

# “Kubla Khan”

by Samuel Taylor Coleridge - 1798



*if a man could pass thro' Paradise in a Dream, & have  
a flower presented to him as a pledge that his Soul had  
really been there, & found that flower in his hand  
when he awoke - Aye! and what then.*

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Anima Poetae* from the Unpublished  
Note-Books of Samuel Taylor Coleridge

# Introduction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Born in Ottery St Mary, Devonshire

He went to Christ's Hospital School in London

studied at Jesus College.

married Sara Fricker - he didn't love her



English lyrical poet,  
philosopher, and critic

lyrical ballads - Romantic movement

He left France and to Germany

studied philosophy at Göttingen University

mastered the German language.



At the end of 1799 Coleridge fell in love-

Sara Hutchinson


the sister of Wordsworth's future wife, to whom he devoted his work.



In 1816 "Kubla Khan" was published


inspired by a dream vision.


He died in Highgate, near London on July 25, 1834


 visionary poem- formal, abstract, vivid,  
and has obsolete words.


 uses intricate language

 The words are flowing and mellow.


 like "sinuous", and "enfolding"

 at the end summons a feeling of being embraced  
by the peacefulness of Xanadu.

 famous not for the story it tells, but how it is told.





Uses elaborate, vivid language used to describe places and sights.




"Gardens bright with sinuous rills," and "sunny spots of greenery."




 Influenced by - high on opium

 he presents us with words full of “image rich metaphors” for the joys and pain -


# Diction

 A "pleasure dome" (2) near which runs a sacred river, which is surrounded by fertile lands, gardens, and ancient forests, this is the Xanadu that Coleridge first presents for us.

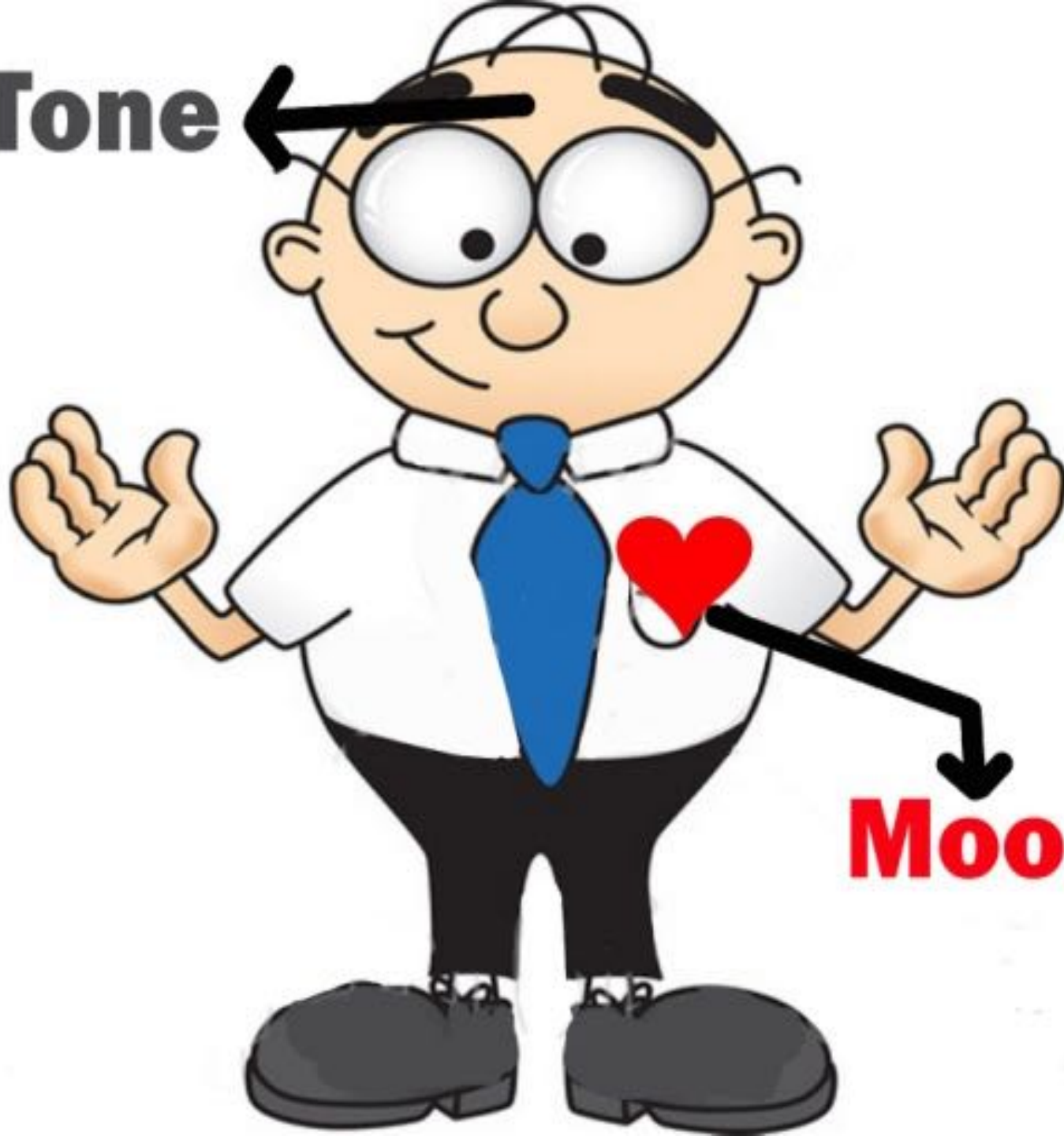
 This place is peaceful, like the state that is brought by using opium.

# Diction

 This drug was used in Classical Greece, Rome, India, and China


 Physicians prescribed it to kill pain, it was used as a social drug and it was used by a lot to forget about the grief in their lives.

**Tone**




**Mood**

## Tone and Mood

 The introduction to the poem - vivid and exciting -


 it describes a sense of utopia.

 A palace is described with lush green forests and a beautiful river running through the canyons.




## Tone and Mood



 The tone then changes to **eerie** as a woman is described crying for her demon lover.

 He is excited - portrays the lush river.

 The reader feels - wonder and enthusiasm about the palace and river.

# Tone and Mood



The mood of the reader-


frightful and scary - when talking about the woman by the river.


Toward the end of the poem-


the tone of the poet's attitude is mysterious as you hear him describe visions of the past.






 The poem conveys **situational irony** in the beginning when the **author talks about how perfect the palace is**

 but then mentions the spooky place where the women cries for her demon lover.



At the beginning, the poem conveys a happy and serene scene.




“And here were gardens bright with sinuous rills.  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree.”





In the middle of the poem, when **Kubla Khan is thinking about the caverns and war, his thoughts become dark and ominous**




“By woman wailing for her demon-lover! And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething”


 The poem ends with a powerful and mighty tone as the author realises the power he could obtain.


 “Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair!”





Overall the poem has a pretty serious mood,  
but the **tone changes frequently due to**  
**Khan's continuous thoughts.**


 poem **deals with irony** when compared to the author's life


 In the poem Kubla Khan has a lot of power and lives in a paradise

 In Coleridge's life, he dealt with debt, addictions, and failure which left him lonely and poor

 The speaker uses great imagery to pull the reader in to make it feel


 speaker uses dramatic descriptions in the beginning of the poem.


 **Alliteration- use of the same beginning consonant sound**

 **Ex: “sunless sea” (line 5), “sunny spots” (line 11)**




# Figurative Language

 Personification- giving human characteristics to inhuman objects


 Ex: “a savage place! as holy and enchanted” (line 14)


 “beneath a waning moon” (line 15)

 “as if this earth in fact thick pants were breathing” (line 18)

# Figurative Language

 **Similes- a comparison using like or as**


 **Ex: “And here were forests ancient as the hills” (line 10)**


 **“huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail” (line 21)**




 **Metaphor- a direct comparison**


 **Ex: “down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!” (line 13)**

# Imagery

 He uses **descriptive imagery** to make the reader picture this great utopia- the Emperor's palace

 but with disturbing thoughts, such that it was “haunted by [a] woman wailing for her demon lover!” (15-16).

 He describes in great detail a scared river that flows through a canyon. Kubla Khan himself was seen listening to the noisy river and thinking about war. The reader can picture this lush ground and hear the noisy river from the descriptive language used.

 Examples of imagery used – “sunless sea” (line 5), “gardens bright with  
sinuous rills” (line 8), “enfolding sunny spots of  
greenery” (line 11).

Kubla Khan creates the mental picture of a palace that is safe, sunny, and warm.


It is built in a beautiful green and vibrant

area, with raging oceans, rivers, and cliffs.

The green gardens make you feel peaceful where the ocean makes you feel gloomy.



 It is a mysterious dead end.


 The cliffs give you the image of something freighting.




**The Xanadu palace is really taken from the Mongol and Chinese emperor Kublai Khan of the Yuan Dynasty**








 **The River: The speaker mentions the river in over half the poem**

 **powerful descriptions...draw us to the conclusion that the main image is about the excitement and power of the Earth's natural wonders.**




 **The Ocean: The ocean is described as dark,  
gloomy and mysterious.**

 **It seems to be a dead-end and an unknown open  
space.**

 **It could possibly be seen as an underworld type  
environment**



 Woman and Demon Lover: The description of the woman wailing for her lover who is also a demon describes supernatural power and romance but it can also be related to excitement.





**Rhyme Scheme**: It has rhyme either back to back or every other line. Ex: “round” & “ground”, “slanted” & “enchanted”, “hail” & “flail”




**Alliteration**: It has alliteration within each stanza. Ex: “sunless sea”, “woman wailing”, “mazy motion”, “deep delight”




**Repetition:** In this poem repetition is used with certain words that sounds the same and have the same ending.

**Ex:** “seething”, “breathing”, “rebounding”,  
“prophesying”, “dancing”, “waning”, “lifeless”,  
“measureless”, “ceaseless”,







Overall we think Coleridge was able to convey **different moods** throughout the poem due to **his diction, figurative language, and imagery** to describe the land of Xandu



Reference to river Alph multiple times





 The garden symbolized **"the spontaneity and freedom of nature,"**

 B. Sprague Allen, *Tides in English Taste (1619-1800): A Background for the Study of Literature, Vol. II*, (Cambridge, 1937), 116.



 Coleridge's **prefatory note** published with the poem in 1816-

 talks- poem's composition

 The note goes on to ascribe composition of the poem to the summer of 1797 in "a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire," where the author had **retired on account of ill health-**




and where he fell asleep from the effects of an "anodyne," while reading **the account** in Purchas his Pilgrimage of the construction of a palace and surrounding gardens by Kubla Khan, the **Mongol ruler of thirteenth-century China.**



There followed "a profound sleep, at least of the external senses," lasting about three hours, during which the poet "has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines."



Upon awakening he wrote down the fifty-four lines we have, whereupon he was **interrupted** by a "person on business from Porlock," with the result that **he was never able to remember the rest of the poem.**





For over a century this account of the poem's  
genesis was taken at face value, and regarding it  
as a beautiful but meaningless fragment




John L. Lowes wrote **The Road to Xanadu** ( 1927 ) , in the latter part of which he applied to "Kubla Khan" the same techniques of **source-hunting** that had been so brilliantly successful with "The Ancient Mariner" in the first part.





On the premise that "The Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan" are "built of essentially the same materials," Lowes extended the knowledge of the poem's sources

 But like his predecessors, Lowes accepted Coleridge's prefatory note uncritically, and lamely concluded that "**Kubla Khan**" is an aimless pageant (spectacle) John L. Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study of the Ways of the Imagination* (London, 1951: 1st pub. 1927), pp. 410, 412.




The first book successfully to broach the poem's inner meaning was Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (London, 1934)

a Jungian reading (**Carl Gustav Jung** (/jʊŋ/ -often referred to as **C. G. Jung**) which recognized that the poem is structured upon the archetypes of heaven and hell.





Next came G. Wilson Knight's *The Starlit Dome*, which proposed a **symbolic reading of the poem** involving **Freudian elements** in the description of the landscape.



According to Knight, the **sacred river**, which "runs into an infinity of death," is "**a symbol of life.**"

 "As for Kubla Khan himself ... **he becomes God:**

 or at least one of those 'huge and mighty forms' ...  
in Wordsworth. . . . ( *The Prelude* line 43) Compare  
the two levels of meaning in *The Tempest*, **where**  
**Prospero** performs a some - what similar role ... **or**  
**Yeats's emperor in *Byzantium***



Knight also usefully observes that "The dome's shadow falls half-way along the river . . . [The dome] is directly associated with the 'mingled measure' of the sounds coming from the two extremes...."





**The shadow of the dome of pleasure**


**Floated midway on the waves:**

**Where was heard the mingled measure**


**From the fountain and the caves.**



The 'mingled measure' suggests the blend and marriage of fundamental opposites:life and death, or creation and destruction.These 'mingle' under the shadow of the greater harmony of the crowning dome-circle



Knight concludes: "The poem has a **barbaric and oriental magnificence** that asserts itself with a happy power and authenticity...




G. Wilson Knight, *The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision* (London, Toronto, and New York, 1941 ), pp. 91-97.


 in common with "The Ancient Mariner" and


"Christabel," "Kubla Khan" has its **setting,**


for the most part, in the **later Middle Ages**


 Elisabeth Schneider, has established beyond serious doubt that Coleridge did not compose the poem in an opium dream:




 "Very likely Coleridge was in a sort of 'Reverie' and no doubt he had been taking opium.

 Perhaps too the euphoric effect of opium rendered his process of composition more nearly effortless than usual.



 "The Dream of 'Kubla Khan/ " PMLA, 60 ( 1945), 796.




In 1951 appeared an influential article by R. H. Fogle entitled "The Romantic Unity of 'Kubla Khan.'





Fogle sees the poem as embodying a Coleridgean "reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" accomplished by the Imagination




 According to Fogle, “the **pleasure-dome** is the **focal point** of the physical setting and is correspondingly important. Within the bounds of the encircled garden, the **pleasure-dome and the river** are the **opposites** to be reconciled. . . .




The image of the dome suggests agreeable sensations of roundness and smoothness.


 This **dome**, however, also **evokes the religious** - it is in **some sort a temple**, if only to the mere mortal Kubla Khan.


 And thus there is also a **blending or interfusion** with its opposite, the sacred river Alph

The pleasure-dome ... is above and beyond Nature, a 'miracle of rare device' in which Man transcends and circumvents mere natural processes.It stands amid an enormous garden in which a considerable segment of wild nature is isolated and imprisoned for the delight of Kubla.The Romantic Unity of Kubla Khan,' " College English, 13 (1951), 13-18.

 Kubla is a typical **eighteenth-century man of reason**, trying to impose his rational order upon a recalcitrant [rɪ'kalsɪtr(ə)nt]


 (unmanageable) landscape.

 George Watson, "The Meaning of 'Kubla Khan,'" "A Review of English Literature, 2 (Jan., 1961 ), 28.




Humphrey House - agrees in essence with those of Knight and Fogle, **Xanadu is a symbol of harmonious human activity**







The sacred river is "the sacred given condition of human life.




By using it rightly, by building on its bank, by diverting its water into sinuous rills, Kubla achieves his **perfect state of balanced living.**




... It is an imaginative statement of the **abundant life in the universe**, which begins and ends in a mystery touched with dread, but it is a statement of this life as the ground of ideal human activity."


 Since "perfect state" presumably means just that, House is in effect saying that Kubla Khan in the poem **inhabits a real paradise**, one in which the conjunction of **heaven and earth is realized**. House also remarks, **"this is a vision of the ideal human life as *the poetic imagination can create it.*"**



Hence, we should not be surprised to find that in the creation of this paradise the "whole man" is taken into account.




The landscape is bathed in the light of eternity, and the poet explicitly tells us that the sacred river is flung up "at once and ever."





Humphrey House, Coleridge (London, 1953), p. 122.




In the first thirty-six lines of the poem, **all the opposites of human and divine nature are given free scope and are reconciled into a unity** which is aptly symbolized by the climactic vision of the "sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!"


 Among the opposites which are reconciled are:


 the **infinite and the finite** ("caverns measureless to man" and "twice five miles")

 **darkness and light** ("sunless sea" and "sunny spots of greenery")

 **nature untamed and nature improved** ("forests" and "gardens") ;

 **savagery and sanctity** ("a savage place! as holy and enchanted . . .")

 **destruction and fertility** ("Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail/ Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail")

 **life and death** ("Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,/ Then . . . sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean" )



In short, these lines give us Coleridge's

"**Marriage of Heaven and Hell,**" in which, as


in Blake's "*The Tyger*," we confront the

**mystery of creation**






It has been frequently observed that Coleridge's description of the landscape in *Xanadu* borrows from Milton's account of the garden of Eden in *Paradise Lost* (IV. 132-285; IX passim).

 only one critic has made the further comparison of the opening lines of "Kubla Khan" to the first two chapters of Genesis.

 H. H. Meier writes-

 "if the Miltonic parallel holds, Kubla himself is God the ordainer of the garden, whereas other persons there are strictly speaking none."




H. H. Meier, "Ancient Lights on Kubla's  
Lines," *English Studies*, 46 (1965), 26




The **Edenic hypothesis**, or parallel, works


insofar as it helps to account for the sense of **pristine enchantment** which imbues this landscape.




Also, one notes that in decreeing that the pleasure-dome and its surrounding gardens be built, Kubla Khan is like God creating the world by fiat.



The river which emerges from the deep  
romantic chasm is thrice referred to in the  
poem, and always as "the sacred river."



It presumably returns to the fountain via the sunless sea, like a serpent with its tail in its mouth - the ancient **emblem of eternity**.



Its very name, Alph, speaks of the beginning of thing

ΠΤΟ ΕΑΥΤΟ ΜΟΥ ΔΕ  
 ΤΟΥΤΕ ΑΙΝ  
 ΚΤΩΝ ΤΗΣ  
 ΠΟΥ :-  
 ΤΕΧΝ  
 ΤΟΥ  
 ΚΙ  
 ΤΟΙ  
 ΜΑΤ  
 ΤΑ  
 ΕΣΤΙΝ ΑΙ  
 ΑΥΤΟΥ ΤΟΥΤΕ ΑΙΝ

Η ΛΗΨΩ ΣΦΕΡ ΤΩΝ Σ  
 ΕΡΓΑΤΩΝ ΑΟ


ΦΩΤΑΙΩΝ ΜΟΥ ΠΑΡΕΙΩΝ ΤΗΣ  
 ΕΝΑ ΤΑΥΤΩΝ Η ΕΥΘΥΘΩΤΗΣ :-  
 ΣΦΑΙΣΙΝΟΥ ΑΥΤΟΥ ΕΝΑΙ ΙΩΣΗΣ,  
 ΠΑΥ Η ΟΝ ΨΦΕ ΑΥΤΟΥ :-  
 ΑΠΟ ΟΕ ΑΥΤΟΥ ΟΙ ΤΕΟΥΣ ΑΡΕΣ ΑΙΝ  
 ΣΩΜΗ ΑΥΤΗΣ ΤΕ ΤΑΧΗΣ









Richard Gerber, "Keys to 'Kubla Khan,'" English Studies, 44 (1963), 334-335, where this point is discussed at length.



if we follow the "Edenic hypothesis" through to its logical conclusion, we shall see that the **war here prophesied is not only war on earth, but** (since Eden symbolizes the conjunction of heaven and earth) **also war in heaven.**



The "ancestral voices" are prophesying a **falling away from the pristine unity** in which heaven and earth are one, as in the myth of Blake.

 "Ancestral voices prophesying war" thus becomes **parallel** to the line "And when the stars threw down their spears" in "The Tyger," – the main difference being that the former is anticipatory, the latter retrospective



THE ISIS OMNIA OF EGYPT,  
THE INDIAN ISA, AND GRECIAN CERES.

*To the Right Honourable Earl Spencer, a Patron of Eastern  
Science, this Plate is respectfully inscribed by T. M.*

































