

## A Note on *Kubla Khan* by S.T. Coleridge

"Kubla Khan" is considered to be one of the greatest poems by the English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who said he wrote the strange and hallucinatory poem shortly after waking up from an opium-influenced dream in 1797. In the first part of the poem, the speaker envisions the landscape surrounding the Mongol ruler and Chinese emperor Kubla Khan's summer palace, called "Xanadu," describing it as a place of beauty, pleasure, and violence. The speaker suggests that these qualities are all deeply intertwined and, in the final stanza, announces a desire to build a "pleasure palace" of the speaker's own through song. The poem is one of Coleridge's most famous, and has been interpreted in many different ways. Overall, though, it's possible to think of it as speaking to the creative ambitions of poetry itself—as well as to its limitations.

"Kubla Khan" begins by announcing that it is a poem about "pleasure." It proposes to describe the Mongol leader's summer palace, along with all its luxurious—and, for the speaker, exotic—pleasures. However, the poem soon takes a curious turn. Instead of describing sumptuous decorations or brilliant jewels, it focuses mainly on the river that runs through the grounds of the palace. What's more, instead of describing that

river in pleasant terms, it often focuses on the river's violent energy. Through these descriptions, "Kubla Khan" suggests that pleasure and beauty are neither simple nor uncomplicated. Rather, the poem shows that pleasure and beauty come from the conflict between opposing forces—and that they always contain some degree of violence and ugliness.

The grounds of Kubla Khan's "pleasure-dome" are not quite as pleasant as one might expect. True, they encompass "twice five miles of fertile ground" and "gardens bright with sinuous rills." But the speaker moves quickly beyond these pleasant places, devoting only six rather formulaic lines to describing them. Instead, the focus of the poem—and the speaker's energy—lies in the poem's middle stanza, where the speaker describes what happens to those "sinuous rills" (small streams) when they exit the pleasant gardens.

They become a violent river, which has cut a deep gorge into the earth; its geysers throw up massive boulders. The speaker describes this place in unsettling terms: it is a "savage place," "as holy and enchanted / As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted / by woman wailing for her demon lover!" In contrast to the bright, sunny gardens, the chasm is a haunted, uncivilized place.

As the river continues its journey, the unsettling description intensifies. The river enters unfathomable caves, where its rushing sounds like “ancestral voices prophesying war.” From the bright gardens where it runs in little “rills,” the river quickly becomes a powerful and violent force—both “holy” and terrifying.

Given these descriptions, one might think that Khan’s “pleasure” must lie in the bright gardens at the start of the river’s course. But Khan himself does not seem to take this view. It turns out that his palace is not in the “gardens bright” where the river is peaceful. Instead, in lines 31-34, the reader learns that the “shadow of the dome” of Khan’s palace hangs “midway” over the river, so that Khan can hear “the mingled measure / From the fountain and the caves.” That is, Khan does not want to hear only beauty or only violence: he wants both. And the pleasure he takes from his palace presumably comes from his appreciation of the fraught interaction between the two.

In carefully describing the geography of the grounds of Khan’s pleasure dome (and not saying much about the dome itself), the speaker thus makes a subtle argument about pleasure itself. Pleasure, the poem claims, does not exclude violence. Rather, it comes from the tension between beauty and chaos; it demands—and includes—both.

Though the speaker describes the grounds of Kubla Khan's palace in detail, the speaker also hints that these physical features are not entirely literal. Indeed, the poem's dreamlike, hallucinatory tone seems to invite the reader to treat the speaker's descriptions as an allegory for creativity and the human mind. People may act like they're in control on the surface, the poem seems to say, but dig a bit deeper and human beings aren't all that reasonable. And the tension between these two parts of the mind—the rational and the irrational—is where creativity comes from.

To understand how the poem can work as an extended metaphor, first note how the description of the palace and its grounds focuses on the "sacred river" named "Alph." There is no real river called "Alph"; Coleridge invented it for the poem. But the name sounds a lot like the Greek name for the first letter of the alphabet, *alpha*. This is an important letter in Christian theology: in the Book of Revelation, God describes Himself as the "Alpha and the Omega"—the first and the last, the source of all things and their end. In this sense, the river's name hints that it is symbolically aligned with God's creative power—which is both the *model for* and the *source of* human beings' creativity.

The speaker then describes the river's course in detail. Along the way, the speaker offers a few hints that the river is not just a symbol of human creativity: it also provides a map of the human mind, showing where that

creativity actually comes from. The river begins close to Khan's "gardens," which is important because, at the time the poem was written, gardens often served as symbols of reason: they represent people's power to organize, dominate, and control nature. In this sense, the river begins with rationality—the reasonable parts of the human mind. The river ends, however, in icy caverns, "measureless to man," where "ancestral voices" prophecy "war." This seems like an image of the subconscious—which is violent, uncontrollable, and unknowable to the rational mind.

Between the two elements erupts a "mighty fountain," which could serve as an image of the meeting point between the rational and the irrational parts of the human mind. The results of their meeting are spectacular—and strikingly human. In describing the fountain, the speaker personifies the river, making its bursts sound like "fast thick pants"—the heavy breaths of an exhausted or passionate person. Furthermore, the fountain throws shards of rock into the air, which the speaker describes as "dancing." The fountain doesn't just randomly throw rocks into the air, but rather produces artful, choreographed motion. Together, this all suggests that the speaker sees the mind as something that is divided, with its two halves in tension—and suggests that creativity emerges directly from this tension.

“Kubla Khan” can be read as an extended metaphor or allegory about the powers of human creativity, with the river that runs through the grounds of Khan’s palace serving as a map of the human psyche and its creative powers. However, the speaker remains skeptical about his own capacity to *realize* that creative potential. Though the speaker wants to build a pleasure-dome of his own, he only fantasizes about doing so. Though “Kubla Khan” celebrates the power of human creativity, it also recognizes that such creativity is limited, fragile, and quickly lost.

The speaker begins the description of Khan’s palace by noting that it is a protected space. The grounds of the palace are “girdled round” with “walls and towers.” If Khan’s palace and its grounds provide a map to human creativity, they also suggest that such creativity is precious and difficult to sustain. From the start, then, the poem hints that creativity is something fragile.

After the speaker’s elaborate description of Khan’s palace, he returns to this initial implicit concern with the fragility of creativity. In a sudden break at the start of stanza 3, the speaker stops talking about Khan’s palace altogether, and discusses instead a song that he once heard from an “Abyssinian maid.” The speaker complains that he cannot “revive” the maid’s “symphony and song”; if he could, he “would build that dome in

air.” In other words, the speaker would recreate Khan’s palace here and now, as a kind of floating city that hovers above the earth.

These lines are marked by a deep sense of loss: the speaker knows that he is capable of constructing Khan’s palace, but he has lost the inspiration to do so. The speaker cannot recreate or rehear the “Abyssinian maid’s song,” which would inspire the “music loud and long” necessary to build the palace in the air. These lines contain the poem’s strongest hint that the reader should regard Khan’s palace as an extended metaphor or allegory, rather than a strictly physical place. The speaker’s wish makes it clear that the palace is not bound to a specific location or time period, but can rather be rebuilt anytime and anywhere, as long as sufficient inspiration exists.

In this sense, the poem suggests that Khan’s palace is an image of the fullest achievement of human creativity. But paradoxically, it is just this achievement that eludes the speaker. Though the speaker has experienced the inspiration necessary to create the palace (as the very existence of this poem proves), his apparent despair also indicates that inspiration itself—though priceless—is fragile and fleeting.

The speaker describes the “stately pleasure-dome” built in Xanadu according to the decree of Kubla Khan, in the place where Alph, the sacred river, ran “through caverns measureless to man / Down to a

sunless sea.” Walls and towers were raised around “twice five miles of fertile ground,” filled with beautiful gardens and forests. A “deep romantic chasm” slanted down a green hill, occasionally spewing forth a violent and powerful burst of water, so great that it flung boulders up with it “like rebounding hail.” The river ran five miles through the woods, finally sinking “in tumult to a lifeless ocean.” Amid that tumult, in the place “as holy and enchanted / As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing to her demon-lover,” Kubla heard “ancestral voices” bringing prophecies of war. The pleasure-dome’s shadow floated on the waves, where the mingled sounds of the fountain and the caves could be heard. “It was a miracle of rare device,” the speaker says, “A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!”

The speaker says that he once saw a “damsel with a dulcimer,” an Abyssinian maid who played her dulcimer and sang “of Mount Abora.” He says that if he could revive “her symphony and song” within him, he would rebuild the pleasure-dome out of music, and all who heard him would cry “Beware!” of “His flashing eyes, his floating hair!” The hearers would circle him thrice and close their eyes with “holy dread,” knowing that he had tasted honeydew, “and drunk the milk of Paradise.”

The chant-like, musical incantations of “Kubla Khan” result from Coleridge’s masterful use of iambic tetrameter and alternating rhyme



schemes. The first stanza is written in tetrameter with a rhyme scheme of ABAABCCDEDE, alternating between staggered rhymes and couplets. The second stanza expands into tetrameter and follows roughly the same rhyming pattern, also expanded— ABAABCCDDFFGGHIIHJJ. The third stanza tightens into tetrameter and rhymes ABABCC. The fourth stanza continues the tetrameter of the third and rhymes ABCCBDEDEFGFFFGHHG.

Along with “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” “Kubla Khan” is one of Coleridge’s most famous and enduring poems. The story of its composition is also one of the most famous in the history of English poetry. As the poet explains in the short preface to this poem, he had fallen asleep after taking “an anodyne” prescribed “in consequence of a slight disposition” (this is a euphemism for opium, to which Coleridge was known to be addicted). Before falling asleep, he had been reading a story in which Kubla Khan commanded the building of a new palace; Coleridge claims that while he slept, he had a fantastic vision and composed simultaneously—while sleeping—some two or three hundred lines of poetry, “if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or conscious effort.”

Waking after about three hours, the poet seized a pen and began writing furiously; however, after copying down the first three stanzas of his dreamt poem—the first three stanzas of the current poem as we know it—he was interrupted by a “person on business from Porlock,” who detained him for an hour. After this interruption, he was unable to recall the rest of the vision or the poetry he had composed in his opium dream. It is thought that the final stanza of the poem, thematizing the idea of the lost vision through the figure of the “damsel with a dulcimer” and the milk of Paradise, was written post-interruption. The mysterious person from Porlock is one of the most notorious and enigmatic figures in Coleridge’s biography; no one knows who he was or why he disturbed the poet or what he wanted or, indeed, whether any of Coleridge’s story is actually true. But the person from Porlock has become a metaphor for the malicious interruptions the world throws in the way of inspiration and genius, and “Kubla Khan,” strange and ambiguous as it is, has become what is perhaps the definitive statement on the obstruction and thwarting of the visionary genius.

Regrettably, the story of the poem’s composition, while thematically rich in and of itself, often overshadows the poem proper, which is one of Coleridge’s most haunting and beautiful. The first three stanzas are products of pure imagination: The pleasure-dome of Kubla Khan is not a useful metaphor for anything in particular (though in the context of the

poem's history, it becomes a metaphor for the unbuilt monument of imagination); however, it is a fantastically prodigious descriptive act. The poem becomes especially evocative when, after the second stanza, the meter suddenly tightens; the resulting lines are terse and solid, almost beating out the sound of the war drums ("The shadow of the dome of pleasure / Floated midway on the waves...").

The fourth stanza states the theme of the poem as a whole (though "Kubla Khan" is almost impossible to consider as a unified whole, as its parts are so sharply divided). The speaker says that he once had a vision of the damsel singing of Mount Abora; this vision becomes a metaphor for Coleridge's vision of the 300-hundred-line masterpiece he never completed. The speaker insists that if he could only "revive" within him "her symphony and song," he would recreate the pleasure-dome out of music and words, and take on the persona of the magician or visionary. His hearers would recognize the dangerous power of the vision, which would manifest itself in his "flashing eyes" and "floating hair." But, awestruck, they would nonetheless dutifully take part in the ritual, recognizing that "he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise."