

Poetry
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Lecture 36
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge
(1772-1834)



- Historical and Literary Context
- S T Coleridge
- Fancy and Imagination
- Kubla Khan, the Emperor
- Kubla Khan, Background
- Kubla Khan, the Poem
- Images and Imagination
- Analysis
- A Sonic Reading
- A New Historicist Reading



In this lecture, we discuss the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge with a specific reference to his well-known poem 'Kubla Khan.' We will see certain elements associated with the history and the literary context. Some bits of information about his life. We will focus on his fascination with two concepts fancy and imagination. We will provide some background information about the historical character Kubla Khan and the poem. Then, we will see the images and imagination in this poem. We will offer an analysis and then give two readings: one is called a Sonic reading; another is called a new Historicist reading.

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Historical and Literary Context



- King George III (1760-1820)
- King George IV (1820-1830)
- Social, economic, political and literary revolutions
- The Impact of the French Revolution on England
- William Godwin's philosophical anarchism
- Collaboration between Southey and Coleridge
- Their failed utopia of pantisocracy
- Friendship between Wordsworth and Coleridge
- De Quincey's and Coleridge's use of opium
- Development of literary theory and practice by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Lamb, etc.



Let us see the historical and literary context. Two kings ruled England at this time, one is King George the third from 1760 to 1820 and next King George the fourth from 1820 to 1830. It was an age of social, economic, political and literary revolutions. One is American revolution; another is French revolution and this French revolution had much impact on British society.

We have this philosopher William Godwin, who came out with this anarchic philosophy. A sense of chaos he did not want to have any order in society. Then we find that Robert Southey and Coleridge had good friendship between the two and in fact they wanted to come up with one idea called pantisocracy, where everyone would be equal, but it was not realized though they try to have one society like this in America.

What we need to understand is the friendship between Wordsworth and Coleridge which actually brought about this great revolution in literature, in British literature, the romantic movement. One interesting case of De Quincey and Coleridge's use of opium we can see. Coleridge and De Quincey were often taking this opium for relieving themselves from pain and also for exploring their own mind.

We notice a major feature of this period particularly with reference to Coleridge that is literary theory was developing from one level to another Wordsworth came up with his preface Coleridge wrote his *Biographia Literaria*, wrote many essays similarly, Lamb also wrote many essays on Shakespeare and other writers.

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Coleridge (1772-1834)



- A poet and critic with a philosophical mind
- Known for his opium addiction, heavy drinking, and quarrels with Southey and Wordsworth
- Noted for his friendship with Wordsworth resulting in the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* with four poems, including "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner"
- Developed his own theory of poetic imagination and "willing suspension of disbelief" in *Biographia Literaria*
- Believed in the organic and unified form of poetry
- Considered a giant in English letters, if not poetry
- Best poems: "Kubla Khan," "Christabel," "Frost at Midnight"



Now, let us see the kind of poet we have in Coleridge. He was born in 1772 and died in 1834. He was a poet and critic with a philosophical bent of mind that is important, because he could not succeed more as a poet but he was able to retain his status as a critic. He was known for his opium addiction, heavy drinking and quarrels with Southey and Wordsworth.

He was noted for his friendship with Wordsworth resulting in the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* with four poems including "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner." He developed his own theory of poetic imagination and a key concept called willing suspension of disbelief in his masterpiece 'Biographia Literaria.'

He believed in the organic and unified form of poetry. He is considered a giant in English letters if not poetry his best poems are "Kubla Khan," "Christabel," and "Frost at Midnight." For our sake we will see the first poem Kubla Khan.

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Fancy and Imagination



Fancy

- Essentially memory
- Logical organization of data without synthesis
- Mechanical operation of the mind to bring things together for creating images without fusion
- Not creative

Biographia Literaria,
Chapter 13

Imagination

- A synthetic process
- “the shaping spirit of imagination”
- **Primary imagination:** perception of the world, common to all
- **Secondary imagination:** specific to poets who shape the world and also create new worlds in their poetry



Coleridge attempted to distinguish between fancy and imagination on the one hand, primary imagination and secondary imagination on the other hand. For Coleridge fancy is essentially a memory, it deals with the logical organization of data without synthesis. Fancy is a mechanical operation of the mind to bring things together for creating images without any kind of fusion. For him, it is not actually a creative process.

In contrast imagination is a synthetic process. It actually shapes the whole mind that is why he calls it the shaping spirit of imagination. When it comes to imagination, he differentiates between primary imagination which is all about perception of the world common to all beings, all human beings. And secondary imagination, which is specific to poets who shaped the world and also create new worlds in their poetry. This kind of distinction is important for us to understand poetry and also the poetic character of people who write poems. So, anybody who writes poems will have to have this secondary imagination; only then they can write great poetry, many great poets have had it that is why they are very successful.

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Kubla Khan (1215-1294)



- A cruel despot and the grandson of Ghenghis Khan
- The first Yuan emperor
- Built a stately pleasure-dome in Xanadu
- Samuel Purchas (1577-1626) had described Kubla Khan's palace.
- Marco Polo had written about Kubla Khan's marble palace
- Coleridge was attracted to the beauty of the dome, not the cruelty of the king



The historical character Kubla Khan lived in 13th century from 1215 to 1294. He was known as a cruel despot and the grandson of Genghis Khan but Coleridge is not concerned with the cruelty of this king. He is more concerned with the pleasure-dome that he built in Xanadu. Coleridge learnt about this Kubla Khan and pleasure dome from Samuel Purchas who was a traveler, who had seen this and described this. Similarly, Coleridge had access to Marco Polo's description of Kubla Khan's marble palace. As we said earlier Coleridge is more interested in the beauty of this dome rather than the cruelty of the king.

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“Kubla Khan”



- Date: Written in 1797; Published in 1816
- Title: “Kubla Khan, Or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment”
- The poem appeared as “a vision during his drug induced sleep” (2)
- Influence of *Purchas His Pilgrimage*
- 200-300 lines: “all the images rose up before him as things” (3)
- Disparity in tone and effect; a gift at the beginning and a loss at the end
- A poem about the composition of poetry (4)
- The principle of Romantic analogy: mind and nature (6)
[Chayes, I. H. 1966. “Kubla Khan’ and the Creative Process,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 6 (1): 1-21]



Now, let us have a brief background to this poem. This was written around 1797 and published in 1816. The original title of the poem is like this “Kubla Khan, Or, A vision in a Dream. A Fragment.” This poem is considered to be a fragment, like many other romantic poems. This poem appeared as a vision during his drug induced sleep. Actually, he had read this book, ‘Purchas His Pilgrimage’ and that had some influence on him. He had a dream in which, he saw some 200 to 300 lines all images rose up before him as things, as he was writing down something happened, somebody knocked at the door; he responded; that is why we have only 54 lines now.

Critics also point out that at the beginning we have some good poetry, at the end there is a difference that is why we have some disparity in tone and effect, a gift at the beginning and a loss at the end. This is considered to be a poem about the composition of poetry which deals with the principle of romantic analogy between mind and nature. We have given a reference here for us to understand more about the creative process in this particular poem.

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Kubla Khan - I



In Xanadu 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,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
10. And here were **forests ancient as the hills**,



Now, let us see this poem Kubla Khan section one.

“In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns merciless 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,

Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;

10. And here were forests ancient as the hills.”

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Kubla Khan - II



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
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 was forced:



Kubla Khan II,

“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

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 was forced:”

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Kubla Khan - II



20. 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.
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!



Section 2 continues;

20. “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.
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!”

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Kubla Khan - III



26. The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
30. It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!



Kubla Khan Section 3,

26. “The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
30. It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!”

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Kubla Khan - IV



32. A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an **Abyssinian maid**
35. And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of **Mount Abora.**
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
39. To such a deep delight 'twould win me,



Section 4,

32. “A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid
35. And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
39. To such a deep delight it would win me.”

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Kubla Khan - V



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 honey-dew hath fed,
54. And drunk the milk of Paradise.



Section 5;

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 honey-dew hath fed,
54. And drunk the milk of Paradise.”

These 54 lines create an image of this pleasure dome, in Xanadu built by Kubla Khan as a symbol of this creative process in which, Coleridge has seen many images of creativity.

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Thematic Contrast

- Eastern and Western
- Pleasure and Pain
- Stately and Ordinary
- Sacred and Profane
- Fertile and Sterile
- Ancient and Modern
- Sunny and Dark
- Deep and Shallow
- Waning and Waxing
- Woman and Man
- Wailing and Laughing
- Fragment and Whole
- Motion and Stillness
- Life and Death
- War and Peace
- Vision and Reality
- Delight and Misery
- Paradise and Hell



First let us see the thematic contrast between the east and the west. Kubla Khan is from China; the poet Coleridge is from the west; we have both pleasure and pain stately and ordinary things, sacred and profane, fertile and sterile, ancient and modern, sunny and dark, deep and shallow, waning and waxing, woman and man, wailing and laughing, fragment and whole, motion and stillness and the most important theme life and death, war and peace, vision and reality, delight and misery. Finally, we have both paradise and hell in this poem.

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Poetic Devices

Symbol: Pleasure-dome/ River Alph/ Song/ Imagination

Hyperbaton: In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree (1-2)

Assonance and Alliteration: (6)
So twice five miles of fertile ground

Simile: (21)
Huge fragments vaulted **like rebounding hail**

Assonance and Alliteration: (25)
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion

Paradox: (31)
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

Conceit: (32-39) The Abyssinian maid and her song



A number of poetic devices make this poem a great one, we have this great symbol of pleasure-dome, further added by this river Alph and song and most importantly imagination. Hyperbaton

we have in the first two lines ‘in Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure-dome decree.’ We have assonance and alliteration in line number 6, ‘So twice five miles of fertile ground.’ And simile in line number 21, ‘Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail;’ Assonance and alliteration in line number 25, ‘five miles meandering with a mazy motion;’ this is considered to be one of the best lines in this poem, “five miles meandering with a mazy motion.” Some kind of incantatory effect we can feel from this kind of line in this poem.

We have of course a paradox, ‘a sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!’ Sunny, pleasure-dome with caves of ice! Ice and sunny together coming make this paradox. We have of course this conceit of connecting this Abyssinian maid and her song with this pleasure-dome. This dome evokes this song from this Abyssinian maid in Coleridge.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

- **Rhyme:** Complex rhyme; **Eye rhyme:** far-war (29-30)
 - **Varied end rhymes:** decree (2), sea (5), tree (9), rills (8), hills (10)
 - **Couplets:** ran (3), man (4), round (6), ground (7)
 - **Rhythm:** tri, tetra and penta meter
 - **Iambic trimeter:** Down to a sunless sea (5)
 - **Iambic tetrameter:** In Xanadu did Kubla Khan (1)
 - **I. pentameter:** Enfolding sunny spots of greenery. (11)
 - **Endecasillabo:** But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted (12)
 - **Meter:** iambic with many variations: Polymetrical
- The question of its form: a ballad, an ode, or a lyric



We have of course some rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem. It has a complex rhyme, sometimes we have eye rhyme as we see in the case of far and war. We also have varied end rhymes decree, sea, tree, three examples together and then rills and hills, rills and hills making a pair.

We have some couplets as well in ran, man, round and ground and as we can see the rhythm is varied tri, tetra and penta, all these three meters come together in this poem. We have iambic trimeter in line number 5, ‘down to a sunless sea,’ then we have iambic tetrameter in line number 1, ‘In Xanadu did Kubla Khan.’ Then iambic pentameter we have in line number 11, ‘enfolding

sunny spots of greenery.’ We have a peculiar case of endecasillabo; it has 11 syllables actually. The example is ‘but oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted.’ Then, the meter we have in this poem is iambic generally, but there are many variations and that is why this is called polymetrical. We also have some question about this form, is it a ballad? is it an ode? is it a lyric? We have all these together in this poem. That is why it is a strange poem; it is an extraordinary poem.

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Overall Impression

- “Kubla Khan” is a powerful visionary poem presented through a series of vivid images about the stately dome, the process of imagination, and the creative self of Coleridge the poet.
- The sacred river Alph meanders through a fertile garden and caverns to reach the ocean.
- The cedarn covered romantic chasm under the waning moon has a wailing woman and an erupting fountain.
- The dome appears like a miracle of rare device.
- It reminds the poet of an Abyssinian singing maid that once he had in his vision.
- This vision is a milk of paradise for the poet to cherish.



On the whole we can say “Kubla Khan” is a powerful visionary poem presented through a series of vivid images about the stately dome, the process of imagination and the creative self of Coleridge, the poet.

The sacred river Alph meanders through a fertile garden and caverns to reach the ocean. the cedarn covered, that means it is a forest, the cedarn covered romantic chasm under the waning moon has a wailing woman and an erupting fountain. The dome appears like a miracle of rare device for the poet, it remains a poet of an Abyssinian singing maid that once he had in his vision. This vision is a milk of paradise for the poet to cherish forever and we cherish this milk of paradise as readers of English poetry.

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Images and Imagination



Kubla Khan	Primary imagination: “the living
The pleasure dome	power and prime agent of all
The river	human perception”
The caverns	e.g. the fountain
The fountains	Secondary imagination:
The underground sea	“essentially vital”
	e.g. the river – Imagination –
	reconciler of opposites



We have certain images like Kubla Khan, the pleasure dome, the river, the caverns, the fountains, the underground sea and these images represent two kinds of imagination; primary imagination and secondary imagination. For primary imagination, we have this example of ‘the fountain,’ this is a perception, this anybody can see. But the secondary imagination that we see in this poem is essentially vital for the poet and for creative process. The critics have considered ‘the river’ as an example of this secondary imagination. This reconciles various opposites, dark and light, east and west, good and bad, war and peace; it reconciles everything; probably we can say, it reconciles primary and secondary imagination as well.

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A Sonic Reading (Jones 2018)

The prosody of "Kubla Khan" is notoriously problematic.

What is the meter used in the poem?

Is it trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter or polymeter?

Is there any uniformity even in this polymetrical system?

Coleridge was an experimental poet, esp. in meter.

He uses ballad type meter, pentameter and also endecasillabo, an eleven syllabled line, an Italian meter.

Ben Glasner calls the meter polymetrical.

E J Jones argues that metrical ambiguities in Kubla Khan have their functions to add a charming and a chanting quality to it.



We have a curious case of a Sonic reading of this poem by Jones, sonic refers to sound. The prosody of Kubla Khan is notoriously problematic as we saw iambic tetrameter, trimeter, pentameter, all together. So, one question raised by critics is this: what is the meter used in this poem? Is it trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter or polymeter?

Another question is, is there any uniformity even in this polymetrical system? We have these questions because Coleridge was an experimental poet, especially he experimented with different kinds of meter. Coleridge uses ballad type meter, pentameter and also endecasillabo and eleven syllable line, that is an Italian meter. In this poem a critic called Ben Glasner calls the meter of this poem 'polymetrical.' Jones argues that the metrical ambiguities in Kubla Khan have their functions to add a charming and chanting quality to this poem, as we read, we can feel that charm and chanting quality of this poem.

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A New Historicist Reading (Khan 2012)



- **The personal context:** staying in a farmhouse near Porlock and Lynton and walking with William and Dorothy; belief in pantheism
- **The scientific context:** Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681) and James Hutton's *Theory of the Earth* (1785) STC's friendship with Sir Humphrey Davy
- **The political context:** Kubla Khan and Napoleon; usurpers; pro-Napoleonic poem
- **The orientalist context:** China/ Mongolia; Abyssinia/ Ethiopia; the British preoccupation with the East
- **The Euro-American connections:** forewarnings of war
- **Kubla Khan is the Eastern other:** rise and fall of civilizations



An interesting case of a new Historicist reading we have in a critic called Khan. He has looked at various dimensions like the personal context, the scientific context, the political context, the orientalist context, the Euro-American connections in this poem. The personal context is about staying in a farm house, that is Coleridge staying in a farmhouse near Porlock and Lynton and walking with William and Dorothy Wordsworth, one day.

We also have to understand that romantic poets generally have belief in this 'pantheism' that is, nature, the whole of nature is considered to be God. The scientific context is the publication of books on 'earth,' that is to do with geology. Thomas Burnet published his book 'Sacred Theory of the Earth' in 1681 and another book by James Hutton called 'Theory of the Earth' came out in 1785.

Coleridge also had friendship with the scientist, famous scientist Sir Humphrey Davy. So, some element of science or scientific perception of nature comes into this context. Then, the political context deals with the French revolution, Napoleon coming into power. So, some kind of resemblance between Kubla Khan and Napoleon is hinted at, and this is considered to be a pro-napoleonic poem.

The oriental context is of course to do with the mixing of the east and the west. China and Mongolia on the one hand, Abyssinian and Ethiopia on the other hand; we have these two in contrast with the British preoccupation with the east in general, for trade, for many other things.

The Euro-American connection also we can see in terms of ‘the four warnings,’ the cautions of war, prophesying war in this poem. Then, we can see that Kubla Khan is the Eastern other that tells us about the rise and fall of various civilizations. It is just a poem of 54 lines, but we can see a larger context for this poem and understand it from a new historicist perspective.

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Summary

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- Coleridge
- Fancy and Imagination
- Kubla Khan, the Emperor
- Kubla Khan, Background
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- Analysis
- A Sonic Reading
- A New Historicist Reading



To sum up, we have seen the historical and literary context in which Coleridge wrote his poems and his critical treatises distinguishing between Fancy and Imagination. Once he was attracted to this story of Kubla Khan, he wanted to write a poem and so, he came out with this poem in his dream.

And he had more than 200 lines, but when he wrote the poem, he was able to write only 54. We have certain images for primary imagination and secondary imagination in this poem. Some critics have offered a Sonic Reading and also a New Historicist Reading. Of course, there are many other readings, we can see in some references here.

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Thank you.