

## **Kubla Khan**

**Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.**

**BY: Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

### **Introduction**

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 Zanadu 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.

'Kubla Khan' is the finest example of pure poetry removed from any intellectual content. Being essential to 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.

**Summary:** Kubla Khan begins as a dream stimulated by Coleridge's reading of Samuel Purchas' 17th century travel book, Purchas his Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and the Religions observed in all Ages and Places discovered, from the Creation unto the Present (London, 1617). The first stanza describes the summer palace built by Kublai Khan, the grandson of the Mongol warrior Genghis Khan and founder of the Yuan dynasty of Chinese emperors in the 13th century, at Xanadu (or Shangdu). In Xanadu did Kubla Khan A stately pleasure-dome decree Xanadu, north of Beijing in inner Mongolia, was visited by Marco Polo in 1275 and after his account of his travels to the court of Kubla Khan, the word "Xanadu" became synonymous with foreign opulence and splendor.

**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.**

In these lines from the poem Kubla Khan, the poet Samuel Taylor 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."

**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 momently 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 momently 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!**

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 to the life of adventures and wars.

**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.**

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.

**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.**

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.