Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



Kubla Khan

by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Grades 8–11 · Common Core RL.8.4, RL.8.2, RL.8.5

Coleridge wrote "Kubla Khan" around 1797 and published it in 1816 with the subtitle "Or, a Vision in a Dream. A Fragment." Kubla Khan was a real 13th-century Mongol emperor of China, but the poem's Xanadu is a dream place. Coleridge published it with a prose preface describing the dream and the "person from Porlock" who interrupted his writing; you can read it on our About Samuel Taylor Coleridge page. The poem shifts from a description of the palace to the poet's own voice in the final section.

THE POEM

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.

VOCABULARY

decree — to order officially

girdled — surrounded, encircled

sinuous — curving, winding

athwart — across

chasm — a deep crack in the earth

momently — every moment; from moment to moment

meandering — wandering, winding slowly

dulcimer — a stringed instrument played by striking or plucking

symphony — harmony of sounds; music

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe the pleasure-dome and its grounds in lines 1–11. What words make it seem ordered and peaceful?

2. How does the "deep romantic chasm" contrast with the gardens? Find two words or images that make it wild or frightening.

3. What does Kubla hear "from far", and why is it a surprising interruption in a place of pleasure?

4. In the last section the speaker says "Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song," what would he do if he could, and how do the listeners react to him?

5. The poem was published as "A Fragment." Does the ending feel unfinished, or complete? Explain using the final lines.

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short description of a dream place of your own, moving, like Coleridge, from calm order to something wild. End with one or two lines in which you, the dreamer, wish you could bring the vision back.

Kubla Khan — Answer Key

1. It is “A stately pleasure-dome” with “walls and towers” around “twice five miles of fertile ground”, “gardens bright with sinuous rills” and “incense-bearing tree”. Words like “stately”, “girdled round”, and measured numbers suggest control and calm.
2. The chasm is “A savage place! as holy and enchanted”, haunted “By woman wailing for her demon-lover!” with “ceaseless turmoil seething” and a “mighty fountain” bursting out. Nature is violent, sacred and out of control, not tamed.
3. “Ancestral voices prophesying war!” Even in paradise there is a warning of destruction; pleasure and power cannot last.
4. He would “build that dome in air” with music. Listeners would cry “Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!” and treat him with “holy dread,” as an inspired, almost dangerous figure who has “drunk the milk of Paradise.”
5. Either: it ends on a strong image of the inspired poet, which feels complete; or it breaks off with a wish (“Could I”), so the vision is never rebuilt. Accept supported answers; mention the “Fragment” subtitle.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/kubla-khan-samuel-taylor-coleridge/