

# *Kubla Khan*

## Samuel Taylor Coleridge

### Prepared by Arindam Ghosh

#### Critical Appreciation

Coleridge composed his poem, *Kubla Khan*, in a state of semi-conscious trance either in the autumn of 1797 or the spring of 1798 and published in 1816. The whole poem is pervaded by an atmosphere of dream and remains in the form of a vision. The vision embodied in *Kubla Khan* was inspired by the perusal of the travel book, *Purchas His Pilgrimage*. Coleridge had taken a dose of opium as an anodyne, and his eyes closed upon the line in the book, “At Xanadu Kubla Khan built a pleasure palace.” But this opened his creative vision, and the poem of about 200 lines was composed in this state of waking dream. On being fully awake, he wrote the poem down. The theme of the poem is unimportant. It describes the palace built by Kubla Khan, the grandson of Chengis Khan, the great ruler of central Asia.

The poem is vastly different in style from other poems written by Coleridge. The first stanza of the poem describes Khan's pleasure dome built alongside a sacred river fed by a powerful fountain. The second stanza of the poem is the narrator's response to the power and effects of an Abyssinian maid's song, which enraptures him but leaves him unable to act on her inspiration unless he could hear her once again. Together, they form a comparison of creative power that does not work with nature and creative power that is harmonious with nature. The third and final stanza shifts to a first-person perspective of the speaker detailing his sighting of a woman playing a dulcimer, and if he could revive her song, he could fill the pleasure dome with music. He concludes by describing a hypothetical audience's reaction to the song in the language of religious ecstasy.

*Kubla Khan* is the finest example of pure poetry removed from any intellectual content. Being essentially of the nature of a dream, it enchants by the loveliness of its color, artistic beauty, and sweet harmony. Its vision is wrought out of the most various sources –oriented romance and travel books. Its remote setting and its delicate imaginative realism render it especially romantic. The supernatural atmosphere is evoked chiefly through suggestion and association. The musical effect of the poem is unsurpassed. The main appeal of the poem lies in its sound effects. The rhythm and even the length of the lines are varied to produce subtle effects of harmony. The whole poem is bound together by a network of alliteration, the use of liquid consonants, and onomatopoeia. The judicious use of hard consonants has given occasionally the effect of force and harshness.

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."

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...").

## Theme of Poetic imagination

One theory says that "Kubla Khan" is about poetry and the two sections discuss two types of poems. The power of the imagination is an important component to this theme. The poem celebrates creativity and how the poet is able to experience a connection to the universe through inspiration. As a poet, Coleridge places himself in an uncertain position as either master over his creative powers or a slave to it. The dome city represents the imagination and the second stanza represents the relationship between a poet and the rest of society. The poet is separated from the rest of humanity after he is exposed to the power to create and is able to witness visions of truth. This separation causes a combative relationship between the poet and the audience as the poet seeks to control his listener through a mesmerising technique. The poem's emphasis on imagination as subject of a poem, on the contrasts within the paradisaic setting, and its discussion of the role of poet as either being blessed or cursed by imagination, has influenced many works, including Alfred Tennyson's "Palace of Art" and William Butler Yeats's Byzantium based poems. There is also a strong connection between the idea of retreating into the imagination found within Keats's *Lamia* and in Tennyson's "Palace of Art". The Preface, when added to the poem, connects the idea of the paradise as the imagination with the land of Porlock, and that the imagination, though infinite, would be interrupted by a "person on business". The Preface then allows for Coleridge to leave the poem as a fragment, which represents the inability for the imagination to provide complete images or truly reflect reality. The poem would not be about the act of creation but a fragmentary view revealing how the act works: how the poet crafts language and how it relates to himself.

Through use of the imagination, the poem is able to discuss issues surrounding tyranny, war, and contrasts that exist within paradise. Part of the war motif could be a metaphor for the poet in a competitive struggle with the reader to push his own vision and ideas upon his audience. As a component to the idea of imagination in the poem is the creative process by

describing a world that is of the imagination and another that is of understanding. The poet, in Coleridge's system, is able to move from the world of understanding, where men normally are, and enter into the world of the imagination through poetry. When the narrator describes the "ancestral voices prophesying war", the idea is part of the world of understanding, or the real world. As a whole, the poem is connected to Coleridge's belief in a secondary Imagination that can lead a poet into a world of imagination, and the poem is both a description of that world and a description of how the poet enters the world. The imagination, as it appears in many of Coleridge's and Wordsworth's works, including "Kubla Khan", is discussed through the metaphor of water, and the use of the river in "Kubla Khan" is connected to the use of the stream in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. The water imagery is also related to the divine and nature, and the poet is able to tap into nature in a way Kubla Khan cannot to harness its power.

### **Romanticism in *Kubla Khan***

S.T. Coleridge may be distinguished as the most representative of the English Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century. *Kubla Khan*, a celebratory poem of Coleridge is romantic in its tone, temperament and content.

Coleridge excels his contemporaries in the psychological treatment of the Middle Ages, where, a strange beauty is there to be won by strong imagination out of things unlikely or remote. The exquisite, distant setting of *Kubla Khan* is laid in harmony with this aspect of Romanticism, that is, "strangeness added to beauty". The first stanza gives a sensuous, typical pictorial presentation of an earthly paradise, which does not have any historical significance. It is the landscape of Xandu, which *Kubla Khan* has selected for building his pleasure-dome, on the bank of the river Alph. Thus a medieval, autocratic Chinese monarch forms the subject of the poem. The names--- Xandu, Alph etc.—unfamiliar and wrought with the spirit of mystery, lend to the poem an enchantment of their own. The exotic plot of land is one of teeming nature—garden, hills, serpentine rivulets, forests and spots of vegetation—all these embracing the centrally located "miracle of rare device", that is, *Kubla's* palace. Down the slopes of the green hills runs a "deep romantic chasm". A mysterious atmosphere hangs over the place as a woman is heard lamenting for her deserted demon-lover. The story derives its origin from the Gothic tales. The nocturnal beauty of the paradisaical landscape is maligned by the "waning" lunar crescent. This is a morbid aspect of romanticism. The second part of the poem also exhibits his inclination for medievalism as here the poet transports us to the far-off land of Abyssinia.

It is the perception of "strangeness added to beauty" that makes for the Romantics' interest in the supernatural—in things veiled under mystery. The essence of Coleridge's romanticism lies in his artistic rendering of the supernatural phenomena. The "woman wailing for her demon lover" and "the ancestral voices prophesying war" are obviously supernatural occurrences. The process of the genesis of the river—the bursting of the fountain volleying up huge fragments and its subterranean terminus evokes a sense of wonder and awe. Towards the end of the poem the poet is presented as a supernatural being feeding on honey-dew and milk of paradise.

*Kubla Khan* is remarkable for its sensuousness which is a great romantic feature. It abounds in sensuous and picturesque description of the vast stretch of land overgrown with the beauties of nature:

"And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree:

And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
 Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.”

The shadow of the dome floating midway on the waves is also sensuous. The sensuousness is further reinforced with the description of the Abyssinian maid playing on her stringed instrument and singing of Mount Abora. The images employed in the poem are sensuous. The dome is an agreed emblem of fulfilment and satisfaction. Its spherical shape is likened to a woman’s breast, both being circular and complete. Moreover, the word “pleasure” is the recurrent qualifier of dome---“a stately pleasure dome” in the line 2, “the dome of pleasure” in the line 31, “a sunny pleasure-dome” in the line 36. The other sensuous images are “thresher’s flail”, “rebounding hail”, “caves of ice”, “sunny dome” etc.

Kubla Khan is essentially a dream-poem recounting in a poetic form what the poet saw in a vision. It has all the marks of a dream—vividness, free association and inconsequence. The dream-like texture of Coleridge’s poem gives it a kind of twilight vagueness intensifying its mystery. This dream-quality contributes greatly to making the poem romantic.

To conclude, it has been rightly said that Coleridge’s poetry is “the most finished, supreme embodiment of all that is purest and ethereal in the romantic spirit”.

### ***Kubla Khan as a Meta-Poetry/ Thematic Analysis of Kubla Khan***

The poem is divided into three paragraphs by the author. It starts with the description of a wonderful palace built by Mongolian and Chinese ruler Kubla Khan in Xanadu, a really existing geographical area situated in China. However strange it sounds, a loose historical background is observable behind the dream-like vision set into poetry, since the Khan was a real historical personality, and the palace described in the overture of the poem really existed in some form. Outside the visionary palace a holy river, the Alph is flowing into the dark, “sunless sea”, as Coleridge writes. Then the poem continues with the description of the “fertile grounds” near the palace, and it also turns out that the building is surrounded by ancient forests and hills. To sum it up, the first paragraph describes a historical, but at the same time seemingly supernatural and mythical, majestic world, dominated by Kubla Khan and his “pleasure dome”. This world seems to be a static picture where everything is unchanged, like a timeless, painting-life place, where the dimension of time does not exist, or at least it cannot be observed, a kind of empire of eternity. It must be mentioned that in the first paragraph the poetic speaker describes the sight as a spectator from outside, he is not an active character, is not present in the world where the dream-like settings exist.

However, in the second paragraph of the poem a drastic, dramatic change of view can be observed:

“But oh ! that deep romantic chasm which slanted  
 Down the 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 demon-lover !”

The paragraph directly starts with a conjunction “but” and an exclamation, introducing the contrast immediately. Something suddenly happens, while in the first paragraph a kind of static description was dominant, something suddenly and drastically changes in the whole landscape. The place near the palace is depicted as a “savage place”, as if a completely different world coexisted in the same dimension. The speaker talks about a hell-like, mysterious and ominous environment, which is beyond the boundaries of the area that is dominated by Kubla and his “pleasure dome”. Pagan, supernatural forces appear in the poem, breaking out from the depth, disturbing the idyll of the world depicted in the first paragraph. A source of a fountain is described that feeds a river. The river floods through trees and rocks, and it finally inundates Kubla’s gardens. As the last lines of the second paragraph describe:

“And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
Ancestral voices prophesying war!”

That is, as the water inundates Kubla Khan’s wonderful domain, the ruler hears voices, “ancestral voices”, supposedly the voice of the spirits of his ancestors who remind him that the flood is just the prognostication, and he will soon have to face war against something or someone. To sum it up, the second paragraph is in contrast to the first, in which the destruction, the annihilation of the idyllic and seemingly perfect land described by the first paragraph is outlined. However perfect and visionary the domain of Kubla Khan was, it was destroyed by a flood, probably motivated by mysterious, supernatural forces that might have been envious of the Khan’s power, as he was a mortal human, despite all that he had possessed and achieved, he could not reach as much power as certain supernatural forces, maybe gods who finally punished him for having wanted too much.

In addition, the second verse paragraph is interesting to analyse because it is about destruction, undoubtedly, but at the same time a certain form of creation also occurs. Strong sexual symbolism can also be observed within the lines of the second paragraph. The whole brutal and violent landscape and scene may refer to one certain mode of creation, to biological propagation, the most elementary, and perhaps at the same time most primordial creative power of human beings that does not demand intellect or superhuman talent at all. That is, it might be stated that the first two paragraphs of the poem contrast the divine, supernatural, special nature of creation with its primordial, elemental and primitive form. It can be viewed as a typical contrast of romantic poetry: the contrast of soul and body, mind and sexual desires. Both of them are able to create or destroy, it only depends on human beings how they decide and how they use these forms of creation or destruction.

In the third, last verse paragraph the speaker continues to describe what happened after the palace was destroyed by the flood.

“The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
Floated midway on the waves ;  
Where was heard the mingled measure  
From the fountain and the caves.  
It was a miracle of rare device,

A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice !”

That is, the shadow of the dome was reflected by the water, and in vain had it been destroyed, a wonderful sight emerged from the water, and in some form the palace (and possibly the ruler himself) re-created itself (and himself) in another dimension of existence. Finally, suddenly the poetic speaker shifts into first person singular, starts to narrate in a much more personal voice, appears as not a simple narrator, but as a kind of character in the poem. “In a vision once I saw...”, that is, the poetic speaker himself acknowledges in a way that all that he described in the first two paragraphs was a kind of poetic vision, as was the “Abyssinian maid” playing a dulcimer mentioned in the further lines of the poem. He claims that if he had the capability of recalling the music played by the mysterious maid, than he would be able to reconstruct Kubla Khan’s visionary palace from mere music, and he would be able to become as enormous and powerful as Kubla Khan himself. As written in the very last lines of the poem:

“And all should cry, Beware ! Beware !

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.”

It is described how powerful and fearful the poetic speaker himself would become if he was able to reconstruct the palace and gain the power of Kubla Khan. A possible interpretation is that he could even become one with Kubla Khan in some kind of supernatural, timeless dimension, he himself could become the mythical ruler.

To sum it up, we may state that the third mode of creation outlined in the third paragraph is the creative power of memory, the power via which things lost in the past can be re-created, if we are strong enough to recall them, and something that no longer exists in a physical form can come into existence once again within the human mind, if we dare to believe that we are able to create by the mere power of our imagination.

Since the search for eternity and cult of geniuses were amongst the key characteristics of the period of the Romantics, Coleridge’s famous poem may be treated as a kind of romantic guideline to poets, a meta-poetic work that reminds artists that eternity can be reached if they are talented and brave enough to fight against the destructive power of time and human mortality, not merely as a vision-dream-like poem that perhaps causes aesthetic pleasure to the all-time reader, but its real message is hard or even impossible to decode.

## Form

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.

### Questions about the poem ' Kubla Khan'

1. What kind of poem is it? It's a narrative but we couldn't retell its story because it's largely a descriptive text till the last verse paragraph. It's an attempt to represent an imaginary landscape.
2. What does it talk about? It talks about STRANGE LANDSACPE of Xanadu.
3. Who or what is speaking? The poem begins in the third person as many novels do. But the last verse paragraph is in the first person; the speaker here seems to be a poet speaking.
4. Form? The poem isn't in stanza form and it's irregular. Not one continuous piece; it's in 4 verse paragraphs. It has an iambic meter and lines of different length. The rhythm varies considerably between short and long lines 17- 18 and even between the longer ones. EX: 24-25: we do not have regular rhyme scheme. A reading of the poem demonstrates sound is important particularly because of the strange or exoticism of the names: xanadu, kubla khan, alph:
5. Figurative language or imagery: the commentator prefers figures to image because some images cannot be seen; for example, "caverns measureless to man" we cannot imagine them; we also have figures of containment and enclosure (6-10): are the walls to keep something out or in? Then, in the second paragraph, we also have figures of energy and struggle set against images of stagnation and immobility: chasm, tumult, and lifeless.
6. Music figures in the poem culminating in the symphony and song of the Abyssinian maid with her dulcimer.
7. Repetition (of lines, ideas, or words): Khan is named 2 times (at the beginning and at the end of second verse paragraph); alph 2 (24 called the sacred river); caverns 2 (4, 27); dome 5; tumult 2(repeated in the second verse paragraph); the poet draws our attention to their strangeness. Listen again to lines 25-36.
8. Title: Kubla Khan: it shapes the way in which we read the poem: Kubla Khan remains mysterious and as mentioned before he is named twice: first time we hear of his power and the second time we learn of a distant threat to him; but what's the relationship between him and the landscape? When the poem was published, it had a Subtitle A visionary dream, fragment (it sounds apologetic, as if Coleridge did not want to see it a complete poem)
9. Ending: last verse paragraph redirects us rather than summing up; the subject of the poem seems to shift: we're no longer with the Khan and his Xanadu but with the poet and his creation. Once the poem is read with attention to the use of language, we can move on to check its meaning in relation to its context. In other words, once we familiarize ourselves with the play of language, of sounds, of words, of imagery, we cover one stage of reading the poem. The other stage is when we look at the extrinsic context of the poem. In the case of this poem we can get a lot of information from the Preface to the poem and from different questions we can get from the imagery, allusions, and perspective. Often we find such material outside the poem. In the case of this poem, Coleridge leaves a lot of clues in the preface he gives and in the imagery and allusions he incorporates in the poem.

### More questions related to contexts outside the poem (5 Marks)

A- Coleridge himself: he attached a long note on how the poem was composed. Hundreds of lines came to him in an opium dream which he tried to transcribe its lines but as a visitor came he later on couldn't remember the lines. This doesn't answer many of our questions about the

poem. This piece of information does not answer our questions; it seems that the author does not know what to make of it.

B- The long interval between writing it and publishing is another indication that the poet was unsure of it: it was first published 1816 (along with *Christable* and *Pains of Sleep*) 20 years after writing it. He also subtitled it as: a visionary dream, a fragment. He also adds another more apologetic note when he says that it is a “psychological curiosity” than the grounds of any supposed poetic merit. Accordingly, some critics try to interpret it psychologically, while others see it as wholly reflexive, i.e., they see the poem is about itself or about the process of writing poetry (the Khan can be seen as a poet or maker) and the poem is a made object, a miracle of rare device.

C- Coleridge notes that he was reading a travel book, Purchase’s *His Pilgrimage*, as he fell asleep. The poem is full of echoes of this and other books he knew. One of the more apparent sources for the dream landscape is Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Book four of *Paradise Lost* there’s a description of paradise as Satan first sees it. The description includes a river flowing through Eden—Milton lists a lot of false paradises that can be compared with Eden, the last of them is mount Omara. Compared with Xanadu, then Xandadu may be a false paradise; how is it coming into being? Unlike to true paradise, it is being produced rather than created; it’s artificial rather than natural. It is brought into being by an oriental monarch; the false paradise has come into being at his decree.

D- Alph, the sacred river, some critics have seen it as a symbol for the imagination: but the imagination is not the root to the place of pure escapist pleasure; it’s a place that can be sublime “caverns measureless to man”; but what is being built it also a savage place; its values are ambivalent: forces of attraction and repulsion are held together in phrases like “a sunless sea” and “a demon lover”; and most of all in “a sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice.” The two are potential threat to this paradise as they prophesy war. The imagination, then, builds a false paradise. Does this mean the Khan too is an artist, is he, too, a Napoleon of the imagination (the kind Coleridge called the man of commanding genius who can subject people and things to his will)? Is *Kubla Khan* a poet?

E- The 4th paragraph is in the first person; after the first creation come doubts as to the possibilities of the creation. In the final verse paragraph come the modal verbs “could,” “would,” and “should,” which are verbs of possibilities that abound in the poem: if the vision could be revived, the false paradise could be regained and the poet and not the monarch could build that dome in air. But the ending doesn’t add to the representation of Xanadu; it talks about the vision of it is lost; how it survives only in fragment. So the poem contains a sort of commentary upon itself; but if there’s regret in the first few lines of this passage, the figure with which it is represented at the end seems terrifying. The line “weave a circle around him thrice” is first spoken by Shakespeare’s witches in *Macbeth* and here they are in reference to the poet. Here if these lines celebrate the powers of the imagination, they also suggest its dangers and terrors.

## List of Questions

### 10 Marks

1. Comment on "*Kubla Khan*" as a dream poem.
2. Why is "*Kubla Khan*" called a fragment?



3. Romantic Elements in Kubla Khan
4. The theme of poetic imagination as addressed in the poem.
5. How can "Kubla Khan" be considered a dream poem?

### 5 Marks

1. Who drank the milk of paradise in "Kubla Khan"? Why should the reader beware?
2. What is the significance of the narrator saying that he would 'build that dome in air`'?
3. Who is "damsel with a dulcimer"?
4. Please explain these oxymoronic expressions used in "Kubla Khan": "sunless sea" and "lifeless ocean."
5. How about the images of the river and the fountain? Do they make a concrete picture in your mind, something you could describe, or do they give you a more general feeling?
6. What are the pictorial qualities in "Kubla Khan," written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge?