Kubla Khan

POEM TEXT

Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.

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.
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;
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!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
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 momently was forced:
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 momently the sacred river.
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
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.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

  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.
  Could I revive within me
  Her symphony and song,
  To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
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!
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.

SUMMARY

In a place called Xanadu, the Mongolian leader Kubla Khan ordered his servants to construct an impressive domed building for pleasure and recreation on the banks of the holy river Alph, which ran through a series of caves so vast that no one could measure them, and then down into an underground ocean. So they created a space with 10 miles of fertile earth surrounded by walls and towers. And in it there were gardens with sunny little streams and fragrant trees, as well as very old forests with sunny clearings in the middle.

But, oh, how beautiful was that deep, impressive gorge that cut through the green hill, between the cedar trees! It was such a wild place! A place so sacred and bewitching that you might expect it to be haunted by a woman crying out for her satanic lover beneath the crescent moon. And out of this gorge, with its endlessly churning river, a geyser would sometimes erupt, as though the ground itself were breathing hard. This geyser would send shards of rock flying into the air like hail, or like grain scattered as it is being harvested. And as it flung up these rocks, the geyser would also briefly send the water of the holy river bursting up into the air. The holy river ran for five miles in a lazy, winding course through woods and fields, before it reached the incredibly deep caves and sank in a flurry into the much stiller ocean. And in the rushing waters of the caves, Kubla Khan heard the voices of his ancestors, predicting that war would come. The shadow of Kubla Khan's pleasure palace

was reflected by the waves, and you could hear the sound of the geyser mingling with that of the water rushing through the caves. This was truly a miraculous place: Khan's pleasure palace was both sunny and had icy caves.

In a vision, I once saw an Ethiopian woman play a stringed instrument and sing about a mountain in Ethiopia. If I could recreate within myself the sound of her instrument and her song, it would bring me so much joy that I would build Kubla Khan's pleasure palace in the sky above me: that sun-filled dome, those caves full of ice! And everyone who heard the song would look up and see what I had built, and they would cry out: "Be careful! Look at his wild eyes and crazy hair! Make a circle around him three times and refuse to look at him: he has eaten the food of the gods and drunk the milk of Heaven!"

THEMES

PLEASURE AND VIOLENCE

"Kubla Khan" begins by announcing that it is a poem about "pleasure." It proposes to describe the Mongol leader's summer palace, along with all its luxurious—and, for the speaker, exotic—pleasures. However, the poem soon takes a curious turn. Instead of describing sumptuous decorations or brilliant jewels, it focuses mainly on the river that runs through the grounds of the palace. What's more, instead of describing that river in pleasant terms, it often focuses on the river's violent energy. Through these descriptions, "Kubla Khan" suggests that pleasure and beauty are neither simple nor uncomplicated. Rather, the poem shows that pleasure and beauty come from the conflict between opposing forces—and that they always contain some degree of violence and ugliness.

The grounds of Kubla Khan's "pleasure-dome" are not quite as pleasant as one might expect. True, they encompass "twice five miles of fertile ground" and "gardens bright with sinuous rills." But the speaker moves quickly beyond these pleasant places, devoting only six rather formulaic lines to describing them. Instead, the focus of the poem—and the speaker's energy—lies in the poem's middle stanza, where the speaker describes what happens to those "sinuous rills" (small streams) when they exit the pleasant gardens.

They become a violent river, which has cut a deep gorge into the earth; its geysers throw up massive boulders. The speaker describes this place in unsettling terms: it is a "savage place," "as holy and enchanted / As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted / by woman wailing for her demon lover!" In contrast to the bright, sunny gardens, the chasm is a haunted, uncivilized place.

As the river continues its journey, the unsettling description intensifies. The river enters unfathomable caves, where its rushing sounds like "ancestral voices prophesying war." From the bright gardens where it runs in little "rills," the river quickly becomes a powerful and violent force—both "holy" and terrifying.

Given these descriptions, one might think that Khan's "pleasure" must lie in the bright gardens at the start of the river's course. But Khan himself does not seem to take this view. It turns out that his palace is not in the "gardens bright" where the river is peaceful. Instead, in lines 31-34, the reader learns that the "shadow of the dome" of Khan's palace hangs "midway" over the river, so that Khan can hear "the mingled measure / From the fountain and the caves." That is, Khan does not want to hear only beauty or only violence: he wants both. And the pleasure he takes from his palace presumably comes from his appreciation of the fraught interaction between the two.

In carefully describing the geography of the grounds of Khan's pleasure dome (and not saying much about the dome itself), the speaker thus makes a subtle argument about pleasure itself. Pleasure, the poem claims, does not exclude violence. Rather, it comes from the tension between beauty and chaos; it demands—and includes—both.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36

CREATIVITY AND REASON

Though the speaker describes the grounds of Kubla Khan's palace in detail, the speaker also hints that these physical features are not entirely literal. Indeed, the poem's dreamlike, hallucinatory tone seems to invite the reader to treat the speaker's descriptions an allegory for creativity and the human mind. People may act like they're in control on the surface, the poem seems to say, but dig a bit deeper and human beings aren't all that reasonable. And the tension between these two parts of the mind—the rational and the irrational—is where creativity comes from.

To understand how the poem can work as an extended metaphor, first note how the description of the palace and its grounds focuses on the "sacred river" named "Alph." There is no real river called "Alph"; Coleridge invented it for the poem. But the name sounds a lot like the Greek name for the first letter of the alphabet, *alpha*. This is an important letter in Christian theology: in the Book of Revelation, God describes Himself as the "Alpha and the Omega"—the first and the last, the source of all things and their end. In this sense, the river's name hints that it is symbolically aligned with God's creative power—which is both the *model for* and the *source of* human beings' creativity.

The speaker then describes the river's course in detail. Along the way, the speaker offers a few hints that the river is not just a symbol of human creativity: it also provides a map of the

human mind, showing where that creativity actually comes from. The river begins close to Khan's "gardens," which is important because, at the time the poem was written, gardens often served as symbols of reason: they represent people's power to organize, dominate, and control nature. In this sense, the river begins with rationality—the reasonable parts of the human mind. The river ends, however, in icy caverns, "measureless to man," where "ancestral voices" prophecy "war." This seems like an image of the subconscious—which is violent, uncontrollable, and unknowable to the rational mind.

Between the two elements erupts a "mighty fountain," which could serve as an image of the meeting point between the rational and the irrational parts of the human mind. The results of their meeting are spectacular—and strikingly human. In describing the fountain, the speaker personifies the river, making its bursts sound like "fast thick pants"—the heavy breaths of an exhausted or passionate person. Furthermore, the fountain throws shards of rock into the air, which the speaker describes as "dancing." The fountain doesn't just randomly throw rocks into the air, but rather produces artful, choreographed motion. Together, this all suggests that the speaker sees the mind as something that is divided, with its two halves in tension—and suggests that creativity emerges directly from this tension.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-5
- Lines 8-9
- Lines 12-36
- Lines 42-54

THE LIMITS OF CREATIVITY

"Kubla Khan" can be read as an extended metaphor or allegory about the powers of human creativity, with the river that runs through the grounds of Khan's palace serving as a map of the human psyche and its creative powers. However, the speaker remains skeptical about his own capacity to *realize* that creative potential. Though the speaker wants to build a pleasure-dome of his own, he only fantasizes about doing so. Though "Kubla Khan" celebrates the power of human creativity, it also recognizes that such creativity is limited, fragile, and quickly lost.

The speaker begins the description of Khan's palace by noting that it is a protected space. The grounds of the palace are "girdled round" with "walls and towers." If Khan's palace and its grounds provide a map to human creativity, they also suggest that such creativity is precious and difficult to sustain. From the start, then, the poem hints that creativity is something fragile.

After the speaker's elaborate description of Khan's palace, he returns to this initial implicit concern with the fragility of creativity. In a sudden break at the start of stanza 3, the speaker stops talking about Khan's palace altogether, and discusses instead a song that he once heard from an "Abyssinian maid." The speaker complains that he cannot "revive" the maid's "symphony and song"; if he could, he "would build that dome in air." In other words, the speaker would recreate Khan's palace here and now, as a kind of floating city that hovers above the earth.

These lines are marked by a deep sense of loss: the speaker knows that he is capable of constructing Khan's palace, but he has lost the inspiration to do so. The speaker cannot recreate or rehear the "Abyssinian maid's song," which would inspire the "music loud and long" necessary to build the palace in the air. These lines contain the poem's strongest hint that the reader should regard Khan's palace as an extended metaphor or allegory, rather than a strictly physical place. The speaker's wish makes it clear that the palace is not bound to a specific location or time period, but can rather be rebuilt anytime and anywhere, as long as sufficient inspiration exists.

In this sense, the poem suggests that Khan's palace is an image of the fullest achievement of human creativity. But paradoxically, it is just this achievement that eludes the speaker. Though the speaker has experienced the inspiration necessary to create the palace (as the very existence of this poem proves), his apparent despair also indicates that inspiration itself—though priceless—is fragile and fleeting.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 6-7
- Lines 37-44
- Lines 45-47

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1, LINES 1-5

Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.
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.

The subtitle sets the stage, letting the reader know that this will be a dreamy poem filled with fragments of some sort of vision. The speaker then actually begins the poem by introducing a palace that a real-world Mongol king and Chinese emperor built in the middle ages—calling this a "stately," or majestic and impressive, "pleasure-dome." Instead of describing the palace in detail, however, the speaker starts talking about a "sacred river" named "Alph." This river runs through caverns so big people can't even measure their true depth.

This river doesn't actually exist, but rather is a symbolically rich invention of Coleridge's. The name "Alph" is probably a shortening of the Greek letter *alpha*, which brings to mind theology: in the Bible's Book of Revelation, God announces, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," meaning the first and the last, the creator and the destroyer.

By naming the river "Alph," the speaker associates the river with this creative power—suggesting that the river itself is a symbol for human creativity. That the river runs into vast, "measureless" caverns and a "sunless sea" suggests that the speaker is just as interested in the hidden, irrational parts of the human mind as its well-lit, rational areas: indeed, the "sunless sea" is potentially a symbol for the unconscious, for death, or for sleep.

Fittingly for a poem written upon awakening from an opium-influenced dream, "Kubla Khan" doesn't follow a set formal pattern. It does, however, begin in very steady iambic tetrameter (four feet per line in an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern), only to be broken by line 5 (which is in iambic trimeter and begins with a trochee):

> 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.

The poem also begins with a relatively smooth rhyme scheme: ABAAB. But in the following lines, the meter and rhyme scheme of the poem will shift radically. Throughout the poem, then, the speaker seems to establish a formal pattern only to break it, shifting meters and rhymes schemes with what feels like an unplanned fluidity—not unlike the river being described.

Underlying these formal shifts, however, is the speaker's consistent and prolific use of alliteration (plus assonance and consonance). For example, each of the poem's first five lines contains a strong alliteration at the end of the line: "Kubla Khan," "dome-decree," "river, ran" "measureless to man," and "sunless sea." This heavy alliteration gives the poem a highly literary, "poetic" feel—which in turn emphasizes that this is all a dream, a vision, and not an even-handed, objective description of a real place. In other words, the poem sure does *sound* nice—which readers will see in the end is part of the point: ultimately, the speaker wants to build a "pleasure-dome" of his own through "music loud and long"—i.e., some sort of art, perhaps even poetry itself.

A note on context: in describing this palace, the speaker alludes to a 1613 travelogue by Samuel Purchas called *Purchas his Pilgrimage*. Purchas writes: "In Xandu did Cublai Can build a stately Pallace, encompassing sixteen miles of plaine ground with a wall…" According to Coleridge's preface to the poem, he was reading Purchas's book and taking a form of opium when he slipped into a dream; upon waking several hours later, he wrote "Kubla Khan."

From its opening, then, the poem signals its debt to *western* accounts of an *eastern* culture: instead of supplying an objective account of Mongolian culture, it draws on western fantasies and projections, portraying that culture as exotic and different. This sense of difference is important to the speaker: it allows him to imagine human creativity outside the boundaries of his own culture—at a moment in intellectual history, the European enlightenment, when intellectuals prized reason and rationality and tended to dismiss the mind's irrational powers and capacities.

LINES 6-11

> *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;*
> *And here were forests ancient as the hills,*
> *Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.*

The speaker continues to describe the area around Kubla Khan's palace. In fact, the speaker focuses almost entirely on these surroundings and tells the reader little about the palace itself! In these lines, the speaker's description feels both perfunctory (essentially, casual and disinterested) and revealing—perfunctory because it repeats many of the clichés of 18th century poetry, and revealing because some of its details offer hints about the speaker's personal understanding of human creativity and the human mind.

For instance, the speaker notes in lines 6-7 that the "fertile ground" of the palace is "girdled round" with "walls and towers." (Note that "girdle" here is a bit different from the way it's used today: it refers not to a women's corset, but rather to a sort of belt, often worn by members of the clergy.) In other words, this is a *fortified* place: this implies that it's vulnerable, and that it must be protected.

It also contains "gardens" through which bright streams wander on their way into the river Alph. Gardens were potent symbols in 18th century poetry, where they often were used to represent wealth, power, and, above all, rationality: the uniquely human capacity to organize and control the natural world.

This symbol thus provides an important hint about how to understand the poem: it's perhaps not *only* a literal description of a real place, but also an allegory. With their associations with reason and rationality, the gardens suggest that the poem is an extended metaphor for the human mind itself, a way to describe its various parts and internal divisions. The word "girdled," which the speaker uses to metaphorically describe the "walls and towers" that protect Khan's palace, supports this because it personifies the palace's grounds: making it like a human body wearing a girdle.

After the end-stop in line 5, the poem develops a new formal scheme. Like the first fives lines of the poem, lines 6 and 7 return to iambic tetrameter. But after those lines, the poem switches into iambic pentameter (meaning there's an additional poetic foot in each line)—a dignified, prestigious meter with a deep history in English literature, which might emphasize the speaker's seriousness and the nobility of his topic. Take line 8:

> And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,

The poem also uses far more end-stops in these lines than in the opening five, with end-stops in lines 7-11. The rhyme scheme shifts here too, to: *CCDBDB*. The result is a highly unusual stanza overall: 11 lines, with a complex, unprecedented set of rhymes—so complex that the reader probably doesn't experience the poem as having a cohesive rhyme scheme at all!

Form generally gives a poem sense of order, structure, and predictability. In "Kubla Khan," just the opposite is true. The form is variable and unpredictable; the speaker's shifting use of rhyme and meter emphasizes how little the poem obeys a set pattern.

Underlying this formal variation, however, the speaker once again makes consistent and strong use of sonic devices like alliteration. Indeed, the speaker arranges these sounds in striking chiastic patterns at times (i.e., A-B-B-A), as in the alliterations on /h/ and /a/ sounds in line 10: "And here were forests ancient as the hills."

LINES 12-16

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

In lines 12-16, the speaker continues to describe the course of the river Alph. The speaker moves on from the bright gardens following the river into a "deep romantic chasm," a.k.a. a gorge or cavern, shaded by cedar trees. If readers take the gardens as symbols of reason and rationality, and the "sunless sea" that the river drains into as a symbol of the irrational or unconscious mind, then the chasm here might represent a sort of in-between space, a channel that links reason/irrationality to irrationality/the unconscious.

The speaker describes this chasm as both "savage" and "holy and enchanted." These are almost opposites: something "savage" is violent and primitive, while something "holy and enchanted" is sacred and magical. Notably, line 14 is divided by a caesura. The speaker gives *equal space* on the line for both characterizations of this chasm, suggesting that the reader should try to think of the "chasm" as violent, primitive, magical, and sacred all at once. In making these characterizations, the speaker personifies the chasm, associating it with human rituals and religious practice.

The speaker further complicates the reader's understanding of the "chasm" with a simile that runs through lines 14-16. The "chasm" is as enchanted as any place under a crescent moon that's "haunted" by a "woman wailing for her demon-lover." In other words, this is a pretty creepy and unsettling spot. The moon is often associated with the supernatural, and the woman crying out for her evil lover calls to mind witches, who, legend goes, would make a pact with the Devil in exchange for their powers. This simile thus connects this chasm to both the occult and to female sexuality, and suggests a sort of break with the boundaries of piety and propriety.

The enjambment at the end of line 15 heightens the complexity of the speaker's simile. "Haunting" is usually associated with dead things like ghosts, but *this* chasm is the kind of place the might be haunted by a "woman wailing for her demon-lover." As such, it's not associated with death, but with erotic love. The enjambment, with line 15 spilling over onto the next, seems to blur the line between sex and death.

Here, the speaker returns to the rhyme scheme of the opening five lines, ABAAB. Yet where those first five lines are in tetrameter (four stresses per line), the meter *now* continues with the iambic pentameter (five stresses per line) established at the end of the first stanza—meaning Coleridge has once again shaken up the poem's form. Lines 12-16 also all end with unstressed syllables (slanted, cover, enchanted, haunted, lover), creating something called feminine endings. Take line 12:

> But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted

Strict iambic pentameter should end on a stress—remember our previous breakdown of the meter of line 8:

> And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,

These extra unstressed syllables dangle off the ends of the lines—almost as though they are "haunting" them with sound!

The speaker also continues to employ sound within the lines in virtuosic fashion—lines 12-14 are dense with assonance, with long /o/ sounds ("oh," "romantic," "holy," etc.) as well some very similar /a/ sounds ("chasm," "savage place," "enchanted," "wailing," etc.) binding the lines together. Basically, the poem remains *very* literary.

LINES 17-22

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:

The speaker continues to describe the "deep romantic chasm" that the river Alph passes through as it runs into the "caverns measureless to man." As it rushes through the chasm, it erupts in a kind of geyser—the speaker calls it a "mighty fountain." The fountain is so powerful that it tosses "huge fragments" of rock up into the air. At this moment, the Alph is no lazy, meandering river; instead it's an immense, mighty force, carving through rock and spitting up chunks of earth into the sky.

The speaker again uses simile and personification to describe the geyser, comparing its eruptions to "fast thick pants"—in other words, heavy breathing, as though the river were a human body, working hard and exhausted. This personification adds weight to the extended metaphor that the speaker has gradually built across the poem's first two stanzas. If the "deep romantic chasm" is the place where the rational and the irrational mind meet, then this fountain seems to be the *result* of their conflict—the passionate expression of some sort of inner turmoil. In this sense, it's perhaps a symbol of poetry itself—something that, for a Romantic poet like Coleridge, would itself be the passionate expression of internal conflict.

After he personifies the river in line 18, the speaker turns to simile in lines 21-22 to describe the rocks that are flung up by the fountain. In line 21, the speaker compares those rocks to "rebounding hail." The speaker then follows this simile with another one in line 22, comparing the rocks to "chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail." A flail is an agricultural tool, used to harvest grain. Farmers strike the grain with a flail and knock its seeds loose. This emphasizes human interaction with nature: unlike hail, the grain has to be struck by human beings in order to scatter (and thus mimic the motion of the rocks as they are flung up by the fountain). The two similes together are thus somewhat unstable, ambiguous: they suggest that the fountain—potentially a symbol of poetry itself, of the creative output of the conflict between the rational and the irrational mind—is both a natural and a man-made phenomenon.

As the speaker describes the fountain, he shakes up the poem's form yet again. Though these lines continue to be in iambic pentameter, their rhyme scheme shifts into couplets, with a slant rhyme in lines 19-20, "forced" and "burst." This is a particularly surprising and notable shift. In the first five lines of stanza 2, the poem repeats the rhyme scheme (and the pattern of the enjambment) found in the poem's first five lines. This leads the reader to expect that the next six lines will repeat the pattern established in the first stanza. But the rhyme scheme in lines 17-22 is markedly different from the rhyme scheme in lines 6-11. The speaker signals here that, despite its intricate rhymes, the poem will not establish or follow a set pattern.

LINES 23-28

And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
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;

In lines 23-28, the speaker summarizes his earlier description of the river. The speaker remarks again that the river is "momently" "flung up"—in other words, it sometimes erupts in a geyser or fountain. This fountain throws rocks up into the air, and the river runs for five miles through woods and meadows before it reaches the "caverns measureless to man."

None of this is exactly new information. But the speaker's decision to repeat it here does reveal something about his priorities. At a moment in the poem when the speaker might turn to other things—and describe, for instance, Khan's palace in some detail—he refuses to do so. The river remains the poem's focus, perhaps obsessively so. This repetition makes it clear that if "Kubla Khan" contains a message about human creativity, it is to be found in the speaker's description of the river itself—everything else is secondary.

As the speaker summarizes the prior description of the river, he also introduces a new metaphor to describe the rocks that the river flings into the air: they are "dancing." The metaphor personifies the rocks, making their motion into a human art. In this way, it strengthens the sense that the fountain is a symbol for human creativity: it produces an artistic movement that's shaped by a creative mind. And it thus strengthens the poem's extended metaphor as well: at the meeting point between the rational and the irrational, the conflict between these two forces produces artistic motion.

Though these lines continue to be in iambic pentameter, their rhyme scheme shifts from the previous five lines. Lines 23-24 are an iambic pentameter couplet, with a slant rhyme ("ever" and "river"). But lines 25-28 form a quatrain rhymed *ABBA*. As soon as the poem slides into a relatively straightforward, recognizable form (the couplet of lines 23-24), it restlessly shakes off that form and moves again into something altogether different.

LINES 29-30

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

In lines 29-30, the speaker describes Khan's interpretation of the river and the sound it makes. As the river reaches the end of its course, the "caverns measureless to man," it makes a lot of noise: in lines 28 and 29, the speaker describes it as a "tumult"—that is, a racket or a cacophony. In this chaotic noise, Khan hears "ancestral voices," which are the voices of his predecessors. They have a message for him: they predict that war will come.

There's an interesting paradox here. The voices that Khan hears come from the past, in that they are "ancestral." But they predict the future: they are "prophesying war." It seems that for

Khan—and for his ancestors—there is perhaps no meaningful distinction between the past and the future. The future will be violent, chaotic, and full of conflict—just as the past has been. (Indeed, by the time the historical Kublai Khan took power, his family had been at war for several generations and amassed the largest empire in human history).

What's more, these voices predicting violence come from a very precise spot. They do not appear in the "bright gardens" at the beginning of the river's course, or even alongside the "deep romantic chasm." Instead they erupt at the river's end point, as it drains into "the caverns measureless to man." If the "gardens" are a symbol of reason and rationality, and the caverns represent the unconscious mind, then these violent, prophetic voices provide a key hint about the contents of the unconscious: it is violent, chaotic, and opposed to reason and intellectual progress. (Indeed, such progress was a key promise of the Enlightenment intellectuals who praised reason in the 18th century).

One might wonder whether such violence and chaos are universal, hidden in the depths of everyone's unconscious mind. The poem subtly suggests that it is not: rather, the meaning of the river's sounds depends on Khan's own interpretation of them. Hearing "ancestral voices" in the river's tumult, Khan himself personifies the river, turning its sounds into human speech. The use of parallelism in lines 28 and 29, with the repeated word "tumult," emphasizes this act of personification: the speaker seems at pains to emphasize that the river is *not* actually speaking, and that Khan is interpreting its sounds in his own peculiar way.

This emphasis, however, also highlights the speaker's own tendency to personify the river, which happens throughout much of the rest of the second stanza. That is, the speaker might not hear the river "prophesying war," but he does draw all kinds of symbolic meaning from its sound and motion. Like Khan, the speaker interprets the river according to his unique perspective. By laying out these different interpretations of the same natural phenomenon, the poem suggests that it's not actually possible for anyone to see the world in an objective, unbiased way; the river will always sound different to each person. This suggestion is another subtle hint that there's more to understanding the world than pure intellectual reason.

These lines mark the end of a long string of iambic pentameter lines, stretching back to line 8. Because iambic pentameter is such a prestigious meter in the history of English poetry, the use of the meter gives these lines a feeling of dignity and seriousness—in contrast to the lighter, more playful lines in iambic tetrameter and trimeter elsewhere in the poem. This is especially true in these lines, which form a rhyming couplet—specifically, a heroic couplet. A heroic couplet is just a rhymed couplet in iambic pentameter, but it's one of the most important and prestigious forms in eighteenth-century poetry. The next set of lines switch into iambic tetrameter, returning the poem to its original playful lightness after the heavy seriousness of these lines.

LINES 31-36

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

After spending more than 20 lines describing the river Alph, the speaker finally returns to the poem's ostensible subject, the "dome of pleasure" that Kubla Khan built for himself. However, the speaker *still* doesn't describe the palace in detail.

Instead, the speaker situates the palace in relation to the river. One might expect the dome to be located in the most beautiful part of its grounds, by the "gardens bright" and the "incense-bearing tree[s]." But the speaker insists that the dome is not located there. Instead, its "shadow" floats "midway on the waves." It seems that it is somewhere between the "gardens bright" and the "caverns measureless to man." And from it, one can hear "the mingled measure / from the fountain and the caves."

This location is perhaps surprising. After all, the fountain and the caves are places of violence and chaos, with rocks flying around and ancestral voices calling out for war—not the most relaxing environment for a summer palace. But Khan seems to have intentionally built the palace in a place where he can hear the "mingled measure" of *both* the "fountain" and the "caves." In this way, the poem makes a subtle and important argument about the nature of pleasure itself. The pleasure that the palace provides does not come simply from its beautiful gardens or its sweet-smelling grounds. Instead, its pleasure comes from the confrontation between opposites: serenity and violence, order and chaos. The palace is placed "midway" so that Khan can best observe the conflict between these opposites.

In the final two lines of the poem's second stanza, the speaker acknowledges that the palace's location is surprising and unusual, describing the "pleasure-dome" as a "rare" "miracle." Specifically, the speaker says, it is miraculous because of the way it contains opposites: it is "sunny" *and* it has "caves of ice." The conceptual antithesis between sun and ice is not incidental. The palace's entire identity comes from the way that it includes these conflicting, opposite phenomena. Indeed, the poem has suggested this all along. For instance, the fountain—with its bursts of creative power—is located midway between the "gardens bright" and the "caverns." It is not only pleasure that emerges from the conflict between opposites, but, the speaker suggests, creativity itself.

"Kubla Khan" is sonically very rich and dense: it contains thick layers of alliteration, assonance, and consonance. For example, in line 33, there is a strong alliteration on an /m/ sound

("mingled" and "measure"), supplemented by a consonant /r/ sound ("Where," "heard," "measure").

But because the poem is so sonically dense, it is often more revealing and interesting when the poem refrains from using such devices, as in line 36. Apart from the consonant /s/ sound in "sunny," "caves," and "ice," the line is empty of distinct sounds. (And that one instance isn't particularly significant, since it's almost impossible to escape /s/ sounds in English.) The absence of such sonic connections emphasizes the complete antithesis between the "sunny pleasure-dome" and "caves of ice."

As the poem switches from describing the river to describing the pleasure-dome, its form also switches. Lines 31-34 are in iambic tetrameter, the first time that meter has appeared in the poem since line 7. These lines are rhymed in a criss-cross pattern, *ABAB*. But then, the stanza ends by returning to a heroic couplet: lines 35-36 are in iambic pentameter, rhymed *CC*. The poem's form remains fluid and unstable, even as it describes the apparently solid structure of Khan's palace. These inconsistencies in form suggest that the architecture of the palace is similarly unsteady, or even unreal.

LINES 37-41

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.

The first two stanzas of "Kubla Khan" focus on the palace and its grounds with an almost obsessive intensity. The poem's third stanza breaks radically from that concern—so much so that some scholars think it was written separately from the rest of the poem and added later.

However, the third stanza is key to the poem's themes and its extended metaphor. The first two stanzas meditate on pleasure, violence, and creativity, using a complicated and subtle extended metaphor. In the poem's third stanza, the speaker continues to consider human creativity (and its sources in the psyche). But here, the speaker is concerned with the *limitations* of human creativity—and, perhaps more importantly, of his own creative powers.

The stanza begins with a sharp break. After describing Khan's palace in detail, the speaker suddenly reminisces in lines 37-41 about a time he heard an Ethiopian "damsel" sing a song about "Mount Abora." (This is likely a misspelling of "Amara," a real mountain in Ethiopia.) She accompanies herself on a "dulcimer," a stringed instrument. It is not immediately clear why the speaker needs to tell the reader this story, at this moment in the poem, though the speaker begins to explain in the lines that follow. The apparent non-sequitur makes it seem even more like the third stanza does not quite belong in the poem. (Of course, the poem is a "fragment," according to the subtitle—so maybe it makes sense that its pieces don't quite feel coherent.)

As the speaker moves into the third stanza, the poem's form remains unstable. These lines are in iambic tetrameter, and indented slightly. This indentation appears throughout the poem, but it is not always clear why it does. Here it seems to separate the speaker's description of the song from the description of the river, which is consistently aligned with the left margin. Though lines 39-40 form a rhyming couplet, there is otherwise no rhyme in these lines; the poem seems to have dropped even the pretense of having a rhyme scheme. This change further separates the final stanza from the rest of the poem, since the first two stanzas are full of rhyme, even though they follow no particular rhyme scheme.

LINES 42-47

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!

In lines 37-41, the speaker describes a song he heard once, which was sung by an "Abyssinian maid." This is a sharp detour in a poem otherwise obsessively focused on Khan's palace and its grounds. In lines 42-47, the speaker explains why he makes this detour. The speaker says that if he were capable of reviving the maid's "symphony and song," its "deep delight" would awaken the speaker's creative powers. Then, the speaker would use that inspiration to build his own version of Khan's palace, "in air." It would float above the speaker, a slice of the past hanging magically in the present.

However, it's crucial to note that the speaker does not accomplish this magical act, despite imagining it in great detail. The speaker describes what he *would* do if he *could* "revive" the maid's song. The implication, then, is that the speaker *cannot* "revive" the song—the inspiration it represents remains beyond the speaker's reach. In a sense, then, the speaker is admitting to a failure: his own creativity has failed, and he cannot recreate Khan's palace.

These lines make it clear that for the speaker, creativity is fragile and limited. (These lines also recall the speaker's aside at the beginning of the poem: remember that Khan's palace is protected by walls and towers. As an image of human creativity, it has to be protected—since that creativity is so fragile). As the speaker admits this failure and defeat, however, he also outlines what creativity can do: at its best, it is capable of creating something that equals Khan's palace. In this sense, Khan's palace represents the highest accomplishment of human creativity, the thing toward which it aspires. As a whole, "Kubla Khan" is about the incredible power of human creativity—which is capable of constructing something as marvelous as Khan's palace—and also about its tendency to disappear or fall short of its ambitions.

These lines continue the formal pattern established at the start of the poem's third stanza: they are all in iambic tetrameter, with inconsistent rhymes. As the stanza progresses, the rhymes tend to fall more and more into a crisscross pattern: for example, the rhymes between "song" and "long" in lines 43 and 45, and between "me" and "me" in lines 42 and 44. The iambic tetrameter continues even when the poem shifts back to the left margin in line 45. This is a surprising transition, because elsewhere the poem marks these formal and changes with an end-stop. Here, however, there is an enjambment that crosses line 44 into line 45. The enjambment ties together these two parts of the poem, showing just how closely linked inspiration (which here comes in the form of the maid's song) and creation are.

Line 47 closely repeats line 36: indeed, its phrasing is almost identical. (Though it is a foot shorter.) And as in line 36, the speaker avoids using sonic devices like assonance, alliteration, and consonance here—again emphasizing the opposition between the "sunny dome" and the "caves of ice" by refusing to link them together sonically. The caesura at the center of line 47 further reinforces this separation, splitting them into two separate sentences. This line is another instance of antithesis, but it's even stronger than the one in line 36, because it uses grammatical parallelism (two very similar sentences) to describe the two opposites. And, at the same time, the caesura underlines the speaker's repeated insistence that both sun and ice are equally important to the palace's identity—they both get the same amount of space in the line.

LINES 48-50

And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!

In lines 42-47, the speaker imagines what he could accomplish at the height of his creative powers: if the speaker could "revive" the Ethiopian maid's song, he would build his own version of Kubla Khan's palace "in air." And the speaker also admits that he cannot do so—his inspiration has failed.

In the poem's final 7 lines, the speaker continues to imagine what would happen if he *could* build the palace "in air." In lines 48-50, the speaker imagines having an audience who will watch him work as he builds the palace. In the speaker's imagination, the audience is terrified of the speaker and his power: they cry out "Beware! Beware!" The use of epizeuxis here emphasizes the audience's terror and awe. They are so overwhelmed that they are reduced to repeating a cry of warning; they are not even capable of speaking complete sentences. The audience is still overwhelmed in the next line, too: they calling attention to "his flashing eyes, his floating hair," but they still can't talk about the speaker in full sentences. The audience's reaction highlights just how awe-inspiring human creativity can be—when it's living up to its potential.

However, the line is formally sophisticated, with a caesura that divides it into two parallel parts, and an alliterative chiasmus that binds those two parts together: "His flashing eyes, his floating hair!" The extra /h/ sound at the center of the line ("his") acts as a kind of pivot for the chiasmus. These sophisticated devices remind the reader that this speech remains part of the speaker's fantasy: he has no real audience, because his creative powers have failed him.

LINES 51-54

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.

In the poem's final four lines, the speaker continues to imagine a hypothetical audience's response to his hypothetical creative powers. The audience regards the speaker as a dangerous and threatening figure—and they seek to contain him.

In lines 51-52, they propose two specific steps to restrain his power. First, they say that they will "weave a circle" around him three times. A "circle" is a powerful symbol of magic; for example, witches were sometimes thought to draw circles on the ground in order to summon demons. The audience thus proposes to use their own magic to contain the speaker and protect themselves from his creativity. Second, they propose a much simpler and more direct way to protect themselves against him: they will simply close their eyes and refuse to look at him.

In the final two lines of the poem, the audience explains why the speaker is such a threatening, frightening figure (in this fantasy, at least): his creative power comes directly from God. They note that the speaker has "fed" on "honey-dew" and "drunk the milk of Paradise." "Honey-dew" is a powerful and evocative symbol. According to some traditions, it is the manna from Heaven that the Israelites eat while they are lost in the desert in the Book of Exodus. The "milk of Paradise" is not quite so specifically tied to the Bible, but in context it seems to be a similarly divine substance. These substances are thus metaphors for human creativity, and for its source in God. (This recalls the name of the river at the center of the poem—Alph—and the way that name often symbolizes God's creative power). At the height of his creative powers, the speaker imagines, he would draw from and even share God's immense creativity.

The poem closes with seven lines of iambic tetrameter. Indeed, the whole third stanza is in iambic tetrameter—which makes it the most metrically stable stanza in the poem. However, its rhyme scheme remains variable and unpredictable. Beginning in line 48, the poem rhymes *AAABCCB*, a highly unusual rhyme scheme. Even as the meter gets more regular, the poem retains its freedom and flexibility. This tension between a steady meter and strange rhyme scheme might reflect the way that the

speaker's creativity fights against whatever lack of inspiration prevents him from actually "build[ing] that dome."

SYMBOLS

THE RIVER ALPH

The "Alph" is not a real river: Coleridge invented it for the poem. His invention is particularly notable because the first two lines of the poem quote almost directly from Samuel Parchas's 1613 account of Kublai Khan's summer palace. The entrance of the Alph into the poem is a radical break from Parchas, an announcement to the reader that the poem has left this historical account and entered the speaker's fantasy.

The name that the speaker uses for this invented river is potentially symbolically rich. For one thing, it is a contraction of the word "alpha," the first letter of the Greek alphabet. "Alpha" is important to Christian theology. In the Book of Revelations, for example, God declares "I am the Alpha and the Omega," meaning both the beginning of things and the end, the creator and the destroyer. The name of the river associates it with this creative power, and thus becomes a symbol for creativity itself.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Alph, the sacred river"

GARDENS

Gardens are a rich and complicated symbol in the history of Western literature. Often they can symbolize both paradise and temptation, as in the Garden of Eden. In the 18th century, however, when this poem was written, gardens were highly controlled and cultivated places, featuring intricate patterns and careful pruning. In this period, gardens most often symbolized wealth and power, the capacity to bend the landscape to one's will (or, better, to pay other people to do so!). Perhaps, then, the gardens here reflect the extent of Kubla Khan's power—his ability to dominate the natural world surrounding the palace.

Gardens also could symbolize rationality: in contrast to the chaos and disorder of the natural world, gardens—with their calculated layout—bore the stamp of human intelligence, the ability to order and organize nature in order to make it more beautiful and less threatening. In this sense, the reader may take the "gardens" in line 8 as a symbol for reason and rationality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "gardens bright with sinuous rills, / Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;"

SUNLESS SEA

The speaker spends much of "Kubla Khan" describing the course of the fictional river "Alph," which terminates in a vast underground sea. It is possible to read this as a literal description of a literal river, but the poem's dreamy, hallucinatory tone—and the fact that the river is itself a fantasy, the poet's invention—encourages the reader to treat the "sunless sea" as a symbol.

What it symbolizes will depend in large measure on the way the reader understands the river itself. If the course of the river represents the various parts of the human mind—running from organized reason to violent irrationality—then the 'sunless sea" might represent unconsciousness, sleep, or even death. Indeed, in the classical tradition, there are four rivers in Hell; the reader might imagine the "sunless sea" as the final meeting point of those rivers, the center of Hell itself. However, if the reader interprets the river as an extended metaphor for pleasure, then the sunless sea might symbolize satisfaction, satiation, and the end of desire.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "sunless sea"

DEEP ROMANTIC CHASM

In contrast to the "gardens" that appear in line 8, the "deep romantic chasm" that the river enters at the start of stanza 2 is not a human-made space, carefully organized and planned. It thus does not reflect or represent human rationality. Instead, it serves in the poem as a sort of *gateway* into a different space—one where nature itself rules and organizes the world according to its own principles. The "deep romantic chasm" should thus be understood in opposition to the "gardens": where they might symbolize reason and rationality, the "deep romantic chasm" symbolizes the *entrance* to a different part of the mind, one that is less controlled, more violent and irrational. It is a transitional space between the two, a channel that connects them.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "deep romantic chasm"

FOUNTAIN

The "fountain" that appears in line 19 is a bit hard to visualize: the river seems to turn into a kind of geyser, its violent energy forcing a jet of water and rock out of

the chasm. If the reader takes the river itself to represent the human mind, then the fountain that bursts forth seems like a dramatic *expression* of that mind. Indeed, the speaker personifies the fountain, comparing it to a person's rough "breathing" in line 19. The river seems fully human here, less a physical space than a symbolic representation of the body as it struggles to make sense of all the complex thoughts coursing through it. In this sense, the fountain might be a symbol for the expression/eruption of that struggle—representing a passionate burst of creative language, maybe even poetry.

Similarly, in line 23, summarizing his description of the fountain, the speaker describes the rocks it flings into the air as "dancing." The metaphor personifies the rock—and does so in a specific, suggestive way. The fountain produces a movement that strongly resembles human art, the choreography of bodies in space. In this sense, the speaker strongly suggests that the reader should understand the fountain as a force of creativity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "A mighty fountain momently was forced:"

ANCESTRAL VOICES

The "ancestral voices" that Kubla Khan hears in the "tumult" of the river are a complex symbol. Literally speaking, they refer to the history of the Mongols, a history marked by conquest and bloodshed. But since the culture and history of the Mongols is not the poem's main concern, their symbolic character is what is most important here.

As a symbol, these voices can be understood on several levels. On the one hand, they represent the violence of the river's rushing course through its gorge. But since the river itself can be interpreted as an image of the human mind, these voices can thus also symbolize the violent urges that course through people's psyches.

The speaker locates these violent urges in the past: they are "ancestral." But he also notes that they predict the future: they are "prophesying." In this sense, the speaker implies that violence cannot be escaped: even if these voices are "ancestral," they know full well what to expect in the future. Violence, the speaker subtly suggests, is just part of being human.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 30:** "Ancestral voices prophesying war!"

HONEY-DEW

When the speaker mentions honey-dew in the second-to-last line of "Kubla Khan," he invokes a symbol with an important history. In the Book of Exodus, when the Israelites are wandering in the desert, they are fed by God with "manna," which falls from Heaven, keeping them from starving. According to some Biblical interpreters, the food that they ate was honey-dew, a sugary substance secreted by some insects as they feast on leaves. In other words, the speaker is claiming that he has eaten food directly from God. The "honey dew" thus serves as a symbol for holy inspiration and nourishment.

In this sense, it is closely linked to the "deep romantic chasm" the speaker mentions in line 12—a place the speaker describes as "holy." The "honey-dew" too is holy, and a symbol of the speaker's close connection with the ultimate creative power: God Himself. This symbol is reinforced in the next line, where the speaker claims to have drunk the "milk of paradise"—presumably a beverage available only in Heaven and another testament to the speaker's intimacy with God's creative capacity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 53:** "honey-dew"

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

"Kubla Khan" uses quite a bit of enjambment throughout, but it does not seem to follow any set pattern or scheme. For instance, the first five lines contain three enjambments, in lines 1, 3, and 4. But the rest of the stanza switches into a heavy string of end-stops. The poems opens at speed, with its lines racing down the page; then it slows, becoming ponderous and heavy.

The switch happens at a key point in the stanza: after line 5, the stanza's rhyme scheme shifts (and after line 7, the poem switches its meter as well). In this case, internal divisions in the poem's form line up with a switch in the way the poem uses enjambment. And the break between these two sections is reinforced by the end-stop at the end of line 5.

The poem often separates its various formal sections with end-stops. For instance, each stanza finishes with a clear end-stop; there is no enjambment across stanzas. And when the second stanza shifts from iambic pentameter to iambic tetrameter in lines 30-31, the speaker separates the two sections with an end-stop. In some places, then, enjambment and end-stop mark the poem's separate sections, clarifying the poem's internal structure.

Alongside these structural uses of enjambment and end-stop, one notes the pleasure with which the poem deploys enjambment: the speaker uses enjambment for surprise, to mislead the reader and then transform their experience of the poem.

For instance, in line 15, the speaker describes the "deep romantic chasm" as "haunted." Falling at the end of the line, the reader is encouraged to pause briefly over the word "haunted—and imagine the kind of creatures that usually are said to haunt: ghosts and ghouls. But line 16 contradicts these expectations: the "deep romantic chasm" is not "haunted" by a ghost, but by a "woman wailing for her demon-lover." Instead of being associated with *death*, the "chasm" is associated with erotic *love*.

The likely effect of the enjambment is to suggest a blurring together of sex and death, to merge the erotic with mortality. The use of enjambment in this way—to surprise the reader—is relatively unprecedented in English poetry (though one does find it in Milton, for example) and one of the key innovations of the Romantic poets.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Khan / A"
- **Lines 3-4:** "ran / Through"
- **Lines 4-5:** "man / Down"
- **Lines 6-7:** "ground / With"
- **Lines 12-13:** "slanted / Down"
- **Lines 14-15:** "enchanted / As"
- **Lines 15-16:** "haunted / By"
- **Lines 23-24:** "ever / It"
- **Lines 25-26:** "motion / Through"
- **Lines 29-30:** "ar / Ancestral"
- **Lines 31-32:** "pleasure / Floated"
- **Lines 33-34:** "measure / From"
- **Lines 37-38:** "dulcimer / In"
- **Lines 39-40:** "maid / And"
- **Lines 42-43:** "me / Her"
- **Lines 52-53:** "dread / For"

END-STOPPED LINE

"Kubla Khan" uses end-stop in uneven, irregular ways: the poem never establishes a strong pattern for its end-stops and enjambments. The speaker generally uses end-stop every couple of lines, but there is no strict pattern: and at some points the end-stops appear more regularly, at some points, more distance separates them. This irregular use of end-stop suggests how elastic and unplanned the speaker's thoughts are: rather than having a careful plan, he describes Khan's palace in an improvisatory burst of energy.

However, there are some places where the speaker uses end-stop in a more regular fashion. Each stanza closes with an end-stop, for example: the speaker does not enjamb across stanzas. Further, the speaker often closes the poem's internal formal units with an end-stop. For instance, in lines 12-16, the speaker repeats the rhyme scheme of the poem's first five lines. As in those first five lines, the speaker uses two end-stops, in the second and fifth line of each group. After line 16, however, the speaker switches rhyme schemes—introducing a new scheme that does not appear in the first stanza.

The end-stop at line 16 thus separates two groups of lines, with two different relationships to what has come earlier in the poem. End-stop operates to mark for the reader the poem's complicated internal structure, to help the reader move through those complications.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** ":"
- **Line 5:** "."
- **Line 7:** ";"
- **Line 8:** ","
- **Line 9:** ";"
- **Line 10:** ","
- **Line 11:** "."
- **Line 13:** "!"
- **Line 16:** "!"
- **Line 17:** ","
- **Line 18:** ","
- **Line 19:** ":"
- **Line 21:** ","
- **Line 22:** ":"
- **Line 24:** "."
- **Line 26:** ","
- **Line 27:** ","
- **Line 28:** ";"
- **Line 30:** "!"
- **Line 32:** ";"
- **Line 34:** "."
- **Line 35:** ","
- **Line 36:** "!"
- **Line 38:** ":"
- **Line 40:** ","
- **Line 41:** "."
- **Line 43:** ","
- **Line 44:** ","
- **Line 45:** ","
- **Line 46:** ","
- **Line 47:** "!"
- **Line 48:** ","
- **Line 49:** "!"
- **Line 50:** "!"
- **Line 51:** ","
- **Line 53:** ","
- **Line 54:** "."

CAESURA

"Kubla Khan" does not use caesura widely. Indeed, for a poem as long as "Kubla Khan," it is surprising and notable how *few* caesuras the poem contains. Though the poem is formally messy, though it feels like an improvisation, the speaker

manages to calibrate his thoughts to the length of his lines—revealing an underlying measure of control, precision, and planning beneath the hallucinatory energy of the poem.

When the speaker *does* use caesura, his caesuras do not always strongly reshape or affect the reader's experience of the line. Line 3 contains two caesuras, but they merely bracket the parenthetical statement, "the sacred river." The caesura in line 17 is similarly parenthetical.

The caesuras in lines 14 , 47, and 50 are more interesting, since they divide the lines in half, splitting into two equal descriptions of the river (in line 14), Khan's palace (line 48), and the speaker himself (line 50). These caesuras imply a kind of equality. For instance, in line 47, the "sunny dome" and the "caves of ice" are equally important to the line—and to the speaker's understanding of Khan's palace. The "caves of ice" are not incidental or unimportant in comparison to the "sunny dome." Something similar happens in line 14: the "deep romantic chasm" is as "savage" as it is "holy and enchanted."

In these instances, the speaker's use of caesura allows him to stage things that are opposite—or at least different from each other—without prioritizing one term over the other. In this way, some of the poem's caesuras underline the speaker's broader interest in bringing together opposites—pleasure and violence, rationality and irrationality.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** ",," ","
- **Line 14:** "!"
- **Line 17:** ","
- **Line 47:** "!"
- **Line 49:** ",," "!"
- **Line 50:** ","

ALLITERATION

"Kubla Khan" uses a lot of alliteration, in a way that tends to be showy and notable. For example, each of the poem's first five lines contains a heavy alliteration: "Kubla Khan," in line 1, "dome decree" in line 2, "river, ran" in line 3, "measureless to man" in line 4, and "sunless sea" in line 5.

These alliterations are situated in prominent places: they always fall at the end of a line, and they often occur in the key words in the line. They force the reader to pay attention to these words, to notice them. Though the rest of the poem is not quite this dense with bold, obvious alliterations, there are other bursts of alliteration scattered throughout.

There are two major consequences from these prominent alliterations: first, the poem feels intensely literary. Indeed, the speaker seems to be showing off, highlighting his literary skill. As a result, the alliteration encourages the reader to regard the poem—and its description of Khan's palace—as a literary show-piece, a product of the speaker's literary imagination, rather than a literal place.

Second, the heavy use of alliteration recalls an earlier moment in the history of English poetry. In the last 300 years, obvious alliteration has come to seem in poor taste, too showy. But in medieval English poetry, particularly in Anglo-Saxon poetry, alliteration was widely used—even required for the meter that Anglo-Saxon poets used.

Using such obvious alliteration, the speaker calls to mind the practices of medieval poets; he aligns his own poetic writing with the distant past, rather than with the present. The reader might understand this as part of the poem's broader resistance to the Enlightenment and its focus on reason—as part of the poem's preference for a medieval past more in touch with the irrational capacities of the human mind.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "K," "K"
- **Line 2:** "d," "d"
- **Line 3:** "r," "r"
- **Line 4:** "m," "m"
- **Line 5:** "s," "s"
- **Line 6:** "f," "f," "g"
- **Line 7:** "W," "w," "w," "g"
- **Line 8:** "g," "b"
- **Line 9:** "b," "b"
- **Line 10:** "a," "a"
- **Line 11:** "s," "s"
- **Line 15:** "w," "w"
- **Line 16:** "w," "w"
- **Line 17:** "c," "s"
- **Line 19:** "m," "f," "m," "f"
- **Line 25:** "m," "m," "m," "m"
- **Line 26:** "r," "r"
- **Line 27:** "r," "m," "m"
- **Line 28:** "t," "t"
- **Line 29:** "f," "f"
- **Line 33:** "W," "w"
- **Line 34:** "F," "f"
- **Line 37:** "d," "d"
- **Line 43:** "s," "s"
- **Line 44:** "d," "d"
- **Line 45:** "l," "l"
- **Line 48:** "th," "th"
- **Line 49:** "B," "B"
- **Line 50:** "H," "fl," "h," "fl," "h"
- **Line 53:** "h," "h," "h"

ASSONANCE

Alongside its frequent and showy alliterations, "Kubla Khan" also makes frequent use of assonance. For example, lines 12-14 contains assonance on two different /o/ sounds as well as /a/ sounds that interlock, binding the lines together:

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted

The prolific use of assonance in these lines contributes to their musical quality: because they contain so much repeated sound, they seem melodic, poetic. Indeed, the speaker's use of assonance contributes to the sense that "Kubla Khan" is highly literary: rather than offering a level-headed, objective description of a historical palace, the poem's pleasure and purpose lie as much in the sheer beauty of its language as in the thing it describes.

Given all this assonance, it is interesting to look at the moments where the poem *refrains* from using assonance. For example, in line 36, the speaker describes the two extremes of Khan's palace:

A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

The palace contains opposites: sun and ice. In describing these opposites, the speaker refrains from using assonance. These small moments of assonance do not link together the lines' opposing elements: there is no assonance that binds together the "sunny pleasure-dome" with "caves of ice." (There is some consonance, in the /s/ sound that appears in both lines—though /s/ sounds are widespread in English poetry and hard to avoid).

In refraining from using assonance, the speaker emphasizes the difference between the two, the strength of their opposition. When the speaker uses assonance and when he refrains from it, the device supports the poem's argument—and its intense musicality.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "u," "u"
- **Line 3:** "A," "a"
- **Line 4:** "a," "a"
- **Line 6:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 7:** "o," "ou"
- **Line 8:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 9:** "a," "a"
- **Line 12:** "o," "o," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 14:** "A," "a," "a," "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 17:** "ea," "ee"
- **Line 18:** "i," "i," "i," "a," "i," "a"
- **Line 20:** "i," "i," "e," "i," "u"
- **Line 24:** "u," "u"
- **Line 25:** "i," "i"
- **Line 26:** "a," "a"
- **Line 27:** "a," "a"
- **Line 28:** "A"
- **Line 31:** "o," "o"
- **Line 32:** "oa," "a," "a"
- **Line 35:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 41:** "i," "i"
- **Line 42:** "I," "e," "i," "e"
- **Line 49:** "e," "a," "e," "a"
- **Line 53:** "e," "ey"

CONSONANCE

"Kubla Khan" uses alliteration widely and freely: it is marked by intense and highly noticeable alliterations, which give the poem an unusually literary feel. The speaker often uses consonance alongside and within these alliterative clusters to reinforce and amplify the poem's musicality. For example, line 33 ends with a prominent alliteration, on "mingled measure." But a consonant /r/ sound runs through the entire line, underlying and supporting the alliteration:

Where was heard the mingled measure

In this sense, the line itself mimics the "mingled measure" it describes: like the conflicting sound that Khan hears from "the fountain and the caves," the line brings together two separate sounds, lays them side by side. And like the "mingled" music of "the fountain and the caves," the result is not necessarily dissonant: instead, the two sounds work together, binding the line together, giving it its intensely "poetic" feel. The coordination between consonance and alliteration is even clearer in the poem's third line:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Here the same /r/ sound appears as both consonance and alliteration. The consonant /r/ sound at the start of the line prepares the reader for its appearance as a prominent alliteration at the end of the line.

Consonance thus supports the poem's broader use of sound: like assonance and alliteration, it helps to make the poem *sound* nice, to the point of becoming perhaps a self-consciously artificial object—rather than an even-handed, objective description of Khan's palace.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "d," "d," "d," "K," "K"
- **Line 2:** "d," "d"
- **Line 3:** "r," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 4:** "m," "m"
- **Line 5:** "s," "ss," "s"
- **Line 6:** "f," "f," "g"
- **Line 7:** "W," "w," "r," "w," "r," "g," "r," "d," "d," "r," "d"
- **Line 8:** "r," "r," "g," "r," "br," "s," "s," "r," "s"
- **Line 9:** "b," "ss," "n," "n," "n," "c," "ns," "b"

- **Line 10:** "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 11:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "d," "m," "m," "d"
- **Line 13:** "D," "d"
- **Line 14:** "s," "c"
- **Line 15:** "n," "w," "n," "n," "w," "n"
- **Line 16:** "w," "w"
- **Line 17:** "s," "c," "s," "ss," "s"
- **Line 19:** "m," "t," "f," "t," "m," "m," "t," "f"
- **Line 24:** "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 26:** "d," "d," "d," "r," "d," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 27:** "m," "m"
- **Line 28:** "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 29:** "t," "t," "f," "f"
- **Line 33:** "W," "w," "m," "m"
- **Line 34:** "F," "f"
- **Line 35:** "c"
- **Line 36:** "s," "c"
- **Line 37:** "d," "m," "d," "m"
- **Line 38:** "c," "s"
- **Line 39:** "ss"
- **Line 40:** "c"
- **Line 43:** "s," "s"
- **Line 44:** "d," "d"
- **Line 45:** "l," "l"
- **Line 46:** "d," "d"
- **Line 47:** "s," "c"
- **Line 48:** "th," "th"
- **Line 49:** "B," "w," "r," "B," "w," "r"
- **Line 50:** "H," "fl," "h," "fl," "h"
- **Line 52:** "h," "d," "d"
- **Line 53:** "h," "h," "d," "h," "d"
- **Line 54:** "d," "d," "d"

CHIASMUS

The speaker deploys alliteration, assonance, and consonance throughout the poem, giving it an unusually showy, literary feel. To heighten this sense of artificiality, the speaker often uses these devices in chiastic patterns.

While this is not traditional chiasmus in the sense of actual ideas or phrases repeating in an inverse order, it can be helpful to note how the otherwise separate moments of alliteration and consonance fold over each other. For instance, the speaker employs alliteration and consonance in both lines 9 and 10, layering them in a chiastic pattern:

> Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree
> And here were forests ancient as the hills

It might be easier to see the pattern if one plucks out the sounds here: *b-n-n-d* and *h-a-a-h*.

As a result, the otherwise various sounds in the line form a tight, musical unity. Chiasmus thus contributes to the poem's sense of intense musicality, organizing and linking its plays of sound. Moreover, the play of chiasmus may be related to the poem's broader themes: just as Khan's palace contains opposites—sunny palaces and icy caves—so too chiasmus binds together different, even opposite sounds.

However, the speaker also uses chiasmus to underline moments of connection and continuity. The reader finds a hint of this in line 50: "His flashing eyes, his floating hair!" Here the chiasmus underlines the line's use of parallelism: it further supports the sense that the two halves of the lines are describing a single thing. The speaker thus chiasmus as a way to organize the poem's sound—and to underline its arguments about pleasure and creativity.

Where Chiasmus appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree; / And here were forests ancient as the hills,"
- **Line 50:** "His flashing eyes, his floating hair!"
- **Line 53:** "For he on honey-dew hath fed,"

SIMILE

"Kubla Khan" contains five similes, all of which fall in the poem's first two stanzas. The speaker uses these similes to explore the dynamics of the landscape he describes. He does so in two ways.

First, he compares the landscape to other natural elements. In line 10, he claims that the "forests" on Khan's estate are "ancient as the hills." In other words, they are so old they are best understood on the extended time-frame of geology. Later, in line 21, the speaker compares the "huge fragments" of rock that erupt from the "mighty fountain" to "rebounding hail." The similes emphasize the majesty and the strangeness of Khan's palace: though it is a natural space, it does not follow the usual rules of nature. The forests are so old they seem like geological features and rocks are thrown around so that they seem like hail. The natural world is upset, topsy-turvy.

The speaker offers an alternative to the hail simile in the next line: instead of being like hail, the rocks are like "chaffy grain" as it is knocked free from a plant by a thresher ("chaffy grain" refers to the dry husks that edible grain seeds are separated from in a process called threshing). This is another natural simile, but it emphasizes the interaction between human beings and nature—specifically, the way that human beings make nature useful to them.

The speaker also compares the grounds of Khan's palace to the human body. The speaker describes the "deep romantic chasm" where the river runs is "as holy and enchanted / as e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing for her demon-lover!" The chasm becomes more understandable through its relation to human beings and beliefs (specifically,

through its comparison to a human presence engaged, rather scandalously, with the supernatural). This kind of personification becomes more explicit in line 18 where the speaker compares the fountain's eruptions to the earth "breathing" in "fast thick pants." In other words, the "earth" is like a human body, breathing hard.

The speaker's use of similes thus consistently marks Khan's palace as a topsy-turvy world where natural categories collide and turn into each other—or where the natural world takes on human characteristics. The similes suggest that the landscape is so strange and beautiful it cannot be understood on its own terms: it must be translated into terms closer to the reader's experience.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "And here were forests ancient as the hills,"
- **Lines 14-16:** "as holy and enchanted / As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing for her demon-lover!"
- **Line 18:** "As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail, / Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:"

METAPHOR

The speaker's use of metaphor may be divided into two broad groups. In the first two stanzas of the poem, the speaker uses metaphor to personify Khan's palace and its grounds. For example, in line 7, the speaker describes the grounds as "girdled." The metaphor makes the palace and its grounds into a human body, and binds that body with a girdle, an article of human clothing (essentially like a belt).

Similarly in line 23, the rocks that the fountain throws up are described as "dancing"—as though their spontaneous natural movements are part of a choreographed human ritual. Something similar happens in line 25, when the speaker describes the river's motion as "mazy"—as though it were running through a maze, a structure built by human beings. (This metaphor is closely related to the description of the river earlier in line 25, where the speaker describes the river as "meandering." However, this metaphor is so traditional that it probably does not even register as a metaphor: it is a dead metaphor, a cliché, that does not weigh heavily on the speaker or the reader).

In the third stanza, the speaker employs metaphor in a different way. The metaphors are nested in a complicated series of hypothetical statements—the speaker is imagining the response to his creative powers from a hypothetical audience, in a world where he is capable of summoning the very peak of his creative powers. In such a world, he seems to have "fed" "on honey dew" and "drunk the milk of paradise." In this case, the metaphors are not describing natural, but rather supernatural phenomena. In some traditions, the "manna from heaven" that God sends to the Israelites while they wander in the desert in the Book of Exodus is honey dew. ("Milk of paradise" is not so closely to tied to the Bible, but in context, it certainly sounds like a similarly divine substance, parallel to the "honey dew"). In this case, the metaphor explains human creativity: it suggests that such creativity is a gift from God. It is not a natural phenomenon, but arrives from somewhere else.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "With walls and towers were girdled round;"
- **Line 23:** "dancing rocks"
- **Line 25:** "meandering with a ," "mazy motion"
- **Line 28:** "lifeless ocean"
- **Lines 53-54:** "For he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise."

PARALLELISM

The poem uses parallelism in line 50: "His flashing eyes, his floating hair!" This instance of parallelism (and also of asyndeton) repeats a phrase, with different words but the same grammatical structure. Those repeated phrases add up to a—hypothetical—portrait of the speaker at the height of his creative powers, enchanted and wild-eyed. These astonished exclamations capture the awe and terror the speaker inspires in his hypothetical audience. And the use of parallelism underlines their reaction: they are so shocked by him that they have been reduced to repetitive sentence-fragments; they are incapable of more profound, eloquent speech.

This parallelism is all the more marked given the antithesis that appears three lines earlier in line 47: "That sunny dome! those caves of ice!" Like line 50, it is composed of two sentence fragments, with parallel grammatical constructions. Unlike line 50, it does not present two similar phenomena: instead, it presents two opposite phenomena: the sunny dome and the icy caves. (This antithesis also appears in line 36, though it does not involve parallelism there). This is a good example of the way antithesis often relies on parallelism in order to make its opposition clear.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 50:** "His flashing eyes, his floating hair!"

ANTITHESIS

The speaker regularly uses antithesis to characterize Khan's palace and its grounds. The palace is not simple or uncomplicated: it contains both beauty and violence, pleasure and pain. The speaker wants to document the way those opposites are part of the palace's identity—indeed, part of what makes it a pleasurable place to be. He uses antithesis twice to

stage those opposites, to bring them into confrontation with each other. In line 35-36, he summarizes his account of the palace:

> It was a miracle of rare device,
> A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

Then in line 47, he closely repeats himself: "That sunny dome! those caves of ice!" Here the antithesis is even clearer than it is in line 36, since it relies on grammatical parallelism between two sentence fragments. By repeatedly characterizing Khan's palace with this antithesis, the speaker subtly insists that both the "sunny pleasure-dome" and the "caves of ice" are important to the palace. It is not the case that the "pleasure-dome" is the main thing, the most important part—and that the reader should only pay attention to it, forgetting the caves of ice. Rather, the essence of the palace, its importance and interest, lies in the confrontation of the two opposites. The speaker stages that confrontation with these instances of antithesis.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Line 36:** "A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!"
- **Line 47:** "That sunny dome! those caves of ice!"

ALLUSION

"Kubla Khan" is dense with allusions to other texts. The most important of these is Samuel Purchas's 1613 travelogue, *Purchas, his Pilgrimage; or, Relations of the World and the Religions observed in all Ages*. According to Coleridge's own account, he was reading Purchas's book when he slipped into an opium dream; upon awaking from the dream, he wrote the poem "Kubla Khan."

By his own admission, the poem begins by quoting almost directly from Purchas's book. Purchas writes: "In Xandu did Cublai Can build a stately Pallace, encompassing sixteen miles of plaine ground with a wall…" This passage was in turn based on Marco Polo's earlier description of Khan's palace. Coleridge's initial characterization of the palace in the poem's first stanza closely paraphrases Purchas's account—though it introduces several details of Coleridge's own invention, like the river "Alph" in line 3.

Scholars have identified a number of other allusions in the poem. Coleridge draws liberally on other, earlier accounts of paradise, including Milton's description of the Garden of Eden in Book 4 (1-170) of *Paradise Lost*, William Shakespeare's account of fairyland in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the Book of Revelation's account of the New Jerusalem. For example, Milton dwells briefly on a river that ran "Southward through Eden ... Nor changed his course, but through the shaggy hill / Passed underneath ingulfed..." The geography of Milton's river closely echoes Coleridge's.

Similarly, the woods in *A Midsummer Night's Dreams*, with wandering fairies and bewitched lovers seem a model for the "holy and enchanted" woods that surround the river Alph.

Finally, the Book of Revelations dwells extensively on the walls that surround the New Jerusalem: "It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel." These allusions tend to be general: Coleridge adopts some of the broad features of these earlier paradises, rather than specifically taking up the language of earlier texts.

Though one might investigate each in depth, it is likely more useful to reflect on the effect of these allusions in total. In constructing his vision of Khan's paradise, the speaker relies consistently on sources from Western literature and religious texts—and on the accounts of Western travelers. Many of these early texts were exaggerated and inaccurate. Instead of providing accurate information about distant cultures, they tended to reflect the fantasies and fears of people who lived in Europe. "Kubla Khan" relies heavily on these texts. Its allusions thus reflect the fantasies and fears that fill them.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree:"
- **Lines 3-5:** "Where Alph, the sacred river, ran / Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea."
- **Line 7:** "With walls and towers were girdled round;"
- **Line 14:** "holy and enchanted"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker spends much of "Kubla Khan" describing the grounds of Khan's palace, a natural space of considerable beauty and strangeness. To make its beauty and strangeness intelligible to the reader, the speaker often resorts to personification. In line 8, for example, the grounds of the palace are "girdled" with walls—as though they formed a body and wore a girdle. In line 21, he compares the "mighty fountain" to heavy breathing: "fast thick pants." An inanimate object becomes a human body, weary and breathing hard.

Similarly, in lines 14-16, the speaker describes the "deep romantic chasm" as a place "as holy and enchanted / as e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing for her demon-lover!" The uncanny power and beauty of the "chasm" is rendered intelligible by reference to religion, magic, and erotic passion—all human activities. Once again, the speaker relies on human values and institutions to make the natural world intelligible. And the speaker's metaphors often rely on personification—as in the "dancing rocks" in line 24 or the river's "mazy motion" in line 26, both of which compare natural phenomena to human actions or creations.

The speaker seems to reflect on this habit in lines 29-30, when

he describes what Khan hears in the river's "tumult": "Ancestral voices prophesying war." Like the speaker, Khan cannot help himself: he interprets the natural world in human terms, finding his own history and perhaps his own desires reflected in its phenomena. The speaker may suggest in this moment that personification is a compulsive habit of the human mind, that it is fundamental to the way people understand nature. Personification is not an irrational distortion of an objective reality; it is fundamental to people's interactions with reality.

More broadly, the poem's use of extended metaphor may be said to participate in personification. Arguably, the poem's long description of Khan's river is allegorical, presenting a submerged image of the human mind, with its complicated balance between the rational and the irrational. This transforms the river from a natural object to a human one; even the apparently objective descriptions of the landscape are fretted with personification.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "walls and towers were girdled round"
- **Lines 14-16:** "A savage place! as holy and enchanted / As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing for her demon-lover!"
- **Line 18:** "As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing"
- **Lines 18-19:** ", / A mighty fountain momently was forced:"
- **Line 23:** "dancing rocks"
- **Line 25:** "miles meandering with a mazy motion"
- **Line 29:** "this tumult"

EPIZEUXIS

The speaker uses epizeuxis in line 49: "And all should cry, Beware! Beware!" The line is caught up in a complicated hypothetical scenario. The speaker imagines what he would do if he could "revive within me" the "symphony and song" that he heard in the song of the "Abyssinian maid": he would build his own version of Khan's palace "in air." If he were to do so, he acknowledges, this would create panic and confusion among the people who saw him do it; everyone who did would cry out "Beware! Beware!" The use of epizeuxis emphasizes the intensity of their panic and concern.

At the same time, it also emphasizes the speaker's sense of scope and importance of his own creative powers. After all, the speaker *hasn't* built a palace "in air"; he is unable to "revive" the "symphony and song." His creative powers have failed him. The response to those powers is thus entirely hypothetical: it manifests the speaker's own dreams and ambitions, rather than an actual response. The use of epizeuxis thus displays the response the speaker hopes his creativity will generate: a response of passionate intensity, even fear. And it also suggests important things about his sense of what a piece of art should do: it does not simply please; it is not simply beautiful. It provokes awe and terror as well.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 49:** "Beware! Beware!"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The speaker of "Kubla Khan" describes Khan's palace and its grounds in considerable detail, dwelling on its geography, its sounds, its smells. It seems like a literal place, a real place. But as the poem progresses, a number of small hints accumulate that suggest the reader can understand the palace as an extended metaphor for the human mind and its (limited) creative powers.

For instance, the "gardens bright" that appear in line 8 might be understood as symbols of reason and rationality (we talk about this more in the Symbols section of this guide), while the icy caves might be a reflection of the irrational mind—with all its violence and chaos. Further, the speaker expresses his desire in the third stanza to rebuild Khan's palace "in air." He does not hope to recreate it as a physical structure, but rather as an image or representation of the capacities of human creativity, working at their highest capacity.

Even more telling, the river's name—"Alph"—associates it with God's capacity to create: since God announces in the Book of Revelations, "I am the alpha and the omega." In other words, He is the beginning and the end of all things—the ultimate source of creative and destructive power. Calling the river "Alph," the speaker associates it with this creative power.

The poem thus presents a coordinated group of symbols and allusions that taken together can be interpreted as an extended metaphor. The river and its course presents an image of the human psyche—running from the reasonable parts of the mind to the chaotic and violent parts of it, the irrational.

The palace is the *product* of that psyche, an image of what human creativity can produce. The extended metaphor—perhaps better described as an allegory, since it is so subtle—suggests something important about the speaker's understanding of creativity: it requires both reason and the irrational, order and chaos, peace and violence. Indeed, the palace hangs over the gorge where the two meet: it emerges from and indulges in the confrontation between these opposites.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "Where Alph, the sacred river, ran / Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea."
- **Line 8:** "And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,"
- **Lines 12-13:** "But oh! that deep romantic chasm which

slanted / Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!"

- **Lines 17-24:** "And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething, / As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing, / A mighty fountain momently was forced: / 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 momently the sacred river."
- **Lines 25-28:** "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;"
- **Lines 45-54:** "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! / 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."

VOCABULARY

Xanadu (Line 1) - A mistranslation of "Shangdu," the city where the Mongol ruler and Emperor of China, Kublai Khan had his summer palace: thus, Xanadu is a place dedicated to pleasure, a retreat from the pressures of politics and everyday life.

Kubla Khan (Line 1) - A misspelling of Kublai Khan, the ruler of the Mongol Empire from 1260-1294. He also founded the Yuan dynasty in China, in 1271.

Pleasure-dome (Line 2) - A building with a dome, dedicated to recreation and pleasurable activity.

Alph (Line 3) - The Alph is a fictional river, invented by Coleridge for the poem. It may refer to "alpha," the first letter of the Greek alphabet—and thus it might be a symbol for origins and beginnings. (For example, in the Gospel of John, God is referred to as "the Alpha and the Omega"—or, in other words, "the beginning and the end.")

Girdled (Line 7) - Encircled or surrounded. The paradise of Xanadu is well protected and fortified.

Sinuous (Line 8) - The word describes curved things: in this case, the "rills" or small streams in Xanadu wander around the gardens, taking a meandering course.

Rills (Line 8) - Small streams or rivers.

Incense-bearing (Line 9) - Sweet-smelling, fragrant.

Chasm (Line 12) - A canyon or gorge, a deep channel cut by the river.

Athwart (Line 13) - Across or crossing.

Cedarn (Line 13) - Made of cedar. The river is covered by the canopies of cedar trees.

E'er (Line 15) - A contraction or shortening of the word "ever."

Pants (Line 18) - Heavy breathing.

Half-Intermitted (Line 20) - Irregular or occasional. The "mighty fountain"—the geyser—only erupts occasionally.

Chaffy (Line 22) - Filled with chaff, the part of a grain that cannot be eaten.

Flail (Line 22) - An instrument used to harvest corn and grain, by striking it to separate the edible part of the plant from its stalk.

Momently (Line 24) - Briefly, only for a moment.

Mazy (Line 25) - Maze-like, intricate, wandering. The river does not follow a direct course.

Dale (Line 26) - A meadow or pasture.

'mid (Line 29) - In the middle of. Kubla Khan hears "ancestral voices" in the sound the river makes as it rushes through the gorge.

Ancestral (Line 30) - Ancient, coming from Khan's dead relatives or ancestors.

Prophesying (Line 30) - Predicting the future. The word usually suggests that the person who is making this prophesy has been instructed by God about the future.

Measure (Line 33) - Music. Since written music is divided up into measures, the "mingled measure" in line 33 refers to the noise the river makes as it flows in the caves and erupts in the "fountain"—the two separate sounds joining together to form one music.

Device (Line 35) - Technology or technique.

Damsel (Line 37) - A young woman, generally unmarried.

Dulcimer (Line 37) - A type of stringed instrument.

Abyssinian (Line 39) - An Ethiopian. "Abyssinia" is a now obsolete name for Ethiopia.

Maid (Line 39) - A woman or lady.

Abora (Line 41) - Like Alph, in line 3, "Abora" appears to be fictional—something that Coleridge made up. However, in earlier versions of the poem, the mountain is called "Amara," a real mountain in Ethiopia and an important place politically—the site of the Ethiopian royal treasury and prison. The mountain is described in one of Coleridge's sources for "Kubla Khan." It thus seems likely that "Abora" is a misspelling of Amara, done intentionally or not.

'Twould (Line 44) - It would.

Flashing (Line 50) - Wild, full of unpredictable energy or light.

Thrice (Line 51) - Three times.

Dread (Line 52) - Fear or respect. The fear of God Himself and his power.

Honey-Dew and Milk of Paradise (Line 53, Line 54) - Some sort of sweet, mythical food that only gods can eat. These also might be veiled allusions to opium, which Coleridge had taken before writing this poem.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Kubla Khan" doesn't have a set form—nor does it follow a traditional form like the sonnet or the ballad. On a basic level, there are three stanzas. The first has 11 lines, the second has 25, and the third has 18.

The poem meanders, wandering between different rhyme schemes and meters over the course of its 54 lines. Indeed, the poem uses three separate meters—iambic tetrameter, iambic pentameter, and in line 5, iambic trimeter. There isn't always a clear reason *why* the speaker switches between these meters. Similarly, the poem will establish an intricate rhyme pattern, only to switch immediately to a new one.

In most poems, formal elements like meter and rhyme serve established rules, to create a sense of order and regularity. In "Kubla Khan" they do just the opposite: they underline how *disorderly* the poem is, how changeable, and how irregular. Because the poem flirts with order only to abandon it, the reader has a sense that the poem is always on the verge of establishing a definite rhythm and rhyme scheme—but it pulls away, toward some fresh, new poetic pleasure. (The major exception will be the poem's final stanza, where the speaker sticks to one meter exclusively, iambic tetrameter—though the rhyme scheme continues to be irregular throughout.)

As a result, the poem's unusual and irregular form closely mimics the poem's subject. It certainly *feels* like a vision made up of *fragments*. One might interpret the poem's form as an image of the wandering, sometimes violent, river it describes. Or one might take it as an image of Kubla Khan's pleasure palace, with its dense mix of both beauty and violence. The poem doesn't insist on one interpretation or another. In its formal strangeness, the poem encourages the reader to develop their own interpretation of its structure.

METER

"Kubla Kahn" bounces between several different meters over the course of its 54-lines: iambic tetrameter, iambic pentameter, and iambic trimeter. Although it introduces meters and then returns to them later, there is no set pattern for when it does so. It does not follow the rules of an established literary form in its alternations in the meter, which reflects the dreamy, hallucinatory nature of the poem. Its meters seem to reflect the speaker's changing whims and inclinations—and they model the tension, contradiction, and unplanned character of the natural spaces the poem describes.

The poem begins with four lines in iambic tetrameter (four poetic feet with a da DUM rhythm, for a total of 8 syllables per line). One can hear this rhythm in the poem's opening line:

> In Xan- | a**du** |did Kubl- | a Khan

Then in line 6, the poem switches for a single line to iambic trimeter (three poetic feet with a da DUM rhythm), but with a trochee in the first foot:

> **Down** to | a **sun**- | less **sea**

Lines 6 and 7 are back in iambic tetrameter—though line 7 is a bit rough, with an anapest (da da DUM) in its third foot:

> With **walls** | and **tow**- | ers were **gird**- | led **round**

Then the poem switches into iambic pentameter (five poetic feet, with a da DUM rhythm), a rhythm one can hear clearly in line 10:

> And **here** were **for**ests **anc**ient **as** the **hills**

In the poem's first 11 lines, the speaker uses three separate meters, all of them iambic.

All of this is to show that, though the rhythm of the lines remains fairly content, their lengths shift unpredictably. As a result, the poem feels uncontrolled, rushing forward and then slowing down—much like the river it describes.

The second stanza begins in iambic pentameter, continuing the meter that the first stanza ended on. These lines contain a number of feminine endings, as in line 14:

> A **sav**age **place**! as **hol**y **and** en**chant**ed

(Note that in places, depending on how you pronounce words like "chasm" the lines arguably expand to twelve syllables).

Iambic pentameter is a prestigious meter in English poetry, favored for dignified, serious subjects: as a result these lines might feel much more dignified and serious than the first stanza. They have a kind of grandeur, where the earlier parts of the poem felt comparatively playful and loose. These iambic lines continue until line 31, when the meter switches back to iambic tetrameter, until line 34. The final two lines of the stanza are in iambic pentameter.

After all the metrical variation in the poem, stanza 3 is remarkably consistent: the whole stanza is in iambic tetrameter, with relatively few metrical substitutions. The poem thus formally marks the distinctness of that stanza, its difference from the rest of the poem. It becomes a separate rhythmic space, more regular and more controlled than the rest of the poem. It suggests that the reader regard this section as

separate conceptually from the rest of the poem—and indeed, this is the point at which the speaker begins moving beyond describing Kubla Khan's "pleasure-dome" to imagining one of his own.

RHYME SCHEME

Though the poem makes prominent use of rhyme, it does not have the regularity and order that usually accompanies a rhyme scheme. For most readers, it will not feel like the poem has a rhyme scheme at all. Instead, like the wandering river it describes, the poem meanders and curves, bending back on itself and then rushing forward unpredictably.

Its rhyme scheme shifts both within and across its three stanzas. For example, the first stanza can be divided into two sections. In lines 1-5, the poem rhymes:

ABAAB

This initial section finishes with the end-stop in line 5, signaling the completion of the poem's first description of the river Alph. The next 6 lines then switch to an uneven new rhyme scheme, signaling a new focus for the poem's descriptions (that is, the gardens surrounding the palace):

CCDBDB

This is an unusual and original rhyme scheme: it does not correspond to any of the established schemes in English poetry. The speaker then *repeats* the first stanza's pattern in the opening of the second stanza (using new rhyme sounds). Perhaps this repetition reflects the speaker's attention returning to the river Alph, now describing the chasm through which it flows. Lines 12-16 are again rhymed:

ABAAB

However, the following lines switch into rhymed couplets, with slant rhymes in lines 19-20 (forced/burst) and line 23-24 (ever/river):

CCDDEEFF

Then, the speaker switches the rhyme scheme once again! Lines 25-30 rhyme:

GHHGII

The stanza finally closes with another rhyme scheme, this time:

JKJKLL

(Note that "pleasure" and "measure"—the J rhymes here—are also slant rhymes with "ever" and "river"—the F rhymes—from earlier in the stanza; as such, it'd be possible to map the scheme as FKFKLL.) The rhyme scheme of the poem's first two stanzas is thus exceptionally complex and irregular. It follows no established rule and seems to shift according to the speaker's whims.

In the poem's final stanza, the rhyme scheme shifts once again. In lines 37-41, many of the lines are unrhymed altogether. After the clear end-stop of line 41, the speaker sets forth with a brand new rhyme scheme throughout the end of the poem. These lines are rhymed:

ABABCDCCCDEED

This is, once again, a highly unusual rhyme scheme: it corresponds to no set form in English poetry. This new rhyme scheme—with its repetition of the C sound three times in a row—might seem somewhat manic. In any case, it represents new, uncharted territory—just as the speaker begins his discussion of building his own pleasure dome.

SPEAKER

Readers don't get much direct information about the poem's speaker. The reader never learns, for instance, the speaker's profession, age, or class. Line 50 reveals that the speaker is a man through the use of the pronoun "his," but otherwise the speaker is pretty detached from the narrative of the poem as he describes, with gusto, the wonder of Kubla Khan's "pleasure-dome."

In the final stanza, however, the speaker starts imagining having such a palace for himself—and the reader gets the image of a rather manic, imposing figure with "flashing eyes" and "floating hair." The speaker thinks that people looking on should "beware" of him in such a state, in which he has "drunk the milk of Paradise." Maybe he's drunk on power in imagining himself with his own palace; or, if one takes the poem to be an extended metaphor about poetry itself, perhaps he's in a frantic, creative mood.

To that end, the speaker seems interested in Kubla Khan and his palace because they serve as reflections of his own creative ambitions. In line 46, the speaker announces, "I would build that dome in air" using "music loud and long." The speaker is thus implied to be a creative person testing the limits of his artistic powers; he thinks he could build a palace through language alone.

One could take the speaker to be Coleridge himself—which, to be clear, is not directly stated in the poem and certainly not the only way to interpret it! But Coleridge allegedly did claim to have written the poem after reading about Kubla Khan and Xanadu, taking opium, and then having a fitful sleep. The final lines do seem to feel as though they could be pulled from the mind of someone rousing from a drug-induced dreams (and the "milk of Paradise" could easily be the speaker's literary way saying he's high on opium).

There are some other clues in the poem about the speaker's identity. For instance, the speaker makes several allusions to books, like Samuel Purchas's 1613 travelogue *Purchas, his Pilgrmes*, an important source for "Kubla Khan" (and, according to legend, the very book Coleridge was reading when he slipped into the opium dream that inspired the poem). The speaker is thus probably an educated person, well read in the

travel writing of the day.

The speaker's interest in and use of travel narratives like Samuel Purchas's reveals something else about him as well: the speaker doesn't belong to Kubla Khan's culture. Instead, the speaker is an outsider, someone from the West, who regards Kubla Khan's palace as an exotic place. In this sense, the poem is not a careful, accurate portrayal of a foreign culture; instead, it says more about the speaker's *own* desires—and the speaker's own stereotypical images of foreign peoples.

SETTING

"Kubla Khan" is set on the grounds of the Mongol leader and Chinese emperor Kubla Khan's summer palace—or, at least, it is set in the speaker's dreamy, hallucinatory *vision* of that palace. The palace itself is a grand-sun-filled place surrounded by lush gardens.

The poem also spends a lot of time focusing on the Alph river that flows nearby. This river isn't of the serene, lazy variety, at least not all of the time; instead it's big and forceful, "seething" through immense caverns and erupting in a "mighty fountain" before making its way to a comparatively "lifeless ocean." In other words, it splashes violently through the canyons, churning up rocks as it goes.

The speaker calls the caverns through which the river flows "deep" and "romantic"—in the awe-inducing sense of the word. These caverns are huge—so big, in fact, that the speaker calls them "measureless to man." They also seem at once wild, holy, and magical. The speaker even imagines that they're haunted, and in doing so conjures the image of a woman crying out in the moonlight for a demonic lover. Altogether, this place seems rather unsettling and spooky.

The setting for the poem is thus only partially literal, however: it's just as much a reflection of the speaker's *own* desires and struggles. This impression is reinforced in the poem's final stanza, where the speaker moves from describing Khan's palace to detailing a desire to build a palace of the speaker's own "in air." This can be understood as building the castle through language and storytelling, even poetry. As such, the speaker wants to recreate Khan's palace as a testament to his own creative powers. The final stanza suggests that the reader should treat the more literal description of the palace and its grounds as being part of the speaker's reflections on creativity, desire, and the power of art—rather than as a literal description of a physical place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of the leading figures of literary Romanticism, an artistic movement that began in Europe in the late 18th century and was influential through the mid 19th century. In English poetry, the Romantics were a small, close-knit group. (In fact Coleridge wrote "Kubla Khan" while living with fellow Romantic poet William Wordsworth in a cottage in rural England!) The Romantics resisted the rationalism of the European Enlightenment in favor of poetry that elevated the imagination, praised the sublime power of the natural world, and valorized historical periods like the middle ages, which were not quite so enamored of modern "reason."

The reader can see all of these dynamics at work in "Kubla Khan." In a sense, the poem is about the creative imagination, with all its incredible powers and limitations. And the poem explores the imagination by focusing on nature itself. Nature isn't depicted as a space that follows strict laws, but rather as a space of beauty, power, and violence.

The poem also notably turns for inspiration to a culture beyond Europe, located in the distant past. Coleridge relied for his information about Kubla Khan on several narratives by early travelers to the Far East, like Marco Polo and Samuel Purchas. Indeed, according to legend, Coleridge was reading Purchas's 1613 book *Purchas, his Pilgrimes, or Relations of the World and Religions Observed in All Ages and Places Discovered* when he slipped into the opium dream that inspired the poem. Purchas's text contains language that closely parallels Coleridge's: "In Xandu did Cublai Can build a stately Pallace, encompassing sixteen miles of plaine ground with a wall…" Coleridge's poem is thus a deeply personal fantasy and a reflection of his culture's limited knowledge of Mongolian life.

In addition to this general literary context, "Kubla Khan" has a specific story attached to its writing. According to Coleridge himself, writing in a preface often printed with the poem, Coleridge was reading Purchas's book when he slipped into an opium dream. Upon waking, Coleridge wrote the first 54 lines of the poem—intending to write several hundred more. However, he was interrupted by a "person from Porlock"—a neighboring village—who had come on business and kept Coleridge occupied for an hour. Once the business was finally finished, Coleridge found he could no longer complete the poem. Hence, Coleridge's acknowledgment in the poem's subtitle that it's a "fragment." Some scholars have called into question the veracity of this story—suggesting, for instance, that the poem's third stanza, was written later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Kubla Khan" has two relevant historical contexts: the moment in English history, at the end of the 18th century, when it was written, and the historical moment in the 13th century it describes, when Kublai Khan was the great Khan of the Mongols and Emperor of China. These two historical moments are quite different from each other: they are separated by five hundred years and a continent. However, the separation

between them is part of the point for the speaker: because Kublai Khan's culture is so far removed from his own, it allows him to imagine life beyond the limitations of European culture.

At the time Coleridge wrote "Kubla Khan," European culture was undergoing serious transformations. Although the leading thinkers of the previous century had prized reason and science, figures across Europe were calling for a return to the powers of the imagination. And politically, the French monarchy had been overthrown in 1789, leading to a brief period of revolutionary radicalism that came to a close in 1799, just after the poem was written. As a result of these intellectual and political transformations, many of the values and institutions that people had cherished—and assumed were untouchable—like hereditary monarchy were coming into question.

By contrast, Kublai Khan was a leader of the Mongol Empire from 1260 until his death in 1294. He was nominally in charge of the Mongols themselves, although in that capacity he didn't wield much power. His real power came from his position as Emperor of China, the first Emperor of the Yuan Dynasty—a position he assumed in 1279 when the Mongols conquered the Song Dynasty. He lived long before the 18th century with its political and intellectual clashes.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Kubla Khan Read Aloud — Actor Benedict Cumberbatch reads "Kubla Khan" aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hfrx_JQcIsI)
- The Romantics — An introduction to British Romantic poetry, from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-romantics)
- Coleridge's Life — A detailed biography of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/samuel-taylor-coleridge)
- The Inspiration for "Kubla Khan" — A brief article on Coleridge's main source for "Kubla Khan," with images of the original text. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/purchas-his-pilgrimage-or-relations-of-the-world-and-the-religions)
- Kubla Khan's Preface — The full text of Coleridge's poem along with its preface. (http://www.victorianweb.org/previctorian/stc/kktext.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SAMUEL COLERIDGE POEMS

- The Eolian Harp

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Altman, Toby. "*Kubla Khan.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 May 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Altman, Toby. "*Kubla Khan.*" LitCharts LLC, May 8, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/samuel-coleridge/kubla-khan.