

## Chapter - 9 Kubla Khan

### Understanding The Poem

#### Question 1.

Find out where the river Alph is.

#### Answer:

The river Alph, located in an ice free region at the west of the Koettlitz Glacier, initiates from Trough Lake and flows through Walcott Lake, Howchin Lake, and the Alph Lake. However, in the context of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Kubla Khan, the river Alph is introduced to focus on the vigour of the water body and to depict the contrasting images of the calmness and serenity of the natural surrounding and the noisy, active insurgency of the river Alph.

#### Question 2.

Does the poem have a real geographical location? How does the poet mix up the real and the imaginary to give a sense of the surreal?

#### Answer:

Coleridge's poem adopts the character of Kubla Khan, who was the grandson of the legendary Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan. Genghis Khan took the initiative to build a summer palace located in Xanadu, which is in Mongolia.

In Kubla Khan, Coleridge talks about how Kubla was seeking means to build a dome which would be unperturbed by the natural forces. He was antithetical to the natural forces of decay and degeneration and wanted to create a private world bereft of metamorphosis. Whereas, the poet wants to build a dome in the air out of the natural forces- the imaginative cocoon that would shell the poetic and the natural truth. The poet doesn't want go against the organic world. Rather he wants to build something out of the natural forces that would blend with the natural motions of the world. The introduction of the River Alph is another instance of how the poet combines the real and the imaginary. There is certainly no river with that name though some critics claim this to have an allusion to river Alpheus in Greece. This is how Coleridge is constantly shifting away from the real world by adopting certain figures and binding them with imaginary concepts to provide a surrealistic effect.

#### Question 3.

Pick out

Contrasting images that are juxtaposed throughout the poem

**Answer:**

- The poem is replete with contradictory images. As such, the noisy, active and a little sinister river Alph is contrasted with the calm, quiet and peaceful garden of the poem.
- The ocean in the poem appears gloomy and mysterious in contrast to the sunny, warm forest.
- The dome feels warm whereas the caves are cold, freezing and icy.
- The caverns described in the poem are gigantic, frightening and cold and contradicts the warm, peaceful and cozy environment of the palace.
- The image of the “wailing woman” is contrasted with her lover, whom Coleridge describes as a “demon”.

**Question 4.**

The words used to describe the movement of water.

**Answer:**

Coleridge defines the natural flow and movement of water through various evocative words. The poet attempts to visualize the river rushing down the hillside “momently” like a “fountain”: “A mighty fountain momentarily was forced.” He wants the readers to imagine the river as something that is recreated at every moment. The speaker also wants us to focus on the wild, ecstatic, vigorous excitement of the river. For the poet, the earth turns into a “seething”, “breathing” animal with the rushing water becoming the sound of its “fast thick pants” to evoke the sensation of a fatigued earth. In the lines, “And ‘mid these dancing rocks at once and ever/ It flung up momentarily the sacred river”- the poet tries to make the readers visualize the river bouncing off the rocks. The meandering motion of the river is described in the words- “meander with a mazy motion”. Through the words- “Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,/ then reached the caverns measureless to man,/ And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean”, the poet visualizes the river as it rushes down a deep canyon and cuts into a wooden hillside. The river then flows gently through Xanadu and flattens out and turns into a proper, running river.

**Question 5.**

What is the discordant note heard in the end of the third stanza?

**Answer:**

In the third stanza, the speaker calls up Xanadu along with a queer spirit, stranger than the surrounding palace, caverns, and the ocean. The speaker is overwhelmed by the images and imagines to have been turned into real and concrete. So, he cries out “Beware, Beware!” while describing the creature possessing “flashing eyes” and “floating hair”. There is dichotomy as to who this strange creature refers to. Thus, it marks the upcoming event of something sinister. This song and his vision becomes overpowering enough, so

much so that the speaker turns into some “God”, consuming “honey-dew” and “the milk of Paradise”. Critics argue this image to be the resultant effect of intake of opium while others have negated this and tried to explain it as a final vision of Kubla Khan, turned into some sort of a strange, mysterious creature. Thus, an inexplicable, bizarre atmosphere of mysticism is created at the end of the third stanza.

#### **Question 6.**

Which are the lines that refer to magical elements?

#### **Answer:**

In Coleridge’s Kubla Khan, imagination is controlled by thought and study through refined, sustained, psychological techniques of mystery, fear, and awe.

- The atmosphere of supernatural mystery is created through the description of the pleasure dome and its surrounding environment. The poetic inspiration has something supernatural in it as is depicted in the words- “And all should cry, Beware!/ Beware!/ His flashing eyes, his floating hair!/ weave a circle round him thrice/ and/ Close eyes with holy dread for/ him on/ Honey- drew hath fed and/ drunk the/ Milk of Paradise.” These lines set a mysterious yet fearful note in the poem.

- Kubla Khan is a poem that transforms the general, monotonous world into a world of awe and enchantment: “Through caverns measureless to man/ Down to a sunless sea.” Again the lines, “Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree” create an intense magical world.

- “But oh! That deep romantic chasm which/ slanted”- uphold the image of a world which is in some sort of trance or spell cast by some unknown power.

- The description of the dome is innately beautiful and captivates the reader with its magnificent charm- “It was a miracle of rare device,/ A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice.”

- Further, the fascinating hold in the mariner’s gaze and the sudden revival of the mysterious skeleton, woman and the mate, the abrupt sinking of the ship and the conversation of the polar spirits between themselves- all impose upon the reader a magical experience.

#### **Question 7.**

What is poetic ecstasy likened to?

#### **Answer:**

Poetic ecstasy is the style of turning into alive the passion through voicing the intricate feelings and experience. The ecstatic energy, the rejuvenating euphoria, that lingers in the

mind and body are clubbed together to define a strange force that shakes us from within. The magic engulfing the artist through such fragmentary moments takes him off into a poetic ecstasy.

**Question 8.**

The poem is fragment. What do you think has made it a lasting literary piece?

**Answer:**

Kubla Khan is considered as one of the greatest masterpieces of the romantic era as it happened "in a sort of Reverie", under the impact of opium. The poem dwells in binaries. The dark, gloomy, violent river is juxtaposed with the calm, serene surrounding and we get to hear the wailing of the damsel for her "demon lover". Critics have deconstructed the poem a modern arena where darkness and corruption coexist with apparent innocence and simplicity. The poem also combines Christian, Hinduism and Islamic traits in its symbolic descriptions. The cross positioned on the palace of Xanadu is a reference to Jesus' cross and the entire poem is based on the hopes of Kubla Khan, who is again from Islamic background. The romantics believed in the Hindu view of Pantheism rather than Monotheism, and the poem hints at the presence of such facts as well. Thus, this poem has emerged as a universal piece of poetry by drawing on broad, universal and all encompassing themes.

## Task

**Question 1.**

Write short descriptions of five other rare musical instruments that are used by folk cultures.

**Answer:**

Some other rare musical instruments used by folk cultures can be enumerated as-

- Ligawka is one of the oldest Polish instruments. It is a wind instrument which is more than two cubits long and used to be employed by herdsmen to call their cattle.
- Hurdy Gurdy produces a haunting sound and was usually used by the vagabond sisters performing for handouts.
- Suka, seldom seen in Polish folk recordings, is an unusual stringed instrument whose strings cannot be altered by the usual technique of pressing the strings with one's fingers.

- Vessel Flute, resembling a whistle, is crafted in the shape of an ocarina. It is filled with water before playing.

- Cart Rattle is a unique instrument that had to be rolled like a rattle for playing the music. A cog attached to certain planks catches the music as the instrument is rolled and enables it to rattle. Thus, music is produced.

## Try This Out

### Question 1.

The poem is a product of subconscious fusion of dream images and ideas from Coleridge's wide reading. Which of the details in the poem do you think are factual, and which imaginary?

Surf the internet to get interesting details.

### Answer:

Coleridge's Kubla Khan is a poem perceived in a dream under the effect of opium intake. However, the poet has adopted certain historical and contemporary facts and transformed or provided them with a space that is completely woven through his sublime and romantic imagination. The poet talks about "a stately pleasure dome", which was actually built in the Mongolian summer capital by the Emperor of Tartary, Kubla, who was the grandson of Genghis Khan. But Coleridge moves beyond this concrete dome and perceives it a form of beauty encapsulating the forces of nature. He is more drawn to the beauty and sublimity of the gardens, the magical brooks and tinkling streams which are of course the products of his imagination. The setting is again a real one- Xanadu but the horrifying, chaotic picture of the tumultuous, violent, "savage" nature, full of "erotic" feeling of the "wailing woman crying for her demon lover" is again his own romantic fantasy.