# Ambiguity, Contradiction, and the Eidolon of Man: An Examination of "Kubla Khan" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

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*"Nature… an ever industrious Penelope for ever unraveling what she had woven, for ever weaving what she had unraveled."*

*—Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

In the Hieronymus Bosch painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, there is a gradual descent into chaos and damnation. Yet what remains most fascinating about the painting is a persistent ambiguity about how or where things go wrong. There is a slow unraveling, from the idyllic world first depicted, to what hints at hedonistic decadence, into what can only be described as Hell. Yet ultimately, there is something which is never fully revealed: and that is the nature by which this occurred. Samuel Coleridge had a sensibility for this, particularly in what Harold Bloom refers to in his three "daemonic" poems: "Kubla Khan," "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and "Christabel" (Bloom and Trilling 235). In this paper, I will be discussing the first two poems.

Bloom mentions that a major theme in these poems is an attempt of the narrator to achieve "divine forgiveness," yet in the end, all that is achieved is a purgatorial state (Bloom and Trilling 235). These poems illustrate a fall: a mistake, a fatal flaw. This is most immediate in "Kubla Khan," where, in the opening stanzas, we are familiarized with "Xanadu," "pleasure domes," and "Alph, the sacred river." However, the river itself flows "through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea" (4-5). This frames the poem within a context of a decline, initiated by what we can extrapolate as decadence via the pleasure domes. It's important to notice the contradiction of images here as well. Xanadu and pleasure domes are mentioned in the same breath as a sunless sea.

This contrast is elaborated upon in the following stanza. Coleridge presents an image with "forests ancient as the hills / Enfolding sunny spots of greenery" (10-11). Following this, the poem once again takes a darker turn:

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! (12-16)

It's puzzling how a place can be holy and enchanted, yet savage and haunted at the same time. So far, one word for this comes to mind: *Eidolon.* This word is not used in the poem itself, but it allows us to understand what is actually occurring. I mentioned briefly that this poem illustrates some kind of unraveling or fall. It would appear as though this is what is happening to Xanadu. I selected eidolon as the word to describe this for a particular reason, and that is, its two definitions. It is either used to describe an idealized thing (Xanadu-as-utopia), or to describe a specter or phantom (the demonic, separation from God, and so on). It is in itself contradictory, yet this is what allows a "savagely holy place."

While on this topic of contradiction, I should take a moment to point out that this is not a criticism regarding the content of the poem. Decline is not a linear process. As institutions decline, from those as grand as civilizations to those as minor as businesses, there is not a definite feel of such declination. Rather, some things continue to function well, while others fall apart. The only way in which we know something has declined, is examining a previous, greater state, as compared to the ruinous final product. This is why I prefer the word "unravel," as it is more illustrative of the process of decline, which is what is quite evidently happening in "Kubla Khan," and why it appears to be contradictory.

Following the wailing woman and her demon-lover, direct action begins to occur in the poem. Here, Coleridge describes a cataclysmic upheaval, in which

from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething

As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing

A mighty fountain momently was forced

. . . . . .

It flung up momently the sacred river. (17-19, 24)

Overall, the poem so far has constantly described a "downhill" motion, from the river Alph flowing "down to a sunless sea," to "down a green hill athwart a cedarn cover." It is clear Coleridge wanted us to have this feeling of downward movement, perhaps even a rushing towards a downward movement. Yet this culminates in what we can only understand as a cataclysmic event.

"As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing" (18), suggests the ground itself is constantly heaving. There's a rare phenomenon in which during high and intense winds, the swaying of trees with shallow root systems will cause the earth to heave and appear as though it is "breathing." I don't think there's a scientific name for it, but it's entirely possible Coleridge experienced this on one of his many excursions. And in the context of the poem, not only is this occurring, but observation of the "huge fragments [which] vaulted like rebounding hail" tells us rock is being expunged into the sky. This event is so powerful that it displaces the river itself when "'mid these dancing rocks . . . / It flung up momently the sacred river" (23-4). It can easily be glanced over, but this is a violent, earth-shattering event. Moreover, it is what leads to our departure from Kubla Khan himself:

> 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! (26-30)

It's a fascinating choice to make Kubla's departure, the last explicit mention of him, roughly halfway through the poem. J.B. Beer, in his book *Coleridge the Visionary,* has a few interesting things to say about the character Kubla Khan. Firstly, he refers to how a passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost* frames Xanadu in the context of a fallen world (9.386-88), but that it goes deeper than that if the reader were to make a few more assumptions (Beer 227).

Beer suggests Kubla may be a connection to the "sons of Ham, the violent ones who worship the sun as a substitute for the lost Shechinah." I'm out of my comfort zone here, but that quote, and a little earlier when discussing Coleridge's views of the Tartars as violent savages (224-25), I can't shake the feeling of something that I am familiar with—that is Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian.* Among many things, the judge articulates this concept of war as religion. Even in what

appear to be the end of days, Kubla Khan is still drawn to the violence "prophesying war." In this way, Kubla Khan can be understood as an Eidolon of man. He lives in this fallen world amidst his utopian pleasure dome, yet it appears as though it is going to be washed away into the "lifeless ocean" or "sunless sea."

But that's not what happens. Despite Kubla Khan's departure, the pleasure dome persists without him:

> 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! (31-6)

Instead of perishing in the cataclysm just described, the narrator finds the pleasure dome floating among the waves. The entire poem itself is suggestive of a descent, so how did it end up there? Rather, the better question is, where are we?

What I have struggled with the most, not just with Coleridge, but with the poetry so far, is understanding the narration—the perspective, perhaps: "A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision I once saw" (37-8). It made me think: "Wait a minute, you saw? I wish we could have been more formally introduced, yet I take it on good faith that there is a reason we have just now been acquainted." The narrator continues, "And on her dulcimer she played / Singing of Mount Abora" (40-1). The footnote of the *Norton Anthology* suggests this is a reference to Milton, which would reinforce Beer's argument that this poem pulls heavily from him. Also, it is the reference to the real Mount Amara, and can be taken as a vague analogy to paradise (Lynch and Stillinger 461).

To see the narrator suddenly take on an active role within the poem is surprising:

> 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 (42-6)

This passage may suggest that the narrator is in a time which has succeeded Kubla Khan's. It is also possible that he is observing Kubla Khan, as he refers to "his flashing eyes, [and] his floating hair" later on:

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 (47-51)

The *Norton* has a perplexing footnote at the end of this line. It reads "A magic ritual, to protect him from intrusion." From this, we can extrapolate that the narrator is attempting to resurrect the pleasure dome, most likely madly. The result of this attempted resurrection of the pleasure dome concludes with "And close your eyes with holy dread / For he on honey-dew hath fed / And drunk the milk of Paradise" (52-4). Either this, or Kubla Khan himself is attempting to resurrect the pleasure dome.

Regardless, while it is clear nothing good, in the long term, comes of the pleasure dome, this idea that it can be "made to" provide such an absence of pleasure suggests a form of purgatory. Neither Kubla Khan nor the narrator are able to "move beyond it," and as a result, are trapped in a perpetual unraveling, or decline. The purgatorial state itself is a fitting metaphor in this contradiction—that is, it is not Heaven nor is it Hell. It is as ambiguous as the problem in and of itself. So are the origins of the poem.

Coleridge himself didn't really talk about the poem outside of an introduction he wrote upon its publication. This is a famous story which has become mythologized and adds an extra layer to it. In short, Coleridge explains that upon retiring to a farmhouse in the summer of 1797, he fell asleep in an opium-induced slumber. In the dream, he "saw," so to speak, 300 lines of the poem itself. However, upon composing the 54 lines we have, he was called away, and upon returning, could not fully

recollect the rest of the poem (Halmi, Magnuson, and Modiano 180). Upon introducing the poem, however, Coleridge references lines from his poem "The Picture:"

Then all the charm

Is broken – all that phantom-world so fair

Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread

And each mis-shape the other (91-4)

As I mentioned earlier, an eidolon is either an idealized thing, or referred to as a specter or phantom. Why he felt these lines were necessary to mention in regard to "Kubla Khan" is unclear. And while Coleridge himself perhaps never would have referred to the characters in his work as an eidolon, I just find that selection worth mentioning. Unfortunately, it will have to remain ambiguous.

This ambiguity, and my aforementioned lack of clarity about the narration, is also prevalent in "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," starting with the main conflict of the poem itself, when the Mariner, for no given reason, shoots an albatross which had been their mirthful companion. Seabirds were considered good omens, and killing them was bad luck. Moreover, it seems to occur to the narrator right away that he had made a poor decision:

And I had done a hellish thing,

And it would work 'em woe:

For all averred, I had killed the bird

That made the breeze to blow. (91-4)

The shooting of the albatross initiates the unraveling. By the end of Part 2, things are already beginning to fall apart:

About, about, in reel and rout

The death-fires danced at night

The water, like a witch's oils

Burnt green and blue and white. (127-30)

Death-fires are a supposed “ghostly, luminous gas from decaying corpses” (Halmi et al. 68). According to the *Norton Anthology,* it is also to be considered a bad omen (Lynch and Stillinger 447). A new, miasmic fog has begun to envelop the ship:

> And some of the dreams assurèd were
>
> Of the spirit that plagued us so;
>
> Nine fathom deep he had followed us
>
> From the land of mist and snow. (131-34)

Because they are sailing in the south Pacific seas (notoriously the roughest waters on the planet), the spirits which haunt the south pole have taken an interest in the Mariner and his crew. At this time, Antarctica was still a land of profound mystery. Today, it is difficult to have a sensibility for how enigmatic the continent was. Yet in Coleridge’s time, being titled “the land of mist and snow,” applies an inherent mystery and other worldliness to what he is talking about. For this reason, it becomes a much more significant line, and creates an explicitly supernatural context to the poem (something Coleridge was interested in). In the final stanza of Part 2, the crew are attempting to absolve themselves of the Mariner’s transgression in killing the albatross: “Instead of the cross, the Albatross / About my neck was hung” (141-42). This is sin; the Mariner, like Kubla Khan, is an Eidolon of Man.

The crucial stanzas in Part 3 arrive towards the end. It involves direct recourse for the consequences of the Mariner’s actions. They are confronted by a “specter-bark” or ghost ship, where a ghastly man and woman seek to deal retribution: “Her skin was white as leprosy / The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she / Who thicks man’s blood with cold” (192-4). One by one, the crew, all around the Mariner, begin to drop dead:

> Four times fifty living men
>
> (And I heard not sigh nor groan)
>
> With heavy thump, a lifeless lump
>
> They dropped down one by one. (216-19)

Sometimes, death is considered a punishment preferable to life, such proves the be the case of the Mariner:

> The souls did from their bodies fly –

They fled to bliss or woe

And every soul, it passed me by

Like the whizz of my cross-bow! (220-23)

The Mariner's crew is granted closure. They are permitted to move on into their next life (presumably Heaven). However, the Mariner is left alone aboard the ship. This implicitly places him in a purgatorial state, which is how we move onto Part 4. The Mariner continues to tell his tale to the wedding guest:

The many men, so beautiful

And they all dead did lie

And a thousand thousand slimy things

Lived on; and so did I. (236-39)

After gazing at the dead men, the Mariner begins to pray, yet ultimately "A wicked whisper came, and me / My heart as dry as dust" (246-47). This marks a clear separation from God, placing the Mariner in at best, a purgatorial state: "Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse / And yet I could not die" (261-62). It is evident that the Mariner now exists in some kind of state of punishment. Whether this is meant to suggest he ought to be seeking atonement is as of yet unclear, but for the sake of understanding the poem, we have clearly entered the supernatural.

A shred of hope arises by the end of Part 4, when the Mariner observes the light-infused "water-snakes":

A spring of love gushed from my heart

And I blessed them unaware

. . . . . .

The selfsame moment I could pray;

And from my neck so free

The Albatross fell off, and sank

Like lead into the sea. (284-85, 288-91)

The following two parts detail the Mariner's journey home. As opposed to the ambiguity in "Kubla Khan," there is more hope which arises regarding the Mariner's situation. After being "piloted" by

angels, the crew begin to sail the ship back to England. Yet who exactly has fully agency over the ship remains unclear. Much later, at the end of Part 6, it becomes apparent that angels sent by God Himself have piloted the ship home:

> Each corse lay flat, lifeless and flat
>
> And, by the holy rood!
>
> A man all light, a seraph-man
>
> On every corse there stood. (488-91)

However, in Part 5, we are given a different impression of who this was:

> Under the keel nine fathom deep
>
> From the land of mist and snow
>
> The spirit slid: and it was he
>
> That made the ship to go. (377-80)

Yet whoever is behind the journey home, the Mariner collapses, and in his unconscious state hears voices. After discussing the transgressions of the Mariner, they conclude "'The man hath penance done, / And penance more will do" (408-9). Once again, as opposed to "Kubla Khan," instead of a continued unraveling, what is suggested about the Mariner is that through "penance," there will perhaps be a re-raveling—Redemption.

At the onset of Part 6, Coleridge is at least kind enough to explain there are two speakers in the "first voice" and "second voice." The Mariner's tale is briefly interrupted by the "first voice," who is the wedding guest:

> But tell me, tell me! speak again
>
> Thy soft response renewing –
>
> What makes that ship drive on so fast
>
> What is the ocean doing? (410-13)

It seems as though the wedding guest is thinking two things. The first, how far-fetched the tale itself is, but also, why the Mariner has selected him as the one who needs to hear it. As mentioned earlier,

the Mariner reveals that angels were piloting the corpses of the men, and now back in his home country, is introduced to a new character, the Hermit, who

> singeth loud his godly hymns
>
> That he makes the wood
>
> He'll shrieve my soul. he'll wash away
>
> The Albatross's blood. (510-13)

This just got me thinking about how uniquely this narrative is crafted. It almost wants to be Campbell's hero's journey, but there are things within it that just don't allow it to be that. Mainly, the ambiguity of the Mariner's motivation for shooting the albatross, and what he was after in the first place would be particularly out of place within this framework.

And why the Mariner selected the wedding guest to be the recipient of his tale remains uncertain. At his departure, he declares "To thee, thou Wedding-Guest" that "He prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast" (612-14). Nonetheless, it becomes evident that wedding guest did indeed benefit from the tale, as

> He went like one that hath been stunned
>
> And is of sense forlorn
>
> A sadder and wiser man
>
> He rose the morrow morn. (622-25)

Finally, the motivation which is at times obscured within the poem becomes irrelevant, as the story the narrative tells is so profound, it becomes something more. Ultimately, what Coleridge negates through the withholding of various information in his poems, is a simple didacticism which could be lazily gleaned from if he had done otherwise. We will never truly know what has led to the unraveling of Xanadu, or why the Mariner shot the albatross, but what we do know is that there are consequences of them doing so. Perhaps as Newton knew, for every action, there is a reaction.

Robert Eggers did a loose adaptation of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." It is titled *The Lighthouse* (2019). He completely missed the point of Coleridge, and the film serves as an example of what is lost when the ambiguity of the poem is removed. The character of the Mariner is depicted by Robert Pattinson, who in the end is just evil and cynical and bad. As an adaptation, it completely

misses the power of the source text. The plot of the film is essentially, he kills the seabird, and gets eaten by seabirds at the end of this film. But really, he has also just been bad anyway, so his transgression doesn't matter to begin with. It's just so silly.

While the characters within both "Kubla Khan" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" find themselves in purgatorial states, their fate is—similar to those cast out into the Biblical place of *Outer Darkness*—open ended. It may be too late for them, and it may not. Personally, I hope that, particularly for the Mariner, he found a path to Redemption. As Coleridge's longtime friend, William Wordsworth, concludes in "Elegaic Stanzas:" "Not without hope we suffer and we mourn." But I have not yet elaborated on the quote I began with. I find particularly fitting its internal contradiction: "for ever weaving what she had unraveled." The line speaks to this idea of the characters within Coleridge's poems, addressing what is more than a temporary conflict. These characters are by nature spiritual, making the purgatorial state they are in all the more relevant, in their representation as the Eidolon of Man.

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