

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Kubla Khan or, a Vision In a Dream: A Fragment (1816)

Coleridge was responsible for attempting to present the supernatural as real whereas his friend William Wordsworth would try to render ordinary reality as remarkable, strange. He suffered great physical and emotional pain during his life and became addicted to opium. He claimed that this poem came to him in an opium dream. It opens with an enigmatic but precise description of an emperor's pleasure dome located in an enchanted, savage spot where a woman cries for her demon lover and the sacred river is flung up violently, then meanders before plunging through caverns into a sunless sea. In trying to interpret this symbolic site we can begin by seeing the dome as a human creation (art) built in and over nature's beauty and power. Note that in the last part of the poem the newly introduced "I" has a vision in which, inspired by a singing woman, he would imaginatively recreate in air the Khan's dome. The artist who could accomplish this would be regarded with awe and even fear by those from whom he is separated by his inspiration. The poem is also a classic case of European fantasizing about the exotic and luxurious East.

What passages in the poem combine images of beauty with images of danger?

In Xanadu did [Kubla Khan \(1\)](#)
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where [Alph. \(2\)](#) 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, \(3\)](#)
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! \(4\)](#)
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 \(5\)](#) 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 \(6\)](#)
 In a vision once I saw:
 It was an [Abyssinian \(7\)](#) 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!

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And drunk the milk of Paradise.

- (1) The 13th-century founder of the Yuan dynasty in China, Kublai Khan ruled over a lavishly luxurious court known to Europeans main through the descriptions of the Italian merchant and traveler Marco Polo.
- (2) Magical river in western Greece.
- (3) Meandering streams.
- (4) Through a wood of cedars.
- (5) Suddenly.

(6) String instrument struck with two light hammers, used both in China and in Europe, in different forms.

(7) Abyssinia is the northeastern African country now known as Ethiopia.

(8) A protective ritual.

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