Teaching Whale Rider to the 10-14 age group

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Whale Rider is set in a small New Zealand coastal village inhabited by Maoris who claim descent from Paikea, the Whale Rider. For 1,000 years a male heir of the Chief has become leader of the tribe. At the beginning of the film, the wife of Porourangi, the Chief’s eldest son, dies in childbirth along with the male twin she was carrying. The surviving child, a girl, is given the name of Pai, the traditional name given to the male child.
Porourangi is grief stricken and departs for Europe, leaving Pai to be brought up by her grandparents, Koro and Nanny Flowers.
Koro loves Pai, but won’t accept her as Chief. He is convinced that the troubles of the tribe are attributable to Pai aspiring to be leader. He tries unsuccessfully to train the other boys in the tribe for the role.
Far out at sea a school of whales respond to Pai’s calls for guidance. They swim to the village but become beached. Symbolically the tribe will die. Only Pai is willing to make the sacrifice to save her people, and because of this Koro accepts her leadership.
Not an obvious film for the top end of primary and the junior end of secondary! But a closer examination of the film however bears fruit, particularly in looking at gender, race and culture
Here is one method of teaching this film between the ages of 10 and 13. I have outlined a suggested approach and followed this with appropriate Representation analysis tied to the Narrative. Lastly I have provided image analysis tied to key scenes.

Methodology

Begin by showing the film in full, and invite responses. Many of these may be negative, but this itself becomes a useful tool for debate.
The second step is an image analysis of the opening scenes (see below), and a thorough examination of how the language of the film is tied to its meaning. Representation is best approached by brainstorming initial reactions, and following this with close analysis of individual scenes in groups, pairs or whole class work as the teacher sees as appropriate.
Each group should then report back to the whole class so that there is an overall ‘picture’ of the construction and possible meaning of the film. The resolution of the film i.e. the last section needs to be studied by the whole class.
Pupils should, by the end of the study, be aware of how the key aspects construct meaning in a film.

Representation

The representation of the Maori people can be looked at under the headings of male/female, Maori/European and tradition.

Male/Female

The whole film is predicated on the division of roles. Koro refuses to accept Pai as leader despite her repeatedly showing herself to be more capable than any of the boys. We see her challenging the old ways, and undertaking the gruelling demands of traditional warrior practice. It is she who goes into the sea to bring back Koro’s prize possession.
The casting of Pai is significant. Keisha Castle-Hughes’ prettiness has been downplayed for the role. One ways this is done is through clothing. At no point is she dressed in a feminine way. She has no female friends. So we see a girl rebelling against the traditional role she sees in her uncle’s girlfriend and her grandmother. Both these women exercise power in the domestic world (Nanny Flowers’ rebellion about smoking sets this up), but are invisible in the public world.
The male world, on the other hand, is the public arena of action and activity. This is true even for Porourangi who walks away from the tragedy of his wife’s death, leaving his daughter to be looked after by his mother.
By examining the key gender scenes pupils can reach understanding of the gender relationships in the community of the film. The resolution of the narrative and of the gender relationships is in the last scene, which will be examined in detail below.

Maori/ European

This is the most problematic discourse. The Maori people are presented in a less than positive light. Koro’s younger son has grown into a beer drinking, snooker playing unemployed young man who has given up on his heritage. His reason for helping Pai is less to do with a belief in his culture than as a way to needle his father. In an early conversation with his mother we learn that he, like Pai has never been good enough for Koro. The music serves to reinforce this.
The Maori/ European dichotomy is also explicit in the scene between Koro and Porourangi when the latter comes back from Europe. The framing emphasises the gap between them. They face each other across an empty space, as they do culturally in the more crowded scene with the slides of Porourangi’s European art.
At the end the community is brought together through traditional culture. Porourangi has returned with his pregnant, blonde European girlfriend. The community is united with Pai as the leader, but in this is the very problem. The

community and its people only attains dignity through its past. At no point does it move forward into the current century. The film fails to address the articulation between past culture and present society, locking the Maoris into a stereotypical backward-looking past.

It is precisely this which makes the film a useful tool of study. A close look at the scene of Koro teaching the boys the warrior ritual, and the scene when Pai approaches his uncle for tuition, raise questions about the representation of the Maori people.

As with the gender issue the last scene is crucial to the sense of the film.

Tradition/Love

The two key scenes in this discourse are the meal scene and the speech scene.

In the meal scene there is an awkward silence. Pai has displeased her grandfather who has caught her trying to take on the ritual of the male tasks. She loves Koro deeply and his displeasure hurts her. Both Koro and Nanny Flowers are also hurting. He is angry; yet he loves her and Nanny is torn between the two of them. The emotional struggle in all three of them is reflected in the construction of the shots.

Here is a breakdown of the shots:

- It begins with a close - up of Pai. She apologises to Koro but is unsure of his reaction.
- Cut to Koro glancing at Pai.
- Cut back to Pai beginning to eat.
- Only at that point does the camera begin to pull back to reveal the whole table.
- Nanny Flowers speaks to Koro. The slow pan is contrasted with Koro’s violence as he slams his fist on the table and a cup falls to the floor.
- There follows a series of cuts to all three characters.
- The camera tracks Nanny Flowers as she speaks and then cleans up the mess.
- Koro begins to eat, as does Pai.

Through this breakdown pupils can see how the tension is conveyed through the language of film. The atmosphere is reinforced by no background soundtrack.

The speech scene is constructed differently. It is shot in a wider focus as it takes place in a hall rather than amidst a compact group at a table.

We see Pai beginning her speech and becoming increasingly distressed that her grandfather has not come as her invited special guest to the school concert. She is unaware that he has in fact set out to attend the concert, but has been diverted by the beached whales.

We see Pai in mid shot: her isolation on stage makes her look more vulnerable as she struggles to speak.

By intercutting exterior and the interior scenes we are shown the link between tradition and love. Pai is dressed in her traditional costume telling the story of the Whale Rider and offering her view that society should change, while both holding dear the traditions, and deeply respecting the grandfather who has let her down. This she says through her tears. He meanwhile has overcome his fury at what Pai has done to challenge tradition out of his love for her. On the beach the wide shots of him make him as vulnerable and lonely as do the mid shots of her in the hall. The two characters are wrestling between love and tradition, which is made explicit in the framing at the moment the whales are beached and the narrative moves forward to its resolution.

Image analysis of the opening and closing scenes

The film’s opening credits are on the blue of the sea with Pai’s voiceover setting the scene. The music has an eeriness which underscores what she is saying. The film then cuts to shots of a woman in agony in hospital, accompanied by a terrified husband. The shots are in close-up, and the camera moves in a discordant way from the point of view of the woman to indicate that the situation is slipping out of the doctor’s hands. A shot of a silent scream is followed by crying which is much less intense than is evident in the visuals. The music conveys the pain far more than does the voice. Here the language of film is superseding the natural sound in order to convey the intensity of the pain. The film then cuts back to the whale, as Pai continues telling the story of her people. The next few shots are in slow motion, as if time has lost its normality, and when the shots go out of focus we realise that the woman is about to die. Her last words are to call the child Pai. This is shown in very tight close-up on her lips. The shot then bridges to the baby’s mouth and via out of focus shots to his closed eyes. The shot only comes into focus when we see the surviving baby with one eye open. Only then does the camera pull back on the whole scene and we see the distraught man cradling his dead wife with the two cots; one blue, one pink beside the bed. The light shines on to the pink one. We know by this that the girl has survived.

Cut to the establishing shot of a hospital car park. There is no music as we track an older couple into the building, so we have no clue as to which parents they are/how they are going to react. Again Pai’s voice comes through, and we know from what she says that she is the little girl who survived. The culture is set up through the ritual chant of one of the older women and is contrasted with Koro’s opening words, ‘Where’s the boy?’ The split between Porourangi and Koro is clear from this point. Koro has no idea how to handle Porourangi’s agony and blurts out the wrong words. The split is complete when Porourangi says the child will be called Pai as his dying wife had said, and Koro refuses to accept this. This is shot in close-up, but when Porourangi breaks away from his father the shot is mid to long. The physical space between them echoes the emotional gap. This is reinforced by the shiny harshness of

the polished corridor. The space and the shine is used later in the film when Porourangi comes back from Europe after twelve years and they once again quarrel because Porourangi will not take his place as the next Chief.

After Porourangi has left the hospital we see Koro looking down at the dead baby while Nanny Flowers is visible in the corridor with the living child. She hands the baby to her younger son, setting up the link between these two characters which will be important later.

Twelve years elapse and we next see Koro and Pai on a bicycle. She looks at him adoringly. The weather is lovely, the scenery is attractive and it is clear that the old man has come to love her. The gentleness of their relationship is evident in the slow pans and the music.

By leading a class through a step by step image analysis, pupils can see clearly that the shot selection is inextricably tied to the meaning of the narrative.

The last scene of the film provides its resolution. It begins with the prow of the boat slicing across the screen and apparently rotating. The movement is slow, the boat decorated, and set against the blue sky the picture is uplifting and quite mesmeric.

The film then cuts to the men pushing the boat into the sea, and the chanting which has been so far subdued becomes stronger. The men are in traditional costume and are tattooed. The camera moves round all the characters who have played a part in the narrative, while at the same time keeping the audience wondering about what has happened to Pai and Koro. The entire narrative has moved to this resolution and thus the characters in the boat and on the shore serve as the build up to the outcome of the narrative of Koro and Pai. Among the crowd on the beach is Porourangi’s pregnant blonde girlfriend being accepted as one of the group. We see the boat in the water, hear Pai’s voice and then finally we see her with Koro in the central position of the boat chanting. Koro and Pai are shot in close- up, she smiling at him just as she did in the bicycle scene at the beginning. The boat sails out to sea accompanied by chanting and Pai’s voiceover, “Our people will go forward with all of our strength”.

The last scene makes clear that the resolution of the gender issue and the Maori/ European issue can only come about by upholding a variation on the traditional ways. Porourangi has come from Europe and the family has been reunited. The family wounds are healed, as are those of the community family. But it’s not a comfortable resolution, and gives rise to much valuable debate.

When doing an image analysis with a class its is important to study each shot in detail. Only by so doing can pupils really grasp the link between the language of film and meaning. The length of each section you analyse should be short in order to keep the pupils’ interest, so it’s a good idea to give different sections of the film to different groups.

Lastly it is valuable to study the key aspects of Audience and Institution for this film. Who is the intended audience? Is it big budget? Who were instrumental in its making? How would Hollywood have done the story differently? Pupils are thereby introduced to a non-Hollywood film, which for many may be entirely new, and this educational experience alone makes a study of Whale Rider valuable.

Resources

The New Zealand film website at

www.whaleriderthemovie.co.nz/new_zealand/ has an Education Pack for free download. It was produced before the DVD and has a useful synopsis.

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