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Honors English 12 Period: \_\_

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

(1772 – 1834)

## What Samuel Taylor Coleridge did... and why you should care

What do you think of when you hear the name Samuel Taylor Coleridge? Maybe you thought of*Kubla Khan*, the epic poem that Coleridge dreamed and then lost when a visitor rapped on his door. Or *willing suspension of disbelief*, his literary concept so essential to our appreciation of art and fiction that it's amazing no one bothered to explain it before. Or perhaps you blurted *opium addiction*, the demon that dominated half his life.  
  
But just as likely, you might have said, *Who?*  
  
You are not alone. Though his poetry and criticism gave us some of the most important ideas in literature, today we're more familiar with the writers who piggybacked on Coleridge's ideas than we are with Coleridge himself. (We're looking at you, William Wordsworth.) Born in 1772 in Ottery St. Mary, England, Coleridge was one of the leading figures of English Romantic literature. He wrote prodigiously, churning out so many poems, plays, articles, essays and speeches that Virginia Woolf once described him as "not a man, but a swarm."[1](http://www.shmoop.com/coleridge/citations.html#1)Together with his close friend William Wordsworth, he wrote the poetry collection *Lyrical Ballads*, one of the defining works of Romanticism. He was, by all accounts, a genius.  
  
Sadly, his tremendous talents were coupled with equally formidable personal problems. Coleridge suffered from depression and poor health. He also seemed chronically unable to make deadlines, get up on time or meet the myriad responsibilities of adult life. His greatest challenge was an opium addiction that began with a legal prescription in 1800 and lasted in some form until his death in 1834. An inkling of how smart Coleridge was: even though he left behind a number of incredible works, history still mourns all that he might have done.

## Everything you need to know about Samuel Taylor Coleridge can be learned from the background story behind the poem "Kubla Khan." In 1797, an over-medicated Coleridge dozed off in his desk chair. During a three-hour nap, the poet dreamed a complete epic poem about Mongol emperor Kubla Khan. He woke up, seized a pen and began to write, only to be interrupted by a knock on the door. Rather than ignoring the distraction and continuing to work, Coleridge spent an hour with his visitor. The man left and Coleridge returned to his work, only to check his brain and discover that the poem was—poof—gone. "[W]ith 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!" Coleridge lamented. The fifty-four lines that he managed to get down before the fateful knock on the door are brilliant, and the poem is one of the most famous examples of Romantic literature. But the specter of the lost lines, the greatness that *could have been*, hangs over the page. This is Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The poet, literary critic, and lecturer was without question one of the most brilliant minds of the nineteenth century—perhaps of the last few centuries. He wrote great poetry (such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, his chilling classic). He also wrote about other poets such as Shakespeare and his friend William Wordsworth in a way that brought new meaning to their works. No one had ever really explained the transformation in the human mind that allows us to appreciate literature and poetry. With his concept of the "willing suspension of disbelief," Coleridge put words to a universal experience that was previously taken for granted. For all of his ideas that never came to fruition, hundreds of them did - in articles, poems, plays, speeches, essays, and the like. He was, as scholar David Perkins has pointed out, "the Shakespeare of ideas." Therefore, Perkins says, "It seems strange indeed that he has so often been judged an example of great gifts come to little." For all of his accomplishments, Coleridge always seemed to fall just short of his full potential. He was a habitual oversleeper. He broke plans and missed deadlines. He often left his mail unopened in case it contained bad news.6For half his life he battled a crippling opium addiction that made him feel worthless and ashamed. He never got some of his best ideas down on paper, leaving other, more diligent friends (like Wordsworth) to write the poems Coleridge only talked about. He spent years working on a massive book of philosophy; it was never finished. Coleridge seemed often to find something or someone else to blame for his lack of productivity. His poem was ruined because of an ill-timed knock on the door; his unhappy marriage was the cause of opium addiction, depression, and chronic procrastination. He was like that friend who can never seem to get his life together, but who is so fun and cool and charming that you can't help but give him a break. Coleridge spent his life trying to bridge the chasm between the inside world and the outside one, the mind and physical reality. He was tremendously passionate. When he fell in love with an idea or a woman, he fell hard. It may have all been too much for him. The literary critic Evelyn Toynton has argued that Coleridge's failures, particularly his drug use, may have been in response to the overwhelming challenges his mind demanded of him. Like everyone else who knew him, we want to give Coleridge a break. "[I]t seems to me that his escapism was extraordinary in that it was fueled (at least sometimes) by such a tremendous sense of what he was fleeing toward—feelings of transcendence, a state of oneness with the deity, a non-material reality far finer than the gross corporeality of the body, etc. etc. That's why there is always something reductive about those studies of S.T.C. that present him as, in effect, a typical junkie. Maybe, like every junkie, he just wanted to get high, but what got him high was of a higher order than with any other junkie one can think of."

## Brain Snacks: Tasty Tidbits of Knowledge

Samuel Taylor was the youngest of nine siblings and four half-siblings in the Coleridge family.[25](http://www.shmoop.com/coleridge/citations.html#25)

When it came to the details of daily living, Coleridge was, by all accounts, an absolute mess. At one point he owned six shirts. In short order, he lost three in the laundry, slept in one, accidentally used one as a floor mat, and had only one left for wearing.[26](http://www.shmoop.com/coleridge/citations.html#26)

Don't try this at home, kids! Among the many awful side effects of Coleridge's opium addiction was crippling constipation, which made him "weep & sweat & moan & scream."[27](http://www.shmoop.com/coleridge/citations.html#27)

Coleridge hated his first name, Samuel, and frequently used pseudonyms in his writing. His pen names included Gnome, Zagri, and Nehemiah Higginbottom.[28](http://www.shmoop.com/coleridge/citations.html#28)

When Coleridge was seven years old, his older brother Frank (in typical older brother fashion) ruined a cheese snack the younger boy was saving for himself. Samuel fought him, Frank punched him back, and an enraged Samuel grabbed a knife and was about to stab him when their mother walked in. Terrified of his punishment, Coleridge dropped the knife and fled to a cold and misty field where he hid overnight. A search party found him the next day. His plan worked – he was so weak and sick that everyone forgot that he tried to kill Frank the day before.[29](http://www.shmoop.com/coleridge/citations.html#29)

One night after drinking claret (a dry red wine) with friends, Coleridge hurled a glass through the window, and then threw a fork at a wine glass. No record of who picked up the mess.[30](http://www.shmoop.com/coleridge/citations.html#30)

Kubla Khan

One night, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wasn't feeling all that great. To dull the pain, he took a dose of laudanum, a preparation of opium used as a medicine in the 19th century. He fell asleep and had a strange dream about a Mongol emperor named Kubla Khan. Coleridge dreamed that he was actually writing a poem in his sleep, and when he woke up after a few hours, he sat down to record the dream poem. He meant to write several hundred lines, but he was interrupted by someone who had come to see him on business. When he came back to the poem, he had forgotten the rest. The lines he did manage to scribble out turned into one of the most famous and enduring poems in English literary history.   
  
Not your average night, maybe, but why should we care about this story? Well, Coleridge wasn't just a guy with the flu who happened to have a weird dream. He was a famous poet, one of a group we now know as the Romantics. He was a particularly good friend of the poet William Wordsworth, and together they published a collection of poems called Lyrical Ballads. "Kubla Khan" was first published in a collection called Christabel, Kubla Khan: A Vision, and the Pains of Sleep, and it kicked off the Romantic movement. The Romantics were interested in writing about nature, and they wanted to escape the old, traditional forms of English poetry. "Kubla Khan," with its interesting rhyme scheme, variable line lengths, and intense focus on nature, is both a good example of Romantic poetry and proof that even your weird dreams can be turned into a masterpiece.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

This is a poem you'll probably hear people mention at some point. They might even quote the first few lines. But we don't want you to read this just because other people think it's important.   
  
"Kubla Khan" is interesting because Coleridge is talking about an experience we've probably all had. At the bottom of all of these odd images and ideas, he's just trying to tell us about a dream he had. Have you ever woken up from a really amazing dream and felt like you just had to tell someone? Maybe when you did tell a friend, he or she looked at you funny. Well Coleridge had a seriously intense dream, and now he wants to tell us about it.  
  
Fortunately, Coleridge is a great poet, and he makes his dream really exciting. Even though it's only a little more than fifty lines long, this poem takes you to exotic and intriguing places. Think of it as a short, strange movie that jumps between several settings to pull you along and keep you engaged. We can assure you that this poem will take you on a wild ride.

## 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!

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## 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.

## This poem describes Xanadu, the palace of Kubla Khan, a Mongol emperor and the grandson of Genghis Khan. The poem's speaker starts by describing the setting of Emperor's palace, which he calls a "pleasure dome." He tells us about a river that runs across the land and then flows through some underground caves and into the sea. He also tells us about the fertile land that surrounds the palace. The nearby area is covered in streams, sweet-smelling trees, and beautiful forests.  Then the speaker gets excited about the river again and tells us about the canyon through which it flows. He makes it into a spooky, haunted place, where you might find a "woman wailing for her demon lover." He describes how the river leaps and smashes through the canyon, first exploding up into a noisy fountain and then finally sinking down and flowing through those underground caves into the ocean far away.  The speaker then goes on to describe Kubla Khan himself, who is listening to this noisy river and thinking about war. All of a sudden, the speaker moves away from this landscape and tells us about another vision he had, where he saw a woman playing an instrument and singing. The memory of her song fills him with longing, and he imagines himself singing his own song, using it to create a vision of Xanadu.  Toward the end, the poem becomes more personal and mysterious, as the speaker describes past visions he has had. This brings him to a final image of a terrifying figure with flashing eyes. This person, Kubla Khan, is a powerful being who seems almost godlike: "For he on honey-dew hath fed/And drunk the milk of paradise" (53-54).

## Developing Skills

## Symbol. Considering that the Alph is a sacred river that runs through nature to a “lifeless ocean,” what might the river symbolize? In what way might the passage of this river represent a kind of panorama of existence?

## Theme. This is one of Coleridge’s “mystery poems,” filled with romantic magic, strongly influenced by the irrational and the unconscious. It can give pleasure without being thoroughly “understood” and can be seen to have meaning and coherence, even as a dream can. In what way does this poem deal with human existence itself, with beginnings and endings and the search for paradise? With the magic of poetic creation and the sacred rivers and chasms of the mind?

Bring on the tough stuff - there’s not just one right answer.

1. Are there moments where it feels like Coleridge is describing something real, or does this seem like a hallucination to you?
2. Have you ever tried to write down or describe an epic dream? Is it hard to bring it into the real world?
3. Many of the images and the words in this poem get pretty fancy, and the setting jumps around a lot. Do you find yourself getting caught up in the excitement, or do you wish Coleridge would dial it down a notch?
4. How about the images of the river and the fountain? Do they make a concrete picture in your mind, something you could describe, or do they give you a more general feeling?
5. If you could rewrite this poem would you make any changes? Would you try to make it easier to understand, or make it even more mysterious?