Poetry for Students

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Presenting Analysis, Context and Criticism on Commonly Studied Poetry

Volume 5

Mary K. Ruby, Editor

Foreword by David Kelly, College of Lake County

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Poetry for Students

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge

1816

Although Samuel Taylor Coleridge is one of the major literary figures of the Romantic movement in England, as a poet his reputation stands on primarily just three works, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," and "Kubla Khan." All three were written between 1797 and 1800; however, "Kubla Khan" was not published until 1816. At that time, Coleridge subtitled it "A Vision in a Dream: A Fragment" and added a prefatory note explaining the unusual origin of the poem. This preface describes how Coleridge, after taking some opium as medication, grew drowsy while reading a passage about the court of Kubla Khan in Samuel Purchas's *Pilgrimage,* a seventeenth-century travel book recounting the adventures of early explorers. Soon he fell into a deep sleep which lasted about three hours. During this period, he composed from 200 to 300 lines of poetry based on the vivid images in his dream. When he woke, he remembered the entire poem and immediately began to write it down. Unfortunately, however, a visitor interrupted him, distracting him for about an hour. When Coleridge returned to his writing, the vivid images had fled, leaving him with only vague recollections and the fifty-four lines of this poetic fragment.

Many critics challenge the truthfulness of Coleridge's version of this story, feeling that the poem is complete as it stands and much too carefully crafted to be solely the result of a dream. However, whether whole or fragment, dream or not, the poem examines issues of vital importance to Coleridge: creativity and the function of the imagination. The

poem, including his prefatory comment, focuses on the process by which art is developed and how it may be lost or destroyed. When the poem begins, Kubla Khan orders the construction of an architectural marvel, his pleasure-dome; he locates his grand palace by a sacred river, one of nature's wonders. The poem continues by contrasting human creativity with the power of the natural world. The final stanza provides still another illustration of the process of creation, as the poet struggles to revive his poetic vision.

Author Biography

Coleridge was born in 1772 in the town of Ottery St. Mary, Devon, England. He was the tenth child of John Coleridge, a minister and schoolmaster, and his wife, Ann Bowdon Coleridge. Coleridge was a dreamy, isolative child who read constantly. His father died when he was ten, and he was sent to Christ's Hospital, a boarding school in London. There he was befriended by fellow student Charles Lamb. In 1791 he entered Cambridge University, showing promise as a gifted writer and brilliant conversationalist. He studied to become a minister but, in 1794, before completing his degree, Coleridge left Cambridge. He went on a walking tour to Oxford, where he became friends with poet Robert Southey. Inspired by the initial events of the French Revolution, Coleridge and Southey collaborated on *The Fall of Robespierre. An Historic Drama* (1794). As an outgrowth of their shared belief in liberty and equality for everyone, they developed a plan for "pantisocracy," an egalitarian and self-sufficient agricultural system to be built in Pennsylvania. The pantisocratic philosophy required every member to be married, and at Southey's urging, Coleridge wed Sarah Fricker, the sister of Southey's fiancee. However, the match proved disastrous, and Coleridge's unhappy marriage was a source of grief to him throughout his life. To compound these difficulties, Southey later lost interest in the scheme, abandoning it in 1795.

Coleridge then moved to Nether Stowey in England's West Country. Lamb, William Hazlitt, and other writers visted him there, making up an informal literary community. In 1796 William Wordsworth, with whom Coleridge had exchanged letters for some years, moved into the area. The two poets became instant friends, and they began a literary collaboration. Around this time Coleridge composed "Kubla Khan" and the first version of

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

"Rime of the Ancient Mariner"; the latter work was included as the opening poem in Coleridge and Wordsworth's joint effort, *Lyrical Ballads, with a few Other Poems,* which was published in 1798. That same year, Coleridge traveled to Germany where he developed an interest in the German philosophers Immanuel Kant, Friedrich von Schelling, and the brothers Friedrich and August Wilhelm von Schlegel; he later introduced German aesthetic theory in England through his critical writing. Soon after his return in 1799, Coleridge settled in Keswick near the Lake District, which now gained for him—together with Wordsworth and Southey who had also moved to the area—the title "Lake Poet." During this period, Coleridge suffered poor health and personal strife; his marriage was failing, and he had fallen in love with Wordsworth's sister-in-law, Sarah Hutchinson—a love that was unrequited and a source of great pain. He began taking opium as a remedy for his poor health.

Seeking a more temperate climate and to improve his morale, Coleridge began a two-year trip to Italy, Sicily, and Malta in 1804. Upon his return to England, Coleridge began a series of lectures on poetry and Shakespeare, which are now considered the basis of his reputation as a literary critic. Because of Coleridge's abuse of opium and alcohol, his erratic behavior caused him to quarrel with

Wordsworth, and he left Keswick to return to London. In the last years of his life, Coleridge wrote political and philosophical works and his *Biographia Literaria,* considered his greatest critical writing, in which he developed artistic theories that were intended to be the introduction to a great philosophical work. Coleridge died in 1834 of complications stemming from his dependence on opium.

Poem Text

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, 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,
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!
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 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 momently 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
    In a vision once I saw:
    It was an Abyssinian maid,
    And on her dulcimer she play'd,
    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!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Poem Summary

Lines 1-2:

In these lines, Coleridge introduces Kubla Khan, ruler of the Mongol Empire in China during the thirteenth century A.D. His kingdom symbolized wealth and mystery to Europeans ever since Marco Polo first wrote about his travels there; throughout the poem, Coleridge builds a sense of the exotic and mysterious. The second line emphasizes Kubla Khan's power as he orders a fitting palace for himself. It also hints at one of the many contrasts that will appear in the poem as the word "stately" conveying the grandeur and majesty of Kubla Khan's creation, is paired with the idea of a pleasure dome, a place of luxury and leisure.

The opening images of the poem bear striking similarities to the following quotation from Purchas's *Pilgrimage,* which Coleridge said he was reading immediately before he drifted into his deep sleep:

> "In Xamdu did Cublai Can builde a *stately* Palace, encompassing sixteene *miles* of plaine *ground* with a *wall,* wherein are *fertile* Meddowes, pleasant springs, delightful Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the middest thereof a suptuous house of *pleasure.*"

As you look through the first eight lines, notice the words that Coleridge has borrowed. It is also interesting to notice the changes which he made. For example, Xanadu fits the poem's iambic tetrameter, where Xamdu would not.

Line 3:

Khan chooses to build this dome on the site of a sacred river, which Coleridge calls the Alph. Although no river with this name exists, the name itself suggests or has the connotation of a beginning. This is because Alph is so similar to Alpha, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, which has as an alternate meaning, beginning. Coleridge, like many poets, likes to experiment with language and invent words to provide added guides to meaning. Critics have also identified the Alph with such different

rivers as the Nile, the Alpheus river in Greece, and the fourth river to flow out of the Garden of Eden. Note that the word river is always accompanied by the adjective "sacred." Since rivers and water are life-giving, the sacred river may be seen as a symbol of life.

Lines 4-5:

A second contrast is introduced with these lines. After the river leaves the area where Kubla Khan creates his kingdom, it flows beyond man's reach into a series of underground caverns. "Measureless to man" conveys not only caverns that man cannot physically map, but areas that are beyond the reach of his full comprehension. The river has as its ultimate destination the sunless sea, a place without light and life and a complete contrast to the earlier impression of the river.

Lines 6-7:

In these lines, Coleridge returns to the construction of Khan's kingdom. Ten miles of land, which are exceptionally rich, are enclosed behind a wall with towers to protect it. The pleasure dome is not a public sight available to anyone who wishes to visit. It is a private domain. This makes it quite different from the poet's creation that will be discussed later in the poem.

Lines 8-11:

Here another contrast is introduced. The gardens, planted or cultivated areas designed by humans, fill part of the area with brightly colored flowers and sweet smelling trees, watered by numerous winding brooks that branch off from the sacred river. These gardens are set among ancient forests, which have been there as long as the land itself. The river and forests provide an ageless backdrop for Khan's dream. Although Coleridge notes the differences between Khan's planned estate and nature's realm, both seem to exist in a harmonious balance. The kingdom described in lines 6 to 11 is created by using an evocative series of images of an earthly paradise, perhaps even a type of Eden.

Lines 12-13:

Line 12 begins by signaling new and even greater contrasts that the following lines will develop as they describe the deep crack in the earth hidden under the grove of cedar trees.

Line 14:

This is no artificial or manmade place. It is unreached by cultivation and civilization, a magic and even blessed spot that exists outside of man's understanding. The calm and balance of lines 8 through 11 are missing in this primitive, wild place. When holy and enchanted are joined together in this description, they convey a sense of the pagan and the supernatural.

Lines 15-16:

Coleridge uses a simile to show the distance of this site from Khan's imposing gardens. The waning moon describes that period as the moon decreases from full, so less and less of it is visible. Thus, this mysterious chasm is compared to a spot haunted by a woman crying in anguish, as the moon's light diminishes, for her demon lover. Any relationship between a human and the supernatural would be impossible in the balanced garden of Khan. It could only exist in the passionate upheaval of the chasm.

Lines 17-19:

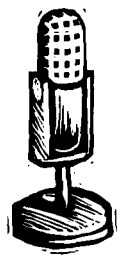
This mysterious chasm is pictured in constant turbulence, very different from the garden's calm. Symbolist critics point out sexual and birth imagery in these lines. The language makes it easy to picture the earth in labor, giving birth to the fountain.

Lines 20-22:

The power of the fountain that pours forth the river is apparent as huge boulders are tossed up with the water. Two similes are used to illustrate this force. In the first, the huge boulders are compared to hail. The second makes them seem even lighter. A thresher is a person or machine who separates the useful, heavier part of a kernel of grain from its lighter, useless shell or chaff. When the grain is hit with a flail, the kernel drops down immediately into a container; the chaff is blown away by the wind.

Lines 23-28:

The next lines reveal all the contradictions in the river's path. Along with the boulders, the river emerges. The previous similes describing the boulders both use images involving striking: hail hits the earth; the thresher hits the grain. The mood of lines 12-22 is of turmoil and upheaval. After the rocks leave the chasm, they are described again, using a gentler metaphor, as "dancing rocks." This phrase is also an example of personification, where inanimate objects are given human characteristics. After its tumultuous beginning, the river slowly takes a wandering path through the gardens. The poet uses alliteration in line 25 to add a slow, hum-



Media Adaptations

- A video by Bayley Silleck entitled *Coleridge: The Fountain and the Cave* is available from Pyramid Media.
- An audio cassette of readings by Christopher Plummer entitled *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Other Great Poems* is available from Listening Library.

ming sound, with the words "miles," "meandering," "mazy," and "motion." The repetition of lines 3 to 5 in 26 to 28 slows the pace as well.

Lines 29-30:

Although Khan's gardens initially seem a place of peace and balance, Khan himself hears a different message coming from the distant rumbles of the chasm and the cave. The tumult of the river issues a warning that human creations are not permanent. The voices of his ancestors provide testimony to the fact that the greatest creations of the world eventually come to ruin. Thus, too, the elegant dome is threatened with the destruction of war.

Lines 31-34:

The various contrasts Coleridge has described in the poem so far come together in these lines. The poem returns to that part of this earthly paradise which Kubla Khan has constructed, the pleasure-dome; however, in these lines, it is not seen directly, merely as a shadow. Now the contrasting element, the turmoil of the fountain and the message of the caverns, seems to overshadow the dome's image, warning that man's creation is transitory; nature endures.

Lines 35-36:

In these lines, Coleridge ends the first part of the poem, describing Kubla Khan and his world. The meter returns to iambic pentameter here, giving the lines a slower, measured quality. This meter helps to emphasize the mood of regret and loss in these lines as they summarize Kubla Khan's creative achievement. He harmonized opposing forces, sun and ice, in his miraculous dome, which has since vanished without trace.

Lines 37-38:

The poet himself becomes the subject as the poem moves from Kubla Khan's physical creation to the poet's vision as he recounts seeing a young girl playing a stringed musical instrument in a dream. The poem shifts from third person to the first person, I. Note that the meter also changes again and becomes even more regular as the poem returns to the light, upbeat tempo of iambic tetrameter throughout much of this stanza.

Lines 39-41:

Coleridge again invents or adapts names to conjure a sense of mystery or the exotic. The maid in the vision, like Kubla Khan, is from a foreign place. Abyssinia is another name for Ethiopia. Mount Abora, like Alph, is a name that Coleridge created. However, several critics note its similarity to Mount Amara in Milton's *Paradise Lost.* The reader is not given any details of the vision; no images are provided. The reader may assume that Mount Abora is similar to Khan's paradise only because the poet says that it creates such deep delight.

Lines 42-45:

This phrasing of these lines is unusual. Could is used as a conditional verb here, and the entire sentence becomes a speculation. If the poet can recover the dream, he will create a vision of Paradise; the beauty of the vision will transform the poet and enable him to use the music of his poetry to build with words what Kubla Khan had built in his kingdom. The poem leaves unanswered whether or not the poet will be able to capture that dream.

Lines 46-48:

Here, the poet describes the power of successful poetic vision; not only can he renew his vision, but he has the power to convey it to all who hear or who read his words. This serves as a contrast to the Khan's pleasure-dome, bound by walls and not meant for all to use.

Lines 49-52:

All of those around the poet are wary of him because he is caught up in a kind of enchantment or madness during his vision. His eyes glitter in a frenzy of creativity. This creativity, like that of the sacred river, comes from tumult. He is viewed with

"holy dread" because he has drawn his vision from a place similar to the chasm described earlier, a place sacred and enchanted, pagan yet blessed. The idea of the poet being "possessed" by his vision is not new with Coleridge. The Greeks believed that creativity was often a type of momentary madness.

Lines 53-54:

Honey-dew refers to the sweet honey-like substance that certain flowers, such as honeysuckle, produce in the summer. Another word for this liquid is nectar, known as the food of the gods. With his words, the poet, when he achieves his dream, can combine the chasm and the gardens, thus tasting Paradise.

Themes

Nature and its Meaning

The opening lines of "Kubla Khan" immediately thrust us into a strange world where the remarkable is commonplace. Kubla Khan orders a "pleasure-dome" to be built next to a sacred river that erupts from a chasm, flows in "sinuous rills" through gardens, then descends "in tumult" into "caverns measureless to man." Encircling the centrally placed dome, walls and towers inscribe a defining limit around "forests ancient as the hills." These elegant and civilized structures actually enclose a "deep romantic chasm ... A savage place" that spurts life-giving waters to the gardens like a spouting heart or a birthing mother. In other words, despite human artifice, nature vivifies the whole and gives it meaning. So Kubla Khan, the prototypical Romantic artist, in order to create his masterpiece, merely defines a limit with his art around the uncontrollable magic of untrammeled nature and allows it to feed and inform his art work. And this, in fact, was the aesthetic Coleridge and other Romantic poets practiced. For them, poetry, as an "imitation of nature," merely delimits in image and form the divine beauty of raw nature.

But in "Kubla Khan," as Coleridge informs us in the preface to the 1816 edition of the poem, the wild nature of the gardens, the fountain "with ceaseless turmoil seething," and "Alph, the sacred river," actually emerge from the poet's dream consciousness. The Romantics believed that, at its core, the self is one with nature. Childhood and dreams fascinated them thematically in their poetry because both, like nature, were simple, raw, and unrestrainable. They recognized that in all of its forms, nature yearns with omnidirected desire. Just like a "woman wailing for her demon-lover," nature is, in William Blake's words, "Energy." And what Blake says in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* of this "Energy" also applies here in "Kubla Khan": "Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.... Energy is Eternal Delight." The "outward circumference" of the Khan's towers and walls circumscribes the "Eternal Delight" of untamed nature, which is both "holy and enchanted" and certainly beyond human control.

Consciousness

Read as the beginning of a longer poem, Coleridge's poetic "fragment" sets forth a fantastic world, set both in the "mysterious" Orient and in the "magical" Middle Ages. But read as a whole complete unto itself, "Kubla Khan" evokes the fleeting images of a waking dream that speak not in words but in symbols. And although many critics point to the Crewe manuscript version of "Kubla Khan" found in 1934 as proof that Coleridge "consciously" revised the text, the poem as it stands successfully replicates the dream state and unveils a genuine glimpse into an archetypal world, a world Carl Jung, a Swiss psychoanalyst, called the "collective unconscious." The first thirty-six lines of the poem imagistically present a symbolic diagram of the "self," in which consciousness strives to find integration with the incalculably greater depth of the unconscious mind, while the last eighteen lines reflect upon the power of the unconscious mind when Coleridge finally realized that the full recollection of his dream work was impossible.

By demarcating a circular space from the "forests ancient as the hills" with protective walls and towers, Kubla Khan creates a kind of "mandala" whose circumference is described by the "stately pleasure-dome" at its center. A Sanskrit technical term from Tantric Buddhism for a circular "cosmogram" used for "centering" and meditation, the mandala is a map of the inner world (the microcosm) that mirrors the outer world (the macrocosm). According to Jung, the mandala serves to define and protect the self as it seeks to integrate with the unruly forces of the unconscious mind. But in "Kubla Khan," the "sunny spots of greenery" and the bright "sinuous rills" within the conscious world of the self appear tenuous, fragile, and minuscule in comparison to the cavernous deeps of the "sunless sea." In fact, all of the paired opposites that appear within the poem (sun and moon, light and dark, male and female, movement

Topics for Further Study

- Reread the poem's description of the Khan's "girdled" gardens, pleasure-dome, chasm, etc. Now use your own powers of imagination to visualize details to supplement the poem's rather broad descriptions: colors, shapes, textures, sounds, and so forth. Now write, draw, or graphically represent your version of the Khan's earthly paradise. Members of the class should share their personal visions with each other for an interesting class discussion about the universal and the personal in the creative imagination.
- Research information on the historical Kublai or Kubilai Khan and compare what you have learned with Coleridge's dream-figure. In the poem, ancestral voices prophesy war. What was the political situation in the Eurasian land mass during the Khan's reign? What was the political, technological, and economic "balance of power" between Europe and Asia at the time?
- Examine the female figures and images in Coleridge's poem. Some feminist critics applaud Coleridge's sharing his "feminine side" in this poem while others reject the way women are portrayed (especially the "woman wailing for her demon-lover"). What is your opinion in this regard? Are women portrayed positively or negatively (or both) in this poem? Follow the text of the poem closely, and use good critical sources to defend your position.

and rest, and good and evil) struggle without success to find balance within this delicate world fed by the waters of the collective unconscious.

Creativity and Imagination

As mentioned previously, "Alph, the sacred river," suffuses consciousness with creative "Energy." This overwhelming creativity fecundates the conscious mind ("twice five miles of fertile ground") via the spouting chasm that flings up water and "dancing rocks" from the underworld. This birth-giving chasm, clearly associated with the "woman wailing for her demon-lover," charges the visionary with almost frenzied inspiration.

In the last eighteen lines, the speaker recalls yet another female figure he had once seen in vision, the "damsel with a dulcimer." Her strange song, if he could but "revive [it] within" himself, would so permeate him with numinous powers that he would be able to recreate the Khan's dome and the "caves of ice" in the air itself. Such magical powers, the fruit of a kind of possession, would then make the speaker into an object of taboo, both holy and dangerous to the common sort of humanity. Like the chasm, both "holy and enchanted," the inspired poet becomes an ambivalent figure "beyond good and evil," for "he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise." Not surprisingly, many critics have commented that this "milk of Paradise" might be nothing more than laudanum, a solution of opium in alcohol, to which Coleridge was addicted most of his life. Unfortunately, Coleridge's dependence on drugs cut short his poetically most productive period.

Style

"Kubla Khan" is an intricately structured poem, using a amazing variety of metric and rhythmic devices. Lines 1 to 7 and 37 to 54 are written primarily in iambic tetrameter.

In order to analyze the rhythm or meter of a line of poetry, the line is divided into syllables. Iambs are units of two syllables, where the first syllable is unstressed, or not emphasized, and the second syllable is stressed. Notice the syllables in the first line of "Kubla Khan":

In **Xa** / na **du** / did **Ku** / bla **Khan**

When the line is read aloud, the emphasis falls on every second syllable. The meter is iambic

tetrameter because there are four of these units in each line (a total of eight syllables). Between lines 8 and 53, the meter shifts to other meters, primarily iambic pentameter.

The poem uses an equally elaborate rhyme scheme. Lines 1, 3, and 4 rhyme, as do lines 2 and 5. The next two lines, 6 and 7, are a couplet. In the following four lines, an alternating rhyme pattern is used: rills, tree, hills, greenery. This variety continues throughout the poem.

The complicated use of rhyme is not limited to the last words in each line. A close examination of the first line provides examples of the intricate rhyme within a line. Each of the eight syllables is involved some type of internal rhyme: *xa / na / bla; / du / ku.* Note also the syllabic alliteration of do and did. The only syllables left, in and Khan, contain a half rhyme. The elaborate rhyme continues throughout the poem. For example, each of the first five lines ends with alliteration: Kubla Khan, dome decree, river ran, measureless man, sunless sea. These shifts in meter, along with clever word play, help to reinforce the poem's theme of creativity and poetic vision.

Historical Context

Born a little less than four years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Coleridge came of age during the French Revolution. Like most of his generation, he was indelibly marked by the Revolution for the rest of his life, even though in his maturity he came to reject its fundamental premises. Even as he was turning away from political radicalism, however, Coleridge came to embrace German philosophical idealism, itself an intellectual result of the Revolution. For its own part, the French Revolution, child of the Enlightenment, had also outgrown the rational and empirical restraints of the Enlightenment's Cartesian and Newtonian world view. What had been declared "self-evident" and a matter of reason and natural law by the proponents of the American Revolution very easily and rapidly evolved into ideological articles of faith for the zealots of the new religion of "Man." This "sea change" was made manifest when a Jacobin-led mob took over Notre Dame Cathedral, renamed it the "Temple of Reason," and then enthroned a naked prostitute on the high altar to worship her as the "Goddess of Reason." These events seem bizarre enough in themselves, and yet the roots of this revolt against reason in the name of reason ironically lie within the rationalism of the Enlightenment's scientific culture.

The scientific revolutions of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries precipitated not only technological, economic, and social revolutions that continue to escalate to this day but also a spiritual and intellectual crisis that has only deepened over time. When René Descartes' radical skepticism could find no firm foothold upon which to stand to ascertain the truth about reality, the philosopher and mathematician clutched on to his ego's own ability to think in order to affirm his own existence: "I think, therefore I am" (*cogito ergo sum*). By substituting epistemology, the philosophy of knowing and apprehension, for metaphysics, the philosophy of being, Descartes put the self with its reasoning faculties at the center of his search for scientific certitude. In other words, the Enlightenment thinkers who followed Descartes came to focus on the "knower" as much as (if not more than) on the "known." This began the so-called "epistemological crisis" of Western thought, a crisis that finds echoes even today in Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics.

The scientific discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton, on the other hand, tended to substantiate a mechanistic view of the physical universe. Deists, unwilling to relinquish completely the idea of God, proposed a deity that was a master "clock maker" who had put together the universe only to "wind it up" and watch it go from a distance. More consistent thinkers suggested, however, that the machine of the universe had no real need a maker because the Deists' God was already so completely absent from the physical phenomena of his "clock works" as not to exist. The combined effect of Descartes' speculations and Newton's discoveries not only eroded traditional faith in the Christian God, but also reinforced two major streams of philosophical thinking that had already been growing within Western civilization. Cartesian doubt regarding sense perception combined with Francis Bacon's scientific methods to beget empiricism, the philosophical basis of scientific method even to this day. But by focusing on the ego's powers of reason in order to affirm objective reality, Descartes was also responsible for the development of philosophical idealism that countered empirical skepticism by studying the inner workings of the self.

But the thinker who provided the ultimate philosophical and ideological justification for the Revolution's revolt against reason was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While not an idealist in the philosophical sense of the word, Rousseau rejected

Compare & Contrast

- **1789-1815:** The French Revolution, starting with the storming of the Bastille in July of 1789, takes on a life of its own and quickly becomes increasingly more radical until Robespierre and the Committee of Safety perpetrate the "Reign of Terror" on Paris from October of 1793 until July of 1794. Because the Revolution seeks to spread its ideology by military means to other countries in Europe, the people's army and its leaders become increasingly more powerful until Napoleon takes dictatorial control in a coup d'état, eventually crowning himself Emperor in 1804. Only at the Battle of Waterloo is allied Europe freed from the "specter of revolution" they saw exemplified in the person of Napoleon himself. Despite the reactionary politics in Europe after the Napoleonic wars, however, revolutionary cadres continue their work underground.

  1917-1989: The November Revolution of the Bolsheviks leads to a "reign of terror" for more than seventy years as Marx and Engels' conception of the "Dictatorship of the Prolertariat" (the working class) over the bourgeoisie (the middle class) is put into practice by Lenin as a dictatorship of the Communist Party over everybody. After Lenin's death, internal power struggles within the Party results in Stalin's becoming dictator. Furthermore, before his death in 1953, Stalin's campaigns of terror cause the death of more than 25 million people, more than those killed in Hitler's concentration camps. Only Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of "glasnost" in 1985 ends rule by terror in the Soviet Union, but soon afterward, Communism's political control of Eastern Europe "withers away."

- **1839-1842:** Because of China's economic self-sufficiency, British merchants begin trading opium from India to China in the late eighteenth century in order to siphon off Chinese reserves of gold. When Lin Tse-hsu, an imperial agent, dumps more than 20,000 chests of opium into Canton's harbor in 1839, the British respond with war. As one of the spoils of their victory in the Opium War, the British take Hong Kong as a colonial port.

  1997: Hong Kong returns to Chinese political control.

  Today: Since it was formed twenty-five years ago, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has been waging an ongoing war in Latin America and the United States against the illegal importation of cocaine. Produced primarily in Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru, cocaine is Latin America's second-most important export after petroleum and yields annual revenues estimated at $9 to 10 billion. Americans spend more on cocaine than on airline tickets, gas utilities, and periodicals.

- **1938-1943:** In 1938 while searching for a circulatory stimulant, Dr. Albert Hoffman, a research chemist for Sandoz pharmaceutical laboratories in Basel, Switzerland, first synthesizes lysergic acid diethylamide (abbreviated as LSD from its name in German). When no medicinal properties are observed in laboratory animals, the chemical is dropped from further study. But Hoffman, acting on a hunch, synthesizes LSD once again in 1943 and accidentally ingests some during the process. Hoffman's "acid trip" leads to modern research on the class of drugs now known as *psychedelica.*

  1960-1963: Harvard University research psychologists Timothy Leary, Dick Alpert, and Ralph Metzner, begin to experiment with psychedelics as therapeutic tools to help patients and prisoners deal with a wide variety of problems. After parents and university officials become alarmed at the effects of their research, the three professors are summarily fired. Leary and Alpert continue their work illegally until personal disagreements and Alpert's conversion to yogic Hinduism separate them. Leary goes on to wage war in what he terms the "politics of consciousness." His slogan of "turn on, tune in, and drop out" becomes a revolutionary mantra as the right of "self-determination" over one's individual consciousness joins racial equality and the war in Vietnam as issues of the "cultural revolution" of the 1960s and early 1970s.

  Today: LSD and other psychedelics are again growing in popularity with young people, although not in the numbers of the later 1960s. For many, however, computer-generated "virtual reality" legally replicates the altered states of consciousness found in psychedelics.

the artificiality of the arts and sciences and said that human authenticity could only be found within the self restored to its original, natural goodness. He believed that as humans "return to Nature," their proclivity toward evil withers away. In his opinion, since civilization as a whole had alienated people from their original simplicity, formal intellectual inquiry could only further estrange them from their true selves. Because of his faith in humanity's "natural goodness," Rousseau advocated direct democracy and an end to all hierarchical classes. Needless to say, with these premises the Revolution could justify any barbarous act as an expedient for humanity's return to "Nature."

Rousseau, of course, has been hailed as the "first Romantic." By rejecting reason and championing individual, emotional response over the mores of civil society, Rousseau provided artists and revolutionaries alike with a ready-made warrant to act upon their inner promptings without reference to "objective" standards of behavior. But Enlightenment science had already cleaved an unbridgeable gap between the knower and the known. If the truth of beings cannot be safely apprehended through sense perception, then how can any "natural law" of proper human conduct be objectively predicated? Coleridge, like many of his era, sought desperately to close this gap. Turning away from his youthful radicalism, he long tried to reestablish the moral primacy of the old order of society. Significantly, however, he did not choose the metaphysics of classical realism to defend his "neo-conservatism" but the relatively new philosophy of German idealism that undertook to ascertain the nature of reality by studying human consciousness, not the essence of being as such.

Critical Overview

John Livingston Lowes, in *The Road to Xanadu,* produced the first extensive analysis of Coleridge's poetry. His primary interest was tracing Coleridge's sources. Lowes was convinced that "Kubla Khan" had indeed been conjured up in a dream, inspired not only by Purchas' *Pilgrimage,* but by several other works that Coleridge had read. He traces influences in such varied sources as Plato, Milton, and several early travel books, particularly John Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile.* His work provides an excellent background on which many other critics build their analyses. In *Coleridge, Opium and "Kubla Khan,"* Elizabeth Schneider provides a detailed analysis of the poem. Unlike Lowes, Schneider feels that "not only do the first thirty-six lines of the poem refuse to sound as if they had been dreamed, they sound more than anything else like a fine opening for a romantic narrative of some magnitude." The final lines are then added to explain the artist's loss or dimming of vision. She stresses the careful construction of the poem, in its use of rhyme and meter, in its use of parallel development, and in its contrasts. Schneider also analyzes the tone of the poem, describing it as ambivalent, moving from one position to another. In spite of the fact that several characters are named in the poem, not one is totally present: Kubla Khan represents the past; the wailing woman exists in a simile; the Abyssinian maid is part of a vision which may or may not be recalled. Even the poet himself is shrouded by his floating hair.

Both J. B. Beer, in *Coleridge the Visionary,* and Max Shultz in *The Poetic Voices of Coleridge,* discuss the two distinct sections of "Kubla Khan." Beer feels that the poem has two main themes, creativity and the loss of Paradise. As the poem opens, Kubla Khan struggles to rebuild a paradisiacal garden, while the forces of nature threaten to reassert themselves and overwhelm his creation. In the last stanza, the poet, too, attempts to use his vision to regain paradise. Schulz notes the contrasting points of view and the two climaxes. He believes that the poem is typical of Coleridge's search for balance, finding "a reconciliation of opposites, particularly of nature and art, is a ruling tenet of his thought."

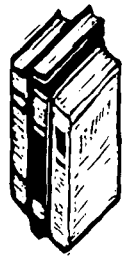
Humphry House, in *Coleridge: The Clark Lectures,* maintains that "Kubla Khan" "is a triumphant positive statement of the potentialities of poetry." To prove this, he discusses different critical views of line 41, in which the poet wonders, "Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song." While some critics assert that this line describes the poet's grief for the beauty that he has lost and is unable to recover, House sees it in a more positive light—as a query. In this case, "Could I?" might easily be answered, "Yes!" He supports his views by discussing the lighter, faster meter in this section. In his opinion, the entire poem is a celebration of the marvelous power of poetry.

Criticism

Mary Mahony

Mary Mahony is an instructor of English at Wayne County Community College in Detroit, Michigan. In the following essay, Mahony argues that "Kubla Khan" is not a poetic fragment re-

What Do I Read Next?



- William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* explicitly explores overcoming the opposing duality of the conscious (Heaven) and unconscious (Hell) minds just as Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" does symbolically. The two works share many ideas about the importance of the imagination as a conduit of prophetic inspiration. Interestingly enough, both poets were strongly influenced in their thinking by Jacob Boehme, a sixteenth-century Lutheran mystic who described his experiences and his theology with alchemical symbolism.
- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's tragedy *Faust* provides yet another artistic expression of Jacob Boehme's ideas during the Romantic period. In the traditional Faust myth, Faust is punished for selling his soul to the devil to gain secret knowledge and magical powers (see also Christopher Marlow's *Doctor Faustus*). But in Goethe's play, Faust is redeemed at the end of part two by the "Eternal Feminine" because his universal desire for consciousness and experience places him "beyond good and evil."
- Carl Gustav Jung's two books, *Psychology and Alchemy* and *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious,* although somewhat difficult to read, provide excellent examples of Jacob Boehme's influence in modern depth psychology. Freud's most favored pupil who was destined to take over as leader of the psychoanalytic movement upon the "master's" death, Jung came to reject Freud's preoccupation with sexuality as the chief cause of psychopathological states. Jung noticed that his patients' dreams or hallucinations more often resembled mythological or religious symbolism. Eventually Jung founded his own school of psychoanalysis based upon a theory of genetic as well as personal memories to explain recurring motifs in all states of altered consciousness.
- Richard Haven has written an excellent book called *Patterns of Consciousness: An Essay on Coleridge.* This work draws upon all of Coleridge's writings to explore his personal and philosophical struggles to understand the nature of consciousness and the unconscious.

sulting from a dream, but a complex and carefully organized work that illustrates Coleridge's poetic principles.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is regarded as one of the great English Romantic poets. Many critics consider *Lyrical Ballads,* published by Coleridge and William Wordsworth in 1798, the first expression of the Romantic movement in English poetry. This collection explored new directions in poetic language and style while breaking away from the formal and highly stylized poetry of the eighteenth century. Coleridge was also a brilliant literary critic. His literary analysis, particularly in *Biographia Literaria,* attempted to define both the nature of poetry and the poet. These definitions, as well as Coleridge's philosophical theories about creativity and the imagination, greatly influenced writers who followed. Unfortunately, however, he was frequently attacked on both a personal and literary level. Many of his friends felt that he had betrayed his initial promise. His life, plagued by ill health and drug use, was often moralistically presented as a cautionary tale. In the third chapter of *Biographia Literaria,* Coleridge compared this persecution by fellow critics to being dragged for seventeen years through a "literary gauntlet."

This same negative attitude often extended to Coleridge's poetry. "Kubla Khan" is an excellent example. Nineteenth-century critics tended to dismiss it as a rather inconsequential or meaningless triviality. In large part, this was due to Coleridge's own introduction to the poem. When it was first published in 1816, he subtitled it "A Vision in a Dream: A Fragment." The preface went on to note that it was only being "published at the request of

a poet of great and deserved celebrity [Lord Byron], and, as far as the Author's own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed poetic merit." Coleridge was taken at his word, and for nearly a century the poem was dismissed. After its publication, poet and critic Thomas Moore included the previous quote in his critique in *The Edinburgh Review,* adding that he totally agreed with Coleridge's evaluation of its merit. That same year another critic, Josiah Condor, voiced a similar opinion in *The Eclectic Review,* expressing regret that Coleridge had even bothered to have the poem published and comparing it to a "mutilated statue."

Those poets and critics who admired "Kubla Khan," such as Algernon Charles Swinburne and Leigh Hunt, did so for its marvelous melodic quality. In an article about Coleridge in *International Quarterly,* critic Arthur Symons called "Kubla Khan" one of the finest examples of lyric poetry. However, he added that it had "just enough meaning to give it bodily existence, otherwise it would be disembodied music." Even John Livingston Lowes, who produced some of the first detailed analytic studies of Coleridge in *The Road to Xanadu,* tended to see the poem as nothing more substantial than a marvelous dream.

Not until the mid-twentieth century did critics start to explore the poem's meaning, finding that it presented a remarkably coherent picture. Although critical interpretations of key images and phrases often vary, more and more scholars believe that the main reason, perhaps the only reason, that the poem has been considered incomplete for all these years is because Coleridge said so in his preface. "Kubla Khan" is complex and, at times, ambiguous; the variety of critical interpretations demonstrates this. However, instead of being inexplicable because of its incomplete state, it has some very specific and unambiguous themes, including creation, inspiration, and the loss of that inspiration.

Briefly review what happens in the poem. The opening stanza describes a marvelous earthly paradise that Kubla Khan has created. The second stanza introduces a chasm, a place of passionate nature that cannot be controlled by any of man's decrees. This section also presents the lifeless ocean. These areas are bound together by the sacred river, which connects the uncontrolled chasm and stagnant ocean with the ordered world of Kubla Khan. The river travels symbolically from passion through order to chaos, from birth through life to death. As the river sinks into the realm of death, it is possible to hear in the tumult the prophecies of war. The stanza ends by mourning the loss of this wondrous pleasure dome where art and nature had briefly been blended together.

The third stanza seems to switch subjects abruptly, opening with a vision of a damsel. Yet it contains the same theme of creativity and loss that was presented in the first two stanzas. The poet, like Kubla Khan, has a creative vision. If he can recall it—a point that Coleridge leaves undetermined in the poem—, he will be able to recreate a vision of Khan's paradise/pleasure dome. However, both the stanza and the poet fail to do so. The reader sees only the shadow of the pleasure dome at the end of stanza two and is left with the tantalizing promise of what might have been in stanza three.

A careful reading of the prefatory note provides another illustration of the same theme. It is written in the third person. Instead of using the pronoun I, Coleridge refers to "the Author," almost as if he is a distinct persona. Although Coleridge uses both first and third person in prefatory notes to other poems, this has the effect of distancing him from the preface. The author composes a wondrous poem during a drug-induced sleep. Upon awakening, he rushes to record it, only to be distracted by the alliterative "person on business from Porlock." When he dismisses the visitor more than an hour later, he can only remember a few lines: "all the rest had passed away like the images on a stream into which a stone has been cast." This occurrence parallels the two experiences described in the poem. The author, like Kubla Khan and the poet in the last stanza, creates and then loses a vision of paradise. The description of the "images on a stream" bears a striking similarity to the shadow of the dome floating on the water. The entire incident is a counterpart to the vision of the damsel that the poet longs to recreate.

A detailed reading of "Kubla Khan" indicates that the miraculous musical quality of the poem is produced by an amazingly intricate structure of metric and poetic devices. For Coleridge, such a complex tapestry of language is an integral part of his view on poetics. In chapter XIV of his *Biographia Literaria,* he explains his philosophical and poetic principles, providing a multifaceted definition of poetry. Coleridge allows that any work having rhyme and rhythm may be described as a poem at the lowest level, simply because there is a pleasure derived from hearing recurring sounds and rhythms. However, he continues, for a poem to be "legitimate," the parts must "mutually support and explain each other; all in their proportion harmonizing with and supporting the purpose and known

A detailed reading of 'Kubla Khan' indicates that the miraculous musical quality of the poem is produced by an amazingly intricate structure of metric and poetic devices."

influences of metrical arrangement." True poetry must be a harmonious entity that "brings the whole soul of man into activity." The meaning or truth of the poem is revealed through this harmony. For Coleridge, all of this should blend together in organic unity.

Coleridge's elegant rhyme in "Kubla Khan" helps to create this unity. The very first line, in which every syllable is connected by some form of rhyme, is just a beginning example. Almost every line includes some form of alliteration. The second stanza, which is less metrically regular than the first, is equally filled with alliteration: "cedarn cover," "mighty fountain momently was forced," "woman wailing."

The unpredictable end-rhyme scheme forces the reader or listener to focus on the words of the poem. At the same time, it reinforces the poem's themes. While the opening seven lines of the first two stanzas follow the same pattern, the third stanza breaks the rule. The subsequent rhyme scheme is different in each stanza. Throughout the poem, the end rhyme is quite elaborate, including some feminine rhymes, in which the rhyme extends for two or more syllables, such as in seething and breathing. Establishing a rhyme scheme and then breaking or embellishing that pattern provides yet another example of creation that initially stays within formal limits, but eventually surpasses its boundaries. It mirrors the difference between Kubla Khan's formal garden and the sumptuous realm of nature, between the calm of the damsel and the frenzy of the poet.

Coleridge's use of meter and rhythm is also carefully organized to support the poem's themes. Clearly, a blend of form and meaning takes place in "Kubla Khan." The first four lines of the poem, written in perfect iambic tetrameter, describe Kubla Khan's carefully ordered paradise, which has been built to his specifications. Ultimately, however, he cannot control the nature around him, specifically the caverns that are described in the fourth line as "measureless to man." Those words at the end of the line remind the reader that there are things that man cannot control. The fifth line reinforces this with its abrupt change in meter and syllable count. The next two lines, a couplet, return to iambic tetrameter. Once again the poem describes Kubla Khan's attempts to impose his will on nature. However, the poetic lines themselves break free, and the meter starts to shift in lines eight through eleven. Kubla Khan may be able to impose his authority by building walls and towers to keep outsiders out of his pleasure gardens, but he cannot exercise these rigid rules on the ancient forests. The meter itself helps to indicate man's tenuous ability to bend nature to his will.

In the second stanza describing the savage chasm, the shifts in meter become even more apparent. The lines are longer, usually varying between ten and twelve syllables. Once again, the meter itself supports the meaning. For example, in line eighteen the poem describes the earth breathing in "fast thick pants." The meter reinforces this image by using three stressed words together. In the following line, the fountain erupts almost as if the earth has given birth to it. This image is suggested in large part by the heavily accented labor of line eighteen. Lines thirty-one through thirty-four, still metrically varied, signal another shift in subject. These lines are shorter, less substantial, as they describe the shadow of the dome that "floated midway on the waves." The final two lines in the second stanza are written in iambic pentameter, the most common metrical form. They provide a formal ending to the entire first part of the poem. The metric structure helps serve as an epitaph for Kubla Khan's amazing accomplishment. The formal tone of regret is clear, reinforcing the theme of the poem: a glorious vision has disappeared.

Initially, the third section, in which the poet describes his vision, may seem to be totally, even confusingly, separate from Kubla Khan and his pleasure dome. However, Coleridge uses meter as a connecting element. Thus, the first seven lines of this stanza mirror the rhythm of the first seven lines of the poem. The very flow of the lines encourages the reader to recognize the relationship between the poet's vision and Kubla Khan's paradise. Line forty-four deliberately breaks the rhythm just as line eight did. Again the meter reinforces the

poem's theme. It is not certain that the poet will be able to recreate his dream; that "deep delight" may vanish as completely as Kubla Khan's world did. Some critics, however, contend that the poem does indicate that the poet will succeed. They use the existence of heavy stresses on "I would build" at the beginning of line forty-six as evidence to help support their theory. The fact that the lines that follow return to the iambic tetrameter of the poem's opening also helps to connect the poem's end to the description of Kubla Khan's paradise in the beginning of the poem.

An additional element indicating the poem's careful construction involves the use of contrast to develop the theme (which is in itself a contrast) of creativity and loss. For Coleridge, the use of contrast was a key element in poetry. In chapter XIV of *Biographia Literaria,* he states that the poet must exercise control by balancing discordant elements in order to create poetic harmony. In "Kubla Khan," the contrasts can be placed into broad categories.

One group deals with images relating to life and death, the ultimate expression of creation and loss. Thus, these opposing forces are central to developing Coleridge's theme. The fertility of both nature and the garden is juxtaposed with the barren desolation of the measureless caverns. Pictures of light, "sunny greenery" and dark, "the sunless sea" further reinforce this point. The voices of war and death spring from the furor produced as the river plunges from Kubla Khan's gardens into this nether world, suggesting both paradise and paradise lost. A second category centers on the two types of creation in the poem—the natural and the artificial. The cultivated world holds quiet and order, while nature's realm is unbridled and uncontrollable, a savage and enchanted place. The two women who appear in the poem represent these polarities. The damsel quietly playing on a musical instrument creates a very different image than the sexual passion of the wailing woman. Many other individual contrasts appear throughout the poem: reality and shadow, calm and frenzy, day and night, sacred and profane. All add to the complexity and texture of "Kubla Khan."

This complexity makes it difficult to fully believe that "Kubla Khan" is nothing more than the remnant of a half-remembered dream. The thematic repetition, intricacy of rhyme and metrical schemes, as well as the carefully juxtaposed images beautifully "harmonize and support" the poem's purpose and theme. In "Kubla Khan," Coleridge has created more than simple lyric poetry. He has fulfilled his poetic ideal of a harmonious blend of meaning and form, which results in a "graceful and intelligent whole."

Source: Mary Mahony, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Regina Hewitt

In the following except, Hewitt uses a sampling of Coleridge's own criticism on the subject of poetry to analyze the two poet figures in "Kubla Khan."

"Kubla Khan" consists of two successive sections that parallel each other in subject matter. The first part (1–36) deals with the manufacture of poetry through skilled, rational craftsmanship; the second (37–54), with the generation of poetry through artless, irrational inspiration. Each section contains a problem that shows its approach to poetry to be inadequate, its poet figure false. Hence, the poem as a whole displays a dilemma: it shows that the two extant theories accounting for poetic composition fail to provide a sufficient explanation of that phenomenon. By implication, it calls for a new theory of poetic creation. Although it does not suggest what that theory should be and does not present a figure of a true poet, it contributes to the formulation of new theories and new symbols by pointing out the pitfalls fresh thought must avoid. In essence, "Kubla Khan" shows Coleridge weighing the merits of inherited ideas of poetic creation, finding them wanting, and leaving a space for a new idea to fill. A closer look at "Kubla Khan" may make this reading of the poem more readily apparent.

As [George] Watson notes [in his article on "Kubla Khan" in *A Review of English Literature*], the first thirty-six lines of "Kubla Khan" may be assigned a historical referent. They are emblematic of Neo-classical or Augustan poetic theory with its prescriptions and proscriptions. The Khan, as Neoclassical poet, brings his work into existence by "decree" and refines it by system and measure ("So twice five miles of fertile ground / With walls and towers were girdled round"). The architectural metaphor reduces the poem to the status of any ordinary object put together piece-by-piece according to an exact blueprint. The Khan's plans, however, cannot account for all aspects of the natural environment in which his construction occurs. The "twice five miles" fail to incorporate the chasm and the river, which violate the enclosure....

The river escapes the Khan's confines, reaching the caverns—themselves measureless—and the

ocean—obviously illimitable, especially within "twice five miles," no matter how one construes the geometry of that figure.

The Khan's method results in an illusory order, a shaky structure on the brink of overthrow by the elements it could momentarily ignore but not permanently exclude. The first section draws to a close by adumbrating the destruction of the Khan's little world: it addresses "ancestral voices prophesying war," and it shifts its focus from the pleasure-dome to the *shadow* of the pleasure-dome appearing on waves, waves to which the excluded river and fountain have contributed and which can, by a bit of agitation, break up the mere illusion reflected on them. Following from the architectural vehicle, the tenor of the metaphor indicates the unstable and incomplete nature of a Neo-classicism that tries to exclude structural and thematic elements inconvenient to its limited design. It implies that the poet must take into account all parts of the organic, natural order, for these elements belong in poetry and will surface there despite all rules to the contrary.

Juxtaposed to the flawed Neoclassical view of poetic creation is a second different but still flawed view—the ancient fury of the poet shown in the last eighteen lines of "Kubla Khan." This poet, with his "flashing eyes" and "floating hair," portrays — possibly even parodies—the "enthused" poet that Plato condemned. This poet's own mind and judgment have been usurped by some spirit. The poet becomes the passive instrument through which the spirit expresses itself in a way that may or may not be intelligible. Watson notes the analogue, of course. But he privileges it as if it were the view of the poet that Coleridge prefers, whereas "Kubla Khan" makes this figure suspect. He believes himself to have received some extraordinary vision ("A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I saw"). He was passive at the time and continues passive to the extent that he cannot recollect the experience sufficiently to write anything about it....

His is "the poem that does not exist" because it cannot and should not. His is a private ecstasy. It results from an esoteric fantasy and not from an insight into nature. Failing at poetic creation, this poet falls back on the exaggerated affectations of "irritable" genius, relishing his ability to mystify others ("And all should cry, Beware! Beware!") instead of welcoming a chance to convey his insight to them (as a true poet would).

It seems, perhaps, odd to reject both figures of the poet in "Kubla Khan." After all, finding a "Romantic" poet critical of Neoclassicism constitutes almost a stock response, but finding him critical of inspiration disturbs some standard assumptions. A glance at Coleridge's attitude toward the figure of the poet as he expresses it in some of his prose works may help to justify the second rejection. The bulk of his writings show an unqualifiedly positive valuation of the possessed poet to be inconsistent with his statements about the nature of poetic genius.

Most of Coleridge's reflections on this matter occur in works of a later date than the time at which "Kubla Khan" is alleged to have been written. *The Watchman,* however, provides at least one example from the later 1790s of what Coleridge then considered an acceptable figure of a poet. Of Louis de Boissy, Coleridge writes in his essay for Thursday, May 5, 1796:

> Boissy, the author of several dramatic pieces, that were acted with applause, met with the usual fate of those men, whom the very genius, that fits them to be authors, incapacitates for successful authorship. — Their productions are too refined for the lower classes, and too sincere for the wealthier ranks of Society. Boissy in addition to great intellectual ability, possessed the virtues of Industry and Temperance; yet his works produced him fame only. He laboured incessantly for uncertain bread.

Hence, Coleridge ranks the poet among men of genius and characterizes those as intelligent, industrious, temperate, and hard-working. Instances of failure are really triumphs, for they stem from an inability to pander to popular taste. While this early essay neither provides a definitive anatomy of genius nor purports to explain how works of genius come into being, it does allow certain attributes to the genius that could not be imputed to a manic bard. Anyone adhering to the Platonic notion of frenzied inspiration would have had a different explanation of Boissy's talents and fate.

Since "Kubla Kahn" returned to Coleridge's thoughts at least once later in his career—when he published it, for whatever reason, in 1816—it may not be inappropriate to examine Coleridge's statements in later prose on this question. Coleridge's early description of Boissy as a "man of genius" suggests that further information be sought in the second chapter of *Biographia Literaria,* the chapter on "irritable" genius. With Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Spenser as examples, Coleridge finds that "men of the greatest genius ... appear to have been of calm and tranquil temper," whereas the "counterfeit" genius is characterized by irritability, fanaticism, and morbid sensibility. In the former,

passion serves insight; in the latter, "passion [is] in inverse proportion to ... insight." Persons of true genius build on and sustain themselves by a "foundation within their own minds." They control and are not controlled by their insights so that they are characterized above all by their "creative and self-sufficing power."

In "Shakespeare's Judgment Equal to His Genius," Coleridge singles out the Bard as the epitome of true poetic genius and carefully defends him from the Neoclassicists' charges that he was

> a delightful monster, wild, indeed, and without taste or judgment, but like the inspired idiot so much venerated in the East, uttering, amid the strangest follies, the sublimest truths.

Had Coleridge subscribed to the "inspired idiot" theory of poetic genius, he would not have found the Neoclassical view of Shakespeare objectionable. He would have endorsed it, holding it up as the proper model for the poet, for it describes someone who creates by the caprice of nature and not by the engagement of his mind. It describes someone in whom passion ranges far from any mental foundation or genuine insight. Coleridge, however, does not welcome such a view. He rejects it as a "dangerous falsehood," and opposes to it his argument that "the judgment of Shakespeare is commensurate with his genius, nay that his genius reveals itself in his judgment, as in its most exalted form"; his essay pleads for the critical discovery of the organization inherent in Shakespeare's works, an organization that takes its pattern from nature (and not from artificial Neoclassical rules) in which every "living body is of necessity an organized one ... [evidencing] the connection of parts in and for a whole, so that each part is at once an end and a means."

It is Shakespeare's ability to make these organic, natural connections that Coleridge most often praises and most often cites to approximate how the imagination works. In "Shakspeare [sic], a Poet Generally," Coleridge argues that Shakespeare's imagination was greatest because it succeeded in "produc[ing] that ultimate end of all human thought and human feeling, unity." Coleridge acknowledges the rarity of such achievement, but never suggests that it is not fully human. In fact, he often repeats "human" and "humanizing" throughout the essay in connection with the operation of Shakespeare's imagination. His emphasis in no way contradicts his famous statement on imagination in Chapter 13 of the *Biographia,* the statement in which he establishes a link between the creative activity of the imagination and the creative activity of God. That statement identifies the authority and precedent for the function of the imagination. Far from suggesting that the operation is aberrent from human activity, it reinforces its appropriateness to it. The appropriateness obtains likewise in the operation of the more specialized secondary imagination, for Coleridge sees the poet's imagination as "co-existing with [his] conscious will," a condition that shows Coleridge to be opposed to the idea of a poet inspired irrespective of his volition.

Coleridge again addresses the "human" aspects of poetry in "On Poesy or Art," writing: "Poetry also is purely human; for all its materials are from the mind ... and all its products are for the mind." His emphasis surely precludes manic "enthusiasm," but perhaps his most definitive rejection of it is to be found in *Anima Poetae:*

> Idly talk they who speak of poets as mere indulgers of fancy, imagination, superstition, etc. They are the bridlers by delight, the purifiers; they that combine all these with reason and order—the true protoplasts—Gods of Love who tame chaos.

Even such a fitful perusal of Coleridge's criticism as is represented above suffices to show that neither figure in "Kubla Khan" possesses the attributes of a true poet. One is a Urizenic type, capable only of weighing and measuring and desirous of forcing his control upon all things; the other is an "indulger of fancy," who can achieve no order at all and who has given up even his self-control to the sway of his visions. Neither is a "bridler by delight." What, then, is the function of the false poets in "Kubla Khan"?

The answer to that question may draw on [Anthony John] Harding's recent exploration [titled "Inspiration and the Historical Sense in 'Kubla Khan' "] of inspiration and "Kubla Khan" in which he posits that "tension itself [between two views of inspiration] was Coleridge's real subject in 'Kubla Khan.' " On the one hand, "Kubla Khan" contains the ancient "belief in the possibility that divine truth may be imparted to human minds," as evidenced by the success (albeit temporary) of the Khan's creation; on the other hand, it accomodates the modern "historicist outlook ... that the normative tradition must be the judge of any inspired or oracular utterance," as evidenced by the concluding reflections "of the bard who knows what it is to be possessed, and knows too that this inspired state has escaped him."

Harding's explanation poses a problem similar to Watson's insofar as it makes the will-usurped

condition of the inspired poet seem attractive, while Coleridge takes a less wistful attitude toward the manic bard. One may, however, borrow from Harding the key idea of tension and posit a different development. The tension in "Kubla Khan" may be seen as a tension between the extant theories of poetic creation—represented by the false poets—which Coleridge rejects and the new theory of imaginative creation that Coleridge embraces but cannot quite completely work out.

Coleridge turned to the imagination to find the alternative to the theories of poetic creation he had inherited from previous generations and found unsatisfactory. "The poem that does not exist"—but should—is the poem of imaginative creation. To finish that poem, Coleridge would also have to finish the thirteenth chapter of his *Biographia Literaria.* He would have to pronounce how, specifically, the imagination operates so he could display it emblematically and set it forth as the true alternative to the faulty theories of creation. This Coleridge did not do. His insights into the flaws suggested by "Kubla Khan" nevertheless remain with his other monumental contributions to the development of Romantic theories of imaginative poetic creation.

Source: Hewitt, Regina, "The False Poets in 'Kubla Khan,'" in *English Language Notes,* Vol. 26, No. 2, December 1988, pp. 48–54.

John Spencer Hill

In the following excerpt, Hill comments on Coleridge's use of opium and its role in the creation of "Kubla Khan."

Coleridge's use of opium has long been a topic of fascination, and the grouping of Coleridge, opium and *Kubla Khan* formed an inevitable triad long before Elisabeth Schneider combined them in the title of her book. It is tempting on a subject of such instrinsic interest to say more than is necessary for the purpose in hand, and I shall do my best to resist temptation by exploring only four of the most obvious and essential aspects of it: (1) the contemporary view of opium in the late eighteenth century; (2) the extent of Coleridge's use and reliance on opiates in the late 1790s; (3) myths and medical evidence about the relationship between opium and the poetic imagination; and (4) *Kubla Khan* as an "opium dream".

The most striking features about opium in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are the contradictory facts that, while it was widely used and easily available, almost nothing was known about it. Medical knowledge of the drug's properties was scanty and unreliable: few people realised, for example, that opium was addictive, and no one understood that withdrawal symptoms were the result of discontinuation or diminished dosages. Indeed, everything that was known about it seemed positive and beneficial. Laudanum (i.e. the simple alcoholic tincture of opium) was freely dispensed to relieve pain in cases as different as toothache and cholera; similarly, opium was used as a "cure" for a host of emotional and psychological disorders; and, in such seemingly innocent patent-medicines as Godfrey's Cordial, it served as a soothing syrup to quieten restless babies, often permanently. In Coleridge's day, as Alethea Hayter has pointed out [in *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*], "most doctors and patients still thought of opium not as a dangerous addictive drug but mainly as a useful analgesic and tranquillizer of which every household should have a supply, for minor ailments and nervous crises of all kinds, much as aspirin is used today".

Since the medicinal use of opium was so common and wide-spread, it is not surprising to learn that its use involved neither legal penalties nor public stigma. All of the Romantic poets (except Wordsworth) are known to have used it, as did many other prominent contemporaries. Supplies were readily available: in 1830, for instance, Britain imported 22,000 pounds of raw opium. Many Englishmen, like the eminently respectable poet-parson George Crabbe, who took opium in regular but moderate quantity for nearly forty years, were addicts in ignorance, and led stable and productive lives despite their habit. By and large, opium was taken for granted; and it was only the terrible experiences of such articulate addicts as Coleridge and DeQuincey that eventually began to bring the horrors of the drug to public attention.

Coleridge's case is a particularly sad and instructive one. He had used opium as early as 1791 and continued to use it occasionally, on medical advice, to alleviate pain from a series of physical and nervous ailments. "I am seriously ill", he wrote to Joseph Cottle in November 1796; "The complaint, my medical attendant says, is nervous—and originating in *mental* causes. I have a Blister under my right-ear—& I take Laudanum every four hours, 25 drops each dose." The evidence of Coleridge's letters argues that during the period 1791–1800 he used opium only occasionally and almost always for medical reasons. The turning-point, as E. L. Griggs has shown [in his

essay titled "Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Opium" in *Huntington Library Quarterly*], may be traced to the winter and spring of Coleridge's first year at Greta Hall, Keswick, in 1800–1. During this period a prolonged and debilitating succession of illnesses, which Coleridge blamed on the raw, wet climate of the Lake District, caused him to use regular and increasingly larger doses of laudanum in an effort to assuage the torments of what he described as an "irregular Gout combined with frequent nephritic attacks". But the opium cure proved ultimately to be more devastating in its effects than the troubles it was intended to treat, for such large quantities taken over so many months seduced him unwittingly into slavery to the drug. And his life between 1801 and 1806 (when he returned from Malta) is a sombre illustration of a growing and, finally, a hopeless bondage to opium.

By the time he realised he was addicted, however, it was too late. He consulted a variety of physicians; he attempted more than once (with nearly fatal results) to break off his use of opium all at once; and, at last, in 1816, when he submitted his case to James Gillman (in whose house he was to spend the rest of his life), he was able to control his habit and reduce his doses, although he was never able to emancipate himself entirely. Contemporary medical science, it must be remembered, concerned itself largely with opium as a panacea and was almost powerless (owing to ignorance) to provide meaningful assistance to those who became victims of its prescriptions. In this light, Coleridge's struggle with his addiction must be seen as heroic and experimental; and it should be added that his experience of addiction led not only (as is sometimes asserted) to sloth and self-pity, but more characteristically to a dearly purchased and altruistic desire to keep others out of the black pit into which he had fallen....

But to return to the 1790s: what can we say about Coleridge's experience of opium at the time of composing *Kubla Khan?* Despite some dissent, the majority of recent scholars agree with E.L. Griggs that, until 1800–1, Coleridge was an occasional user of opium (usually for medicinable purposes, but sometimes for the pleasurable sensations which the drug induced) and that he was not, in any proper sense of the term, an opium-addict before this time. It is not surprising to find, then, that in the late 1790s Coleridge's opium experiences were essentially pleasurable; it was only in later years, when his slavery was firmly rooted, that the evil of

By and large, opium was taken for granted [in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries]; and it was only the terrible experiences of such articulate addicts as Coleridge ... that eventually began to bring the horrors of the drug to public attention."

opium manifested itself in the corrosive nightmares described in *The Pains of Sleep* (1803)....

As we know from the Crewe endnote, Coleridge took "two grains of Opium" before he wrote *Kubla Khan;* and this fact naturally raises the issue of the drug's effect on the poet's creative imagination. Early critics, guided by Coleridge's statements in the 1816 Preface, assumed that there was a direct and immediate correlation between opium and imagination. In 1897 [in *New Essays towards a Critical Method*] J.M. Robertson could not bring himself to doubt that "the special quality of this felicitous work [*Kubla Khan*] is to be attributed to its being all conceived and composed under the influence of opium"; and in 1934 M.H. Abrams declared [in *The Milk of Paradise*] that the "great gift of opium" to men like Coleridge and DeQuincey "was access to a new world as different from this as Mars may be; and one which ordinary mortals, hindered by terrestrial conceptions, can never, from mere description, quite comprehend". More recent criticism, however, grounded on modern medical studies, controverts such conclusions decisively. According to Elisabeth Schneider [in *Coleridge, Opium and "Kubla Khan"*], "it is widely agreed now that persons of unstable psychological makeup are much more likely to become addicted to opiates than are normal ones" and that, among such neurotic users of opium, "the intensity of the pleasure" produced by the drug seems (on the evidence of medical case-studies) "to be in direct proportion to the degree of instability". The explanation ... of

the supposed creative powers of opium lies in the euphoria that it produces....

Alethea Hayter, although she wishes to avoid the "extremes" of the positions of Abrams and Schneider, nevertheless comes much closer in her conclusions to the latter than to the former. Opium, she argues [in *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*], can only work "On what is already there in a man's mind and memory", and, "if he already has a creative imagination and a tendency to rêverie, dreams and hypnagogic visions", then opium may intensify and focus his perceptions. Her final verdict—which "can be no more than a hypothesis"—is that "the action of opium, though it can never be a substitute for innate imagination, can uncover that imagination while it is at work in a way which might enable an exceptionally gifted and self-aware writer to observe and learn from his own mental processes". The most reasonable conclusion to be drawn from these various explorations of the relationship between opium and the operation of the creative imagination is that, while *Kubla Khan* might well not have been produced without opium, it most assuredly would never have been born except for the powerfully and innately imaginative mind of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Source: Hill, John Spencer, *A Coleridge Companion: An Introduction to the Major Poems and the Biographia Literaria,* London: Macmillan, 1983, pp. 73–8.

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For Further Study

Lowes, John Livingston, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Way of the Imagination,* Princeton University Press, 1986.

First published in 1928, Lowes's work is now considered a classic in Coleridgian criticism. Although somewhat dated by the fact that it was written before the discovery of the Crewe manuscript, Lowes's monograph does an incredible job of detailing many of Coleridge's sources. Even if you don't accept the dream theory of the poem's origin, Lowe makes a compelling case for the recreative power of the unconscious.

Williams, Anne, "Coleridge and the Mysterious (M)other," in *Approaches to Teaching Coleridge's Poetry and Prose,* edited by Richard E. Matlak, 1991, pp. 147-57.

There are four excellent essays about "Kubla Khan" in Matlak's collection, but this particular one brings a fascinating feminist perspective to the subject. Citing French theorists of *l'écriture féminine,* Williams notes that Coleridge, much like a woman, writes "the body" and describes hysteria imagistically. Using a feminist interpretation of Freud, Williams arrives at conclusions surprisingly similar to Jungian criticism.