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# Exploring the Main Theme of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Poem "Kubla Khan" and Its "Preface"

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That with Music loud and long  
I would build that Dome in Air,  
That sunny Dome! Those Caves of Ice!  
And all, who heard, should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing Eyes! his floating Hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your Eyes in holy Dread:  
For He on Honey-dew hath fed  
And drunk the Milk of Paradise. \_\_\_\_\_

This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed, in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of opium, taken to check a dysentery, at a Farm House between Porlock & Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church, in the fall of the year 1797. \_\_\_\_\_  
S.T. Coleridge

Or chaffy grain beneath the Thresher's Flail.  
And mid these dancing Rocks at once & ever  
It flung up momentarily the sacred River:  
Five miles meandering with a mazy Motion  
Thro' Wood and Dale the sacred River ran,  
Then reach'd the Caverns measureless to Man  
And sank in Tumult to a Lifeless Ocean;  
And mid this Tumult Kubla heard from far  
Ancestral Voices prophesying War.  
The Shadow of the Dome of Pleasure  
Floated midway on the Wave  
Where was heard the mingled Measure  
From the Fountain and the Cave.  
It was a miracle of rare Device,  
A sunny Pleasure-Dome with Caves of Ice!  
A Damsel with a Dulcimer  
In a Vision once I saw:  
It was an Abyssinian Maid,  
And on her Dulcimer she play'd  
Singing of Mount Amara.  
Could I revive within me  
Her Symphony & Song,  
To such a deep Delight 'twould win me;

## Appendix 2:

### **The Crewe Manuscript of Kubla Khan:**

In Xannadu did Cubla Khan

A stately Pleasure-Dome decree;

Where Alph, the sacred River, ran

Thro' Caverns measureless to Man

Down to a sunless Sea.

So twice six miles of fertile ground

With Walls and Towers were compass'd round:

And here were Gardens bright with sinuous Rills

Where blossom'd many an incense-bearing Tree,

And here were Forests ancient as the Hills

Enfolding sunny spots of Greenery.

But o! that deep romantic Chasm, that slanted

Down a green Hill athwart a cedarn Cover,

A savage Place, as holy and enchanted

As e'er beneath a waning Moon was haunted

By Woman wailing for her Daemon Lover:

From forth this chasm with hideous Turmoil seething,

As if this Earth in fast thick Pants were breathing,

A mighty Fountain momentarily was forc'd,

Amid whose swift half-intermitted Burst

Huge Fragments vaulted like rebounding Hail,

## Appendix 1:

### From Purchas, Pilgrimage (1614):

The entire paragraph that Coleridge quotes from in his 1816 "Preface" to "Kubla Khan," which appeared in **Christabel, Kubla Khan, and the Pains of Sleep** (London, 1816).

In **Xanadu** did Cublai Can build a stately Pallace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddows, pleasant Springs, delightful Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure, which may be removed from place to place. Here he doth abide in the months of June, July, and August, on the eighth and twentieth day whereof, he departeth thence to another place to do sacrifice in this manner: He hath A herd or Drove of Horses and Mares, about ten thousand, as white as snow; of the milke whereof none may taste, except he be of the blood of **Cingis Can**. Yea, the Tartars do these beasts great reverence, nor dare any cross their way, or go before them. According to the directions of his Astrologers or Magicians, he on the eight and and twentieth day of August aforesaid, spendeth and poureth forth with his own hands the milke of these Mares in the aire, and on the earth, to give drink to the spirits and Idols which they worship, that they may preserve the men, women, beasts, birds, corne, and other things growing on the earth.

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### *Footnote:*

1. Hereafter, this paper includes in parentheses the page or page and line number to refer to what is quoted from E.H. Coleridge (ed.). (1967). Coleridge: Poetical Work. London: Oxford University Press.
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wholeness and, thus, he is relieved from the tension within. However, the man in the “Preface” is symbolic and reflects the obstacles facing creators.

“Kubla Khan,” as a unique poem, has drawn numerous critics to comment on and praise Coleridge’s artistic achievement. On the other hand, some do not believe in the poem’s great merits and are puzzled about its main theme. However, studying the symbolic implications of the images in the poem reveals that it is a poem full of echoes against echoes and a reflection of them. Each part reflects the other, and the poem as a whole reflects both itself and its creator, who is capable of creating this organic, artistic form in which the two parts of the poem are merged together.

There is an ascendancy in the poem in presenting creators who are capable of fulfilling their ideals till they reaches the highest point, when the poet is illuminated at the end of “Kubla Khan” and is triumphant because he has discovered himself and is “anchored to a self identical to itself” (MacCannell, 1986, p. 63). “Kubla Khan” represents a holy struggle by its creator to produce a poem of pure imagination that is given a concrete shape through a series of images that are loaded with symbols. The poet casts a spell upon his readers, who accept his world with all its magic and supernatural elements. The holy madness and divine inspiration at the end of the poem manifest the poet’s own feelings toward poetic creativity.

*Are of imagination all compact:  
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And, as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shape, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name. (Act 5, Scene 1, ll. 8, 12-17)*

The "flashing eyes" and "floating hair" show that a creative wind is blowing within the poet, although the turmoil within the poet or the poetic frenzy apparently disturbs the serenity and calm. Ironically, they lead to the poet's mental peace and his fulfillment in the domain of creativity. The highly abstract description at the end of "Kubla Khan" becomes tangible by the successful employment of a host of creative imagery. It seems obvious that the poet could materialize his desire only when he was able to create a paradise of his own. The poet's frenzy, although an explicit prophetic vision of himself, is universalized by Coleridge because this is associated with man's unconscious creative activity. This is a triumph of man's originality over the mechanical laws of the world. House (1953) states that the poet at the end "deserves the ritual dread" because he can create a paradise (p. 122).

A conditional clause on line forty-two seems to be essential for a better understanding of the poem: "Could I revive within me." The answer is "yes" because the poet eventually revives and accomplishes the poem "Kubla Khan." Through the poet's frenzy, his hope is fulfilled, and in that fulfillment lies the greatness of the poem.

## **Conclusion:**

The "Preface" is a profound fragment in Coleridge's poetic creativity and a symbolic prelude with ironic touches that reflects a marvelous poem, "Kubla Khan." The main theme of both, the poem and its "Preface," is poetic creativity, which is reached when the poet is in a Coleridgean "profound sleep," i.e. in poetic joy. This enabled the poet to recollect his fragments in a unified

literally, and hence cannot be termed a retreat to solitude, as Robert Graves believes it to be (Schneider, 1970, p. 239). Nothing in the poem suggests that the poet is fleeing from real life; on the contrary, the poem has a forward-flowing movement that is quite compatible with the symbols of creativity used in the poem. When Coleridge composed the poem, even in his personal life, he was happy with his family and was enjoying his growing friendship with Wordsworth.

A vital connection exists between the end of “Kubla Khan” and what Coleridge shows as the two levels of imagination: the secondary imagination is represented by the poet who is inside the circles, whereas the primary imagination is represented by the onlookers who remain outside the circles. ***The poet’s frenzy is not to be confused with the ordinary madness which Coleridge (1936) divided into four categories:***

1. Hypochondriasis; or, [when] the man is out of his senses.
2. Derangement of the understanding; or, [when] the man is out of his wits.
3. [When there is a] loss of reason.
4. Frenzy; or [when there is a] derangement of the sensations.

(Lectures on Shakespeare, Etc, p. 248)

It seems that Coleridge was influenced by both Plato’s account of the frenzied poet in his *Ion*, and that of Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Plato (1984) describes the poet’s frenzy:

***They [Poets] are inspired and possessed when they utter all these beautiful poems, and so are the good lyric poets; these are not in their right mind when they make their beautiful songs, ... As soon as they mount on their harmony and rhythm, they become frantic and possessed; just as Bacchant women, possessed and out of their senses, draw milk and honey out of the rivers, ... The poets ... get their honey-songs from honey-fountains of the Muses, ... the poet is an airy thing, a winged and a holy thing; and he cannot make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his senses and no mind is left in him. (p. 18)***

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare (1951) describes the poet, along with the lunatic and the lover:

fulfillment after seeing her in a vision. This means that his creativity is at work and a refined higher creative self is replacing a familiar self. The poet is coveting the expressive powers of the artist, the Abyssinian Maid's musical melody, and he is successful. Readers are thus able to see the poet's creation and miracles which are embodied and solidified in "Kubla Khan."

The final lines in "Kubla Khan" have the quality of a charm that is realized in front of the reader's eyes. This has been accomplished through the image of the bard whose song is so astonishingly vivid that the watchers fear he is a sorcerer. In addition, the poet's preternatural physical appearance shows a spiritual turmoil. This is felt from the poet's "flashing eyes," which represent his poetic ability to express himself, and his "floating hair," which symbolizes his freedom, at least from known poetry conventions. His body is in an "involuntary physical response, and is hence not far from the sense of magic, or physically compelling power" (Frye, 1990, p. 278). People recognize the poet's highly creative power, and they cry out "Beware! Beware!" They do this out of awe because this man's power extends beyond that of an ordinary man's understanding. The entire scene lends a certain strangeness to the poet's enterprise. The poet's frenzy is a part of his strangeness, but it is holy. Although the poet is feeding on honey dew and drinking the milk of paradise, that is, he has stepped into the eternal, he also feels agony and great restlessness because he is in an ecstatic state. This is similar to a mother's delivery of her child. As a creator, the poet is in his frenzy, and in this state, the secondary imagination is active and reaches its highest point.

The poet's specialty is enhanced by his spontaneity and his paradisaic irresistible drink and food, which reflect his innate motivation to compose his lines and his successful poetic communion. The circles drawn around the poet symbolize his need to limit his spontaneity and the flux of emotion. The three circles around the poet mirror the sacred river and the dome, which are mentioned thrice. The weaving of circles in the then common superstition and folklore were associated with magical feats and rituals. In "Kubla Khan," the magic is the magic of creation, and the circles are there to protect the inspired poetic creative self from the intrusions of familiarity from within and without. The poet is alienated from others by the circles, just as Kubla Khan's garden is protected from the rest of the world. Such a self is able to create the "pleasure-dome" and the garden of Babylon.

The poet's isolation at the end of "Kubla Khan" should not be interpreted

Even for Yarlott (1967), the “Abyssinian Maid” is the cornerstone of understanding “Kubla Khan.” He considers her to be a “symbol of woman inspirer” who possesses one or more qualities admired by Coleridge (p. 147). Yarlott thinks Sara Hutchinson and Mary Evans were the most complete Abyssinian Maids among a host of Coleridge’s maids, including Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Morgan, and Charlotte Bent, in addition to Coleridge’s wife Sara Fricker (pp. 32, 35). Yarlott believes that the word “Maid” is more important than the word “Abyssinian” because it expresses a symbol in Coleridge’s mind that implies “the ‘vital air’ of inspiration” (p. 147). Coleridge probably borrowed the word “Abyssinian” from his readings of travel books. Perhaps the word is even associated with the beauty and poetic inspiration in his mind, as is the case of the woman inspirer in Coleridge’s poem “An Effusion at Evening:”

*Aid, lovely Sorc’ress! aid the Poet’s dream,  
With faery wand O bid my Love arise,  
The dewy brilliance dancing in her Eyes;  
As erst she woke with soul-entrancing Mien  
The thrill of Joy extatic yet serene. (p. 49, ll. 14-18)*

It is possible that Coleridge universalizes the equation of his unattainable beloveds in the character of the “Abyssinian Maid” whose music is associated with the dome because both are beautiful creations. Her music is associated with poetry because the poet says that he would build—if he could capture her music—a “dome in air,” which most likely refers to poetry. The Abyssinian Maid sings and plays music with her dulcimer of Mount Abora. The word “dulcimer” has been used because it is a primitive stringed instrument that brings people close to nature and the poet’s instinctive powers. The Abyssinian Maid produces her symphony of Mount Abora, which is a romantic landscape. The mountain, which people look at with awe, has also been used by Coleridge archetypally as a symbol of freedom. This is explicit in Coleridge’s “Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni” (pp. 376-80). “Mount Abora” also adds a touch of spirituality to the poem.

The Abyssinian’s music is “an inexpressible music, sounds which cannot be presented in words” (Bennett, 1999, p. 136). The poet tries to revive within him the Abyssinian Maid’s symphony in an attempt to accomplish a spiritual

together both the sun and its warmth with the caves and their coldness in a unique unity, the dome is privileged to be "a miracle of rare device." That miracle can be an accomplishment of the highest poetic inspiration, bringing together the opposites of possibility, and fusing the demarcating lines between art and life. The apparent contradictions of "caves of ice" and "pleasure dome" point to the poet's ability to hold opposing aspects of human existence in balance in a search for an organic unity of life. The dome with its caves of ice represents the triumph of the work of art over the destructive forces threatening it. A genius like the frenzied man in "Kubla Khan" is able to construct and immortalize the garden and the dome.

It is quite reasonable and archetypal to associate the "caves of ice" with dead familiarity, which is the opposite of the warm creativity represented by the shining dome. In our minds, caves are associated with darkness, fear, and a threat of the unknown. The caves of ice inside the dome are like a worm inside a flower. House (1953) is against the idea of associating the "caves of ice" with darkness or with "caverns measureless to man." For him, the "caves of ice" are not associated with "terror or torment or death" but with the sacred river (pp. 121-122). Unfortunately, House (1953) provides no evidence to support his interpretation. Nothing in Coleridge's poetry suggests that the caves are connected with pleasantness and sacredness, as House claims. House's ideas seem to be deeply influenced by those of Lowes. It is possible that House has a different understanding of Lowes who tries to show how the images of the ice and caves are unconsciously drawn into the poem:

*The Image of Ice, accordingly, in the cave in the mountains of Cashmere, sank below the threshold as an atomes crochu. And its particular "hook of the memory"--that potentiality of junction which it carried with it--was the sacred river. And through their association with the sacred river the caves of ice were drawn into the dream. (p. 348)*

The "Abyssinian Maid" transcends the real world and reaches the world of creativity. This is the world of the "demon lover" which the "woman wailing" could not reach, and she is thus able to express the inexpressible through her symphony. She becomes aware of this power through her intuitive experience. With her dulcimer, she produces a surpassing symphony and becomes a symbol of creativity. Belonging to a world above the familiar world, she has similarity with both the frenzied man at the end of the poem and Kubla Khan at the beginning because all are creators in their own right.

foresee that his creativity may wither away.

The dome is arguably the most beautiful scenery in the landscape in “Kubla Khan” and through which the poet’s creation is mysteriously linked with creations in nature. The word “dome” is mentioned three times and plays an important role in “Kubla Khan.” In line 2, the dome is described as “a stately pleasure-dome,” in line 31 as “the dome of pleasure,” and in line 36 as “a sunny pleasure-dome.” It is also interesting to note that the word “pleasure” is used in all three descriptions. This reflects the poet’s joy in his arrangement of the materials at his disposal to create an organic harmonious whole, which is exactly in line with that of nature.

The words “dome” and “pleasure” are well linked. The dome, as a piece of art work, is the result of an inner “pleasure” that the poet realizes through his inner experience. Domes are often associated with an ideal that provides inspiration to people. This inspiration is not a self-induced hallucination, but rather a translation of the real and tangible images accompanying it. Graves, therefore, does not appear correct when he says: “The pleasure-dome is the bower into which Coleridge retired by means of opium” (Schneider, 1970, p. 239). The reason is that in the poem, there is no hint of Coleridge taking any shelter. Instead, radiations and reflections come from the “dome of pleasure” to the floating hair.

Both the “sacred river” and “pleasure-dome” meet in the waves of the river; the dome is reflected in the water of the river. It is exactly what the poet does when he reflects nature in a fine artistic picture. The fineness of creation is like that of a shadow of the dome which can easily be disturbed. The visitor from Porlock in the “Preface” may be assumed to cause this possible disturbance. Poetic reflection, in Fraser’s (1981) opinion, is born of a sort of union of “inspiration” and “the element of contrivance,” both of which are necessary to give birth to poetry (p. 208). At this point, the poem, that is to say, when “The shadow of the dome of pleasure / Floated midway on the waves,” presents the diverse elements reconciled to bring the work of art into existence. The dome combines, in House’s (1953) opinion, both “pleasure and sacredness” (p. 119). It is sacred because its shadow is mingled with the sacred river. Moreover, domes, alters, and temples are associated with religious sacredness.

The dome is “a miracle of rare device” symbolizing the eternal, while the “caves of ice,” which eventually melt, represent the temporal. By bringing

The whole creation in "Kubla Khan," which includes the garden with its romantic chasm, is under the light of the moon. This alludes to the connection between the light of the moon in Coleridge's poetry and poetic creativity. This light of the moon varies, and consequently, the degree of creativity. Thus, the "waning moon" symbolizes the decline in the poet's ability to create. Yarlott (1967) proposes that the "waning moon" is "a Coleridgean emblem for declining powers of imagination" (p. 141). Although the moon is waning, its presence implies that the poet is hopeful of further creation, because the moon not only wanes, it also gradually develops through several phases into a full moon. This symbolizes the natural and endless possibility in the poet and the full blooming of his creativity which will come soon because the poet is endowed with a natural fountain of creativity.

The poet's task to create is similar to that of the woman wailing who tries to create a new world of fantasies. The "woman wailing" tries desperately to find her demon lover. She struggles to approach the inapproachable and reflects the poet in "Kubla Khan" who succeeds in accomplishing his creative mission.

The hills of Kubla Khan's garden are covered with cedar trees that are always green and beautiful and characterized by their sweet smell. These well-known characteristics of cedar trees are important for Coleridge, but what is more important is that cedar trees are associated with sacredness. In the Bible, Solomon commanded to hew for him "cedar trees from Lebanon," and Hiram, King of Tyre, helped him build the temple of God. Hiram told Solomon that "I will do all thy [Solomon's] desire concerning timber of cedar," and "so Hiram gave Solomon cedar trees ... according to his desire" (Kings, Ch. 15, V. 1, 6, 8, 10). The cedar tree in "Kubla Khan" may be considered a symbol of beauty, sacredness, and freshness, and thus can be linked with artistic creativity.

The "dome of pleasure" evokes memories of splendid domed cities like Jerusalem, which also symbolizes, for the West, ideas of the quest for perfection and transcendence. In "Kubla Khan," the dome also symbolizes the triumph of inspiration and the poet's creation. The pleasure dome at the centre of the poem brings to mind other tangible symbols like Keats' (1996) "Grecian Urn" (pp. 177-178). Furthermore, the "caves of ice" within the dome are similar to the "cold pastoral" on the Grecian urn. These caves may indicate a mysterious and vague feeling in Coleridge, and he could possibly

ocean is supposed to be full of life?

The sacred river flows through “caverns measureless to man” before it flows to “a sunless sea.” They are measureless because they lie deep within the poet’s subconscious from where creativity springs. These caves, Holmes (1989) suggests, come to Coleridge’s poetry from “The little sandstone cave of his childhood” (p. 51). Others such as Knight (1968, p. 92) and Baker (1957, p. 209) seem to err when they associate “caverns measureless to man” with physical death. It could be asked how the river of life can cross the place of death, the caverns, and at the same time remain representative of life, while the caverns remain the representative of death.

The profound powers of creation both in the universe and in the poet, which spread their roots deep into the poet’s psyche, are symbolized by the forests that are “ancient as the hills.” The place where the forests and the chasm are located is described with a kind of awe as a “savage place, as holy and enchanted.” This reflects the mysterious and wild nature of creation. In this way, the poet’s creativity and what is related with it may be understood as the qualities of special minds with special madness, which are simultaneously holy.

The place with a “deep romantic chasm” alludes to a number of chasms in the poem. These are first, between Kubla Khan’s garden, which is surrounded by walls and towers and the outside world. The second is between the “woman wailing” and her “demon lover.” The third chasm is between the “waning moon,” which symbolizes the poet’s dwindling creative power, and the glorious creation of the “savage” but holy paradise-like garden. The fourth is between the “Abyssinian Maid” with her unattainable music, and the poet who tries to revive it within him. The fifth is between the frenzied man and his surroundings with three magical circles. The sixth chasm is between the world of creativity represented by the poem itself, and the familiar world represented in the poem by the lifeless ocean and the sunless sea. It is logical from the atmosphere of the poem that the poet’s task is to overcome these chasms and connect the two different worlds. It is a part of the poet’s struggle to unite the worlds, which seem to be completely separated, and to attain what seems unattainable. Part of Coleridge’s special magical skill is his ability to overcome the barriers and chasms that exist between the natural and the supernatural. Therefore, the “distinctions of the real and unreal lose their sharpness” in Coleridge’s poetry (Lowes, 1955, p. 199).

poetry" (p. 130). The best way to know Coleridge's precision and effectiveness in using such a name is to apply his own principle: to know the effectiveness of any word used in poetry is to know it by virtue of "its untranslatableness in words of the same language without injury to the meaning" (*Biographia*, Vol. 2, p. 115).

The sacred river ends in "a lifeless ocean" which is outside the walls that surround Kubla Khan's garden. The "lifeless ocean" is where the sacred river ends. Symbolically, this ocean represents the poet's waning inspiration. It is lifeless because it is the ocean of familiarity which is cold, colorless, silent, and dead compared with the warm, colorful, and lively act of creation. Whatever exists inside the enclosure is indicative of a lively creation, and what exists outside of it belongs to the world of lifeless familiarity. Whenever the poet is with his creation and its Eden-like beauty, he is in an ecstatic state; however, whenever the poet is outside his Eden, he is symbolically no longer a lively person. He is doomed like Adam to live as an ordinary, mortal human being after the Fall. The poet's absence of inspiration for creation amounts to his death.

There is a contrast between the symbols of creativity such as the fountain, and symbols of the death of creativity such as the lifeless ocean. Familiarity and the permanence of creativity are antithetical. As a poet, Coleridge does not believe in the existence of death because he feels there is life everywhere from which a creative artist can always draw his material. Coleridge writes: "Life seems to me then a universal spirit, that neither has, nor can have, an opposite ... where is there room for Death?" (Griggs, 1956, Vol. 2, p. 916). Coleridge also writes in his notebook: "No one can leap over his shadow, poets leap over Death" (Sastri, 1971, p. 106). Nothing can be termed death in the domain of creativity because when there is imagination, there is life. That is why the "lifeless ocean" is out of the boundaries of the garden of creation in "Kubla Khan." Even thoughts, for Coleridge, are not perishable. When he narrates the story of the frenzied lady in *Biographia Literaria*, he concludes that "All thoughts are in themselves imperishable" (Vol. 1, p. 79). This shows that he firmly believes in the permanence of any form of creativity.

However, for House (1953), the sacred river is an ordinary river with no symbolic implication. He states that it "is not an allegorical river" (p. 121). House's opinion can be thus questioned: If the river was not used allegorically and was an ordinary river, why does it end in a lifeless ocean even though the

elements of creativity in the process. The fountain is imagined as “the heart of all things,” and “the core of the creative process in nature was best imagined as a fountain” (Coleridge’s *Poetic Intelligence*, pp. 32-33).

The “flail” is a primitive tool used in the past to separate the grains from the chaff. Man in those days was very close to nature, and continually in touch with it. By using the names of primitive instruments, Coleridge hints at the natural use of this appliance, and this foreshadows the romantics’ faith in nature and that man learns from it, mainly instinctively. Thus, the vital connection between the poet and nature is emphasized.

A connection exists between the poet’s frenzy at the end and Kubla Khan’s garden at the beginning with its river and fountain. This connection is noticed by Hazlitt who is one of the first English critics to associate the river and its snake-like motion with creativity: “The principle of the imagination resembles the emblem of the serpent, by which the ancient typified wisdom and the universe, with undulating folds, for ever varying and for ever flowing into itself,—circular, and without beginning or end” (Beer, 1977, Coleridge’s *Poetic Intelligence*, p. 270). The majority of the romantic poets such as Shelley and Wordsworth use the river archetypally as a giver of life. On the other hand, Coleridge’s use of the river as a symbol of poetic creativity is in line with the atmosphere of “Kubla Khan.” However, readers should take care in differentiating between the creative life and ordinary, everyday life. Compared with the creative imagination associated with infinite possibility, the familiar life is monotonous and associated with barrenness. The sacred river connects and unites both the worlds of the natural and the supernatural. The river flows from the fountain with a mysterious force through Kubla Khan’s garden with its “sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice” and the haunted chasm and flows into and ends up in “a lifeless ocean.” These are images from the world of both the known and the knowable on one hand, and the unknown and incomprehensible on the other. The sacred river is an emblem of synthesis that unites the diverse elements in “Kubla Khan” into a harmonious whole.

The sacred river is deliberately named “Alph” to give it a touch of mystery and vagueness because the name belongs to the mythological world. Watson (1970) says that Coleridge’s “Alph” is associated with “the Alpheus of Milton’s ‘Lycidas’, where it is associated with the Sicillian Muse of pastoral

*It flung up momentarily the sacred river.*

*Five miles meandering with a mazy motion*

*Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,*

*Then reached the caverns measureless to man,*

*And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean. (p. 297, ll. 17-28)*

The fountain spontaneously erupts. Coleridge associates the fountain with poetic joy. He says: "Joy is of which the Heart is full as of a deep and quiet fountain overflowing insensibly, or the gladness of Joy, when the fountain overflows ebullient" (Coburn, 1951, p. 61). The fountain is the cause of all the beauty and life in the garden. It also reflects the spontaneity of the poet who has no option but to create when he is charged with emotion. Like the fountain, the poet is compelled by an inner instinct to sing his song. In addition, both the poet and fountain have some vital similarities. One of them is the "turmoil" of the fountain and its "fast thick pants" which is similar to the poet's throes when he is creating. The poet is in agony when giving birth to his creation. At the same time, the quick motion of the fountain alludes to the poet's optimism because such an image represents his intense involvement with his subject, and the urgency with which he continues to record his epiphanic revelations. This intensity and urgency indicate that the poet is very near to fulfilling his ambitions. It is an indirect hint that Coleridge's account in the "Preface" to "Kubla Khan," to the effect that he was disturbed by a visitor during his composition of the poem, cannot be taken literally to be true.

Another characteristic of the fountain is its stream forever gushing forth, which is associated with immortality and eternity. The romantics generally consider the fountain as a symbol of "uncontrolled bounding energy" (Hough, 1963, p. 64). With its continuous panting, the fountain also "signifies the act of creativity" (Yarlott, 1967, p. 142). Beer (1977) claims that the use of the fountain as a symbol of creativity is neither solely romantic, nor a Coleridgean invention; rather, it has a long history of being used in that sense. Fountains have been used in literature as a symbol of creation because they represent the active forces in nature. Coleridge was deeply influenced by both Plotinus and Boehme who used the fountain as a symbol of the infinite source embodied in man and nature, and as a symbol of the imaginative creation that unites the

2008). This is in line with Coleridge's theory about imagination in which he describes "reason" as an "integral spirit of the regenerated man" (Nabholtz, 1974, p. 166). Reason is vital because the conscious mind must also be at work during creativity. However, Beer (1977) connects the imagery used to describe the garden with the sacred places that were built in the past for the worship of the sun because man tries to defend himself "against the awareness of death which had consequently come to obsess" him. Beer attempts to prove that the garden of Kubla Khan is a symbol of the human nostalgia because this creation tries to "recreate the paradise-garden which had been lost by the first man" (Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence, p. 116).

Some critics such as Yarlott (1967) maintain that the garden at the beginning of "Kubla Khan" is artificial in the sense of being unnatural (p. 133). However, to what extent are these views acceptable? The answer is, not much, because the garden is the poet's creation and hence very natural and consistent with poetic creativity. The garden is the creation of an inspired man, who, as it were, by his magical skill holds a mirror to reveal his interior world. In his description of the garden in "Kubla Khan," Coleridge uses many exclamation marks to indicate that the description is one that brings the poet's own subjective responses to the forefront. Thus, the garden may be understood as part of the "I," and the "I" could be seen through the garden. Therefore, the two are organically linked. In this way, the highest moments of creativity and illumination in the poet's life are symbolized by the "sunny spots of greenery." Another inseparable element of the garden is "Alph, the sacred river" which "ran / Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea" (p. 297, ll. 3-5). The course of the sacred river is described from its source, the fountain, to its end, the lifeless ocean:

*And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,*

*As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,*

*A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:*

*Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst*

*Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,*

*Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:*

*And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever*

sounds, which somehow become symbolic of our joys and expectations as well as fears and anxieties. One such auditory symbol is the set of "ancestral voices" that ominously foretells a war, which is the antithesis of the entire poem and the poet's creativity, and may take them to the "lifeless ocean" and "the sunless sea" where the sacred river ends. Had the "ancestral" voices been realized, there would have been no "Kubla Khan." Watson (1970) considers Kubla Khan's "ancestral voices" as "megalomaniac dreams" (p. 129), while Robert Graves believes that the ancestral voices "probably" symbolize the threat against Britain (Schneider, 1970, p. 239). Knight (1968) maintains: "The 'ancestral voices' suggest that dark compulsion that binds the race to its habitual conflicts and is related by some psychologists to unconscious ancestor-worship, to parental and pre-parental authority" (p. 92). However, taking the "ancestral voices" literally involves considering an element that is extrinsic to the theme of the poem. If the opinions of Graves and Knight were accepted, then Britain is equated with the garden of Kubla Khan, which in turn makes the poet's frenzy at the end seem strange and alien. Knight's interpretation is, in fact, literal because he does not consider the usual practices of creative artists and their special power for creation ensuing from their unconscious and frenzy.

There is no specific reason why Coleridge chose a certain number to describe the area of Kubla Khan's garden as "twice five miles" (297: 6). Maybe he chosen these words to give his description a touch of reality; moreover, the way the number is mentioned is significant. Instead of saying "ten miles," he states it as a special formula: "twice five miles" because such a method of counting is generally used by children and primitive people. This evokes the primitive and natural energies and abilities with which the poet is endowed. However, Cirlot (1963) says that "Ten is the Pythagorean number that raises all things to unity and is considered the number of perfection" (p. 223).

The description of the garden with images like "girdled round" and "with walls and towers" indicates that, despite the fact that even though the world of creativity is primarily rooted in the real world conceived by the primary imagination, it is distinguished from the ordinary reality and transcends the world of familiarity with the help of the secondary imagination. The walls surrounding the garden symbolize the poet's rational faculty, controlling the flow of his emotions. Thus, poetic creativity "combined the stereotypical conventions of masculinity (reason) and femininity (emotion)" (Inboden,

and beauty, as well as the symbolic value of its parts. Coleridge named “Kubla Khan” after Kubla Khan, who was the Emperor of the Tartars in 1260. Surely, Coleridge was not impressed by Kubla Khan as a Mongol prince, but perhaps he was influenced by Purchas’ account of Kubla Khan, who described the historical “Cubla” as a benevolent person free from rigidity in his opinion, and who loved intellectuals from all sects and nations. He exempted men of letters from paying taxes; moreover, he provided them with various kinds of facilities. Such treatment of gifted individuals was certainly attractive to Coleridge (Schneider, 1970, 251; Watson, 1970, p. 128). By a decree, Kubla Khan establishes a paradise-like garden within an enclosure, isolated from the outside world by walls and towers. Kubla Khan, without an entourage or even a consort, lives there in loneliness amid his beautiful and lovely creations. There is nothing kingly or princely about him except his name and the fulfilled wishes through his decree.

This character is mentioned twice in the poem. At the beginning of the poem, Kubla Khan, the creator, issues a decree to create the garden. The second time Kubla Khan is mentioned is when “Kubla heard from far / Ancestral voices prophesying war!” (p. 298, ll. 29-30). In the first instance Kubla Khan is a creator, but in the latter, his position has been threatened. It is important, however, to keep in mind that Kubla Khan is an emperor who can issue a decree to build such a beautiful garden with its pleasure dome. More importantly, he is a creator like the frenzied man at the end of “Kubla Khan” who is capable of acting on his vision and realizing it.

Kubla Khan’s decree to create a paradise-like garden demonstrates his constructive power, but at the same time, a destructive power is threatening him and his creations: the ancestral voices prophesying war. At the end, both Kubla Khan and the poet are like emperors in their gardens of creativity. Kubla Khan’s decree to create his garden can be compared with the poet’s will to create his. Both Kubla Khan and the frenzied man transform their ideas and ideals into reality. They are dreamers who create and give reality to their dreams. The frenzied man and Kubla Khan are surrounded and enshrouded by the same sort of circumstances, mainly the wilderness, which is both attractive and frightening. This landscape is progressively interiorized until it becomes a metaphor for the complexities of one’s subconscious cross-currents: some of which are creative and some that lead man toward a dark space where vague forces rage against him. Coleridge provided an interplay of sights and

to suggest that the poem lacks unity. This is the reason why T.S. Eliot (1967) described it as a disorganized poem (p. 146). Lowes and Watson represent two opposite directions towards studying the theme of "Kubla Khan." Lowes (1955) dissects the poem, especially Chapters 19 and 20 (pp. 324-388), and seems to solve its riddle through tracing the poem's sources. On the other hand, Watson (1977) believes that one knows "almost everything ... about the poem," yet not "what it is about." Therefore, a lot of information is needed about the course of Coleridge's mind to even partially understand "Kubla Khan" (p. 119).

A number of critics, some quoted here, believe that the major theme in "Kubla Khan" is poetic creativity, but it should be noted that this is not the whole truth because their approach leaves an important question unanswered: How can a connection be established between the ideas of these critics which will be discussed and the images that are mainly symbolic in "Kubla Khan"? As an example, House's opinion about "Kubla Khan" will be presented. It is sometimes difficult to accept some critics' opinions, such as that of House (1953) who claims that the real meaning of the poem depends on one word which seems to steal all the emphasis. He contends that if the emphasis is on the word "could" in "Could I revive within me" (p. 298, ll. 42), it gives the impression that there was probably a blockage in the poet's creativity, and as a result, he could not fulfill his promises and hopes. On the other hand, if one stresses the word "delight" in "To such a deep delight 'twould win me," it indicates that the poet is hopeful and able to fulfill his holy mission (p. 15). House (1953) describes "Kubla Khan" as "For this is a vision of the ideal human life ... this is the creation of the poet in his frenzy" (p. 122). However, he contradicts himself when he states that "Kubla Khan" is not allegorical or symbolical (pp. 107-108) because he also claims that it is "the creation of the poet in his frenzy." House is unable to interpret parts of the poem such as the "woman wailing for her demon lover" because such an image cannot be interpreted literally. Thus, it is assimilated into the entire structure of the poem without taking recourse to a symbolical understanding, a possibility that House rejects.

## **Analysis of the Poem to Explore its Theme and Unity:**

After what has been stated so far, it seems necessary to analyze "Kubla Khan" in detail in order to comprehend its magic and reveal its organic unity

“not wholly discreditable to the author’s talents” (Beer, 1977, “The Languages of ‘Kubla Khan,’” p. 258).

It seems that the poem is not only unique because of its display of intense inspiration, but also because of its unique subject and the way that subject is skillfully handled. The manner in which the theme is revealed through images and symbols is also unsurpassed. The following interpretation of the poem will show that the poem is well organized, with one theme developed organically within a unified whole.

### **An Approach to Understanding the Poem:**

To do justice to a poem like “Kubla Khan,” it is necessary to analyze the key images used. A close and careful reading of the poem finds that the images proliferating throughout the poem, such as the pleasure-dome, mighty fountain, and garden, are all images of creation. They are used by the poet to build his paradise-like garden. Each character has the role of creator in his own world. In “Kubla Khan,” there is ascendancy through the stages marked by different creative characters, leading to a triumphant climax at the end with the holy, poetic self exposing itself as a unique creative self. The characters are Kubla Khan who decrees to create the garden, the “woman wailing” with her pursuit of winning over her “demon lover,” the “Abyssinian Maid” with her dulcimer and magic symphony, and the poet’s self, which celebrates its poetic creativity. The movement is from the less refined character to a more refined and pure one. The “Abyssinian Maid,” as the creator of a great symphony, is more refined than the “woman wailing.” Furthermore, the “woman wailing” who tries to win the “demon lover” is more translucent than Kubla Khan, who issues a decree to create a garden; this indicates his association with power and the world of rough action. The most refined is the poet with his holy madness and holy food. He transcends and transforms his everyday self into a higher self. He also discards a lower self for the sake of a higher self whose strange food is “honey dew” and the “milk of Paradise.” The poet’s holy madness is a necessity and, in fact, an inevitable step towards a higher world.

### **The Meaning of “Kubla Khan”:**

Many critics are puzzled when they try to find an answer to the question: What is the poem about? The presence of diverse images and characters seems

must continue to reflect the poem's ambivalences and ambiguities rather than explain them" (Levinson, 1986, p. 101). In dealing with "Kubla Khan," one should be aware that it is like a rainbow that is much more than the sum of its colors. It is a poem characterized by both magic and charm. Thus, an attempt to interpret "Kubla Khan" and to unveil its charm may be compared with the endeavor of the "woman wailing" who is continuously searching in vain for her "demon lover." It is difficult to unweave the magic of "Kubla Khan" because, in Roberts' opinion, Coleridge's three greatest poems—"Kubla Khan," *The Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*—are all "abnormal products ... of abnormal nature under abnormal conditions" (Walsh, 1973, p. 116). In addition, Lowes (1955) believes that "Kubla Khan" is a great poem because in it, "the unconscious playing its game alone—as it happens, with conspicuous and perhaps unique success" (p. 96).

It is true that interpretations of "Kubla Khan" vary widely, but a majority of the critics share the opinion that the poem is unique, belongs to a special genre, and is "a poem about the act of poetic creation" (House, 1953, p. 115). Two important critics can be used as examples: G. Wilson Knight (1968) and Graham Hough (1968). Knight believes that it is a poem "with universal implications" (p. 97), whereas Hough considers it "a fragment of a private experience, not of a universal one." Interestingly enough, Hough considers "Kubla Khan" a piece of "pure poetry ... without the usual logical and conceptual framework" (p. 63), and G. Knight considers "Kubla Khan" a remarkable and unusual poem that leaves out "hardly anything" (p. 115).

Nonetheless, a host of critics ranging from Coleridge's friends and his contemporaries such as Lamb and Hazlitt, to a number of modern critics such as Schneider (1970, p. 282) and T.S. Eliot (1967), "dismissed it ("Kubla Khan") as a confused and disappointing effort" (Hogsette, 1997) with nothing extraordinary about it; however, none seem to have convincing reasons for his or her claim. Lamb says (2003): "I am almost afraid that Kubla Khan is an owl that won't bear daylight. I fear lest it should be discovered, by the lantern of typography and clear reducing (sic) to letters, no better than nonsense or no sense." Eliot believes that the reputation of "Kubla Khan" has been "exaggerated" as a result of the people's "faith in mystical inspiration." He adds that "Kubla Khan" rose from Coleridge's consciousness. Consequently, the "poem has not been written" and lacks the necessary organization (p. 146). Even during Coleridge's lifetime, an anonymous commentator equated "Kubla Khan" with Coleridge's poem "The Pains of Sleep" because both are

state is like a serene lake that can easily be disturbed by the slightest breeze. The image in “The Picture” articulates Coleridge’s anticipation of his short-lived poetic career, which is like a charm that vanishes quickly. In spite of this, the poet remains hopeful:

*Stay awhile,*

*Poor youth! who scarcely dar’st lift up thine eyes-*

*The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon*

*The visions will return! And lo, he stays.*

*And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms*

*Come trembling back, unite, and now once more*

*The pool becomes a mirror. (p. 296, ll. 94-100)*

When the trance or poetic spell ends, the situation is exactly as the interruption that was caused by the visitor from Porlock:

*Then all the charm*

*Is broken--all that phantom-world so fair*

*Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,*

*And each mis-shape the other. (p. 296, ll. 91-94)*

The poet does his best to recollect the fragments and sing his song. He may be unable to do so, still he hopes because “to-morrow is yet to come” (p. 297). Fortunately, Coleridge succeeds in recollecting the fragments of his charm, and the result is “Kubla Khan.”

## **“Kubla Khan” Is a Unique Poem:**

The majority of critics agree that “Kubla Khan” deserves to be recognized as a special poem in the English Language. Schneider (1977) states: “Kubla Khan ... speaks to us from an unknown or half-known world as no other poem does” (p. 24). Frye (1990) also considers that “Kubla Khan” belongs to a special genre in English literature. He names these “self-recognition” poems in which “the poet himself is involved in the awakening from experience into a visionary reality” (p. 302). Some people even declare that “criticism

## **Ironic and Symbolical Touches in the "Preface":**

However, one should keep in mind that when Coleridge wrote the "Preface," he was mainly a critic and was preparing his *Biographia Literaria*. At that time, Coleridge was undoubtedly aware of both his stature as a poet and that "Kubla Khan" was one of his best poems. Coleridge also described "Kubla Khan" in his "Preface" as having no "poetic merits." However, it is important to remember that one of the most distinguished and popular poets of his time, Lord Byron, spoke highly of this poem (Coleridge, 1967, p. 295). Therefore, one may take Coleridge's depreciation and remark that this poem has no "poetic merits" as ironic. The same is true about Coleridge's purporting to have been interrupted from his "profound sleep" by a visitor, a "person on business from Prolock" (p. 296) who caused the loss of many irrecoverable lines he had formed. It is highly probable that concocting the man in the "Preface" is similar to that faked man in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* who sent a letter to Coleridge requesting him to stop his philosophical discussion (Vol. 1, pp. 198-201). The two men are fictitious, but each serves a purpose. The man in the "Preface" symbolizes the threats the poet's creativity might face. He reflects the "ancestral voices prophesying war!" (p. 298, l. 30).

This symbolical outlook may be true when thinking about the 54 lines Coleridge was able to recollect, as the poem itself contains a total of "two to three hundred lines." Coleridge's account cannot be taken literally because, on the one hand, the difference between two hundred and three hundred lines is great. On the other hand, the main difference is between the lines he was able to recollect and the portion that was lost. Therefore, it makes more sense to suppose that the statements Coleridge makes about the number of lines of "Kubla Khan" are not to be taken literally. He appears to say this in order to convey the idea that what the poet is able to bring out with the help of his poetic powers is relatively insignificant, and many lines remain buried in the recesses of the subconscious of every poet. Based on what Coleridge says, it seems clear that what remains there in his well is much more than the water that is spilled.

However, a number of lines in the "Preface," in addition to the prose portion, are quoted from "The Picture; or, the Lover's Resolution." These reflect and represent the poet's life as a whole, which consists of two opposite aspects: charm and anti-charm. The charm was Coleridge's "profound sleep," which was broken by the visitor who represents the anti-charm. The poetic

*It is wrong to connect the flowering of Coleridge's genius with the formation of the opium habits; for though he had begun to take opium, it was not yet a habit, and as yet he took it only at intervals to get rest and sleep. It certainly does not explain the prodigious outburst of energy needed to create his unique poems. (p. 52)*

Perhaps, when Coleridge later became an invalid, he used opium as an escape.

## **Place and Date of “Kubla Khan”:**

Unlike the controversial issue of the effect of “anodyne” mentioned in the “Preface,” Coleridge specifically mentions the place where the poem was composed. In the Crewe Manuscript, it was “at a Farm-House between Porlock and Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culborne Church” (p. 296).

Unlike the particularity of the location of the poem's composition, the specificity of the date is extremely controversial among critics and literary historians. Beer's and Griggs' arguments on the exact date seem to be the most convincing. Both depend on evidence from the Crewe Manuscript and a number of letters written by Dorothy Wordsworth. Beer (1977) believes the most probable date is the autumn of 1797 (Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence, p. 125). There is no doubt that the poem was published in 1816, although the “Preface” asserts it was composed in the summer of 1797. Griggs (1956) also argues about a prefatory note to a letter sent by Coleridge to John Thelwall, claiming that the poem was composed in October 1797. To quote Griggs (1956): “An autographed copy to the poem now in the possession of Lady Crewe, points to the autumn of 1797.” The letter to Thelwall tends to confirm the date mentioned in the Crewe Manuscript because the “brief absence mentioned in the opening sentence probably refers to the solitary retirement near Porlock where ‘Kubla Khan’ was composed” (Vol. 1, pp. 348-49). Furthermore, in his letter to Thelwall, Coleridge uses phrases that echo the expressions used in “Kubla Khan.” Thus, the safest date in Griggs' opinion is “Oct. 1797, a few days before this letter was written (14 Oct. 1797), and not, as E.H. Coleridge (p. 295) and J. D. Campbell suggest, in May 1798” (Vol. 1., p. 349). It is probable that 1797 is the year when “Kubla Khan” was composed, but it does not really matter whether “Kubla Khan” was written in the summer or fall of that year.

Another description in the "Preface" that enhances this idea is that "Kubla Khan" was born of a holy, "profound sleep, at least of the external senses" (p. 296). It is obvious that the "profound sleep" does not refer to sleep in the physical sense, when, needless to say, the question of creativity does not arise. Undoubtedly, the creative will was at work during the composition of "Kubla Khan." This is obvious from the skilful use of the images and the rhythmic formation of the poem. In a lecture given at Cambridge in 1830, Wordsworth discussed "Kubla Khan" as a dream poem, declaring that it "might very possibly have been composed between sleeping and waking, or as he [Coleridge] expressed it, in a morning sleep; he said some of his best thoughts had come to him in that way" (Beer, 1985, "The Languages of 'Kubla Khan,'" p. 255). Perhaps this description is only to draw our attention to the fact that the poem was composed in circumstances that differed from the ones in which the majority of his known poetry were written. However, Levinson (1986) believes that "Coleridge's decision to emphasize the unconsciousness of his composition" is to "clear himself of responsibility for the work's imperfections" (p.100)

The opium mentioned in the "Preface" as the cause of Coleridge's sleep was taken by the poet in order to attain happiness or merely to obtain relief from physical pain. Creation and the taking of opium were closely linked in Coleridge's mind because opium relieved him of the pain that crippled him and limited his creative activities. However, when he composed "Kubla Khan," Coleridge was not an addict. Even in 1801, he associated opium with the temporary relief from physical pain without giving the slightest indication of any of its harmful effects. He informed Joseph Poole of his illness and his suffering, and that he used "Brandy and laudanum which they rendered necessary" (Griggs, 1956, Vol. 2, p. 731).

It seems that when Coleridge composed "Kubla Khan," he was ignorant of the disastrous consequences of taking opium, believing that the drug did not have any disagreeable effects on him. However, one cannot say that opium literally dictated "Kubla Khan," as a number of critics such as Abrams (1970) emphasize the dream quality of the poem because it "caught up the evanescent images of an opium dream, and struck them into immobility for all time" (p. 4). On the other hand, Bowra (1988) is correct when he rejects the idea that the poem is the result of taking anodyne:

poetic sleep. This fits well with his account of himself and the circumstances under which he composed “Kubla Khan:”

*[Luther] sinks, without perceiving it, into a trance of slumber: during which his brain retains its waking energies, excepting that what would have been mere thoughts before, now (the action and counterweight of his senses and of their impressions being withdrawn) shape and condense themselves into things, into realities! (Vol. 1, p. 240)*

Thus, for Coleridge, the further he was removed from the material world, the closer he was to his ideal world. This is clear in a letter to Thomas Wedgwood when Coleridge wrote: “The farther I ascend from animated Nature, from men, and cattle, and the common birds of the woods, & fields, the greater becomes in me the intensity of the feeling of life” (Griggs, 1956, Vol. 2, p. 916). Coleridge practiced this in “Kubla Khan” and tried to be completely free from the control of his reason by yielding himself to a “profound sleep.” Even Coleridge believes that the Bible is the result of spiritual inspiration and “The first chapter of Isaiah—(indeed a very large portion of the whole book)—is poetry in the most emphatic sense” (Biographia, Vol. 2, p. 11), and that Scripture is “the poetry of all human nature, to read it likewise in a figurative sense, and to find therein correspondences and symbols of the spiritual world” (The Statesman’s Manual, 1916, Appendix B, p. xiii). He believes that a poet may produce noble poetry when inspired, as the prophets who wrote the Bible. In line with his belief, in a letter to John Thelwall written on 17 December 1796, Coleridge graded Milton higher than both Homer and Virgil because Milton took his imagery from Scripture. Coleridge wrote:

*Is not Milton a Sublimier poet than Homer and Virgil? ... And do you not know, that there is not perhaps one page in Milton’s Paradise Lost, in which he has not borrowed his imagery from the Scriptures? ... after reading Isaiah, or St Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews... Homer and Virgil are disgustingly tame to me, and Milton himself barely tolerable. (Griggs, 1956, Vol. 1, p. 281)*

Coleridge’s description of the Bible and his distinction between poetry and a poem shows that he considers a piece of poetry higher than a poem because “A poem of any length neither can be, or ought to be, all poetry” (Biographia Literaria, Vol. 2, p. 11).

poem, "The Picture; or, the Lover's Resolution," Coleridge indicates that the fragments are parts of images that came to him spontaneously: "And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms / Come trembling back, unite, and now once more / The pool becomes a mirror" (p. 296: ll. 97-100). Second, in the last paragraph of the "Preface," Coleridge states: "As a contrast to this vision, I have annexed a fragment of a very different character, describing with equal fidelity the dream of pain and disease" (p. 297). The fragment to which Coleridge refers is a complete poem, "The Pains of Sleep." Thus, Coleridge considers every poem a fragment both in the poet's overall vision about life and in the specific world of his creativity. It should, however, be noted that the word "fragment" is not meant to be taken literally. According to Kathleen Coburn, Coleridge believes that everything on its own is a fragment, and forms a whole only when each part is organically connected because "Everything is connected with everything else" (Coburn, 1951, p. 15). However, a number of critics such as Beer ("The Languages of 'Kubla Khan,'" 1985, p. 253) accept literally whatever has been written in the "Preface," including Coleridge's account of the conditions under which he wrote the poem. Other critics dismiss the "Preface" altogether as being doubtful (Watson, 1977, pp. 120-21).

Coleridge noted in the "Preface" that he was reading about Khan's palace from Samuel Purchas's travel book *Purchas's Pilgrimage* (see Appendix 1)<sup>(2)</sup>, when he fell asleep, and then suddenly awoke in a poetic frenzy and began recollecting his vision for writing. In the *Crewe Manuscript*<sup>(3)</sup>, Coleridge speaks of "Kubla Khan" as being "composed, in a sort of Reverie," and that it comes from "a Vision in a dream" (see Appendix 2), while in its well-known published version in 1816, he states that "Kubla Khan" was born of "a profound sleep" (p. 296). Three terms: reverie, vision, and dream are used by Coleridge to describe how "Kubla Khan" came into being. The assertion that "Kubla Khan" was born of a "dream" or a "reverie" implies an absence of active participation of the poet's will, and the greater the absence of will in poetry, the more intense is the inspiration, and the more the poet is "Footless and wild, like birds of paradise / Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untam'd wing!" (p. 101, ll. 24-25). When inspiration reaches its highest point in poetry, (where the critical self is not at work and the poet is in a Coleridgean "profound sleep"), the effect of poetry is more powerful. The same idea is stated in *The Friend*, when Coleridge (1818) describes Luther's profound

## Discussion of the “Preface” of “Kubla Khan”:

The “Preface” (Coleridge, pp. 297-98)<sup>(1)</sup> is a kind of epigraph that was written nineteen years after Coleridge composed “Kubla Khan,” and it has led to numerous heated discussions and hair-splitting controversies among Coleridge’s critics. The “Preface” is as fascinating as “Kubla Khan” itself, and is considered as much a part of the poem as the marginal glosses of *The Ancient Mariner*. Critics have debated almost everything mentioned in it, including the date, location and the circumstances under which it was composed.

House (1952) summarizes the questions that have been raised: What is the justification of writing an introduction to “Kubla Khan”? Is it a kind of self-defense against the charges of obscurity that Coleridge might have faced or is likely to face because of the new type of poetry “Kubla Khan” would come to represent that contravened the critical standard of the time? (p. 114). Is it, as Kathleen Wheeler suggests (1981), “an advertisement for the poem that encourages the reader to approach the poem specifically as a ‘psychological curiosity’ and as a fragment” (p. 20)? Is it just an “imaginative adjunct to the poem” (Stevenson, p. 606), or is there another reason? One thing that should be kept in mind is that when Coleridge wrote the “Preface” in 1816, he was virtually dead as a poet. However, it should not be forgotten that the poet in him still remained. The loss of his creativity did not mean that he had lost faith in himself as a poet. He was aware of his originality and his relevance. It is highly improbable that he would write an introductory passage in prose to such a unique poem and not be figurative. The following discussion will prove that the “Preface” is a symbolic undertaking about poetic creation that is skillfully interwoven to reflect the theme of “Kubla Khan.” It is a reflection on the poem in prose.

The first legitimate question a reader or critic might raise is whether “Kubla Khan” is a fragment, as described in the “Preface.” None of the major critics who would have written about Coleridge, including Lowes in the 1950s have tackled this question seriously, despite the fact that they discuss the “Preface” in detail. Coleridge makes it quite clear what he means by the word “fragment” in two sections of the “Preface.” First, by quoting from his

## *Abstract:*

There are two main purposes for this paper. The first is an analysis of the "Preface" of "Kubla Khan," which attracts critics' attention and confounds them, as the poem proves it is symbolic and reflects the poem itself. The second is to explore the profundity of the poem and its main theme, which is poetic creativity and its antithetical elements by studying the images in the poem. Furthermore, the study seeks to demonstrate that the characters in "Kubla Khan" serve as creators each of whom reflects the creative poet. This paper proves that the poem is an organic entity, although it seems that there is a hiatus between lines 36 and 37.

## ملخص:

هناك هدفان لهذه الورقة البحثية، الأول: تحليل مقدمة قصيدة «قبلا خان» التي اجتذبت اهتمام النقاد وحيرتهم، وهذا التحليل يثبت أن هذه المقدمة رمزية، وأنها مرآة لما ضمته القصيدة بين سطورها. أما الهدف الثاني فيتمثل باستكشاف عمق هذه القصيدة وفكرتها الرئيسية، والمتمثلة بالإبداع الشعري والعناصر المثبطة لهذا الإبداع والمضادة له. وتسعى الدراسة بالإضافة إلى ما ذكر، أن تبسط أمام القارئ أن الشخصيات التي ذكرت في القصيدة، مثل قبلا خان، هي شخصيات مبدعة، وهي باعتبارها مرآة، تعكس صورة الشاعر المبدع. أثبتت هذه الدراسة أن القصيدة تتمتع بوحدة عضوية، بالرغم مما يظنه بعضهم من وجود فجوة في القصيدة ما بين السطر ٣٦ وما قبله، والسطر ٣٧ وما بعده.

# **Exploring the Main Theme of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Poem “Kubla Khan” and Its “Preface”**

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