

# KUBLA KHAN

1797

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge —

The Romantic Movement changed the way art and literature represented the world by focusing on emotions, nature, and imagination. This emphasis can be seen in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the most influential poets of the era. In his poem “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge used dreamlike imagery to describe the fabulous palace of a Mongol emperor. The poem shows the author’s interest in the mysterious and the exotic, as well as the beauty and savagery of nature.

### **THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Clarifying**

How does Coleridge describe Kublai (also Kubla) Khan’s palace and the grounds surrounding it?

In Xanadu<sup>1</sup> did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure dome decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
5 Down to a sunless sea.  
So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were girdled round:  
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,<sup>2</sup>  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
10 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!<sup>3</sup>  
A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
15 As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon lover!  
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
A mighty fountain momentarily<sup>4</sup> was forced:  
20 Amid whose swift half-intermitted<sup>5</sup> burst  
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail:  
And ‘mid these dancing rocks at once and ever

1. **Xanadu:** Shangdu, one of Kublai Khan’s residences in what is now northern China

2. **sinuous rills:** winding streams

3. **athwart a cedarn cover:** across a grove of cedar trees

4. **momently:** at every moment

5. **half-intermitted:** half-interrupted

- It flung up momentarily the sacred river.  
 25 Five miles meandering with a mazy motion  
 Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,  
 Then reached the caverns measureless to man,  
 And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:  
 And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
 30 Ancestral voices prophesying war!  
     The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
     Floated midway on the waves;  
     Where was heard the mingled measure  
     From the fountain and the caves.  
 35 It was a miracle of rare device,  
 A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice!
- A damsel with a dulcimer<sup>6</sup>  
 In a vision once I saw:  
 It was an Abyssinian<sup>7</sup> maid,  
 40 And on her dulcimer she played,  
     Singing of Mount Abora.<sup>8</sup>  
 Could I revive within me  
 Her symphony and song,  
 To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
 45 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!  
 50 His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
 Weave a circle round him thrice,  
 And close your eyes with holy dread,  
 For he on honeydew hath fed,  
 And drunk the milk of Paradise.

**Source:** *Christabel; Kubla Khan, a Vision; The Pains of Sleep* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (London: Murray, 1816).

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

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

8. **Mount Abora:** a legendary earthly paradise like Kublai Khan's