Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

The Whale Rider

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Plot

- Whangara, a **Māori** village on the east coast of New Zealand's North Island. The people are descended from Paikea, the **ancestor** who rode a whale to their shore.
- Kahu is born, and her mother dies soon after. Her great-grandfather, Koro Apirana, the chief, is bitterly disappointed that she is a girl: he wants a boy to lead the tribe after him. Her great-grandmother, Nanny Flowers, loves and defends her.
- Koro teaches the village boys the old knowledge and keeps Kahu away, but she learns in secret. He throws a carved stone into the sea as a test; none of the boys can find it, but Kahu dives and brings it back.
- A herd of whales strands on the beach, led by an ancient bull whale with a spiral pattern on its head. Koro and the village fail to save it. Kahu climbs onto the whale and speaks to it, and it swims back out to sea with her. She survives, Koro accepts that she is the leader he had been waiting for, and the whales return to the deep.

Characters

- Kahu: brave, loving and determined, with a special bond with the whales; she keeps trying to win Koro's love.
- Koro Apirana: proud and stubborn; he cares deeply about tradition but is blind to Kahu's gifts.
- Nanny Flowers: funny, tough and outspoken; she supports Kahu and challenges Koro.
- Rawiri: Kahu's uncle and the **narrator**, who travels abroad and comes home with a new view of his people.

Themes and context

- Gender and leadership, tradition and change, **Māori** identity, the bond between people and nature, and love within a family.
- Witi Ihimaera, one of the first **Māori** writers to publish a novel in English, wrote it in 1987. A film version came out in 2002.

Form and structure

- Rawiri's warm, humorous narration is broken up by short passages in italics from the point of view of the ancient whale and the sea, which link the present to the mythic past.
- The ending joins the two strands: Kahu's courage fulfils the old story of Paikea.

Key terms

Māori	The Indigenous people of New Zealand.
Myth	A traditional story about the past that explains a people's beliefs.
Patriarchy	A society in which men hold the power.
Narrator	The character who tells the story, here Rawiri.
Ancestor	A person from whom a family or people is descended.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where is The Whale Rider set?
2. Who rode a whale to Whangara in the old story?
3. Why is Koro disappointed when Kahu is born?
4. Who loves and defends Kahu?
5. Who finds the carved stone Koro throws into the sea?
6. Who narrates the novel?
7. What marks the ancient bull whale?
8. What happens when Kahu climbs onto the whale?

Answers

1. Whangara, New Zealand
2. Paikea
3. He wanted a boy to lead the tribe
4. Nanny Flowers
5. Kahu
6. Rawiri, Kahu's uncle
7. A spiral pattern on its head
8. It swims back out to sea with her

Your notes

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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