

Kubla Khan: S.T. Coleridge

The Poet and His Poetry

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was not only a major Romantic poet, but he was also the foremost philosopher and literary critic of his age. His poetic output is erratic in comparison to Wordsworth's, but his contribution to English literary history also includes his literary criticism and his lively discussion of the ideas of the German Idealist philosophers, particularly Immanuel Kant. His theory regarding the cognitive and synthesising role of the imagination is one of the most important cornerstones of the Romantic Movement. John Stuart Mill summed up his influence on the age when he called Coleridge a "seminal mind".

Birth and the early years

Coleridge was born at Ottery St. Mary, Devonshire, on October 21, 1772, the youngest son of John Coleridge, vicar, and Ann Bowdon, his second wife. A precocious boy, dreamy and introspective, he finished the *Bible* and the *Arabian Nights* before he was five. At ten, following the death of his father, he was sent to Christ's Hospital, London, as a charity boy. Though poor and neglected, he became an accomplished Greek and Latin Scholar. Here he met Charles Lamb. It was the first of many significant literary friendships. He entered Jesus College, Cambridge on a scholarship in 1791; but in spite of a brilliant career in

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classics, he finally left the college in 1794, without taking a degree. At University, he was interested in the radical political and religious ideas of his day. He had already been attracted by the motto of the French Revolution and Jacobin politics, though later he dismissed it as a youthful folly. These early years of radical politics later put him under the suspicion of the Government which was preparing to wage war against Revolutionary France. To go back to Coleridge's University days, he also ran up substantial debts, to avoid which he ran away and joined the Royal Dragoons as a conscript, using a pseudonym. He was brought back and readmitted after three months, but did not complete his degree. It was probably during his University days that he became increasingly addicted to opium, which had been prescribed to him as a pain-killer. Coleridge's youthful views of social reform found expression in his scheme for Pantisocracy. Through all the ups and downs of his life, he retained his fundamental faith in religion, and was a part of the Broad Church Movement, a liberal group which emerged within the Anglican Church.

Pantisocracy

Coleridge met Robert Southey in 1794, and the next couple of years he spent in Bristol. With Southey and Robert Lovell he fervently desired to establish a *pantisocracy*, a utopian concept of a community based on ideal equality, on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania, New England. This scheme ultimately failed because of

want of funds, and also a bitter quarrel between Coleridge and Southey over politics and money.

Marriage and early career

He married Sara Fricker, sister of Southey's fiancé in 1795. The newly-weds retired to a cottage at Clevedon, where their first son Hartley was born (1796). The marriage was a disaster and Coleridge has often been accused of being an irresponsible and unfeeling husband. Later, he was to fall passionately in love with Wordsworth's sister-in-law, Sara Hutchinson, to whom he addressed *Dejection: An Ode*.

While at Clevedon, he edited a radical journal, *The Watchman*, which ran for ten issues. *Poems on Various Subjects*, was published in 1796 with the assistance of his friend Joseph Cottle. The poem *Eolian Harp* is one of the most celebrated poems of this period in which Coleridge created a symbol which has come to be associated with the Romantic imagination. At the end of the year he moved to Nether Stowey, to be near to the Wordsworth's. In 1797 appeared *Poems* which included, besides his own poems, those of Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd.

Coleridge and Wordsworth

In June, 1797 Coleridge walked to Racedown, Dorset, where he met Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy. The intense friendship that sprang up among the three shaped their lives for the next fourteen years

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and proved to be one of the most creative partnerships in English Romanticism. It was based on a mutual love of poetry, critical discussion, and hill-walking, and an impassioned response to the political and social problems of the age. Between July 1797 and September 1798 they lived and worked intimately together: the Coleridges at Nether Stowey, Somerset, and the Wordsworths two miles away at Alfoxden on the edge of the Quantock hills, where they were visited by Lamb, Hazlitt and others.

While living at Nether Stowey Coleridge wrote a series of ‘conversation poems’, including *Fears in Solitude*, *This Lime Tree Bower My Prison*, *The Nightingale* and *Frost at Midnight*. Between 1797 and 1798 he also wrote *Christabel (Part I)* and *Kubla Khan*. In 1798 Wordsworth and Coleridge jointly published the *Lyrical Ballads*, which after a poor critical reception, achieved a revolution in literary taste and sensibility. For this volume Coleridge contributed *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the tale of a superstitious sailor on an ill-fated voyage. We come to know from his *Biographia Literaria*, while Wordsworth was to take his subjects from ordinary life, Coleridge was to write poems of the supernatural, but in such a way that the reader’s would be induced to a “willing suspension of disbelief”.

The opium years

Originally prescribed as a medication, Coleridge became habituated to opium. Though associated with one of the most colourful stories of creativity, the composition of *Kubla Khan*, his addiction made him subject to frequent illnesses, which hampered his poetic output. However, his opium-taking was brought relatively under control by Dr. James Gillman of Highgate, with whom the poet moved in. In the same year, 1816, a single volume named *Christabel and Other Poems* was published which also contained *Kubla Khan*. In 1817 appeared *Biographia Literaria*, a long prose work containing his principles in politics, religion and philosophy, and ‘an application of the rules, deducted from philosophical principles to poetry and criticism’.

For the last four years of his life he was practically confined to a sick-room. The last work published during his lifetime was *On the Constitution of Church and State* (1830). Coleridge died in Highgate on 25th July, 1834, while dictating some portion of *Opus Maximum* to J.H. Green. Wordsworth, always chary of praise, uttered on hearing his death: ‘He was the most wonderful man I have ever known’. Charles Lamb, his lifelong friend, described him as ‘an archangel slightly damaged’.

The following assessment of Coleridge is to be found in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*:

Coleridge has been variously criticised as a political turn-coat, a drug-addict, a plagiarist, and a mystic humbug, whose wrecked career left nothing but a handful of magical early poems. But the shaping influence of his highly imaginative criticism is now generally accepted, and his position (with his friend Wordsworth) as one of the two great progenitors of the English Romantic spirit is assured. Nothing has re-established him as a creative artist more than the modern editions of his *Letters* and *Notebooks*. There is a religious and metaphysical dimension to all his best work, both poetry and prose, which has the inescapable glow of the authentic visionary.

Coleridge as a Theorist

Coleridge's first important critical document was the verse-letter *Dejection: an Ode* (1802) in which he explored the essential nature of the Creative Imagination. For a complete understanding we have to go to his *Biographia Literaria* (1817). The terms 'Imagination' and 'Fancy' were frequently used synonymously before Coleridge but in the eighteenth century they were beginning to be considered separately. The term imagination comes from the Latin verb '*imaginari*' meaning "to picture oneself." This root definition of the term indicates the self-reflexive property of imagination, emphasizing the imagination as a private sphere. As a medium, imagination is a world where thought and images are nested in the

mind to "form a mental concept of what is not actually present to the senses." The root of "fancy" was the Greek word "phantasia," which meant "appearance, perception, imagination".

Fancy was generally given a decorative function while Locke and Hartley made association or combination of sense impressions into images the entire business of imagination. In giving imagination a deeper significance Coleridge was influenced by Dante, Plautinus, the Cambridge Platonists and the German Philosopher Kant and Schelling. With the Romantics there was a shift in sensibility from the 18th century mechanistic world view to the 19th century vitalistic world view. The mind-machine equations gave place to the mind-plant analogy and the current Romantic terms of criticism such as organic unity, vital growth, assimilation, fusion, and inner unity emerged. The creative interpenetration of the secondary imagination and the external world leading to unity and harmony.

Coleridge's idea of unity cannot be described as something "single" or "linear," but is best expressed by certain terms which recur in his writings-"agglomerative" and "progressive." An unfolding, associative structure is advocated. "You will find this a good gage or criterion of genius," Coleridge once remarked. If the "contents and purposes" of a composition can be summed for the Romantics, imagination is a living power of the mind which

unifies and coalesces, shapes the patternless chaos of the world and creates unity of diversity. For Blake, imagination is the organ that perceives the ultimate spiritual reality. For Shelley, it is with the help of Imagination that the poet creates. For Wordsworth Imagination was that 'awful power...reason in her most exalted mood'. Lamb has observed that Imagination 'draws all things into one'.

The world as we know it is full of polarities, antithesis and patternlessness. It is primary imagination which makes ordered perception possible. It is an analogical power akin to Reason that is possessed by all mankind. The secondary imagination is akin to the primary in that both are vital and perform the common function of creating order out of chaos and confusion of sense-impressions. But the secondary imagination is not possessed by all. It is a special gift of the poet or the creative individual and is at the basis of all artistic activity.

The secondary imagination is a power of synthesis, 'it dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate'. It is an Essemplastic (one making) power that reorganizes reality into unity, it imposes pattern and form on the formless, patternless and otherwise contradictory and intractable material of this world- "it effects the reconciliation of opposites". This is poetically expressed in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* :

A miracle of rare device

A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice.

It is a miraculous power that reconciles polarities (such as sun and ice) to create that unity and harmony of art. Imagination fuses and blends the flux of the senses into harmony and unity; it re-orders and re-creates reality into unity.

KUBLA KHAN

The Background of the Poem 'Kubla Khan' was published by Coleridge in 1816 at the request of Lord Byron. It was described by Coleridge as 'A Vision in a Dream, a Fragment', and in a brief preface to the poem, the poet writes that after taking anodyne he "fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence ... in Purchas's Pilgrimage: 'Here the Kubla Khan commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground was enclosed with a wall' On awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole ... and instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business ... and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained 26 The Romantic Poets some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the

vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away....”

‘Kubla Khan’ is a poem about the act of poetic creation. It is significant for a thrilling picture of a poet in ecstasy in the process of creation. Kubla Khan (1216-1294), one of the powerful Asiatic kings, was the founder of the Mongol dynasty in China. The poem is both descriptive and suggestive – descriptive in the sense that it describes in detail Kubla Khan’s pleasure-dome of “rare device”, the source of the sacred river Alph, the maid, and suggestive in that if the poet could revive his inspiration a great poetry would follow. Coleridge also hints at some physical clues to identify a poet in his moments of inspiration. Kubla Khan ordered a magnificent pleasure-palace to be built for him in Xanadu, also called Chandu or Shandu. So a ten-miles of fertile land on the banks of the sacred river Alph was enclosed with walls and towers. The source of the sacred river was a deep mysterious gorge that ran down a green hill across a wood of cedar trees. All these make the enclosed area wild, savage and enchanted, yet it is holy, fit to be frequented by a woman wandering about in the light of a waning moon in search of her demon-lover. Amidst the loud, tumultuous noise caused by the fall of water into the sunless sea, Kubla Khan could hear the voices of his ancestors to be prepared for a war in the near future. In the last stanza, the poet gives us a vivid picture of an inspired poet and the act of poetic creation. Once, in a vision, he saw and heard an Abyssinian

maid playing on her dulcimer and singing sonorously of the wild splendour of Mount Abora. The poet says that if he could recreate in his imagination the sweet, enchanting music of the maid, he would feel so inspired and ecstatic that with the music of his poetry he could build Kubla Khan's pleasure-dome in the air / imagination, i.e., the listeners would see it in their imagination. In other words, a poet in a spell of poetic inspiration is capable of creation like God (Read the section on the Background). 29 S.T. Coleridge: 'Kubla Khan' In the last five lines Coleridge draws a picture of a poet inspired. When a poet's eyes are flashing, his hair floating and seem to be withdrawn from the material world, the listeners / readers ought to be beware of him and feel awed, but not fearful, for he has fed on honey-dew and drunk the milk of Paradise. In that moment he transcends into a superhuman being. The poem is full of suggestive phrases and lines capable of evoking mystery. The description of the deep romantic chasm, the woman wailing for her demon-lover, the ancestral voices prophesying war, the source of the river Alph, sinuous rills, etc. are natural phenomena, but are suggested in such a way as if they were supernatural occurrences. The poet takes us to distant times and remote and unknown regions where the very unfamiliarity of the scenes prompt us to suspend our reasoning faculties, "willing suspension of disbelief" as Coleridge called it. The very idea of poetic creativity taking shape under divine inspiration and of the poet transcending his mundane existence and transforming himself to the

level of superhuman being when caught in his poetic frenzy evokes a world of magic and enchantment, a romantic concept of poetry. Kubla Khan's strength and splendour are symbols of the might of poetry and his architectural achievements suggest power of the poetic imagination. The image of 'dome' suggests fulfillment and satisfaction of the might of finished creation. The rhythm and the sound are perfect and conform to Coleridge's dictum: 'the best words in the best order'.

Coleridge was the philosopher of the Romantic movement. His poems reveal his love of the marvelous and his great power to fuse natural with the supernatural. 'Kubla Khan' illustrates vividly what he meant when he called the imagination a 'synthetic and magical power', a power which 'instantly' fuses 'shattered fragments of memory' to produce a great poem. The poem composed in irregular metre, is the recollection of a dream Coleridge saw when he had fallen asleep while reading Purchas's Pilgrimage. Coleridge was an avid reader of travel literature. The poem is about the act of poetic creation, and notable for a thrilling picture of a poet in ecstasy.

Questions

1. Would it be correct to describe 'Kubla Khan' as a finished fragment? Give reasons for your answer.

2. There is deep psychological realism behind Coleridge's use of the supernatural in his poetry. Consider the statement with reference to 'Kubla Khan.'
3. Discuss 'Kubla Khan' as an allegorical poem.
4. Do you think remoteness and strangeness constitute the essence of Coleridge's roil~anticism in 'Kubla Khan'?
5. What picture of a poet is Coleridge's ideal?
6. Kubla Khan's palace, as Coleridge describes it, best represents the strangeness, mystery and contradictions in life. Do you agree?
7. Recreate an imaginary picture of the Abyssinian maid playing on her dulcimer in the form of a short story.