Escape into Myth or Strategy for Community and Identity? *The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera

Anton Escher

Abstract *This article aims to show that in a 'Western' reading of Witi Ihimaera's book, "The Whale Rider" (1987), myth is of overarching importance to all societies in the world for the preservation of community and identity. In the world of the Whangara myth, three aspects are of importance to the reading of the narrative: the Leviathan, the Whale Rider and the reflection of the real world in the mythical world. The narrative shows that Māori do not flee into myth, but that the integration of myth and the everyday reference to myth is what enables Māori to exist and continue to exist as Māori, because Māori define themselves as Māori through myth. Ultimately, the message of the narrative to preserve and build a community and identity not only for the Whangara community but for all societies around the world is: "Haumi e, hui e, taiki e": Let us unite, come together and stand by each other!*

Keywords *myth; Leviathan; interpretation; whale; community*

0 Prologue

In recent years, the author of the following text has made several work trips to New Zealand with students and colleagues from Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. When meeting Indigenous people, my experiences and communication always had a touristy, exotic feel to them. After I had deciphered Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* (1987) using the interpretation presented below, this feeling and perception disappeared like a picture puzzle. I had lost the emotional and 'Western-reflective' distance to the people of New Zealand.

1 Introduction

The book *The Whale Rider* (1987) has been translated into more than 20 languages and is a worldwide bestseller. Typologically, the novel can be read as a "New Zealand vari-

ation on South American magical realism, in which both the discourse of the real and the discourse of the magical make ontological claims" (Eckstein 2020). Born in New Zealand in 1944, author Witi Ihimaera stands between cultural worlds, as the Māori Witi Tame Ihimaera-Smiler "has Lowland Scots ancestry on both sides of his family" (Keown 2013, 66). His cultural literacy is remarkable, not only because of his family background, but also because of his professional career, which included diplomatic posts for the New Zealand government in numerous countries around the world. The novel was written in English and was therefore initially aimed at an English-speaking, Western audience. It was not until 1995 that the novel, published in 1987, was translated into the Māori language. Due to the fact that the narrative addresses almost the entire world in the course of its reception, the following questions arise: What is the possible central message of the novel from the perspective of a Western-oriented audience? Given the classification of the narrative as magical realism, the following question further arises: Does the novel describe the Māori's escape from their endangered world into myth, or does the story show a strategy to preserve Māori community and identity through the integration of myth and reality? The book is "about belief as much as about fantasy, and evolves around a rural community, its cultural rituals, and the quest for an affirmative syncretistic identity in times of cultural crisis" (Eckstein 2010, 94). The content can be summarised briefly:

> [T]he narrator is a young man in search of his cultural identity, the heroine is a young girl who desperately tries to win her grandfather's love and recognition and who has a very special connection to the sea and its inhabitants. The grandfather, who gradually becomes more and more obsessed with the search for a successor, and the grandmother, who critically accompanies this search […], are also key whanau actors (Māori for extended family). (JGU 2023)

Niki Caro's successful 2002 film adaptation, which made the novel famous, has come to dominate interpretations of the novel, as numerous examples show (Prentice 2006; Hokowhitu 2007; Visser 2008; Dodd 2012 and Rein 2015). As Eckstein (2010) demonstrates, modifications to the text in different editions play a negligible role in subsequent interpretations.

2 *The Whale Rider* from a broken perspective behind the scenes

Based on the brief summary, the meanings of the structuring characters Rawiri (narrator), Koro Apirana and Nanny Flowers (makers) and Kahu (heroine) are outlined from a broken perspective behind the scenes of the narrative. The formal structure of the narrative comprises 21 sections, divided into the four seasons. They

are framed by a prologue 'The Coming of Kahutia Te Rangi' and an epilogue 'The Girl From the Sea'. The framing deals predominantly with the world of the Māori myth of Whangara. Therefore, the interpretation begins with the myth, which is at the center of the narrative.

2.1 The myth of the Whangara Māori

In the world of the Whangara myth, three aspects are of paramount importance for a Western-centric reading of the narrative: the Leviathan, the Whale Rider, and the reflection of the real world in the mythical world. At the beginning and end of the narrative, the central figure of the myth is referred to as Leviathan: "A dark shape rising from the greenstone depths of the ocean, awesome, leviathan, …" (Ihimaera 1987, 5) and "Leviathan. Climbing through the pounamu depths" (93). The author thus draws on a mythical figure of Hebrew origin, which Thomas Hobbes uses as a symbol for the power of state organisation. The Leviathan symbolises the mortal god (Hobbes 1996, 145) and the organisational form of humans, who themselves created the monster in reality and in their imagination.

Important for the interpretation of the story is, that the appearance of the Leviathan, the "taniwha" (mythical creature) and "tipua" (guardian spirit) (Ihimaera 1987, 93) is accompanied by "awesome singing" (5 and 93) on both occasions. The connection to the mythical world is symbolised by the Whale Rider, who is the forefather, creator, and bringer of life force (*mauri*) for the creation of the community. The Whale Rider is identified as the human and sea god Kahutia Te Rangi of the Whangara: "He came riding through the sea, our sea god Kahutia Te Rangi, astride his tipua, and he brought with him the mauri, the life-giving forces which would enable us to live in close communion with the world" (27). The world of myth is reflected in the everyday world of the Māori. Not only are the actions and behaviour of the married couple Koro and Nanny reflected in the pair of whale bull and whale cow that 'rule' the whale herd, but multiple references in the text also show this connection, such as "Our Koro was like an old whale stranded in an alien present, …" (59). The threat posed by industry and nuclear testing affects both worlds. This mirroring shows the interdependence and mutual conditionality of the worlds.

2.2 Rawiri, the 'Māori storyteller'

In the narrative within the novel, the author is represented by Rawiri. The narrator Rawiri is the brother of Porourangi and grandson of Koro Apirana, as well as the uncle of Kahu, Porourangi's daughter. Three aspects of Rawiri's stories demonstrate his enlightened character, his Western education, and his reflective intellect: self-realisation, mythological competence, and dream narration. Rawiri seeks self-realisation outside New Zealand in Australia and New Guinea. There he discovers that

Māori from his village live "the way they wanted to" (51). He realises that these people could not behave as they wished in their home village because they would have been expelled from the community: "They weren't embarrassed, but hiding the way they lived was one way of maintaining the respect" (52) and remain relatives. The community in New Zealand functions according to traditional norms, which the narrator Rawiri has left behind. The narrator shows that he is familiar not only with Māori mythology, but also with European myths: the reference to their "hedonistic life of the lotus eater" (52) quotes Homer's Odyssey, where an island people consume the intoxicating fruit of the lotus tree. Another example is the metaphor "to pull the sword out of the stone" (58) from the Arthurian legend about the sword Excalibur. These are mythical references that are certainly not taken from the treasure trove of legends of the Māori of Whangara.

Time and again, the narrator Rawiri makes it clear that the world of myth has something to do with dreams, i.e., as soon as the real world intersects with the world of talking whales or communicating dolphins, there is a reference to dreams: "The dolphins were like silver dreams as they disappeared" (74), "Time passed, time passed like a dream" (80), "But there were no television cameras nor radio newsmen to see what occurred in Whangara the following night. Perhaps it was just as well, because even now it all seems like a dream" (90). In almost ingenious passages and ambiguous formulations, the author weaves together the worlds of reality and dreams.

2.3 Koro Apirana and Nanny Flowers, the 'Māori makers'

In my view, although they argue constantly, the married couple Koro Apirana and Nanny Flowers act as a unit with regard to the existence and future of the Whangara tribe. The first names of the two spouses reflect their roles in the story: Koro Apirana is the 'grandfather of the Whangara' and Nanny Flowers is the 'educator of the Whangara'. The couple acts as guardians, shapers, and educators of tradition for the community. Ultimately, it is the eldest who preserves and passes on the tribe's traditions based on their knowledge. The question arises as to how the Māori deal with the modern world that is forcing its way into their community. This concerns not only the dynamics of the Pākehā (white New Zealanders) in the country and the migration of the Māori, but also the physical changes brought about by industry and global politics. This raises the question for the Māori: "And will they still be Maori?" (59). Preserving tradition means preserving the identity of the community, the identity as Māori that the grandfather strives for as the leader of the tribe. "In this respect we both recognised that the answer lay in Koro Apirana's persistence with the wananga sessions, for he was one of the very few who could pass on the knowledge, the sacred kumara, to us" (59). When it comes to preserving tradition, Nanny Flowers acts without regard for the rules handed down: "She had telephoned Porourangi and said that the baby could be named Kahu, after Kahutia Te Rangi" (16). With the

naming Nanny defines Kahu's ancestry and helps determine the girl's identity. "Not only was Kahutia Te Rangi a man's name but it was also the name of the ancestor of our village" (16). In addition, she arranges for Kahu's umbilical cord (*pito*) to be buried in the community's meeting place (*marae*). Nanny also keeps the stone that was retrieved from the bottom of the sea as proof of Kahu's competence, to give just one more example. With her actions, she places the girl in the line of succession of the original ancestor. Grandfather Koro, in turn, explains to the members of the village that the world is divided into two parts: "The real and the unreal. The natural and the supernatural. The present and the past. The scientific and fantastic" (96). He goes on to criticise enlightened, modern society: "He put a barrier between both worlds and everything on his side was called rational and everything on the other side was called irrational" (96). Grandfather Koro Apiriana explains that the myth represented by the whale belongs to both worlds: "It is a reminder us of the oneness which the world once had. It is the pito joining past and present, reality and fantasy. It is both" (96). He then explains the importance of the unity of the world and myth for the existence of the Māori: "and if we have forgotten the communion then we have ceased to be Maori" (96).

2.4 Kahu, the 'Māori heroine'

The central character of the story is without doubt the girl Kahu. Her actions are driven by her desire to earn the respect and recognition of her grandfather. Depending on one's perspective and interpretation, Kahu is the heroine of the story, the successor to the Whale Rider, and the mediator between the worlds of everyday life and Māori mythology. The original rule that only a male firstborn can succeed is overcome, and a young girl takes the place and function of a firstborn for the Māori of Whangara. In doing so, a character in the novel undergoes a dynamic change that, on the one hand, corresponds to the current social norms of European societies and, on the other hand, preserves the community and identity of the Māori. It is not about man or woman, it is about establishing a connection with the myth. The girl Kahu risks her life to be the Whale Rider, which she succeeds in doing in imagination: "SHE WAS the whale rider" (107), "She was Paikea" (107) and "She was Kahutia Te Rangi. She was Paikea. She was the whale rider" (108). Kahu expresses herself completely differently after being rescued from the sea in the real world: "I fell off the whale" (121). This shows that it is not the action with the whale that determines her succession in the real world, but rather the recognition of her succession by the guardians of tradition, by Koro Apirana and Nanny Flowers, and by the Whangara community. The story demonstrates that Kahu has followed in the footsteps of the founder of the Kahutia Te Rangi tribe for generations by risking her life. "Oh, *Paka*, can't you hear them? I've been listening to them for ages now. Oh *Paka*, and the whales are still singing" (122), Kahu says to her grandfather at the end of the

story. This statement manifests the integration of myth and the real world, for the song of the whales always accompanies the appearance of the Leviathan. Kahu fulfils her destiny and connects the 'unreal world' of myth with the 'real world' of the Māori. In order for the unity of the two worlds to be possible for the Māori community as Māori, they must comply with the guardian spirit's request: "Haumi e, hui e, taiki e."

3 The central message of the Māori narrative

It has been shown that the Māori writer formulates a message for the world using the example of the Māori narrative. The protagonists appear to act and argue to a large extent with a Western intellectual background and are therefore also comprehensible to a Western audience. The interspersed Māori words embellish the story and reinforce its authenticity. The Whale Rider's destiny is to spark a dynamic that creates worlds, brings them together, and makes them complement each other, because all worlds are created by the gods and humans. This dynamic can be summed up in the message "Haumi e, hui e, taiki e" [Let's unite, come together, and support each other]! The appeal applies to all Māori who identify as Māori and to the Māori myth that they live by every day. The narrator conveys that the dominance of this mission in Māori life is also evident in the fact that ten of the 21 sections of the story end with this appeal. Witi Ihimaera succeeds masterfully in uniting the worlds of reality and myth, as Lars Eckstein (2020) puts it. Ultimately, the message of the story is about preserving and shaping community and identity: "Haumi e, hui e, taiki e."

The narrative shows that the Māori do not escape into myth, but that the integration of myth and the everyday reference to myth is what enables the Māori to exist and continue as Māori, because the Māori define themselves as Māori through myth.

4 Epilogue

The narrator Witi Ihimaera argues almost throughout with Western reasoning about myth and enlightenment. In doing so, he shows his readers that all societies, regardless of their constitutional rules and lived values, need myth for self-realisation and the formation of community and identity. We at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz also draw on the myth of Johannes Gutenberg, even if we like to treat the myth in the sense of the philosopher Hans Blumenberg (2001, 38) with a "Maß von Unernst" [Measure of unseriousness] and "Leichtfertigkeit" [light heartedness]. The "Gutenberg Spirit" (Krausch 2017) has already been captured in theoretical approaches in a normative paper and culminates in the Christian motto "ut omnes unum sint". The achievements of Johannes Gutenberg, the "man of the

millennium," in the field of printing with movable type are undisputed. His history and work are being studied at our university (e.g., Füssel 2003 and Mattheus 2005). In addition, the 'Gutenberg myth' is honoured as part of the doctoral programme with the examination and celebration community of the doctoral candidate by visiting the monument of Johannes Gutenberg on campus. It is of great significance after 'corona virus restrictions' to bring people back together and revitalise the campus with all members of the university community, students, faculty, and staff, as well as the myth of Johannes Gutenberg in the spirit of our university motto "ut omnes unum sint" and thus with the imperative "Haumi e, hui e, taiki e." Thank you, Witi Ihimaera!

References

Blumenberg, Hans. *Die Arbeit am Mythos*. Suhrkamp, 2001 [1979].

Dodd, Kevin V. "Whale Rider: The Re-enactment of Myth and the Empowerment of Women." *Journal of Religion & Film*, vol. 16, no. 2, Art. 9, 2012, pp. 1–16, https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.16.02.09.

Eckstein, Lars. "Think Local Sell Global: Magical Realism, the Whale Rider and the Market." *Commodifying (Post)Colonialism: Othering, Reification, Commodification and the New Literatures and Cultures in English*, edited by Rainer Emig and Oliver Lindner, Rodopi B.V., 2010, pp. 93–108.

Eckstein, Lars. "Ihimaera, Witi: The Whale Rider." *Kindlers Literatur Lexikon*, edited by H. L. Arnold, Springer Nature, 2020, pp. 1–2, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-05728-0_8797-1.

Egger, Christoph. "Das Mädchen und die Wale." *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, 26 September 2003.

Füssel, Stephan. *Johannes Gutenberg*. 3rd ed., Reinbek, 2003.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Translated by Jutta Schlösser, Meiner, 1996 [1651].

Hokowhitu, Brendan. "Understanding Whangara: Whale Rider as Simulacrum." *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2007, pp. 22–30, https://doi.org/10.11157/medianz-vol10iss2id65.

Ihimaera, Witi. *The Whale Rider.* Heinemann, 1987.

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität (JGU). "Ringvorlesung / Lecture Series. Eine Uni – Ein Buch: *The Whale Rider*. Eine Erkundung Neuseelands mit Witi Ihimaeras Roman." *Eine Uni – ein Buch Mainz*, 7 July 2023, https://eine-uni-ein-buch.uni-mainz.de/programm/ringvorlesung/, accessed 23 March 2025.

Keown, Michelle. "Isles of Voices: Scotland in the Indigenous Pacific Literary Imaginary." *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, no. 9, 2013, pp. 51–67, http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue9/keown.pdf, accessed 08 April 2025.

Krausch, Georg. *Leitbild. The Gutenberg Spirit – Moving Minds. Crossing Boundaries*, 3rd ed., edited by Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 2017, https://www.verwaltung.personal.uni-mainz.de/files/2020/02/JGU_leitbild.pdf, accessed 08 April 2025.

Matheus, Michael. *Lebenswelten Johannes Gutenbergs*. Steiner, 2005.

Prentice, Chris. "Riding the Whale? Postcolonialism and Globalization in *Whale Rider*." *Cross/Culture: Global Fissures. Postcolonial Fusions*, edited by Clara A.B. Joseph, pp. 247–267, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401203098_015.

Rein, Nele. "Wem gehört der Wal? Geschlecht und Ethnizität in *Whale Rider*." *total. Universalismus und Partikularismus in post-kolonialer Medientheorie*, edited by Ulrike Bergermann und Nanna Heidenreich, transcript, 2015, pp. 207–217.

SWR. "Big Read im Sommer: Eine Uni – Ein Buch. Die Uni Mainz liest den Roman 'Whalerider' von Witi Ihimaera." *SWR Kultur Gespräch*, 14 May 2023, https://www.swr.de/swrkultur/literatur/eine-uni-ein-buch-whalerider-von-witi-ihimaera-an-der-uni-mainz-100.html, accessed 08 April 2025.

Visser, Irene. "Exclusion and Revolt in Witi Ihimaera's *Whale Rider*." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2008, https://journals.openedition.org/ces/9149, accessed 29 April 2025.