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The motif of the water journey as a metaphor for philosophical enquiry in selected novels of Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad

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ABSTRACT

This research report explores the motif of the water journey as a metaphor for philosophical enquiry in Melville and Conrad by comparing Moby-Dick with Heart of Darkness, and Billy Budd, Sailor with Lord Jim. It takes as its starting-point M.H. Abrams's essay, "Spiritual Travelers in Western Literature", and adapts the typology which he introduces by identifying four different kinds of fictional journey, namely, the physical, the experiential, the narrative and the hermeneutic. By concentrating on a broadly-based semiotic approach to interpretation (while also allowing for other critical possibilities), it examines Melville and Conrad's treatment of certain pivotal issues in metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. It compares the narrative strategies of the two authors and, by offering close readings of the four texts under discussion, it highlights the similarities and differences in the authors' responses to a universe of teasing complexity, as well as exploring the reader's engagement with such texts.

Keywords: Barthes, Billy Budd, Sailor, Conrad, Derrida, epistemology, ethics, Heart of Darkness, hermeneutics, journey, judgement, Lord Jim, maritime novel, Melville, metaphysics, Moby-Dick, narratology, semiotics.