

## **TEACHING LITERATURE: ALAN DUFF'S *ONCE WERE WARRIORS* AS POST-COLONIAL ARTISTIC TRAGEDY**

*Didáctica de la literatura: Once Were Warriors* de Alan Duff como una tragedia artística post-colonial

FRANCISCO MUNUERA WALLHEAD  
PhD. Fine Arts  
Department of fine Arts, University of Granada (España)  
[Francisco.munuera@ugr.es](mailto:Francisco.munuera@ugr.es)

### **Resumen**

La didáctica de la literatura es un área de reciente creación. Sus contenidos se han ido adaptando a los diferentes contextos lingüísticos en los que se desarrolla. No obstante, aún quedan muchas oportunidades para desarrollar sus contenidos.

El estudio de las literaturas postcoloniales, así como la relación entre la literatura y el arte ofrecen oportunidades para desarrollar la investigación en la didáctica de la literatura. En este artículo se hace una propuesta al respecto desde el estudio de la obra de Allan Duff desde una perspectiva multidisciplinar.

**Palabras clave:** Didáctica de la literatura; literatura postcolonial; Allan Duff; Bellas Artes.

### **Abstract**

The teaching of literature is an area of recent creation. Its contents have been adapting to different linguistic contexts in which it operates. However, there are still many opportunities to develop their content.

The study of postcolonial literatures, and the relationship between literature and the arts provide opportunities to develop research in the teaching of literature. In this paper, a proposal is made in this area since the study of the work of Allan Duff from a multidisciplinary perspective.

**Key words:** Teaching literature; postcolonial literature; Allan Duff; Fine Arts.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

On the back cover of *Once Were Warriors*, Alan Duff's 1990 novel is described as "a raw and powerful story in which everyone is a victim." That is not strictly true of course, some of the characters, notably the Pakeha family, are not victims. But the main characters are victims, and because some of them victimise each other, the situation is a complex one. The book is also a postcolonial cry of the heart denouncing one race's victimisation of the other; but again, the blame is not all on one side, which makes for a complex moral situation on both the individual and on the national and political level.

The victims Duff creates in his main characters are tragic, and much of the power of the novel comes from their development as tragic heroes and heroines, a development along a narrative line which leads us up to the climax which could at several points in the plot go otherwise and not lead to the tragic ending and catharsis Duff gives his story. The success of the novel as a novel lies in this tragic dimension and in the fine line it treads in apportioning blame amongst its protagonists.

In this study, I examine first the attributes of the novel that could allow it to stake a claim as tragedy. A study of the narrative line and the characters allows us to familiarise ourselves with the plot and its development and the presentation of the themes within this framework. Secondly, I look at the aspects of the novel which could be called post-colonial, and which place the novel on a national basis.

## **2. THE NOVEL AS TRAGEDY**

Tragedy began in drama, so before we can look at this novel and categorise it as contemporary tragedy, a brief look at what constitutes a tragic work today will be necessary. The definition of "Tragedy" according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica begins thus: "Although the word tragedy is often used loosely to describe any sort of disaster or misfortune, it more precisely refers to a work of art, usually a play or novel, that probes with high seriousness questions concerning the role of man in the universe." (Macropaedia vol. 18, 580) In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, tragedy usually comes in the form of the novel, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* being leading examples. The origins of tragedy are to be found in Greek literature and probably in religious ritual. The word "tragedy" means "goat song," so goats were obviously either sacrificed or given as prizes. The definition continues: "Whatever the original religious connections of tragedy may have been, two elements have never entirely been lost: (1) its high seriousness, befitting matters in which survival is at issue and (2) its involvement of the entire community in matters of ultimate and common concern." (ibid.)

The story of Jake Heke and his wife Beth, who lose two of their children –thirteen-year-old Grace commits suicide because she thought her father was raping her and saw no future for herself as an abused Maori girl; and seventeen-year-old "Nig" dies in a fight between the two local Maori gangs, the Brown Fists and the Black Hawks– is a story of misfortune and is of high seriousness. I have chosen to focus on the novel rather than the film, as the latter underplays the role of incest in the novel, and fails to develop the cathartic part of the story, after Grace's death, when her mother dedicates herself to a reconstitution of the Maori community through a return to the more positive aspects of their history and heritage. If we continue with the definition, we see more aspects that are present in Duff's novel:

As the Greeks developed it, the tragic form, more than any other, raised questions about man's existence. Why must man suffer? Why must

man be forever torn between the seeming irreconcilables of good and evil, freedom and necessity, truth and deceit? Are the causes of his suffering outside himself, in blind chance, in the evil designs of others, in the malice of the gods? Are its causes within him, and does he bring suffering upon himself through arrogance, infatuation, or the tendency to overreach himself? Why is justice so elusive? (580–1)

The points mentioned here are applicable to the protagonist, Jake Heke, who does evil, but is not all evil, and lays claim to being as aggressive as he is, through victimisation as a child. Thus he brings suffering upon himself and others, and part of that certainly comes from inside him. He is a complex mixture of arrogance, on account of his good looks and bodily strength, and self-pity. His identity is formed through this mixture, which is inextricable from the fact of his being Maori. The Greeks saw tragedy as questioning identity. In the definition, it says of the three greatest Greek dramatists, Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.), Sophocles (c. 496–406 B.C.), and Euripides (c. 480–406 B.C.), that “From their tragedies of the fifth century they learned who they were, something of the possibilities and limitations of the spirit, and of what it meant, not merely what it felt like, to be alive in a world both beautiful and terrible.” (580)

There is knowledge through suffering, not only in the hero, but in his community or society. Speaking of Aeschylus, the entry says: “In his plays evil is inescapable, loss is irretrievable, suffering is inevitable. What the plays say positively is that man can learn through suffering.” (581) Going more deeply into how one learns from suffering, we see that the analysis of it in Aeschylus applies more readily to the female protagonist than to the male in Duff’s novel: “The capacity to learn through suffering is a distinguishing characteristic of the tragic hero, pre-eminently of the Greek tragic hero. He has not merely courage, tenacity, and endurance but also the ability to grow, by means of these qualities, into an understanding of himself, of his fellows, and of the conditions of existence.” (581) It is Beth Heke who learns courage, tenacity and endurance and, with the backing of the elders, who are wiser, comes to help found a better society for her Maori kin and neighbours.

Her husband Jake sinks lower towards the end of the story, so that he is completely marginalised by the community, being only a distant spectator at his own son’s funeral. His self-pity makes him feel that his life has been decided by the mark of slavery in his childhood, as if this has fated him to the life of a secondary citizen or lower. Fate is an important factor in Greek tragedy, but the discussion is always on the level of the dilemma, the ambiguity of the power of fate on one hand, and freedom of choice on the other. In Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King*, the hero is doomed to kill his father and marry his mother, yet he is free during the course of the play to make his own decisions. His own choices lead to the loss of his wife, of his kingdom, and of his sight, since he was self-blinded. For an argument and a drama to be convincing, there must be a balance of power: “The action is so presented that the final impression is not of human helplessness at the hands of malign gods nor of man as the pawn

of fate. Steering his own course, with great courage, Oedipus has ferreted out the truth of his identity and administered his own punishment, and, in his suffering, learned a new humanity." (581)

But there is something of Oedipus in Jake: they are both hot-tempered, contentious, and hate their enemies. Of Oedipus it is said: "Though he admits his 'pollution' in the murder of his father and the marriage to his mother, he denies that he has sinned, since he had done both deeds unwittingly." (582) Marrying one's mother is incest, and Jake is likewise "polluted" if he really has committed the taboo act of incest on his daughter; and though it may have been done unwittingly, since he was drunk (though that is no excuse), there was nothing unwitting about his wife-beating. At the end of the story, separated from his wife and remaining children and from the community, he "adopts" a homeless, loveless teenager, but more for company than with the idea of making amends. It is Beth who transcends the evil and refuses to succumb. Of Sophocles it was said: "His position has been described as 'heroic humanism,' as making a statement of belief in the human capacity to transcend evils, within and without, by means of the human condition itself." (582)

There is no sentimental, happy ending for anyone, however. Jake has to endure abandon and hardship, and Beth has to work hard and become "mother" to all the loveless children of the community. In neither case is there any recourse to spiritual comfort. The return to the old Maori values is far from an easy option. Finding the right path is like treading a fine line:

Tragedy must maintain a balance between the higher optimisms of religion or philosophy, or any other beliefs that tend to explain away the enigmas and afflictions of existence, on the one hand, and the pessimism that would reject the whole human experiment as valueless and futile on the other. Thus the opposite of tragedy is not comedy but the literature of cynicism and despair, and the opposite of the tragic artist's stance, which is one of compassion and involvement, is that of the detached and cynical ironist." (582)

The materials of tragedy are violence, madness (as in Hamlet and Othello), hate and lust. Once *Were Warriors*, especially the graphic film version, caused a public commotion with its portrayal of Maori urban culture in all its violent aspects. There is violence amongst the Maoris themselves, here expressed in the gang warfare between the Brown Fists and the Black Hawks, ending in the death of Nig. There is domestic violence within families for the slightest of reasons. Jake smashes Beth's face for refusing to fry an egg for his mates during one of their all-night "parties." There is little lust as most of the Maori men are too drunk to lust after a woman and do much about it. The rape can hardly be called lust, it is mere bestiality (which is to malign innocent animals.) As Duff said in the interview, the Maori warrior spirit is in decadence, and the old violence and revenge has been channelled through the wrong means. If Jake has a weakness, it is that he allows his ancestral rage to be

channelled into what he feels is revenge against life itself, life having dealt him a poor hand, victimising him as a descendant of slaves in childhood.

Traditionally, there is a tragic flaw in the hero. It may be a moral failing, or sometimes, an excess of virtue. The latter is not the case with either Jake or Beth Heke. It may be the society itself, as in the rottenness of Denmark in *Hamlet*. This is more applicable to Duff's novel, as he denounces a rottenness at the heart of contemporary urban Maori society. Herein is the moral ambiguity concerning Maori society. It is rotten for two reasons: the white colonisers have denigrated its value, but yet, it has not known how to adapt itself to the modern world without betraying its principles. Thus the fault comes from both outside and within.

Later Greeks began the theorising of tragedy. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, answered Plato's limiting theories. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* discussion, Aristotle "defends the purgative power of tragedy and in direct contradiction to Plato, makes moral ambiguity the essence of tragedy. The tragic hero must be neither a villain nor a virtuous man but a 'character between these two extremes, [...] a man who is not eminently good or just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty [hamartia]." (588) This misfortune must excite "pity and fear" in the audience. As Aristotle put it: "Tragedy is an imitation [mimesis] of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude [...] through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation [catharsis] of these emotions." (ibid.)

The most powerful elements of emotional interest in tragedy, according to Aristotle, are reversal of intention or situation [peripeteia] and recognition scenes [anagnorisis]. In the second half of *Once Were Warriors* there is certainly a reversal of fortunes, with Chapter 8, "The Visit," being the turning point. Jake is not so fated by his ancestry that he has no choice. There are several points in the story where he could save or redeem himself. If it was him who raped Grace, then every time he entered her bedroom, he had the chance to see the error of his ways. In that situation, there was no one to pressure him to desist but the terrified, inert body of his daughter. But in Chapter 8, where the family set off happily in a hired car to visit Boogie in the institution, the whole family are there to encourage him to carry out their plan. For me, this chapter is Duff's finest writing moment, as he controls the narrative progression to bring out the ironic twists and hiatuses through which the chances of the fortunate reunion and the establishment of a better life are step by step postponed and eventually wrecked. The Heke family's fortunes go downhill from that point, though the seeds of their disaster have been sown long before. There is an inevitability about the looming tragedy, though at each point, the reader hopes for a better outcome. Things could have gone right if only Jake had disciplined himself as Beth had learned to do. Before the visit, Beth had abstained from drinking and gambling at cards for thirteen weeks (perhaps thirteen was her unlucky number, as was age thirteen for Grace). Thus, for about the first time in their married life, she had been able to put money aside for buying food (food being the Maoris'

dream, as we see when Jake squanders his first unemployment benefit on food). The idea was to take the picnic of chicken and other goodies to share with Boogie in the Boys' Home. But they never get there. After passing through Beth's home village, driving round the rich people's houses and showing off the hired car as if it were their own, they end up in McClutchy's. Although Beth herself succumbs to the drink, when she can think what has happened, with Jake and his friends eating Boogie's picnic in McClutchy's, she feels violated, a violation she imagines in her body, similar to the one, unbeknown to her, but not to the reader, that has been visited upon her daughter: "She looked around her [...] at them, the feeding animals gorging on what felt like her very own body, such a violation did it feel." (111)

It is obvious that Jake's own wilfulness has spoiled the good intentions of the picnic. But the rape of Grace is not such a straightforward matter, and again, this ambiguity gives great power to the character of Jake, to the narrative, and to the whole concept of this novel as a tragedy. Duff shrouds the first and succeeding rape scenes in a blanket of darkness. Grace does not know who rapes her, as it is completely black in her room. She only wonders if it is her father (90). For the reader, what adds to the possibility of his guilt is that through Beth's inner thoughts, we know that she and Jake have not had sexual intercourse "in weeks" (95). The ambiguity of Jake's guilt of the sin of incest is maintained in the novel, as neither victim nor perpetrator can be certain:

Walking. Walking and hurting and that other matter drifting round and round in his mind of not being true, it can't be true. I'm not like that. But then again ... you know how drunk a man gets, he don't remember nuthin half the fuckin time. But surely he wouldn't do that? Man don't even have thoughts like that, of, you know: havin sex with kids. Let alone his own daughter. But then again ... thinking of the dreams, how violent they were, how -a man don't have words- but he knows his dreams are strange. (162-3)

In this, the film differs from the novel, as the idea of incest is avoided. Sexual violence within the family is maintained, however, as the rapist is a cousin of the family. In my opinion, the change saves face for the character of Jake in the film, but crucially detracts from his tragic moral ambivalence.

For Aristotle, the tragic hero had to be aristocratic, but Romantic concepts of tragedy changed that. As Gotthold Lessing put it in his *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (1767-9):

The names of princes and heroes can lend pomp and majesty to a play, but they contribute nothing to an emotion. The misfortune of those whose circumstances most resemble our own, must naturally penetrate most deeply into our hearts, and if we pity kings, we pity them as human beings, not as kings. (Quoted in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 590)

Thus, although Jake Heke is not a Maori prince, or Beth a princess, the readers can feel for them. We would place them in the third category

of Schopenhauer's scheme of three types of character through which tragic representation is achieved:

(1) by means of a character of extraordinary wickedness [...] who becomes the author of the misfortune; (2) blind fate –i.e., chance and error [...]; (3) when characters of ordinary morality [...] are so situated with regard to each other that their position compels them, knowingly and with their eyes open, to do each other the greatest injury, without any one of them being entirely in the wrong. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 591)

Before we look at the ways in which the characters are victims and heroes, I will just briefly discuss the trajectory of the tragic narrative line. The story is set in a small town called Two Lakes, roughly based on Rotorua, in the centre of New Zealand's North Island, where Duff spent part of his childhood. Duff uses free indirect discourse in his narration, so we can see inside the characters' minds. It is significant that we should start by seeing into the mind of the thirty-four-year-old Beth, and that she should start with the strong language which is to characterise the Maoris' way of speaking throughout the book: "Bastard, she'd think, looking out her back kitchen window" (*Once Were Warriors*, 7), though here she is referring, not to her husband, but to the rich Pakeha farmer who has his estate adjoining the street of run-down state houses in which they live. Beth, "(who used to be a Ransfield but not that life was so much better then)" (7), feels superior to her husband Jake, she calls him an "arsehole." He does not consider himself that way, however. Having overcome the stigma of being branded a "slave" in childhood, he has cultivated his body and muscles and has a physique which makes almost everyone fear him. We can detect that arrogance of the tragic hero in him: "so he stood there swelled with pride and vanity and this sense of feeling kingly and inside a voice was going: Look at me. Look at me, ya fuckers. I'm Jake Heke. Jake the Muss Heke. LOOK AT ME (and feel humble, you dogs)." (66)

In Greek drama, there is often a chorus which relates actions which occur off-stage and comments upon the action from a more neutral point of view. There are several groups or individuals in this novel which serve a similar function to a chorus. Jake has a "chorus" in his pub, McClutchy's: "And a chorus of em –but right out of synch– jabbering, Ooo Jake! The toughest cunt in Two Lakes! That sorta thing." (60) As Grace accompanies her brother Mark, also known as "Boogie" on account of his childhood fear of the Bogey Man, out of the Juvenile Court, there is a hostile, sneering crowd: "Everyone looking. (Oh God. No way to hide.) [...] Someone, it turned out to be one of the Brown Fist prospects, asking, Whassa madda, bubs? The beak hit you with his powder puff? Laughter." (36) The character who is perhaps the most superior in the novel, in terms of being able to rise above all events on earth, is the lonely atheist bachelor, Derek. He is the Pakeha with the telescope, the amateur astronomer. His visual exploration of the night sky gives him "a sense of his own unimportance." (78) Thus he is able to put the petty fights of the Maori "warriors" in the context of the cosmos:

(You are warrior, Jake Heke. And these arrivals, they are warrior too. You threaten each other. That is why you are maddening, O great but crazy warrior amongst us; why you come furiously from your lair. To protect your mad warriorhood without knowing that you do. You –most of you– live only in the volatile moment of warriorhood.) Whilst the man with the telescope kept gazing starwards never ceasing to wonder –wonder– at that unimaginable moment way back in unimaginable time gone by that did (or may have) create such unimaginably far-flung fiery space stuff which would create, in turn, the explosion called Man. He wondered hard and long about this. All this universe from a single event of supposedly Big Bang? (75)

Derek thinks of unrealised potential, and this concept, along with the leitmotif of the stars, unites him with Grace as she hangs herself, and with the Maori family drinking and singing (119). The simultaneity of these three events reinforces the tragedy.

### **3. HEROES AND VICTIMS**

If we ask ourselves who are the victims in this story, most of the characters will be candidates. The heroes are easier to identify. Beth emerges from her double, or triple, tragedy, strengthened in her resolve to improve, not only herself, but her fellow Maoris. And she feels this way through love. She loves her people (12), just as she loves her children, and even her husband, Jake (19), a love which has been her weakness. Grace loves her brothers Boogie (22) and Nig (29), but they are afraid of their father. They know that Jake does not love Boogie because he is not tough, he is studious, kind and sensitive (23), qualities not appreciated by the Maori warrior. Mr Bennett, the Maori children's welfare officer is also a hero, because he is concerned about Maori children who come off the rails. He teaches Boogie about his Maori heritage, and channels his energies towards the more artistic, pacific virtues of Maoridom. He proves to be a better father to Boogie than Jake.

Even if Jake has not raped his daughter, and even if the chip on his shoulder, his feeling that the whole world is against him, is justified by his childhood taunting as a slave, the reader cannot forgive him his domestic violence. Jake is an almost full-blood Maori (Beth has white blood on both sides of her parentage, p. 19), he is over six feet tall and is heavily muscled (19): "Jake the Muss [...] Muss for muscles." (23) Beth says that he is "fist-happy" (7), as if it were a western, and he were gun-happy. She is not living in a film, however, and he makes her life not quite hell, but almost (9). But Beth considers herself "a fighter" (13) too, and laughs in her husband's face even when he has made it bleed and she is too beaten up to go to Boogie's court hearing. Boogie, aged fourteen, hates violence (23), he is "a wimp thrown into a den of warriors" (37), according to Grace. Grace is a mother substitute for her five siblings, since her mother gets drunk and cannot get up in the mornings. But Beth is no exception; Grace sees the fat mothers, hitting their children, and the teenagers who only think of joining gangs, and she thinks of them as "The

Lost Tribe." (31) The eldest brother, Nig, is destroyed by gang warfare. He joins the Brown Fists and dies at the hands of the Black Hawks. But even the gang does not provide a new "home." The gang leader deliberately denies Nig the opportunity to go to his sister's funeral, as he says that the gang is now his only family. Nig will soon go to his own funeral, as the protection provided by the gang is non-existent.

The greatest tragedy of the story is Grace's pain in both a physical and a mental or spiritual sense. The rape is prefigured in Grace's thoughts as she lies in bed listening to her parents and their guests arguing and fighting below: "lovely children corrupted, ruined, raped ...) (26) In the physical sense, the virgin in mind and body suffers: "it hurts too much" (90). She suffers in her body, then she feels defiled, then she feels hopeless, with no possible future. Comparing herself to the daughter of the Pakeha family, who is her own age, and can play the piano, and who is kissed by her parents every night, her sense of degradation and limited potential leads her to take her own life. The reader feels that perhaps Grace would have borne with it and soldiered on, or even at some point found the opportunity to tell her mother about her sexual molestation, and would have survived, had it not been for the juxtaposition of her misery with the evident *joie-de-vivre* of the Pakeha girl. This leads us into a discussion of the racial issues in the story.

#### **4. POST-COLONIAL OR RACIAL ASPECTS OF THE STORY**

The physical dysfunction we have seen in the Heke family could be categorised as domestic violence, and we could examine it under the heading of gender issues. For indeed, part of the problem is that the Maori culture is patriarchal. Beth's memories of childhood in Wainui are of a "males-only domain" (120). She was not raised to expect equality: "And growing up to the knowledge that as a woman she was never going to have the right to speak publicly." (ibid.) She does not even have freedom over her own body within the intimacy of her marriage. She cannot make sexual overtures towards her husband: "Careful not to wink back because he didn't like the woman to be the instigator of that particular activity ..." (20) Hence, women must be modest, and men must be strong. As Phoebe Koch points out about Jake in her article about the rejection of women in the novel: "his rejection of female sexuality (and affection between husband and wife) plays a large part in Jake's isolation." (Koch 2) It is only after Beth has thrown him out that Jake recognises how much he depended upon her. He thinks is it not masculine to be dependent or to be intimate, and learns the hard way. In another article, this time about the acceptance of women, Koch reminds us that his dreams become less violent when he opens up to the fifteen-year-old homeless boy, Cody McLean (Koch 3). Even young Grace finds her life constrained by the gender roles imposed upon them from an early age: "Boys: they make such a big deal of being tough. It's the most important thing in the world to em. Specially Maoris. Not that the Pakeha boys at school are that much better. They're all stupid. [...] It's males. Grace was sure of it." (22)

Most of the criticism of Maori society comes from the females, either Beth or her daughter. It is Beth who laments that they live in semi-slum state housing at Pine Block. All the houses are the same, and Beth calls them "misery boxes" (7), many of them with a car wreck in the front "garden," overgrown with grass and weeds. The tone of Pine Block is "neglected, run-down, abused. [...] prideless." (11) What accentuates the poverty is that from their back window, Beth and Grace can see the fine house of the Pakeha family, "Mr fuckin white Trambert" (8) and other Pakeha houses with "well-kept lawns and nice gardens with flowers" (12).

The Maoris are "going-nowhere nobodies" (7), and although she loves them, Beth feels ashamed of her own people, and ashamed yet again for feeling that way:

Feeling like a traitor in her own midst because her thoughts so often turned to disgust, disapproval, shame, and sometimes to anger, even hate. Of them, her own people. And how they carried on. At the restrictions they put on themselves (and so their choice-less children) of assuming life to be this daily struggle, this acceptance that they were a lesser people; and boozing away their lives and the booze making things all distorted and warped and violent." (8)

Beth is aged thirty-four at the time of the narration and has been married for sixteen years. She appears to have assumed the helplessness and hopelessness of the situation: "She had dreams then. But they got lost along the way. Sixteen years is a long time. For dreams to stay alive." (8) Her daughter Grace seems to follow the same path, but she has refused to compromise, to go on living in such conditions. Beth diagnoses as part of the problem the fact that urban Maori society is not literate, it does not value learning and improvement: "Bookless. Bookless. We're a bookless society." (10) She moves through the rooms of her own house to see which members of the family read, and what, if at all:

It was bookless. She thought why? Almost in anguish. Why are Maoris not interested in books? Well, they didn't have a written language before the white man arrived, maybe that was it. But still it bothered her. And she began to think that it was because a bookless society didn't stand a show in this modern world, not a damn show. (10)

Jake is frustrated because he cannot find words for things, he is "unable to escape his word limits" (61). As Sage Wilson puts it: "The absence of hope eviscerates language." (Wilson 3) Grace and her ten-year-old sister Polly read teenage girl magazines, where the girls are not dark like them (Grace is very dark and hates it, p. 85), but "prissy white girls dolled up" (11), whom they could never emulate. Early in the story, Beth is worried about her children's future, but alone can do nothing. The course of the events will see her transformation, but only with the backing of the elders who come to her in her need: "What can a woman do about their future, their education? It ain't in my hands. Not on my own. [...] It's all of us; we need to get together- talk and try and sort ourselves out. Before it's too late. If we haven't already missed the bus." (14) With

dramatic irony, this premonition points to the fact that they have already missed the bus for Grace and Nig.

At the Children's Court, where Boogie's case of shop-lifting is examined, the Pakehas are on one side of the bench, that is, the judge and the officials, with the portraits of important white men on the wall, and the people on the other side, on the receiving end of justice, are all Maori. Boogie may have done some petty stealing, but the reason for his truancy is more justified, in that he was picked on at school for not wanting to be a "warrior," and, like Grace, can see no future. Ironically, the fact that he has got into trouble has saved him, for as we see at Grace's funeral, he has been transformed at the Reformatory into a responsible young man, proud of his Maori heritage, without having to be violent. He had also suffered racist taunts at school, as Grace muses: "God knows there were plenty at school didn't like Maoris. Not that a girl blamed em half the time; they're a rough tough mean lot, those (us) Maoris." (23) The role models of the Maori men and boys were black boxers like Muhammad Ali (51). Racism seems to be endemic in all areas and institutions; at the Children's Court, Grace can see in the Pakeha policeman's face "a hate for Maoris." (ibid.)

Beth is aware that her people are losing their culture, and hence, their identity. Although it costs her a beating from her husband, she harangues and chides his friends for not caring about it. But she has put her finger on the wound:

You call yourselves Maoris? [...] Can any of us in this room speak the language? No reply. What do we know of our culture? [...] She told them the Maori of old had a culture, and he had pride, and he had warriorhood, not this bullying, man-hitting-woman shet, you call that manhood? It's not manhood, and it sure as hell ain't Maori warriorhood. So ask yourselves what you are." (28)

Jake and his mates do not care about the coming generation, for they live for the moment, from hand to mouth. Beth knows that Pakeha children have a head start, because their parents discipline them, help them with their homework, make them see the importance of it. Not like the Maoris, where the father and even the mother are more likely to be at the pub (34), as Grace thinks while at the Children's Court: "Man, if I had a head start like they do I could be a magistrate too." (34) She feels "massively deprived" compared to the Trambert girl (86), and because she sneaks up to look into their window, she can see the visible difference between their socio-economic levels and their lifestyles: "From grand piano to this. Even God wouldn't believe it. And of course she wondered where she stood in all this, this human scheme of things." (88)

Duff emphasises, notably through the Trambert family and the character of Derek, that the Maori and Pakeha rarely mix (43). So if the two races live parallel lives alongside each other in New Zealand, who is to blame for this? Beth feels that "life is not getting better" (82), and that Two Lakes, where she lives, is "just another two-bit town in a two-bit country." (69) The Maoris no longer have any pride in their country. Duff

insists that there is good and bad alike in both Maori and Pakeha (103), but there is certainly an element of blame on the side of the white man. The system allows very few Maori New Zealanders to get to the top of the socio-economic ladder. The opera singer Kiri Te Kanawa is singled out as an example of one who has "made it." But there is resentment when she is compared to the character Mavis Tatana, who has got no further than singing in McClutchy's bar, on account of her Maori shyness (64). It is suspected that Kiri Te Kanawa was brought up "posh" (68), and is not likely to be addicted to beer like Mavis (69).

Beth accuses the white man of taking away their language (64), and only belatedly, were efforts being made, through the kohanga reo, to get the Maori language spoken on television and taught in the schools. (ibid.) But there is a downside to this, as Sage Wilson points out: "The kohanga reo movement to rehabilitate the Maori language and teach it in the classroom attempts to address these concerns, but in the absence of a broader premise shift, speaking Maori does little good and can even breed resentment." (Wilson 2) At least Duff gives voice to the urban Maori, even if it is a peculiar version of English. As Iain Lambert puts it: "a particular local voice outside of, or even in opposition to, Standard English." (Lambert )

Not only have the Pakeha taken away the language of the Maoris, but also their history. The history that is taught in school is the white man's history (178). The Treaty of Waitangi has been broken. So how far is the white man to blame? Unfortunately, when the Pakeha try to make amends, it is either too late, as with the Tramberts and Grace, hanging herself on their land, or counterproductive. The government pays unemployment benefit to alleviate poverty, for Maori unemployment is "much higher than their white counterparts. It was because they were less skilled." (21) But the effects are worse than if the men were meaningfully employed: "And hardly a one working, the government, the good old government, paying em to do crimes against each other and society." (15) The Maoris stand in direct contrast to the Chinese. The latter know the value of hard work, therefore not only despise the Maori, but also, apparently, hate them (81). They may hate them, but they use them. When the Maori pile out of the pubs at night, the Chinese are hard at work, for while the Maori, outside their houses, eat mostly "fishnchips" (16), if they have more money, they eat Chinese takeaways. Duff contrasts the Maoris getting drunk: "seething, beer-bloated, mindless humanity; three hundred broken dolls, three hundred flopped-out puppets dangling in the hands of some god-cunt making em do things you wouldn't credit animals with" (65), with the hard-working Chinese, who, as a result of their labours, have better homes, and cars for the Maori to envy. Sage Wilson has an article "Working Your Way Out: Building Premises for Change in Once Were Warriors" (Wilson 3), where she ventures that the elder's chastisement of his fellow Maoris and his exhortation to work to create identity and dignity can be seen as the main thesis of the novel: "he jus toldem: Work! We work our way out. Same

way as we lazed ourselves into this mess!" (185) Te Tupaea tells the Maoris to stop drinking, stop being lazy and stop feeling sorry for themselves (182).

So there is a need to belong and have an identity. What options are open to the Maori? The young men think that their only hope lies in becoming a member of one of the urban gangs. We see the Brown Fists through the eyes of Nig: "Yet they, The People, were looking at strangers. Because you could read it on even their dark, shaded faces the mad loyalty given to being a gang member. It was funny, being drunk and therefore somehow wise, you could just see why these young warriors'd joined up with the Browns: it was love. Being loveless. As well as something else missing ...but what was it ...? Sumpthin to do with race, with being a Maori and so being a bit on the wild side when you compared with the other race, the ones running the show. It was sumpthin closely linked with that but damned if you could figure it." (74) As Sage Wilson says, the gang members are "stupid, grunting and bellowing," they are even more inarticulate than Jake: "Strikingly uncommunicative, the Fists represent the direct opposite of premises for change: instead of building new structures of new hope, the gang simply exploits the current misery as best they can." (Wilson 3)

Belonging to a gang is not the answer. But it is necessary to belong to a collective, one cannot have an identity in isolation. Beth is taken back to her home village by the elders to give Grace a decent and meaningful funeral. Wainui pa is described as if with a stranger's eyes. At Grace's funeral, Beth feels an outsider for not understanding the Maori language. The meeting house is described, and we see the role of art and craft in the religious rituals of a culture (121). Chapter 10, "They Who Have History II," is the description of Grace's funeral. Te Tupaea, paramount chief of the tribe, gives a speech. He starts with his genealogy and the need for a history (124). The whakapapa is described. He talks of life and "how precious it is" (125) Then the ritual proceeds to the waiata tangi, the lament for the dead (126). This gives importance to Grace, even in death, even in her lack of fulfilled potential. Te Tupaea gives an example of collective responsibility and guilt over the death of a child. Burdens should not be shouldered in isolation, thus through the funeral rites, Beth finds not only consolation in her loss and her feelings of guilt at having failed her daughter, but also "a resurgence of fierce pride, a come-again of a people who once were warriors." (127) The description of the haka or peruperu, performed by thirty men and women, is a wake-up call to Beth, which he will pass on to others: "Like your ancestors'd sent a sign, eh? A sign to you, those of you who don't know your own culture, you better get your black arses into gear do sumpthin about it. Before it's too late." (128-9).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In Jake Heke we have a tragic figure who is neither a hero nor a villain, while his wife Beth does prove herself a heroine, but only after she has “betrayed” her children and her Maori heritage. They both have an inner struggle, but Beth’s childhood, albeit in a patriarchal society, has fitted her better. She may have lost the physical battle against her husband, but she has moral strength. Some critics have objected to the “happy” ending, opining that Beth’s transformation into a Maori cultural heroine is unlikely. But Duff has written the seeds of her transformation into the character from a very early stage. Seeing herself as a member of the “Other” race of New Zealand, secondary to the Pakeha, she has felt the need to question the reasons for this status, and has always seen herself on a stage, acting out her role and explaining herself to her “audience” of Pakeha, which we may see as a sort of chorus, as I discussed earlier:

They’re my audience. I tellem what’s wrong with this world, with my world, with the MAORI world –Yep, the MAORI world, in big capital letters like that. I tellem like that because it’s a big problem being a Maori in this world. We used to be a race of warriors, O audience out there. You know that? And our men used to have full tattoos all over their ferocious faces, and it was chiselled in and they were not to utter a sound. Not one sound. The women, too, they had tats on their chins and their lips were black with tattooing. But I think they let us cry out when it was being done; I spose they thought us women are weak anyway, though we aren’t.

Now where was I and what was I saying? Oh who cares? Who gives a fuck?

And we used to war all the time, us Maoris. Against each other. True. It’s true, honest to God, audience. Hated each other. Tribe against tribe. Savages. We were savages. But warriors, eh. It’s very important to remember that. Warriors. Because, you see, it was what we lost when you, the white audience out there, defeated us. Conquered us. Took our land, our mana, left us with nothing. But the warriors thing got handed down, see. Well, sort of handed down; in a mixed-up sense it did. It was more toughness that got handed down from generation to generation. Toughness, eh. Us Maoris might be every bad thing in this world but you can’t take away from us our toughness. But this toughness, Pakeha audience of mine, it started to mean less and less as the world got older, learned more, and new technology all this fandangled computer stuff, oh, but even before computers, it all made toughness redundant. Now thassa god word for a Maori, eh, redundant? (47–8)

The Pakeha might have caused the problems in the first place, but they are more adapted to the modern world, and, as in the survival of the fittest, the Maori have to adapt or die out. The quality of toughness is not intrinsically wrong, says Duff, but it must be redirected.

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WORKS ON DUFF IN NEW ZEALAND (THAT I HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO GET HOLD OF)

AT THE NEW ZEALAND LITERATURE FILE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND LIBRARY: WWW.NZLF/AUCKLAND.AC.NZ/AUTHOR THERE IS A LONG LIST OF REVIEWS OF ONCE WERE WARRIORS, INTERVIEWS WITH ALAN DUFF, A HANDFUL OF CRITICAL ARTICLES, AND THE FOLLOWING THESES:

CALVERT, JULIA HELEN 2002 "CONTEXTUALISING MAORI WRITING: A STUDY OF PROSE FICTION WRITTEN BY WITI IHIMAERA, PATRICIA GRACE, KERI HULME AND ALAN DUFF." UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO.

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