

Beyond the Horizon: The Ocean as a Posthuman Agent in Disney's Moana (2016)

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Abstract

Disney's Moana (2016) presents the ocean not merely as a natural background but as a dynamic and responsive presence that participates actively in the narrative. The film portrays the ocean as a living and interactive entity that chooses Moana to restore the heart of Te Fiti and save the island of Motunui. This paper examines how the film reimagines the ocean as a posthuman agent, challenging traditional anthropocentric assumptions about the relationship between humans and nature. Drawing on posthuman ecocriticism and the theoretical insights of scholars such as Serpil Oppermann, Rosi Braidotti, and Stacy Alaimo, the study analyses the ocean's actions as forms of agency that guide, protect, and communicate with human characters. Through close analysis of key scenes, the paper demonstrates how Moana visualizes the ocean as a co-creator of narrative meaning rather than a passive environment. By portraying the ocean as an intelligent and ethically responsive presence, the film blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman actors and proposes a relational ecological vision that challenges anthropocentric worldviews. The study ultimately argues that Moana contributes to contemporary discussions in posthumanism and environmental humanities by reimagining the ocean as an active participant in shaping human destiny and ecological balance.

Keywords: Posthumanism; Ocean; Anthropocene; Ecocriticism; Blue Humanities

Introduction

Disney's Moana (2016), directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, represents an important development in contemporary animated storytelling. While the film is widely celebrated for its

representation of Pacific Island cultures and its feminist narrative of a young heroine discovering her destiny, it also offers a compelling ecological vision that challenges conventional portrayals of nature in cinema. Traditionally, natural environments in adventure narratives function primarily as scenic backdrops against which human heroes perform acts of bravery. In *Moana*, however, the ocean emerges as an active narrative presence that repeatedly intervenes in the story and shapes the course of events.

The film follows Moana, the daughter of the chief of the island of Motunui, who is chosen by the ocean to restore the stolen heart of Te Fiti, the life-giving goddess whose power sustains the natural world. As ecological imbalance spreads across the islands, Moana embarks on a voyage across the ocean to return the heart and restore harmony. Throughout this journey the ocean guides, protects, and communicates with Moana in ways that suggest intention and agency. Waves part to reveal pathways, currents redirect dangers, and the sea itself responds playfully to Moana's presence. These moments invite viewers to interpret the ocean not simply as an environmental setting but as a narrative agent.

This paper examines the representation of the ocean in *Moana* through the lens of posthuman ecocriticism. Posthuman theory challenges anthropocentric assumptions that position humans as the sole agents within the world and instead emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman actors. By analysing the ocean as a posthuman entity within the film, this study explores how *Moana* reimagines ecological relationships and proposes a model of cooperation rather than domination between humans and nature.

Review of Literature

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined *Moana* through interdisciplinary approaches that combine film studies, environmental humanities, and cultural studies. Researchers have explored the film's ecological symbolism, Indigenous Pacific perspectives, and posthuman implications. Pushpita Basumatary's article "Oceanic Belonging and Posthuman Identity: A Posthuman Ecocritical Reading of Disney's *Moana*" argues that the ocean functions as a central narrative presence that actively shapes Moana's identity and journey. Basumatary suggests that the ocean

operates as a co-creator of meaning by selecting Moana as the hero and guiding her actions throughout the film.

Kevin Chew further develops this interpretation through the framework of Blue Humanities, which examines the cultural and political significance of oceans and maritime spaces. According to Chew, the ocean in Moana cannot be reduced to a simple metaphor for nature; rather, it acts as a political and ethical environment that connects human and nonhuman actors. Through moments of cooperation and resistance between Moana and the ocean, the film illustrates a relational model of ecological interaction.

Other scholars within environmental humanities have also emphasized the importance of posthuman perspectives in understanding contemporary ecological narratives. Rosi Braidotti's concept of the posthuman subject challenges human-centered definitions of identity and proposes a framework in which humans exist within networks of interdependence with other forms of life and matter. Similarly, Stacy Alaimo's theory of trans-corporeality highlights the material interconnections between human bodies and environmental forces. These theoretical insights provide valuable tools for analysing how Moana represents the ocean as an active participant in shaping narrative meaning.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study adopts a posthuman ecocritical framework to examine the representation of the ocean in Moana. Posthuman ecocriticism seeks to move beyond anthropocentric interpretations of nature by recognizing nonhuman entities as active agents within ecological systems. Rather than viewing nature as a passive resource available for human exploitation, this perspective emphasizes relationality, interdependence, and mutual influence between human and nonhuman actors.

The methodology of the paper involves close textual and visual analysis of selected scenes from the film. Particular attention is given to moments where the ocean interacts directly with characters, alters the course of events, or communicates symbolic meaning. These scenes are interpreted in relation to theoretical concepts drawn from posthumanism, Blue Humanities, and

Indigenous ecological perspectives. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the paper investigates how the ocean operates simultaneously as environment, narrative guide, and ethical presence within the film.

Analysis and Discussion

The Ocean as an Agentive Presence

From the opening scenes of the film, the ocean demonstrates a level of autonomy that challenges traditional anthropocentric assumptions. When Moana is a young child exploring the shoreline, the ocean gently parts its waves to reveal a glowing shell and ultimately presents her with the heart of Te Fiti. This moment establishes the ocean as an entity capable of intention and communication. The waves respond playfully to Moana's curiosity, creating a visual impression that the sea recognizes and interacts with her as a living presence.

Such scenes suggest that the ocean possesses agency in the narrative sense: it initiates events, influences characters, and participates in shaping the story. Rather than simply reflecting human emotions, the ocean appears to act independently, guiding Moana toward her destiny. This portrayal resonates with posthuman theory, which proposes that agency is distributed across networks of human and nonhuman actors rather than belonging exclusively to human beings.

Relationality and Posthuman Subject Formation

Moana's identity develops through her evolving relationship with the ocean. Unlike traditional heroic narratives in which the protagonist conquers nature, Moana learns to listen to the rhythms of the sea and respond to its guidance. Her journey therefore represents not a triumph over nature but a process of ecological understanding and cooperation. The ocean becomes a partner in her transformation from a curious child into a confident leader.

This relational dynamic reflects Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, which emphasizes the constant interaction between human bodies and environmental forces. Moana's growth occurs through her immersion in oceanic space and her willingness to engage with nonhuman

elements. In this sense, her subjectivity is shaped through ecological relationships rather than isolated individual agency.

The Ocean as Ethical Authority

The ocean in Moana also functions as a moral presence within the narrative. Its actions often guide characters toward humility, cooperation, and respect for ecological balance. When the demigod Maui attempts to assert control over the ocean for personal gain, the sea responds by undermining his authority and reminding him that power cannot be exercised through domination. In contrast, Moana's willingness to respect the ocean and listen to its guidance allows her to succeed in her mission.

Through these narrative moments the film presents the ocean as an ethical force that rewards humility and discourages exploitation. This portrayal aligns with Rosi Braidotti's conception of posthuman ethics, which emphasizes the transformation of hierarchical relationships into cooperative networks of coexistence. By distributing ethical authority across human and nonhuman actors, Moana challenges anthropocentric assumptions about moral agency.

Symbolic Significance of the Ocean

Beyond its narrative role, the ocean also functions as a powerful symbol of cultural continuity and ancestral memory. The recurring phrase "We know the way" reflects the deep maritime heritage of Pacific Island cultures, where the ocean serves as both pathway and archive of collective knowledge. In this context the sea becomes a living repository of cultural identity rather than an empty space awaiting exploration.

The film therefore integrates ecological and cultural meanings within the representation of the ocean. By portraying the sea as a dynamic presence connected to history, identity, and survival, Moana reinforces Indigenous Pacific perspectives that emphasize relational belonging within oceanic environments.

Findings and Interpretation

The analysis demonstrates that the ocean in *Moana* operates simultaneously as environment, narrative agent, and ethical guide. Its actions influence key moments in the story, shaping *Moana*'s decisions and redirecting the narrative toward ecological restoration. By presenting the ocean as an active participant in the creation of meaning, the film disrupts traditional anthropocentric hierarchies and opens space for recognizing nonhuman agency.

The portrayal of the ocean ultimately reflects a broader ecological message: human survival depends upon cooperation with environmental forces rather than attempts to dominate them. *Moana*'s journey illustrates that harmony between humans and nature can emerge through listening, respect, and relational understanding.

Conclusion

Moana offers a compelling cinematic representation of the ocean as a posthuman entity that reshapes traditional understandings of nature. Instead of presenting the sea as a passive backdrop, the film portrays it as an intelligent and responsive presence that participates actively in shaping human destiny. Through the lens of posthuman ecocriticism, the ocean emerges as a co-creator of narrative meaning that challenges anthropocentric assumptions about agency and power.

By emphasizing cooperation between human and nonhuman actors, *Moana* proposes a vision of ecological coexistence grounded in respect and interdependence. The film therefore contributes to contemporary discussions within environmental humanities by encouraging audiences to reconsider the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Future research may further explore how animated cinema and popular culture represent ecological relationships and contribute to broader conversations about sustainability and posthuman ethics.



Works Cited

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