

“The Line Where the Sky Meets the Sea:” Character Foils and the Four Elements in Disney’s *Moana*

Disney’s 2016 animated film *Moana* begins by telling the legend of how the trickster demigod, Maui, stole the heart of Te Fiti and brought forth a darkness that disrupted the balance of life in the islands. The film is filled with language surrounding the four elements of water, air, earth, and fire. Maui is described as a “demigod of the wind and sea” and the fiery Te Ka as “demon of earth and fire.” Moana herself is strongly associated with the water, having been chosen by it to return the heart of Te Fiti to its proper resting place. Water also represents the birth of life, with Gramma Tala’s opening tale stating that, “In the beginning, there was only ocean. Until the mother island emerged: Te Fiti.”

Representations of all four elements within the film add interesting connections and connotations between characters as well as adding power to Moana’s journey and nuance to the Polynesian culture that undercurrents the film. Moana notes that her people were voyagers before they settled on Moto Nui, and their prosperous life there is attributed to the earth goddess Te Fiti. In her more destructive aspect of Te Ka, the goddess combines earth and fire in much the same way as ocean volcanoes erupted and created the islands in the first place. Moana has power over water, but none over the air—it is not until she joins with Maui and begins to learn the craft of wayfaring from him that she gains mastery over her boat and the film’s plot. You need both water and wind to sail where you want. By examining the relationships of the characters through the usage of the four elements in the film, this paper will explore how the elements themselves can act as foils for Moana’s development in the narrative.