

“Kubla Khan”  
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment

**Dream vision**

The dream vision was a conventional narrative frame that was widely used in the Middle Ages and is still employed on occasion. The narrator falls asleep and while sleeping dream a dream which is the actual story told in the dream frame. Among the dream visions are The Romance of the Rose, Dante's Divine Comedy.

- Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is purely a lyrical fragment, full of Romantic suggestion and haunting beauty.
- There is a break in vision between stanzas 2 and 3.
- The musical beauty of the poem depends partly on alliteration and assonance.

➤ The bright beauty of the pleasure-park and the cold dark of the caverns beneath can symbolize the elemental forces of life and death, united by the 'sacred river' that flows through both.

- ❖ The first publication of the poem included a lengthy note by Coleridge attributing its inspiration to a combination of having taken a drug for an illness he was suffering, and then reading a 17<sup>th</sup> C. travel book about the Chinese ruler.

he claimed that in his reverie he had composed between two and three hundred lines of verse, but as he was beginning to write them down he was interrupted by a visitor and discovered that he had forgotten the rest.

Coleridge read:

“In Xanadu did Cublai Can build a stately palace”. Somehow, his imagination seized upon the first five words as he wrote:

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

Kubla's domain is a delicately drawn scene with its gardens, trees blossoming with incense, and forests enclosing sunny spots of greenery: it is its own enclosed garden, girdled round with walls and towers, and contrasted with the landscape which follows:

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

- The poem is full of symbols whose meaning is highly elusive and whose presence in the poem abides beyond any thematic meaning. Humphry House interprets the poem as:

A poem about the act  
of poetic reaction.

The poet's excitement is a moment of holiness and enchantment , a place and a time of joy in which he is scarcely in control of what happens.

And mid this tumult Kubla from far  
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The 'ancestral voices' are a further puzzle in this enigmatic poem. They add to the fascination of it by suggesting a relationship between the tumult of the savage chasm and the tranquility of the of the pleasure garden.

The two modes of being are complementary though opposed, a way of recovering the lost paradise through peaceful art and another way of doing so through passion, inspiration and nature.

And all who heard should see them there  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Wave 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.

Here, the poet seems to be like a primitive figure who has to be kept apart from society. He is inspired by a paradisaical vision that most would find beautiful and fearful.

The final section of the poem recalls the sense which is symbolically presented in the earlier part of the poem:

There is a vision which is  
able to transcend the  
ordinary vision of beauty  
and become beautiful,  
enchanted and violent.

# Conclusions

✓ “Kubla Khan” is a poem which both describes and enacts the process of vision, the way in which poetry can possess some person and the way in which, in that possession, he or she becomes transformed.

✓ The poet brings the whole soul of man into activity and

*diffuses a note and spirit of unity, that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic power, to which we have appropriated the name of imagination.*

Biographia Literaria, (Ch. XIV)

A.C. Swinburne states:  
Every line of the poem  
might be subjected to the  
like scrutiny, but the  
student would be none  
the nearer to the master's  
secret.

The spirit, the odour in it, the cloven tougue of fire that rests upon its forehead, is a thing neither explicable nor communicable.