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## Kubla Khan

### The Poem

“Kubla Khan,” one of the most famous and most analyzed English poems, is a fifty-four-line lyric in three verse paragraphs. In the opening paragraph, the title character decrees that a “stately pleasure-dome” be built in Xanadu. Although numerous commentators have striven to find sources for the place names used here by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, there is no critical consensus about the origins or meanings of these names. The real-life Kubla Khan, a thirteenth century Mongolian general and statesman who conquered and unified China, lived in an elaborate residence known as K’ai-p’ing, or Shang-tu, in southeastern Mongolia. Coleridge’s Kubla has his palace constructed where Alph, “the sacred river,” begins its journey to the sea. The construction of the palace on “twice five miles of fertile ground” is described. It is surrounded by walls and towers within which are ancient forests and ornate gardens “bright with sinuous rills.”

Xanadu is described more romantically in the second stanza. It becomes “A savage place! as holy and enchanted/ As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted/ By woman wailing for her demon-lover!” It is inhabited not by Kubla’s family and followers, but by images from Coleridge’s imagination. His Xanadu is a magical place where the unusual is to be expected, as when a “mighty fountain” bursts from the earth, sending “dancing rocks” into the air, followed by the sacred river itself. The poem has thus progressed from the creations of Kubla Khan to the even more magical actions of nature. The river meanders for five miles until it reaches “caverns measureless to man” and sinks “in tumult to a lifeless ocean.”

This intricate description is interrupted briefly when Kubla hears “from far/ Ancestral voices prophesying war!” This may be an allusion to the opposition of the real Khan by his younger brother, Arigböge, which led eventually to a military victory for Kubla. Coleridge then shifts the focus back to the pleasure-dome, with its shadow floating on the waves of the river: “It was a miracle of rare device,/ A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!”

The final paragraph presents a first-person narrator who recounts a vision he once had of an Abyssinian maid playing a dulcimer and singing of Mount Abora. The narrator says that if he could revive her music within himself, he would build a pleasure-dome, and all who would see it would be frightened of “his flashing eyes, his floating hair!” His observers would close their eyes “with holy dread,/ For he on honey-dew hath fed,/ And drunk the milk of Paradise.”

Coleridge prefaces the poem with an explanation of how what he calls a “psychological curiosity” came to be published. According to Coleridge, he was living in ill health during the summer of 1797 in a “lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire.” Having taken an “anodyne,” he fell asleep immediately upon reading in a seventeenth century travel book by Samuel Purchas: “Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall.” He claims that while sleeping for three hours he composed two-hundred to three-hundred lines, “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 consciousness of effort.”

When Coleridge awoke, he remembered the entire poem and set about copying it down, only to be interrupted for an hour “by a person on business from Porlock.” Returning to the poem, Coleridge could recall only “some eight or ten scattered lines and images.” He claims he has since intended to finish “Kubla Khan” but has not yet been able to.

## Forms and Devices

The most striking of the many poetic devices in “Kubla Khan” are its sounds and images. One of the most musical of poems, it is full of assonance and alliteration, as can be seen in the opening five lines:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.

This repetition of *a*, *e*, and *u* sounds continues throughout the poem with the *a* sounds dominating, creating a vivid yet mournful song appropriate for one intended to inspire its listeners to cry “Beware! Beware!” in their awe of the poet. The halting assonance in the line “As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing” creates the effect of breathing.

The alliteration is especially prevalent in the opening lines, as each line closes with it: “Kubla Khan,” “pleasure-dome decree,” “river, ran,” “measureless to man,” and “sunless sea.” The effect is almost to hypnotize the reader or listener into being receptive to the marvelous visions about to appear. Other notable uses of alliteration include the juxtaposition of “waning” and “woman wailing” to create a wailing sound. “Five miles meandering with a mazy motion” sounds like the movement it describes. The repetition of the initial *h* and *d* sounds in the closing lines creates an image of the narrator as haunted and doomed:

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

The assonance and alliteration soften the impact of the terminal rhyme and establish a sensation of movement to reinforce the image of the flowing river with the shadow of the pleasure dome floating upon it.

The imagery of “Kubla Khan” is evocative without being so specific that it negates the magical, dreamlike effect for which Coleridge is striving. The “gardens bright with sinuous rills,” “incense-bearing tree,” “forests ancient as the hills,” and “sunny spots of greenery” are deliberately vague, as if recalled from a dream. Such images stimulate a vision of Xanadu bound only by the reader’s imagination.

# Themes and Meanings

Much of the commentary on “Kubla Khan” has focused on the influence of Coleridge’s addiction to opium, on its dreamlike qualities, the “anodyne” he refers to in his preface, but no conclusive connection between the two can be proved. Considerable criticism has also dealt with whether the poem is truly, as Coleridge claimed, a fragment of a spontaneous creation. The poet’s account of the unusual origin of his poem is probably only one of numerous instances in which one of the Romantic poets proclaimed the spontaneity or naturalness of their art. Most critics of “Kubla Khan” believe that its language and meter are too intricate for it to have been created by the fevered mind of a sleeping poet. Others say that its ending is too fitting for the poem to be a fragment.

Other contentions about “Kubla Khan” revolve around its meanings (or lack thereof). Some critics, including T. S. Eliot in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), have claimed the poem has no veritable meaning. Such analysts say its method and meaning are inseparable: The poem’s form is its only meaning. For other commentators, “Kubla Khan” is clearly an allegory about the creation of art. As the artist decided to create his work of art, so does Kubla Khan decide to have his pleasure-dome constructed. The poem’s structure refutes Coleridge’s claim about its origins, since the first thirty-six lines describe what Kubla has ordered built, and the last eighteen lines deal with the narrator’s desire to approximate the creation of the pleasure-dome.

Xanadu is an example of humanity imposing its will upon nature to create a vision of paradise, since the palace is surrounded by an elaborate park. That the forests are “ancient as the hills” makes the imposing of order upon them more of a challenge. Like a work of art, Xanadu results from an act of inspiration and is a “holy and enchanted” place. Within this man-decreed creation are natural creations such as the river that bursts from the earth. The origin of Alph is depicted almost in sexual terms, with the earth breathing “in fast thick pants” before ejaculating the river, a “mighty fountain,” in an explosion of rocks. The sexual imagery helps reinforce the creation theme of “Kubla Khan.”

Like Kubla’s pleasure-dome, a work of art is a “miracle of rare device,” and the last paragraph of the poem depicts the narrator’s desire to emulate Kubla’s act through music. As with Kubla, the narrator wants to impose order on a tumultuous world. Like Xanadu, art offers a refuge from the chaos. The narrator, as with a poet, is inspired by a muse, the Abyssinian maid, and wants to re-create her song. The resulting music would be the equivalent “in air” of the pleasure-dome. As an artist, the narrator would then stand apart from a society that fears those who create, those who have “drunk the milk of Paradise.”

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