

---

# UNIT 12 S.T. COLERIDGE: 'KUBLA KHAN'

---

## Structure

- 12.0 Objectives
- 12.1 Introduction
- 12.2 S.T. Coleridge (1772-1834)
  - 12.2.1 Poems of Coleridge
- 12.3 Kubla Khan
  - 12.3.1 The Background of the Poem
  - 12.3.2 The Text
  - 12.3.3 Scansion
  - 12.3.4 A Discussion
- 12.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 12.5 Suggested Reading
- 12.6 Answers to Self-Check Exercises

---

## 12.0 OBJECTIVES

---

After having read this Unit you will be able to:

- Talk and write about Coleridge the poet; and
- Appreciate 'Kubla Khan'.

---

## 12.1 INTRODUCTION

---

In this Unit we have discussed Coleridge's life in brief and his poetry in general. It has been pointed out by critics that his whole life was a fragment and so are almost all his poetic creations.

It is better if you read through the Unit section by section and do the exercises as you progress. Do give yourself a break after you have worked on a section.

---

## 12.2 SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE (1772-1834)

---

Coleridge was born on October 21, 1772 in Ottery St. Mary, Devonshire. After studying at Christ's Hospital, a charity school in London, he went to Cambridge, but left the University without completing his studies, and enlisted for some time as a private in a cavalry regiment. Heavy debt might have been the reason of this erratic step. Right from his childhood, he was a sensitive and lonely boy who enthusiastically read whatever books he found around him.

Disillusioned with the French Revolution and convinced that freedom was impossible in Great Britain, he together with Robert Southey and other friends conceived the Utopian idea of Pantisocracy in which twelve gentlemen of good education and liberal principles would marry twelve ladies, migrate to Susquehanna, somewhere in the United States of America, and form a classless community. They proposed to work on a farm two hours a day to eke out a living and devote the rest of their time in literary pursuit. Lack of fund and young ladies

forced them to abandon the venture. But in his enthusiasm for it, Coleridge married Sarah Fricker, Southey's sister-in-law, a step he repented throughout his life.

The Coleridges settled at Clevedon in Somerset where he pursued his literary interests and the result was the publication of a political and literary magazine, *The Watchman*, which, as was his wont with other activities, was short lived. He also published a volume of poems, *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1796. But it was only in the contact and companionship with Wordsworth that he discovered himself, his mental peace, security and environmental harmony, to write his most enduring poems between 1797 and 1800 – 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', the first part of 'Christabel' and 'Kubla Khan'. In collaboration with Wordsworth, *The Lyrical Ballads*, the manifesto of 'New spirit in poetry', was published in 1798.

In 1804, Coleridge decided to separate from his wife and went to Malta and Italy in search of health. However, he returned to England in 1806 and found a permanent home at Highgate in the house of Dr. Gillman. Here he gave up his addiction to opium. In 1817, he published his magnum opus *Biographia Literaria* – literary autobiography – which, though not an organized treatise, contains some of the most philosophical principles of poetic composition to be found anywhere. In it he has made a distinction between Fancy and Imagination. According to him, Fancy is passive which simply computes isolated mental pictures – memories and associations. It is intellectual rationalism. On the other hand, Imagination is creative, synthetic and magical power which brings about the fusion of human faculties.

When in 1824, under the patronage of George IV, The Royal Society of Literature was founded, Coleridge was nominated as one of the first ten associates with an annual pension of £100.

He published his last work *On the Constitution of Church and State* in 1830. He breathed his last at Highgate, London, on July 25, 1834.

Coleridge was a poet, philosopher and critic all rolled into one. He possessed the most vigorous mind among the Romantic poets. His versatility, however was also his undoing.

Do you find Coleridge's life interesting? If you do, you will find a longer introduction to it in any History of English Literature.

Now find out how well you have understood the section you read just now.

**Self-check Exercise I**

1) What was the aim of Pantisocracy?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) Who was Sarah Fricker?  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

3) In the space provided below mention Coleridge’s most celebrated poems.  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

4) The Royal Society of Literature was founded in the year .....

**12.2.1 Poems of Coleridge**

Among the poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Coleridge is the most fragmentary and unsystematic. Of the three poems on which his fame traditionally rests, only ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ is complete. ‘Christabel’ and ‘Kubla Khan’ are merely fragmentary. Apart from these three great poems, he also wrote ‘The Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ – a poem of hope and joy as experienced by the poet, ‘Frost at Midnight’, which subscribes to the theory of pantheistic philosophy – presence of divine spirit in nature, ‘Dejection: An Ode’, and ‘Youth and Age’ express poet’s sense of failure of creative powers. He also composed some political poems like ‘France: An Ode’, which underlines the disgust caused by the failure of the French Revolution and subsequent reign of terror; ‘The Destruction of Bastille’ extols the event, whereas ‘The Ode on the Departing Year’ fears the fall of England.

Coleridge was the true pantheist who took delight in everything around him, even the weird and bizarre. In his later days, however, under the influence of German transcendental philosophy, he added a new note to it that the external world is phenomenal rather than actual and in whatever form the external objects appear, is actually given to them by ourselves, i.e., Nature lives in us and the impressions we receive from it are nothing distinct from us but a reflection of our own thoughts. He, however, honestly adhered to his own view of poetry: “the best words in the best order.”

In his three important poems on which his fame rests, there is an element of romance enveloped in mystery and marvel of the unknown and untravelled regions. Nature is depicted in its myriad forms – familiar and comforting, tender and soothing, cheerful and jubilant, weird and horrifying, desolate and mournful, tumultuous and perturbing. All these are linked to produce the harmony of a perfect and moral impression. To the critics most of his poems may appear to be

fragmentary, but to the reader they present a wholesome experience. While, on the one hand, other romantic poets – Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and others – weave a web of romance from their personal experience, Coleridge sees it among the wonders of the external world, links them to the subtleties of human psychology and presents them in a story rich in dramatic situations and psychological truths with a delicate sense of morality.

The essence of Coleridge's romanticism lies in his artistic rendering of the supernatural. In 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' there are a phantom ship with its ghastly crew of Death and Life-in-Death, the Polar spirit seeking vengeance for the murder of the Albatross, the two supernatural voices representing Justice and Mercy and a troop of celestial spirits animating the dead crew. The whole atmosphere of this long poem is charged with a sense of heightened mystery. In 'Christabel', the evil spirit that haunts the body of Geraldine and blast the innocent happiness of sweet and lovely Christabel is in the true tradition of vampires and Coleridge infuses a mysterious dread into her. In 'Kubla Khan', a poet, a creator, is shown caught in a spell of creative inspiration which transcends his mundane existence into a purely supernatural being.

Coleridge's chief purpose, and also a problem, while writing about supernatural characters and events as he himself said, was "to transform from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes the poetic faith", i.e. one has to willingly suspend the disbelief to enjoy poetry, written in frenzy and at the height of imagination.

Coleridge's treatment of the supernatural elements made it imperative for him to lay the scenes in the Middle ages, marked for its magic, witchcraft and superstition. And yet his treatment of the supernatural was quite modern, full of philosophical and psychological hints.

The most distinguishing feature of Romantic poetry is its emphasis on imagination, and Coleridge's poetry reveals his intense imaginative power. He decreed poetry to be governed by the principles of Imagination and not by those of Fancy. To him Imagination was an organizing and integrating principle in absence of which no great poetry could be written.

---

## 12.3 KUBLA KHAN

---

### 12.3.1 The Background of the Poem

'Kubla Khan' was published by Coleridge in 1816 at the request of Lord Byron. It was described by Coleridge as 'A Vision in a Dream, a Fragment', and in a brief preface to the poem, the poet writes that after taking anodyne he "fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence ... in *Purchas's Pilgrimage*: 'Here the Kubla Khan commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground was enclosed with a wall' .... On awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole ... and instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business ... and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained

some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away ....”

### 12.3.2 The 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 momentarily the sacred river.

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion

Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,

Then reached the caverns measureless to man,

And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean :

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far

Ancestral voices prophesying war !

The shadow of the dome of pleasure

Floated midway on the waves;

Where was heard the mingled **measure**

From the Fountain and the caves.

It was a miracle of rare device,

A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a **dulcimer**

In a vision once I saw :

It was an Abyssinian maid,

And on her dulcimer she played,

Singing of Mount Abora.

Could I revive within me

Her symphony and song,

To such a deep delight 'twould win me,

That with music loud and long,

I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice !  
And all who heard should see them there ,  
And all should cry, Beware ! Beware !  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair !  
Weave a circle around him **thrice**,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

### Glossary

<b>Xanadu</b>	:	The summer capital of Kubla Khan
<b>Kubla Khan</b>	:	The grandson of the great Genghis Khan, the founder of the Mongolian Empire. Kubla Khan ruled from 1257 to 1294. He founded the city Peking(Beijing).
<b>stately</b>	:	splendid; grand
<b>decree</b>	:	order
<b>caverns</b>	:	deep caves
<b>sunless sea</b>	:	subterranean sea
<b>girdled around</b>	:	enclosed
<b>sinuous</b>	:	winding
<b>rills</b>	:	small streams
<b>chasm</b>	:	a broad, deep opening in the earth
<b>slanted</b>	:	sloped
<b>athwart</b>	:	across
<b>cedarn</b>	:	cedar trees
<b>haunted</b>	:	visited again and again
<b>wailing</b>	:	sobbing; crying; moaning
<b>seething</b>	:	bubbling with a hissing sound
<b>pants</b>	:	short breaths
<b>momently</b>	:	every moment
<b>chaffy grain</b>	:	grain not yet freed from chaff
<b>thresher's flail</b>	:	a mechanical device to separate grain from chaff
<b>dancing rocks</b>	:	large pieces of rocks being thrown about
<b>measure</b>	:	music
<b>dulcimer</b>	:	a stringed musical instrument
<b>thrice</b>	:	a favourite number in magical rites

### 12.3.3 Scansion

Let us scan lines 47 to 50 of the poem.

/            /            /            /  
 That sun / ny dome ! / those caves / of íce  
 /            /            /            /  
 And all / who heard / should see / them there,  
 /            /            /            /  
 And all / should cry, / Beware ! Beware !  
 /            /            /            /  
 His fla/shing eyes, / his floa/ting hair !

Though the poem is composed in irregular metre, these four lines are quite regular written in iambic tetrameter.

Now scan the following four lines:  
 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.

For answers see Answers to Exercises II.

### 12.3.4 A Discussion

‘Kubla Khan’ is a poem about the act of poetic creation. It is significant for a thrilling picture of a poet in ecstasy in the process of creation. Kubla Khan (1216-1294), one of the powerful Asiatic kings, was the founder of the Mongol dynasty in China. The poem is both descriptive and suggestive – descriptive in the sense that it describes in detail Kubla Khan’s pleasure-dome of “rare device”, the source of the sacred river Alph, the maid, and suggestive in that if the poet could revive his inspiration a great poetry would follow. Coleridge also hints at some physical clues to identify a poet in his moments of inspiration.

Kubla Khan ordered a magnificent pleasure-palace to be built for him in Xanadu, also called Chandu or Shandu. So a ten-miles of fertile land on the banks of the sacred river Alph was enclosed with walls and towers. The source of the sacred river was a deep mysterious gorge that ran down a green hill across a wood of cedar trees. All these make the enclosed area wild, savage and enchanted, yet it is holy, fit to be frequented by a woman wandering about in the light of a waning moon in search of her demon-lover. Amidst the loud, tumultuous noise caused by the fall of water into the sunless sea, Kubla Khan could hear the voices of his ancestors to be prepared for a war in the near future.

In the last stanza, the poet gives us a vivid picture of an inspired poet and the act of poetic creation. Once, in a vision, he saw and heard an Abyssinian maid playing on her dulcimer and singing sonorously of the wild splendour of Mount Abora. The poet says that if he could recreate in his imagination the sweet, enchanting music of the maid, he would feel so inspired and ecstatic that with the music of his poetry he could build Kubla Khan’s pleasure-dome in the air / imagination, i.e., the listeners would see it in their imagination. In other words, a poet in a spell of poetic inspiration is capable of creation like God (Read the section on the Background).

In the last five lines Coleridge draws a picture of a poet inspired. When a poet's eyes are flashing, his hair floating and seem to be withdrawn from the material world, the listeners / readers ought to be beware of him and feel awed, but not fearful, for he has fed on honey-dew and drunk the milk of Paradise. In that moment he transcends into a superhuman being.

The poem is full of suggestive phrases and lines capable of evoking mystery. The description of the deep romantic chasm, the woman wailing for her demon-lover, the ancestral voices prophesying war, the source of the river Alph, sinuous rills, etc. are natural phenomena, but are suggested in such a way as if they were supernatural occurrences. The poet takes us to distant times and remote and unknown regions where the very unfamiliarity of the scenes prompt us to suspend our reasoning faculties, "willing suspension of disbelief" as Coleridge called it.

The very idea of poetic creativity taking shape under divine inspiration and of the poet transcending his mundane existence and transforming himself to the level of superhuman being when caught in his poetic frenzy evokes a world of magic and enchantment, a romantic concept of poetry.

Kubla Khan's strength and splendour are symbols of the might of poetry and his architectural achievements suggest power of the poetic imagination. The image of 'dome' suggests fulfillment and satisfaction of the might of finished creation.

The rhythm and the sound are perfect and conform to Coleridge's dictum : 'the best words in the best order'.

### Self-check Exercise II

1) What is the subtitle of the poem?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

2) Identify the similes used for the **mighty fountain**.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....



3) Read the text of the poem carefully and find out the number of proper nouns. What do they suggest?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

4) Write down the images used for **dome**.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

5) What is the epithet used for the word **river**.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

6) Identify one paradoxical line in the poem.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

7) Scan the last four lines given in the section 12.3.3.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

## 12.4 LET US SUM UP

---

Coleridge was the philosopher of the Romantic movement. His poems reveal his love of the marvelous and his great power to fuse natural with the supernatural. 'Kubla Khan' illustrates vividly what he meant when he called the imagination a 'synthetic and magical power', a power which 'instantly' fuses 'shattered fragments of memory' to produce a great poem.

The poem composed in irregular metre, is the recollection of a dream Coleridge saw when he had fallen asleep while reading *Purchas's Pilgrimage*. Coleridge was an avid reader of travel literature.

The poem is about the act of poetic creation, and notable for a thrilling picture of a poet in ecstasy.

---

## 12.5 SUGGESTED READING

---

M.H. Abrams : *The Mirror and the Lamp*

C.M. Bowra : *The Romantic Imagination*

Graham Hough : *The Romantic Poets*

A.R. Jones and William Tydeman(ed) : *Coleridge* (Casebook Series)

William Walsh : *Coleridge: The Poet*

---

## 12.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

---

### Self-check Exercise I

- 1)
  - i) To establish a classless society
  - ii) To work for two hours to earn a living, and devote the rest of the time in literary pursuit.
- 2) Coleridge's wife and Southey's sister-in-law.
- 3)
  - i) *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*
  - ii) 'Christabel'
  - iii) 'Kubla Khan'
- 4) 1824

### Self-check Exercise II

- 1) 'A Vision in a Dream, a Fragment'.
- 2) Huge fragments volted like rebounding hail  
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail (ll 20-21)
- 3) Xanadu, Kubla Khan, Alph, maid, Mount Ebor, Paradise  
They suggest remoteness, fear and awe.

- 4) i) stately pleasure-dome (l 2)  
ii) a dome of pleasure (l 31)  
iii) a sunny pleasure-dome (l 36)
- 5) sacred
- 6) A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice ! (l 35)
- 7) Answer to the scansion (12.3.3)

/ / / /  
Weave / a cir / cle round / him thrice,  
/ / / / /  
And close / your eyes / with ho / ly dread,  
/ / / / /  
For he / on hon / ey-dew / hath fed,  
/ / / / /  
And drunk / the milk / of Pa / radise.

Though this poem is composed in irregular metre, these four lines are quite regular written in iambic tetrameter.

Variation : the only variation is that in the first line the first foot is Trochaic.

Kubla Khan, a purely romantic poem, has a dream like quality about it. It might be called a great magical strain in Coleridge's poetry; a combination of pleasure and sacredness which is the sign of true art. The poet employs fancy to relate that Kubla ruled in Xanadu. His palace was built amid all the beauties of Nature. This made it wonderful and fantastic. In "Kubla Khan," Coleridge describes the creation and destruction of Kubla Khan's palace in the EXOTIC location of Xanadu, which gives the poem a DREAMLIKE quality. Through the HISTORICAL character of Kubla Khan, Coleridge uses the wild image of the Mongols to suggest that Kubla Khan is insane, implying that all creative actions are the acts of MAD men. The last lines bring the poem to a CLIMACTIC close. Flashing eyes evoke the image of passionate creativity. Kubla Khan by S.T. Coleridge is a poem that has been interpreted in a thousand different ways. Critics have analysed every word and every line only to make the readers more confused about the real message of the poem. Yes, there is a simple straightforward message right on our faces which we tend to lose sight of in the mazy patterns that the critics have drawn down the ages. Her symphony and song, A look at the lines above makes a clear statement. Kubla Khan attempted to create a man-made paradise at the cost of natural beauty, by restrictive actions. The damsel with a dulcimer made music by her empathy with nature. For a romantic poet like Coleridge, the choice was clear. He wished his creativity to be like that of the damsel by embracing nature and not disrupting it.