

## Kubla Khan

Poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge



### LITERARY ANALYSIS: SOUND DEVICES

“Kubla Khan” is a poem that begs to be read aloud. The sounds of the words evoke almost as much as their meaning. Coleridge uses a variety of sound devices to unify his stanzas, create a mood, and delight the ear. These sound devices include

- **alliteration**—the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words, as in *Kubla Khan*
- **consonance**—the repetition of consonant sounds in the middle and at the end of words, as in *As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted*
- **assonance**—the repetition of a vowel sound in two or more stressed syllables that do not end with the same consonant, as in *ceaseless turmoil seething*
- **onomatopoeia**—the use of words whose sounds echo their meanings, such as *burst*

As you read the poem aloud, notice examples of these sound devices. On a second reading, record the examples and their location in a chart like the one shown.

Alliteration	Consonance	Assonance	Onomatopoeia
Kubla Khan (line 1)			

### READING STRATEGY: VISUALIZE IMAGES

To get the most from this poem, you will have to **visualize**, or construct mental pictures from details in the text. Most useful will be sensory details. For example, what colors and shapes are brought to mind by the phrase “caves of ice”? What would the caves feel like to touch? What would they smell like? Let yourself get carried away, and imagine the sight of things you’ve never seen before. How might a place called “Xanadu” look? Even if you have no artistic talent, it might help to make sketches after certain descriptions. See if your sketches look like those of your classmates.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

## Can DREAMS reveal truths?

In *Wuthering Heights*, 19th-century novelist Emily Brontë wrote, “I’ve dreamt in my life dreams that have stayed with me ever after, and changed my ideas: they’ve gone through and through me, like wine through water, and altered the color of my mind.” Artists and psychologists also have commented on the power of dreams to inspire and to reveal truths about the self and the world.

**QUICKWRITE** Describe, as fully as you can, an image or a sensation from a dream you once had. How easy is this to do? Also describe the emotions you associate with the dream. What meaning, if any, can you read into the dream? Read “Kubla Khan” to see how well it describes a dream and what truths it may hint at.

Dream: rowing a boat across a lake

Emotions: calm, peaceful

Author  
Online



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# Kubla Khan

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

**BACKGROUND** Coleridge wrote “Kubla Khan” in 1797 after taking opium prescribed to relieve pain. Affected by the powerful narcotic, he fell into a deep sleep while reading about the 13th-century Mongol emperor Kublai Khan. In his sleep, he composed 200 to 300 lines based on fantastic images that rose up as he dreamed. Awakening hours later, Coleridge began to write the poem down, but a visitor interrupted him, and later Coleridge could not recall the rest of the lines. He called the poem “a fragment” and “a vision in a dream.”

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure dome decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
5 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;  
10 And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery. **A**



But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted  
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!  
A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
15 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 momentarily was forced:  
20 Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst  
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:  
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever  
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.

**1 Xanadu** (zăn'ə-dōō'): Shangdu, one of Kublai Khan's residences in what is now northern China.

**8 sinuous rills:** winding streams.

## **A SOUND DEVICES**

Read lines 1–11 aloud. What sound devices do you notice, and what **mood** do they help create?

**13 athwart a cedarn cover:** across a grove of cedar trees.

**19 momentarily:** at every moment.

**20 intermitted:** interrupted.

**22 chaffy . . . flail:** grain being beaten to separate it from its husks, or chaff.





*Peking Imperial Garden* (1800s), Chinese artist. © Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris/The Art Archive.

- 25 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: **B**  
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
30 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.  
35 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,  
40 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,  
45 That with music loud and long, **C**  
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!  
50 His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honeydew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

**B VISUALIZE IMAGES**

Sketch a map of the **setting** you visualize from the description in lines 12–28.

35 **device**: design.

37 **dulcimer**: a stringed musical instrument played with small hammers.

39 **Abyssinian**: from Abyssinia, now called Ethiopia.

41 **Mount Abora**: a legendary earthly paradise like Kubla Khan's.

**C VISUALIZE IMAGES**

From lines 45–54, create a mental picture of the speaker and his listeners. Why do the listeners cry “Beware”?

53 **honeydew**: an ideally sweet or luscious substance.

## Comprehension

1. **Recall** What are some features of the site Kubla Khan chooses for his pleasure dome?
2. **Clarify** What does the speaker imagine would happen if he could again hear the “symphony and song” of the Abyssinian maid?
3. **Paraphrase** What does it mean to have fed on “honeydew” and “drunk the milk of Paradise”?



**READING 3** Evaluate the changes in sound in poetry across literary time periods. **7** Analyze how the author’s patterns of imagery reveal theme, set tone, and create meaning in metaphors, passages, and literary works.

## Literary Analysis

4. **Visualize Images** Describe, in as much detail as you can, the images you visualized in lines 1–36. What qualities of nature are suggested through these images?
5. **Interpret Details** What do you predict about Kubla Khan and his pleasure dome from line 30—“Ancestral voices prophesying war”?
6. **Identify Sound Devices** Refer to the chart you created as you read, and identify examples of **alliteration**, **consonance**, **assonance**, and **onomatopoeia** in the poem. Which device does Coleridge use most often? Discuss instances in which sound supports mood or meaning.
7. **Analyze Form** How regular are the **rhyme scheme** and **meter** of the poem? At what specific points are the rhyme scheme and meter especially appropriate for the subject?
8. **Draw Conclusions About Theme** What ideas does the poem suggest about dreams and the act of creation? Comment on the following:
  - the circumstances of the poem’s composition
  - Kubla Khan’s construction of his pleasure dome
  - the speaker’s vision of the Abyssinian maid
9. **Evaluate Structure** Recall that Coleridge said he was interrupted by a visitor as he wrote down this poem and later was unable to remember more lines. Does the poem seem complete or incomplete to you? Explain.

## Literary Criticism

10. **Author’s Style** Coleridge’s poetry demonstrates a romantic fascination with the supernatural and exotic. Name modern works of film or literature that conjure up a faraway, magical world. What do you think accounts for the continued appeal of the exotic?

### *Can DREAMS reveal truths?*

What are other examples of imaginary dream worlds from film, television, or literature? Describe them. How do they resemble, or differ from, Xanadu?



## Two Faces of Romanticism

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth were good friends who shared many conversations about the nature of poetry. In planning *Lyrical Ballads*, their joint book of verse, they agreed to write two different kinds of poems. Coleridge describes this agreement in his *Biographia Literaria*.

*“In this idea originated the plan of the LYRICAL BALLADS; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure. . . that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was . . . to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us. . . .”*

In other words, Coleridge agreed to write about the supernatural in a way that was believable, while Wordsworth set out to awaken readers’ senses to the magical wonder of everyday sights and sounds.

### Writing to Analyze

Review the Coleridge and Wordsworth poems in this unit. Write an analysis of the poems, explaining how they illustrate the principles outlined in the excerpt from *Biographia Literaria*.

#### Consider

- the kinds of events and people depicted
- the portrayals of nature
- the attitudes of the speakers toward their subject matter

### Extension Online

**INQUIRY & RESEARCH** Search the Internet for information about the Lake District, which was home to Coleridge and Wordsworth. What was the region like when they lived there? What is it like today? Choose two or three of the most interesting Web sites or articles on the subject and share them with your class.



**WRITING 15C** Write an interpretation of a literary text.

