

Samuel Taylor Coleridge
Kubla Khan
Easier questions to cut your teeth on!

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Kubla Khan, ruler of the imaginary and mystical land of Xanadu, orders that a majestic dome be built for the pleasure of his people. The place he chooses for its construction is where the River Alph enters a series of caves which are so massive they cannot be measured, and where the river eventually runs into a vast underground sea.

"Alph" is a particularly significant name. Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet. Jesus Christ was said to be the Alpha and the Omega. The River Alph then is the first river -- and therefore very holy. Is there also any association with the rivers Tigris and Euphrates which were the first rivers mentioned in the Bible and which formed the boundaries of the Garden of Eden? Does the poet have the Garden of Eden in mind when he speaks of Xanadu?

The poet thereupon describes the area in which the pleasure-dome is being built. It measures ten miles in length -- or does the poet mean five miles square? -- and contains fertile fields enclosed by great walls and battle turrets. The gardens of Xanadu are bright with flowers, and many small streams meander through it. Sweet smelling trees grow everywhere, together with ancient cedar forests.

The poet mentions that the trees smell of incense, which is a mixture of aromatic resins. When burnt, these resins give off a sweet smelling smoke. Because incense is associated with religious ceremonies, the poet is able to use the word to add to the religious or magical effect of his poem.

1. "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."

- Who was Kubla Khan? (2)
- Explain in your own words the meaning of the phrase, "through caverns measureless to man". (2)
- The first stanza speaks of how small man is when compared to nature. Quote the words which tell you this? (2)
- Why should the sea be "sunless"? (2)

2. "So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round."

- Write the above lines in your own words. (4)

3. "And here 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."

- Quote the words which tell you that the poet thinks of Xanadu as a beautiful place. (6)
- What are "sinuous rills"? (2)
- What does the poet mean when he says that there "blossomed many an incense-bearing tree"? (4)

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