

# [Coleridge’s philosophy of imagination](https://assignbuster.com/coleridges-philosophy-of-imagination/)

Coleridge’s Philosophy of Imagination

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In Kubla Khan, Samuel Coleridge depicts the great Mongol ruler Kubla Khan creating a palace representative of his great power and ability to induce fear. But near the end of the poem Coleridge reveals that Kubla is a metaphor for an inspired poet. Thus Kubla’s palace is like a poet’s creation and represents how his imagination constructs poetry. During the course of the poem, Coleridge utilizes images and symbols to enlighten the reader as to his philosophy of how the imagination functions. Most of the poem describes the untamed forces of nature, implying that the poet is uncontrollable, and his imagination rages on in creation with chaotic movement. But Coleridge also subtly hints that there is an element of conscious control in the imagination, which he represents with images of prophesy and inspiration. Since the images of chaotic creation dominate the poem, Coleridge suggests that the process of imagination is largely a mystery.

Coleridge gives a direct explanation of his theories on imagination in his book Biographia Literaria, and the philosophy he describes parallels the images of imagination in Kubla Khan. First he distinguishes between two different kinds of imagination: he describes the “ primary imagination” as a faculty allowing man to form concepts, make connections, and organize the information received from the world; and the “ secondary imagination” includes man’s ability to create new images. The secondary is a similar concept to creativity and is the focus of Kubla Khan. He says that the secondary “ dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate” (477). Coleridge also writes that the poet creates “ by that synthetic and magical power…of imagination” (482). Therefore, his philosophy notes both a cognizant and wild aspect of imagination: the terms “ dissolves, diffuses, dissipates” and “ synthetic” show that a conscious effort is needed; and by deeming creation “ magical” Coleridge suggests that imagination also has an untamed aspect.

Scenes of wild nature, which make up the majority of images in Kubla Khan, represent the riotous, magical side of what Coleridge terms the secondary imagination. The palace depicted in the poem is a place where one finds violent and turbulent forces of nature everywhere. Coleridge describes, “ A savage place!…holy and enchanted” (14). Since this is a metaphor for a poet’s creativity, “ savage” deems the secondary imagination as unrestrained, while “ enchanted” endues it with a tint of wonder—this echoes the term “ magical” used in Biographia. The poem continues: “ And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething…A mighty fountain momently was forced” (17, 19). This passage also panders to the notion that creativity is untamed. The phrase “ ceaseless turmoil” suggests that creativity spins forward in a chaotic fashion. And the fountain that springs from the earth is symbolic of the spontaneous creation of an idea. Other images of chaotic action dominate the poem in phrases such as “ mazy motion” (25), lending to the conclusion that the secondary imagination is chiefly uncontrolled.

A large section at the end of the poem describes the poet who could conceive of such a palace as dangerously volatile, continuing the theme of untamed creation begun with scenes of nature. Coleridge writes that when people will see the poet, “ All should cry, Beware! Beware!” (49). These warnings imply that the poet is in a state of unrestrained thought—his imagination has made him unpredictable. Similarly, Coleridge refers to a magic ritual that warns all to steer clear of a poet in creation. It reads: “ Weave a circle round him thrice,” (51) instructing onlookers to regard a poet with caution. Again, the secondary imagination is associated with a sense of enchantment and anarchistic creation. And since this image comprises a substantial portion of the poem, the mysterious aspect of creation is given great weight.

In contrast to the numerous images of free and spontaneous creation, Kubla Khan suggests that the secondary imagination operates on a conscious level as well. However, these suggestions are sparse and this aspect easy to overlook—there are only two images of this process. Therefore, Coleridge suggests that creation does not heavily rely on conscious processes. One image is of Kubla hearing prophetic advice. The passage reads: “ And ‘ mid this tumult Kubla heard from far / Ancestral voices prophesying war!” (29-30). Here, Kubla’s ability to hear “ ancestral voices prophesying” argues that he is able to consciously ascertain how to conduct his thought. And saying that Kubla can thoughtfully plan his actions “‘ mid this tumult” of nature’s havoc, Coleridge implies that these different facets of secondary imagination work in coordination. The conscious aspect of creativity described as prophesy resonates with the processes of diffusion and dissipation that Coleridge explains in Biographia. The other image of consciously controlled creation is projected via the inspiration the poet receives from “ an Abyssinian maid” (39). To create with an inspiring thought in mind is to make something starting from a base. For instance, Coleridge wrote Kubla Khan with inspiration from a tale of Kubla’s powerful reign. Consequently, the poem depicts a poet whose goal is to attain the level of awe and wonder that Kubla created in all those he ruled. Thus inspiration is a premeditated source of the secondary imagination.

Coleridge’s philosophy of the imagination sent new currents through the intellectual community in the years following his publications. Romanticism, the movement Coleridge was a part of, took a deep interest in the mind of the artist—a subject that was previously neglected. Kubla Khan demonstrates that the artist’s mind– particularly the poet’s mind– operates on both a tumultuous and self-conscious level. Perhaps Coleridge’s views upon the imagination provide another lens for analyzing Coleridge’s other works, and works of his colleagues in the Romantic era.