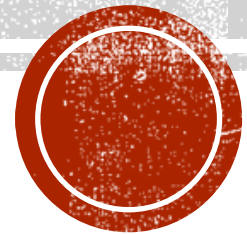


KUBLA KHAN
OR, A VISION IN A DREAM. A
FRAGMENT
BY SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

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TIMELINE

TARDIS, commissioned to transport Eng. Lit. students to various points in the past to study the works of literature from those eras



1 AD

5th cent. BC



18th cent.

19th cent.



Present

The poem was published in 1816, but Coleridge claimed it was composed in 1797



Samuel Taylor Coleridge
(October 21, 1772-July 25, 1834)



A VISION? IN A DREAM? HOW FAR DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE MUST WE GO?

Dream vision or dream allegory: a kind of narrative (usually but not always in verse) in which the narrator falls asleep and dreams the events of the tale. The story is often a kind of **allegory**, and commonly consists of a tour of some marvellous realm, in which the dreamer is conducted and instructed by a guide...

Allegory: a story or visual image with a **second distinct meaning** partially hidden behind its literal or visible meaning.

--Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*



FRAGMENT? OR A FIGMENT OF THE POET'S IMAGINATION?

If it was not enough to know that we are dealing with a dream vision, likely an allegory (which would suggest multiple layers of meanings), there are added, interconnected complications here:

1. It is a fragment, i.e. a small part broken off or separated from something (bigger)
2. The hard-to-believe story of how the poem was composed
3. The time gap between composition and publication



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.

By naming a real place, Xanadu (or Shangdu, called Shandu by Marco Polo), and a historical figure, Kubla Khan, in the first few lines seems to anchor the poem in time and space (13th century; Inner Mongolia, 350km north of Beijing). However, like much else in the poem, that proves to be an illusion, hinted at by the imaginary river, Alph.



(2nd stanza; 19 lines)

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!

Difficult words

chasm, noun, a very deep, narrow opening in rock, ice, or the ground

athwart, preposition, from side to side of; across

cedarn, adjective, connected to cedar, a tall coniferous tree

momently, adverb, from moment to moment (another word for intermittently)

dale, noun, valley

tumult, noun, loud noise, agitation



(2nd stanza; 19 lines)

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!

Colour codes

Yellow = haunting imagery

Green = description of nature that is untamed, full of uncontrollable energy that was only hinted in the first stanza ("forests ancient as the hills, / Enfolding sunny spots of greenery") lurking on the edges of the serene landscape surrounding Kubla's pleasure dome (see the contrast in the descriptions: "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.")

Blue = repetitions of words & phrases

Magenta = echo of words and phrases used earlier



(3rd stanza; 24 lines)

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.



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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- **Kubla Khan**, Kubla also spelled Kublai or Khubilai, (born 1215—died 1294) was a Mongolian general & statesman, who was the grandson and greatest successor of Genghis Khan. As the fifth emperor (reigned 1260–94) of the Yuan, or Mongol, dynasty, he completed the conquest of China (1279) started by Genghis Khan in 1211. Kublai was, at the same time, the overlord of all the other Mongol dominions, which included areas as diverse as that of the Golden Horde in southern Russia, the Il-Khanate of Persia (present-day Iran), and the steppe heartlands where Mongol princes were still living the traditional nomadic life. Marco Polo, the Venetian traveler, became Kublai's agent and his book *Il milione* ("The Million"; known in English as the *Travels of Marco Polo*) is the chief Renaissance source of information on eastern Asia. It is the only personal account of Kubla and is more of a panegyric than a sober appraisal.



DRAMATIS PERSONAE



Marco Polo, his uncle,
and his father
presenting the pope's
letter at the court of
Kublai Khan, detail of an
illuminated manuscript;
in the Bodleian Library,
Oxford, England.
© Photos.com/Getty
Images Plus



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- **Kubla's ancestors**, who only appear as a voice prophesying war
- **The Abyssinian maid**, whom Coleridge apparently saw in a vision (the second one), singing of Mount Abora (a mountain in Abyssinia, or present-day Ethiopia)
- **The poet himself**, who is introduced as late as the 38th line of the 54-line poem. Once he arrives on the scene, however, he becomes the centre of attraction (note the last 13 lines)



1816 EDITION, EDITOR'S NOTE

The following fragment is here published at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity, and, as far as the Author's own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the grounds of any supposed poetic merits.



Lord Byron (1788-1824), one of the young Romantics

As was customary with Coleridge, he is slightly dismissive about the poem

Prefiguring Freud?



EDITOR'S NOTE (CONTD.)

In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in 'Purchas's Pilgrimage':

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.



EDITOR'S NOTE (CONTD.)

The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two 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.



EDITOR'S NOTE (CONTD.)

On awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved." "A person on business from Porlock" interrupted him and he was never able to recapture more than "some eight or ten scattered lines and images."



LAUDANUM = OPIUM + ALCOHOL: SOUNDS POTENT

The term laudanum is now used only to describe the alcoholic tincture of opium, a 10 percent solution of opium powder dissolved in high-proof distilled spirits.

