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EAD 800
Interpretation and Analysis – *Whale Rider*

Observing the events that took place during the scene “Our Ancestors” we are given insight into a significant pillar within the Maori culture, the importance of tribal traditions that permeate the daily behavior of the townspeople on a constant basis and how those traditions and beliefs are reflected in the generational disparagement shown toward the younger members of the community by the elders. Even though there is a shared understanding of the customs, the younger generation does not hold the same rigidity exhibited by the elders who refuse to evolve their behavior within their customs to meet the demands of modern times.

Looking first at the importance and influence that the traditions have on the behavior of the Maori people in daily life, we can begin with the exchange between Paikea and Koro during which Paikea brings up the origin of their people. She starts the conversation, “You know how we all came on a whale.” Not as a question, but as a statement of an undeniable truth. She inquires further as to the origin of whale and how long ago the legendary Paikea came upon their land. It is the certainty though of her initial remarks which implies that she never before, or will ever the future, question the validity of this fable. It is foreseeable that she will never challenge the physical history of her culture, only as the movie progresses, she will contest some of their practices.

In response to Paikea’s questions Koro responds with an allegory illustrated by piece of rope to represent the Maori people and their adherence to their customs. Koro believes that the culture and traditions are unwavering and in order to remain strong the community must behave like the rope. Each member of village, each tiny fiber in the string, must stay true and together for the rope to remain strong.

What took place next provides a deeper metaphor to what is happening to the Maori people and their communal condition. Once Koro has provided Paikea with what he sees as a fitting explanation to her inquires he uses the rope in an attempt to attempt to start a boat motor placed between Koro and Paika. The location of the motor appears significant because it is physically and metaphorically separating the old and the young. He pulls the rope to start the motor but the rope breaks. Koro proclaims the rope useless and leaves to get another one. In this a rather simple sequence of events we can infer the conflict facing the Maori people in their adherence to their traditions. Previously establishing, by Koro himself, that the rope is intended to represent their culture we can now infer that the motor will represent modern times and the present state of affairs that the Maori people find themselves in contemporary culture.

With the breaking of the rope (tradition) trying to start the motor (modern) we are being shown that the Maori way of life is struggling in the modern age. With tradition whole and unchanged it is not strong enough to function in modern times. The striking remark is that Koro admits this when he deems the rope, tradition, to be useless and leaves the scene to retrieve a new rope. Perhaps symbolizing that he would want Paikea to be switched for another “rope” because she is his only heir and not a male to become chief, thus breaking the line back to the ancestors.

In Koro’s absence Paikea knots the rope whole again. In this act you can no longer trace the line back by a connection of continuous strands but the rope is strong again. Paikea is able to start the motor with the rope that her grandfather had left behind. Illustrating that the younger generation can be successful in modern society without the emphasis on an unbroken line. Koro returns to calls by Paikea, excited and proud, that she was able to make the old traditions work in a new age. Her enthusiasm is thwarted though with disapproval from Koro who warns her, “to never do that again, it’s dangerous.”

Koro’s actions imply a warning to Paikea that tradition is not something that should be tampered with and that the modern world is not safe for the younger generation. His unwillingness to acknowledge Paikea’s

ingenuity and cleverness stands as an indication of the elder's unwillingness to adapt in the face of changing times. While not advocating for a complete abandonment of their traditions and culture the stubbornness of the elders is preventing a younger generation from finding success in changing times.