

“Water as Religion, Water as Captor: The Vinegar Seas in D. M. Cornish’s YA novel, *Foundling*”

Water is immediately problematized in D. M. Cornish’s young adult literature series *Monster Blood Tattoo*. In book one, *Foundling*, as readers are introduced to the monster-filled, Dickensian world of the Half-Continent, they learn of “the vinegar seas.” These open seas have “sharp, sour-wine smells,” have different colors depending on which sea is in question, and have caustic effects on humans to the point of poisoning and death. Rossamünd, the protagonist and titular foundling, has been raised to desire a life as a vinegar-roon—a sailor—as the navy is likely his best chance at usefulness in society. He is raised in a Maritime-based orphanage that indoctrinates its charges with the desire to serve on the open waters. This is practically Rossamünd’s religion, so much so that he is shocked when he is chosen to be a lamplighter: a profession that will require him to be land-locked, away from the only religion he has ever known. As he travels, his contact with the open waters are tantalizingly short and fraught with suspicion, paranoia, and danger. When he finally reaches a harbor to the open sea and views the ships moored there, he is captured and confined inside the hold of a putrid ship. This captivity will be my focus, as it is exceedingly important to the series in a number of ways: not least of all because it takes place below sea-level. The hold contains two other prisoners: a humanoid monster, and a rever-man (a reanimated abomination made from discarded and dead human tissue). Here, Rossamünd finally breaks down and weeps. He is, for all intents and purposes, in hell. He is tantalizingly close to the freedom the open water will bring, but is denied. He is tied unmercifully, tortured by the proximity of the undead cannibal brought to life through unspeakable dark arts. The trilogy’s overarching theme, that humans are often more monstrous than the monsters themselves, begins to ruminate here, facilitated by the caustic vinegar sea slowly leaking into the hold, bilge-water beginning to burn into Rossamünd’s skin.