

<p>College of Education</p> <p>Department of English</p> <p>Third Stage (Morning)</p> <p>Lecture 11</p>		<p>Instructor: Dr.Mugdad</p> <p>Subject: Poetry</p>
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Themes of Coleridge Poetry

The Transformative Power of the Imagination

Coleridge believed that a strong, active imagination could become a vehicle for transcending unpleasant circumstances. Many of his poems are powered exclusively by imaginative flights, wherein the **Speaker** temporarily abandons his immediate surroundings, exchanging them for an entirely new and completely fabricated experience. Using the imagination in this way is both empowering and surprising because it encourages a total and complete disrespect for the confines of time and place. These mental and emotional jumps are often well rewarded. Perhaps Coleridge's most famous use of imagination occurs in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" (1797), in which the speaker employs a keen poetic mind that allows him to take part in a journey that he cannot physically make. When he "returns" to the bower, after having imagined himself on a fantastic stroll through the countryside, the speaker discovers, as a reward, plenty of things to enjoy from inside the bower itself, including the leaves, the trees, and the shadows. The power of imagination transforms the prison into a perfectly pleasant spot.

The Interplay of Philosophy, Piety, and Poetry

Coleridge used his poetry to explore conflicting issues in philosophy and religious piety. Some critics argue that Coleridge's interest in philosophy was simply his attempt to understand the imaginative and intellectual impulses that fueled his poetry. To support the claim that his imaginative and intellectual forces were, in fact, organic and derived from the natural world, Coleridge linked them to God, spirituality, and worship. In his work, however, poetry, philosophy, and piety clashed, creating friction and disorder for Coleridge, both on and off the page. In "The Eolian Harp" (1795), Coleridge struggles to reconcile the three forces. Here, the speaker's philosophical tendencies, particularly the belief that an "intellectual breeze" (47) brushes by and inhabits all living things with consciousness, collide with those of his orthodox wife, who disapproves of his unconventional ideas and urges him to Christ. While his wife lies untroubled, the speaker agonizes over his spiritual conflict, caught between Christianity and a unique, individual spirituality that equates nature with God. The poem ends by discounting the pantheist spirit, and the speaker concludes by privileging God and Christ over nature and praising them for having healed him from the spiritual wounds inflicted by these unorthodox views.

Nature and the Development of the Individual

Coleridge, Wordsworth, and other romantic poets praised the unencumbered, imaginative soul of youth, finding images in nature with which to describe it. According to their formulation, experiencing nature was an integral part of the development of a complete soul and sense of personhood. The death of his father forced Coleridge to attend school in London, far away from the rural idylls of his youth, and he lamented the missed opportunities of his sheltered, city-bound adolescence in many poems, including "Frost at Midnight" (1798).

Here, the speaker sits quietly by a fire, musing on his life, while his infant son sleeps nearby. He recalls his boarding school days, during which he would both daydream and lull himself to sleep by remembering his home far away from the city, and he tells his son that he shall never be removed from nature, the way the speaker once was. Unlike the speaker, the son shall experience the seasons and shall learn about God by discovering the beauty and bounty of the natural world. The son shall be given the opportunity to develop a relationship with God and with nature, an opportunity denied to both the speaker and Coleridge himself. For Coleridge, nature had the capacity to teach joy, love, freedom, and piety, crucial characteristics for a worthy, developed individual.

The medicine Coleridge took was laudanum, a combination of opium and alcohol, and his addiction to it would intermittently but severely ruin his health and his ability to work over the next two decades. Thus, the poem was the fruit of an opium trance. Like so many of Coleridge's great poems, including *Christabel*, it presents itself as a fragment, but we may ask whether it really is a fragment of anything greater than itself. Without the interruption from Porlock, would there have been a complete, or at least a longer poem? Or is visitor from Porlock part of the story that the poem tells: the story that romantic poets tell so often of the fall into the mundane world from visionary heights, perhaps never to be regained?

In a 1955 essay on inspiration, writing in the romantic tradition, the great French critic Maurice Blanchot, observed that we usually think of inspiration as the pathway to literary work, but that, in fact, the work is a pathway that seeks

to regain and to understand the inspiration that it has lost. Coleridge awakened from his reverie and tried to return to it in his poem. That return only half succeeded: As Coleridge notes in the preface, the poet sought “to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him” but failed. He quotes, and in a later revision misquotes, the Greek poet Theocritus: The misquotation may be translated as “I shall sing you a sweeter song tomorrow” (and not the originally correct “another day”), a subtle allusion to the quotation from the Roman poet’s Virgil’s own allusion to Theocritus in the *Eclogues* that William Wordsworth put at the head of the 1807 publication of his *Intimations Ode*: “Paulo majora canamus” (“Let us sing of loftier things”). Coleridge says in his preface to “Kubla Khan” that this ““tomorrow is yet to come,”” which means both that it will never come and that it belongs to the futurity, which is just what poetic inspiration promises and where it promises to be found.

The question, then, is: To what extent is this what the poem is *about*, or to what extent is the preface in accord with the poem? Here we should look to poem’s ending, to the dream vision that occurs *within* the poet’s dream vision. If we take seriously the framing narrative presented by the preface, we have to say that Coleridge never did see the Abyssinian maid he describes in the last stanza. The poem came to him as a whole, and so while it may *be* an experience it does not represent other experiences external to itself. “All the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort,” he says in the preface, so that what arose before him with such vividness includes not the Abyssinian maid *but the fragmentary memory of the Abyssinian maid*.

The full title of the poem should be recalled: *Kubla Khan: Or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment*. That fragmentary vision or memory occurs in his dream; the maid

not as present but as a lost vision is what has come to him in the opium reverie or dream. The poem which he claims came to him whole, unbidden, and utterly without effort included, in what turns out to be its climactic passage, an unfulfilled desire to revive just the sort of vision that the preface laments Coleridge has not been able to revive after the visit of the person from Porlock. For what the last stanza says is that if he could revive the vision of the maid, he could write—"with music loud and long"—a poem like the poem about Xanadu that he wishes to write now, and that he is failing to write. Remember that that poem is not, in the fiction the fragment presents, the poem that we have or would have had without the interruption. Even in its unavailable finished state, "Kubla Khan" as it supposedly was at one time in Coleridge's mind would have been a poem about not being able to write the great poem of which he had a failing vision. And that is just what "Kubla Khan" is: It is a fragment of a poem about only being able to write a poetic fragment.

In this sense, the poem should be compared to other great romantic poems, in particular Coleridge's own *Dejection: An Ode* and Wordsworth's *Intimations Ode* and *The Prelude*, which begins with Wordsworth lamenting that he is unable to write the poem that he wishes to write, and that *The Prelude* will exist to some extent, but only to the extent that the failure it recounts is real, and so it fails to be the poem he wishes to write. This is not an arid paradox but a deep and central element of the romantic conception of poetry: that what makes it haunting is an absence or phantom that can never be grasped or attained, and that this phantom is itself the spirit of poetry—that is, the "Spirit of Solitude" (as Percy Bysshe Shelley puts it in *Alastor*, his own reworking of *Kubla Khan*).

We can therefore identify the maid with a dulcimer as the muse herself, the source of poetic inspiration. She appears to Coleridge in a vision, and her

symphony and song gives him something not that he can keep but that he can attempt to revive. The half-memory of the music is what causes him to write; his writing is an attempt to bring that memory to an unattainable fullness. His poem is about the intense experience of trying to remember the intensity of a lost experience of poetry. Were he to succeed, he would return to the lost paradise of pure poetry or pure aesthetic experience; but there is no such paradise, even in the poetry of John Milton, because all aesthetic experience is predicated on loss. As the French poet Charles-Pierre Baudelaire will say, the only paradises are lost ones. Loss is the condition and, in fact, the substance of poetry, especially when the poetry laments loss.

The preface of *Kubla Khan* gives a demonstration of this just in its account of the actual words that elicited the poem: the sentences from the book Coleridge was reading when he nodded off, Samuel Purchas's 1613 book of explorers' tales, *Purchas His Pilgrimage*. The passage from Purchas (which Coleridge quotes from memory) elicits the poem and is the fact behind the dream poem, a literal fact which, were the dream to recover, would be entirely deflating. We have the original words that sparked the poem; what makes it great is the way it forgets those words, even as it laments that forgetting. It becomes instead a poem about trying to recover them, or trying to recover how the soul felt in first responding to them. The soul hears "ancestral voices prophesizing war" (l. 30), not because the poem is about war but because it is about a tumult that can never be put to rest by the attainment of its object. The poet will always experience tumult, always hear the prophecies that give him or her no peace. Kubla Khan's creation of Xanadu is itself an image of the creation of the poem, the "miracle of rare device" (l. 35) that contains within it the unplumbable caverns and sunless seas of the parts of the mind that the mind cannot reach.

(Coleridge is thinking of the Greek philosopher Plato here, but we may think of Sigmund Freud's similar invocation of the platonic myth of forgetfulness of all but dim intimations left to the soul.)

It is therefore telling that Coleridge invents a river, Alph, based probably on the Sicilian river Alpheus, which features prominently in classical mythology (particularly Ovid) but which, Coleridge knew, had no connection whatever with Xanadu or any other place frequented by Kubla Khan. The sacred river that runs through caverns measureless to man and all the way to the sunless lifeless sea of death is the alphabet (the word comes from *alpha* and *beta*, the first two letters of the Greek alphabet); so Xanadu is the creation of the letters that come together so mysteriously to make the poem. It is not a real place but a place that can only exist in the words that describe it, and not even there. The phantom that haunts the poet and makes him seek to follow the river does not lead him back to Xanadu, but, through it, to the poem that tries and fails to describe it.

Summary of Kubla Khan

Popularity of “Kubla Khan”: A highly visionary poem of S. T. Coleridge, “Kubla Khan” is a masterpiece of romantic poetry published in 1816, and it still maintains its romantic appeal and artistic touch, though. Originally, it was written to describe a luxurious palace of a Chinese king, Kubla Khan, about which the poet has read somewhere. The poet has won accolades due to its appealing imagery and the way he has painted a lively and perfect picture of that palace.

“Kubla Khan” a Representation of a Dream: The poem explores art and romanticism used to paint a dream world. The expression of beauty runs

throughout the poem. Coleridge has skillfully applied the “willing suspension of disbelief”, despite knowing that the palace is a dreamland. He has presented it to enchant the readers and to inspire by describing the delightful and mesmerizing beauty of a dream.

Major Themes in “Kubla Khan”: The poem comprises diverse themes. True to its romantic tradition, it presents various versions of the reality of the palace the poet has presented through his imagination. The second theme is of the man and his significance in the natural world as depicted by Kubla Khan himself. The concept of time as well as the permanence of art, too are its other thematic strands presented by Coleridge.

Analysis of Literary Devices in “Kubla Khan”

literary devices such as similes, personification, and irony are very important elements of any literary text. These devices bring richness and clarity to the text. In addition, the use of literary devices makes the text life like so that a reader can use imagination like “Kubla Khan.” Here is the analysis of some literary devices used in this poem.

1) **Simile:** Simile is a figure of speech in which two things with different qualities are compared to present a vivid description of an object or a person. There is one simile used in the poem in line 21 such as “huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail.” The fragments have been compared to pieces of hailstorm to show their impacts.

2) **Personification:** Personification is attribution of human qualities to an inanimate object. Coleridge has used personification in the first stanza where he states, “as if this earth in fast thick pant was breathing,” comparing the earth to a

breathing human being. He also has personified rocks in line 23 as “the dancing rocks.” Dancing is a human characteristic, but the poet has attributed this quality to rocks.

3) **Metaphor**: There are two metaphors in the poem. First is used in the twelfth line where it is “deep romantic chasm.” Here the “deep romantic chasm” represents the creativity and deep imagination of the poet. Second is used in the last stanza such as “woman wailing for her demon-lover.” Here “wait” metaphorically represents the desire for love.