Critical analysis of one poem; kubla khan

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In the visionary fragment Kubla Khan, Coleridge tells us of the mythical land of Xanadu, and its emperor Kubla Khan. Throughout the poem, he describes Xanadu using strong imagery, which reflects nature and sublimity, but not always in the safe, happy way that we might expect. Coleridge's own love of nature is evident and the religious references that he includes suggest the theory of Pantheism-that ' God is all, and all is God.

' The name Kubla Khan is reminiscent of the historical emperor Kublai Khan who ruled over Shangdu, claiming he had the Mandate of Heaven, a traditional Chinese concept of rule by divine permission. Coleridge's choice of the name ' Kubla Khan' for the emperor references this religious concept, and the religious theme is continued throughout the poem. " For he on honey-dew hath fed, /and drunk the milk of paradise" is one of the strongest religious ideas that Coleridge has included- the foods honey and milk make reference to the Promised Land, or ' land of milk and honey' which, according to the Bible, was promised by God to the descendants of the Hebrew patriarchs. The use of food imagery here could also give us the idea that nature is food for the soul. In the first stanza of the poem, the use of the phrase " incense-bearing trees" is reminiscent of the incense used in both temples and Catholic Churches as a gift to God. These two examples, as well as the numerous other religious references in the poem, including " sacred river," " a miracle.

.." and "…holy and enchanted" are put in amongst descriptions of nature, elevating it as it suggests to the reader the idea it was God who not just created, but exists in what Coleridge has portrayed.

The description of Xanadu is quite sensuous, as though Coleridge is desperately trying to show us as the reader just how beautiful or sublime the place was. The phrases " Gardens bright with sinuous rills" , " incense-bearing tree" and " the sacred river, ran" gives us a detailed mental picture of Xanadu, addressing the senses of sight, smell and possibly sound in the description of the running river, so we can experience this sublime place. The word ' garden' associates Xanadu with the Garden of Eden, or a paradise. This is reinforced by the description " Abyssinian maid," as Abyssinia was another name for Eden. Coleridge's awe at certain aspects of nature is also reflected. The phrase " caverns measureless to man" suggests a sense of amazement, displaying the insignificance of man compared to God as we are unable to measure or comprehend his creation.

It could also be interpreted as part of the Romantics' rebellion against measurement, as they considered emotions to be of greater importance. However, despite all the tranquil imagery in the first Stanza, there is a sense of danger evident, which hints at the frightening, uncontrollable side of nature. This terrifying side is hinted at early in the poem. In the third line of the first stanza, the phrase " the sacred river, ran" suggests that something dangerous and frightening is coming, and that Alph, the river, is running away from it. The idea of a " sunless sea" is sinister and frightening, and suggests a forbidden place, that man would not normally experience.

However, it is not until the second stanza that we see this aspect to nature clearly. There is a rapid increase in pace -from the calmness of the first stanza, where Coleridge has used alliteration to make the passage seem to flow gently, for example, " river ran" and " sunless sea", to the second

stanza, punctuated with exclamation marks which speed up the poem and change the atmosphere. The stanza begins with " But oh!" suggesting instantly that there has been a negative change in what Coleridge is describing. In this second stanza, the earth seemingly becomes alive as it ' breathes' furiously;" And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething, As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing" In these two lines, there is a strong sense of anger, " seething" suggesting that the earth itself is angry with Kubla Khan for trying to control the " twice five miles of fertile ground" that he enclosed with " walls and towers." The earth breathing in ' fast thick pants' ads to the feeling of fury and the consequences of this are equally terrifying.

" It flung up momently the sacred river" brings us back to the first stanza, and it seems like all the beautiful things that Coleridge described to us are now being destroyed. The phrase ' measureless to man' is also repeated here, reinforcing to us how we as human beings can never understand and control nature. This sense of nature itself being angry with man can also be felt in Rime of the Ancient Mariner, where it seems that the mariner is punished with the lack of wind for shooting the Albatross, one of God's creatures. The feeling of fear in this stanza makes nature seem terrible and uncontrollable, but this too was considered sublime by the romantics. The philosopher Burke said that anything that produced the strongest emotions that a human is capable of feeling is Sublime, and that the strongest feelings are those of pain and fear. This makes us consider that nature is more impressive here, demonstrating its power, making us feel scared and

demanding reverence, than in the first stanza where it could be considered simply beautiful.

Nature in this poem can also be considered a metaphor for the imagination-if kept suppressed and controlled for too long, it will burst out with disastrous consequences. This idea is originally from the Augustan age, a time that Coleridge and other Romantic poets idolised and tried to recreate in their work. Throughout the poem, Coleridge uses images of nature to convey the ideas of sublimity and Pantheism. He explores the impact of man on nature, and the consequences of trying to control it. Despite his claim that ' a person on business from Porlock' meant that he never actually finished the poem, it portrays a message to us that it is nature that connects man and God.