, natural muscles are superfluous for those endowed with supernatural power. Similarly, being a scrawny, unassuming and underrated little kid is not necessarily an impediment to being disproportionately influential. Nor is it inconsistent with being the chosen. Rather, it makes Pai particularly well suited to demonstrate this principle. Also, it is normally best to disguise divinity lest its undiluted, ineffable majesty overwhelm. Rawiri's "spooky" timing implies the concept of synchronicity just as Pai is about to confront a task that fits her talents well and for which she is prepared. Though initially taken as a joke based on the irony of disanalogy, it occurs when it does so as to provide Pai with the opportunity to reveal her readiness.

The fundamental theme of this film is the polar, contradictory extremes of tradition as both problem and remedy. Traditions can be made relevant and need not be abandoned if properly interpreted. Pai demonstrates this when she fixes the broken rope that Koro has already analogized to their family's lineage, and which he seeks to replace. Even though Pai's fix is "working," Koro looks the gift horse in the mouth and scolds her. He subsequently tries to replace his broken lineage with that of the worthiest of the first-born boys, eventually complaining that Pai has broken the *tapu* (sanctity) of his school. Just as Pai fixes the rope, so she fixes its analogues.

The projection of photographic slides provides an opportunity to consider projection in the psychological sense. Pai loves and admires Koro, who carries her self projection. Koro appreciates the old ways, but does not accept this appreciation when embodied in a female. The projection of his anima onto Pai disturbs him because she is doing what his mother would not have.

Because this film is a New Zealand/Germany coproduction, the computer effects were generated by the German company TVT instead of, for instance, Peter Jackson's WETA. As a further consequence, in an interesting bit of cross-promotional product placement, it is to Germany that Pai's father has traveled. To Koro, these wanderings are a brain drain that results in his son's art becoming commodified. Koro may even consider Porourangi, the repository of his dreams, to be something of a cultural quisling if not a racial defector. (In an article about "the Cortes/Malinche story" in the *Los Angeles Times*, 10/21/07, Gregory Rodriguez writes of "the peculiarly Mexican concept of *malinchismo*, which means the betrayal of one's own.") In spite of his conservatism, Koro, interestingly, never makes an issue of the fact that his son's new girlfriend is European. In the novel, Koro would indeed accept a son of hers. Her pregnancy is of great potential significance to Koro, who is still feeling the impact of the death of the family heir apparent. However, though Porourangi has in a sense followed his father's advice to "start again," Koro is still not satisfied. Koro's dismissal of Pai as of "no use" to him may seem decidedly premature, foreclosing possibilities and denying his people the full measure of her promise. But Pai has yet to prove herself.

In the scene with her father in his *waka*, Pai alludes to her brother. In James Joyce's *Ulysses*, it has been 11 years since Leopold Bloom's infant son Rudy died. Porourangi is similarly situated. Bloom's only surviving child is a daughter and it has been a little over ten years since he has had sex with his wife. The same could be said of Porourangi, though he is expecting a new child with a new girlfriend. Bloom redirects his paternal attention to Stephen Dedalus, while Koro needs to reconsider his estimation of Pai's value to him. In the meantime, the scar near her right eye is emblematic of a much deeper psychic injury.

From the perspective of the whales, the novel refers to an underwater cathedral "known as the Navel of the Universe." On the day that her father returns, and again just before she leaves with her father, Pai and her grandfather ride around in circles on a bicycle. Thus they establish the world axis (*axis mundi*), which could be established anywhere, and this is just as good a place as any. In the novel, Rawiri wants "to see the world." Nanny tells him, "You've got the whole world right here. Nothing you can get anywhere else that you can't get here." This is an expression of the Mahayana realization of having been in the Promised Land all along and that "there's no place like home." It is, in a sense, this moral from *The Wizard of Oz* that occurs to Pai as soon as she leaves her home and receives the call. As for Koro, some viewers marvel at how he could be so emotionally immured as to part with Pai without tearing his hair and clawing the

ground. Be that as it may, in search of greener pastures, he now shifts his focus from his own family to “the first-born boys.”

As noted above, this is the second time that Pai and Koro have thus cycled, and given this writer’s preoccupation with repeated or rhyming events, the following, in no particular order, may be considered:

- The film is bracketed by pregnancies, beginning with the birth of Pai and ending with the expectant Anna looking on. Porourangi is the father in both cases.
- Twice Koro and Pai cycle around the bush in Koro’s yard. Each time, she is the first to leave the bicycle, even if involuntarily. Like the Buddha escaping the otherwise endless cycle of reincarnation, she leads by example.
- Twice Pai advises against smoking.
- Twice Pai walks in a road while practicing something, first chanting and then *taiaha*.
- Twice Pai participates in a concert during which she “breaks” a chant. The first is interrupted by audience laughter, the second by Pai’s crying.
- Twice Pai presses noses, first with her father and then with the whale. Koro also presses noses twice, each time with the fathers of one of the two main contenders for his office, Pai and Hemi.
- Twice a rope breaks.
- Twice Pai is followed into her father’s *waka* at night by a relative bringing the same blanket, first her father and then Nanny.
- Twice Koro discovers Pai and Hemi behind the *marae* with *taiahas*. Both times, the *taiahas* have just been in contact, playfully in the first instance and more tumultuously in the second.
- Twice, at the *marae*, Koro sends Hemi away to use water, first for drinking and then for washing.
- Twice Pai scolds Hemi, first telling him that he should not be smoking and then that he should not have hit Koro.
- Twice Hemi gives Pai permission (or perhaps only notes her ability) to join in some endeavor in which he is engaged, first to ride the bus and then to sit in the back of Koro’s school.
- After Koro tells Pai, “Go to the back,” Hemi tells her, “You could sit up the back.” Still later, Rawiri’s location is given as “Out the back.”
- Twice Pai leaves a question unanswered after being caught behind the *marae* with a *taiaha*, the first posed by Hemi and the second by Koro. (The unanswered question from Koro is preceded by one that Pai answers only after it is repeated.) Pai also twice leaves unanswered a question of Koro’s (“What did I say?”) that he asks in front of the *marae*.
- Twice Hemi takes a swing at Pai with his *taiaha*.
- Twice Hemi’s *taiaha* is forced from his grasp, first by Koro and then by Pai.
- Koro knocks Hemi’s *taiaha* to the ground and tells him, “Pick it up.” Koro subsequently throws or knocks an object onto the kitchen floor and expects Pai to clean up the broken pieces. (These aggressive acts of Koro also rhyme with Porourangi pulling down the drapes.)
- Twice Pai says something thrice either to Koro or at his insistence, first “I’m back” and then “I’m sorry.”
- Koro ejects Pai from the *marae* and then excludes Hemi from the boat.
- Twice people withdraw to leave Koro and Porourangi alone to converse.
- After Koro hugs Porourangi, who then fights his way out of the embrace, Koro is then twice hugged by a descendant, first Porourangi and then Pai.



- Twice Rawiri's girlfriend hugs someone other than Rawiri, first Porourangi and then Pai.
- Twice Nanny mentions divorce.
- Twice Nanny declares limits on the extent to which Koro is "the boss."
- Twice Nanny is seen folding clothes in Pai's room, first in the aftermath of the loss of Koro's *reiputa*, and then when Rawiri informs her of its recovery.
- Twice the boys remove their shirts hurriedly, first at the *marae* and then in the boat.
- Twice something involving Maori traditions is dismissed as "a stink."
- Twice Pai leaves home to live elsewhere, first with her father "for a while" and then with Rawiri's girlfriend "for a little while." On both occasions, she is hugged when away from home, but is less than enthusiastic about reciprocating.
- Twice attempts are made to recover Koro's *reiputa*, first by the boys and then by Pai.
- Twice Pai says, "I found this," referring first to Rawiri's *taiaha* trophy and then to Koro's *reiputa*. Pai acquires the skills celebrated by both of these and eventually wears the latter.
- Twice Pai speaks to a woman, first Nanny and then Rawiri's girlfriend, while mostly submerged in water, first in a bathtub and then in the sea.
- Twice Koro turns around while in the *marae* because of something Pai does outside.
- Twice Koro asks, "Who is to blame?" though in both cases he is speaking about the same thing.
- Twice family and/or friends gather at the hospital in which Pai is a patient.
- Both Pai (at the first concert) and Hemi perform a Maori chant during a gathering at which the respective father of each is the last to arrive but the first to applaud. Both Pai (at the second concert) and Hemi are also applauded after each recites Paikea's chant. (A possible implication of other parallels connecting Pai and Hemi will be proposed below.)
- After Pai's father leaves, Hemi asks Pai why she did not go with him. After Hemi's father leaves, Pai asks Hemi if that was his dad with whom he did not go.
- Koro subjects the boys to "one final test." Pai describes a later event as "a test, but for Koro this time."
- Just before the "final test" needed because "there can only be one," Koro tells his students, "You've shown me that you've got courage, that you're strong, and that you can learn." Pai says in her speech, more broadly and inclusively, "But we can learn. . . . And soon, everyone will be strong."
- By the end, both Rawiri and Pai have trophies, the former for proficiency with the *taiaha*, the latter for her speech.
- Porourangi says to Koro, "You didn't even look at her," and later asks, "Did you even look at it?" In both instances, Koro is angered when Porourangi subsequently turns and walks away.
- Nanny mockingly asks Koro, "No good to you, you reckon?" Koro later says, "She's no use to me."
- In anticipation of the first concert, Nanny says, "Bet she's got her best gears all laid out on the bed." In preparation for the second concert, Koro's suit is seen in arranged just such a manner.
- Referring to the first concert, Pai says, "My dad's coming." When Nanny says that Koro "might be held up" for the second concert, Pai says, "No, he's coming."
- Pai explains how to modify Rawiri's trophy so that the figure appears to be holding a *taiaha*. Rawiri's girlfriend then similarly modifies a broom so that he can use it as a *taiaha*.
- Hemi cries after performing Paikea's chant because his father has left. Pai later cries during the same chant because her grandfather has not arrived.

- In teaching Paikea's chant to his students, Koro repeats its beginning at a higher pitch. As Pai recites it at the second concert, the pitch of her voice gradually rises until she "breaks" it.
- On the day that Pai is born (and her mother and brother die), there is a close-up of her eye. On the day that she seems to die and be reborn, another close-up of her eye occurs when she wakes. (Related to this is the fact that when Nanny and the others discover Pai riding the whale, there appears on the soundtrack a bit of the same chant that was performed when her mother was being mourned in the hospital.)
- Speaking of Koro's criticism, the young Rawiri asks, "He start that early with me?" Porourangi later says, "You know, . . . he did the same thing with me."
- Both Pai and Koro are drawn to the ocean in response to the mysterious voice that is implicitly attributed to the whales.
- Twice Rawiri is involved in trying to rescue Pai from the sea after concern for her is shown by a woman, first his girlfriend and then his mother.
- Twice a whale's exhalation is shown.
- Twice Pai says someone "wanted to die."
- Twice Porourangi asks Pai, "You all right?"
- Koro raises the possibility of his failure and later Pai asks Nanny about the prospect.
- Twice Pai encounters Hemi as she leaves school. The first time, Koro comes to pick her up and smacks Hemi on the head. The second time, Pai tells Hemi that Koro will be upset with him when Koro next picks her up, which would have rhymed, but Koro does not come.
- Twice Rawiri's girlfriend swats him, first during the slide show and again in the boat while Pai is underwater.
- Twice Koro grieves horizontally because of the loss of something in the ocean, first his *reiputa* and later Pai.
- Koro commands Hemi, with the other boys looking on, to have more "respect" for the old ways. He later tells the boys, including Hemi, that the *taiaha* must be given "respect" if it to be mastered.
- Twice Koro hesitates to accept Pai's apology.
- Pai and Koro exchange glances at a distance in the *marae* before "the welcome" and then again later when Pai is riding the whale.
- Koro closes a door as he leaves to go to the final concert and Nanny closes one after returning from it.
- The community assembles to push Paikea's whale out to sea and then later assembles to push the *waka* out to sea.
- The film ends with a revised, condensed restatement of Pai's speech.

These and other contextually cited examples may be what led one critic to call the film "repetitive." Rhyming is even suggested when Koro directs the boys, "The rest of you in pairs." Michael Cunningham's comment, cited in the essay on *The Hours*, about embracing repetition could apply equally well here.

Rejoining the action of the film, Pai is driven away from her home, but she does not get far. Western sacred scriptures are said to be divinely inspired. The fundamental sacred texts of Hinduism, the Vedas, are said to represent a form of knowledge called *sruti*, which means "heard." As the inheritor of her grandfather's shamanic gifts, Pai hears not the natural, physical sound of the whales, but their spirit. She and Koro are both in tune with these noumenal

whisperings, which they each hear at different times. At one point, the whales come to be more in tune with Pai, hearing her but not him. She ultimately receives the higher revelation and establishes a special mutual rapport with the whales. Mortals like Moses can often hear the voice of God but are forbidden to see Him. Here, the audience is privileged, being given clues as to why Pai's thoughts are driven first seaward and then homeward.

In spite of their conflict, it is as if Koro and Pai are joined by Ariadne's thread. Pai may be similarly linked to another relative. In fairy tales, according to Christopher Vogler, a fairy godmother can be thought of as a guardian spirit representing a girl's dead mother. Thus could the whales be the medium through which Pai's mother speaks, just as Nacha (*in loco parentis*) necromantically coaches Tita in *Like Water for Chocolate*. This would explain the sound like that of a human female voice that is associated with the whales and that disillusioned a certain segment of the audience.

Several critics of this film were disgusted by what they saw as manipulative, "maudlin," "New Age hokum." Within the aesthetics of Third World cinema, the magical realist mode is a typical alternative to the formulaic, premodernist, mimetic aesthetic conventions of dominant cinema. *Whale Rider* is quite subtle in its employment of this strategy, especially compared to the source novel, where the mystical and fantastic are explored much more freely. With the drama cinematically grounded in what seems to be minimally art-directed reality and unfolding against a background of deromanticized domestic banality and drudgery (thought admittedly with several opportunities for pictorialist cinematography), a more literal treatment of the novel might go beyond mere contrast and surprise, and run the risk of jolting incongruity.

Ultimately, very little mysticism is absolutely necessary to interpret this film. As with the love potion consumed by Tristan and Isolde, much can be attributed to a placebo effect because the surreal aspect is little more than a delicate overlay. Similarly, one promotional image, featured on the soundtrack CD cover, is that of Pai's face bearing a tattoo that, in some print ads, is almost as imperceptible as a watermark. This image, incidentally, is an echo of the novel, in which it is the whale that has "a swirling tattoo imprinted on its forehead."

In spite of the geographical decentering of Europe, the film still largely adheres to European realist ideals. Commenting on realism, Robert Stam says, "The crusty conservative father who resists his show-crazed daughter's entrance into show-business can 'realistically' be expected, in a backstage musical, to applaud her on-stage apotheosis at the end of the film, no matter how statistically infrequent such a denouement might be in real life." Accordingly, sensing just such teleological predetermination, a friend of this writer commented, "I *knew* Pai was not going to die." Still, Pai's ultimate fate must remain somewhat uncertain because the plausibility of a fatal outcome is bolstered by the deaths of her mother and brother.

One critic faulted the film for contradicting worldly experience, though to do otherwise would be to fall below mythological standards. Along with those critics who bemoaned the narrative inevitability and lack of suspense, all these detractors must regard the cinematic treatment as judiciously amended if not heroically improved compared to the novel.

Rawiri spends years away from home in the novel. A deeper diasporic aspect is expressed in the film when Pai asks, "Can we go home now?" Having left Hawaiki (sadly, some critics missed the *k*), Pai's people may be thought of as diasporized. (Immigrants are distinguished from exiles in that they seek to forget the old life. They instead aim to start fresh and build anew.) Ideally, the desire for repatriation should yield to the Mahayana realization that the Promised Land is everywhere. Pai's true mission is not to lead her people to a different piece of real estate ("Get outta this dump," as Hemi will say) but to heal their estrangement from the ancient ones. It

is she who will reach across the gulf schismatically separating these two groups and strike a new alliance.

Alexander Hamilton asked if it was “not time to awake from the deceitful dream of a golden age.” Despite a wistful sense of loss, it may be impossible to re-indigenize absolutely and return to the imagined utopia of a pre-colonial, pre-industrial, non-European age. Such a restoration of native essence by the simple withdrawal of extrinsic influence would be what Roberto Schwarz calls “nation by subtraction.” Richard Schickel says of “lazy nostalgia,” “There is no other kind.” Wisely, then, the film is not over-endowed with such nostalgic yearnings for what Manohla Dargis calls “a spuriously romantic past.”

Pai interprets her calling (perhaps unconsciously) in local terms and says, “I have to go home.” At the end, she is carried, not geographically to a new land, as was her ancestor, but to the old one, now resuscitated, reborn and revitalized psychologically.

Joseph Campbell asserts that when the structures of mythic stories are analyzed into three acts, the first act typically culminates with what he calls crossing the first threshold. Having crossed a threshold of perception, though perhaps not of clairvoyant comprehension, Pai returns home because crossing a geographical threshold is unnecessary even if the Aristotelian unities of time, place and action are not a priority. The end of the first act is a time for decision, in this case to return home. Having proved herself eligible for initiation by fixing the broken rope and hearing the whales, Pai slams the door on the first act.

Before embarking on the second act, a cursory archetypal assessment will be undertaken. Koro remains an unreconciled and oppugnant antagonist almost until end, but acts as a mentor, at least accidentally, in so far as he serves as a model of Pai’s higher potential self to which she can aspire. Eventually, their pedagogic, tutelary relationship is reciprocally illuminating, with Pai teaching less by precept than by example. Pai does not regard Koro as a villain, but, in spite of their mutual love, each is the other’s greatest opponent. As in romantic comedies and buddy stories, the central relationship is initially adversarial. Love must be earned. Rawiri and Nanny act as mentors and allies. Both provide comic relief, but Nanny is a true trickster, exposing hypocrisy and outwitting a stronger opponent, a lesson not lost on Pai. The herald motivates the hero by announcing the need for change and the possibility of adventure. Pai and Koro both recognize the needs of the people as a kind of call, and Pai takes even Koro’s breaking of a piece of rope as a call to adventure in miniature. But beyond this, Pai is largely self-motivated, repeatedly announces herself, and issues a further call for change to Koro. But, as a threshold guardian, Koro resists change. Encountering such a redoubtable sentry is an encouraging sign because it implies the proximity of the goal. The unworthy are impeded by resistance, but the hero is strengthened by it. Threshold guardians are said to represent inner demons in need of destruction, but Pai seems to have far fewer than Koro, even if she occasionally wavers and falls prey to doubt. Also, in contrast to the *puer aeternus*, Pai is an example of what Rosalind G. Wholden calls the *puella forta*, who achieves the redemptive renewal of tradition.

Continuing the digression, of the half-dozen theaters in which this film was viewed by this writer, the Lido Theater in Newport Beach, California caused the most frustration. Their history of faulty formatting, including the exhibition of a film the title of which appeared on screen as *ap of the Human Hea*, was already well established. Half a century should be more than enough time in which to learn to deal with widescreen cinema. On a related technical note, the formatting of the DVD’s trailers and special features suggests that the film could tolerate a bit

of unmatting. The pan-and-scan VHS version reveals only slightly more of the image vertically, but conceals, for instance, both ends of the *waka* when it is first named.

A school bell announces the start of the second act, which is normally where the hero takes action and gains experience as merit accrues. Hemi's competence is limited to the material realm, while Pai's extends into the spiritual. When they meet, they are dressed, respectively, in blue and red. The essay on *Heavenly Creatures* explains the propriety of this color scheme. Hemi asks Pai why she did not leave with her dad. She takes this as a compound question and replies, "I did." Hemi qualifies her statement by specifying, "For one day." But for Pai, even that was too much. Additionally, Koro's exclusive and "sacred" school is now like forbidden fruit issuing a call to her, which she accepts.

A prominent theme in the film is that of waiting. (This is perhaps more broadly characteristic, since James A. Michener begins his *Tales of the South Pacific* with a list of the region's features that includes "The waiting. The timeless, repetitive waiting.") The land is said to have been "waiting to be filled up . . . waiting for someone to love it . . . waiting for a leader." The community is "waiting for the first-born boy" in Koro's line. Koro tells his son, "They've been waiting for you." In a deleted scene, Pai says to her father, "We waited for you." In the novel, Koro says that salvation "is waiting out there." Pai continues to wait for Koro to recognize her as the rightful new leader. Symbolic of this, Pai waits to be picked up from school, repeating to Hemi that she is "waiting." But, after rebutting Hemi's pessimism, she realizes that one should not hold one's breath waiting for Koro, especially when he is deliberately imposing obstacles. She instead takes self-motivated action, first by walking (or possibly cycling) to the *marae* and later by demonstrating her various chiefly qualities. At the *marae*, visitors (*manuhiri*) must wait to be welcomed and escorted.

Pai's part of the "welcome," which she does not perform in the novel, is a solicitation for welcome in which one asks to be called. It was with these words that the original Paikea had called out to the land. In the novel, the whale also sings this same chant. Koro is not amused by Pai's disobedience and she is dispatched from the *marae*, withdrawing under silent protest. Niki Caro's DVD commentary makes clear that it is not just within some fictitious context that Pai's behavior is heretical. Caro also observes that Koro burdens Porourangi with "the weight of expectation." With Koro providing only headwind for Pai, any such load on her is self-imposed.

Pai is no fawning sycophant whose obeisance degenerates into servile adherence to sterile, doctrine-driven orthodoxy. But Koro's teachings resonate deeply within her. She intuitively senses the core value of the regnant tradition underlying the encrustations and stratifications that threaten to render it an impotent relic. Koro clings to what may be an eclipsed paradigm consisting of exhausted, ossified, reactionary dogma that would benefit greatly from the injection of new progressive energy.

In *Heavenly Creatures*, the *idam* principle is exercised to create an alternative to Christianity. But Pai's story is not a radical critique of tradition or an absolute countermyth to some disowned Old Testament. She is a trailblazing trendsetter, but not a wanton scofflaw or apostatic iconoclast. She seeks merely something like Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* ("fresh thinking"), what Pope John XXIII called for *aggiornamento* ("updating") or what in Islam is known as *tajdid* ("renewal") and *islah* ("reform"), replacing received thinking, including Koro's entrenched sedevacantism, with informed, inventive statecraft. Consequently, the internecine doctrinal polemics between Pai and Koro conceal their commonalities and mutual aim. Pai regards Koro as more than a apologist for antiquarianism, and she must also revere the

generations of ancestors on whose legacy she draws. The Maori word for customs and traditions being *tikanga*, Pai could, in fact, be called a tikangaphile or tikangista, exhibiting a precocious enthusiasm (tikangamania) for the old ways, while being simultaneously ecumenical. During her father's slide show, Pai is the only one to greet Miss Parata in English, as if to translate for the rest of us.

With her ability to distinguish the baby from the bathwater, Pai seeks a corrective only to the aspects of tradition that are as suffocating as colonization and at which she chafes. Burdened by an ideology that naturalizes inequalities and imprisons her in a stereotype, her recusancy allows her to survive the social undertow and to attempt a broader, less prejudicial, more inclusive reframing of Koro's project. This would entail a complementary conceptualization yielding slightly rearticulated configurations of power, while preserving institutional integrity.

It is the job of heroes to transcend reactionary standards in advance of their contemporaries, thus jolting the community out of its complacency. Pai is similarly in the vanguard, reading against the local moral grain to redress gender inequality. Her progressive redeployment of tradition will break the log jam of stagnation and obsolescence, allowing that tradition to serve as a wellspring of restorative power. Meanwhile, this is not a simple contest between dominant and resistant factions. The eclectic Pai (mag-Pai?) adopts a negotiated reading strategy with respect to her local cultural patrimony. Thus she largely, but conditionally, accepts the status quo. The trick will be to enlist Koro into her brand of revivalism.

Koro instructs the boys, but the more inquiring and retentive Pai spies on them. Seeking the peripheralization of all alternative discourse, the austere Koro tries to act as gatekeeper, but simply cannot keep Pai out of the loop any more than Morgana can be kept from learning the charm of making in *Excalibur*. As with Tita in *Like Water for Chocolate*, Pai spends a youthful apprenticeship in the tuition of a master (though not always a willing one) whose example she voraciously imbibes. One goal of teaching is to awaken a permanent hunger in the student. Nothing Pai learns appeases her ache for more. When necessary, she is ferociously autodidactic, which is fortunate. As George Steiner writes in *Lessons of the Masters*, "To teach greatly is to school the disciple for departure." Correspondingly, "One repays a teacher badly," writes Friedrich Nietzsche, "if one always remains nothing but a pupil." Recall from earlier essays that Kali obligingly cuts off her own head to free her disciples from her influence. Living one's own life requires being released from one's heroes. In an obituary for Jacques Derrida, Elaine Woo writes in the *Los Angeles Times*, 10/10/04, "'Of all the philosophers of our time,' eminent Stanford University philosopher Richard Rorty once said, Derrida 'has been the most effective at doing what Socrates hoped philosophers would do: breaking the crust of convention, questioning assumptions never before doubted, raising issues never before discussed.'" Further, Tibetan Buddhists say that if the student is not better than the teacher, then the teacher is a failure.

Pai arouses misogyny by threatening to destabilize the sexual binarism undergirding patriarchal institutions. But this story, though feminism-inflected, is no mere clumsy, reductive critique of patriarchal chauvinism and subordination. In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell relates the Upanishad story of the Vedic gods being instructed by the goddess Maya-Shakti-Devi (giver of life and mother of forms) about *brahman*, the source of their being. The derivation of natural forms from a transcendent source is symbolized as the female power, which informs even the gods, not to mention chiefs like Koro. In the novel, Nanny speaks of Mihi, a female chief of her tribe who was told to sit down "because women weren't supposed to stand up and speak on sacred ground." Mihi then "reminded the chief that all men are born of woman." Also in the

novel, it is the old mother whale who informs the ancient bull whale that the current rider is not the original Paikea but may be his descendant.

Mythologically, the female is the instigator. The first suggestion that Pai will be so named comes from her mother. Just as the dying Dido foresees Hannibal rising centuries in the future to avenge her, it is as if augury allows Pai's dying mother to sense her daughter's destiny and to foresee the propriety of the name. This providential naming might actually be what determines Pai's destiny. For her part, Nanny subversively chooses Pai to "do the welcome." She later plants the idea in Pai's mind that Rawiri is a potential source of instruction. Pai then overcomes her uncle's inertia and spurs him to fulfill the avuncular mandate he received from his mother immediately following Pai's birth. (In the novel, Nanny charges Rawiri and his friends: "You have become her guardians.") Nanny may be assumed to be the one to have gotten Koro's clothes "all laid out on the bed" to expedite his preparations for attending the concert during which Pai receives her trophy. And it could even be speculated that Miss Parata may act behind the scenes to facilitate Pai's victory in the speech contest.

The female is also the typical mythological taboo breaker, though heroes must generally be rebels because to obey the community is simply to perpetuate the community's problems. In this sense, as discussed in the essay dealing with *The English Patient*, the choice is either to "mess around with sacred things" or "get lost." Pai seems to appreciate this intuitively, though with less theoretical self-consciousness than in the novel, where Rawiri infers Kahu's facial expression to mean, "You just wait." Her behavior at times seems paratelic, which is to say only partially voluntary. She explains her need to go home by saying, "I just have to." When told to go to the back, she, like Rosa Parks, disobeys, though not spitefully. She just naturally gravitates to her proper place in the front, again because she just has to. Even so, when Pai is first seen engaging in the forbidden behavior of using a *taiaha*, a sign in the background reads, "WAHINE," which means "women," as if to remind her of a woman's place.

A girl who wanted to join the Catholic clergy once asked a priest why she was not allowed to become what he was. He replied, "Why be a priest when you could be a saint?" Being a priest himself, he obviously had answered that question to his own satisfaction. Even if Pai is not consciously farsighted, she has no use for such rationalization.

In the novel, Rawiri says of Kahu, "She had no guile." She is thus comparable to Parzival, the guileless fool (*der reine Tor*). The innocent Parzival does not realize how bad it is to kill a swan. Pai realizes neither how bad it is to use a *taiaha* nor how good (nor how difficult) it is to retrieve the *reiputa*. She simply does what she must until reaching the inevitable redemptive *telos* toward which the story has been progressing. Émile Zola, a champion of "the legitimacy of eccentricity" would have admired Pai's fidelity to her nature.

The fact that the composer and the screenwriter/director of this film are women raises the issue of *écriture féminine*, and an anecdote in the source material raises the issue, encountered in *The Crying Game* and *Heavenly Creatures*, of gender fluidity. The novel tells how Muriwai, whom Nanny calls "the greatest chief of my tribe," saved the crew of her canoe by making herself into a man and taking charge in an emergency. In the novel, Nanny says to Koro, "If I think you need the help, well, I shall change myself into a man. . . . I'll be like Muriwai if I have to. Kahu, also, if she has to be." Well, Kahu does not have to, though she does not consciously appreciate this when she says to Koro, "I fell off the whale. If I were a boy, I would have held on tight. I'm sorry, Paka, I'm not a boy." Koro replies, "You're the best great-grandchild in the whole wide world. . . . Boy or girl, it doesn't matter." However, discovery can occur only off the beaten path. In the Arthurian tradition, Pai ventures "where there was no path," at least for girls,

Muriwai's precedent not having been embraced. The necessity of Muriwai's gender reassignment stunt is thus refuted.

Euro-colonialist films often simplistically set the epic odyssey of European exploration against a deflationary view of natives as lethargic, superstitious and in need of rescue. Whatever doubts may have existed about the extent to which a *Pakeha* outsider could adequately give voice to Maori experience, Niki Caro's film aspires more to the empowerment of polycentric multiculturalism than to the mere sensitivity of liberal pluralism. On the other hand, Robert Stam quotes Kenneth Macpherson as saying that the "white man is always going to portray the negro as he likes to see him, no matter how benevolently. Benevolence, indeed, is the danger." Stam also says, "A cinema of contrivedly positive images betrays a lack of confidence in the group portrayed, which usually itself has no illusions concerning its own perfection." Instead of naively idealizing the Maoris or becoming an ideological dumping ground, this film engages with issues and conflicts such that any inferred melioristic thrust is moderated. The filmmakers reasoned that if Pai is to be the solution, then it is proper to address the problems, though the specification of some of these is relegated to a deleted scene.

Whatever the extent to which Maori society may have been economically, politically and culturally distorted by colonial subjugation, the film does not overtly scapegoat the hegemonic culture, especially compared to *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, in which Kenneth Branagh is featured as Whitey, a.k.a. The Man. Tellingly, though, Rawiri's *taiaha* trophy was not originally designed as such, whereas the dominant culture presumably has little need to settle for golf trophies derived from Maori artifacts.

This film may not be totally depoliticized, but nor does it stress itself as the kind third-worldist, anti-imperialist cinema that is sometimes intended as an emancipatory weapon in the struggle for cultural survival. Its didactic critique of normativized Eurocentrism is mild, with no overt demand for insurrectionary militancy. Pai is in some sense a maverick and renegade, but constructively so. She is not some apocalyptic, eschatological messiah sent to vanquish the white oppressor. The film is more akin to postcolonial cinema with its interactive incorporation and transformation of foreign influences. The situation may resemble the media-specific imperialism in places like Brazil, where local television and pop music thrive, but Hollywood dominates the cinema. The Maoris perform chants in their native language, but also routinely speak English (note that Rawiri's girlfriend is not familiar with the word *reiputa*) and use modern Western technologies such as cars, bicycles, outboard motors and refrigerators. In the novel, Western mythological references include mention of the fatted calf, the Furies, Leviathan and the lotus eaters. Such elements, not to be found in films like *Rapa Nui*, facilitate transcultural portability, easing the spectatorial task of going imaginatively native. They also prompted Jurgen Fauth to describe the film as "faux-foreign," with "easily identifiable yet 'other' characters."

Another Western allusion occurs in a deleted scene when Nanny ironically says of Pai, "She's not Cinderella." Pai is indeed a Cinderella figure, while Koro acts as Orpheus in his quest to recover something of value that was lost. This reclamation is ultimately achieved by Pai in a much less premeditated manner.

In accordance with Pai's formula for converting Rawiri's trophy, his girlfriend modifies the broom. In response to Pai's reinvigorating, recuperative influence, Rawiri, a symbol of dissipation and malaise, jogs. Pai herself cycles past the bus. Meanwhile, Hemi continues to receive positive feedback from Koro.

On the DVD, the subtitle for Koro's line "It's not just your fathers that are watching you today" unfortunately persists for just two frames. Hemi's father arrives suddenly, but his equally



abrupt departure adversely affects Hemi. Pai, who knows about absentee fathers (as may Keisha Castle-Hughes in real life), seems about to offer consolation to Hemi when he becomes belligerent. During their previous *taiaha* encounter, Pai would rather flinch than fight. But Hemi can no longer rely on her passivity.

Even though it is pleasing to see Pai surreptitiously learn sacred martial arts that are reserved for men, she ultimately need not become proficient at them in order to wield her authority, the basis of which is not physical prowess. A lesser film would content itself with such stock situations and canned jokes, whereas here they have limited mileage. Rather than providing the basis for a decisive victory, physical skills are relevant only to the extent that Pai uses them to unseat the frontrunner among the pretenders to her rightful rank, which serves only to stiffen Koro's resistance. Though some critics saw no more than "a Maori Karate Kid" that "goes through the motions of the genre," the film frequently does so only to tease with red herrings so as to allow for at least a small degree of surprise. Incidentally, Hemi's repeated loss of his war staff could be taken as a Freudian metaphor connoting the *utu* spoken of by Koro. Also, Pai's use of a pool cue in this fight is foreshadowed (or at least made more plausible) by the pool players past whom she walks as she takes Rawiri's *taiaha* trophy to him. Such a weapon more properly simulates Koro's *taiaha* than does the broom handle used by Rawiri when he first practices. This is because Koro's weapon is seen to be tapered in one dimension, especially when he says to Pai, "I'll deal with you later," while Rawiri's is more consistently cylindrical. The pool cue also echoes Koro's cane, which, at the first concert, he uses to exert the authority that it even more specifically symbolizes.

The crisis occurs when the hero can no longer avoid confrontation. Pai and Koro now engage in perhaps the most serious of many. As expected, Pai comes in for reproach and is met with censure, hinderance and frustration. Koro calls the *marae* "the one place where our old ways are upheld." Pai is desperately interested in those old ways, but not in shoehorning her people into an *argumentum ad antiquitatem*, her vision being much broader in scope than that expressed by Koro's phrases "one place" and "the answer." The family's shamanic gift seems to skip generations, as Koro says that the knowledge has come down "from my grandfather to me to those boys." As for those poaching aspirants, Pai, though she leaves Koro's question unanswered, does not "want these boys to fail," but, rather, to succeed in the appropriate way by recognizing her proper role. Just prior to this telling silence, Pai vocally denies wanting Koro to fail in his attempt to find a new leader because she wants to be the one who is found. Also, as discussed below, Koro may unconsciously realize the falsehood of his statement when he tells Pai, "Right from the beginning, you knew this wasn't for you." Pai is prompted to apologize four times and she complies, except when Koro demands sincerity by ordering her, "Say it so you mean it!" at which point she significantly refrains.

The typical hero is issued a challenge and offered an opportunity, but is fearful and reluctant, and initially refuses the call. The closest Pai ever comes to a refusal is when she denies growing up. It is Koro who balks. An essential stage of the hero's journey is the death of ego. Pai is willing to serve and save her community through altruistic self-sacrifice. But it is Koro who remains unconvinced and who clings to the past the way that Pai clings to the hope of a better future. It is *his* ego that must die. It is *his* obstinacy that is the final obstacle. It is he who must achieve psychic integration, balance and wholeness in order to avoid being an antihero. It is he who must distinguish wisdom from folly and discard the latter.

Many quest myths involve the search for a lost father. Pai's principal search is for the approval of her grandfather, while Koro's search is for a prophet. But a prophet is seldom

respected in her own land, and drama requires the postponement of Pai's acceptance. Pai arouses Koro's hostility by being an anomaly, beyond his ideological horizon. Specifically, her persistence threatens to unsettle a normatively male hierarchy, which Koro reasserts by privileging the boys with his attempted cultivation and fostering of their capabilities, such as they are. As an unreflective, reactionary custodian of a vast but institutionally conservative legacy, Koro's short-sighted authoritarianism and tunnel vision result in a blind spot that causes him to misrecognize the solution that has been under his nose the whole time. A spectacular epiphany is required to override Koro's denial of Pai's obvious vocation and legitimacy, and he is ultimately taken by surprise in spite of portents.

Meanwhile, the new generation is ready for change. Hemi hints at his particular acceptance of Pai when he says that she is welcome to ride on the bus and when he says that he (provisionally) would not object to her attendance at Koro's school. He also tries to divert blame from Pai after she disarms him. At the end, amid the general celebration, his approving smile is singled out. In fact, though Pai, in a deleted scene, denies that he is her boyfriend, Hemi stands as a good candidate for Pai's future husband. The two take parallel paths up the learning curve and share coincident crises: Pai's most extreme clash with Koro comes just after Hemi cries and just before Hemi is rejected from the boat. This is also where, in close temporal proximity, each denies another's blame: he hers and she Koro's. Once assured of Hemi's complicity after he earlier catches her spying on the *taiaha* class, Pai playfully taps his staff with hers, initiating what could be construed as an unintentional juvenile analogue of and precursor to flirting. Any inferred potential spousal compatibility also contributes to the potential for a sequel. There is already available material in the novel that is not treated in the film, like Rawiri's travels and his encounter with racism. Pai may as well grow up and encounter this for herself. For now, recognizing the possibility of a more familial affinity, Hemi could even be construed as a surrogate sibling, since he has been on his way to earning the post that would have been inherited by Pai's brother.

Prisoners on Alcatraz were provided with hot showers so that they would not become accustomed to the cold water they would face if they tried to escape the island by swimming to freedom. Harry Houdini would sit in an ice-cold bath to prepare for underwater escapes. Pai sits in "a cold bath," which both foreshadows and helps prepare her for her climactic ride. She even goes to the trouble of lying down, bringing the imagery even closer to that of traditional baptism. Her body is submerged, as her voice has been. But this immersion is a reminder that she is the anointed one. This baptismal imagery also parallels a scene in the novel where Rawiri and his friends wash their hands and "sprinkle themselves with water." The bath is also a physical manifestation of how Koro is always throwing cold water on Pai's ambitions.

Hemi continues as Koro's star pupil even after getting caught showing Pai how to hold the *taiaha*. Now, however, Koro excludes Hemi from the boat into which his classmates have been welcomed. Superficially, this is either because Hemi cried or was disarmed. But, as suggested later, it could be that Koro senses that Hemi is about to prevail and that this would thwart Koro's unconscious wishes. It is left to speculation whether, given the opportunity, Hemi would have held the field. Ominously, being passed over for promotion, Hemi now shares a bit of common motivation with Iago.

After rejecting Hemi, Koro can only pick through the meager leavings. When Koro speaks of "one final test," Rawiri looks sad and concerned, lending an air of foreboding. Thus, as in *Like Water for Chocolate*, a simple, economical, intelligent and highly functional choice of camera position augments the dialogue. Koro speaks of a leader's need to have the jaw of a

whale, but figuratively, not literally. In the novel, a concretistic fallacy leads to butchery when a whale's jaw is cut off with a chain saw. When his *reiputa* lands in the water, the shot is recognized as being from the same perspective as that used behind the titles, as if the sea were already "waiting."

Practicing what he has preached, Koro has tried to "start again" and "find the answer" among the boys, but these interloping remnants disappoint him. His grief is all the more understandable considering the possibly long and regal provenance of the *reiputa* he has lost. Like Hemi's loss of his *taiaha*, Koro's loss of his *reiputa* and the upcoming loss of his cane may symbolize the *utu*. In a deleted scene, Koro tells Nanny, "While I'm teaching at the school I'm *tapu*. I couldn't have sex with you even if I wanted."

Pai retreats to her father's *waka* for solace, even when she is in exile from Koro's house. There she is comforted by a blanket, brought to her on the first occasion by her father and on the second by her grandmother. The third instance is self-initiatory. Leading up to this, Nanny carries the blanket as she walks down the road with Pai as Koro grieves. Pai clutches it when introduced to her temporary lodgings. Thus it is available for her to bring with her when she comes back to the *waka* and calls to the ancient ones.

Christopher Vogler observes that films with a delayed crisis often place that crisis so as to divide the film according to the Golden Ratio. Such a point would occur approximately 61.8% of the way through. *Whale Rider* is between 97.5 and 101 minutes long, depending on whether the credits are counted. This places the period in question at an elapsed time of 60 to 63 minutes, also coinciding with Howard Suber's "one-hour pivot point." This corresponds to the current time of crisis and grief for Koro and exile for Pai. The pivotal event that crowns this interval occurs when Pai is heard by the ancient ones.

The first act seems to culminate when Pai, for the first time, hears the whales. The second would seem to culminate when the whales, though deaf to Koro's quasi-ritual invocations, hear her. In the third act come the consequences of the action taken by the hero in the second. Connecting with the ancient ones indicates Pai's readiness, and it is immediately after this that the opportunity arises for her to pass her most critical test yet and further demonstrate her worthiness.

As in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, the first and second acts of this film have vaguely parallel structures. Both acts begin with Pai discouraging smoking and continue with her chanting at the *marae* and being joined by a family member in the *waka*. Both acts end with Pai leaving to live elsewhere and then interacting indirectly with the whales in a way that is never as explicitly semantic as the conversation between Siegfried and the forest bird in Wagner's *Siegfried*.

Another momentary digression will now be indulged in before "diving" into the third act. Consideration of Witi Ihimaera's source novel may help illuminate the process of adaptation. Paralleling this writer's experience with *The English Patient*, the novel reveals that the screenplay features both benign dramatic simplification of its hypotext as well as many useful additions and alterations that are very much to Niki Caro's credit, there being so much found in the translation. In February 2004, the Directors Guild of America, in deference to writers, sought to restrict "possessory credits" for directors. Calling *Whale Rider* "a film by Niki Caro" largely avoids such controversy because the director is simultaneously the screenwriter.

In the film, Porourangi's girlfriend (whose name is spelled *Anna* in the DVD subtitles, *Anne* in the credits and *Ana* in the novel) comes as a surprise. In the novel, there is no *waka*, no

rope used to start a boat motor, Kahu does not leave with her father, she receives no call to return, Porourangi is not said to be an artist, Hemi is not individualized from within the anonymous mass of boys being taught by Koro, Kahu has no twin brother, she retrieves a stone instead of a whale tooth, is accompanied in the dinghy by Rawiri and Nanny, and is assisted in her quest by dolphins.

In the film, Koro and Nanny become the grandparents of Pai rather than the great-grandparents, thus eliminating a superfluous generation. In the novel, Nanny is more outspoken, while Rawiri, in contrast to the more subtle foreshadowing employed in the film, is often telegraphing and hyping Pai's pending iconic status and epoch-making *annus mirabilis*. For example, like the Star of Bethlehem, an illuminated cloud's "center was just above the village." Kahu "was moving closer and closer to that point where she was in the right place at the right time, with the right understanding to accomplish the task that had been assigned to her." Similarly, "Our Koro was like an old whale stranded in an alien present, but that was how it was supposed to be, because he also had his role in the pattern of things, in the tides of the future."

In the novel, the sublime monster appears in the form of a whale and bears "the gift of the Gods." With echoes of Androcles, Paikea's whale "had been succored by the golden human who became his master." The "whale drew nearer to the human, who cradled him and pressed noses with the orphan in greeting." The mothers of both Kahu and the whale die three months after giving birth. Like the giant figure of Finn MacCool (Fionn mac Cumhail) incorporated into the landscape in *Finnegans Wake*, "some people say the whale was transformed into an island." This island is *Te Ana o Paikea*, which appears in the film and is an obvious candidate for the source of the legend of Paikea via the process of *land-nam*, the appropriation of local features for mythological purposes. Folkloric material could have easily accreted around such a distinctive object, facilitating the conflation of myth and history. Analogously, in chapter 1 of *Ulysses*, it is said of Stephen and Buck Mulligan, "They halted, looking towards the blunt cape of Bray Head that lay on the water like the snout of a sleeping whale."

In the novel, Rawiri, commenting on a traffic accident, speaks of "that broken body moving fitfully in the headlights." This image anticipates the stranded whale at the end. The novel features an additional, preliminary stranding of whales during which "navy personnel arrived, and members of Greenpeace, Project Jonah, and Friends of the Earth." A ranger, rather than Rawiri, instructs people to pour water on whales and keep their blowholes clear. Kahu's ride is prefigured when an old lady sits on a beached whale. Perhaps in unconscious acknowledgment of the wisdom of the ancient ones, an old lady names a whale Sophie. "The whales were singing a plaintive song" and the humans, again under Western influence, sing "Onward Christian Soldiers."

The second stranding transpires in the FUBU (For Us, By Us) tradition. "Perhaps . . . the drama enacted that night was meant to be seen only by the tribe and nobody else. Whatever the case, the earlier stranding of whales was merely a prelude to the awesome event that followed, an event that had all the cataclysmic power and grandeur of a Second Coming." Koro says to the whale, "Oh, sacred one, . . . greetings. Have you come to die or to live?" Rawiri feels "that this was a decision that had been placed in *our* hands." The people face a test to determine if they deserve a second coming. People are told to talk to the whales and that the whales understand, but only Pai gets a response. The men confer, Jonah-like, "[i]nside the stomach of the meetinghouse." Later, Rawiri is reassured by the recollection of Jonah's survival, again citing a Western story.

The novel tells of a time when humans and nonhumans “could live in helpful partnership.” Whales “became known as the helpers of men lost at sea. Whenever asked, the whale would attend the call, as long as the mariner possessed the necessary authority and knew the way of talking to whales.” It is now Pai who possesses these qualities. “But as the world aged and man grew away from his godliness, he began to lose the power of speech with whale . . . . So it was that the knowledge of whale speaking was given only to a few. One of these was our ancestor Paikea.” Another is the new Paikea. With a slightly different emphasis, Koro speaks of the “close communion” in which man, beasts and gods once lived until human arrogance drove “a wedge through the original oneness of the world.” He speaks of illusory distinctions, such as those between real and unreal, past and present. He declares Paikea’s whale to be both natural and supernatural. Similarly, it is the distinction between the *tapu* and *nao* (sacred and profane) that Pai implicitly rejects by going barefoot in the film. Koro says that if the means to communicate with whales has been forgotten, “then we have ceased to be Maori!” He says of the whale, “If we are able to return it to the sea, then that will be proof that the oneness is still with us. . . . If it lives, we live. If it dies, we die. Not only its salvation but ours is waiting out there.” Koro seeks atonement for the misconduct that he knew “would bring retribution.” Kahu introduces herself to the whale and he takes her for her ancestor, both having the same name. The whale supposes that “his fate and that of the rider on top of him were inextricably intertwined.”

Like Jonah three days in the whale and Christ three days in the tomb, Kahu is found after three days at sea. Like the Buddha, the whale’s wife tells Kahu not to be afraid but to return and fulfill her destiny. Koro says to Kahu, “Rise up from the depths of your long sleep.” This is metaphorical of her ascent from the sea and would also metaphorically apply to her people. Kahu tells Koro and Nanny, “You two sounded just like the old mother whale and the bull whale arguing.” The dream characters in *The Wizard of Oz* are caricatures of people in Dorothy’s environment. The personalities of the whales may be similarly biographically derived in Kahu’s mind.

In the novel, “Kahu’s kinship with the sea” is mentioned and her appearance is compared to that of a dolphin, a sea urchin and a stingray. Reflecting her dogged tenacity, Kahu dog paddles, is said to be “like a small puppy” and is ordered by Nanny to “stay.” Of how Kahu loved Koro, Rawiri says, “If he had told her he loved dogs, I’m sure she would have barked, ‘Woof woof.’” Several references to eternity are consistent with the long-lived whale, and Kahu says, “Oh, Paka, can’t you hear them? I’ve been listening to them for ages now.” Radiance is attributed to both the sea and to Kahu. A lizard with a third eye is mentioned. Kahu demonstrates something of that same special perception.

In the film, Pai spearheads the reanimation of her village. In the novel, “shards of ice began to cascade like spears.” Reference is made to “the spearing rain,” and an airplane “spears through the clouds.” Rawiri and his friends on their motorcycles are “flying like spears.” Whales “spear through the raging surf.” Paikea flung spears which became various animals. He himself “was a spear populating the land and sea.” The ancient bull whale is told by his wife that Kahu “is the last spear, the one which was to flower in the future.” It must be returned to land to “fulfill its task.” At the beginning of the novel, Paikea says of his last spear, “Let this be the one to flower when the people are troubled and it is most needed.” At the end of the novel, the ancient bull whale recalls that Paikea, “before throwing the last of his wooden spears,” had said, “Let this spear be planted in the years to come when the people are troubled and it is most needed.” This is like the sword Nothung that Wotan leaves for Siegmund to find. Also, the use of the verb *to flower* may be significant, since Ana gives birth to a girl and names her Putiputi (flower) after

Nanny Flowers. Perhaps great things are in store for her, as well. At the end of the film, Nanny and Rawiri's girlfriend both wear floral patterns while flanking the pregnant Anna.

Many additional elements in the film are either direct derivations from or ironic reflections of the novel:

- In the novel, Nanny says about the naming of Kahu, "I have said prayers about it. What's done is done." In the film, Nanny's friend says about Pai's condition in the hospital, "I've been praying to God about it," and Koro says of the death of Pai's mother, "What's done is done."
- In the novel, the mother of Rawiri's friend Jeff refers to Rawiri when she says, "You know our Jeff, always bringing home dogs and strays." The screenplay has Rawiri telling his brother, "You always get the good looking ones."
- In the novel, Hawaiki is referred to as "the other side of the world." In the film, Porourangi says that Anna cannot be expected "to move to the other side of the world."
- In the film, Koro says of Pai, "She's no use to me." In the novel, Koro says this of Kahu in both the third and second person.
- In the novel, when Rawiri returns, Kahu says, "You're back!" In the film, Pai says, "I'm back."
- At the end of the novel, Nanny says to Koro, "You were deaf, dumb, blind, *and* stubborn." At the dinner table in the film, she asks him if he has gone deaf.
- In the novel, Koro does not want Nanny to interfere, as "this is sacred work." In the film, he says, "you don't mess around with sacred things."
- In the novel, Kahu loves Maori food and Nanny says of her, "This kid's a throwback." In a deleted scene in the film, Koro says, "That kid's a throwback."
- In the novel, Kahu says to Rawiri, "I love singing the Maori songs. Will you teach me how to play the guitar?" In the film, Pai asks him to teach her the use of the *taiaha*.
- In the novel, Nanny says, "rules are made to be broken." In the film, she says, "He's got a lot of rules he has to live by."
- In the novel, Kahu is at the top of her class and is the leader of her culture group. In the film, Rawiri's girlfriend says that Rawiri reckons Pai is "pretty brainy."
- In the novel, the headmaster announces that Pai has won the speech contest. The film uses Miss Parata for this function and as a prospective wife for Porourangi.
- In the novel, it is during the drive home from giving her speech that Kahu says, "It's not Paka's fault, Nanny, . . . that I'm a girl." In the film, Pai says this in the bathtub.
- In the novel, the boys are to retrieve a carved stone instead of a whale tooth.
- In the novel, Rawiri reports that during Kahu's speech, "my heart was aching for her and I wanted to leave. Nanny Flowers gripped me hard and said, 'No, we all have to sit here, like it or not.'" In the film, Nanny stops other young men from leaving.
- In the novel, Nanny asks Porourangi rather than Rawiri if he knew that Kahu had won the speech contest.
- In the novel, Nanny says, "Where is she?" when Kahu dives to retrieve the carved stone. In the film, she says it when the whales return to the sea.
- In the novel, the tribe waits for the stranded whale to die, while in the film they plan to return and try again later.
- At the end of the novel, the bull whale is flanked by seven females. In the film, Koro teaches, at least at certain points, seven boys.

- In the novel, “‘It’s all right,’ Kahu soothed. ‘It will be all right, Paka.’” In the film, Pai says, “It’s okay, Paka.”
- In the novel, Koro “asked the Gods to forgive him,” whereas in the film, he asks for Pai’s forgiveness.
- In the novel, Rawiri says, “I was no hero.” In the film, Pai says, “I’m not a prophet.”

In one of the DVD featurettes, Witi Ihimaera tells of an event that inspired this story, saying that it occurred in “1989.” When the film was broadcast on PBS in 2005, he, in a similar featurette, gave the year of this event as “1984.” As the copyright and first publication date of the novel is given as 1987, the date stated as 1989 would seem to be incorrect.

Consideration of the narrative will now resume as its final act begins. As Pai dives for Koro’s *reiputa*, she nonchalantly says, “I’ll get it.” The task seems to her as easy as the ABC label on the crate behind her. The scene begins with Rawiri’s girlfriend looking cold, whereas Pai is thermally conditioned and prepared. Her dive is an extrapolation from her “cold bath” and is but a foretaste of death and resurrection. As Pai makes her literal descent into the ocean, her narration says that Koro “wanted to go down and down.” This matches descriptions of the psychological experience of the shaman, who is experienced with the interface between life and death. Pai accomplishes her errand with such abecedarian ease that she surfaces with a lobster along with the *reiputa*, nature yielding to her its bounty of food both for the body and for the spirit.

The film is an expression of Arthurian postcolonialism and reassertion of ethnic pride. Pai’s retrieval of the *reiputa* is an obvious reminder of Arthur’s withdrawal of the sword from the stone. The novel refers to this specifically: “‘He wants to find a young boy,’ Porourangi jested, ‘to pull the sword out of the stone, someone who has been marked by the Gods for the task. Nobody has so far been able to satisfy him.’” Nonetheless, one critic saw no excuse for Pai succeeding “without any trouble at all.” As with the prototypical Arthurian example, trouble is reserved exclusively for the unworthy and ineligible, and portends their lesser destiny. Pai could only encounter trouble if physical strength were the issue, which it explicitly is not because this would violate a centuries-old contrivance that is central to the Arthurian formula. Pai may seem already to have earned the title of hero, but heroism must be repeated until it is recognized. She must resort to continuous rededication and, finally, grandstanding to effect the necessary change in Koro.

Pai gives to Koro an invitation for a ceremony that is dated “Wednesday 28 November.” A featurette on the DVD shows the clapper board slate for one of the shots in that “culture night” scene, and it is dated “28 NOV 2001,” which was indeed a Wednesday.

The table full of cups and saucers seen as people arrive for the second concert rhymes with the earlier shot of pairs of shoes awaiting the people leaving the first concert. Of Koro, Pai says, “He’s coming.” Even if he is not coming to the concert, he will eventually be coming to his senses. Koro may be on his way out, both of his home and of his leadership role, but he is not yet completely out of touch. Thanks to the gift that he and his granddaughter share, albeit asymmetrically, he hears and is diverted by a Delphic call like the one that draws Pai back to her home. (Note that both characters respond by walking away from a car and toward the sea.) Just before this, Nanny catches two men trying to sneak out of the concert as a recorded song is being played and the singer sings the lyrics, “‘cause no one there gonna see you run.”

Pai's community is located on the east coast, east being the direction of the rising sun, of rebirth and the direction in which the Buddha was facing when he achieved illumination. Her surname is Apirana, which is the name of one of the people depicted in a set of stamps issued in New Zealand 11/26/80 commemorating Maori leaders. Rawiri speaks of the "surprise" that Pai intended for Koro. Little does he or anyone, including Pai, know what surprises lie in store. In her speech, Pai speaks of "the ones that first heard the land crying and sent a man" as she herself is being heard crying. They have apparently anticipated her crying and are even now sending themselves. She then tells how she "broke the line back to the ancient ones." When they themselves weigh in on this issue, this assertion will not seem to be true in any important sense. When Koro tries to start the boat motor, the "line" is broken not by Pai but by him. Similarly, as will soon be demonstrated, Pai breaks her noble, biological line only according to Koro's obsolete patrilineal shibboleths, not according to the ancient ones. Even when the breaking is unambiguous, as with the broken crockery on the kitchen floor, others must follow in the wake of Koro's destruction and clean up.

Hemi says of Pai, "It wasn't her fault." Pai picks up on this and later echoes Hemi when she says of Koro, "It's not his fault." She now says, "It wasn't anybody's fault." This declaration of universal innocence (or perhaps plenary indulgence) applies explicitly only to her breaking of the chiefly lineage. She must still demonstrate that her inclusion in that lineage is "working." To that end, she becomes a willing sacrifice with her declaration that she was not "scared to die." Together with her subsequent resurrection, this establishes her as a Christ-like figure who brings redemption to her people by assuming their collective guilt on their behalf.

Pai further says of her breaking of the line, "It just happened." This recalls her reason for wanting to return home: "I just have to." It also suggests the Eastern doctrine of mutually and simultaneously arising causes. This, however, is not the explanation Koro applies to the beaching of the whales. Instead, he asks, "Who is to blame?" For him, such culpability would practically constitute deicide. (The second time he asks this question, note the fallaciously pathetic rain.) Before the discovery of what has drawn Koro to the beach, there may be momentary fear of a pending oceanic suicide like that in *A Star is Born*.

Koro is superficially reluctant to acknowledge Pai's eligibility. He might not hinder her so much if he did not realize that she is capable of succeeding. In a deleted scene, Koro allows that Pai performed well at the first concert. But Koro "doth protest too much, methinks." At some level, he may actually want her to succeed, as suggested when he excludes Hemi from the boat. Recall that Brünnhilde, regarding herself as the instrument of Wotan's will, disobeys him in order to fulfill his secret desire. As noted in a previous essay, Freud says that there are no accidents (least of all among fictional characters), only the "opening of a destiny" in response to suppressed desires. "Honor thy error as a hidden intention," reads one of the *Oblique Strategies* cards created by Peter Schmidt and Brian Eno. An unconscious motivation not to prolong his agony may explain why Porourangi "accidentally" overshoots the beginning of his set of slides to reveal the woman he has been seeing. A similar impulse may be what causes Koro to abdicate implicitly by dropping his cane, which perhaps has been fetishized like his *reiputa*, and allowing it to wash away in the surf. This may also be why earlier, like the sword left by Wotan in anticipation of his son's need, Koro's *reiputa* is consigned to the sea so that Pai can prove herself by retrieving it. Pai will reconfirm her legitimacy by again going into the sea, but next time emerging with more than any such paltry physical token of authority. Koro's loss is also reminiscent of the traditional story element that Joseph Campbell calls "the magic flight," in which something of value is left behind to delay a pursuer.



In response to a felt need and renouncing oppressively hierarchical power, Pai advocates a Promethean democratization of knowledge and a dispersal of strength, offering the possibility of “lots of leaders” in opposition to Koro’s assertion that “there can only be one.” Such distributed, collective power would allow all to feel the *ihi*, while avoiding the *wehi*. Pai hears not only the whales, but also the call of her people. She will respond large-heartedly to their implicit request for aid, if they will only recognize her as a resource on which to draw. Pai also recognizes that it takes a village, and so she solicits the support of her community. Already experiencing some battle fatigue, she acknowledges that even a leader “can get tired.” This also reflects her empathy for Koro. In her DVD commentary, Niki Caro observes that Pai is a chief by nature and understands the burden that Koro carries and that she will inherit. She can walk in his shoes (even when barefoot) and compassionately comprehend his ordeal (*nadie sabe lo que tiene el costal, nomás el que lo carga*).

Recalling the “mystical kinship” exemplified in *Howards End*, Pai’s inheritance of Koro’s mantle as her birthright is not necessarily the issue. More generally, the goal is female empowerment at least to the extent that being “chosen” becomes a gender-inclusive process, regardless of whether patrimony is made independent of genealogical propinquity. Ironically, though it is Pai who aspires to the status of hereditary monarch, her counterpart Hemi is played by Mana Taumauna, who, in real life, is the grandson of Hone Taumauna, the chief of Whangara. (This chief is featured in one of the DVD featurettes and may have a small cameo in the film, just as one of the extras bears a passing resemblance to carver Gordon Toi. Also, by the way, one of the “iterations” referred to in that featurette gave rise to a lawsuit.)

As Pai speaks of when her ancestor “couldn’t find the land,” it is as if the whales cannot find the sea. Paikea was lost in the water and the whale returned him to the land. Now that his whale is stranded, the test for Koro is to see if he can reciprocate. Pai says of her forebear that “he probably wanted to die.” The next day, she says, “He wanted to die.” The novel confirms that the reference is to the whale, but it could also be true of Koro.

Pai’s chant is a call not just to the ancient ones, but to her community, asking, like her forbearer, to be lifted up and given strength. Koro says that the consequences (*utu*) of breaking Paikea’s chant involve a loss of masculinity. After being told by Koro that she has broken the *tapu* of the school, Pai breaks this chant with crying during her speech, in which she tells of also breaking the line back to the ancient ones. But, as a female, she is not at risk of phallic divestiture and is thus immune to such consequences. For the purposes of leadership, the lack of masculinity is not incapacitating. Pai is able to fulfill her destiny without denying her gender because the test she passes is one of spirit. Conversely, in Koro’s scholastic crucible of masculinity, the boys are taught to chant, fight and slap their chests, but a failure of a test of spirit ultimately disqualifies them. Pai’s brand of leadership does not require intimidation or having to “smack all those other ones” via stick fighting (*mau rakau*). (David Gelernter, discussing Title IX in the *Los Angeles Times*, 6/10/05, writes, “Why is it crucial for women to be just as keen as men on hammering their opponents into the ground?”) Nor will her success be purely the result of being “brainy,” as she is earlier reckoned to be. For the moment, Pai is at least applauded for her bravely met sorrow.

The whales ultimately respond to Pai’s petitionary prayer by beaching themselves nearly coincident with her recitation of Paikea’s chant, at which time she is traditionally attired and tattooed. As with the sword in the stone, this chant yields results only when recited by the right person. It could be that she summons them in the manner of the sorcerer’s apprentice, not knowing her own strength and not in full control of the power she wields, such that they, like Pai,

“just have to.” Clearly, she is no evil siren eagerly luring whales to their deaths. Perhaps the whales voluntarily make themselves available (*cetacea ex machina*) as the test of which Pai speaks because they foresee the results being all for the best. These ancient ones could have been orchestrating events all along, perhaps even influencing the death of Pai’s brother, rather than just passively “waiting.” They may channel the voice not just of Pai’s mother but of all Pai’s female ancestors, including Muriwai. But this distaff partiality may be misplaced because, again, gender may be too narrow a category. The DVD featurette on the making of the *waka* describes the motif of male and female lineages converging.

The dilemma of the people comes to be symbolized in the plight of their totem animal. Both are beached. This parallelism between whales and humans reflects their mythical consanguinity and mutually imbricated destinies. In the novel, Koro makes this explicit: “If it lives, we live. If it dies, we die. Not only its salvation but ours is waiting out there.”

For primitive hunting people, one species typically serves as the animal master through which all the other animals are influenced. If the principal whale can be turned around, then the others will follow. If Koro can be turned around, then his people will follow. Pai turns both leaders around, to the benefit of their respective communities.

Certain animals have been thought to function as witches’ familiar spirits. Pai demonstrates her affinity with the whales by hearing the call of the ancient ones and by being heard by them. Hunters generally establish a ritual covenant by which the animals agree to supply themselves as food in return for the performance of rites that will bring about their resurrection or reincarnation. In this case, the whales and humans ultimately enjoy reciprocal salvation.

Standing in the *waka* like a Rapa Nui *moai* statue, Pai surveys the scene. That Porourangi, Nanny, and now Rawiri let Pai get away with being in a *waka* is indicative of the progressive influences working on her, since it remains the case in real life that “girls aren’t allowed.” (Niki Caro’s DVD commentary explains how defilement of the *waka* was avoided via temporary desanctification.) But again, though a taboo may serve as a warning not to risk inflation by assuming dangerous powers, it may also be a challenge arising only because the protagonist is ready for it. Pai ambiguously speaks of “Paikēa’s whale” as she is about to become a whale rider in the manner of her namesake. Koro chants to the whale, but it is not his and he is not the chosen one. When Koro tells Rawiri how they must try to move the whale, the camera appears to break the 180-degree rule, as if to echo the breaking of rules by Pai.

When Koro tells Pai that she has “done enough,” it is not clear whether this refers to the whole of the film or is an acknowledgment of her power to summon the whales. Even after manifesting so many hallmarks during her protracted verification phase, Pai remains subject to irksome reproval, chastisement and ostracism.

Yet another rope breaks. When the rope of the Norns breaks in Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*, it is attributed to “an avenging curse” and indicates the pending end of the old order. Similarly, Koro’s reign has effectively ended, possibly as part of the repercussions of collective transgression, and it is now Pai’s turn to try to make amends.

Pai has already succeeded in recovering Koro’s *reiputa* after the boys fail. The final showdown involves determining who can move the whale. Koro, like Pai, has the ears to hear the whales but he cannot move them. Thus he functions as the false claimant. Pai’s attempt to move the whale, on the other hand, does not constitute hubris due to overestimation of her prowess because she does not merely benefit from beginner’s luck when she retrieves the *reiputa*. She, not Koro, will prove to be the hypertrophically developed hierophant.

Pai establishes a specific rapport with the whale by reverentially pressing noses (*hongī*), which involves the sharing of breath. Moments earlier, Pai confirms that the whale still has breath to be shared. (This also rhymes with an event in the first concert where Hemi, portraying a whale, passes a different sort of gas.) Koro has pressed noses throughout the film, but only with other people, not with the whale. This lapse on his part is equivalent to Parzival failing to ask the question that would demonstrate his compassion. In the novel, the whale takes Kahu for the latter's ancestor, with whom he had pressed noses long ago. Though the return of Arthur is integral to Celtic mythology, the return of Paiea may not be similarly expected, even by the whale. But now is revealed the deep significance of the earlier statement of the new and self-heralded Paiea: "I'm back." It is no wonder that Pai does her best to emphasize this annunciation by issuing it thrice. Parenthetically, another phrase, which Pai also repeats, could serve as an alternative motto for the film: "It's working!" Let it also be noted that this is the last time that Pai is seen with her feet on the ground, in symmetry with the beginning.

The opportunity to misinterpret the enterprise physically should be avoided. Accordingly, Koro describes the retrieval of the *reiputa* as a test not of strength but of spirit. Yet, in the final crisis, which is said to be a test for Koro, he tries to move the whale physically. A rope breaks when he tries to start the boat motor, and another breaks when he tries to move the whale. Pai's physical remedy suffices in the first instance. But it is not because of brute force that the stone yields the sword to Arthur and Howards End yields to Meg. Similarly, when the problem is spiritually soluble, Pai, with her spiritual authority, is able, like Arthur, to succeed where physically stronger people (and their tractor) fail. The whale, too, may not seem physically capable of freeing itself. But such physical limitation is no more relevant to it than they are to Arthur or Meg or Brünnhilde or Pai. As for Koro, whatever such power he may have had seems to have washed out to sea along with his cane.

Some feminist theory regards the fluid voice as the feminine counterpart to the masculine rigidity of written expression. Accordingly, Koro says that certain information "comes from the books." Reflecting the more dialogic nature attributed to women, Pai's methods for rescuing the whale contrast strongly with Koro's use of a tractor, and may also be taken as yet another mythological example of a female activating a male. But, as with the sacred/profane dichotomy, binary oppositions inferred from gender polarity may be simplistic. Activity and passivity need not be construed, respectively, as masculine and feminine. Some feminists also contend that dominant cinema constructs a gender-specific subject, and Robert Stam reminds us that spectators are "embodied, . . . historically situated" and "also sexualized, classed, raced, nationed, regioned, and so forth." While most films featuring female protagonists could be said to have a high chick-flick quotient, this film can also boast near-universal appeal.

Aided by a convenient barnacular pommel, Pai astride the whale is comparable to such dolphin riders as Arion and Phalanthus, and recalls the image of Europa, the personification of an entire continent, carried off by Zeus in the form of a bull. (Paul Atreides atop the sandworm in *Dune* also comes to mind.) George Michael Evica claims, "The ancient myths were sacred stories, but they were also script for ritual dramas enacted by the people in cleansing and renewing their community, nation, and world." The carved figure of the ancestral Paiea is at risk of being idolatrous until it gains renewed currency when Pai reenacts the story of her namesake and realizes this image in the flesh. Such concretization is needed before the perennial doubts that plague Koro can be overcome. His readiness to embrace Pai's legitimacy is then crystallized in a trice. Koro had wanted "the hairs on the backs of their necks to stand up." As his and Pai's

gazes answer one another, the nonplused Koro experiences this feeling himself when he becomes a transfixed witness to Pai's definitive, legitimizing epiphany.

Though only two or three shots seem to have required computer-generated whale images, one critic somehow managed to form the impression that *all* the whales in the film were "digital." Saying this was "too bad," this critic evidently felt regret that live whales were denied a paycheck. While on the topic of critics, one said the film fails to "deal with real issues facing indigenous peoples" in spite of noting that characters "drink beer, take drugs and drive American cars." These very issues contributed to the earning of a PG-13 rating and are part of the refreshing candor that almost amounts to writing against genre. One critic characterized the film as propaganda, saying that "it wants to do all the thinking for you." If true, it should provide welcome relief to the many critics who express a desire for such films because so many others leave them wallowing in a stupor of incomprehension. One critic regretted the insufficiently "proactive" heroine. For her age, Pai seems to have ample statesmanship and messianic zeal for one dedicated to the democratic, nonviolent, pure means of Mahatma Gandhi.

When Pai surfaces and looks at the sky, it recalls Kahu making "her farewell to sky and earth and sea and land" in the novel. Sir Gawain successfully passes the tests of lust and fear. The former test does not apply here as it might in a true coming-of-age story. However, recalling that the original Paikea "probably wanted to die," and that his whale "wanted to die," Pai now claims not to be "scared to die." Like Tristan, she accepts death rather than dissuasion. In *Transformations of Myth Through Time*, Joseph Campbell says of the sacrificial approach to war, "The individual gives himself up to the Lord Death and is not in protection of himself but is moved by the tides of history." Buddhism teaches that ignorance, lust and malice dominate the world as it appears to those who fear death. It is as if Pai has moved beyond this under the Buddhistic influence of Yama-Antaka, the ender of the fear of death.

Before the revelation that it is not her time to die, the past tense of Pai's narration suggests that she may be speaking from beyond the grave, just as the whales could be channelling her mother. With that possibility looming, she descends Jonah-like to realms that are symbolically beyond the bounds of consciousness, eventually having to return from literal unconsciousness as from a shamanic trance. In the meantime, like Tita's healing Texan sojourn, Pai partakes of the transfiguring, amniotic, oceanic darkness.

The boys salute Pai with Paikea's chant, recalling Karen being invited into the bar for a drink at the end of *Out of Africa*. Nanny returns the *reiputa* to Koro and this clinches it. Pai is finally able to exert her sway on Koro, who, with newly found plasticity, relaxes his lofty mien and registers his approval with a smile of a different character than previously seen. For him, having overcome his well-entrenched obstinacy toward Pai's impertinence, all comes clear. Also possibly clarified is what may have been his secret wish for Pai, which in the epilogue will be seen to have come true. Recalling (and perhaps surpassing) Barton Fink's experience at the beach, Koro finally accepts the inevitable with equanimity. He had resisted changing the rules, but he is in no position to argue with the ancient ones themselves or the recipient of their espousal. As with the distinction between mystical and civil marriage, Pai is the chosen one, but Koro is not the one to do the choosing. Nor is Pai's status merely self-conferred or self-validated. The whales crucially cooperate in her mythographic iconization as well-credentialed avatar. Thus is her legend assured.

A story's climax traditionally features the most dangerous and decisive encounter with death and the final chance to succeed. The result is purification and resurrection. Pai's cleansing has been foretold by her bath and dive. Pai comes close to experiencing physical death, but she

ultimately functions as a catalyst hero because it is Koro who experiences the major change of attitude. His is the more extensive and complex character arc, while Pai seems to hit the ground running and fathom (pun intended) what is right from the day she is born. In the end, it is Koro who emerges victorious and triumphant over himself. Like Wotan surrounding his disobedient but beloved daughter with magic fire on a mountain top and bidding her farewell forever, Koro commits Pai to the ancient ones and to the depths of the sea. As if doing so affirmatively, the next word he will speak, even though in a different context, will be “yes.”

Koro, already “sadder but wiser,” receives a telephone call with news of events that in the novel are, characteristically, extraordinary. His reaction alone suffices here. Pai earlier says, “I have to go home.” Not surprisingly, she again does not intend to leave her community behind. Most myths are stories of the fortuitous confluence of individual endowment and community need in which a hero typically undergoes initiation and transformation, and then returns with a remedy for the wasteland problem. Pai’s Bodhisattva-like actions bring about just such a watershed moment for her people, who get a new leader because they are ready for one. Like her uncle’s, Pai’s “timing’s spooky.” Her village is to enjoy changes scarcely hints at by a pledge to “give up the smokes.”

It is sometimes the case that the hero’s reintegration with the group is preceded by a period of quarantine. In the hospital, Pai teeters on the brink of death, her whale ride having been her precarious sword bridge adventure. Koro seems to confer the status of chief upon her by transferring his *reiputa* to her, but his *mea culpa* and self-criticism may indicate that this act is simply in recognition of that which she has conferred on herself. It is by hanging around Pai’s neck that the *reiputa* is reconsecrated. Of all the integral, theatrically exhibited subtitles featured on the DVD, only this last one is uncharacteristically presented in the style of those for the hearing-impaired with the preface “Speaks Maori.” This does not occur in the VHS version. The 15th anniversary edition, both on Blu-ray and on Netflix, lacks these translations entirely, and thus does not functionality replace the 2003 DVD fully.

At this point, a bone is thrown to readers of the novel. A pair of whales is seen, with one passing beneath the other. This corresponds to the following passage in the novel: “The old mother whale allowed herself to drift just below her husband. . . . She . . . let a fin accidentally on purpose caress the place of his deepest pleasure.” Pai’s admittedly momentary awakening is perhaps foretold by her successful survival of hospitalization as an infant, when Pai the narrator says of her nascent self that she had not died. Perhaps too, the denouement featuring the renascent Pai is foretold by the earlier implicit denial of “someone dying or something.” The scene ends with an optimistic fade to white rather than black.

A graded series of tests, culminating in the supreme ordeal of mortal jeopardy, brings Pai a series of rewards. She starts the boat motor, passes the school bus on her bicycle, disarms Hemi, retrieves the *reiputa*, receives a trophy for her speech, moves the whale and comes to wear the *reiputa*. But the best is yet to come, with the offer to “give up the smokes” being a comic understatement of the pending improvements.

The beginning of the epilogue is accompanied by music titled “*Waka* in the Sky.” In Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*, the title character is told by the Pope that the former’s redemption is as impossible as it would be for the papal staff to blossom with new greenery, which, at the end of the opera, it does. The same gimmick punctuates the ending of *Enchanted April*. Likewise, Koro can be imagined saying that he would accept Pai as legatee “when *wakas* fly.” The image of the traditional *waka* apparently hoisted by a modern crane nicely illustrates the synthesis of old and new that Pai has achieved.

This final scene is a triumph of the salvic possibilities of tradition, which now, slightly retooled, mobilizes the citizenry. Pai and the whales having musingly heard each other, her mediation is the midwifery that brings about both the restoration of a syncretic concord between humans and whales as well as the revivification of an unmoored and moribund community that had been at risk of rotting beneath the waterline. The same chant that Pai rehearses while walking down the street is again being performed, but now heralding the new, resurgent Paikēa. At first, it is only Pai's disembodied voice that is heard, like the spectral voice of the whales. She is then discovered ensconced alongside Koro, their wedge issue amicably resolved, the rift between them healed. Thus has the war canoe in which she is enthroned become a peace canoe abounding with a deep affection, and Koro has become the doting grandfather he should have been all along.

Borrowing a phrase used by Heller McAlpin in reviewing *Pushkin and the Queen of Spades* by Alice Randall, Koro's story is something of an "odyssey from prejudice to pride." With singular satisfaction and confidence tempered by humility, the concessive, conciliatory Koro proudly supervises Pai's regal progress. Just as Parzival changes God's law, Pai changes Koro's, and now basks in his autumnal appreciation. Their's can be seen as an epic love story, their shared passion stronger than any conflict between them. Now with his endorsement, having finally disabused him of his antiquated fundamentalism, and under the aegis of the ancient ones, this once seemingly inconsequential runt is finally given her due and takes her victory lap amidst a contagion of joy, her *métier* universally acknowledged.

Others are drawn to the *waka* each time Pai visits it: first her father, then Nanny, then the whales, and now the entire jubilant populace, including the audience. If Pai's mother has exerted benevolent influence via the whales, she may not have been alone. The film is dedicated to "those who have gone before." All Pai's ancestors may now be revenants speaking through her. Having tasted death herself and mastered the two worlds, Pai is a beacon and lodestar for all people.

Pai repeatedly shares a bicycle with Koro until he turns his attention to the boys and stops bringing her home from school. Cycling solo, she passes a school bus full of contestants, leaving her competitors behind. At the end, she and Koro ride in tandem in the *waka* as they did on the bicycle, as her people go forward "all together." Yet another version of the "*Ko Paikēa*" chant is heard during the credits, providing a fitting postlude.

In the novel, Rawiri says that Kahu was beautiful "both inside and outside." In the opera *Les Troyens* of Hector Berlioz, the Carthaginians praise their beloved queen Dido: "Queen by her beauty, grace and genius, queen by the favor of the gods, and queen by the love of her happy subjects." Pai seems well on her way to meeting that same standard, and her portrayer will shortly portray a similarly regal character, the Queen of Naboo in *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*, and then the Virgin Mary in Catherine Hardwicke's *The Nativity Story*. [Years after these initial observations were made, Keisha Castle-Hughes would also fittingly appear in *Queen of Carthage*, directed by Mardana M. Mayginnes.] Thus, like Lumi Cavasos in *Like Water for Chocolate*, Keisha Castle-Hughes has not merely provided the corporeal substrate on which a conceptual, virtual, fictional character could be realized. She has been given the privilege of incarnating the goddess.