

Dreams, Drugs, and Inspiration
Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan: or, a Vision in a Dream"

On a separate piece of paper, describe one of your most vivid dreams or nightmares, especially one that truly upset or perplexed you. Be sure to go into detail, using details to not only recreate the experience or story, but also to explain your reaction to it.

Then read the following preface to the poem "Kubla Khan"; in it, the poet discusses his inspiration for the poem.

Author's Preface:

"In the summer of the year 1797, the author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne [opium, most likely] had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in Purcha's Pilgrimage: 'Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall.' The author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external sense, during which time he has the most vivid confidence that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!"

Questions on the Preface

1. What caused Coleridge to fall asleep?
2. What does he believe that he did while asleep?
3. What did he do when he woke up?
4. What happened when he returned after the interruption?
5. What kind of poem do you expect to read after this preface? Why?
6. Do you think that an opium induced sleep would create a good or bad poem? Why?

Look up the following words; they should help you understand the poem.

Xanadu

Sacred

Chasm

Waning

Tumult

Dulcimer

Read the poem below. On the back of your free write, quote and draw five images from the poem.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Kubla Khan

OR, A VISION IN A DREAM.
A FRAGMENT

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

 A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
 Down to a sunless sea.

So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were 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.
But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

 The shadow of the dome of pleasure
 Floated midway on the waves;
 Where was heard the mingled measure
 From the fountain and the caves.

It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome ! those caves of ice !
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware ! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.



After you have finished with the drawings, answer the following questions.

1. What in this poem makes it seem like it was inspired by an opium dream?
2. Do you think the author made up the story about how the story of the poem came to him? Why or why not?
3. Besides the imagery, what other poetic devices do you notice in the poem? Quote and explain a few examples.
4. Having noted these poetic devices, are you less likely to believe the author's story about the poem's inspiration? Why or why not?
5. Why might a poet want a story like this to be attached to a poem that he or she has written?

Write a freewrite on the following questions: Do drugs or alcohol help or hinder the creative process? Do you think that crazy people are somehow more creative or imaginative than sane people? Why or why not? Does madness give people special insight or vision? Why or why not? Where do people find inspiration to create art?