



Kubla Khan

Samuel Taylor Coleridge
*Kubla Khan, or a Vision
in a Dream*
(1816)

Kubla Khan (written in 1798, but published only in 1816) is one of the most famous poems by Coleridge and has received a lot of critical attention because of the circumstances of its composition. As the poet himself declared in the introduction, the content of the poem seems to derive from a dream following the reading of a Renaissance book about geography, travel, and history. Coleridge dreamt that he had composed some poetic lines and these images had arisen before him along with the phrases to accompany them. On waking up, he started writing it all down, but a visitor interrupted him and when he went back to his writing, he had forgotten almost everything. Probably this reverie was the product of an opium hallucination, and it is thus perhaps the most famous poem written in an altered state of mind, which is a characteristic of Romanticism.

In Xanadu¹ did Kubla Khan²
A stately pleasure-dome decree³:
Where Alph⁴, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
5 Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round⁵:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills⁶,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
10 And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding⁷ sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm⁸ which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover⁹!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
15 As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon lover¹⁰!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething¹¹,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momentarily¹² was forced:
20 Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted¹³ like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail¹⁴:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.
25 Five miles meandering with a mazy¹⁵ motion
Through wood and dale¹⁶ the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
30 Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves¹⁷.
35 It was a miracle of rare device¹⁸,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

- 1 **Xanadu**. Città della Cina, sede della capitale estiva dell'imperatore Kublai Khan, nel XIII sec. d.C.
- 2 **Kubla Khan**. Kublai Khan, il famoso gran khān mongolo del XIII secolo che completò la conquista della Cina.
- 3 **did ... decree**. Ordinò di costruire un imponente duomo di piacere.
- 4 **Alph**. Il nome di questo fiume ricorda quello del fiume Alfeo che secondo gli antichi aveva la sorgente in Grecia e la foce in Sicilia.
- 5 **were girdled round**. Furono circondate.
- 6 **sinuous rills**. Ruscelli sinuosi.
- 7 **Enfolding**. Che racchiudevano.
- 8 **deep ... chasm**. Profondo abisso romantico.
- 9 **athwart a cedarn cover**. Attraverso un bosco di cedri.
- 10 **demon lover**. Amante demoniaco.
- 11 **ceaseless ... seething**. Incessante tumulto che ribolliva.
- 12 **momently**. A tratti, d'un tratto.
- 13 **vaulted**. Rimbalzavano.
- 14 **thresher's flail**. Lo strumento del trebbiatore.
- 15 **mazy**. Tortuoso.
- 16 **Through ... dale**. Attraverso il bosco e la valle.
- 17 **caves**. Caverne.
- 18 **rare device**. Rara invenzione.



A damsel with a dulcimer¹⁹
 In a vision once I saw:
 It was an Abyssinian maid,
 40 And on her dulcimer she played,
 Singing of Mount Abora²⁰.
 Could I revive within me
 Her symphony and song,
 To such a deep delight 'twould²¹ win me,
 45 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!
 50 His²² flashing eyes, his floating hair!
 Weave a circle round him thrice²³,
 And close your eyes with holy dread,
 For he on honey-dew hath fed²⁴,
 And drunk the milk of Paradise²⁵.

19 **dulcimer**. Dulcimele (strumento a corde).

20 **Mount Abora**. Monte Abora in Abissinia.

21 **'twould**. *It would*.

22 **His**. Suo (riferito al poeta).

23 **Weave ... thrice**. Tracciategli intorno tre cerchi (rituale magico usato per rendere inviolabile l'area intorno al poeta ispirato).

24 **honey-dew ... fed**. Si è nutrito di nettare.

25 **milk of Paradise**. Latte del Paradiso.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

1 READ the text and identify the two sections. Then write a heading for each section.

2 LOOK at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each highlight and colour represents. Then answer the questions.

What atmosphere is created by this natural element?

What power would the music of the Abyssinian maid give the poet?

→ What does the line break mean?

3 DISCUSS the following questions in pairs.

- 1 What kind of landscape did Kubla Khan try to create? What did he desire to control?
- 2 Why are the pleasant world surrounding Kubla Khan's dome and the world outside its walls in contrast?
- 3 What oppositions are there in lines 1-36? What reconciles all these opposites?
- 4 Why is it possible to state that there is an abrupt shift in the poem in the second part?
- 5 What view of the poet is suggested in the closing lines?
- 6 What do the references to 'honey-dew' (line 53) and 'the milk of Paradise' (line 54) suggest about the poet's special nature? What is his social role?
- 7 Remembering Coleridge's theory of imagination, try to find out the symbolic meaning of
 - 1 the pleasure-dome;
 - 2 the river;
 - 3 the natural world;
 - 4 the mighty fountain.
- 8 Which do you think are the main themes of this poem?

**4 COMPLETE** the summary of the poem using the words in the box below.

war	fountain	hail	sweet-smelling	Paradise	canyons
singing	fills	flashing	dream	emperor	describes



The speaker of the poem **(1)** Xanadu, the palace of Kubla Khan, a Mongol **(2)**
He tells us about a river that runs through **(3)** , first exploding into a noisy
(4) and then finally sinking down and flowing through underground caves into the ocean.
The speaker also describes the contrasting composition of Xanadu: there are both gardens with
(5) trees and 'sunny spots of greenery', 'caverns measureless to man' and a fountain from
which 'huge fragments vaulted like rebounding **(6)**'. In this hostile natural atmosphere
Kubla Khan, who is listening to the noisy river, thinks about **(7)**
All of a sudden, the speaker moves away from this landscape and tells us about another vision he had:
a woman playing an instrument and **(8)** about Mount Abora. The memory of her song
(9) him with longing, and he believes that the song would transport him to a
(10) world where an image of a terrifying godlike figure with **(11)** eyes
who has drunk 'the milk of **(12)** ' could 'build that dome in air' .

5 WRITE 10-12 lines about the differences between the content, the style and the theme of this poem and Wordsworth's *Daffodils* (→ T47).