

Satanic Hero and Demon: Paradise and Inferno in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"

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Abstract

"Kubla Khan", written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), has been renowned for its rosy imagery and poetic imagination. In this poem, Kubla Khan was depicted as a hero as well as a demon, which was analogous to Satan in John Milton's "Paradise Lost". This essay compares Coleridge's Kubla Khan and Milton's Satan, demonstrating the Satanism in Kubla Khan, and Miltonic Paradise in "Kubla Khan", and through the analysis of sources of imagination, it leads to the hypothesis that the dual characteristics of the two poetic figures derived from the dual power of poetic imagination.

Keywords

Kubla Khan; Satan; Poetic Imagination.

1. Introduction

"Kubla Khan, as a poem, emerged out of Coleridge's visionary speculations. [1]" The stimuli for Samuel Coleridge's composing the masterpiece "Kubla Khan", according to the account of the genesis of the poem, prior to his "opium-induced sleep or reverie", was "an article from a book of travels, Purchas his Pilgrimage. [2]" Inspired by the sentences in the book, he then opened the poem with Kubla Khan's building "a stately pleasure-dome" in Xanadu, a place in the far east, mysterious to the poet. Underlying the glorious creation of the empire and dome, however, Kubla Khan demonstrated a dark side as a war starter and "demon lover". By the same token, the fallen angel Lucifer, later more known as Satan, in Milton's Paradise Lost, possessed the dual characteristics of a tragic hero and fallen devil. The established research on "Kubla Khan" and "Satan", respectively, have profoundly discussed their complex nature. Many scholars agree that Milton's Satan was a "tragic hero" [3, 4, 5], as they believed in Milton's commending Satan's rebellion against God as revolutionaries. Whereas Satan was also associated with "tyrannical rulers in human history" [6], the latter of which coincided with my argument.

Overall, former scholars have acknowledged that the Paradise in "Kubla Khan" echoed that of Milton [7]; nevertheless, what might be less obvious is the relationship between the dual characteristics of Coleridge's Kubla Khan and Milton's Satan and the dual quality of poetic power, except Pearce's mentioning Coleridge's creative power in Kubla Khan [8]. Thus this essay, combined with former studies, will emphasize the duality of the protagonists, Kubla Khan and Satan, as well as probe the dual power of poetic imagination.

2. Comparisons between Coleridge's Kubla Khan and Milton's Satan

2.1. Heroic Creation: Two "Domes"

In "Kubla Khan", the emperor established the empire of the Yuan Dynasty, building the "pleasure-dome", a substantial construction, whereas Satan fought against God, building a hell, which is a non-substantial dome of freedom for himself and other creatures subjected to God. Coupled with the effect of opium, Coleridge was enlightened to compose the poem by the recording in *Purchas his Pilgrimage* that Khan Kubla commanded a stately garden to be

constructed [1], which coincides with the opening of the poem, the description of an enchanting scenery that Kubla Khan decreed to construct a spectacular palace in Xanadu. Coleridge applied glamorous diction to demonstrate the emperor along with the “pleasure-dome” in his imagination. The term “dome”, specifically scrutinized by scholars, showed the grandeur and magnificence of the palace, the splendid creation of the emperor.

The “dome” could be interpreted as the manifestation of the vault of heaven, indicating the ambition and authority of Coleridge’s Kubla Khan [9], including “decree”, “stately”, “sacred”, revealed the holy dignity and supreme power of Kubla Khan. The arched architecture in the poem, especially the “dome”, implied “female womb and creative power” [2]. The liveliness and vitality of the “dome”, in a natural sense, was explicitly displayed through such vivid expressions as “fertile land”, “rills” “gardens”, “blossomed”, “incense-bearing tree”, “forests” “hill” and “sunny spots of greenery” demonstrating the creativity of the natural scenery that Coleridge’s Kubla Khan had chosen for his dome. In this sense, the dome with walls and towers, symbolized mother’s anatomy, “the original residence that provides idyllic shelter and sustenance. [2]” Therefore, as is analysed above, the pleasure-palace, created by Coleridge’ Kubla Khan, was productive, procreative, judging from both the natural landscape and artificial architecture.

John Milton’s Satan, like Coleridge’s Kubla Khan, could also be defined as a creative hero. One of the questions was what precisely the term “hero” means? Anyone who dared to be the opponent of the Creator is “truly but not superficially heroic”, and that, in Milton’s Satan, we can witness “the process of moral self-determination”, “the driving urge toward self-definition”, traits normally appearing “in the heroes of Homeric epics” [5]. As Satan proclaimed in the first book of Paradise Lost: “To reign is worth ambition though in Hell: Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven. [10]” Miltonic Satan, the charismatic hero, rebelled against his Creator, and assembled the “faithful friends” with his leadership comparable yet secondary to God. “Satan’s pervasive powers and leadership are evident, being able to rally the fallen angels to continue in the rebellion after their deadly defeat in the Angelic War. [4]” In the sense of leadership, Satan was akin to Coleridge’s Kubla Khan, in that both the fallen angel and the emperor fought with passion, inspired and invoked their followers or subordinates to establish a new “dome” for dwelling.

The more apparent characteristic in Miltonic Satan was, the same as Coleridge’s Kubla Khan, his lively creativity, which stemmed from his stubborn self-consciousness, as described in Book I of Paradise Lost, “The mind is its own place, and in it self / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven. [10]” With his liberal mind and free will, Satan realized that his submission and subjugation in Heaven to the Omnipotent was actually equivalent to the suffering of Hell, and that he was capable of self-creating a new heaven for the fallen angels oppressed and repressed, out of the “Hell” in the opinion of the orthodoxy.

Judging from Satan’s intention to create a heavenly hell, Miltonic fallen angel showed differences from Coleridge’s Eastern emperor. Although both dedicated to founding a spectacular “dome”, their purposes of creating the dome ran in opposite directions. For the imaginary Kubla Khan, his goal was to create a substantial palace displaying the imperial majesty as well as blazing his own dignity. The monarch in the poem, who did not intend to produce a better living environment for his people, was the only person benefiting from the creation of the dome. In fact, the expansion of his palace even signified that his power and territory were expanding as well, and that there would be more people suffering under his tyrant reign. Whereas Miltonic Satan was more like a heroic leader with fraternity, guiding his crew to fight for a dreamy dome without the suppression of God. His aim to reign as a king, could be called selfish, though, indeed ignite the spark of disobedience and self-consciousness of other fallen angels. Once succeeding, the visionary dome of freedom would be established be

a group of freeman, or freed angels, who would credit their self-aware state of mind to Miltonic Satan, the heroic leader and creator of the dome.

It is worth noting that neither of them were purely creative, heroic figures. There was something completely opposite to these heroic productivity in them. It was observed that Satan possessed the dual identities of “a tragic hero” and “an absurd villain” [3]. “Satan was qualified as a tragic hero overreaching himself,” agreed Zeng, “for his divided nature of the hero straddling across the divine and the demonic. [4]” Therefore, the analysis of Milton’s Satan cannot be comprehensive if we merely investigate his heroic side. The following part probes the “beast” or “demon” in Kubla Khan and Satan, complementing the analysis of their dual characteristics.

2.2. Demonic Destruction: Two “Tyrants”

Both Coleridge’s Kubla Khan and Milton’s Satan, in certain measure, can be dubbed “tyrants”. The Kubla Khan in the poem devastated the lives of the maids in his palace crying for their demon lover, as well as millions of soldiers and construction workers perishing for his ambition. Similarly, in order to gain victory against God, Satan brought about “hideous ruin, combustion”, and “perdition”, not to mention that the Satanic infernal serpent seduced Adam and Eve into eating the fruit of the Forbidden Tree, and thus they were driven out of Eden.

Coleridge’s depiction of “pleasure dome”, like Milton’s Heaven, was mingled with the intense smell of misery and death. The palace of temporary joy and superficial glamour, in the mind of Coleridge, was, in nature, a savage place with “caverns” and “caves of ice”. The “holy, enchanted” dome led to a “sunless”, “lifeless sea”, beneath which “woman cried for her demon lover”. Underlying the surface of the lively, reproductive palace, the dome created by Coleridge’s Kubla Khan was, in fact, a dark, gloomy inferno, where he, like other tyrants in human history, imprisoned numerous innocent maids, and destroyed their hope and lives. The wailing woman could be interpreted, not only as the maids belonging to Kubla Khan, wasting the most precious section of their lives in long, lonely, hopeless waiting, but also the wives of the workers who were ordered to build the dome [11], an enormous construction costing decades of years, and a great deal of lives.

Another proof that Kubla Khan the demon ruined millions of lives was his aggressive deeds of provoking war, according to the poem “Kubla Khan”, “amid this tumult Kubla heard from far / Ancestral voices prophesying war.” It is a truth universally acknowledged that almost every emperor’s crown is blood-soaked, at the cost of rank-and-file soldiers, with families falling apart, common people in tear, blood, and misery, and Coleridge’s Kubla Khan was no exception. It appeared as if the poet had moved to the more “personal and intricate mood of his own time” from the “serene, peaceful oriental mood” at the beginning [12]. Coleridge’s description of war was implicit, though, without directly mentioning the cruelty of war and lives sacrificed for Kubla Khan’s ambition, yet the poet assumed that the king was, the same as his European counterparts, a ruthless, tyrannical ruler, a demon murdering the lives of many for his personal desire and ambition. It was the “Paradise” for Kubla Khan alone, yet the hell for all the wailing maids in his imperial palace, and for the common people who suffered under the extravagant, arbitrary dome, and died at the expense of his wild ambition of conquering the continent and establishing a unified empire.

By the same token, in “Paradise Lost”, Miltonic Satan could also be viewed as the representation of the devil. Satan was guilty of Christian sins, greed, wrath, envy, and most severe of all, pride. Satan was an “infernal Serpent”, whose wicked scheme was realized by “deceiving the Mother of Mankind”, “stirred up with Envy and Revenge” [10]. “The absolute preoccupation with self” in Satan, his “craving for dominion and the hunger for glory, forms the cornerstone of the infernal city. [5]” The Satanic image resembled Charles I or Oliver Cromwell rather than revolutionary [5]. It was further pointed out that “a tyrant like Charles was for Milton literally

an imitator and servant of the devil. [6]" Thus Satan was correlated to, not the revolutionary warrior, but the tyrannical ruler in human history [6], which coincidentally fit the description of Coleridge's Kubla Khan, the oriental emperor. Infernal Satan, in this sense, was interpreted as a "tyrant and usurper" in his claim to divine power.

Milton argued that the right to exercise power belongs to those who were endowed with the power to exercise, such as the sun, by nature, "imparts life-giving influence on the earth and so naturally controls her fertility." And thus God, creating the universe, naturally owns the power to rule [6]; whereas Satan the usurper of divine right, whose daughter was "Sin", and son was "death", was immoral in his intention and action of rebelling against God. This point can be deduced from Milton's repeatedly comparing Satan to the sun, not full, complete sun, but eclipse or setting sun, and thus proves that Milton disapproved of the legitimacy of Satan's rule.

Coincidentally, Milton held the same opinion of earthly kings, arguing that they borrowed their power instead of actually owning it [6]. In other words, the authority of these emperors was "not inherent in their persons". Thus, the Satanic king, the category which Kubla Khan fell into, in Milton's view, claimed absurdly to perceive himself as God, and damaged the righteous chains of hierarchy. When Coleridge's Kubla Khan, "drunk the milk of Paradise", and Milton's Satan attempted to rob the divine power of God, they were depicted more as devils rather than heroes. In the eyes of Coleridge, Kubla Khan made "all cry", in both homage and fear. With "his flashing eyes, his floating hair", the enchanted emperor was a scary creature with the dual feature of divinity and demon. Similarly, Satan was "The Infernal Serpent", with pride, envy, greed and impiety occupying his mind.

The ending for the two demons committing sins of usurpation, greed and pride was, not surprisingly, failure and falling, though, the term "fall" seemed to be interpreted differently, as "fortunate fall". It was argued that their fall was a blessing for themselves or people around them, especially Satan, Adam and Eve, the fall of which broke the deadly silence in Miltonic Paradise, opening the doors for them to acquire knowledge and self-consciousness. That was the reason why Satan professed himself to be a "self-created and self-imprisoning hell" [4].

In addition to his jealousy of and revenge on God, Milton's Satan also committed the fault of deception, seducing human beings into disobeying God and eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, bringing death and destruction to the world. He made himself, along with those who followed him or deceived by him, lose Paradise forever. Despite the fact that the result of the fall might be fortunate because of the procurement of knowledge and independence, the loss of the blissful life in Paradise is undeniable. As could be experienced in the poem, Milton's Satan was torn, with recurring remorseful sentiments, wishing to regain his former state as a righteous angel, regardless of his hollow glory as an infernal ruler.

It could be concluded that the Satanic fall was flooded with torture and remorse inside. The empire built by Coleridge's Kubla Khan would fall as well, as implied in the ceaseless turmoil and gigantic tumult in the unfinished poem, which "must evoke a torturing contrast between life in the pleasure dome and life on the tented field. [8]" The mighty empire would be exterminated by the destructive war, like "these dancing rocks", sinking into "a lifeless ocean".

3. Duality of Poetic Characters: Duality of Poetic Imagination

3.1. Poetic Character and the Poet as One

To figure out the sources of the duality of poetic characters, such as Coleridge's Kubla Khan and Milton's Satan, we may trace back to the poets who own dual poetic, imaginative power, and probe the source of their poetic imagination.

Unlike the emperor in the poem, who constructed the pleasure dome at the price of swingeing manpower, material and financial resources, the poet "would build that dome in air", "with

music loud and long". In the aspect of creativity, the poet was identical but superior to Kubla Khan. In other words, the oriental king was the reincarnation of Samuel Coleridge. "Kubla Khan, the powerful creative figure, the hero-poet, and the dreamer Coleridge are one and the same person. [2]" This argument is consented by Pearce, who suggested that Kubla Khan was "a dedication of Coleridge-to-be, an incarnation, and dedication of an earlier Coleridge. [8]" As was commonly accepted, Coleridge himself, an opium-taker, was the one, in the poem, who drank the milk from Paradise, which meant that the honey dew and the heavenly milk in the poem was the opium the poet took. Furthermore, "the inspired poet", specifically, when creating this poem was described as Coleridge's Kubla Khan in the poem, the half-human, half-beast character with flashing eyes and floating hair [8], of whom we should "close our eyes with holy dread". Both Kubla Khan and Coleridge were "concerned with creating and governing their empires or civilizations", though their heroic creations "differ in divisions, and manners... Both possessed a vision of a complete empire. [8]" Hence, by condensation, Kubla Khan was the persona of the poet, and the creative power of Kubla Khan derived from the creative power of the poet, more specifically, the poetic imagination and creativity of the composer.

In "Paradise Lost", which character was the incarnation of Milton? It is indeed a controversial issue. Samuel Coleridge, another poet analysed in this essay, commented on Milton and his masterpiece that Milton himself is seen in every one of Milton's poems, with each character the projection of the poet.

It does make sense that Milton, like Coleridge, cast himself in almost all the characters in his poems. The Satanic serpent, the same with Coleridge's Kubla Khan, was generally identified with Milton himself for Satan born resemblance to Milton in his "rebellion against God's law, the corruption and extinction of true liberty in himself and his followers" [5]. This general view, however, is refuted and reversed. It a mistaken interpretation of Milton as a Satanic revolutionary, and that the Satanic image was a royal portrait of King Charles I, for Milton exposed "the conflict between Charles's use of a royal title and his abuse of a royal oath to uphold the law" [6]. In the political view, Milton utilized the power gun of words, shooting at Charles I, the "tyrant of a lesser degree than Satan". The destructive yet enlightening power of Milton, as well as his poetic imagination, was expanded to an immense scale, rather than Charles alone. "Every bad man is a tyrant," as Milton judged, "each in his own degree." [6]

3.2. Poetic Creative and Destructive Power as One

To define the quality of the poets' poetic power, we must first explore the sources of their creativity. "For Coleridge, each of the images bounded together in an intricate logical and sensuous pattern, with its emphasis upon the importance of the human imagination" [1]. Thus, we could analyse the representative imagery, majorly in "Kubla Khan", to probe the sources of the dual power of imagination.

From the signs in the poems, both "Paradise Lost" and "Kubla Khan" absorbed inspiration from supernatural Muses, Mount, sacred river, and damsel. "Mount Abora" in "Kubla Khan" was actually "Amara" [2], as it was in "Paradise Lost". It was said that Coleridge substituted "Amara" for "Amora", but considering the term "said too much", he changed it to "Abora" in the printed version. Personally, I suppose Mount Amora could be, judging from a realistic view, "amoral", indicating that Kubla Khan in the poem, along with other tyrannical rulers, was an immoral and ineligible oppressor, who would finally be overthrown by the righteous people who suffered. Nevertheless, for fear that the political interpretation of the poem might bring him unnecessary trouble, he euphemistically altered the diction. From this detail, we could tell that merely a word in poetry might possess the power to destroy the poet, and that the life and destiny of the poet would be affected, bringing about misery and even death.

When it comes to Muses, the common knowledge is that they were originally more integrated with water images. It is suggested that Muses "originally water nymphs, whose waters gave

inspiration, and were associated with a number of famous springs”, and thus “a projection to the supernatural of the idealized mother” [2]. In “Kubla Khan”, Alph, the sacred river, finally led to “sunless sea”, the abyss of darkness and despair, “transforming into the sublime and violent eruptions, the objective related to Coleridge’s revision of his Fancy. [13]” Ironically, River Alph was, in Greek mythology, the manifestation of Alphues, the lovestruck River God who reincarnated as the sacred river to congregate with his lover Arethusa, the forest nymphs, which formed sharp contrast with Coleridge’s ungrateful Kubla, further satirizing the inconsistency and nastiness of the eastern emperor [14]. In this sense, the creative and destructive power can be sensed at the same time. In the positive light, it can be used as a powerful weapon to attack the target the poets denounce, be their accusations true or false. That is to say, the poet was endowed with the power to destroy the world he created without effort, simply owing to his fear and prejudice against China, and his worries about Sino-British relations, as he publicly declared [15]. The imaginary dome of Coleridge was, as a matter of fact, far from the real palace of Kubla Khan, though the eastern legends did furnish a prototype for the poet, and thus proof that the power of poetic imagination can be both productive and detrimental, for the poet himself, and the landscape and creature in his works.

In “Kubla Khan”, the Abyssinian maid was a divine creature. She was “plainly the muse of poetic inspiration” [8] appearing in front of the poet, “possessing supernatural powers that make possible the building of the poems and pleasure dome” [13]. But also, the Abyssinian maid, whose singing aroused fancy, would disappear as the poet’s recollections of her music; while Kubla, the incarnation of the poet, was “trapped in the poem, standing by the river forever, never waking up from his trance, and never entering his sunny dome again. [8]” Hence, the Abyssinian maid of “Kubla Khan” was “both black and brilliant” [13], playing a positive role as the source of the poet’s poetic inspiration, while rendering the poet trapped and chained.

Like the black Abyssinian damsel, the poem contained adverse power as well. It was even said that “Kubla Khan” was a tragedy unsatisfactory in its author. “It has its basis in a visionary world which even in Coleridge’s day was under harsh attack. His ‘Abyssinian maid’, was an imaginary being, non-existent in real life, yet Coleridge’s attempts to find her brought nothing but unhappiness to his wife, his children, his intimate friends and himself. [1]” This offered clues about why Coleridge led an unhappy marriage, spending most of his time apart from his wife and children. It is possible that it was his pursuit of poetic inspiration and imagination that rendered the poet unfortunate, for the poet “under the regressive influence of opium and anxieties [2]”, was requested to reach a trance state of reverie and unconsciousness, and hence the quotidian, material world, including “the unwelcome pregnancy of his wife”, was far away from him, causing him trouble with his family and friends, such as William Wordsworth.

Ultimately, I would like to reiterate the potent power of poetic imagination: “The milky water of the Spring, which flows through the paradisiacal landscape constructed by the poet’s Fancy, has been transformed into a sublime image of unrealized potency and real destruction. [13]” Raiger’s illustration and interpretation of poetic power perfectly supported my claim that the dual power of poetic imagination, potent and powerful to such an extent that the poet himself could not control it. Therefore, the poetic imagination has dual impacts, both creative and destructive, upon the poet himself, the poetic world he created, as well as the real world he resided in.

4. Conclusion

Overall, Samuel Coleridge’s Kubla Khan bore the dual nature of hero and demon, so was Satan in John Milton’s “Paradise Lost”, a tragic hero who was a self-created and self-slaved hell. The duality of their characteristics, which embraced the representation or incarnation of the poets themselves, as has been discussed above, stemmed from the dual power of poetic imagination.

Furthermore, with the tangible analysis of the supernatural Muses of imagination in the two poems, we could safely draw the conclusion that a poet, with his poetic imagination, possesses the power to create as well as destroy, exerting influence on the poet himself, the characters he imagines, as well as the character's allusion in real life. Hence, by condensation, the duality of the characters created actually derives from the duality of the poetic imagination of the poet.

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