Study Guide  
*The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera  
LEXILE 810

**The Novel at a Glance**

**BACKGROUND**
As you read this novel, you will be plunged into the world of the Maori, the first people to live in New Zealand. They have a rich and long cultural history, but were virtually unknown to the Western world until 1840, when New Zealand became a British colony. During this time, the Maori lost much of their land to the new government, and many feared that with the loss of their land their cultural identity would also diminish. In the mid-1900s, however, a group of well-educated Maori took it upon themselves to change the direction in which their nation was headed. Other tribal members also began to focus on improving Maori education, teaching the Maori language, and sharing cultural traditions. These efforts have yielded a greater interest in the indigenous culture of the Maori, but that culture remains in jeopardy, because of the dominance of Western culture and the prevalence of intermarriage with Europeans.

**MAJOR CHARACTERS**

**Rawiri** is the narrator of the novel, a young man who ages from sixteen to twenty-four as the story progresses. As her uncle, he is appointed one of her guardians at the beginning of the novel, a post which he takes seriously, even when he travels far from home. He feels great affection for his niece and wants to protect her from the upsetting things in the world.

**Kahu (Kahutia Te Rangi)** is the main character of the novel, though not the narrator. Her birth marks the beginning of the story, and she is eight years old at its conclusion. She is, by birthright, the next in line to lead her tribe, but her great-grandfather sees no use for her because she’s a girl. She has a great love for him, however, and will not give up until she’s secured his affection. She also seems to have a special connection to the sea and to whales.

**Koro Apirana** is Kahu’s great-grandfather and the leader of their tribe. He is desperately worried about finding a successor, since he views Kahu unfit because of her gender. He is very gruff with her and never returns her enthusiastic affection. He is very concerned about the fate of his tribe and that of the entire Maori people.

**Nanny Flowers** is Koro’s wife and Kahu’s great-grandmother. She is as tough as Koro, but is Kahu’s champion. She thinks that women have been left out of the tribe’s power circle for far too long and wants Kahu to take her rightful place as leader.

**Porourangi** is Kahu’s father. He does not want to raise her by himself so, when her mother dies shortly after giving birth, he sends Kahu to live with her mother’s family in another village. He loves his daughter very much but seems ambivalent about her leading the tribe.
VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

In an analogy, the words in one pair relate to each other in the same way as the words in a second pair do.

EXAMPLE: FRIEND: BENIGN:: warrior :_____

a. enemy  b. companion  c. fierce  d. sword

You can say a sentence that states the relationship: “A friend is often benign, and a warrior is often what?” Relationships may be synonyms, antonyms, or some other association. You should select fierce from the list of choices.

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