



Kubla Khan

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

BACKGROUND Coleridge wrote “Kubla Khan” in 1797 after taking opium prescribed to relieve pain. Affected by the powerful narcotic, he fell into a deep sleep while reading about the 13th-century Mongol emperor Kublai Khan. In his sleep, he composed 200 to 300 lines based on fantastic images that rose up as he dreamed. Awakening hours later, Coleridge began to write the poem down, but a visitor interrupted him, and later Coleridge could not recall the rest of the lines. He called the poem “a fragment” and “a vision in a dream.”

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
5 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;
10 And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery. **A**



But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
15 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 momentarily was forced:
20 Amid whose swift half-intermittent 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.

1 Xanadu (zǎn'ə-dōō'): Shangdu, one of Kublai Khan's residences in what is now northern China.

8 sinuous rills: winding streams.

A SOUND DEVICES

Read lines 1–11 aloud. What sound devices do you notice, and what **mood** do they help create?

13 athwart a cedarn cover: across a grove of cedar trees.

19 momentarily: at every moment.

20 intermittent: interrupted.

22 chaffy . . . flail: grain being beaten to separate it from its husks, or chaff.

25 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: **B**
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
30 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.
35 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,
40 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,
45 That with music loud and long, **C**
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!
50 His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honeydew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

B VISUALIZE IMAGES

Sketch a map of the **setting** you visualize from the description in lines 12–28.

35 **device**: design.

37 **dulcimer**: a stringed musical instrument played with small hammers.

39 **Abyssinian**: from Abyssinia, now called Ethiopia.

41 **Mount Abora**: a legendary earthly paradise like Kubla Khan's.

C VISUALIZE IMAGES

From lines 45–54, create a mental picture of the speaker and his listeners. Why do the listeners cry “Beware”?

53 **honeydew**: an ideally sweet or luscious substance.