

2. CRITICAL APPRECIATION

1. One of the best poems of Coleridge

Kubla Khan is one of those three poems which have kept the name of Coleridge in the forefront of the greatest English poets – the other two being *The Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*, and all three having been written in 1797 and 1798 dealing with “persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic”. All these poems were written when intimate friendship existed between Coleridge and Wordsworth.

2. A Dream Poem

Kubla Khan is a dream fragment. The whole poem came to Coleridge one morning when he had fallen asleep over Purchas' *Pilgrimage*, a book of travels, and upon awakening he began to write the poem hastily. He could complete only 54 lines. Then, he was interrupted by a visitor. So the rest of the poem slipped out of his mind, and the existing one has remained a fragment. The poem really belongs to what Elton calls the dream.

3. The Origin of the Poem

The origin of the poem is given by Coleridge himself. In 1797 he fell asleep in his chair while reading a passage in Purchas's *Pilgrimage* relating to the Khan Kubla and the palace that he commanded to be built. On waking up he was conscious of having composed in his sleep two or three hundred lines on that theme, and immediately set down the lines that form this piece. Then, he was disturbed by someone and he lost his vision. Coleridge had read plenty of material relating to famous travellers and voyagers of the Middle Ages, like Marco Polo, Purchas and others, and his imagination was coloured by the supernatural tales which they narrated of their voyages and the strange lands they visited.

4. Summary and Theme of the Poem

Kubla Khan, the great oriental king, once ordered a magnificent luxury palace to be built in Xanadu, on the bank of the sacred river Alph which flowed through deep and immeasurable caverns in the hill and then, at last, fell into a dark sea. Xanadu was surrounded by walls and towers upto ten square miles.

There was a deep romantic chasm which sloped down a green hill across a wood of cedar trees. It was an awe-inspiring place. It was as holy and enchanted a place as was ever visited by a woman wailing for her demon-lover in the dim light of the waning moon. And from this chasm a mighty fountain gushed forth at short intervals producing a continuous roaring sound. At every burst of the waters huge fragments of rocks were

flung here and there like the hailstone or like the grains spreading when separated from the chaff by a farmer's flail. The sacred river Alph flowed in a zigzag manner for full five miles. Kubla Khan seemed to hear in the tumult of the river ancestral voices of foretelling him of the impending war. The shadow of this pleasure-dome fell in the middle of the river. A rare skill was employed in making this sunny luxury-palace which had caves of ice.

In a dream, the poet once saw an Abyssinian girl who was playing on a dulcimer and singing a sweet song in praise of Mount Abora. If it were possible for the poet to revive the melody and music of her song, it would give him so great a pleasure that he would feel enraptured and poetically inspired and with his inspired poetry he would make a palace of the same type in the air. His imaginative palace would be so vivid that all the persons who would listen to his song, would see it clearly before their eyes. They would regard him a magician and would ask others to be cautious on his flashing eyes and floating hair. They would weave a circle round him three times and close their eyes with holy dread. They would say that he had been fed on honey-dew and the Milk of Paradise. The meaning is that people would regard him as inspired by God.

5. Symbolism in the Poem

In the poem the sacred river is a symbol of life. According to **Humphry House**, it is suggestive of life in this universe, which begins, and ends in a mystery touched with dread. It runs into caverns measureless to man and a sunless sea. The ceaseless turmoil of the earth, the fountain forced out with half-intermittent burst, the fragments rebounding like hail, the dancing rocks represent agony, tumult and power, the dynamic energy of birth and creation. The maze suggests uncertain and blind progress of human soul and the complexities of human life. The tumult is suitably associated with war : those conflicting and destructive forces that drive man to his doom. The ancestral voices stand for that dark compulsion that binds the race to its habitual conflicts.

Immortality is symbolised by the pleasure-dome which stands solid and firm above creation's mazy progress. The mingled measure suggests the blend of fundamental opposites ; life and death or creation and destruction. **G. W. Knight** rightly says, "The poet's genius, starting to describe an oriental monarch's architectural exploits, finds itself automatically creating and symbolising a universal panorama of existence."

6. Construction

Some critics have found fault with the construction of *Kubla Khan*. In their opinion there is no logical connection between the first part with its vivid, sensuous and suggestive pictures and the second part with its vision of a damsel with a dulcimer. Actually, however, a connection does

exist, as mentioned by **Humphry House** who says that the second part is a logical extension of the first. The second part, in his opinion, describes the act of poetic creation and the ecstasy of imaginative fulfilment. In the first part, the poet presents the dome and the river with all its setting, and in the second he talks about the creative power of poetry which can build such a dome in the air. The whole poem is thus about the possibilities and potentialities of the creative power of a poet.

7. The Supernatural in the Poem

The poem is a feat of supernaturalism. It is a poem of magic and supernaturalism. The caverns measureless to man, the deep romantic chasm, the intermittent burst of water from the fountain the sunless sea—they all create a world of wonder and enchantment. The atmosphere of strangeness and mystery has effectively and skilfully been created in the poem Coleridge has fused the natural with the supernatural, e.g., in the following lines :

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.

A supernatural note of mystery runs through the following lines :

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.

8. The Descriptive or Pictorial Quality

The Descriptive or Pictorial quality of the poem is very striking. Some of the pictures are highly sensuous and suggestive. Such are the pictures of bright gardens and streams, trees laden with sweet blossom, sunny spots of greenery, caves of ice. For example, the description of the water bursting from the fountain and the pieces of rock flying about at most vivid :

A mighty fountain momentarily was forced ;
Amid whose swift intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail.

9. The Romantic Element in the Poem

Kubla Khan is a delightful blend of imagination, emotion, mystery, sensuousness, romantic description, sweet melody and exquisite diction.

All these qualities make it a richly romantic poem. The essence of Coleridge's romanticism lies in his artistic rendering of the supernatural phenomena. Almost all his major poems are steeped in supernatural mystery. Reference to distant times and places with a view to evoking a sense of awe and mystery is another romantic characteristic used by Coleridge in *Kubla Khan*. The description of the romantic chasm, the source of the river Alph in the second part of the poem is romantic in spirit.

Sensuous phrases and images are generously used in the poem. The bright gardens and sunny hills, the immense hearing trees laden with sweet blossoms, the sunny spots of greenery, the half-intermittent burst of the mighty fountain, the rocks vaulting like rearing horse – all these vivid pictures give the poem a sensuous touch and speak of the love of nature so characteristic of romantic poetry.

The picture of the divinely inspired poet in the closing lines is also highly romantic. It is a purely romantic conception of the poetic genius. No writer imbued with the neo-classical spirit could have written these wonderful lines where the poet is presented as a magician and a creator and a dreamer. *Kubla Khan*, like a true romantic poem, is a product of pure fancy, a work of sheer imagination and is, therefore, a wholly romantic composition.

Its Exquisite Melody

Kubla Khan has been universally appreciated for its haunting melody and hitting music. It is a piece of perfect music. Every syllable has been well chosen in the poem and it contributes to its music. Besides, there is a close correspondence between the metre, the march of the verse, and the imagery throughout the poem. The full tone and the slow movement of the following lines are exquisite for their sweetness and rhythms :

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.

Equally melodious are the lines which begin with 'A damsel with a dulcimer,' etc. In fact, the whole poem is a flow of sweet continual music.

Through the Critics' Eyes

This poetic fragment, *Kubla Khan*, has been praised by several critics. Over this last fragment Swinburne goes into raptures, and exhausts his eulogistic vocabulary. He calls it "the most wonderful of all poems". In reading it, he continues, we are rapt into that paradise where music and colour and perfume are one : where you hear the hues and see the

harmonies of heaven. For absolute melody and splendour it were hardly rash to call it the first poem of the language.....” *Humphry House* praises the precision and clarity of the opening part of the poem, its suggestiveness, its vivid descriptions, etc. A woman critic named *Elizabeth Schneider* praises its music, rhythm and pattern. *J. B. Beer* eulogizes its extraordinary compression. *Mr. Beer* says : “if *Kubla Khan* is a petrified forest, it is also an enchanted forest. At every point it glows directly and at every point also, it reflects the intense subterranean energy of a mind which could not rest in its endeavour to apprehend all experience and reduce it to one harmony. *Graham Hugh* is enchanted by the equality of enchantment present in *Kubla Khan*. *G. Wilson Knight* attempts a detailed analysis of the imagery of *Kubla Khan* to come to the conclusion that this is a poem about life and about poetic potentialities.