

Kubla Khan

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

About the poem

- ***Kubla Khan: or A Vision in a Dream*** is a poem written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, **completed in 1797** and **published in 1816**.
- It is sometimes given the **subtitles "*A Vision in a Dream*" and "*A Fragment*."**
- According to Coleridge's preface to Kubla Khan, the poem was composed one night after he experienced an **opium-influenced dream after reading a work describing Shan-du**, the summer capital of the **Mongol-led Yuan dynasty of China founded by Kublai Khan** (Emperor Shizu of Yuan).
- Upon waking, he set about writing lines of poetry that came to him from the dream until he was interrupted by **"a person on business from Porlock"**.
- The poem could not be completed according to its **original 200–300 line** plan as the interruption caused him to forget the lines.
- He left it unpublished and kept it for private readings for his friends until **1816** when, at the **prompting of Lord Byron**, it was published.
- The poem is **vastly different in style** from other poems written by Coleridge.

Points to Know

- Some of Coleridge's contemporaries denounced the poem and questioned **his story of its origin**.
- It was not until years later that critics began to openly **admire the poem**.
- Most modern critics **now view *Kubla Khan* as one of Coleridge's three great poems**, along with *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*.
- The poem is considered one of the most famous examples of **Romanticism in English poetry**, and is one of the most frequently **anthologized poems in the English language**.
- The **manuscript** is a permanent exhibit at the **British Library in London**.

"Kubla Khan" Setting

- "*Kubla Khan*" is set on the grounds of the **Mongol leader** and **Chinese emperor** Kubla Khan's summer palace—or, at least, it is set in the speaker's dreamy, hallucinatory vision of that palace. The palace itself is a grand-sun-filled place surrounded by lush gardens.
- The poem also spends a lot of time focusing on the **Alph river** that flows nearby. This river isn't of the serene, lazy variety, at least not all of the time; instead it's big and forceful, "**seething**" through immense caverns and erupting in a "**mighty fountain**" before making its way to a comparatively "**lifeless ocean**." In other words, it splashes violently through the canyons, churning up rocks as it goes.
- The speaker calls the caverns through which the river flows "**deep**" and "**romantic**"—in the awe-inducing sense of the word. These caverns are huge—so big, in fact, that the speaker calls them "**measureless to man**." They also seem at once wild, holy, and magical. The speaker even imagines that they're haunted, and in doing so conjures the image of a woman crying out in the

moonlight for a **demonic lover**. Altogether, this place seems rather unsettling and spooky.

- The setting for the poem is thus only partially literal, however: it's just as much a reflection of the speaker's own desires and struggles. This impression is reinforced in the poem's final stanza, where the speaker moves from describing Khan's palace to detailing a desire to build a palace of the speaker's own "**in air.**"
- This can be understood as building the castle through language and storytelling, even poetry. As such, the speaker wants to recreate Khan's palace as a testament to his own creative powers. The final stanza suggests that the reader should treat the more literal description of the palace and its grounds as being part of the speaker's reflections on creativity, desire, and the power of art—rather than as a literal description of a physical place.

Literary Context of "Kubla Khan"

- Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of the leading figures of literary **Romanticism**, an artistic movement that began in **Europe in the late 18th century** and was **influential through the mid 19th century**.
- In English poetry, the Romantics were a small, close-knit group. (In fact Coleridge wrote "**Kubla Khan**" while living with fellow Romantic poet William Wordsworth in a cottage in rural England!) The Romantics resisted the rationalism of the **European Enlightenment in favor of poetry that elevated the imagination**, praised the sublime power of the natural world, and valorized historical periods like the middle ages, which were not quite so enamored of modern "**reason.**"
- The reader can see all of these dynamics at work in "*Kubla Khan*." In a sense, the poem is about the creative imagination, with all its incredible powers and limitations.

- And the poem explores the imagination by focusing on nature itself. Nature isn't depicted as a space that follows strict laws, but rather as a space of beauty, power, and violence.
- The poem also notably turns for inspiration to a **culture beyond Europe, located in the distant past**. Coleridge relied for his information about Kubla Khan on several narratives by early travelers to the Far East, like **Marco Polo and Samuel Purchas**.
- Indeed, according to legend, Coleridge was reading ***Purchas's 1613 book Purchas, his Pilgrimes, or Relations of the World and Religions Observed in All Ages and Places Discovered*** when he slipped into the opium dream that inspired the poem.
- Purchas's text contains language that closely parallels Coleridge's: ***"In Xandu did Cublai Can build a stately Pallace, encompassing sixteen miles of plaine ground with a wall..."*** Coleridge's poem is thus a deeply personal fantasy and a reflection of his culture's limited knowledge of Mongolian life.
- In addition to this general literary context, **"Kubla Khan"** has a specific story attached to its writing. According to Coleridge himself, writing in a preface often printed with the poem, **Coleridge was reading Purchas's book when he slipped into an opium dream**. Upon waking, Coleridge wrote the **first 54 lines of the poem**—intending to write several hundred more. However, he was interrupted by a **"person from Porlock"**—a neighboring village—who had come on business and kept Coleridge occupied for an hour.
- Once the business was finally finished, Coleridge found he could no longer complete the poem.
- Hence, Coleridge's acknowledgment in the poem's **subtitle that it's a "fragment."**
- Some scholars have called into question the veracity of this story—suggesting, for instance, that the poem's third stanza, was written later.

Historical Context

- *"Kubla Khan"* has **two relevant historical contexts**: the moment in English history, at the **end of the 18th century**, when it was written, and the historical moment in the **13th century it describes**, when **Kublai Khan was the great Khan of the Mongols and Emperor of China**.
- These two historical moments are quite different from each other: they are separated by **five hundred years and a continent**.
- However, the separation between them is part of the point for the speaker: because Kublai Khan's culture is so far removed from his own, it allows him to imagine life beyond the limitations of European culture.
- At the time Coleridge wrote *"Kubla Khan,"* European culture was undergoing serious transformations. Although the leading thinkers of the previous century had prized reason and science, figures across Europe were calling for a return to the powers of the imagination.
- And politically, the **French monarchy had been overthrown in 1789**, leading to a brief period of revolutionary radicalism that came to a close in **1799**, just after the poem was written.
- As a result of these intellectual and political transformations, many of the values and institutions that people had cherished—and assumed were untouchable—like **hereditary monarchy** were coming into question.
- By contrast, Kublai Khan was a **leader of the Mongol Empire from 1260 until his death in 1294**. He was nominally in charge of the Mongols themselves, although in that capacity he didn't wield much power. His real power came from his position as **Emperor of China**, the first Emperor of the Yuan Dynasty—a position he assumed in **1279** when the Mongols conquered the **Song Dynasty**. He lived long before the **18th century with its political and intellectual clashes**.

“Kubla Khan” Speaker

- Readers don't get much direct information about the **poem's speaker**. The reader never learns, for instance, the speaker's profession, age, or class.
- Line **50 reveals that the speaker** is a man through the use of the **pronoun "his,"** but otherwise the speaker is pretty detached from the narrative of the poem as he describes, with gusto, the wonder of Kubla Khan's "pleasure-dome."
- In the final stanza, however, the speaker starts imagining having such a palace for himself—and the reader gets the image of a rather manic, imposing figure with **"flashing eyes"** and **"floating hair."**
- The speaker thinks that people looking on should **"beware"** of him in such a state, in which he has **"drunk the milk of Paradise."**
- Maybe he's drunk on power in imagining himself with his own palace; or, if one takes the poem to be an extended metaphor about poetry itself, perhaps he's in a frantic, creative mood.
- To that end, the speaker seems interested in Kubla Khan and his palace because they serve as reflections of his own creative ambitions. In line 46, the speaker announces, **"I would build that dome in air" using "music loud and long."**
- The speaker is thus implied to be a creative person testing the limits of his artistic powers; he thinks he could build a palace through language alone.
- One could take the speaker to be Coleridge himself—which, to be clear, is not directly stated in the poem and certainly not the only way to interpret it! But Coleridge allegedly did claim to have written the poem after reading about Kubla Khan and Xanadu, taking opium, and then having a fitful sleep.
- The final lines do seem to feel as though they could be pulled from the mind of someone rousing from a drug-induced dreams (and the "milk of Paradise" could easily be the speaker's literary way saying he's high on opium).
- There are some other clues in the poem about the speaker's identity. For instance, the speaker makes several allusions to books, like Samuel **Purchas's**

1613 travelogue Purchas, his Pilgrmes, an important source for "Kubla Khan" (and, according to legend, the very book Coleridge was reading when he slipped into the opium dream that inspired the poem). The speaker is thus probably an educated person, well read in the travel writing of the day.

- The speaker's interest in and use of travel narratives like Samuel Purchas's reveals something else about him as well: the speaker doesn't belong to Kubla Khan's culture. Instead, the speaker is an outsider, someone from the West, who regards Kubla Khan's palace as an exotic place.
- In this sense, the poem is not a careful, accurate portrayal of a foreign culture; instead, it says more about the speaker's own desires—and the speaker's own stereotypical images of foreign peoples.

Form

- **"Kubla Khan"** doesn't have a **set form**—nor does it follow a traditional form like the **sonnet or the ballad**. On a basic level, there are three stanzas. **The first has 11 lines, the second has 25, and the third has 18.**
- The poem meanders, wandering between different rhyme schemes and meters over the course of its **54 lines**.
- Indeed, the poem uses three separate meters—iambic tetrameter, iambic pentameter, and **in line 5, iambic trimeter**.
- There isn't always a clear reason why the speaker switches between these meters. Similarly, the poem will establish an intricate rhyme pattern, only to switch immediately to a new one.
- In most poems, **formal elements like meter and rhyme serve established rules**, to create a sense of order and regularity. In "Kubla Khan" they do just the opposite: they underline how disorderly the poem is, how changeable, and how irregular. Because the poem flirts with order only to abandon it, the reader has a sense that the poem is always on the verge of establishing a **definite rhythm**

and rhyme scheme—but it pulls away, toward some fresh, new poetic pleasure. (The major exception will be the poem's final stanza, where the speaker sticks to one meter exclusively, iambic tetrameter—though the rhyme scheme continues to be irregular throughout.)

- As a result, the **poem's unusual and irregular form closely mimics the poem's subject**. It certainly feels like a vision **made up of fragments**. One might interpret the poem's form as an image of the wandering, sometimes violent, river it describes.
- Or one might take it as an image of **Kubla Khan's pleasure palace**, with its dense **mix of both beauty and violence**. The poem doesn't insist on one interpretation or another. In its formal strangeness, the poem encourages the reader to develop their **own interpretation of its structure**.

Rhyme Scheme

- Though the poem makes **prominent use of rhyme**, it does not have the **regularity and order that usually accompanies a rhyme scheme**.
- For most readers, it will not feel like the poem has a rhyme scheme at all. Instead, like the wandering river it describes, the poem meanders and curves, bending back on itself and then rushing forward unpredictably.
- Its rhyme scheme shifts both within and across its three stanzas. For example, the first stanza can be divided into two sections. In **lines 1-5**, the poem rhymes:
ABAAB
- This initial section finishes with the end-stop in line 5, signaling the completion of the poem's first description of **the river Alph**.
- The **next 6** lines then switch to an uneven new rhyme scheme, signaling a new focus for the poem's descriptions (that is, the gardens surrounding the palace):
CCDBDB
- This is an unusual and original rhyme scheme: it does not correspond to any of the established schemes in English poetry. The speaker then repeats the first

stanza's pattern in the opening of the second stanza (using new rhyme sounds). Perhaps this repetition reflects the speaker's attention returning to the river Alph, now describing the chasm through which it flows. **Lines 12-16** are again rhymed: **ABAAB**

- However, the following lines switch into rhymed couplets, with slant rhymes in **lines 19-20** (forced/burst) and **line 23-24** (ever/river): **CCDDEEFF**
- Then, the speaker switches the rhyme scheme once again! Lines 25-30 rhyme: **GHHGII**
- The stanza finally closes with another rhyme scheme, this time: **JKJKLL**

(Note that "pleasure" and "measure"—the J rhymes here—are also slant rhymes with "ever" and "river"—the F rhymes—from earlier in the stanza; as such, it'd be possible to map the scheme as FKFKLL.) The rhyme scheme of the poem's first two stanzas is thus exceptionally complex and irregular. It follows no established rule and seems to shift according to the speaker's whims.

- In the poem's final stanza, the rhyme scheme shifts once again. In lines **37-41**, many of the lines are unrhymed altogether. After the clear end-stop of **line 41**, the speaker sets forth with a brand new rhyme scheme throughout the end of the poem. These lines are rhymed: **ABABCDCCDEED**
- This is, once again, a highly unusual rhyme scheme: it corresponds to no set form in English poetry. This new rhyme scheme—with its repetition of the C sound three times in a row—might seem somewhat manic. In any case, it represents new, uncharted territory—just as the speaker begins his discussion of building his own pleasure dome.

Gist of the Poem

- The **first** stanza of the poem describes **Kublai 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**.



Text

Kubla Khan Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.

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.

So twice five miles of fertile ground

With walls and towers were girdled round;

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.

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!

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

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;

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far

Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure

Floated midway on the waves;

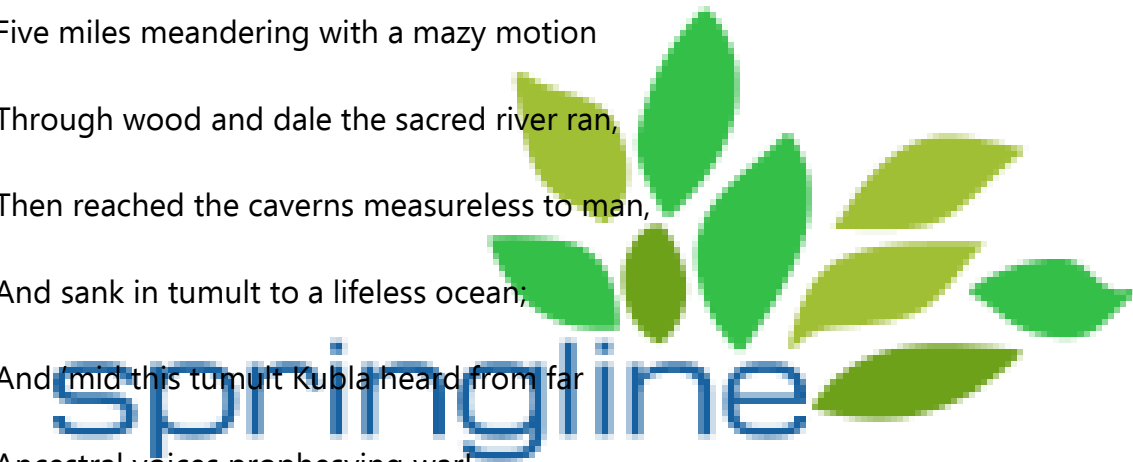
Where was heard the mingled measure

From the fountain and the caves.

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 played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
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 with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.



Kubla Khan Analysis

Lines 1-12

- In these lines S T Coleridge narrates how Kubla Khan ordered a stately pleasure house to be built and what was subsequently done to get it built.
- Kubla Khan ordered the erection of a magnificent pleasure palace on the banks of the sacred river 'Alph' which flowed underground for a long distance through unfathomable caves into a sea where the rays of the sun could not penetrate.
- Accordingly, for this purpose, a plot of fertile land covering ten miles was enclosed with walls and towers all around. On one side of this land, there were gardens full of aromatic trees where sweet-smelling flowers bloomed. There were meandering streams flowing through these gardens making the place exceedingly beautiful. On the other side of the land were thick primeval forests as old as the hills within which there were plots of grassy land warmed by the rays of the sun.
- Thus, Coleridge creates a vaguely but suggestive romantic palace. "In reading it", Swinburne observes about these artistic touches, "we are wrapped into that paradise where music and color and perfume are one; where you hear the hues and see the harmonies of heaven."

Lines 13-31

- These are the most famous lines of Coleridge's poem 'Kubla Khan' and have been highly appreciated for the effortless adaptation of the sound and rhythm to the various parts of the descriptions. While describing the beautiful grounds, the poet seems to have been attracted by the most remarkable mysterious chasm which stretched across the hill covered with cedar trees. It simply defied all descriptions and was a highly romantic place and wore a mysterious aspect. It seemed an enchanted place haunted by demons and fairies and frequented by a disappointed lady-love weeping for her demon-lover under the light of the fading moon.

- The vagueness and mystery of this place suggested witchcraft and its practice as they are associated with such surroundings. From this chasm, a fountain gushed forth every moment so violently that the trembling earth round about appeared like a man breathing hard while dying. It momentarily threw up huge fragments of rock which tossed up and then fell to the ground in all directions like hailstones from the sky or like chaff flying about when crushed with a flail.
- From this chasm also sprang up the sacred river, Alph which flowed with a zig-zag course for five miles through forest and valley and then fell into the calm and tranquil ocean through the unfathomable caverns. As it fell into the ocean, it created a great roaring sound. In the midst of this uproarious noise, Kubla Khan heard the voices of his ancestors prophesying that the time was near when he should indulge in ambitious wars. In the pleasure-house, Kubla Khan became addicted to luxury so his ancestors urged him to shake off his lethargic and luxurious life and be ready for a life of adventures and wars.

Lines 32-42

- These lines further describe the charms of displayed by the pleasure palace of the emperor at Zanadu. The pleasure-house of Kubla Khan was a very romantic and beautiful palace. The poet here says that the reflection of the pleasure-dome fell between the fountains mingling with the echoing sound coming out of the caves created for the onlooker an illusion of really rhythmical music. The palace was the construction of rare design and a wonderful triumph of architecture as it combined in itself a summer and a winter palace. The top of the building was warm because it was open to the sun while the low-lying chambers were kept cool by ice which never melted.
- In the next lines, Coleridge introduces a beautiful girl brought from a distant country, to complete the picture of the romantic atmosphere. He says that once in his dream he saw a girl who was brought from Abyssinia. She was singing of

her native land Abyssinia and Mount Abora. The poet means to suggest that her song showed homesickness. She had been brought from her country to a distant land China and wanted to return home and to play freely and happily once more with other girls of her country.

Lines 43-55

- These lines conclude the unfinished poem. When the poet saw an Abyssinian girl singing a melodious song and producing an exquisite melody on her dulcimer in the pleasure palace of Kubla Khan, his imagination was seized by the great power of music. In these lines, he says that if he could recall or learn the ravishing music of the Abyssinian girl, he would build the beautiful palace of Kubla Khan in the air. He would be filled with his swelling notes.
- Helped by his quickened imagination he would be able to reconstruct the whole scene. The long practice of this divinely inspired music will enable him to reproduce the whole palace in the air as beautiful and ethereal as the palace of Kubla Khan together with its sunny dome and caves of ice.
- His inspired imagination would create "a willing suspension of disbelief" and the readers would feel that the entire beauty of the palace has been captured for them. They would be struck with awe created by his flashing eyes, steaming hair, and lips.
- His frenzied condition would frighten them so much that they would guard themselves against coming into close contact with him. In order to save themselves from being infected by his magical charm, they would confine him within a magical circle three times.
- The poet has tasted the manna and nectar of divine poetic inspiration and has developed a catching influence of music in his looks. In order to save themselves from the effect of his charm, they would shut their eyes.

Critical response

- The reception of ***Kubla Khan*** has changed substantially over time. Initial reactions to the poem were **lukewarm**, despite praise from notable figures like **Lord Byron** and **Walter Scott**.
- The work went through multiple editions, but the poem, as with his others **published in 1816 and 1817**, had poor sales.
- Initial reviewers saw some aesthetic appeal in the poem, but considered it unremarkable overall.
- As critics began to consider Coleridge's body of work as whole, however, *Kubla Khan* was increasingly singled out for praise.
- Positive evaluation of the poem in the **19th and early 20th centuries** treated it as a purely aesthetic object, to be appreciated for its evocative sensory experience.
- Later criticism continued to appreciate the poem, but no longer considered it as transcending concrete meaning, instead interpreting it as a complex statement on poetry itself and the nature of individual genius.
- In October 1821, **Leigh Hunt** singled out *Kubla Khan* as one of Coleridge's best works, ***praising the poem's evocative, dreamlike beauty***.
- **Hall Caine**, in his 1883 survey of the original critical response to ***Christabel*** and ***"Kubla Khan"***, praised the poem and declared: "It must surely be allowed that the adverse criticism on '***Christabel***' and '***Kubla Khan***' which is here quoted is outside all tolerant treatment, whether of raillery or of banter.
- **T. S. Eliot** attacked the reputation of "***Kubla Khan***" and sparked a dispute within literary criticism with his analysis of the poem in his essay "***Origin and Uses of Poetry***" from ***The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*** (1933).