Female dramatic

*Aroha Mataira* from Bruce Mason’s *The Pohutukawa Tree*

**Time:** day

**Location:** outside Aroha’s house at Te Parenga

*Aroha*, the matriarch of the last Maori family to live on their tribal land at Te Parenga, is describing a battle her ancestor Whetumarama won against British forces in the Land Wars. She is addressing Mr Sedgwick, the priest newly arrived in town from England, whom she has just met for the first time.

**Note:** In the original text Aroha asks her daughter Queenie to bring her the taiaha of Whetumarama. To allow performance as a solo piece, this excerpt sets the taiaha onstage with Aroha.

*AROHA, rising:*  Man of God: you are on the site of the greatest victory ever won by the Maori over the Pakeha. Look over there. What do you see? The oranges and lemons of the Atkinson orchard. See instead a great totara forest. And here, where my house stands. See the pekerangi where the warriors crouched, muskets set to fire. Down there on the beach, where those Pakeha children play, see the great ship *Alcestis*, white sails spreading, moving into Te Parenga Bay. Four hundred soldiers aboard her, red coats and crossed straps. And here, where this old pohutakawa stands, see the puwhara of Whetumarama where he took his stand, like a star shining in glory, his taiaha raised to strike.
She begins to mutter to herself, an old battle chant.

Ka whawhai, ka whawhai, e he!
Ka whawhai, ka whawhai, e ha!
Ka whawhai, ka whawhai, ki roto ki te awa...

AROHA picks up the taiaha and moves up to the tree.

AROHA:

The Pakeha captain got as far as here: placed a ladder against the puriri wall and climbed halfway up. Face to face he came with Whetumarama: Maori and Pakeha, holding each other’s eyes. Then Whetumarama raised his arm and sss! The taiaha sped to the captain’s heart. Down he fell, down, down, bleeding his life into Te Parenga’s earth. With that it was all over. The Pakeha fled, leaving behind him two hundred dead, lying out there like great patches of blood. The great ship Alcestis spread its wings, borne away on the great wave of fear. Te Parenga pa was never taken by force. Only by time; Pakeha time. Slice by slice from the whale: by time. You ask me to leave this place, hallowed by blood. I will not. I stay here, in the shadow of this old pohutukawa. It was planted by Whetumarama himself. On the day after the battle, he planted it where the Pakeha captain fell that its red flowers might be a sign of blood between Maori and Pakeha for ever. She shudders. Euh, how he hated them! I too, hated them. Until He came to me. The Lord Jesus.
With a painful intensity: He came to me in a dream. Glory was on his face. Abide, He said, abide. Keep my covenant between Maori and Pakeha. Let my Cross be your guide…. It was late: I rose from my bed and took this taiaha in my hand. I went to the church, your church. I had never been there before. There He was, hanging like a fly by the nails, blood on His hands, His feet. His poor, poor side. Her voice shudders with emotion. The moon shone on the stained glass and played on His head. I fell to my knees. I took Him then as my King, the great Ariki of my soul. And I gave him this. I offered it to Him as a sign of peace between Maori and Pakeha. It is holy, blessed. And I stay in Te Parenga to keep my trust. This last acre, this last slice from the whale, I keep for Whetumarama and for his peace with Jesus the Christ. No tree is cut, no stone disturbed. It is a holy place, now and forever.

She lightly touches the taiaha with her lips.

Commentary

First performed in 1957 The Pohutukawa Tree is considered a classic of New Zealand theatre and theatre writing. This is mainly because it centres on the relationship between Maori and Pakeha. It is also because the writer, Bruce Mason, wrote drama that reflected the New Zealand experience at a time when most plays performed in this country were imported from overseas.

The play has a long history of production in New Zealand and overseas. It was produced as a BBC television drama in 1959 and as a New Zealand radio drama in 1960. The events in the play represent a specific time in our
history, and the characters and their actions must be seen in an historical light.

➢ Compare this monologue with Tiri Mahana’s opening speech from *Woman Far Walking*, written almost 50 years later.

See *The Pohutukawa Tree* project http://www.tki.org.nz/r/arts/drama/purapurawhetu/index_e.php for more information.