

Musicality in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*

Hasan Hussein Karo

Faculty of Humanities, University of Zakho, Zakho, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

hassan.karo@uoz.edu.krd

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the definition and the use of sound devices in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (1816) which creates the poem's musicality. It shows the biography of the life of the poet and his contributions to English literature. A short clarification of the poem *Kubla Khan* will be presented in this paper along with the main literary techniques such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia and rhyme, responsible for creating the musicality in the poem with reference to the lines in the poem. The paper highly focuses on the language used to answer the questions raised in this research in which it makes the paper discourse analytic research. It is worth noting that the conclusion in the paper provides the existence of musicality in the poem.

1. Introduction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is one of the prominent figures of the Romantic movement in England. His reputation as a poet appears in three major works *Kubla Khan*, *Christabel*, and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. These three literary works were written between 1797 and 1800. *Kubla Khan*, his literary dream visionary poem was not published until 1816. Coleridge affixed a preliminary note explaining the strange origin of the poem. This preface shows how Coleridge grew drowsy during his reading of a passage about the court of *Kubla Khan* in Samuel Purchas's *Pilgrimage* after he has taken some opium as a medication. During a deep state of sleep, he composed about 200 to 300 lines of poetry based on his dream visions. He started to write the poem after he woke up from his dream. Meanwhile, a visitor interrupted him for about one hour.

After the visitor's departure, Coleridge's images of his dream faded away, leaving him with only fifty-four lines of poetic fragment (Ruby, 1999: 170).

Coleridge's account of composing *Kubla Khan* has become a classic interest of the Romantic unusual conditions of the mind and its belief that poetry should result from the deepest and most spontaneous impulses of the mind. It is worth mentioning that Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* is partly a poem about a dream. His poems are notably famous for their use of sound to enhance or heighten emotion, or deepen meaning which would result in a clear influence on the reader's reaction (Adventures in American literature, 1996: 515)

According to the rhythmic chant and unusual imagery of *Kubla Khan*, numerous literary critics have concluded that the poem 'to be read as a 'meaningless reverie' and to be enjoyed through its luxurious and bright qualities. An examination of the poem should be conducted psychologically and mythologically as it contains a multifaceted structure of meaning and the poem is dealing with the virtuosity of human nature (Britannica Encyclopaedia, [online website](#)). So, it is understandable that the poem should be enjoyed by the reader as a part of emotional releasing.

2. About the Author

Coleridge was born on October 21, 1772, into a pious family in Ottery St. Mary, England. He moved in Christ's Hospital School in London when he was ten years old, where he familiarized himself with numerous classical works. He joined Jesus College in Cambridge and he was absorbed in revolutionary and Unitarianism politics in 1791. He encountered the poet Robert Southey in 1794, with whom he proposed a community to be built that could be called 'utopian' in the United States of America. Coleridge met Southey's sister-in-law, Sara Fricker, and married her (Galens, 2002: 294).

In 1794, his first poem was published in the Morning Chronicle. He left the form of sonnet as he completely failed to write. He started giving some lectures to fund the utopian plan he intended. When the idea of giving lectures failed him, he began to write poetry again in 1795. From 1797 to 1798, he resided in

Somerset and finished some of his best-known poems such as *Kubla Khan*, *Fears in Solitude*, *Frost at Midnight*, and *The Ancient Mariner*. In 1798, he travelled to Germany with Dorothy and William Wordsworth, where he became profoundly interested in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Galens (2002: 294) states that Coleridge's addiction to opium "gradually overtook him and his marriage." In 1804, he travelled to Malta as an attempt to recover his marriage and physical health. When he came back to England in 1806, his marriage had already collapsed.

Coleridge became more attracted to the process of critical and literary theory after being aware of drying his poetic inspiration of his 'visionary gleam' in the early stage of 1800s, as Sanders (2004: 366) writes "an intellectual exercise which ranged from literature and the workings of the mind to the development of the society and religion."

By 1813, Coleridge was being recovered from his opium addiction that led him to resume to Christian beliefs. He started to write *Biographia Literaria* in (1817) which is a poetic discussion and a critique of Wordsworth based on writings by German philosophers as Kant and Fichte. He passed away in 1834, in Highgate, England (Galens, 2002: 294). His personal experience and addiction to opium have a direct relation to his career of writing poetry as it will be illustrated in the coming sections.

3. *Kubla Khan*

The main characteristics of romantic literature highlighted the individual's fantasy or inner world. The use of fantastic, visionary, or drug-induced imagery was dominant in romantic period. The emphasis shifted to the importance of the experiences by individuals in the world rather than the interpretations by the church or the traditional ones. So, emotions and feelings were viewed superior to analysis and logic. "Poetry was believed to be the highest form of literature according to the romantic poets" (Galens, 2002: 292).

Written in the summer 1797, *Kubla Khan* mostly arises from the mysterious imagery of Coleridge's wide reading of mythology, history, and religion. As

Coleridge explains in his preliminary note, the poem superbly stays a fragment. Sanders (2004: 365) claims that Coleridge wrote it down under “the effect of opium in which he composed two to three hundred lines.” This poem remains a riddle. DiYanni (2002: 940) states that the name ‘Kubla Khan’ is “the first ruler of the Mongol dynasty in the thirteenth-century China.” Coleridge’s topography and place names are imaginary.

4. Musicality: Literary Sound Techniques

Poetry tends to be an exceptional musical form of writing, and by doing so, there is a number of techniques that the poets employ to this musicality. Coleridge uses different techniques in *Kubla Khan* to create such musicality. The main techniques or literary sound effects that Coleridge employs in the poem are alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, and rhyme.

As cited by Widerburg (1975: 8) that the critic William Hazlitt in his book *Coleridge, the Critical Heritage* (1968) writes:

Kubla Khan, we think only shows that Coleridge can write better nonsense verses than any man in England. It is not a poem, but a musical composition. We could repeat these lines to ourselves not the less often for not knowing the meaning of them (p. 208).

It is understandable from the quotation above that listening to the poem while being read brings more joy than paying attention to the words or its meaning.

4.1 Alliteration

Stephen (1984: 75) states that alliteration is “a close repetition of consonant sounds.” It is worth mentioning that Anglo-Saxon verse was more based on alliteration rather than rhyme. According to Thorne (2006: 69) alliteration is the sound of repeating consonants that “usually appear at the beginning of words.” Mostly, all Old English poetry uses the alliterative pattern to provide cohesion in the standard two-part line. When Gerard Hopkins experimented with the pattern of alliteration, the interest in alliterative verse was revived in the late eighteenth century and during the nineteenth century. It is based on

the sound rather than spelling. It is therefore crucial to take the sound of words into consideration rather than their initial letters.

Furthermore, Abrams and Harpham describe alliteration as “the repetition of a speech sound in a sequence of nearby words” (2009: 10). The term is applicable on consonants since it starts with a word that is mainly stressed as a syllable. alliteration is the major device in organizing the line of verse in Old English. The written verse during this time was mainly unrhymed. The use of caesura made each line to be divided into two half-lines. In later English versification, some of the main aims of using alliteration were for special stylistic effects as to join related words, emphasize the meaning, or to deliver a tone colour and improve the reality of articulating the poetic words. So, an example of alliteration in the first six lines of *Kubla Khan* as following:

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** (Coleridge and Coleridge, pp. 297).

The repeated initial sounds in the words ‘Kubla-Khan,’ ‘dome-decree,’ ‘river-ran,’ ‘measureless-man,’ ‘sunless-sea,’ and ‘five-fertile’ are a clear use of alliteration to create the element of musicality in the poem. Thus, in the lines above, Coleridge tends to show the importance of the initially alliterated words, or an important message is being conveyed through interesting musical sounds in these words. So, alliteration is the rhetorical device that Coleridge employs to get the attention of his readers.

In the following random and different words of the lines in the poem such as ‘woman-wailing,’ fountain-forced,’ ‘miles-meandering,’ ‘mazy-motion,’ ‘mingled-measure,’ ‘symphony-song,’ ‘deep-delight,’ ‘loud-long,’ and ‘honeydew-hath’ Coleridge’s use of alliteration is to create a sensational

effective mood, sometimes without even knowing the definition or the meaning of word. The use of this technique by Coleridge may also help the reader to remember the words even for the non-English speakers which creates a sense universality of the poem.

By **w**oman **w**ailing for her demon-lover! (16)
A mighty **f**ountain momentarily was **f**orced: (19)
Five **m**iles **m**eandering with a **m**azy **m**otion (25)
Where was heard the **m**ingled **m**eaure (27)
Her **s**ymphony and **s**ong, (43)
To such a **d**eep **d**elight 'twould win me, (44)
That with music loud and **l**ong, (45)
For he on **h**oney-dew **h**ath fed (52) (Coleridge and Coleridge, pp. 297-298).

Alliteration is frequently used in poetry because it has a pleasant tone. It's a technique for grabbing readers' or listeners' attention. Additionally, it's an obvious method to indicate that the alliterative words are connected thematically and it highlights the theme of the passage.

4.2 Assonance

Assonance is the close repetition of the same vowel sounds and it is usually appeared in stressed syllables (Thorne, 2006: 70). Furthermore, Stephen (1984: 75) states that assonance is "a close repetition of vowel sounds, usually as the stressed syllables in a line of verse." While, Abrams and Harpham (2009: 11) describe it as the repetition of "identical or similar vowels - especially in stressed syllables." The following lines are examples of the use of assonance in the poem, *Kubla Khan*:

So twice **f**ive miles of fertile ground (6)
With walls and **t**owers were girdled **r**ound; (7)
But oh! that deep romantic **ch**asm which slanted (12)
Down the **g**reen hill athwart a **c**edarn cover! (13)

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething, (17)
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing, (18)
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst (20)
Floated midway on the waves; (32) (Coleridge and Coleridge, pp.
297-298).

The use of assonance in the lines above is to grasp the reader's attention and make something fascinating thing that can be remembered for a long time. Briefly, Coleridge has employed assonance in his poem to add the rhythm to poem to make the sufficient musicality. It makes the poem permanent as well as interesting. Most importantly, it sets the mood and stimulates the reader's sensation. So, it develops the internal rhyme of the poem.

4.3 Consonance

Consonance is repeating two or more consonants in a row with a different vowel in between (Abrams and Harpham, 2009). Thorne (2006: 70) identifies the term as "the close repetition of identical consonant sounds before and after different vowels such as in these two words (**flip/flop**).” While some writers accept the term as only the repetition of consonant sounds at the end of words. The following lines from the poem are clear examples of using the consonance to enhance and establish a sense of movement or connection from one word to another. It helps to make the sounds musical and smooth.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted (12)
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted (15)
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst (20) (Coleridge and
Coleridge, p. 297).

The repeated sounds of 'm' and 'n' in the lines above make smooth transition from one word to another. The two sounds give more rhythmic voice to the whole line so as to be sung.

4.4 Onomatopoeia

In the common use, onomatopoeia designates “a word, or a combination of words, whose sound seems to be closely similar the sound it denotes” (Abrams and Harpham, 2009: 236) as in ‘hiss,’ ‘rattle’ ‘buzz’ ‘bang.’ However, there is no “exact duplication of nonverbal by verbal sounds; the perceived similarity is due as much to the meaning, and to the sensation of articulating the words, as to their sounds” (*ibid.*). Galens (2002: 374) describes the term as “the use of words whose sounds suggest or express their meaning. It may be represented by words that mimic the sounds they denote.” The rhythm of sounds and rhymes of a poetic line might be onomatopoeic.

The two main examples of onomatopoeia in the poem are ‘wailing’ in line sixteen that refer to the sound of the woman in which she mourns her lover, the other one is ‘fast thick pants’ in line eighteen that refers to the sounds of earth and its fountain.

By woman wailing for her demon-lover! (16)

As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing, (18) (Coleridge and Coleridge, p. 297).

4.5 Rhyme

Abrams and Harpham (2009, 316) claim that the normal rhyme involves “the repetition, in the rhyming words, of the last stressed vowel in English versification”. It is the use of words with similar sounds in poetry, usually words that the lines end with. Galens explains it as:

The term generally refers to a poem in which words seem identical or very similar. It appears in matching positions in two or more lines. Rhymes are classified into different types according to where they fall in a line or stanza or according to the degree of similarity they demonstrate in their spellings and sounds. Some major types of rhyme are ‘masculine’ rhyme, ‘feminine’ rhyme, and ‘triple’ rhyme. In a masculine rhyme, the rhyming sound falls in a single stressed syllable, as with

'heat' and 'eat.' Feminine rhyme is a rhyme of two syllables, one stressed and one unstressed, as with 'merry' and 'tarry.' Triple rhyme matches the sound of the stressed syllable and the two unstressed syllables that follow as in 'narrative' and 'declarative' (2002: 379-380).

The rhyme of Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan* is highly unpredictable and irregular. When it comes to the rhyme scheme, it follows no obvious pattern. The couplets are sometimes ended with the same sound for example (CC) or alternating into different pairs such as (EBEB). Rhyme, along with meter, helps to make the poem musical. Also, it provides expected pleasure and assists in memorizing passages for recitation. Coleridge employs more of free verse in the poem that breaks the traditional pattern and adds unpredictable spice, giving special emphasis to the lines that rhyme. Some examples that use rhyme in the poem are as follow:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran (3)
Through caverns measureless to man (4)
So twice five miles of fertile ground (6)
With walls and towers were girdled round; (7)
A savage place! as holy and enchanted (14)
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted (15)
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething, (17)
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing, (18)
The shadow of the dome of pleasure (31)
Floated midway on the waves; (32)
Where was heard the mingled measure (33)
From the fountain and the caves. (34) (Coleridge and Coleridge,
pp. 297-298).

The alternation of rhyme by Coleridge grants the poem more chant-like piece. The rhyme employed is more like AABBCDDFFGGHHIHI. It can be noted that Coleridge sticks to the use of heroic couplet to make the flow of ending sounds more honeyed for the reader when reading or listening to it.

CONCLUSION

Coleridge uses many techniques and sound devices to create musicality in his poem *Kubla Khan*. The main techniques that the research sheds lights on are alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, and rhyme. Alliteration is mainly used to create cohesion in two-part line. Assonance is employed as a literary tool to accelerate the musical effect in the poem. So, it develops the internal rhyme which enhances the pleasure of reading. Subsequently, it creates a mood as well as a flow that allows the reader to connect with the subject matter. On the other hand, consonance is used by Coleridge to inspire the listener and to establish a sensation of movement in the poem. Also, it helps to make the sounds musical and smooth. In addition, onomatopoeia describes the use of words with suggestive sounds or which express their meaning. Words that resemble the sounds they represent are used to describe it. Rhyme, along with meter, helps to make the poem musical by breaking with the traditional pattern and adds unpredictable spice, giving special emphasis to the lines that rhyme. Finally, the poem sounds like a symphony orchestra when reading it.

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موسیقی له ههلبهستی سامویل تایلور کالهریج 'کوبلا خان'

پوخته:

ئهم تووژینه وهیه باس له پیناسه و به کارهینانی ئامپره دهنگیه کان دهکات له پۆمانی کوبلا خان (1816) ی سامویل تایلور کۆله ریج که موسیقییه تی شیعره که دروست دهکات. جگه له وهش ژیانامه ی شاعیر و به شدارییه کان له ئەدهبیاتی ئینگلیزیدا نیشان دهکات. له م تووژینه وهیه دا روونکردنه وهیه کی کورت له شیعی کوبله خان باس ده کریت و دواتر ته کنیکه سه ره کییه ئەدهبییه کان وه ک ئەلیتیراسیۆن، ناسۆنونس، کۆنسۆنانس، ئۆنۆماتۆپۆییا و قافیه، که به رپرسن له دروستکردنی موسیقی له شیعره که دا، به ئاماژەدان به دپره کان ناو شیعره که باس ده کرین له هۆنراوه که. تووژینه وهیه که هه موو گرنگیه ک به و زمانه دهکات که بۆ وهلامدانه وهی ئەو پرسیارانه ی له م لیکۆلینه وهیه دا وروژینراون که تیبیدا تووژینه وهیه که دهکاته لیکۆلینه وهیه کی شیکاری گوتار. شایه نی باسه که دهره نجامه که ی ناو تووژینه وهیه که ئەنجامه کان تووژینه وهیه که دهخاته پوو.

الموسيقية في كوبلا خان لصموئيل تايلور كوليردج

الملخص:

يناقش هذا البحث تعريف واستخدام الأجهزة الصوتية في قصيدة صموئيل تايلور كوليردج "كوبلا خان" (1816) لخلق الموسيقى في القصيدة. بالإضافة إلى أن البحث يتناول سيرة حياة الشاعر وإسهاماته في الأدب الإنجليزي بشكل مختصر. سيتم مناقشة توضيح قصير لقصيدة "كوبلا خان" في هذا البحث ، ثم سيتم مناقشة التقنيات الأدبية الرئيسية مثل الجناس ، والسجع ، والتوافق ، والمحاكاة الصوتية والقافية ، المسؤولة عن خلق الموسيقى في القصيدة بالرجوع إلى الأسطر الموجودة في القصيدة. يعطي البحث كل الاهتمام للغة المستخدمة للإجابة على سؤال البحث مما يجعله بحثًا تحليليًا للخطاب. ومن الجدير بالذكر أن خاتمة البحث تقدم نتائج النهائية.