

Kubla khan, or, not a romantic poem. a fragment



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the preface to the second edition of his book *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth, famed romantic poet, wrote down his definition of romanticism and classifications of romantic poetry. To be considered romantic, in Wordsworth's eyes, a poem had to be the result of an "overflow of emotion, recollected in tranquility" until the relevant emotion exists in the author's mind at the time of writing (Wordsworth). It should be thought about "long and deeply" so that it has "a worthy purpose", and so that the feeling that the author recounts gives meaning to the subject of the poem, not the other way around (Wordsworth). Finally, it should dwell upon "ordinary incidents and situations" from "humble and rustic life", made interesting by "certain colorings of the imagination," and related in the language of the common man (Wordsworth). Many poems that are considered romantic in the modern day do indeed follow Wordsworth's guidelines. However, *Kubla Khan*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is a notable exception.

If the urban legends surrounding the writing of this poem, perpetuated by Coleridge himself, are to be believed, then it fails Wordsworth's first criteria for romantic poetry. Coleridge isn't reflecting in tranquility, he is caught up in the moment, attempting to describe a dream. One can argue that a dream is indeed a spontaneous overflow of emotion, but it is not meditated upon by the dreamer, it is spit straight from the subconscious. Therefore, it could not be a poem "to which any value can be attached," as Coleridge has not "thought long and deeply," (Wordsworth).

However, it is also possible the circumstances of writing are indeed more mundane and Coleridge simply made up the story of being interrupted while attempting to describe his opium dream to explain why the poem seems so

disjointed and fragmented. This seems plausible given the polished nature of the poem, its fairly consistent meter and rhyme scheme, and the ending lines, which do not read as if someone was interrupted, but rather ring with finality, “ For he on honey-dew has fed, / and drunk the milk of Paradise,” (Coleridge 53-54). If this is true, it does seem that the poem represents an overflow of emotion, as expressed in a dream and the rush that one feels upon waking from a particularly vivid vision, reflected upon later in tranquility until the emotions conjured by the dream were conjured again in the author and the reader, upon writing and reading respectively. Therefore, whether or not Kubla Khan fulfills Wordsworth’s first criteria is a bit ambiguous.

The second criteria is also somewhat concerned with the circumstances wherein the poem was written. One can argue that it is the feeling of the poem that gives Coleridge’s subject, which pretty much comes out of left field if one is expecting standard romantic poetry, meaning. His dreamscape wouldn’t have any worth to the reader did his somewhat scattered and nonsensical description of Xanadu not evoke powerful emotions. As Wordsworth says, “ the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.” Nonetheless, it does not seem that in Wordsworth’s eyes being moving and capturing one’s imagination would give this poem a “ worthy purpose,” (a “ worthy purpose being that “ the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified,”) and therefore wouldn’t fulfill his second criteria.

Measuring the poem against the third criteria is potentially the most interesting. Kubla Khan seems to have no relation to the common and ordinary life of men in romantic times. It concerns a Mongol emperor, who most common people, the people whose language and life Wordsworth says romantic poetry should be based on, probably wouldn't know. Furthermore, it repeatedly strays from the "plainer and more empathetic language," Wordsworth advocates for, using phrases like, "sinuous rills," and "ceaseless turmoil seething" (Wordsworth, Coleridge 8, 17). Moreover, it isn't concerned with rustic activities, made interesting by imagination; it is a creation of Coleridge's imagination (with some help from history), inherently wild and interesting.

Nonetheless, it does utilize the descriptions of nature prevalent in most romantic poetry, especially Wordsworth's own. This fascination with the power and beauty of the natural world is where Kubla Khan most closely resembles what Wordsworth would consider true romantic poetry. Romantic poems in the Wordsworthian style are often very concerned with the dichotomy of civilization and nature, a dichotomy that the common people whose lives Wordsworth believed poetry should be relevant to and written in the style of would be familiar with (which is why this consideration is included in the category of the third criteria). This dichotomy is well represented in Kubla Khan.

However, whereas in Wordsworth's poetry, nature is often described as an escape from civilization, a place of peace and harmony, in Kubla Khan, the civilization within the walls of the "stately pleasure dome" is idyllic, "[...] gardens bright with sinuous rills, / Where blossomed many an incense-

bearing tree ; / And here were forests ancient as the hills, / Enfolding sunny spots of greenery,” while the natural world outside of it is wild and full of power (2, 8-11). Coleridge describes the country outside Xanadu as “ A savage place! as holy and enchanted / As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing for her demon-lover!” (14-16). Therefore, though one could argue that Kubla Khan’s focus on the natural world makes it somewhat more relatable to the common people of the romantic era, it still doesn’t deal with nature in the classic, romantic way and therefore one would be hard pressed to argue it fulfills Wordsworth’s third criteria.

When compared to the Wordsworthian definition of a romantic poem, it doesn’t seem logical for Coleridge’s Kubla Khan to be classified as such. Though one could argue there is some relation to the genera given the poems concern with the dichotomy of nature and civilization, there doesn’t seem to be tension within the poem as it attempts to reconcile its subject and inspiration with the standards of the romantic poetry genera – it truly seems to be the antithesis of Wordsworth’s three criteria. This doesn’t mean that romantic is not a useful category for poetry; there are lots of poems that fit Wordsworth’s definition quite well, it simply means that Kubla Khan, as it was not written in tranquility, has no “ worthy purpose,” was not written in plain language, and is not concerned with common pursuits, cannot be considered a romantic poem by the Wordsworthian definition.

Works Cited

Wordsworth, William. “ Preface to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads.”

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “ Kubla Khan, Or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment”