

# Whales in Contemporary Anglophone Literature and Film: A Cetopoetic Reading of Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*

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**Abstract** *That whales are integral to “The Whale Rider”’s plot is readily apparent from the novel’s title. But how is one to read these whales, and what is their significance to this literary text? In this essay, I approach Witi Ihimaera’s 1987 novel “The Whale Rider” from the perspective of cultural and literary animal studies. After a brief theoretical discussion, I situate the novel in the context of other contemporary anglophone literature and film in which whales are prominently featured. I then analyse what I call “The Whale Rider”’s cetopoetic elements and argue that it is through these elements that the novel performs Māori cosmology.*

**Keywords** *cultural and literary animal studies; zoopoetics; cetopoetics; Māori cosmology*

In Witi Ihimaera's novel *The Whale Rider* (1987), a Māori myth serves as the spring board for a thorough exploration of Māori identity in postcolonial Aotearoa. Ihimaera retells the myth of Paikea, the whale rider, who founded the coastal town Whangara in New Zealand. In lustrous language, Ihimaera describes how the sea and land yearn to be discovered as an old bull whale carries his rider across the Pacific, and how Paikea throws spears across time and space that are to become leaders wherever they are planted in order to ensure his descendants' future. However, when the novel shifts its focus to present-day Whangara, it reveals a moment of crisis for Paikea's lineage: The aging current chief, Koro Apirana, is growing increasingly desperate to identify a new leader among the younger generations. His grandson Rawiri is not willing to become his successor, and his great-granddaughter Kahu, despite her keen interest, is not considered for this role traditionally filled by men. It is not until a peculiar whale strands itself on Whangara's beach that Kahu nevertheless emerges as the new leader by becoming the whale rider.

Ihimaera's exploration of the pressures on Māori traditions and culture in late twentieth-century New Zealand, I propose in this essay, is a zoopoetic endeavor, i.e. it is characterised by an “undeniabl[e] ... affinity between ‘poetic thinking’ and ‘an-

imal thinking” (Driscoll and Hoffmann 2018, 2). More precisely, *The Whale Rider* is a *cetopoetic* text, i.e. a zoopoetic text whose poetic thinking proceeds specifically via cetaceans, as whales, dolphins and porpoises are commonly referred to<sup>1</sup>. How Ihimaera writes whales and writes with whales in *The Whale Rider*, I propose, facilitates the specific cultural work of opening up a crisis of Māori identity for critical reflection.

By situating *The Whale Rider* in the context of other contemporary anglophone texts in which whales are prominently featured, I first aim to establish the semantic connotations of cetaceans at the current historical moment in anglophone literature. These connotations inform my subsequent analysis of cetaceans’ metonymic function in *The Whale Rider*. However, the whales in Ihimaera’s novel resist any singular interpretation. They drive the plot, which demands that they are read as actual living beings in the diegesis, or story-world; at the same time, they are ascribed figurative meanings by characters in the diegesis. As literary scholar Colleen Boggs points out, literary representations of animals always present a particular challenge to readers, because they raise the question “whether the animal is to be taken literally or figuratively.” Thereby, they “crucially confront readers with the complex terrain of epistemology and ontology, of representation and symbolization” (Boggs 2013, 33). The whales in *The Whale Rider*, too, exist in this productive textual tension, which makes them indispensable to the novel’s critique of the displacement of Māori beliefs. Finally, I examine the inclusion of a cetacean perspective in the story-telling as a performance of Māori cosmology.

## Whales in Contemporary Anglophone Literature and Film: “Icons of Endangerment”

In contemporary anglophone literature and film, cetaceans are closely associated with the idea that nature, on a planetary scale, is at risk of being destroyed by human activities. Industrial whaling had such a devastating impact on whale populations that many species were so drastically reduced that they are now in danger of becoming extinct. The whaling days of the past continue to be a topic in contemporary fiction and nonfiction. For example, Nathaniel Philbrick’s nonfictional account *In the Heart of the Sea* (2000) retells a whaling ship named *The Essex* was reportedly rammed by a sperm whale in 1820 and so severely damaged that it sank<sup>2</sup>. In

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1 The term cetaceans and the prefix “ceto” derive from *cetacea*, the Latin name for the taxonomic suborder to which these groups of animals belong.

2 The film *In the Heart of the Sea*, released in 2015, also connects the survivor of this event to Herman Melville, whose novel *Moby-Dick* was in fact inspired by, among other things, the fate of *The Essex*.

2015, a motion picture with the same title presented a fictionalised version of this historical event. The history of whaling, ecocritic Lawrence Buell concludes, has effectively made cetaceans in general and large whales in particular legible as “icons of endangerment” (2001, 201).

The semantic association of whales with overexploitation of resources and environmental destruction is further instrumentalised in contemporary literature and film to raise the specter of potential human extinction. For example, the 1986 science fiction film *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* links the imagined extinction of humpback whales to a crisis for all life on Earth. Scientists discover an alien probe hovering over the ocean which is rapidly evaporating water and thus threatening to induce catastrophic climate change. It appears that the probe wants to communicate, but the emitted messages prove difficult to decode. Eventually, it is determined that the messages are intended for humpback whales. Since this whale species no longer exists, however, the destruction of the earth seems inevitable. Whales, through this connection to the probe, represent the unintended consequences of environmental destruction.

Simultaneously, they represent the only solution. The ingenious *Star Trek* crew travels back in time and succeeds in bringing a pair of humpback whales back with them, and this de-extinction saves the planet and all of its inhabitants. As Graham Huggan aptly puts it, representations of whales are often “symbols of guilt as well as an opportunity for atonement, and while they register concern for the future, they also offer painful reminders of a violent past” (2018, iv). This cetacean symbolism also comes into play in *The Whale Rider*.

## Cetopoetic Elements of *The Whale Rider*

In *The Whale Rider*, the connotations of endangerment and possible redemption are extended to the local Māori community. Many local Māori gather on the beach when a small group of whales strands themselves, a few days after a much larger stranding in a different area. Before the helpers begin their rescue efforts, Koro Apirana addresses them to stress the stranding’s deeper significance.

The whale is a *sign*. . . . If we are able to return it to the sea, then that will be proof that the oneness is still with us. If we are not able to return it, then this is because we have become weak. If it lives, we live. If it dies, we die. Not only its *salvation* but ours is waiting out there. (Ihimaera 1987, 94; emphases mine)

The character dialogue links the whales and the local community semantically, equating the physical survival of the stranded whales with the figurative survival of the local Māori. The particular whales in the diegesis are inextricably linked to the

particular local Māori community (for whom the myth of the whale rider constitutes a shared legacy), and the connotation of extinction is extended from the whales to the Māori.

Another cetopoetic element in *The Whale Rider* is the explicit questioning of the nature of the whales. The chief invites the helpers to ponder the nature of the whale:

You have all seen the whale. You have all seen the sacred sign tattooed on its head. Is the tattoo there by accident or by design? . . . Does it belong in the real world or the unreal world? Is it natural or supernatural? (Ihimaera 1987, 94)

These questions get to the heart of a deeper crisis by provoking a reflection on how individuals make sense of the world and their place in it. With each question Koro Apirana poses, he includes a pair of hypothetical answers. These answers consist of pairs of binary opposites, which are seemingly mutually exclusive. Within this heuristic framework, the whales are considered to be *either real or unreal, either natural or unnatural*. Māori beliefs, the chief points out, are often rejected because they are considered to be “irrational” as opposed to Western beliefs, which pride themselves on being “rational” (Ihimaera 1987, 93). The displacement of Māori beliefs is thus presented as a consequence of binary thinking, which dictates that selecting one option necessitates rejecting the other.

According to the chief, the current crisis results from the reductiveness of binary either/or-thinking. The states of “communion” and “oneness” reflected in the ancient myths have been disrupted.

[M]an, beasts, and Gods lived in close communion with one another. . . . But then, . . . man . . . started to drive a wedge through the original oneness of the world. [Man] divided the world into that half that he could believe in and that half he could not believe in. The real and the unreal. The natural and the supernatural. The present and the past. The scientific and the fantastic. (Ihimaera 1987, 93–94)

As the question how to interpret the whale is explicitly raised in character dialogue and then explored in the context of different worldviews, readers are vicariously taught about Māori cosmology and how it has been impacted by colonialism. The contiguity of endangerment is further extended from the whales to Māori identity and ultimately to the very cosmology in which the latter is rooted.

Likewise, the possibility of redemption that first extended from the whales to Māori identity ultimately extends to Māori cosmology. Rescuing the whales is contingent upon overcoming binary thinking by embracing that

the [whale] is *both*. It is a *reminder of the oneness* which the world once had. It is the *birth cord joining* past and present, reality and fantasy. . . . It is *both*. It is *both*,

. . . [a]nd if we have forgotten *the communion* then we have ceased to be Māori. (Ihimaera 1987, 94; emphases mine)

By embracing both/and-thinking, the community can validate Māori cosmology and thereby affirm their identity.

Challenged to become aware of our own reading practices and the heuristics that undergird them, readers, too, are encouraged to embrace both/and-thinking when they grapple with how to read the whales in *The Whale Rider*. We, too, have “seen the whale” with the “sacred sign tattooed on its head” (Ihimaera 1987, 94) in our minds’ eye and followed it throughout many chapters in the novel. Thusly positioned, we are able to read the stranded whale on the beach in Whangara as the same ancient bull whale that carried the original whale rider.

### Multiplicity of Perspectives: Performing Communion, Separation, and Coming Together

In *The Whale Rider*, whales participate in the story-telling. Several full chapters are rendered from a cetacean perspective (chapters *two*, *five*, and *nineteen*). This perspective is set apart visually through the use of italics from Rawiri’s perspective, which is the only perspective that appears in the majority of chapters (three, four, six, seven, eight, ten through thirteen, and fifteen through sixteen). By including a cetacean perspective, which might appear irrational or supernatural to readers, *The Whale Rider* affirms Māori cosmology. What is more, the strict separation of perspectives dissipates throughout the novel as several chapters (*nine*, *fourteen*, and *twenty*) contain both Rawiri’s perspective and a cetacean perspective (indicated by italics). The changes in perspective throughout *The Whale Rider*, I propose, perform the separation causing the moment of crisis as well as an eventual movement towards a new “communion.”

Table 1: Perspective(s) in the chapters of “*The Whale Rider*” (Source: author)

Section Title	Chapters	Perspective(s)
PROLOGUE The Whale Rider	<i>One</i>	<i>communion</i>
SPRING The Force of Destiny	<i>Two</i> Three Four	<i>whales</i> Rawiri Rawiri

Section Title	Chapters	Perspective(s)
SUMMER Halcyon's Flight	Five Six Seven Eight	<i>whales</i> Rawiri Rawiri Rawiri
AUTUMN Season of the Sounding Whale	Nine Ten Eleven Twelve Thirteen	Rawiri, <i>whales</i> Rawiri Rawiri Rawiri Rawiri
WINTER Whale Song, Whale Rider	Fourteen Fifteen Sixteen <b>Seventeen</b> <b>Eighteen</b>	Rawiri, <i>whales</i> Rawiri Rawiri <b>blended</b> <b>blended</b>
EPILOGUE The Girl from the Sea	<i>Nineteen</i> Twenty <b>Twenty-One</b>	<i>Whales</i> Rawiri, <i>whales</i> Rawiri, <i>whales</i> , <b>communion</b>

In the prologue, the narration performs the “original oneness” of the world. The myth of the whale rider, retold in chapter one, is rendered from a single, all-encompassing perspective that represents a state of communion. The omniscient narrator is privy to the cognitions and emotional states of more than the human protagonist. In this mythological view, many perspectives are acknowledged, including those of animals: “Suddenly, looking up at the surface, the fish began to see the dark bellies of the canoes from the east” (Ihimaera 1987, 3). Moreover, feelings and desires are ascribed to the natural world: “The land and the sea sighed with gladness: *We have been found.*” (Ihimaera 19887, 3; italics original). Within this panoramic view, two perspectives become discernible: that of the whale and that of the whale rider. Yet, the human is rendered as part of, not apart from, the natural world.

The setting then changes to the novel’s present time, and the narration performs the separation addressed in the character dialogue. Each individual chapter contained in the Spring, Summer, and Autumn sections follows *either* the Māori protagonists *or* the whales. For example, the Spring section begins with a chapter that reflects a cetacean perspective (chapter *two*). Here, the narration is focalised through the minds of the bull whale and his herd, reflecting their emotions, memories, and thoughts.

*As the years had burgeoned the happiness of those days was like a siren call to the ancient bull whale. But his elderly females were fearful; for them, that rhapsody of adolescence, that song of the flute, seemed only to signify that their leader was turning his thoughts to the dangerous islands to the southwest. (Ihimaera 1987, 9)*

By contrast, the two following chapters (three and four) reflect Rawiri's perspective.

I suppose if this story has a beginning it is with Kahu. After all, it was Kahu who was there at the end, and it was Kahu's intervention which perhaps saved us all. We always knew there would be such a child, but when Kahu was born, well, we were looking the other way, really. (Ihimaera 1987, 10)

The summer and autumn sections maintain this separation, with each individual chapter containing *either* a cetacean perspective *or* Rawiri's.

However, as the plot approaches the climax, the two separate perspectives begin to intermix. The individual chapters in the Autumn and Winter section (chapters nine, fourteen, and twenty) contain more than one perspective. For example, chapters nine and fourteen open with Rawiri's perspective and conclude from the whales' point of view (with the text on the printed page again set apart visually by the use of italics for the latter). In chapters **seventeen** and **nineteen**, the two separate narrative strands converge: The whales have concluded their journey to Whangara, where the ancient bull whale has sacrificed himself by "propell[ing] itself forcefully onto the beach" (Ihimaera 1987, 91–92). Paikea's descendants have come to the rescue, and Kahu sacrifices herself by "climbing the side of the whale" (Ihimaera 1987, 103) and riding it back "into the deep ocean" (Ihimaera 1987, 104). In these two chapters, the perspectives of the whales and people on the beach become intertwined. It is as if the omniscient narrator has insight into both Kahu and the whales, and only the direct thoughts of the stranded bull whale, "*It is my lord, the whale rider,*" are rendered in italics (Ihimaera 1987, 103).

Finally, the epilogue contains the reflections of both the whales and the Māori on the event that ensured their joint salvation. Although the voices of both the whales and the Māori are discernible, they are rendered from a consciousness that has access to both. At the end of the final chapter, different times and forms of consciousness converge. When Kahu hears the voice of "the old mother whale" asking her to return to her people who need her, she answers "Haumi e, hui e, taiki e. Let it be done" (Ihimaera 1987, 122). The change of perspectives throughout the novel, together with the section titles in the novel, which bear the names of the four seasons, indicate a cyclical development from a mythical oneness through a period of separation to the perspectives coming together once again. The "salvation" to which Koro Apirana alludes lies in a return to Māori cosmology, which has become marginalised by the now predominant worldview in postcolonial Aotearoa and the binary oppositions

upon which it is built. Kahu's agency is not the only agency in play: The whale, too, willingly sacrifices himself. Together, they carry what it means to be Māori into an uncertain future.

*The Whale Rider* projects a sense of hope that the past will be able to be carried on into the future, and that a mending of the rift in the oneness might be possible. The novel itself can be understood as a major contribution to this task. Ihimaera's retelling of the myth in writing adapts Māori oral tradition in a way that records the myth of the whale rider for future generations. Committing the myth to writing necessitates some adaptation, but Ihimaera nonetheless captures not only the myth itself but a way of story-telling that is rooted in a culturally specific, nonanthropocentric way of seeing the world. The form of the novel in particular, due to its popularity in anglophone contexts, offers readers of all cultural backgrounds a glimpse of Māori cosmology. Marking the first time a Māori myth was published in writing, *The Whale Rider* constitutes a milestone in literary history. It might, at first glance, appear irrelevant, if not irreverent, to focus on the importance of whales to this literary text. However, cetopoetics is inextricably linked to how *The Whale Rider* facilitates cultural work.

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