Journal of English Language, Literature and Education
Vol. 8 Issue 3 (July - Sept 2026) PP. 76- 85
ISSN: 2710 - 4923 (Online)
ISSN: 2663 - 3485 (Print)

Marine Landscapes and Human Experience: A Blue Humanities Approach to Abby Geni's *The Lightkeepers*

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the role of the oceanic environment in Abby Geni's *"The Lightkeepers"*. The study establishes that literary works often present water as a natural phenomenon and also as a symbolic power that can impact human feelings, activities, and relationships with others. The study uses a qualitative method, and through the Blue Humanities approach, the analysis makes the ocean a significant agent that links human beings to nature and encourages respect for marine life. The research recommends that readers and academicians be more attentive to the ways in which water in literature can teach ethical, emotive, and environmental principles, and therefore reinforce the main purpose of the matter in defining human thought and conduct.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, human experience, human – ocean relationship, marine landscape, shipwreck modernity

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.54692/jelle.2026.0803115

Introduction

Background of the study

Ecocriticism has also seen new developments through the blue humanities, which is where scholars are taking a closer look at how the oceans as spaces influence humans on both social and global levels, shaping life, societies, histories, and cultures. It is believed by many of the scholars that rather than being a setting for everyday activities, the ocean plays an active role in shaping human experience through seafaring movement, the unknown, and ecological interconnectedness. Building on earlier ecocritical movements and posthuman theories, the development of the Blue Humanities emphasises fluidity and the agency of waterscapes beyond the human. Steve Mentz (2009, 2015) has played a key role in shaping this field by proposing concepts such as "blue

ecology" and "shipwreck modernity," which highlight how the sea disrupts stable notions of self, challenges human-centred thinking, and exposes the vulnerability of human systems. In addition to Mentz's contributions, scholars such as Stacy Alaimo (2010) and Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2007) expanded ocean-focused criticism through material feminisms and postcolonial approaches. Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality in her book "Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self" illustrates the interaction between humans and sea creatures throughout history as both bodies interact with each other in an oceanic environment and vice versa. The effect of this interaction is to create connections between human and animal bodies that allow for a deeper understanding of human-nature dichotomies in the study of literature. The concept of the ocean as a site of migration and colonisation through time is one that is of great importance to DeLoughrey's research. By viewing this body of water through an ecological and cultural framework,

DeLoughrey's book "Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures" highlights the importance of viewing the marine environment as a cultural and ecological archive, and how it can be used to analyse literary studies that reference the ocean in their narratives. Marine studies and literary studies are interconnected, as many writers use ocean and marine environments to explore human feelings, emotions, and identity. The Lightkeepers by Abby Geni is a story set on the Farallon Islands. The weather, storms, and animals affect the protagonist's way of thinking and living. The ocean is not just a background but plays an important role in shaping the characters' experiences. The characters of the novel live alongside sea animals, storms, and birds, influencing events in the story. Critical work on the interaction between the human and natural environment, especially the ocean, explains that the ocean plays a significant role in shaping the story's themes and environment. The setting of the novel strongly reflects the ideas of Blue Humanities, which studies the connection between humans and the oceanic environment. As a result, the novel shows readers how water plays an important role in shaping humans' experience, development, and identity. By studying the novel through the lens of Blue Humanities, it also highlights the necessity of shifting the focus from land-based studies to the marine environment.

Problem Statement

Since the publication of Abby Geni's *The Lightkeepers* and the emergence of Blue Humanities as a literary framework, not much research has been published on it; only a few studies have discussed its theoretical dimensions. Additionally, no academic research has ever focused on the relationship between the ocean and humans, how the oceanic environment influences characters' psychological development, and the personal transformation of the characters. This study applies the theoretical framework of Blue Humanities to explore the human-nature connection, especially with the ocean. By developing a deeper understanding, this research highlights the importance of marine life in understanding human experiences.

Research Objectives

1. To explore how marine landscapes in *The Lightkeepers* influence the psychological and emotional development of the protagonist, Miranda.
2. To analyse the role of nonhuman elements such as seals, birds, and storms in shaping human experiences and identity in the novel.
3. To apply Steve Mentz's Blue Humanities concept, including shipwreck modernity and blue ecology, to interpret the interaction between humans and the oceanic environment

Research Questions

1. In what ways do the sea landscapes represented in *The Lightkeepers* shape the psychological, emotional, and behavioural reactions of Miranda throughout the story?
2. How do nonhuman elements (fauna, weather, and other natural forces) influence the human experiences as depicted in the novel?
3. In what ways can the Blue Humanities model, which deals with such notions as shipwreck modernity and blue ecology, be used to explain the dynamic interdependence between Miranda and the oceanic world?

Significance of the study

This research is important since it examines Abby Geni's "*The Lightkeepers"* through the prism of Blue Humanities, indicating that there is a relationship between human beings and oceans. This indicates that the ocean is not merely a background of the story but is an important part of how the characters of this novel develop and understand the world and the things around them in their own ways. It emphasises how the ocean influences the relationship between people and their emotions and feelings. This study not only emphasises research on land environments but also on the oceanic environment and the relationship between people and the ocean. This study also draws on Hester Blum's concept of material thinking, which emphasises how people understand the material world through physical engagement with it. This study can be very helpful for other studies because it gives an approach to how Blue Humanities can be adopted for other literary works that relate to the ocean and its living creatures.

Literature Review

The interconnections between human and ocean systems, as well as other aquatic environments, have become a growing area of scholarly interest in the Blue Humanities. Researchers have discussed the potential for the sea to disrupt anthropocentric views in literary works, as well as the cultural, ecological and emotional value of water. For example, Oppermann (2023) and Kluwick (2023) highlight the significance of water in literature and the ways in which water has influenced human experience, identity and non-human relationships. Likewise, Campbell and Paye (2020) discuss how the representation of the sea and ocean in literature helps humans to understand the aquatic environment. Chhibbar (2025) argues that stories and poems about oceans give a person a chance to relate to ocean creatures and understand more about ocean nature. Borgohain (2025) argues that literature has the strength to give people a wish to be friendly towards animals and sea creatures in terms of the natural world around them. Peterson (2024) explains that fishing activities such as fish farming ruin sea and ocean life as well as bodies of water. Through the concept of oceans in stories, Sawhney (2025) considers the concept of the ocean as an archive, in which meaning, history, and memory reside. All these concepts related to the Blue Humanities are made evident in the novel. Miranda says, "Any slight change in the water can cause dire results in the sea animals, as the ocean increases by about half an inch, and they'll

be extinct" (Geni, 2016). Moreover, she says the ocean itself has seasonal times, namely the shark season, the whale season, the bird season, and the ocean itself has its regulations. The scientists she cohabits with are mere spectators of nature and do little to intervene in it, as the natural environment requires the level of concern exhibited by the concept of the Blue Humanities, related to the concept of nature, which requires respect and concern from human beings and scientists, according to Oppermann (2023) and Borgohain (2025). For instance, Mentz (2022) thinks that novels such as Moby-Dick and Mason and Dixon reveal that the ocean has this capacity "to change the novel and human experience in a way that makes people understand what water is for in storytelling." Gonsalvis (2023) relatedly establishes that oceanic literature is associated with human history, movement, and culture, which essentially stresses that Blue Humanities is not all about the sea, but it indicates the links between it and the past. Ursula Kluwick also identifies that modern literature should be studied using the Blue Humanities approach, which proposes that scholars pay attention to the oceanic environment instead of simply land. To date, there is still a gap in these insights. Most of the research conducted by Blue Humanities is theory-oriented, and recent ecological literatures such as the Lightkeepers are under-explored. The proposed research will address this gap by shifting the perspective to the marine setting based on the lens of the Blue Humanities.

Research Methodology

Theoretical Framework

This research is qualitative in method and studies *"The Lightkeepers"* through the lens of Blue Humanities. Blue Humanities approach focuses on the significance of water, oceans, and marine environments, highlighting human relations with the aquatic world. The text itself is a primary source of data collection. The close reading of the novel focuses on the parts where the ocean appears to play a significant role in shaping human identity and how it influences the characters' experiences and interactions with the natural world. Scholarly articles and books on Blue Humanities and oceanic literature serve as secondary sources of data collection. This approach helps to understand how a novel highlights the presence of the ocean in the story, making it a main character rather than just a background setting.

Data analysis

The close reading of Abby Geni's “The Lightkeepers” demonstrates that the ocean is more than a setting; it is a force that affects Miranda's psychological, emotional and behavioural experiences. Set in the remote marine landscape of the Farallon Islands, the novel reinvents ‘sea' as the primary character, inviting the reader to immerse themselves in the natural world of the sea, fog, weather, birds, whales and more to shape and inform their perception of reality. There is an overpowering and unstable landscape from the start of the story. Miranda describes the Farallon Islands as “a tiny, aquatic mountain range”(Geni, 2016, p. 9). The word “aquatic” immediately evokes images of the islands as part of an ocean, and their physical size and majesty with the mention of a mountain range. But as Miranda considers the prospect of being washed away by “a single powerful wave” (Geni, 2016, p. 9), she is made aware of just how vulnerable and fragile this apparently solid surface is. The contrast between the man-made observer and the sea is created: the islands appear to be forever, but can be destroyed by a natural phenomenon. The marine environment thus provides an early notice of human and geological vulnerability.

Another instance of the ocean's psychological effect on Miranda occurs when she arrives on the island. “The ocean was inky, capped with slimy bubbles” (Geni, 2016, p. 9), which seems to be a reference to darkness and uncertainty. Descriptions are crucial as the ocean is an unusual and disturbing place for Miranda. Rather, it's what makes her feel disoriented. This is even worse when she ends up on the island. As the Billy Pugh crane carries her above the water, “The ocean fell away” (Geni, 2016, p. 10). The movement changes Miranda's perception of the sea and makes her aware of the expansiveness below her feet. Her response is quite physical: “I thought I would throw up” (Geni, 2016, p. 10). The ocean not only affects Miranda's mind, but also her body and soul. Fear becomes a part of her experience of the marine environment, and how the sea changes human behaviour and human bodily experiences.

The weather and the atmosphere on the island also distort Miranda's perception. The narrator remarks that “The archipelago is shrouded in mist” (Geni, 2016, p. 1). The word ‘shrouded' suggests hidden messages and a sense of mystery in this landscape. Fog makes it difficult for Miranda to get a full picture of what is happening around her, and makes it difficult for her to know where the horizon is and how much to trust it. The sea becomes something of

partial visibility and uncertainty. This is important, psychologically, as it is often where Miranda encounters scenarios that she is unable to control and comprehend on the island. The ocean and the weather further increase her sense of fragility and her interest in the island.

As Miranda's photographs bring her ever closer to the sea, she starts to feel a growing attraction to the ocean. She's not just a passive bystander when it comes to the ocean. Rather, she wishes her images to convey the sense of being physically in the landscape. She imagines the viewer to be “surrounded by this ocean” (Geni, 2016, p. 44). The word “surrounded” is also an important one to eradicate the sense of distance between human beings and the sea. Miranda is not only looking out at the ocean, but she is part of the ocean. Art therefore becomes a tool through which she investigates the relationship between human perception and marine space. The ocean is a part of her emotional and artistic life. The representation of marine animals is a further development of this relation by Geni. Whales are reported to be “sliding through the sea like nightmares” (Geni, 2016, p. 66). Initially, the whales are enigmatic and unsettling, echoing Miranda's curiosity and fear of the other. But the whales, too, begin to be hard to see from the sea. Miranda observes, “They camouflage themselves as waves, as clouds, as islets, as reflections of light” (Geni, 2016, p. 66). She therefore has the realisation that “the sea is full of bodies” (Geni, 2016, p. 66). It is imperative in a Blue Humanities approach, as it changes the human perception of the sea as a blank space. The human eye would see this as an empty space, but this is not the case, as there is life there, non-human life. Then the ocean has its own ecology that is not dependent upon human observation. The whales also symbolise the existence of rhythms beyond human systems, the marine rhythms. “They inhabit a blue world, away from land, dipping from water to air and back again, sliding between darkness and glow” (Geni, 2016, p. 67). This description presents the ocean as a world of its own. The whales are linked to tides, storms and magnetic currents as well as darkness and light, which indicates that they live in relationship to the bigger marine system. This is based on the idea of blue ecology, which is more interested in a different concept of the environment than one that is centred on human beings. The sea is not just for people or for the view; it's a living thing, where things live and move in their own way.

Nonhuman forces also directly impact Miranda's actions. It is important that the birds of the Farallon Islands are significant because they take up space that is the space of the humans and require Miranda to learn how to move around differently in that space. The gulls are described as

being in “attack formation, circling her like bomber jets homing in on a target” (Geni, 2016, p. 1). The military expression reverses the birds' passive nature and makes them part of the landscape, a threat to human beings. As a result, Miranda will have to take protective measures and move slowly around these nests and chicks. It is the birds which control her actions, not the other way round. This is a reversal, as it is an anthropocentric attitude to the environment that is being opposed; Miranda has to learn how to adapt herself to the animals living on the island.

Miranda is also impacted by the sounds of the ecological environment. When it comes to storms, she says she gets a sense of“Wild music” (Geni, 2016, p. 183). The phrase connects the sea, wind, seals, and birds as elements of a single ecological system. Nature is treated as a whole system of connections, and not a set of discrete entities. The storm is not just something she sees; it's something she hears and feels. Natural forces are then added to her sensory/psychological experience.

The novel also de-centres human perceptions of the environment when dealing with the concept of time. Each season of the islands has a specific association with certain animals: “Winter is when the whales and seals breed. Summer is bird Season. Autumn belongs to the sharks” (Geni, 2016, p. 149). This time is not the time of humans. It's a giant leap into the ecology, with Miranda beginning to understand the island's animal cycles. Time is humanised with the timing of the reproduction and migration of marine and terrestrial species. This kind of visualisation also reinforces the Blue Humanities perspective on the human being as a part of an ecological system, rather than an individual.

The Farallon Islands represent a way of life that differs significantly from that of the mainland in the twenty-first century. The connection between Miranda and the sea may be further explored with the notion of shipwreck modernity. Miranda's movement from the mainland to the Farallon Islands places her in an environment where the normal structures of modern life become unreliable. There is “No marina. No semblance of normalcy” (Geni, 2016, p. 10). The absence of ordinary infrastructure emphasises the island's distance from the mainland and exposes Miranda to conditions in which human control is limited. Adaptation to the ocean is required even for transportation, since the ferry is not able to go closer to the cliffs due to the reefs. This is the marine environment, which throws the apparent stability of modern technological life into disarray. The

story ofMiranda shows that technology can aid travel by humans, but not replace it, and cannot ensure their safety while travelling by sea.

Thus, this analysis shows that there is a constant and never-ending interdependence between Miranda and the oceanic world. The sea dictates her feelings of fear, fascination, uncertainty and awe; the weather and sea states dictate her body movements and behaviours; the animals challenge her understanding of the boundaries between human and nonhuman life. Meanwhile, Miranda's photographic observations and understanding of the marine world are her way of communicating and understanding. In other words, her experience is one of observing, then immersing. The sea is a perilous, gorgeous source of wisdom and change. In this representation, Geni questions the notion of nature as background to the lives of humans. *The*

Lightkeepers, on the other hand, provide the ocean as an active presence, one which can affect the human experience. Thus, reading Miranda through a Blue Humanities perspective leads to a recognition of the inseparability of Miranda and the oceanic world.

Conclusion

The ocean and marine environment, as is presented in *The Lightkeepers* by Abbay Geni, is not only presented as a background but as a dynamic environment with powers that shape human life and experiences. The novel explains, through detailed descriptive accounts of the sea, waves, and seashores, the overwhelming, artistic, and unpredictable character of water and how it influences the mood of the characters, determination of their actions, and the relationship of the characters to the rest of the world. Applying a Blue Humanities paradigm, the work proves that the ocean is a pedagogical machine that directs the readers to the realisation of the exchange between humanity and nature and the urgency to be stewards, respect nature, and take care of it in every possible way. The light depiction of water and sea wildlife makes the readers think about the dependence of humans on the water environment and the moral consequences of coexistence.

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