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## Analysis of Coleridge's Kubla Khan

## **“Kubla Khan”: Introduction**

"Kubla Khan" is considered to be one of the greatest poems by the English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who said he wrote the strange and hallucinatory poem shortly after waking up from an opium-influenced dream in 1797. In the first part of the poem, the speaker envisions the landscape surrounding the Mongol ruler and Chinese emperor Kubla Khan's summer palace, called "Xanadu," describing it as a place of beauty, pleasure, and violence. The speaker suggests that these qualities are all deeply intertwined and, in the final stanza, announces a desire to build a "pleasure palace" of the speaker's own through song. The poem is one of Coleridge's most famous, and has been interpreted in many different ways. Overall, though, it's possible to think of it as speaking to the creative ambitions of poetry itself—as well as to its limitations.

## **“Kubla Khan” Summary**

In a place called Xanadu, the Mongolian leader Kubla Khan ordered his servants to construct an impressive domed building for pleasure and recreation on the banks of the holy river Alph, which ran through a series of caves so vast that no one could measure them, and then down into an underground ocean. So they created a space with 10 miles of fertile earth surrounded by walls and towers. And in it there were

gardens with sunny little streams and fragrant trees, as well as very old forests with sunny clearings in the middle.

But, oh, how beautiful was that deep, impressive gorge that cut through the green hill, between the cedar trees! It was such a wild place! A place so sacred and bewitching that you might expect it to be haunted by a woman crying out for her satanic lover beneath the crescent moon. And out of this gorge, with its endlessly churning river, a geyser would sometimes erupt, as though the ground itself were breathing hard. This geyser would send shards of rock flying into the air like hail, or like grain scattered as it is being harvested. And as it flung up these rocks, the geyser would also briefly send the water of the holy river bursting up into the air. The holy river ran for five miles in a lazy, winding course through woods and fields, before it reached the incredibly deep caves and sank in a flurry into the much stiller ocean. And in the rushing waters of the caves, Kubla Khan heard the voices of his ancestors, predicting that war would come. The shadow of Kubla Khan's pleasure palace was reflected by the waves, and you could hear the sound of the geyser mingling with that of the water rushing through the caves. This was truly a miraculous place: Khan's pleasure palace was both sunny and had icy caves.

In a vision, I once saw an Ethiopian woman play a stringed instrument and sing about a mountain in Ethiopia. If I could recreate within myself the sound of her instrument and her song, it would bring me so much joy that I would build Kubla Khan's pleasure palace in the sky above me: that sun-filled dome, those caves full of ice! And everyone who heard the song would look up and see what I had built, and they would cry out: "Be careful! Look at his wild eyes and crazy hair! Make a circle around him three times and refuse to look at him: he has eaten the food of the gods and drunk the milk of Heaven!"

## **Meaning and Key Themes**

**The Power of Imagination:** The poem is largely interpreted as a commentary on the poetic process itself—how the mind creates beauty out of chaos. Coleridge invents a river, Alph, based probably on the Sicilian river Alpheus, which features prominently in classical mythology (particularly Ovid) but which, Coleridge knew, had no connection whatever with Xanadu or any other place frequented by Kubla Khan. The sacred river that runs through caverns measureless to man and all the way to the sunless lifeless sea of death is the alphabet (the word comes from *alpha* and *beta*, the first two letters of the Greek alphabet); so Xanadu is the creation of the letters that come together so mysteriously to make the poem. It is not a real place but a place that can only exist in the words that describe it, and not

even there. The phantom that haunts the poet and makes him seek to follow the river does not lead him back to Xanadu, but, through it, to the poem that tries and fails to describe it.

**Contrasting Forces:** The poem contrasts the "stately pleasure-dome" (ordered, man-made) with the "caverns measureless to man" and the "sacred river" (wild, natural, violent).

**The Fragility of Inspiration:** The final stanza reveals the speaker's desire to recreate this vision through music and song but highlights the inability to sustain such intense creative, almost divine, inspiration.

**Nature vs. Man:** The "pleasure dome" represents an attempt to control nature, but the surrounding "savage place" remains, suggesting a tension between human civilization and nature's raw power.