

ROMANTIC IDEALS IN “KUBLA KHAN” BY SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

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***Abstract.** This article explores “Kubla Khan” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a seminal work in Romantic literature that showcases the poet's exploration of the creative imagination and the sublime. The poem, inspired by a dream and referencing the grandeur of Kublai Khan's palace, serves as a metaphor for the artistic process, blending myth, nature, and the divine. Through its vivid imagery and thematic complexity, “Kubla Khan” reflects the Romantic fascination with the unconscious mind and the power of dreams in fueling creativity. This paper delves into the poem's symbolic representation of an idyllic yet unattainable world, examining Coleridge's ambivalence towards its publication and the enduring appeal of its mysterious, visionary landscape.*

***Key words:** Romanticism, Kubla-khan, creative imagination, nature, sublime, landscapes, dream-inspired, visionary realms, mysticism.*

Introduction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) was a foundational figure in the English Romantic movement, an era that spanned the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Alongside contemporaries like William Wordsworth, with whom he co-authored "Lyrical Ballads" in 1798, Coleridge helped to inaugurate Romanticism in England. This movement marked a shift from the classical emphasis on reason and formality to a focus on emotion, nature, and the individual's subjective experience.

Coleridge was not only a poet but also a philosopher, critic, and theorist, whose works explored the imagination and the human psyche. His poetry is renowned for its vivid imagery, supernatural themes, and exploration of the sublime, an aesthetic concept central to Romanticism

that emphasizes the power and beauty of nature to inspire awe and wonder. Some of his most famous works include "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "Kubla Khan", and "Christabel", which showcase his innovative use of language and meter, as well as themes of nature, the exotic, and the metaphysical.

The Romantic period itself was characterized by a rebellion against the Enlightenment ideals of the preceding century. Romantic poets and writers valued emotional depth, glorified the natural world, and celebrated creativity, imagination, and the artistic expression of the individual. This era was also marked by a fascination with the past, especially medieval and Gothic elements, and an emphasis on the sublime and the picturesque in art and literature.

Discussion

"Kubla Khan" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge is inspired by the story of the magnificent walled summer palace built by Kublai Khan, described in the travel collections of Samuel Purchas. This background sets the stage for a poem in which the creation of an idyllic kingdom is intertwined with a fertility ritual, embodying both construction and preservation within a poetic paradise. The poem reflects Coleridge's fascination with creative power, combining elements of myth, nature and the divine among his personal experiences and visions caused by opium [3, p.208].

Despite the rich imagery and complex themes, Coleridge's ambivalent attitude towards the publication of the poem, coupled with the uncertain date of its writing, give it a mystery. References to Kubla Khan before its publication suggest its importance in private circles, however, it remained unpublished until later, in stark contrast to his other works of the period. The enduring appeal of the poem lies in its depiction of an unattainable creative utopia, marked by the poet's struggle between mastery and self-sacrifice in the face of the power of imagination [4, p.62].

According to the story of Coleridge himself, while in a secluded farmhouse, he felt unwell and fell into a deep three-hour sleep. During this time, inspired by an excerpt from the "Pilgrimage of Purchas," he experienced a vivid dream consisting of about 300 poetic lines representing vivid images as if they were tangible reality. Upon waking up, he began to decipher this dream-vision, but was interrupted by a visitor from Porlock, which caused him to forget most of the poem, except for a few lines and images. Despite this, Coleridge hoped to complete the poem based on his remaining fragmentary memories, ending his story with a quote from Theocritus: "I'll sing a sweeter song tomorrow." This origin story, whether completely true or embellished, highlights the romantic fascination with the subconscious and the creative power of

dreams [4, p.73].

The poem "Kubla Khan" is based on the description of Xanadu, the dome of pleasure created by Kubla Khan. This landscape is rich in lush gardens, caves and a "solar dome" made of ice — a paradoxical image that impresses with the ability of the imagination to go beyond logic and mix the beautiful with the sublime. The setting of the poem, inspired by historical descriptions of the summer palace of the Mongolian Emperor Kubilai Khan, becomes a symbol of the indomitable and mysterious forces of nature, as well as human attempts to contain these forces and glorify them. By placing the poem in a remote and exotic area, Coleridge uses a romantic interest in the unfamiliar and ancient. This not only adds to the mystery of the poem, but also reflects a romantic belief in the value of exploring and understanding cultures and eras other than your own as a way to deepen understanding of the human experience [5, p.112].

"Kubilai Khan" is a testament to the power of the poet's imagination, a key theme in romantic literature. The opening lines: "*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree*", immediately transport the reader to the realm of imagination that exists beyond the rational world [6, p.11]. And how further descriptions of this majestic element are given: "*The shadow of the dome of pleasure Floated midway on the waves/ That with music loud and long, / I would build that dome in air*", [6, p.11]. It shows the boundless potential of imagination, the central romantic ideal. This suggests that with the power of art and creativity, it is possible to overcome the physical boundaries of the world.

The act of creating "Xanadu" and the poem itself demonstrates the romantic ideal of the artist as a creator who turns to the sublime and inexpressible to create art that goes beyond ordinary experience. Coleridge's depiction of the Xanadu landscape reflects a romantic interest in the sublime: "*And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething, / As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing, / A mighty fountain momentarily was forced*". [6, p.11]. It reflects the boundless potential of imagination, the central romantic ideal. This suggests that with the power of art and creativity, it is possible to overcome the physical boundaries of the world.

Coleridge's depiction of the Xanadu landscape reveals a romantic interest in the sublime: "*Where Alph, the sacred river, ran / Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea*". [6, p.11]. It embodies the romantic charm of sublime landscapes. These images convey the overwhelming power and majesty of nature, inspiring awe and a sense of infinity. In places, natural landscapes turn into a description of the interweaving of nature and natural elements: "*It was a miracle of rare device, / A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice! / By woman wailing for her demon-lover! / And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething*" [6, p.11]. The "rare

device” suggests something beyond the natural, an architectural miracle combining the earthly with the unearthly, as well as the description of a woman who desired a creature from another world. This fusion reflects a romantic fascination with how the supernatural can manifest itself in the natural world, blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy as well as the image of a girl: “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” [6, p.11]. This passage introduces a mysterious, almost supernatural character whose music embodies the inexpressible beauty and mystery that romantic poets often sought. The maid's song about a mythical place symbolizes the transcendent power of art, capable of transporting the listener to a higher realm of understanding and emotion.

In the last stanzas we can see how the figure of the poet appears in the final stanza: “His flashing eyes, his floating hair! / Weave a circle round him thrice” creates a mystical aura, suggesting going beyond rationality, modern society and physical volition, represents the poet as a recipient of divine or supernatural inspiration [6, p.11]. This description shows the romantic ideal of the poet as a seer or prophet, a person specially endowed with the ability to access deeper truths through imagination and emotions and convey them to listeners: “Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song, I would build that dome in air/And all who heard should see them there/And all should cry, Beware! Beware!” [6, p.11]. This warning introduces an element of mystery and foreboding, encapsulating the romantic charm of the unknown. The unfinished nature of the poem and its fabulous inspiration emphasize the spontaneity of creativity and the romantic belief that intuition is more important than reason.

Kubla Khan has had an indelible impact on literature and art, inspiring countless writers, composers and artists with its rich imagery and thematic depth. Its openness and multilayered meaning have made it the subject of endless analysis and interpretation, embodying the romantic spirit of exploration and the triumph of imagination [7, p.39].

Conclusion

In conclusion, “Kubla Khan” emerges not only as a vivid fragment of Coleridge's imaginative prowess but also as a cornerstone in the edifice of Romantic literature, encapsulating the period's quintessential themes and concerns. Through its exploration of sublime landscapes, the creative act, and the mystical boundaries of consciousness, the poem offers a rich terrain for the contemplation of the poetic imagination's capabilities and limitations. Coleridge's ambivalence towards the publication of this work, combined with its mysterious and dream-like origin, further enriches its legacy, presenting it as a perpetual source of fascination and scholarly

debate. Ultimately, “Kubla Khan” endures as a testament to the enduring power and complexity of Romantic expression, inviting readers and critics alike to dwell within its enigmatic verses and explore the boundless horizons of the imagination. Through its layers of meaning, imagery, and emotion, the poem continues to inspire a sense of wonder and introspection, affirming its place as a masterpiece of literary artistry.

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