



SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION OF SEA SONGS AND SHANTIES IN SEA TRAVEL WRITING

A myth-analytical approach

Interpretación simbólica de canciones marinas y chabolas en la escritura de viajes marítimos

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ABSTRACT

Travel writing is characterized by a narrative discourse that describes landscapes, transforms adventure into a mythical journey and reveals the fears of humankind. The sea gathers momentum when the protagonists overcome the fear of death. However, the significance of the tune of sea songs has not been adequately highlighted, being relegated as side special effects that embellish the narration. The aim of this paper is to analyze the symbolical element of the songs to foreground its function in sea travel writing in the English and American fiction from the 18th to the 21st century accounts, and their symbolic implication.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Escritura de viajes
Narrativas del mar
Canciones marineras
Mitos
Símbolos
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Lengua Inglesa

RESUMEN

La escritura de viajes es un discurso narrativo que describe paisajes, transforma la aventura en un viaje mítico y revela los miedos del ser humano. El mar cobra fuerza cuando los protagonistas superan el miedo a la muerte. Sin embargo, la importancia de la melodía de los cantos marinos no se ha destacado adecuadamente, quedando relegada como efectos especiales que embellecen la narración. El artículo analiza el elemento simbólico de las canciones para destacar su función en la escritura de viajes por mar en los relatos ingleses y americanos desde el siglo XVIII hasta el XXI y su implicación simbólica.

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1. Introducción

A film without an alluring soundtrack is soulless. A book about sea voyages without a sea song is bereft of life. When analyzing Melville's use of sea ballads, Agnes Dicken Cannon (Dicken Canon, 1964) remarked that even though his works have attracted critical attention for the philosophical debates, the allegorical inference and the ambiguous interpretation of symbolism, his use of ballads and sea songs has been widely overlooked. The simplicity of the ballads could not rival the grandiose exhibition of adventure, emotion and human vital existence of Melville's works. However, the sea songs constitute the fine fabric that supports the dynamic and vital accounts of sea voyages. Without them the narratives would be overwhelming, sweeping and vibrant but also anarchic and disoriented.

The shanties were songs used on board of merchant sailing vessels sung by sailors that had to perform their sea labours with the only help of their hands. As Sir Walter Ruciman reminds us in his introduction to the *Shanty Book* (1921), before the introduction of machinery, manual labour would make use of songs as a way to distribute times and mark the rhythm of the task, as well as a way to pass the time and overcome boredom and exhaustion. Singing is instinctive and part of the ancestral history of human beings. Through it we express love, hatred, joy and sorrow; with it we make our dearest fall in love with us, we ask for forgiveness and redemption and we reconcile ourselves with the world. While machinery in land relegated music to recreation with the coming of industrial revolution, the sea prevailed some more time as the vast auditorium of the last surviving labour songs, since all work aboard sailing ships depended on man power.

The etymology of the word shanty is inconclusive and its spelling has also been inconsistent. Spelt *chanty* or *shanty* refers to the sea songs that accompanied sailors in their toils. This word, therefore, should not be confused with the word "shanty" that refers to the rough huts built in North America in the 19th century that may have derived from the French word *chantier*, a storage place. The musicologist Richard Ruciman (Runciman, 1921) states that the word referred to the sea song should be spelt with *sh* and the spelling with *ch* does not explain a French origin. The earliest record we have of this word in print spelt *chanty* is the American Publication *Seven Years of a Sailor's Life* (1867). In contemporary British publications it appeared spelt with *sh*, as in *The Merchant Vessel* (1855), but in later works the word appeared spelt *sh* or *ch* regardless of its origin. In Latin the word *celeusma* referred to the chants that the Roman oarsmen used to create a certain rhythmic motion and to supply energy to their herculean effort, and this word developed into *saloma* in Spanish, which lead us to think that the English word may have derived from the original Latin through French.

British and American sailors were reported to use very simple chants or sing-outs to carry out brief tasks that required a certain amount of force and energy performed by the crew simultaneously, such as hauling sheets and tacks, raising the anchor on a ship, which involved winding its rope around a capstan, or pumping the water accumulated in the wooden ships. While French sailors used the effective but simple *un, deux, trois* their American and English counterparts were more creative and produced a kind of short song that filled the air with the masculine voices of the seamen, attracting the marvelous creatures of the ocean. In the 19th century, with the peak of the merchant vessels sailing the oceans and seas, a more sophisticated form of song began to be recorded by writers and passengers that were captivated by the strength of the sailors' chorus. Some work-chants became popular and known by their title, like *Cheer'ly Man*. When recounting his experiences at sea, Herman Melville mentions how this chant was sung out loud by the sailors that hurried on the decks of the ship: "*The decks were all life and commotion; the sailors on the forecastle singing, "Ho, cheerly men!" as they catted the anchor*" (Melville, 1847:151). Also the British author, Rudyard Kipling, seized upon these songs as nostalgic literary forms that echoed the adventures and perils of the seas (Kipling, 1899:18-25).

2. Objectives and Methodology

What was so appealing for those writers that made them feel the almost supernatural power of these simple work songs? On one hand the answer comes from the short span of time these melodies lasted. By the 1870's work songs had reached their zenith as vessels offered people a new world full of adventure and romance (Alden, July 1882). By 1880 the ever-improving naval technology allowed ships to carry goods and passengers from one end of the world to the other, but at the same time the industrial revolution substituted human labour, and consequently, human voices for thunderous machines that silenced men's melodious and rhythmic sounds. Imagination, creativity, freedom and new opportunities were concepts instilled in the minds of the 19th century traveler. The songs meant the prelude of the adventure, of a new world to be discovered and enjoyed, but at the same time their virile tone was a reminiscent of the glory days of pirates, treasures and novel territories to be explored. On the other hand, the fascination of these songs lies in the fact that they are an intrinsic part of the history of the sea, and symbolically of the history of mankind. Symbolism and the use of ancient myths and beliefs is what bind sea songs together, providing the reader an explanation of human pilgrimage on earth, uncovering hidden desires and fears. In the above mentioned sea song, Kipling uses Anglo Saxon verses, full of alliterations that draw images of the eternal sea. His poem is older than time because the musical rhythm of the songs takes us

back to a mythical world that explains life on earth as a circumnavigation that comprises men's anguish and fear of the unknown.

Therefore, our objective is to analyse these songs through the myth-analytical approach called Mythocriticism. It is a discipline that deals with one of the oldest anthropological manifestations of humanity: myth. Defined in the early 1960s by Gilbert Durand (Durand, 1960), the philosopher and his followers have not only demonstrated the potential for diachronic analysis of this subject, but also its value in critically examining contemporary society. It is a methodology characterised as a concrete procedure of artistic analysis based on the theoretical postulates of figurative structuralism. Mythocriticism is, in fact, the study of myths and their reformulation in literature, i.e. it deals with the study of the myths of different cultures and their influence on literature. This methodology aims to highlight how literary texts can adapt an original mythical tale to the narrated universe and infuse it with new approaches.

Mythocriticism studies the story starting from an ideal myth, from all the mythical lessons, and from the variations it has. It is characterised by analysing literary texts in the same way as a myth is analysed, i.e. this method of literary analysis studies the literary object as if it were a myth. We could assert that myth is, in a sense, the model for any story. And the cohesion between the two lies in the symbolic creation through language. Moreover, it can be affirmed that the myth would be in some way the matrix model of all narration, besides the fact that it is structured on the basis of fundamental schemes and archetypes of the psyche of *sapiens sapiens*, that is, our own psyche. Mythical structures are presented, which can be latent or patent. These structures are inherent to the text and therefore need to be analysed and interpreted.

In *Redburn* (1849), Melville talks about the power of the sailor's songs to make the world go round. In this travelogue the refined Wellinborough Redburn, embarks in the *Highlander*, a merchant vessel traveling from New York to Liverpool. This semi-autobiographical novel narrates the fortunes and misfortunes this young man encounters aboard the ship where he expects to be treated according to his social status. But, much to his surprise he does not find any sympathy and has to adapt to coarse and brutal sailors that teach him the rules of the sea:

I soon got used to this singing, for the sailors never touched a rope without it. Sometimes, when no one happened to strike up, and the pulling, whatever it might be, did not seem to be getting forward very well, the mate would always say, 'Come men, can't any of you sing? Sing now and raise the dead'. And then some one of them would begin, and if every man's arms were as much relieved as mine by the song, and he could pull as much better as I did, with such a cheering accompaniment, I am sure the song was well worth the breath expended on it. It is a great thing in a sailor to know how to sing well, for he gets a great name by it from the officers and a good deal of popularity among his shipmates. Some sea captains, before shipping a man, always ask him whether he can sing out at a rope. (Melville, 1849: Ch.9)

2.1. Fictional and real sea accounts

Although we have been using the words "shanty" and "sea song" indistinctively, they do not refer to the same type of chant. The first one is used only when working to accompany the sailor's strenuous labours but, the sea songs are compositions destined to the entertainment of seamen, either in the ports in their recreational times or on board the ship when they took a rest from the hard work of the day. Nevertheless, in the literature of the 18th and 19th centuries, these musical compositions presented mixed characteristics of both types of chants without distinction, for the purpose of the authors was to make life in the sea more real to our senses. Fiction as well as real accounts held these songs as a material treasure that evoked the mythical, mystical, symbolical and authentic presence of the sea. In fiction, one of the most famous adventure books, *The Treasure Island* (1883), includes the popular "Dead Man's Chest" (also known as Fifteen Men On The Dead Man's Chest) originally composed by the author himself, Robert Louis Stevenson. He claims that he found his inspiration for his master piece in Charles Kingsley's work, *At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies* (1871), where Dead Chest Islands were mentioned as part of the British Virgin Islands. Stevenson composed the chorus that appears in his novel and that reads as follows:

Fifteen men on the dead man's chest--

Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!

Drink and the devil had done for the rest--

...Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum! (Stevenson, 1883:1).

This canticle is continuously resounding in the novel from the very beginning when Captain Billy Bones enters the Admiral Benbow Inn, and constitutes the leitmotif around which the plot revolves. It is true that this chorus was expanded in later works during the 19th and 20th centuries, and known and anonymous hands enriched the original version, but Stevenson developed his mythical adventure book from these unassuming four lines that condensed in them the symbolic meaning of the sea.

The sea waters made their impressive appearance in the first mythological explanation of the world, before the creation of islands, and what constitutes a difference from other cosmogonies is that the narratives substantiate the existence of the sea. In all religions water presents a purifying and regenerating function, for the sacred universe is based on the dichotomy between pure and impure, between light and darkness, between cleanness and filthiness. In this duality the water aligns with the light and together they regenerate a mortal life that is withering, fading and smeared with impurities.

In the sea songs the sea represents an imposing background that could be considered as the “environmental character” and neither fictional characters nor real adventurers can escape the seduction of its voice. Its omnipresence is not only material, physical and unavoidable, but intimate, spiritual and hence mythical. Edward John Trelawney, in his memoirs about his voyages as captain admits that his life is monitored by the calling of the sea. His narratives are based on his own experience as volunteer in the Royal Army in 1805. He was a good friend of the Romantic Poets Shelley and Byron and shared with them the ideals of freedom and adventure. He fought with Byron in the Greek War of Independence and travelled around the world on board of different ships. His friend, Byron, modeled the main character of his poem *The Corsair* (1814) on the life and adventures of Trelawney, who wrote several autobiographical and fictional works recounting life at sea. He embellished his stories with fantastic anecdotes and descriptions that came directly from his own imagination. In his memories he tells of the songs the sailors use in their long journeys at sea, and quotes several English chants that inspired him to continue serving in the Navy. He was a sea man, but also a gentleman, and even though his whole existence was devoted to the sea, he abhorred alcohol and the consequences of its abuse. In his book, *Adventures of a Younger Son* (1831) he describes how alcohol makes men self-destructive and violent. In the portrait John Everett Millais made of him and his daughter when he was retired, the painter added a glass of grog as an element intrinsic to sea life, a fact that deeply upset Trelawney. He was a man of sea, but a romantic gentleman whose lips would never taste a drop of the devil’s liquid (Trelawney, 1897).

The sea becomes both in fiction and in real accounts a mythical presence and the symbolic content of the majestic blue waters in the sea songs and shanties reveals the meaning of the sea as a journey all men should undertake. Its transcendence takes man closer to God with an invisible thread that connects the silence of the multitudinous seas with an intimate mystical experience that emerges in the synesthetic songs of the mariners that turn the polychrome of the sea into an acoustic experience. The sea is the synthesis of, otherwise, irreconcilable contradictions as the water is the giver of life but also the agent of death: its strength and weakness, its silence and thunder, its calm and vigour, its isolation and its only communicating passage between different worlds stands for the metaphor of human existence.

The sea is the journey we all commence in our existence on earth. We need the sea to live, and the songs in the voices of the sailors in the sea narratives endow the marine adventure with a familiar authenticity that makes the reader identify with the vibrant account of the sea, as part of the spiritual experience. The songs enable the writer to install an atmosphere oscillating between reality and fiction, sadness and enthusiasm, peace and anxiety, becoming the chaperons of the reader along the journey. Furthermore, the songs offer the reader the possibility of adhering to a certain privileged group, the confraternity of seamen that the narrator has reunited. As a result, the sea songs transform themselves into a means of transport and become part of the artifice to reconstruct a certain journey or to create the illusion of a journey. The role of the songs is to confer more passion, danger, exoticism to a narrative where the audience can taste the salty flavour of the sea, feel the burning sand under the feet and enjoy the peaceful breeze of the sky before a storm.

In the analysis we present of the sea songs, we observe how the chants perform three functions related to a mythical representation of our existence. First, the songs invite us to start the journey; they prepare our soul and our minds to begin a new exciting but unpredictable quest. Second, we will examine how the songs suggest a change of direction or a modification of the itinerary when an obstacle blocks the way. And third, we will see how the ancient melodies encourage us to return introducing us in the symbolic meaning of the voyage.

2.2. The departure or an invitation to depart

The writer makes use of the sea songs to transport the reader with him in his own adventure. They serve both as the preparations of the journey, opening the gates to go on board the ship, and as the introduction of the narrative. Thus, in *Channel Crossing* (2002), the sailors ‘melody anticipates what the crossing of the English Channel is going to be like. The narrator and author, Sebastian, abandoned his press agency job to become a one-man sea voyage. He begins his journey as a journalist who wants to find out more about the last lighthouse keepers lives before they are finally substituted by computers. But, what initially was a mere documentary project becomes a quest for the self, a symbolic journey of life on earth. He is determined to learn everything about the sea, even to pilot and sail, and he sells all his possessions to buy a dinghy to cross the channel. The first thing Sebastian does before embarking is to enter a church, the fishermen’s Mission, where the weather-beaten faces of the mariners are gathered together to pray and sing. “The old seaman sang to piano and tambourine: ‘Will your anchor hold in the storm of life?’ (...) The voices were strong, the tune sad” (Smith, 2001:15). From the beginning of the account,

Sebastian becomes a member of the seamen confraternity sharing with them one of their customary activities. The fishermen in the 21st century, like the sailors of the 19th century narratives, find in the song the strength to continue their hard job. They share their worries, their fears and their deeds through the song. Their voices are as strong as the tempest, as broken as the waves against the bow. They sound hard, passionate and sorrowful. The song tastes of salt and smells of sea and it metamorphoses the reader into one of the sailors, and joins them in their sea adventure, where suffering, fear and pain should be overcome by an overwhelming desire for freedom, adventure and comradeship.

The songs come from virile voices in a sacred timeless context. The tune is sad and it fills the air with a feeling of nostalgia that pervades the narrative. The song is a pause, a brief moment of contention and reflection before the journey. After the calm, Sebastian decides to change his life and set sail. The song has strengthened his soul and he sees clearly that he should start his voyage. With him, the reader embarks on an adventure on board a ship. Simultaneously, the song instills a vague sensation of uneasiness: the calm that anticipates the storm. The reader is capable of imagining the real dangers of the sea: tempests, shipwrecks, reefs, sharks, white whales and maybe...pirates.

The song transforms itself into an initiation rite. It is only known by those who belong to the same confraternity, who share a distinctive trait that characterizes the group and instills in all the members a sense of belonging, such as *Yohoho* is known as the hymn of the pirates, a group whose members share a patch on the eye, a black flag and a wooden leg. The reader, as well as the narrator, is just a neophyte that has to enter the group to learn all about sea life, and all of them become part of the wide confraternity of travelers who enjoy and suffer the crossing until they arrive to their destination. The song at the same time introduces the rules that should be followed to the letter under penalty of expulsion and at the risk of their lives. As well as the shanties of the 19th century vessels, the sea songs in our time mark the beat and are the guidelines that guide sea men and teach them how to survive at sea.

To soften the rigidity and roughness of the sea, music features as the mediator between refinement and harshness, between a cultivated mind and callused hands, between land and sea. In *Master and Commander* (1970) Jack Aubrey, a self-made man raised at sea, runs into the refined physician, Stephen Maturin during a concert at the Governor's mansion (O'Brien, *Master And Commander*, 1970). Their encounter is far from being amicable, as Maturin, the Irish-Catalan doctor, elbowed an enthusiastic Aubrey who was beating the time of the string quartet. Both men defy each other with fiery looks that denoted that each of them stood for a different sort of life: the rough but regulated communal life of seamen and the highly educated but free and independent life of an intellectual. What unites these two apparently antagonistic characters is, precisely, their love for music. That very same night Aubrey is promoted to the rank of Commander and he ends up employing Maturin as surgeon in his brig *Sophie*. From then on both men struck up a great friendship based on their love for music and on their complementary characters. While Maturin is the scientist that uses his mind to discover the world, Aubrey uses his experience as a means to survive. The whole series develops around their adventures at sea, but the beginning of the voyage, the invitation to depart together is marked by the song.

This kind of initiation rite entails solidarity, for the narrator shares the adventures of the seamen, the reader partakes in the adventures of the narrator, and consequently, the reader participates in the adventures of the mariners. Through the song the reader will accompany the narrator along his journey.

2.3. Change of direction or linking space and time

The function of the sea songs in the narrative serves both to introduce the reader to the voyage as well as to plan the trip. What will the itinerary be? Where is the traveler bound for? The sea song will be our cicerone, a guide that gradually reveals the plan without disclosing the whole information at once, just as *Yohoho* narrates the adventures of pirates while Long Silver John constructs a parallel story that takes the narrator and the reader to the places where the corsairs lived their adventure. The journey is, therefore, real and imaginary: we travel together with the narrator, but the songs transport us to other worlds and spaces (Edward, 1923). They are the link of the theory of relativity where two events that occur in different times and places can be connected by the observer in motion. The narrator and the reader move together and go beyond the limits of time and space. In *The Thirteen Gun Salute* (1989), Stephen Maturin wonders what the origin of the song the sailors sing is (O'Brien, 1989). He is fascinated by the force of the lyrics and the simplicity of the refrain: *Heisa heisa, vorsa, vorsa, vou vou*. The chant repeated and echoed by the immensity of the sea takes us to other oceans, to other shores and to ancient times. In *A Guide for the Perplexed: Translations of All Non English Phrases in Patrick O'Brian's Sea Tales* (Brown, 1996: 49), the author explains that the chant comes from an old sea shanty either Old English or Norse. There is a later mid-16th century version, heard from a lowland Scottish seaman repeated from some English sailors that sang a version that could be the translation of the ancient words: *one long pull, more power, young blood, more mud*. However, the words also bear some similarity to colloquial Italian, *issa, issa; forza, forza; su, su*, which means heave, heave; come on, come on; up, up (Danchin, 1928).

The intertextuality the songs present take the travelers to other times and places, inviting the reader to change direction and explore other territories. In *The Star of the Sea* (2003), Joseph O'Connor presents a fine embroidered

story of the Irish famine, the Atlantic crossing of the misery left behind, the despair of a sea voyage on board a coffin-ship and the last spark of hope in a dreamed future in the New World. The story of humankind, a flight from death on land, the search for a Promised Land, but a horror journey at sea where passengers listen to the nostalgic notes of traditional Irish ballads, intoned by an old sea dog that takes their imagination far from the barren Irish land. His song has the power to alleviate their sorrows by flying up the highest peaks of the Alps when listening to *Boney crossing the Alps* (O'Connor, 2003:157) or by transporting them to joyful times of choruses and dance when humming *Miss Bailey's Ghost*. The song, in this case, invites the Irish migrants to change their course and rejoice in the opportunity they have to sooth their souls with music and songs, until they lose sight of reality and become part of the fiction narrated in the song. The real and the fictional amalgamate in this dramatic journey from Ireland to New York transporting the passengers and the readers away from the Atlantic sea, away from desolation into a new world of expectation.

Another example of the transcendence of sea songs in the narration of sea voyages is the adventure story *In Patagonia* (1977) authored by Bruce Chatwin. The reader in this case partakes in the adventures of Charles Amberst Milward, the explorer who ran away to sea and by 1897 had circumnavigated the world 49 times. With his account of the quest of this extraordinary adventurer, Chatwin outlines the story of a trip to Patagonia, an unexplored and unknown geographical area that awakens in the reader the curiosity to find new lands and territories. While at sea, the protagonist, Charles Amberst Milward, recreates the times when ships were steered by authentic sea dogs, whose chants were the real engine that propelled the vessels that proudly and coarsely defied the seas, and took the reader beyond time and space in a mesmerizing voyage where reality and fiction had obliterated their boundaries:

And the ship Ealing out of harbour, and all the men singing in chorus the shanty 'Homeward Bound!' And the captain calling: 'Steward! Grog for all hands!'-the old Geordie skipper, dressed in black and white check trousers and a green frock-coat, with a soft white hat for sea and a hard white hat for port. (Chatwin, 1977:150)

It is precisely the travel in time that urges readers of the 20th and 21st centuries embark in ships that will transport them to ancient times and situations where the soul is enlightened by the rhythm of powerful sea songs that take the traveler to their desired places. In the previous example, the ballad recalled by Sebastian Smith in *Channel Crossing*, originated in the religious hymn "Will you anchor" that shows how deeply rooted our soul is in the powerful waters of the sea as pointed out by Stan Huggill. Huggill (1906-1996) was defined in the new edition of his book as "a singer, raconteur, amateur anthologist, armchair philologist, self-taught artist, and boon companion." He worked enthusiastically at sea, survived two shipwrecks, was a German prisoner of war, and finally retired into a new career as a boatswain and sailing instructor for Outward Bound. He was the heir of the old tradition of sea songs and undertook the task of preserving and reviving the shanty man's art. He collected all the shanties and sea songs he heard during his life at sea and took great care in preserving them for future generations. "Will your anchor", is noted in Huggill's book as original lyrics by Priscilla Owens (1829-1899), and music by James Kirkpatrick (1838-1921) (Huggill, 1961). The metaphor of the anchor aims at holding the wandering soul that travels from end to end of the world paradoxically searching for a haven to rest. The songs revive nostalgic times of adventure and hard work but also instil in the reader an irrepressible desire to cross the oceans in search for fulfillment. No matter how fast technology can take us from place to place, shortening the geographical distance by ever growing speed and comfort, deep inside we long for the enjoyment and relief of long trips where what matters is the journey itself, and how we are able to cope with adversity. There is an incandescent desire to stand up to nature, but also to rejoice with nature.

The songs are the means through which the reader can travel back in time and space enjoying a spiritual and physical freedom that allows the traveler to change places and go from land to sea rejoicing in the endeavour.

3. Conclusions: the return or the mythological symbolism of the journey

The symbolic aspect of the journey is present in the mariners' songs. The lyrics of the melody, to which Sebastian attentively listens in the church before embarking in his life's voyage, contain in themselves all the symbols of human life that represent hope and despair, strife and adventure, fortune and misfortune, mortal and eternal life, anxiety and peace. The sad and melancholic tone resounds in the little seamen's confraternity church creating a metaphorical atmosphere that spins around the topic of the sea:

Will your anchor hold

In the storm of life?

Will your anchor hold

In the straits of fear,

When the breakers roar

And the reef is near,
While the surges rage,
And the wild winds blow,
Shall the angry waves
Then your bark o'erflow?
Will your anchor hold
In the floods of death,
When the waters cold
Chill your latest breath? (Smith, 2001:12)

The song has a religious origin and it is a variation of different stories that illustrate the anguish of men in their combat between fear and faith, as the account of Jonah and the whale or the narrative of the storm that menaces the disciples whose faith falter when they feel astray in the middle of the mighty sea. The narrator, who has entered the church attracted by the sad and melancholic tone of the music, turns into a fisherman caught in the ebb and flows of that sea. The protagonist, Sebastian, identifies the real situation he is experiencing with a fictional scene:

It seemed like something straight from the pages of Moby Dick: the church where Ishmael, on the eve of his own voyage, sees a pulpit in the likeness of the ship's bluff bows, and the Holy Bible rested on a projecting piece of scroll work. (Smith, *ibid.*)

While the readers become Sebastian, Sebastian becomes Ishmael and all the seas and the oceans seem alike, and all men become sailors obsessed with the quest of the absolute and inaccessible. In the end all journeys transform themselves in metaphysical deeds through which men try to control and understand nature, and ultimately, find an explanation to life. This means going back home, trying to reach the inner self and find the solace of the comfortable home. Bruce Chatwin, in *Patagonia*, selects the popular sea song *Homeward Bound* that encapsulates the dream of the mariners: the safe and sound return home. This coming back, eventually, unveils itself as a triumph but also as a defeat. The whole quest after a definite answer about the meaning and purpose of life takes the sailors back home with the despairing realization that they have to embark in a never ending voyage that unavoidably ends up by taking them back home. The feeling of victory for having reached the safe haven after the boat tacked homeward is adumbrated by the painful understanding that men are wandering Jews in search of knowledge and happiness, embarked in an eternal journey where Paradise is out of reach, as Sebastian stated at the end of his quest: "Each dream leads to another, and now that I'd completed one small journey, a second much better had to begin" (Smith: 240).

In conclusion the narrator uses the sea songs as a narrative device to make the reader an active character that becomes a "pleasant travel companion" that shares the fears and excitement of the mariner. The myth of the journey and its symbolic constellation add a new dimension to the journey, as it turns into a parallel destiny that allows the narration to shift between reality and fiction. The songs take the reader to unknown and yearned for destinies, and transform themselves in a narration of their own that is represented and interpreted in a temporal and physical space. But at the same time, they generate in the narrator and in the reader a sense of uneasiness and a need to continue travelling in an everlasting journey.

In the analysis of the songs, we have tried to include narrations of all times and ages, because they are the evidence that proves the timeless essence of the songs. We have heard melodies of the times before the maritime transport revolution, when sailors were the hands and souls of the ships. The sea men were an intrinsic part of the frame and their melodies were the fuel that gave impulse to the vessels. The sea songs continue appearing in all narratives of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, even though sea men use technology to navigate, because hands no longer needed as labour, but souls continue yearning for a safe haven to rest.

While studies on travel writing have mainly concentrated on the type of traveller, or on the lands explored (Youngs, 2006), the present article has examined the role of the shanties as a main literary resource to bound the reader to the narration. Through the symbolic nature of the song, the readers are transformed into the main character of the story, as they feel the strength of the tunes and become aware of the spiritual journey that guides them through life.

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