

KUBLA KHAN

'Kubla Khan' is one of the many fragments that Coleridge wrote. Although he claimed that this poem was a product of a frustrating attempt to recall a 200 line poem written during a drug-induced dream, it does have unity. Fragments were an eighteenth-century genre. Before Coleridge wrote 'Kubla Khan', he was reading 'Purchas's Pilgrimage'. Some of the words from this text fell into Coleridge's poem.

This poem contains a fantasy with a metaphorical framework similar to the Chinese box technique used in *The Arabian Nights* tales. Coleridge's use of a self-referential narrative technique is another similarity between his poem and the tales.

In 'Kubla Khan', Coleridge considers the nature of poetry and genius. The poet includes himself in the poem. This allows him to explicitly describe the journey of the imagination induced by drugs.

In the opening section of the poem, the poet creates an oriental fantasy named Xanadu. In the poem's first five lines, Coleridge evokes the image of Kubla Khan¹, a powerful Chinese Emperor. Coleridge describes Khan's royal estate and explains Khan's decision to build a dome or garden paradise. The dome can be read as a metaphor for Western and Oriental achievements. It represents a form of paradise on Earth. During the eighteenth-century, oriental gardens were fashionable in the stately homes of the English aristocracy.

Coleridge manipulates the sound of the words used to describe the dome. Short vowel sounds, especially the 'a' sound, are repeated. Assonance slows the pace of the poem and accentuates the strangeness of the world within it. Coleridge's use of third person adds to the mystery. The rhythm of the poem fluctuates as the ideas in the poem change – from the dome, to water and then to the garden. The rhyming scheme has an echoing effect which contributes to the haunting tone of the poem. These concrete images are then juxtaposed against metaphors for the subconscious.

The River Alph is situated on Kubla Khan's estate. There is considerable debate about the meaning of the river. One theory is that the River Alph is an ancient symbol that can be traced back at least a thousand years as the river of life. Another theory is that the river is an allegory for human consciousness. The river plunges down into a deep underground cave which symbolises the dark aspects of the subconscious mind. Yet another theory is that the river represents the beginning of life, as its name, 'Alph', is derived from the first letter of the Greek alphabet, 'alpha'.

Coleridge uses sensuous language to describe what the garden paradise looks like (lines 6–11). The alliterative 'f' sound is used to help the composer emphasise its fertility – 'and twice five miles of fertile ground' (line 6). The aesthetic aspects of the garden are constructed using adjectival phrases such as 'bright with sensuous rills'² (line 8). The garden is described as being 'blossomed' by many 'Incense-bearing tree' (lines 9) which gives a strong sense of sensuous pleasure. The image of the garden flows into the forest and there is a hint of darkness implied through the use of the words 'ancient' (line 9) and 'Enfolding' (line 11), even though the fertile character of the garden continues to be emphasised.

The existence of the river and the underground caves mean that the pleasure garden in this particular location is imperfect. Coleridge develops the idea that the River Alph