

KUBLA KHAN

Published on: June 11th, 2020

By Aakriti Saxena

Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan', bringing out all its Romantic aspects.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (21 Oct 1772 -25 July 1834) i.e. ST Coleridge was an English poet, literary critic, philosopher and theologian who with his friend William Wordsworth, was founder of the Romantic Movement in England and a member of Lake Poets. He wrote the poems, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan', as well as the major prose work *Biographia Literaria*. His critical work on Shakespeare was highly influential. He helped to introduce German idealist Philosophy to English-speaking Culture. Coleridge coined many familiar words and phrases, including suspension of disbelief. He had major influence on Ralph Waldo Emerson and American Transcendentalism.

Coleridge is one of the most important figures in English poetry. His poems deeply and directly influenced all the major poets of the age. He was known by his contemporaries as a meticulous craftsman who was more rigorous in his careful reworking of his poems than any other poet, and Southey and Wordsworth were dependent on his professional advice. His influence on Wordsworth is particularly important because many critics have credited Coleridge with the idea of 'Conversational Poetry'. The idea of using common everyday language to express profound poetic images and ideas for which Wordsworth became so famous, may have originated in Coleridge's mind.

As important as Coleridge was to poetry as a poet, he was equally important to poetry as a critic. His philosophy of poetry which he developed over many years, has been deeply influential in field of literary criticism. This influence can be well noticed in critics as A.O. Lovejoy and I.A. Richards.

Coleridge is best known for his longer poems such as 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel' but "KUBLA KHAN", although shorter, is also widely known. It has an additional romantic aura just like 'Christabel' because they were never finished. Stopford Brooke characterized both the poems as having no rival due to their exquisite metrical movement and imaginative phrasing.

Poems like 'Kubla Khan', 'Christabel' and 'Rime of Ancient Mariner' were full of elements of horror, terror, shrieks, murders and subterranean dungeons. This influenced other poets and writers of the time too. Poems like these both drew inspiration from and helped to inflame the craze for Gothic romance. Coleridge also made considerable use of Gothic elements in his commercially successful play 'Remorse'.

'Kubla Khan' was composed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge after being inspired by an experience he had of an opium influenced dream. He dreamt of something related to Xanadu, the summer palace of the Mongol Ruler and Emperor of China, Kublai Khan.

Earlier the contemporaries of Coleridge denounced the poem, questioning his story but later, critics began to appreciate the poem considering it to be one of Coleridge's three great poems along with 'The Rime of Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel'. Coleridge usually used to date his poems but did not date Kubla Khan, therefore there is a very rough idea of 'Kubla Khan' being composed in October 1797. This poem is considered as a composition in a dream for this poem is inspired by Coleridge's experience he had in an opium influenced dream. Coleridge, according to the extended preface narrative, was reading 'Purchas his Pilgrimages' by Samuel Purchas, and fell asleep after reading about Kublai Khan. On awakening, he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the entire dream and wrote it down as his next poem 'Kubla Khan'. This poem was later published along with 'Christabel' and 'The Pains of Sleep' on 25 May 1816. Kubla Khan's publication was much delayed as Coleridge received mixed reviews of this poem from his friends and family. In the final work, he added the expanded subtitle "Or A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment" and a preface that justified his dream that influenced the poetry.

The poem is divided into three irregular stanzas which revolve around different times and locations. The very first stanza gives a vivid description of the origin of the fanciful capital of Kublai Khan's Xanadu. It describes it being near river Alph that traces its paths through the caves before meeting the dark sea and being a ten miles land that was surrounded by fortified walls encompassing gardens and forests. In the second stanza, a mysterious canyon is described from which a geyser erupted being the source of the sacred river Alph. Kubla Khan hears a prophecy of war and an indented section presents an image of pleasure-dome which gets described in a final un-indented couplet. The last stanza perceives the thoughts of the poem's speaker. It explains speaker's vision of a woman playing dulcimer and his feelings following that.

This poem is much different in style and forms as compared to Coleridge's other poems. The poem relies on sound-based techniques, heavy use of assonance, reuse of vowel sounds and alliteration. The rhyme scheme is not definite but the rhyme in first seven lines of the first and second stanza is very similar.

The major themes in 'Kubla Khan' are its Gothicism and Romanticism of the elements such as rivers, tartars and paradise and abyssinian maid. The poetic imagination is the most important part of Kubla Khan. One theory says that it is about poetry and the power of imagination. The poem celebrates creativity and imaginative dreams.

During Coleridge's lifetime, the critics were quite provocative, and they were hostile to Coleridge due to different political views. As a result, 'Kubla Khan' received a huge amount of negativity and even was expressed with huge regret to be incomplete. The poem received limited amount of praise for the playful thoughts and poet's fanciful imagery. The early reviews generally considered this poem as unremarkable and accepted Coleridge's story of the composition of the poem but dismissed its relevance observing that other poets had similar experiences. More than one reviews suggested

that dream had not merited publication and in sleep the judgment is first faculty of the minds and the opinions of a sleeper shall not be trusted.

Positive appraisals of the poem started emerging when his contemporaries received a chance to evaluate his body of work overall. Hunt praised the poems evocative dream like beauty," KUBLA Khan is a voice and a vision, an everlasting tune in our mouths, a dream fit for Cambuscaen and all poets, a dance of pictures such as Giottso or Cimabue, revived and re-inspired, would have made for a Stourie of Old Tartartie, 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 mind is to realize the world they speak of. We could repeat such verses as the following down a green glade, a whole summer's morning." An 1830 review praised it for its melodious versification describing it as perfect music. Victorian critics praised the poem and some examined the aspects of the backdrop of the poem. John Sheppard analyzed it to be "evidence for a wonderfully inventive action of the mind in sleep". T. Hall Cane in 1883 declaring it to be "exquisite art which is among the most valued". An anonymous reviewer wrote in 1885 Westminster Review, "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 voice of poesy itself.

Critics by the end of 19th century appreciated the poem and favored it to be one of the best by Coleridge. The modern critics think of this poem to be able to revive faith in mystical inspiration and exaggerated deep saturated feelings of the poets. Coleridge's claim of being one of the great poets is what this poem proves to be and resolves the psychological ambiguity and curiosity. The lust for paradise in Kubla Khan is a manifestation of Coleridge's revisions. The dreamy images created reach well to the modern critics and give out a way to appreciation of romanticism of Gothic Elements in the modern perception of literature.

By Aakriti Saxena

Maharaja Agrasen College

5th june'20



Navigated to KUBLA KHAN