

Kubla Khan Summary

This poem describes Xanadu, the palace of Kubla Khan, a Mongol emperor and the grandson of Genghis Khan. The poem's speaker starts by describing the setting of Emperor's palace, which he calls a "pleasure dome." He tells us about a river that runs across the land and then flows through some underground caves and into the sea. He also tells us about the fertile land that surrounds the palace. The nearby area is covered in streams, sweet-smelling trees, and beautiful forests.

Then the speaker gets excited about the river again and tells us about the canyon through which it flows. He makes it into a spooky, haunted place, where you might find a "woman wailing for her demon lover." He describes how the river leaps and smashes through the canyon, first exploding up into a noisy fountain and then finally sinking down and flowing through those underground caves into the ocean far away.

The speaker then goes on to describe Kubla Khan himself, who is listening to this noisy river and thinking about war. All of a sudden, the speaker moves away from this landscape and tells us about another vision he had, where he saw a woman playing an instrument and singing. The memory of her song fills him with longing, and he imagines himself singing his own song, using it to create a vision of Xanadu.

Toward the end, the poem becomes more personal and mysterious, as the speaker describes past visions he has had. This brings him to a final image of a terrifying figure with flashing eyes. This person, Kubla Khan, is a powerful being who seems almost godlike: "For he on honey-dew hath fed/And drunk the milk of paradise" (53-54).

Lines 1-2

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure dome decree:

- Here's the famous opener.
- This line gets a lot of work done quickly. It introduces us to the title character (Kubla Khan), and begins to describe the amazing setting of the poem (Xanadu).
- That "stately pleasure dome decree" means that he had a really fancy and beautiful palace built.
- We want you to know right away that Coleridge is actually talking about a real place and a real guy.
- Kubla Khan was the grandson of the legendary Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan, and he built a summer palace (called Xanadu, in English) in Mongolia.
- Marco Polo visited Xanadu, and helped to start the legend of its magnificence.
- We're starting with actual history here, although by Coleridge's time Xanadu is already a bit of a legend.
- Keep this little historical nugget in mind, as you read. Does this feel like a real place and a real person? Or does it seem completely imaginary? Maybe a little of both?

Lines 3-5

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

- The speaker begins to describe the geography of Xanadu. He starts by introducing us to the River Alph.
- There's certainly no river in Mongolia by this name. Some scholars think that this is an allusion to the river Alpheus, a river in Greece that was made famous in classical literature.
- The name "Alph" might also make us think of the Greek letter "Alpha" which is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and a symbol of beginnings.

- Coleridge keeps this intensity up line after line, plunging us into the river again and again.
- After a while, this turns into a snowstorm of images and analogies.
- Apparently the river is bouncing off the rocks, which reminds the speaker of the clatter of hail, or grain raining down out of the air as it is being separated from the chaff.
- We could dig into each one of these images, and we definitely wouldn't want to stop you from looking as closely as possible at every one of these lines. But we think what the speaker is really after here is a *feeling*.
- Do you feel the rushing of the river, the crash of the water against the rocks?
- If yes, then the poem is doing its job. Each image is meant to drive home that feeling of wild natural force.
- In a sense these lines are like a symphony – a rush of feeling and sound and excitement that's meant to pick you up and carry you along.

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:*

- Suddenly things calm down a little.
- Our favorite river reaches the flat plain of the valley where Xanadu is located, and it begins to "meander with a mazy motion" (line 25).
- So, now we've gotten the whole story of the river, from the perspective of someone in Xanadu.
- The first glimpse is of the river rushing down a deep canyon cut into a wooded hillside. The water is moving fast and furious, almost like a waterfall, but not quite so steep. It bounces off rocks and creates a lot of big ruckus.
- The river then flattens out and turns into a proper river, flowing gently through Xanadu for five miles until it reaches a bunch of caves or "caverns."
- Nobody knows how deep these caverns are. They are so huge you couldn't possibly measure them. But we do know that they seem to contain an underground ocean, into which the river flows.

See all those "m" sounds? We call that repetition of the first sound in a word "alliteration."

- Coleridge has gotten us all worked up, and now, to show us he can, he slows it all down.
- One minute the river's making a "fast thick pant," then it's lazy and murmuring in the woods and dales.
- You know how some pop songs start out quiet, build up until they are fast and loud and then quiet down again?
- That's what's happening here. The speaker took us up to peak, and now he's taking us down again, circling back to the quiet, spooky images that started the poem.
- To bring this idea home, the speaker repeats the phrase "caverns measureless to man" that we first heard in line 4. Remember that "sunless sea" in line 5? It's back too, this time as a "lifeless ocean" (line 28).
- Different words, same gloomy idea.

Lines 29-30

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

- Coleridge could have ended the poem there, with that "lifeless ocean."
- In that case, it would have been almost perfectly symmetrical.
- But what fun would that be? This is supposed to be an intense vision, after all.
- Plus, what about Kubla, our title character? It almost seems like Coleridge has forgotten him.
- Well now he's back, in the last two lines of this section. As the poem's pace slows down, the "tumult" of the river becomes an echo of the intense rush we just felt.
- Like us, Kubla listens from a distance, and what does he hear? "Ancestral voices prophesying war" (line 30).

- Xanadu is located in a valley surrounded by hills. The river cascades down the side of one of these hills, cutting a "deep chasm," or canyon, through it.
- The chasm cuts a path "athwart a cedarn cover" which means that the entire hillside is covered in cedar trees. This river is violent and uncontrollable, completely unlike those poky little rills we heard about in line eight.
- The speaker seems to be pulled toward this river like a magnet. He could have imagined himself sitting in those gardens, having someone feed him grapes.
- But it's the "romantic" chasm that appeals to him, and gives the poem its life.
- Can you feel how excited the speaker is when he talks about the river?
- One way Coleridge tips us off to his excitement is with all of those exclamation points. They are all over the place in the first few lines of this section.
- Look at just two examples: "a cedarn cover!"(line 13), "a savage place!"(line 14). The exclamation points really make those images pop out at you, don't they?
- And how about that woman, the demon lover, and that waning moon?
- The speaker is using them to let us know just how romantic and spooky the chasm really is.
- Our speaker wants us to imagine a woman, maybe even the ghost of a woman, since she haunts this place.
- Maybe she has been cursed, or has had a spell cast on her, and she has fallen in love with an evil spirit.
- If this woman wanted to scream about her terrible fate, to let out all her sadness and her anger and her longing, where would she go? She'd go to a place just like this: a lonely, wild canyon, where no one could hear her but the "waning moon" (that just means the moon is getting smaller).
- These images are really intense, and it gives us a little glimpse of a whole new story.
- The speaker isn't saying that any of these things are there in the poem; he's saying that this is the kind of place where they *would be* at home.
- He's coloring the mood of the landscape, not introducing new characters, so don't let the details throw you off too much.
- Remember that we're hearing a description of a dream or a vision.
- Have you ever been at that moment where you're about to fall asleep and something flashes across your mind? One minute it's there, and it's really intense, maybe as intense as this woman and her demon. Then the next minute it's gone, just like the woman in this poem.

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.*

- More about this river. Seriously, he really likes it. Apparently it comes rushing down the hillside at every moment ("momently") like a "fountain."
- Of course, rivers don't usually stop moving, so Coleridge doesn't need to tell us that it flows at every moment. However, he wants us to think of the river not as something continuous, but as something that is *created* each moment.
- The speaker wants us to focus on the wild, rushing, violent excitement of the water.
- Coleridge and his poet-friends, the Romantics, loved scenes like this, where the tremendous power of nature is unleashed and we get to watch.
- Coleridge gets so carried away by this scene that he turns the earth into a kind of "seething," "breathing" animal.
- The rushing water becomes the sound of its "fast thick pants," as if the earth were really tired from doing a lot of exercise. He really wants you to hear and almost feel the rushing force of that river.
- You can't just dip into an image like this. It's like trying to get a drink from a fire hose.

- These associations, and the fact that the river has a name at all, really make the Alph stand out in the beginning of this poem.
- Notice how Coleridge is already stepping away from history: he is transforming this place, this person, and this story into his own creation.
- "Kubla Khan" is definitely a poem as much about the journeys of the mind and the imagination as it is about the real world.
- If this is partly an imaginary landscape, how does the poem's speaker make it look and feel? When he talks about "caverns measureless to man" we get a sense that this landscape is both huge and unknowable.
- That slightly spooky feeling continues when we get to the "sunless sea." That's a pretty gloomy image to start out with, and it casts a shadow over these first few lines. It also gives us a sense of being in an imaginary landscape, because where else could a sea always be "sunless" and never bright or cheerful, or any of the other things a sea can be?
- Also, check out how much shorter line 5 is than all the others. In a poem where all the lines have a carefully planned length, short lines stand out and make us take notice. It makes this image just a little lonelier. It also makes this line into more of a dead end, a stopping place, just like the sea is for the River Alph.

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.*

- Now things become a little more cheerful.
- The speaker takes us away from those gloomy, endless caverns, and tells us a little bit about the gardens around the palace.
- You might have noticed that the language gets fancy here. A "sinuous rill" (line 3) is really just a twisty stream.
- Coleridge often uses beautiful language to illustrate simple underlying concepts.
- Here, the speaker is setting up a contrast between the scary, strange caverns and the pleasant, familiar space around the palace. He describes how the palace is "girdled" (that just means surrounded) by walls and towers. While the caverns were "measureless" (line 4) this space can be measured very precisely at "twice five miles."
- Everything about this place feels safe and happy. It's protected by the walls, it's "fertile," the gardens are "bright," even the trees smell good ("incense-bearing").
- Even though the forests are "ancient" the speaker manages to make them seem comforting too, since he tells us they are "enfolding sunny spots of greenery" (line 11).
- Notice how the idea of "enfolding" echoes the sense of "girdled." The forest wraps around those little sunny spots and keeps them safe, just like the walls wrap around the palace and keep it safe.
- The natural world outside is wild and strange, but within the palace walls things are peaceful and protected.

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!*

- Then, just like that, we get pulled back into the wild, slightly scary natural world. The speaker takes us back to the river Alph, which is beginning to seem almost like a character in this poem.