

**MURSHIDABAD ADARSHA MAHAVIDYALAYA**

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**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

**TEACHER: SUKANTA BARMAN, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, STAGE-II**

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## **Topic of discussion: Symbolism in Kubla Khan**

*Kubla Khan* is a poem widely appreciated by readers sophisticated in the poetic medium as well as by unsophisticated but sensitive readers. This appreciation is relatively constant whether the reader, for instance, thinks the poem a product of opium eating or, disregarding biographical facts, prosodically so perfect that few if any technical flaws can be found in it, notwithstanding Coleridge's statement that it is a fragment. But the aesthetic satisfaction derived from it, its effect, is hardly consistent with a fragmentary character or with abnormality. The aesthetic satisfaction mainly relies on its symbolism.

1. *Kubla Khan* achieves its effect because of its high degree of meaningful integration, an integration which may, following Coleridge's description of the ideal poet, "**bring the whole soul of man into activity.**" In demonstrating the integration, the historical method in literary criticism and aspects of the 18th century are relied on, such as the acknowledged symbolism of the picturesque garden, Coleridge's criticism of the Gothic romance, modified notions of primitivism, equalitarianism, etc., the influence of Jacob Boehme generally in certain of his religious ideas and specifically in his sequence of imagery.

2. The paradise the poem describes is revealed as Coleridge's creative activity of paradisaical consciousness. *Kubla Khan* is a poem symbolic of that activity and conveying that consciousness.

3. The similarity between the geographic exactness of the poem's first thirty-six lines and the picturesque Gothic or Chinese garden has been noted. The garden symbolized "**the spontaneity and freedom of nature.**"

4. Critics have pointed out the influence of the Gothic symbol in the figure of *Kubla Khan*. We are reminded of Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*: "**mysterious terrors are continually exciting in the mind the idea of a supernatural appearance.**" *Kubla Khan* himself is the symbol of knowledge, spread of education, spread of empire, aestheticism and ferocity. Coleridge has chosen his symbol carefully.

5. The Abyssinian maid is another powerful symbol in the poem. The Abyssinian maid is "**one of the most cryptic points in Coleridge's poem**" according to I.A. Richards: The Abyssinian maid is Boehme's heavenly Virgin, the poet's visionary seeing her is wisdom's drawing him to herself.

6. In the poem, all the forms are in equilibrium imaged by the juxtaposition: "**That sunny dome!**" or "**sunny pleasure-dome**" (light, divine play)-and "**those caves of ice!**" (immobile matter, congealing or coagulating contraction). The image also shows the

impermanence of the equilibrium; by the nature of things, **"a sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice"** is not permanent, therefore is a symbol of transitoriness. In addition, the earlier unmodified **"stately pleasure-dome"** symbolizes the triumph of the stateliness and pomp.

7. The audience **"weave a circle [an angelical dance] round him thrice"** to symbolize their acknowledgment of his threefold sanctity -love, the expression of love, and his experience of paradise; they **"close [their] eyes with holy dread"** or reverence, the synthesis of love and fear, the two great forces independent of the abyss of freedom: **"For he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise"**.

8. In *Kubla Khan*, an image of new Earth and new Heaven, distinctions between the pure, the sensual, and the proud are presented only as aspects of the continuum; the **"savage place"** is as integral a part of the whole as **"the gardens bright with sinuous rills."**

9. The river, **"Five miles meandering with a mazy motion,"** is hypnotic; and Coleridge meant it to be, or rather the **"unconscious activity. . . that is the genius in the man of genius"** so shaped it with a purpose more profound than its immediate perceptible hypnotic power.

Coleridge was then in *Kubla Khan* not only reflecting his age but also shaping it. The poem symbolizes like the picturesque garden genius; like the garden it has ethical power; like the garden it is a divertissement; like and unlike the garden it has religious significance. The mystic symbolism of Boehme becomes the poetic symbolism of Coleridge.