

natural beauty of Xanadu and follows the course of the river through the kingdom. The speaker focuses on the force and disposition of the water, describing it as a “ceaseless turmoil seething”¹⁶³ and “a mighty fountain.”¹⁶⁴ The swift waters intermittently burst.¹⁶⁵ Ultimately, this river discharges “in tumult to a lifeless ocean.”¹⁶⁶ A wailing woman resides where the river meets the sea, and she prophesizes war. The frequent reference to nature imagery draws attention to humanity’s connection with the natural world, creating themes of delight in nature and nature’s influence on individual development. Gaiman’s story closely parallels Coleridge’s poem. “Down to a Sunless Sea” opens on the image of a river; however, instead of a beautiful and idyllic scene, Gaiman describes the Thames as “a filthy beast...carrying all the filth and scum and waste...”¹⁶⁷ The river deposits the lifeless—the bones of animals—into the ocean. Like the speaker in “Kubla Khan,” the speaker in “Down to a Sunless Sea” focuses on the existence of the river, commenting on water quality and local lore. A woman haunts the water’s edge and shares a horror story that focuses on the connection between humans and nature. She describes the cruelty of the sea and how it indifferently consumes human life.

Gaiman also draws on the German story “The Singing Bone,” which was included in the Brothers Grimm collection of fairytales. In “The Singing Bone,” a king offers his daughter’s hand in marriage as a prize to whoever can kill a boar that has been destroying their town. Two brothers set out to kill the beast. While the older one drinks with his comrades, the younger finds and kills the boar. Wishing to marry the king’s daughter, the older brother kills his younger brother and buries the bones under a bridge. Several years later, a shepherd finds the younger brother’s bones and turns one into a horn. When the shepherd blows into the bone, it relays the story of the younger brother’s murder. Word spreads through the kingdom, and the older brother is drowned as punishment for his crime.

In “Down to a Sunless Sea,” the young son’s bone functions similarly to the younger brother’s in “The Singing Bone.” Despite the attempt to silence the reality of their deaths, the truth comes out, and their bones play a significant role. Though the young son’s bone doesn’t literally sing as the younger brother’s did, it exists as a piece of evidence of what happened to the young boy at sea. Once the bone is in the mother’s possession, she



The English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose famous nautical poem Rime of the Ancient Mariner and other works influenced Gaiman’s story “Down to a Sunless Sea.”

carries it around and compulsively tells the story of what happened to her boy. Furthermore, both killers—the older brother and the ship’s mate—face drowning as a punishment for their crimes. The shipmate who told the mother of her son’s true fate cannot handle the guilt of killing and consuming the boy, so he loads his pockets with rocks and charges into the sea.

Gaiman also alludes to Edgar Allan Poe’s nautical novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. It makes sense that Gaiman, as a fan of Poe, would reference this piece of sea fiction. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* tells the tale of a young stowaway on a whaling vessel. Along the way, Pym experiences several misadventures, including cannibalism. Following a severe storm, Pym and his fellow sailors find themselves stuck aboard a ship with no supplies. The men struggle without food. After failing to sight land or a rescue ship, one man, Richard Parker, suggests they turn to cannibalism using the Custom of the Sea. The Custom of the Sea, an informal “code” that governs