Kubla Khan

Close Reading

**Explanation: "Kubla Khan"**

**Lines 1-2**

In these lines, Coleridge introduces Kubla Khan, ruler of the Mongol Empire in China during the 13th 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 which 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' 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, therefore 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 which 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 which 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 6-11 is created 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 which 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 man-made 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 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 which 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 twenty-five to add a slow, humming sound, with miles, meandering, mazy and motion. The repetition of lines 3-5 in 26-28 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 or 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 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, and taste Paradise.