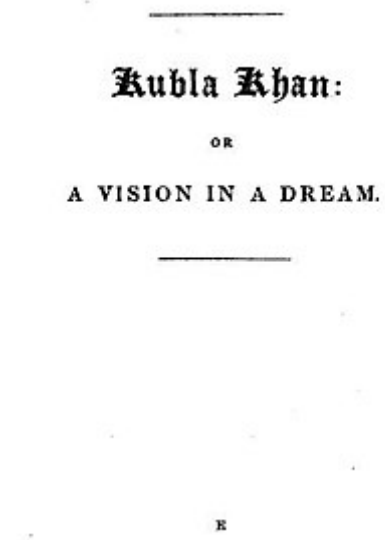
Kubla Khan

Kubla Khan: or, A Vision in a Dream: A Fragment (/ˌkʊblə ˈkɑːn/) is a poem written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, completed in 1797 and published in 1816. According to Coleridge's preface to *Kubla Khan*, the poem was composed one night after he experienced an opium-influenced dream after reading a work describing Shangdu, the summer capital of the Yuan dynasty founded by the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan. Upon waking, he set about writing lines of poetry that came to him from the dream until he was interrupted by "a person from Porlock". The poem could not be completed according to its original 200–300 line plan as the interruption caused him to forget the lines. He left it unpublished and kept it for private readings for his friends until 1816 when, at the prompting of Lord Byron, it was published.


Kubla Khan:

OR

A VISION IN A DREAM.

Title page of *Kubla Khan* (1816)

The poem is vastly different in style from other poems written by Coleridge. The first stanza of the poem describes Khan's pleasure dome built alongside a sacred river fed by a powerful fountain. The second stanza of the poem is the narrator's response to the power and effects of an Abyssinian maid's song, which enraptures him but leaves him unable to act on her inspiration unless he could hear her once again. Together, they form a comparison of creative power that does not work with nature and creative power that is harmonious with nature. The third and final stanza shifts to a first-person perspective of the speaker detailing his sighting of a woman playing a dulcimer, and if he could revive her song, he could fill the pleasure dome with music. He concludes by describing a hypothetical audience's reaction to the song in the language of religious ecstasy.

Some of Coleridge's contemporaries denounced the poem and questioned his story of its origin. It was not until years later that critics began to openly admire the poem. Most modern critics now view *Kubla Khan* as one of Coleridge's three great poems, along with *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*. The poem is considered one of the most famous examples of Romanticism in English poetry, and is one of the most frequently anthologized poems in the English language.[1] A copy of the manuscript is a permanent exhibit at the British Library in London.[2]

Contents

Poem

The poem is divided into three irregular stanzas, which move loosely between different times and places.

The first stanza begins with a fanciful description of the origin of Kublai Khan's capital Xanadu (lines 1–2).[3] It is described as being near the river Alph, which passes through caves before reaching a dark sea (lines 3–5). Ten miles of land were surrounded with fortified walls (lines 6–7), encompassing lush gardens and forests (lines 8–11).

> 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.

The second stanza describes a mysterious canyon (lines 12–16). A geyser erupted from the canyon (lines 17–19), throwing rubble into the air (lines 20–23) and forming the source of the sacred river Alph (line 24). The river wandered through the woods, then reached the caves and dark sea described in the first stanza (lines 25–28). Kubla Khan, present for the eruption, heard a prophecy of war (lines 29–30). An indented section

presents an image of the pleasure-dome reflected on the water, surrounded by the sound of the geyser above ground and the river underground (lines 31–34). A final un-indented couplet describes the dome again (lines 35–36).

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!

The third stanza shifts to the first-person perspective of the poem's speaker. He once saw a woman in a vision playing a dulcimer (lines 37–41). If he could revive her song within himself, he says, he would revive the pleasure dome itself with music (lines 42–47). Those who heard would also see themselves there, and cry out a warning (lines 48–49). Their warning concerns an alarming male figure (line 50). The stanza ends with instructions and a warning, to carry out a ritual because he has consumed the food of Paradise (lines 51–54).

    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 round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.[4]

Composition and publication

Date of composition


Coleridge, 1814

Kubla Khan was likely written in October 1797, though the precise date and circumstances of the first composition of *Kubla Khan* are slightly ambiguous, due to limited direct evidence. Coleridge usually dated his poems, but did not date *Kubla Khan*,[5] and did not mention the poem directly in letters to his friends.

Coleridge's descriptions of the poem's composition attribute it to 1797. In a manuscript in Coleridge's handwriting (known as the Crewe manuscript), a note by Coleridge says that it was composed "in the fall of the year, 1797."[6][7] In the preface to the first published edition of the poem, in 1816, Coleridge says that it was composed during an extended stay he had made in Somerset during "the summer of the year 1797."[8] On 14 October 1797, Coleridge wrote a letter to John Thelwall which, although it does not directly mention *Kubla Khan*, expresses many of the same feelings as in the poem,[note 1] suggesting that these themes were on his mind.[10] All of these details have led to the consensus of an October 1797 composition date.

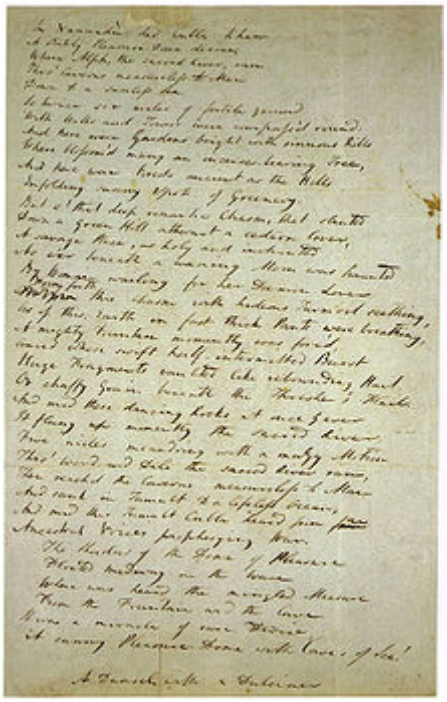
A May 1798 composition date is sometimes proposed because the first written record of the poem is in Dorothy Wordsworth's journal, October 1798. October 1799 has also been suggested because by then Coleridge would have been able to read Robert Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer*, a work which drew on the same sources as *Kubla Khan*. At both time periods, Coleridge was again in the area of Ash Farm, near Culbone Church, where Coleridge consistently described composing the poem. However, the October 1797 composition date is more widely accepted.

Composition in a dream

In September 1797, Coleridge lived in Nether Stowey in the southwest of England and spent much of his time walking through the nearby Quantock Hills with his fellow poet William Wordsworth and Wordsworth's sister Dorothy[11] (his route today is memorialised as the "Coleridge Way").[12] Some time between 9 and 14 October 1797, when Coleridge says he had completed the tragedy *Osorio*, he left Stowey for Lynton. On his return journey, he became sick and rested at Ash Farm, located near Culbone Church and one of the few places to seek shelter on his route.[11] There, he had a dream which inspired the poem.

Coleridge described the circumstances of his dream and the poem in two places: on a manuscript copy written some time before 1816, and in the preface to the printed version of the poem published in 1816. The manuscript states: "This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed, in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium taken to check a dysentry, at a Farm House between Porlock & Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church." The printed preface describes his location as "a lonely farm house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire," and embellishes the

events into a narrative which has sometimes been seen as part of the poem itself.



The Crewe manuscript, handwritten by Coleridge himself some time before the poem was published in 1816

According to the extended preface narrative, Coleridge was reading *Purchas his Pilgrimes* by Samuel Purchas, and fell asleep after reading about Kublai Khan. Then, he says, he "continued for about three hours in a profound sleep... during which time he had the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two or three hundred lines ... On Awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved."[13] The passage continues with a famous account of an interruption:[14] "At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock... 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 purpose of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away."[13] The Person from Porlock later became a term to describe interrupted genius. When John Livingston Lowes taught the poem, he told his students "If there is any man in the history of literature who should be hanged, drawn, and quartered, it is the man on business from Porlock."[15]

There are some problems with Coleridge's account, especially the claim to have a copy of Purchas with him. It was a rare book, unlikely to be at a "lonely farmhouse", nor would an individual carry it on a journey; the folio was heavy and almost 1,000 pages in size.[16] It is possible that the words of Purchas were merely remembered by Coleridge and that the depiction of immediately reading the work before falling asleep was to suggest that the subject came to him accidentally.[17] Critics have also noted that unlike the manuscript, which says he had taken two grains of opium, the printed version of this story says only that "In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed." The image of himself that Coleridge provides is of a dreamer who reads works of lore and not as an opium addict. Instead, the effects of the opium, as described, are intended to suggest that he was not used to its effects.[18]

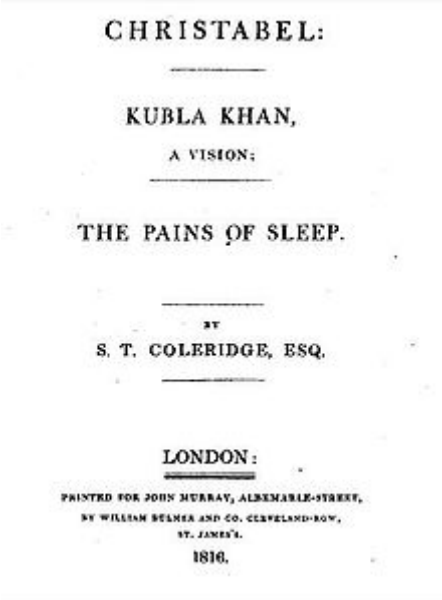
According to some critics, the second stanza of the poem, forming a conclusion, was composed at a later date and was possibly disconnected from the original dream.[19]

Publication

After its composition, Coleridge periodically read the poem to friends, as to the Wordsworths in 1798, but did not seek to publish it. The poem was set aside until 1815 when Coleridge compiled manuscripts of his poems for a collection titled *Sibylline Leaves*.[20] It did not feature in that volume, but Coleridge did read the poem to Lord Byron on 10 April 1816.[note 2]

Byron persuaded Coleridge to publish the poem, and on 12 April 1816, a contract was drawn up with the publisher John Murray for 80 pounds.[22] The Preface of *Kubla Khan* explained that it was printed "at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity, and as far as the author's own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed *poetic* merits."[23] Coleridge's wife discouraged the publication,[note 3] and Charles Lamb, a poet and friend of Coleridge, expressed mixed feelings, worrying that the printed version of the poem couldn't capture the power of the recited version.[note 4]

Kubla Khan was published with *Christabel* and "The Pains of Sleep" on 25 May 1816.[26] Coleridge included "A Fragment" as a subtitle *Kubla Khan* to defend against criticism of the poem's incomplete nature.[27] The original published version of the work was separated into 2 stanzas, with the first ending at line 30.[28] The poem was printed four times in Coleridge's life, with the final printing in his *Poetical Works* of 1834.[29] In the final work, Coleridge added the expanded subtitle "Or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment". Printed with *Kubla Khan* was a preface that claimed a dream provided Coleridge the lines.[30] In some later anthologies of Coleridge's poetry, the preface is dropped along with the subtitle denoting its fragmentary and dream nature. Sometimes, the preface is included in modern editions but lacks both the first and final paragraphs.[31]


CHRISTABEL:

KUBLA KHAN,

A VISION:

THE PAINS OF SLEEP.

BY

S. T. COLERIDGE, ESQ.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE-STREET,

BY WILLIAM BULMER AND CO. CLEVELAND-ROW,

ST. JAMES'S.

1816.

Title page of *Christabel, Kubla Khan, and the Pains of Sleep* (1816)

Sources

Purchas and Marco Polo

The book Coleridge was reading before he fell asleep was *Purchas, his Pilgrimes, or Relations of the World and Religions Observed in All Ages and Places Discovered, from the Creation to the Present*, by the English clergyman and geographer Samuel Purchas, published in 1613. The book contained a brief description of Xanadu, the summer capital of the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan. Coleridge's preface says that

> he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in Purchas's *Pilgrimage*: "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall."

Xanadu (here called Ciandu, as Marco Polo called it) on the French map of Asia made by Sanson d'Abbeville, geographer of King Louis XIV, dated 1650. It was northeast of Cambalu, or modern-day Beijing.

Coleridge names the wrong book by Purchas (Purchas wrote three books, his *Pilgrimage*, his *Pilgrim*, and his *Pilgrimes*; the last was his collection of travel stories), and misquotes the line. The text about Xanadu in *Purchas, His Pilgrimes*, which Coleridge admitted he did not remember exactly, was:

> In Xandu did Cublai Can build a stately Pallace, encompassing sixteen miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightfull streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the middest thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure, which may be moved from place to place.[32]

This quotation was based upon the writings of the Venetian explorer Marco Polo who is widely believed to have visited Xanadu in about 1275.[note 5] Marco Polo also described a large portable palace made of gilded and lacquered cane or bamboo which could be taken apart quickly and moved from place to place.[note 6] This was the "sumptuous house of pleasure" mentioned by Purchas, which Coleridge transformed into a "stately pleasure dome".

In terms of spelling, Coleridge's printed version differs from Purchas's spelling, which refers to the Tartar ruler as "Cublai Can", and from the spelling used by Milton, "Cathaian Can".[35] His original manuscript spells the name "Cubla Khan" and the place "Xannadu".

Mount Abora

Debre Damo, an amba (flat-topped mountain) in Ethiopia similar to Amba Geshen (Mount Amara)

In the Crewe manuscript (the earlier unpublished version of the poem), the Abyssinian maid is singing of Mount Amara, rather than Abora. Mount Amara is a real mountain, today called Amba Geshen, located in the Amhara Region of modern Ethiopia, formerly known as the Abyssinian Empire. It was a natural fortress, and was the site of the royal treasury and the royal prison. The sons of the Emperors of Abyssinia, except for the heir, were held prisoner there, to prevent them from staging a coup against their father, until the Emperor's death.

Mount Amara was visited between 1515 and 1521 by Portuguese priest, explorer and diplomat Francisco Alvares (1465–1541), who was on a mission to meet the Christian king of Ethiopia. His description of Mount Amara was published in 1540, and appears in *Purchas, his Pilgrimes*, the book Coleridge was reading before he wrote "Kubla Khan".[note 7]

Mount Amara also appears in Milton's Paradise Lost:

> Near where Abessian Kings their issue Guard,
> Mount Amara, though this by some suppos'd
> True Paradise under the Ethiop line.[37]

Mount Amara is in the same region as Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile river. Ethiopian tradition says that the Blue Nile is the River Gihon of the Bible, one of the four rivers that flow out of the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis, which says that Gihon flows through the Kingdom of Kush, the Biblical name for Ethiopia and Sudan. In fact the Blue Nile is very far from the other three rivers mentioned in Genesis 2:10–14, but this belief led to the connection in 18th and 19th century English literature between Mount Amara and Paradise.[38]

Other sources

Charles Lamb provided Coleridge on 15 April 1797 with a copy of his "A Vision of Repentance", a poem that discussed a dream containing imagery similar to those in "Kubla Khan". The poem could have provided Coleridge with the idea of a dream poem that discusses fountains, sacredness, and even a woman singing a sorrowful song.[39]

There are additional strong literary connections to other works, including John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, Chatterton's *African Eclogues*, William Bartram's *Travels through North and South Carolina*, Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Short Residence in Sweden*, Plato's *Phaedrus and Ion*,[40] Maurice's *The History of Hindostan*, and Heliodorus's *Aethiopian History*.[41] The poem also contains allusions to the Book of Revelation in its description of New Jerusalem and to the paradise of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[42] The sources used for "Kubla Khan" are also used in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.[43]

Opium itself has also been seen as a "source" for many of the poem's features, such as its disorganized action. These features are similar to writing by other contemporary opium eaters and writers, such as Thomas de Quincey and Charles Pierre Baudelaire.

Coleridge may also have been influenced by the surrounding of Culbone Combe and its hills, gulleys, and other features including the "mystical" and "sacred" locations in the region. Other geographic influences include the river, which has been tied to Alpheus in Greece and is similar to the Nile. The caves have been compared to those in Kashmir.

Style

The poem is different in style and form from other poems composed by Coleridge. While incomplete and subtitled a "fragment", its language is highly stylised with a strong emphasis on sound devices that change between the poem's original two stanzas. The poem according to Coleridge's account, is a fragment of what it should have been, amounting to what he was able to jot down from memory: 54 lines.[44] Originally, his dream included between 200 and 300 lines, but he was only able to compose the first 30 before he was interrupted. The second stanza is not necessarily part of the original dream and refers to the dream in the past tense.[45] The rhythm of the poem, like its themes and images, is different from other poems Coleridge wrote during the time, and it is organised in a structure similar to 18th-century odes. The poem relies on many sound-based techniques, including cognate variation and chiasmus.[46] In particular, the poem emphasises the use of the "æ" sound and similar modifications to the standard "a" sound to make the poem sound Asian. Its rhyme scheme found in the first seven lines is repeated in the first seven lines of the second stanza. There is a heavy use of assonance, the reuse of vowel sounds, and a reliance on alliteration, repetition of the first sound of a word, within the poem including the first line: "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan". The stressed sounds, "Xan", "du", "Ku", "Khan", contain assonance in their use of the sounds a-u-u-a, have two rhyming syllables with "Xan" and "Khan", and employ alliteration with the name "Kubla Khan" and the reuse of "d" sounds in "Xanadu" and "did". To pull the line together, the "i" sound of "In" is repeated in "did". Later lines do not contain the same amount of symmetry but do rely on assonance and rhymes throughout. The only word that has no true connection to another word is "dome" except in its use of a "d" sound. Though the lines are interconnected, the rhyme scheme and line lengths are irregular.[47]

The first lines of the poem follow iambic tetrameter with the initial stanza relying on heavy stresses. The lines of the second stanza incorporate lighter stresses to increase the speed of the meter to separate them from the hammer-like rhythm of the previous lines.[48] There also is a strong break following line 36 in the poem that provides for a second stanza, and there is a transition in narration from a third person narration about Kubla Khan into the poet discussing his role as a poet.[49] Without the Preface, the two stanzas form two different poems that have some relationship to each other but lack unity.[50] This is not to say they would be two different poems, since the technique of having separate parts that respond to another is used in the genre of the odal hymn, used in the poetry of other Romantic poets including John Keats or Percy Bysshe Shelley.[51] However, the odal hymn as used by others has a stronger unity among its parts, and Coleridge believed in writing poetry that was unified organically.[52] It is possible that Coleridge was displeased by the lack of unity in the poem and added a note about the structure to the Preface to explain his thoughts.[53] In terms of genre, the poem is a dream poem and related to works describing visions common to the Romantic poets. *Kubla Khan* is also related to the genre of fragmentary poetry, with internal images reinforcing the idea of fragmentation that is found within the form of the poem.[54] The poem's self-proclaimed fragmentary nature combined with Coleridge's warning about the poem in the preface turns "Kubla Khan" into an "anti-poem", a work that lacks structure, order, and leaves the reader confused instead of enlightened.[55] However, the poem has little relation to the other fragmentary poems Coleridge wrote.[56]

Major themes

Although the land is one of man-made "pleasure", there is a natural, "sacred" river that runs past it. The lines describing the river have a markedly different rhythm from the rest of the passage.[48] The land is constructed as a garden, but like Eden after Man's fall, Xanadu is isolated by walls. The finite properties of the constructed walls of Xanadu are contrasted with the infinite properties of the natural caves through which the river runs. The poem expands on the gothic hints of the first stanza as the narrator explores the dark chasm in the midst of Xanadu's gardens, and describes the surrounding area as both "savage" and "holy". Yarlott interprets this chasm as symbolic of the poet struggling with decadence that ignores nature.[57] It may also represent the dark side of the soul, the dehumanising effect of power and dominion. Fountains are often symbolic of the inception of life, and in this case may represent forceful creativity.[58] Since this fountain ends in death, it may also simply represent the life span of a human, from violent birth to a sinking end. Yarlott argues that the war represents the penalty for seeking pleasure, or simply the confrontation of the present by the past.[59] Though the exterior of Xanadu is presented in images of darkness, and in context of the dead sea, we are reminded of the "miracle" and "pleasure" of Kubla Khan's creation. The vision of the sites, including the dome, the cavern, and the fountain, are similar to an apocalyptic vision. Together, the natural and man-made structures form a miracle of nature as they represent the mixing of opposites together, the essence of creativity.[60] In the third stanza, the narrator turns prophetic, referring to a vision of an unidentified "Abyssinian maid" who sings of "Mount Abora". Harold Bloom suggests that this passage reveals the narrator's desire to rival Khan's ability to create with his own.[61] The woman may also refer to Mnemosyne, the Greek personification of memory and mother of the muses, referring directly to Coleridge's claimed struggle to compose this poem from memory of a dream. The subsequent passage refers to unnamed witnesses who may also hear this, and thereby share in the narrator's vision of a replicated, ethereal, Xanadu. Harold Bloom suggests that the power of the poetic imagination, stronger than nature or art, fills the narrator and grants him the ability to share this vision with others through his poetry. The narrator would thereby be elevated to an awesome, almost mythical status, as one who has experienced an Edenic paradise available only to those who have similarly mastered these creative powers.[62]

Poetic imagination

One theory says that "Kubla Khan" is about poetry and the two sections discuss two types of poems.[63] The power of the imagination is an important component to this theme. The poem celebrates creativity and how the poet is able to experience a connection to the universe through inspiration. As a poet, Coleridge places himself in an uncertain position as either master over his creative powers or a slave to it.[64] The dome city represents the imagination and the second stanza represents the relationship between a poet and the rest of society. The poet is separated from the rest of humanity after he is exposed to the power to create and is able to witness visions of truth. This separation causes a combative relationship between the poet and the audience as the poet seeks to control his listener through a mesmerising technique.[65] The poem's emphasis on imagination as subject of a poem, on the contrasts within the paradisal setting, and its discussion of the role of poet as either being blessed or cursed by imagination, has influenced many works, including Alfred Tennyson's "Palace of Art" and William Butler Yeats's Byzantium based poems.[66] There is also a strong connection between the idea of retreating into the imagination found within Keats's *Lamia* and in Tennyson's "Palace of Art".[67] The Preface, when added to the poem, connects the idea of the paradise as the imagination with the land of Porlock, and that the imagination, though infinite, would be interrupted by a "person on business". The Preface then allows for Coleridge to leave the poem as a fragment, which represents the inability for the imagination to provide complete images or truly reflect reality. The poem would not be about the act of creation but a fragmentary view revealing how the act works: how the poet crafts language and how it relates to himself.[68]

Through use of the imagination, the poem is able to discuss issues surrounding tyranny, war, and contrasts that exist within paradise.[69] Part of the war motif could be a metaphor for the poet in a competitive struggle with the reader to push his own vision and ideas upon his audience.[70] As a component to the idea of imagination in the poem is the creative process by describing a world that is of the imagination and another that is of

understanding. The poet, in Coleridge's system, is able to move from the world of understanding, where men normally are, and enter into the world of the imagination through poetry. When the narrator describes the "ancestral voices prophesying war", the idea is part of the world of understanding, or the real world. As a whole, the poem is connected to Coleridge's belief in a secondary Imagination that can lead a poet into a world of imagination, and the poem is both a description of that world and a description of how the poet enters the world.[71] The imagination, as it appears in many of Coleridge's and Wordsworth's works, including "Kubla Khan", is discussed through the metaphor of water, and the use of the river in "Kubla Khan" is connected to the use of the stream in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. The water imagery is also related to the divine and nature, and the poet is able to tap into nature in a way Kubla Khan cannot to harness its power.[72]

Rivers

Towards the end of 1797, Coleridge was fascinated with the idea of a river and it was used in multiple poems including "Kubla Khan" and "The Brook". In his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), he explained, "I sought for a subject, that should give equal room and freedom for description, incident, and impassioned reflections on men, nature, and society, yet supply in itself a natural connection to the parts and unity to the whole. Such a subject I conceived myself to have found in a stream, traced from its source in the hills among the yellow-red moss and conical glass-shaped tufts of bent, to the first break or fall, where its drops become audible, and it begins to form a channel".[73] It is possible that the imagery of *Biographia Literaria* followed the recovery of the "Kubla Khan" manuscript during the composition of the book.[74] Water imagery permeated through many of his poems, and the coast that he witnessed on his journey to Linton appears in *Osorio*. Additionally, many of the images are connected to a broad use of Ash Farm and the Quantocks in Coleridge's poetry, and the mystical settings of both *Osorio* and "Kubla Khan" are based on his idealised version of the region.[75] "Kubla Khan" was composed in the same year as *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, and both poems contained images that were used in 14 October 1797 letter to Thelwall. However, the styles are very different as one is heavily structured and rhymed while the other tries to mimic conversational speech. What they do have in common is that they use scenery based on the same location, including repeated uses of dells, rocks, ferns, and a waterfall found in the Somerset region.[76] The Preface uses water imagery to explain what happens when visions are lost by quoting a passage from his poem *The Picture*. When considering all of *The Picture* and not just the excerpt, Coleridge describes how inspiration is similar to a stream and that if an object is thrown into it the vision is interrupted.[50] Also, the name "Alph" could connect to the idea of being an alpha or original place.[77]

Tatars and paradise

The Tatars ruled by Kubla Khan were seen in the tradition Coleridge worked from as a violent, barbaric people and were used in that way when Coleridge compared others to Tatars. They were seen as worshippers of the sun, but uncivilised and connected to either the Cain or Ham line of outcasts. However, Coleridge describes Khan in a peaceful light and as a man of genius. He seeks to show his might but does so by building his own version of paradise. The description and the tradition provide a contrast between the daemonic and genius within the poem, and Khan is a ruler who is unable to recreate Eden.[78] There are also comparisons between Khan and Catherine the Great or Napoleon with their building and destroying nations. Though the imagery can be dark, there is little moral concern as the ideas are mixed with creative energies.[79] In the second stanza, Khan is able to establish some order in the natural world but he cannot stop the forces of nature that constantly try to destroy what he made. Nature, in the poem is not a force of redemption but one of destruction, and the paradise references reinforce what Khan cannot attain.[80]

Although the Tatars are barbarians from China, they are connected to ideas within the Judaeo Christian tradition, including the idea of Original Sin and Eden.[81] The account of Cublai Can in Purchas's work, discussed in Coleridge's Preface, connects the idea of paradise with luxury and sensual pleasure. The place

was described in negative terms and seen as an inferior representation of paradise, and Coleridge's ethical system did not connect pleasure with joy or the divine.[82] As for specific aspects of the scene, the river and cavern images are used to describe how creativity operates in a post-Edenic reality. The river, Alph, replaces the one from Eden that granted immortality and it disappears into a sunless sea that lacks life. The image is further connected to the Biblical, post-Edenic stories in that a mythological story attributes the violent children of Ham becoming the Tatars, and that Tartarus, derived from the location, became a synonym for hell. Coleridge believed that the Tatars were violent, and that their culture was opposite to the civilised Chinese. The Tatars were also in contrast to the concept of Prester John, who may have been Prester Chan and, in Ludolphus's account, chased out of Asia by the Tatars and, in John Herbert's *Travels*, was Abyssinian.[83]

The land is similar to the false paradise of Mount Amara in *Paradise Lost*, especially the Abyssinian maid's song about Mount Abora that is able to mesmerise the poet. In the manuscript copy, the location was named both Amora and Amara, and the location of both is the same.[84] There are more connections to *Paradise Lost*, including how Milton associates the Tatar ruler to the Post-Edenic world in Adam's vision of the Tartar kingdom. In post-Milton accounts, the kingdom is linked with the worship of the sun, and his name is seen to be one that reveals the Khan as a priest. This is reinforced by the connection of the river Alph with the Alpheus, a river that in Greece was connected to the worship of the sun. As followers of the sun, the Tatar are connected to a tradition that describes Cain as founding a city of sun worshippers and that people in Asia would build gardens in remembrance of the lost Eden.[85]

In the tradition Coleridge relies on, the Tatar worship the sun because it reminds them of paradise, and they build gardens because they want to recreate paradise. Kubla Khan is of the line of Cain and fallen, but he wants to overcome that state and rediscover paradise by creating an enclosed garden. The dome, in Thomas Maurice's description, in *The History of Hindostan* of the tradition, was related to nature worship as it reflects the shape of the universe. Coleridge, when composing the poem, believed in a connection between nature and the divine but believed that the only dome that should serve as the top of a temple was the sky. He thought that a dome was an attempt to hide from the ideal and escape into a private creation, and Kubla Khan's dome is a flaw that keeps him from truly connecting to nature. Maurice's *History of Hindostan* also describes aspects of Kashmir that were copied by Coleridge in preparation for hymns he intended to write. The work, and others based on it, describe a temple with a dome.[86] Purchas's work does not mention a dome but a "house of pleasure". The use of dome instead of house or palace could represent the most artificial of constructs and reinforce the idea that the builder was separated from nature. However, Coleridge did believe that a dome could be positive if it was connected to religion, but the Khan's dome was one of immoral pleasure and a purposeless life dominated by sensuality and pleasure.[87]

Abyssinian maid

The narrator introduces a character he once dreamed about, an Abyssinian maid who sings of another land. She is a figure of imaginary power within the poem who can inspire within the narrator his own ability to craft poetry.[88] When she sings, she is able to inspire and mesmerise the poet by describing a false paradise.[79] The woman herself is similar to the way Coleridge describes Lewti in another poem he wrote around the same time, *Lewti*. The connection between Lewti and the Abyssinian maid makes it possible that the maid was intended as a disguised version of Mary Evans, who appears as a love interest since Coleridge's 1794 poem *The Sigh*. Evans, in the poems, appears as an object of sexual desire and a source of inspiration.[89] She is also similar to the later subject of many of Coleridge's poems, Asra, based on Sara Hutchinson, whom Coleridge wanted but was not his wife and experienced opium induced dreams of being with her.[90]

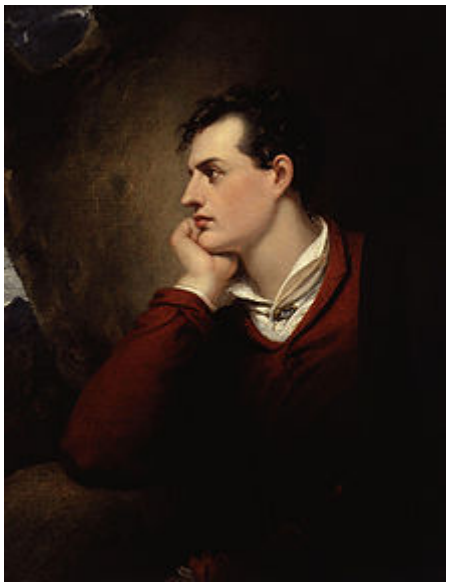
The figure is related to Heliodorus's work *Aethiopian History*, with its description of "a young Lady, sitting upon a Rock, of so rare and perfect a Beauty, as one would have taken her for a Goddess, and though her present misery opprest her with extreamest grief, yet in the greatness of her affliction, they might easily perceive the greatness of her Courage: A Laurel crown'd her Head, and a Quiver in a Scarf hanged at her

back".[91] Her description in the poem is also related to Isis of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, but Isis was a figure of redemption and the Abyssinian maid cries out for her demon-lover. She is similar to John Keats's Indian woman in *Endymion* who is revealed to be the moon goddess, but in "Kubla Khan" she is also related to the sun and the sun as an image of divine truth.[92]

In addition to real-life counterparts of the Abyssinian maid, Milton's *Paradise Lost* describes Abyssinian kings keeping their children guarded at Mount Amara and a false paradise, which is echoed in "Kubla Khan".[93]

Critical response

The reception of *Kubla Khan* has changed substantially over time. Initial reactions to the poem were lukewarm, despite praise from notable figures like Lord Byron and Walter Scott. The work went through multiple editions, but the poem, as with his others published in 1816 and 1817, had poor sales. Initial reviewers saw some aesthetic appeal in the poem, but considered it unremarkable overall. As critics began to consider Coleridge's body of work as whole, however, *Kubla Khan* was increasingly singled out for praise. Positive evaluation of the poem in the 19th and early 20th centuries treated it as a purely aesthetic object, to be appreciated for its evocative sensory experience.[94] Later criticism continued to appreciate the poem, but no longer considered it as transcending concrete meaning, instead interpreting it as a complex statement on poetry itself and the nature of individual genius.[94]



Lord Byron, second-generation Romantic poet who encouraged Coleridge's publication of *Kubla Khan*, by Richard Westall

Self-portrait of William Hazlitt, Romantic critic who wrote the first negative review of *Kubla Khan*

During Coleridge's lifetime

Literary reviews at the time of the collection's first publication generally dismissed it.[95] At the time of the poem's publication, a new generation of critical magazines, including *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *Edinburgh Review*, and *Quarterly Review*, had been established, with critics who were more provocative than those of the previous generation. These critics were hostile to Coleridge due to a difference of political views, and due to a puff piece written by Byron about the *Christabel* publication.[96] The first of the negative reviews was written by William Hazlitt, literary critic and Romantic writer, who criticized the fragmentary nature of the work. Hazlitt said that the poem "comes to no conclusion" and that "from an excess of capacity, [Coleridge] does little or nothing" with his material.[97] The only positive quality which Hazlitt notes is a certain aesthetic appeal: he says "we could repeat these lines to ourselves not the less often for not knowing the meaning of them," revealing that "Mr Coleridge can write better *nonsense* verse than any man in English."[97] As other reviews continued to be published in 1816, they, too, were lukewarm at best. The poem was not disliked as strongly as *Christabel*,[98] and one reviewer expressed regret that the poem was incomplete.[99] The poem received limited praise for "some playful thoughts and fanciful imagery,"[100] and was said to "have much of the

Oriental richness and harmony"[101] but was generally considered unremarkable, as expressed by one review which said that "though they are not marked by any striking beauties, they are not wholly discreditable to the author's talents."[98]

These early reviews generally accepted Coleridge's story of composing the poem in a dream, but dismissed its relevance, and observed that many others have had similar experiences.[98][102][103] More than one review suggested that the dream had not merited publication,[101][103] with one review commenting that "in sleep the judgment is the first faculty of the mind which ceases to act, therefore, the opinion of the sleeper respecting his performance is not to be trusted."[103] One reviewer questioned whether Coleridge had really dreamed his composition, suggesting that instead he likely wrote it rapidly upon waking.[104]

More positive appraisals of the poem began to emerge when Coleridge's contemporaries evaluated his body of work overall. In October 1821, Leigh Hunt wrote a piece on Coleridge as part of his "Sketches of the Living Poets" series which singled out Kubla Khan as one of Coleridge's best works: Every lover of books, scholar or not...ought to be in possession of Mr. Coleridge's poems, if it is only for 'Christabel', 'Kubla Khan', and the 'Ancient Mariner'."[105] Hunt praised the poem's evocative, dreamlike beauty:

Leigh Hunt, second-generation Romantic poet who praised *Kubla Khan*

> "[*Kubla Khan*] is a voice and a vision, an everlasting tune in our mouths, a dream fit for Cambuscan and all his poets, a dance of pictures such as Giotto or Cimabue, revived and re-inspired, would have made for a Storie of Old Tartarie, a piece of the invisible world made visible by a sun at midnight and sliding before our eyes...Justly is it thought that to be able to present such images as these to the mind, is to realise the world they speak of. We could repeat such verses as the following down a green glade, a whole summer's morning."[106]

An 1830 review of Coleridge's *Poetical Works* similarly praised for its "melodious versification," describing it as "perfect music." An 1834 review, published shortly after Coleridge's death, also praised *Kubla Khan*'s musicality. These three later assessments of *Kubla Khan* responded more positively to Coleridge's description of composing the poem in a dream, as an additional facet of the poetry.[105]

Victorian period

Victorian critics praised the poem and some examined aspects of the poem's background. John Sheppard, in his analysis of dreams titled *On Dreams* (1847), lamented Coleridge's drug use as getting in the way of his poetry but argued: "It is probable, since he writes of having taken an 'anodyne,' that the 'vision in a dream' arose under some excitement of that same narcotic; but this does not destroy, even as to his particular case, the evidence for a wonderfully inventive action of the mind in sleep; for, whatever were the exciting cause, the fact remains the same".[107] T. Hall Caine, in 1883 survey of the original critical response to *Christabel* and "Kubla Khan", praised the poem and declared: "It must surely be allowed that the adverse criticism on 'Christabel' and 'Kubla Khan' which is here quoted is outside all tolerant treatment, whether of raillery or of banter. It is difficult to attribute such false verdict to pure and absolute ignorance. Even when we make all due allowance for the prejudices of critics whose only possible enthusiasm went out to 'the pointed and fine propriety of Poe,' we can hardly believe that the exquisite art which is among the most valued on our possessions could encounter so much garrulous abuse without the criminal intervention of personal

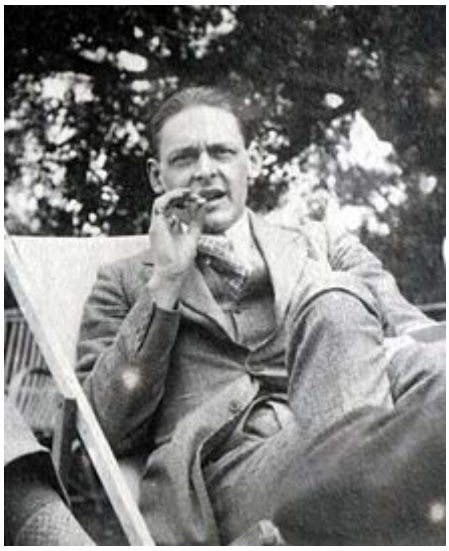
malignancy."[108] In a review of H. D. Traill's analysis of Coleridge in the "English Men of Letters", an anonymous reviewer wrote in 1885 *Westminster Review*: "Of 'Kubla Khan,' Mr. Traill writes: 'As to the wild dream-poem 'Kubla Khan,' it is hardly more than a psychological curiosity, and only that perhaps in respect of the completeness of its metrical form.' Lovers of poetry think otherwise, and listen to these wonderful lines as the voice of Poesy itself."[109]

Critics at the end of the 19th century favoured the poem and placed it as one of Coleridge's best works. When discussing *Christabel*, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and "Kubla Khan", an anonymous reviewer in the October 1893 *The Church Quarterly Review* claimed, "In these poems Coleridge achieves a mastery of language and rhythm which is nowhere else conspicuously evident in him."[110] In 1895, Andrew Lang reviewed the *Letters of Coleridge* in addition to Coleridge's "Kubla Khan", *Christabel* and *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, saying: "all these poems are 'miraculous;' all seem to have been 'given' by the dreaming 'subconscious self' of Coleridge. The earliest pieces hold no promise of these marvels. They come from what is oldest in Coleridge's nature, his uninvited and irrepressible intuition, magical and rare, vivid beyond common sight of common things, sweet beyond sound of things heard."[111] G E Woodberry, in 1897, said that *Christabel*, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and "Kubla Khan" "are the marvelous creations of his genius. In these it will be said there is both a world of nature new created, and a dramatic method and interest. It is enough for the purpose of the analysis if it be granted that nowhere else in Coleridge's work, except in these and less noticeably in a few other instances, do these high characteristics occur."[112] In speaking of the three poems, he claimed they "have besides that wealth of beauty in detail, of fine diction, of liquid melody, of sentiment, thought, and image, which belong only to poetry of the highest order, and which are too obvious to require any comment. 'Kubla Khan' is a poem of the same kind, in which the mystical effect is given almost wholly by landscape."[113]

1920s–30s

The 1920s contained analysis of the poem that emphasised the poem's power. In *Road to Xanadu* (1927), a book length study of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and "Kubla Khan", John Livingston Lowes claimed that the poems were "two of the most remarkable poems in English".[114] When turning to the background of the works, he argued, "Coleridge as Coleridge, be it said at once, is a secondary moment to our purpose; it is the significant process, not the man, which constitutes our theme. But the amazing *modus operandi* of his genius, in the fresh light which I hope I have to offer, becomes the very abstract and brief chronicle of the procedure of the creative faculty itself."[115] After breaking down the various aspects of the poem, Lowes stated, "with a picture of unimpaired and thrilling vividness, the fragment ends. And with it ends, for all save Coleridge, the dream. 'The earth hath bubbles as the water has, and this is of them.' For 'Kubla Khan' is as near enchantment, I suppose, as we are like to come in this dull world. And over it is cast the glamour, enhanced beyond all reckoning in the dream, of the remote in time and space – that visionary presence of a vague and gorgeous and mysterious Past which brooded, as Coleridge read, above the inscrutable Nile, and domed pavilions in Cashmere, and the vanished stateliness of Xanadu."[116] He continued by describing the power of the poem: "For none of the things which we have seen – dome, river, chasm, fountain, caves of ice, or floating hair – nor any combination of them holds the secret key to that sense of an incommunicable witchery which pervades the poem. That is something more impalpable by far, into which entered who can tell what traceless, shadowy recollections...The poem is steeped in the wonder of all Coleridge's enchanted voyagings."[117] Lowes then concluded about the two works: "Not even in the magical four and fifty lines of 'Kubla Khan' is sheer visualizing energy so intensely exercised as in 'The Ancient Mariner.' But every crystal-clear picture there, is an integral part of a preconceived and consciously elaborated whole...In 'Kubla Khan' the linked and interweaving images irresponsibly and gloriously stream, like the pulsing, fluctuating banners of the North. And their pageant is as aimless as it is magnificent...There is, then...one glory of 'Kubla Khan' and another glory of 'The Ancient Mariner,' as one star differeth from another star in glory."[118] George Watson, in 1966,

claimed that Lowes's analysis of the poems "will stand as a permanent monument to historical criticism."[119] Also in 1966, Kenneth Burke, declared, "Count me among those who would view this poem both as a marvel, and as 'in principle' *finished*."[120]


T. S. Eliot, poet and literary critic

T. S. Eliot attacked the reputation of "Kubla Khan" and sparked a dispute within literary criticism with his analysis of the poem in his essay "Origin and Uses of Poetry" from *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933): "The way in which poetry is written is not, so far as our knowledge of these obscure matters as yet extends, any clue to its value...The faith in mystical inspiration is responsible for the exaggerated repute of "Kubla Khan". The imagery of that fragment, certainly, whatever its origins in Coleridge's reading, sank to the depths of Coleridge's feeling, was saturated, transformed there...and brought up into daylight again."[121] He goes on to explain, "But it is not *used*: the poem has not been written. A single verse is not poetry unless it is a one-verse poem; and even the finest line draws its life from its context. Organization is necessary as well as 'inspiration'. The re-creation of word and image which happens fitfully in the poetry of such a poet as Coleridge happens almost incessantly with Shakespeare."[121] Geoffrey Yarlott, in 1967, responds to Eliot to claim, "Certainly, the enigmatic personages who appear in the poem...and the vaguely incantatory proper names...appear to adumbrate rather than crystalize the poet's intention. Yet, though generally speaking intentions in poetry are nothing save as 'realized', we are unable to ignore the poem, despite Mr Eliot's strictures on its 'exaggerated repute'."[122] He continued, "We may question without end *what* it means, but few of us question if the poem is worth the trouble, or whether the meaning is worth the having. While the feeling persists that there is something there which is profoundly important, the challenge to elucidate it proves irresistible."[122] However, Lilian Furst, in 1969, countered Yarlott to argue that, "T. S. Eliot's objection to the exaggerated repute of the surrealist "Kubla Khan" is not unjustified. Moreover, the customary criticism of Coleridge as a cerebral poet would seem to be borne out by those poems such as *This Lime-tree Bower my Prison* or *The Pains of Sleep*, which tend more towards a direct statement than an imaginative presentation of personal dilemma."[123]

1940s–60s

During the 1940s and 1950s, critics focused on the technique of the poem and how it relates to the meaning. In 1941, G. W. Knight claimed that "Kubla Khan" "needs no defence. It has a barbaric and oriental magnificence that asserts itself with a happy power and authenticity too often absent from visionary poems set within the Christian tradition."[124] Humphrey House, in 1953, praised the poem and said of beginning of the poem: "The whole passage is full of life because the verse has both the needed energy and the needed control. The combination of energy and control in the rhythm and sound is so great" and that Coleridge's words "convey so fully the sense of inexhaustible energy, now falling now rising, but persisting through its own pulse".[125] Also in 1953, Elisabeth Schneider dedicated her book to analysing the various aspects of the poem, including the various sound techniques. When discussing the quality of the poem, she wrote, "I sometimes think we overwork Coleridge's idea of 'the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.' I have to come back to it here, however, for the particular flavor of "Kubla Khan", with its air of mystery, is describable in part through that convenient phrase. Yet, the 'reconciliation' does not quite occur either. It is in fact avoided. What we have instead is the very spirit of 'oscillation' itself."[126] Continuing, she claimed, "The poem is the soul of ambivalence, oscillation's very self; and that is probably its deepest meaning. In creating this effect, form and matter are intricately woven. The irregular and inexact rhymes and varied lengths of the lines play some part. More important is the musical effect in which a smooth, rather swift forward movement is

emphasized by the relation of grammatical structure to line and rhyme, yet is impeded and thrown back upon itself even from the beginning".[126] She then concluded: "Here in these interwoven oscillations dwells the magic, the 'dream,' and the air of mysterious meaning of "Kubla Khan". I question whether this effect was all deliberately through [*sic?*] out by Coleridge, though it might have been. It is possibly half-inherent in his subject...What remains is the spirit of 'oscillation,' perfectly poeticized, and possibly ironically commemorative of the author."[127] Following in 1959, John Beer described the complex nature of the poem: "'Kubla Khan' the poem is not a meaningless reverie, but a poem so packed with meaning as to render detailed elucidation extremely difficult."[128] In responding to House, Beer claimed, "That there is an image of energy in the fountain may be accepted: but I cannot agree that it is creative energy of the highest type."[129]

Critics of the 1960s focused on the reputation of the poem and how it compared to Coleridge's other poems. In 1966, Virginia Radley considered Wordsworth and his sister as an important influence to Coleridge writing a great poem: "Almost daily social intercourse with this remarkable brother and sister seemed to provide the catalyst to greatness, for it is during this period that Coleridge conceived his greatest poems, 'Christabel,' 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,' and 'Kubla Khan,' poems so distinctive and so different from his others that many generations of readers know Coleridge solely through them."[130] She latter added that "Of all the poems Coleridge wrote, three are beyond compare. These three, 'The Ancient Mariner,' 'Christabel,' and 'Kubla Khan,' produced an aura which defies definition, but which might be properly be called one of 'natural magic.'"[131] What sets apart the poem from the others is its "verbal enactment of the creative process" which makes it "unique even among the three poems of high imagination."[132] To Radley, "the poem is skilfully wrought, as are all the poems of high imagination. The opposites within it are diverse and effectively so. In tone, the poem juxtaposes quiet with noise...Action presents its contrasts also...These seemingly antithetical images combine to demonstrate the proximity of the known and the unknown worlds, the two worlds of Understanding and Imagination."[133] In concluding about the poem, she argued, "In truth, there are other 'Fears in Solitude' than that written by Coleridge and there are other 'Frosts at Midnight'; but there are no other 'Ancient Mariners' or 'Kubla Khans,' nor are there likely to be. In evaluating Coleridge's poetry, it can readily be seen and accepted that for the poems of high imagination his reputation is eternally made."[134]

In the same year as Radley, George Watson argued that "The case of 'Kubla Khan' is perhaps the strangest of all – a poem that stands high even in English poetry as a work of ordered perfection is offered by the poet himself, nearly twenty years after its composition, as a fragment. Anyone can accept that a writer's head should be full of projects he will never fulfil, and most writers are cautious enough not to set them down; Coleridge, rashly, did set them down, so that his very fertility has survived as evidence of infertility."[135] He later argued that the poem "is probably the most original poem about poetry in English, and the first hint outside his notebooks and letters that a major critic lies hidden in the twenty-five-year-old Coleridge."[136] In conclusion about the poem, Watson stated, "The triumph of 'Kubla Khan,' perhaps, lies in its evasions: it hints so delicately at critical truths while demonstrating them so boldly. The contrasts between the two halves of the poem...So bold, indeed, that Coleridge for once was able to dispense with any language out of the past. It was his own poem, a manifesto. To read it now, with the hindsight of another age, is to feel premonitions of the critical achievement to come...But the poem is in advance, not just of these, but in all probability of any critical statement that survives. It may be that it stands close to the moment of discovery itself."[137] After responding to Eliot's claims about "Kubla Khan", Yarlott, in 1967, argued that "few of us question if the poem is worth the trouble" before explaining that "The ambiguities inherent in the poem pose a special problem of critical approach. If we restrict ourselves to what is 'given', appealing to the poem as a 'whole', we shall fail probably to resolves its various cruxes. Hence, there is a temptation to look for 'external' influences ... The trouble with all these approaches is that they tend finally to lead *away* from the poem itself."[138] When describing specifics, he argued, "The rhythmical development of the stanza, too, though technically brilliant, evokes admiration rather than delight. The unusually heavy stresses and abrupt masculine rhymes impose a slow and sonorous weightiness upon the movement of the iambic octosyllabics which is quite in contrast, say, to the light fast metre of the final stanza where speed of movement matches buoyancy of tone."[48] Following in 1968, Walter Jackson Bate called the poem "haunting" and said that it was "so unlike anything else in English".[139]

1970s–present

Criticism during the 1970s and 1980s emphasised the importance of the Preface while praising the work. Norman Fruman, in 1971, argued: "To discuss 'Kubla Khan' as one might any other great poem would be an exercise in futility. For a century and a half its status has been unique, a masterpiece *sui generis*, embodying interpretive problems wholly its own...It would not be excessive to say that no small part of the extraordinary fame of 'Kubla Khan' inheres in its alleged marvellous conception. Its Preface is world-famous and has been used in many studies of the creative process as a signal instance in which a poem has come to us directly from the unconscious."[140]

In 1981, Kathleen Wheeler contrasts the Crewe Manuscript note with the Preface: "Contrasting this relatively factual, literal, and dry account of the circumstances surrounding the birth of the poem with the actual published preface, one illustrates what the latter is not: it is not a literal, dry, factual account of this sort, but a highly literary piece of composition, providing the verse with a certain mystique."[141] In 1985, David Jasper praised the poem as "one of his greatest meditations on the nature of poetry and poetic creation" and argued "it is through irony, also, as it unsettles and undercuts, that the fragment becomes a Romantic literary form of such importance, nowhere more so than in 'Kubla Khan'."[142] When talking about the Preface, Jasper claimed that it "profoundly influenced the way in which the poem has been understood".[143] Responding in part to Wheeler in 1986, Charles Rzepka analysed the relationship between the poet and the audience of the poem while describing "Kubla Khan" as one of "Coleridge's three great poems of the supernatural".[144] He continued by discussing the preface: "despite its obvious undependability as a guide to the actual process of the poem's composition, the preface can still, in Wheeler's words, lead us 'to ponder why Coleridge chose to write a preface...' What the preface describes, of course, is not the actual process by which the poem came into being, but an analogue of poetic creation as *logos*, a divine 'decree' or fiat which transforms the Word into the world."[145]

During the 1990s, critics continued to praise the poem with many critics placing emphasis on what the Preface adds to the poem. David Perkins, in 1990, argued that "Coleridge's introductory note to "Kubla Khan" weaves together two myths with potent imaginative appeal. The myth of the lost poem tells how an inspired work was mysteriously given to the poet and dispelled irrecoverably."[18] Also in 1990, Thomas McFarland stated, "Judging by the number and variety of critical effort to interpret their meaning, there may be no more palpably symbolic poems in all of English literature than "Kubla Khan" and *The Ancient Mariner*."[146] In 1996, Rosemary Ashton claimed that the poem was "one of the most famous poems in the language" and claimed the Preface as "the most famous, but probably not the most accurate, preface in literary history."[147] Richard Holmes, in 1998, declared the importance of the poem's Preface while describing the reception of the 1816 volume of poems: "However, no contemporary critic saw the larger possible significance of Coleridge's Preface to 'Kubla Khan', though it eventually became one of the most celebrated, and disputed, accounts of poetic composition ever written. Like the letter from the fictional 'friend' in the *Biographia*, it brilliantly suggests how a compressed fragment came to represent a much larger (and even more mysterious) act of creation."[14]

In 2002, J. C. C. Mays pointed out that "Coleridge's claim to be a great poet lies in the continued pursuit of the consequences of 'The Ancient Mariner,' 'Christabel' and 'Kubla Khan' on several levels."[148] Adam Sisman, in 2006, questioned the nature of the poem itself: "No one even knows whether it is complete; Coleridge describes it as a 'fragment,' but there is a case for doubting this. Maybe it is not a poem at all. Hazlitt called it 'a musical composition'...Though literary detectives have uncovered some of its sources, its remains difficult to say what the poem is about."[149] In describing the merits of the poem and its fragmentary state, he claimed, "The poem stands for itself: beautiful, sensuous and enigmatic."[150] During the same year, Jack Stillinger claimed that "Coleridge wrote only a few poems of the first rank – perhaps no more than a dozen, all told – and he seems to have taken a very casual attitude toward them...he kept 'Kubla Khan' in manuscript for nearly twenty years before offering it to the public 'rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the grounds of any supposed *poetic* merits'".[151] Harold Bloom, in 2010, argued that Coleridge wrote two kinds of poems and

that "The daemonic group, necessarily more famous, is the triad of *The Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel*, and 'Kubla Khan.'"[152] He goes on to explain the "daemonic": "Opium was the avenging daemon or *alastor* of Coleridge's life, his dark or fallen angel, his experiential acquaintance with Milton's Satan. Opium was for him what wandering and moral tale-telling became for the Mariner – the personal shape of repetition compulsion. The lust for paradise in 'Kubla Khan,' Geraldine's lust for Christabel – these are manifestations of Coleridge's revisionary daemonization of Milton, these are Coleridge's countersublime. Poetic genius, the genial spirit itself, Coleridge must see as daemonic when it is his own rather than when it is Milton's."[153]

Musical settings

Excerpts from the poem have been put to music by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Granville Bantock, Humphrey Searle, and Paul Turok; and Charles Tomlinson Griffes composed an orchestral tone poem in 1912 (revised 1916).

Canadian rock band Rush refers to the poem directly in the 1977 song Xanadu, in which the narrator searches for a place called "Xanadu" that he believes will grant him immortality.

British band Frankie Goes to Hollywood alludes to the poem in the song Welcome to the Pleasuredome from its eponymous 1984 debut album, however altering the quoted wording to "In Xanadu did Kublai Khan a pleasuredome erect".

Notes

1. "I should much wish, like the Indian Vishna, to float about along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of the Lotos, & wake once in a million years for a few minutes – just to know I was going to sleep a million years more...I can *at times* feel strong the beauties, you describe, in themselves, & for themselves – but more frequently *all things* appear little – all the knowledge, that can be acquired, child's play – the universe itself – what but an immense heap of *little* things?...My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something *great* – something *one & indivisible* – and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty!"[9]
2. Leigh Hunt, the poet and essayist, witnessed the event and wrote, "He recited his 'Kubla Khan' one morning to Lord Byron, in his Lordship's house in Piccadilly, when I happened to be in another room. I remember the other's coming away from him, highly struck with his poem, and saying how wonderfully he talked. This was the impression of everyone who heard him."[21]
3. She wrote to Thomas Poole, "Oh! when will he ever give his friends anything but pain? he has been so unwise as to publish his fragments of 'Christabel' & 'Kubla-Khan'...we were all sadly vexed when we read the advertisement of these things."[24]
4. Lamb wrote to Wordsworth: "Coleridge is printing Xtabel by Lord Byron's recommendation to Murray, with what he calls a vision of Kubla Khan – which said vision he repeats so enchantingly that it irradiates & brings Heaven & Elysian bowers into my parlour while he sings or says it; but there is an observation: 'never tell thy dreams,' and I am almost afraid that 'Kubla Khan' is an owl that won't bear daylight. I fear lest it should be discovered by the lantern of typography and clear reducing to letters, no better than nonsense or no sense."[25]
5. In about 1298–1299, Marco Polo dictated a description of Xanadu which includes these lines:
   And when you have ridden three days from the city last mentioned (Cambalu, or modern Beijing), between north-east and north, you come to a city called Chandu, which was built by the Khan now reigning. There is at this place a very fine marble Palace, the rooms of which are all gilt and painted with figures of men and beasts and birds, and with a variety of trees and flowers, all executed with such exquisite art that you regard them with delight and astonishment.
   Round this Palace a wall is built, inclosing a compass of 16 miles, and inside the Park there

are fountains and rivers and brooks, and beautiful meadows, with all kinds of wild animals (excluding such as are of ferocious nature), which the Emperor has procured and placed there to supply food for his gerfalcons and hawks, which he keeps there in mew.[33]

6. Marco Polo described it this way:
   "Moreover at a spot in the Park where there is a charming wood he has another Palace built of cane, of which I must give you a description. It is gilt all over, and most elaborately finished inside. It is stayed on gilt and lackered columns, on each of which is a dragon all gilt, the tail of which is attached to the column whilst the head supports the architrave, and the claws likewise are stretched out right and left to support the architrave. The roof, like the rest, is formed of canes, covered with a varnish so strong and excellent that no amount of rain will rot them. These canes are a good 3 palms in girth, and from 10 to 15 paces in length. They are cut across at each knot, and then the pieces are split so as to form from each two hollow tiles, and with these the house is roofed; only every such tile of cane has to be nailed down to prevent the wind from lifting it. In short, the whole Palace is built of these canes, which (I may mention) serve also for a great variety of other useful purposes. The construction of the Palace is so devised that it can be taken down and put up again with great celerity; and it can all be taken to pieces and removed whithersoever the Emperor may command. When erected, it is braced against mishaps from the wind by more than 200 cords of silk.
   The Lord abides at this Park of his, dwelling sometimes in the Marble Palace and sometimes in the Cane Palace for three months of the year, to wit, June, July, and August; preferring this residence because it is by no means hot; in fact it is a very cool place. When the 28th day of the Moon of August arrives he takes his departure, and the Cane Palace is taken to pieces."[34]
7. Alvares wrote:
   The custome is that all the male child of the Kings, except the Heires, as soone as they be brought up, they send them presendly to a very great Rock, which stands in the province of Amara, and there they pass all their life, and never come out from thence, except the King which reignith departeth their life without Heires.[36]

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External links

- Full text of the poem (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43991/kubla-khan)
- Explicated for an undergraduate class (https://brians.wsu.edu/2016/11/04/samuel-taylor-coleridge/)
- Kubla Khan Analysis (http://www.englishromantics.com/kublakhan/analysis.htm), another explication of the poem by JM Schroeder
- *Kubla Khan* (https://librivox.org/search?title=Kubla+Khan&author=Coleridge&reader=&keywords=&genre_id=0&status=all&project_type=either&recorded_language=&sort_order=catalog_date&search_page=1&search_form=advanced) public domain audiobook at LibriVox