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An Ambiguous Manifestation of Draining Inspiration-Exploring Coleridge's Writing Block

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's celebrated yet incomplete poem Kubla Khan has received mixed reviews, but it remains a quintessential example of Romantic poetry. This article adopts Writer's Block Theory to explore Coleridge's writing block, especially during the process of creating Kubla Khan. It argues that Coleridge's writing block is attributed to a combination of external and internal factors. The external causes are related to the turbulent historical context and his personal struggles, while the internal ones include physiological/affective causes and motivational/cognitive causes. Then the article discusses the representations of Coleridge's block by analyzing symbolism employed in Kubla Khan as well as the tension between the preface and the poem. Finally, it challenges the notion that writer's block is entirely negative, arguing how constraints motivated Coleridge to innovate and expand the limits of poetic expression.

KEYWORDS

Writer's Block; Samuel Taylor Coleridge; Kubla Khan; inspiration

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1. Introduction

As an outstanding representative of English Romantic poets, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) left the later generations with numerous poems that are characterized by rich images and supernatural inclination. *Kubla Khan*, one of his best-known and most intriguing poems, has triggered enormous controversy for its phantasmagorical narrative, illusive themes and unpredictable rhythms, and received polarized reviews over the centuries. It was regarded as mundane when first published in 1816, especially from those hostile to Coleridge due to different political opinions. With the passage of time, positive appraisal began to emerge, though with a tendency of generalized praises about the "tenderness of fancy and luxuriant imagery" (Graham 284). G. W. Knight, for example, gave high remarks on its barbaric and oriental magnificence (Knight 158-69).

After Coleridge's demise, critics began to recognize the musicality and aesthetic value of the poem. In the 1970s and 1980s, critics put more emphasis on the significance of its preface. Kathleen Wheeler, for instance, addressed it as "a highly literary piece of composition" rather than "a literal, dry, factual account", arguing that the preface endows the poem with mysteriousness and depth (Wheeler 28). Adam Sisman admires its "beautiful, sensuous and enigmatic" traits (196). Chronologically, *Kubla Khan* has undergone a transformation in its reception from being largely ignored to being highly praised in the critical community. The poem's sense of mystery, its technical proficiency, and Coleridge's creative genius have all become the focal points of interest for critics, and the status of the poem in literary history has been increasingly acknowledged.

Fragmented but written in an extremely beautiful manner, *Kubla Khan* does present a grand and exotic picture of an ancient Oriental empire. Despite its bizarre imagery and inexplicable theme, the poem demonstrates the profound power of imagination of the writer. Regarding the subtitle of "a Vision in a Dream. A Fragment" (Coleridge 295), Coleridge claims in the preface that the work was a production of a dream after he took some anodyne while reading "Purchas's Pilgrimage". Upon awakening, he started scrambling down the lines as images unfolded in his mind. There could have been two to three hundred lines had a visitor from Porlock not interrupted the composition. After the writer sent away the guest and returned to his writing, the rest of the poem had pitifully vanished in his memory, leaving only fifty-four lines to the present time. However, this story about how the poem came into being in the preface makes people doubt its authenticity, and a great variety of interpretations have been provided to solve the enigma. Alen Richardson identifies the preface as "a statement that constitutes an apology rather than a defence" for suspending the publication of the poem for so many years (13). Shortly after completing *Kubla Khan*, Coleridge wrote *Dejection: An Ode* in 1802 which is about the state of poetic paralysis. It is true that his three most influential poems (i.e., *Kubla Khan*, *On the Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*) were written during the three years from 1979 to 1800. After that, he shifted his career from poem-writing to literary criticism, prose writing and lecturing. Is *Kubla Khan* "evidence of [Coleridge's] infertility" as deemed by George Watson (9)? This article employs the Writer's Block Theory to explore Coleridge's writing block and how his block is displayed in his works.

2. Writer's Block Theory: Definitions, Symptoms and Causes

The term "Writer's Block" is presumed to have been coined in 1947 by Austrian psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler. Over the century, the definition of the term has gone through many changes, and researchers have explored the causes and solutions of this phenomenon from various perspectives. On the basis of the previous studies, there is a tendency of examining it as a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors rather than viewing it as a solely psychological or emotional issue.

As a follower of Freud, Bergler pursued a psychoanalytical approach in understanding writer's block. In his opinion, all forms of creative writing are expressions of sublimated oral regression (Bergler, "Unconscious Mechanisms in "Writer's Block"" 160-67). Neurotic and masochistic, the creative writer uses words to heal the

psychological wounds inflicted during infancy, as expressed in the equation "Words = milk." (Bergler, *The Writer and Psychoanalysis* 70) When this "milk" runs out, writer's block sets in, which can only be resolved by recognizing and addressing the underlying psychological process. Awareness of this sublimation process is key to restoring psychological balance and resuming literary production, and Bergler claims to have helped thirty-six blocked writers regain their writing ability with a one hundred percent success rate.

Bergler's perceptions triggered great interest and curiosity among writers and literary critics. Robert Boice has developed an IRSS model which comprises four elements: involvement, regimen, self-management, and social networking, for conceptualizing and treating writing block. He has summarized the symptoms of writing block that are often reported by blocked writers, such as paralysis, discomfort, anxiety, and a racing heart, acknowledging their traumatic and disabling impact. He has also found out the most common causes of writing block, such as internal censors, fear of failure, perfectionism, early negative experiences, procrastination, and mental health issues.

Some researchers use "writing apprehension" or "writing anxiety" as synonyms of "writer's block". For instance, John Daly regarded writing apprehension to be "concerned with a person's general tendencies to approach or avoid situations perceived to demand writing accompanied by some amount of evaluation" (10). Therefore, individuals who suffer from a high level of anxiety for potential negative evaluations on their writings will try all means to avoid writing situations. Together with his work colleague Morris Holland, Daly developed a questionnaire to identify writing-apprehensive students, and found that they demonstrate weaker knowledge about writing skills and tend to avoid courses, majors, and professions concerning writing in the future. By contrast, Lynn Bloom's research indicated that anxious writers, regardless of their skill level, have certain "misconceptions" and "characteristics" in common, while non-anxious writers tend to be more "realistic" and "efficient" in their approach to writing (Rose, *Writer's Block* 15). Lynn Z. Bloom has also proposed five internal features (intellectual, artistic, temperamental, biological, and emotional factors of the writer during the writing process) as well as two external contexts (social and academic contexts) which she considered as essential to successful writing (Bloom 119-33).

In Mike Rose's argumentation, though, individuals suffering from writer's block, unlike those with writing apprehension, do not habitually avoid writing situations for fear of negative evaluations. According to Rose, the experience of writer's block is characterized by an individual's genuine effort to commence writing, yet their inability to do so as a consequence of diverse impediments, for "blocking is not simply measured by the passage of time…but by the passage of time with limited productive involvement in the writing task" (Rose, *Writer's Block* 3). Providing an explanation of the phenomenon in a broader sense, Rose's definition of writer's block as "an inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or commitment" (3) is probably the most widely accepted one. He managed to distinguish blocking from apprehensiveness by identifying writing apprehension as "a possible cause of or reaction to blocking" and pointing out that they are "not synonymous, not necessarily coexistent, and not necessarily causally linked" (4). According to Rose, blocking can be manifested in various forms: "some high-blockers produce only a few sentences; others produce many more, but these sentences will be false starts, repetitions, blind alleys, or disconnected fragments of discourse; still others produce a certain amount of satisfactory prose only to stop in mid-essay" (3). Moreover, Rose designed a questionnaire to identify students with high and low writer's block, observing cognitive variables such as rigid rules and premature editing and collected enormous empirical evidence. By conducting interviews and analyzing students" writing behaviors, he drew a conclusion that rigid rules and inflexible plans restrict the writing process and contribute to writer's block, and emphasized the significance of making adjustments on these aspects through counseling and tutoring to alleviate writer's block (Rose, "Rigid Rules" 389-401).

Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* is usually mentioned as a product of writer's block due to its abrupt ending, as if it is left unfinished. Interpreting the poem through the lens of Writer's Block Theory offers not only a fresh perspective for understanding the context for its abrupt ending, but also valuable insights into the mind of a famous Romantics

like Coleridge, shedding light on the challenges and struggles in their creative processes. This approach allows for a better appreciation of the poem's historical significance while enhancing our understanding of creative blocks and how creative writers may sometimes reflect on them in their creative works.

3. Causes of Coleridge's Block

According to the materialist dialectics, the occurrence, development, and demise of anything are the joint result of both internal and external causes. However, internal causes are the fundamental reasons, while external causes are secondary reasons. "External causes are the conditions for change, internal causes are the basis for change, and external causes act through internal causes" (Mao 314). It is unilateral to deny or ignore either the internal causes or the external causes, so when analyzing Coleridge's writing block, a comprehensive analysis of both the internal causes and the external causes needs to be conducted. In view of the existing studies on writer's block, this article contends that Coleridge's block is associated with both external causes and internal ones. The external causes are concerned with the historical environment of his times and his unhappy marriage, while the internal causes could be categorized into physiological/affective causes and motivational/cognitive causes.

3.1 Environmental Causes

The environmental causes of Coleridge's writing block are multidimensional, covering the historical background of his earlier life, the disillusionment of his political ideal, and his marital problems. *Kubla Khan* is believed to have been written during 1797 and 1800, coinciding with the flourishing of Romanticism across Europe. This literary movement, which began in the late 18th century and spanned the early 19th century, permeated various artistic domains. The birth of Romanticism was influenced by specific historical circumstances. Politically, the French Revolution at the turn of the century, as well as the subsequent nationalist and democratic uprisings across Europe, ignited intense political fervor among the populace.

However, these events also resulted in a sense of disillusionment and despair towards the Enlightenment's ideal of a rational society. Additionally, the progression of Industrial Revolution not only exacerbated social class tensions within England but also engendered a widespread aversion to capitalist urban life. Despite the rapid economic growth spurred by the Industrial Revolution, it also precipitated a wave of rural-to-urban migration. As a university student who was deeply concerned with social issues, Coleridge witnessed the decline of traditional British agriculture and the plight of the dispossessed peasantry forced to migrate to cities due to the Enclosure Movement. The Industrial Revolution, while boosting productivity, saw capitalists prioritize wealth accumulation over improving workers" living and working conditions, leading to appalling living conditions and inhumane treatment in the mining regions of the north. The "Glorious Revolution" did successfully resolve a political crisis, but it failed to eradicate social inequalities. Coleridge articulated a sense of desperation in the opening lines of his sonnet *On the Prospect of Establishing a Pantisocracy in America*: "Whilst pale Anxiety, corrosive Care, /The tear of Woe, the gloom of sad Despair, /And deepen'd Anguish generous bosoms rend" (Coleridge 69). These sorrowful words revealed his profound dissatisfaction with the state of the world.

In the meantime, Coleridge firmly believed in the transformative potential of the French Revolution, which he saw as a catalyst for reviving humanity and reshaping Britain into an ideal society. Inspired by the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, he envisioned a world where private property was abolished and individuals could work and study together in pursuit of equal values. Robert Southey, a close friend of Coleridge, also embraced these revolutionary principles, and the two of them planned to establish a Utopian agricultural community called "Pantisocracy" in America. However, the advent of Napoleon Bonaparte and his subsequent political domination through violence shattered their revolutionary dreams. The reality of violence and autocracy

that emerged from the revolution's promise of justice and redemption left Coleridge deeply disillusioned. After his political ideals evaporated and passions declined, he retreated to the Lake area and turned to escapism as one of the "Lake Poets", seeking to build a unified transcendental philosophy that could accommodate religious meditation, complex philosophical views, and the realities of life. The French Revolution had a profound impact on the Romantic poets, shaping their spiritual values and philosophical ideologies. They turned to seek refuge in imaginative pursuits, creating a utopian vision that served as a response to the disappointment and destruction they witnessed in the aftermath of the revolution and the ravages of industrialization.

To realize his political ideal, Coleridge married Sarah Flicker, whom he did not truly love, leading to a lifelong responsibility of providing for the mother of his children. Coleridge's emotional life was complex, for he also had friendships and intellectual connections with other women, including Sara Hutchinson, with whom he shared a profound emotional bond. Although Coleridge's relationship with Sara Hutchinson was platonic, it has been suggested that their connection was more intense and emotionally fulfilling than his marriage to Sarah Fricker. The depression in his romantic relationships arose from the fact that he had married a woman he could not love and loved a woman whom he could not marry. The unresolved emotions and unrequited love may have contributed to his psychological state, which can sometimes hinder the flow of creative writing. In *Dejection: An Ode* whose title used to be *Letter to Sara Hutchinson*, he expresses the feeling of emptiness and failure in writing: "A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear, / A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief, / Which finds no natural outlet, no relief, / In word, or sigh, or tear—" (21-24). (Coleridge 364) These emotional distractions might have made it difficult for him to fully immerse himself in the writing process.

3.2 Physiological/Affective Causes

Coleridge's physical and mental health problems, along with his opium addiction, constituted the physiological/affective causes of his block. Coleridge suffered from various physical ailments, including rheumatic fever and gastrointestinal issues ever since his early childhood. At the age of six, Coleridge contracted a severe fever. After a dispute with his brother Frank and scolding from his mother, the frail child fled to the open fields and endured a chilly, damp night lying on the bare earth, which led to a rheumatic fever, causing him to suffer from chronic pain for the rest of his life. Then at the age of fourteen, Coleridge swam across the New River fully dressed and allowed his clothes to dry on his back, which brought about another attack of rheumatic fever, compounded later by a severe neuralgia and jaundice, so that he had to spend the rest of the year in the sick ward of Christ's Hospital. Chronic pain and discomfort can distract and drain energy, making it difficult to focus and engage in creative work.

Due to his health problems, Coleridge was haunted by opium addiction for almost half his life. During Coleridge's times, opium was commonly used as a painkiller in British families just like aspirin used today. Walter R. Bett emphasized the availability of the drug as "freely sold anywhere to all who wished to buy it" (Bett 91). Coleridge might have started using opium to relieve the pain from childhood illnesses. Traces of evidence that Coleridge was taking laudanum could be found in his letters from 1791 to 1796. When he entered Cambridge college in 1791, he complained in his letter to his brother George about a "disagreeable tearing pain" in his head, and revealed that "opium never used to have any disagreeable effects on me" (Griggs, *Collected Letters, I* 16). The natural tone of the sentence indicates that he should have tried opium before, and probably more than once. In a letter to Joseph Cottle on November 5, 1796, Coleridge mentioned that he took laudanum "every four hours", "25 drops each dose" to cure the "blister" under his right ear (Griggs, *Unpublished Letters, I* 59*)*, and on the same day, in another letter written to Thomas Poole, Coleridge referred to taking "between 60 and 70 drops of Laudanum" to ease "an intolerable pain" which was "nearly frantic" (Griggs, *Collected Letters, I* 150-51). His letter of December 17, 1796 stated that his health went so bad that "the frequent use of Laudanum" was "absolutely necessary" (163). Illness

and the toll of opium addiction likely left him with limited energy reserves and impaired his ability to concentrate and sustain the mental effort required for writing.

When discussing mental health as one of the most commonly attributed causes of writing block, Boice points out that "writing attracts unhealthy personalities who tend to block" ("Writing Blocks and Tacit Knowledge" 27). Coleridge was suffering from mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, and he used opium to alleviate his mental anxiety with its narcotic effects. He complains to Thomas Cottle that, "I am seriously ill. The complaint, my medical attendant says, is nervous-and originating in mental causes." (Griggs, *Collected Letters, I* 150) In his poem *The Pains of Sleep*, he described his distressful sleeping problems such as nightmares and insomnia (Coleridge 389-91), and in a letter to George in March, 1789, he claimed that laudanum gave him "divine repose" just like "a spot of enchantment" (Griggs, *Collected Letters, I* 394-95). His sensitive nature kept him alert to any physical discomfort or mishap in life, rendering him spiritual vulnerability and physical frailty, and opium provided him with an escape from the reality, a temporary solution to all problems. It worked as his defense mechanism, shoving all worries out, keeping him in high spirit when he felt depressed. Coleridge's addiction to opium created a physical dependence that required him to continually seek and consume the drug. Opium addiction can cause cognitive impairments and "neurological malfunctions" (Cunningham 156), affecting memory and concentration, which could have made it difficult for Coleridge to recall his ideas or maintain focus on his writing. Perhaps that is why his attitude towards the drug changed dramatically with an obvious increase in dosage of the drug. In his letter to Joseph Cottle on April 26, 1814, he talked about his first experience with opium, celebrating it as "a charm" and "a miracle" (Griggs, *Collected Letters, III* 476); nevertheless, in the later letters, he referred to this habit of "more than 30 years" as "great debasement" and "misery of [his] existence" (Griggs, *Unpublished Letters, II* 441), while calling himself "a poor miserable wretch" (Griggs, *Collected Letters, III* 511), in a much more regretful tone, showcasing a growing sense of guilt and maybe hatred in himself for his weak willpower in the face of demon's seduction. Molly Lefebure notes in her biography that "his predicament was not simply a matter of a sapped will. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's imaginative powers and concentration were literally destroyed by the drug: his intellectual capacity was fearfully eroded: his sense of truth hopelessly distorted." (Youngquist 887) Though originally used to ease his physical and mental ailments, opium has tremendously impacted Coleridge's health and literary creation. Coleridge must have noticed the negative influence; otherwise, he wouldn"t have entrusted himself to Dr. Henry Gillman in the hope of getting rid of opium addiction for seventeen years till the last days of his life. The physical and psychological symptoms of opium withdrawal can be severe and debilitating and they could have further impaired Coleridge's ability to write, as he battled cravings and discomfort.

In terms of the inducement of the reverie in which *Kubla Khan* was composed, "two grains of opium" (Kelliher 192) in the Crewe Manuscript was substituted with "anodyne" (Coleridge, "Kubla Khan" 296) in the 1816 preface. The reason why Coleridge altered the wording might be his reluctance to admit to be a drug addict for fear of moral condemnations. Another change in the wording worthy of noticing is the replacement of "Reverie" (Kelliher 192) in the manuscript with "profound sleep" (Coleridge, "Kubla Khan" 296) in the preface. The definition of "reverie" provided by the Oxford English Dictionary and the Collins Dictionary both indicate a state of imagining or thinking about pleasant things, as if someone is dreaming; therefore, the degree of mental activity in a reverie is much higher than that in a profound sleep. Then why did the writer emphasize that he was in a profound sleep, "at least of the external senses" (296)? A possible reason is that he intended to find a justification for the unaccomplished poem. By claiming that the poem was written down in an autonomous but unconscious reverie, Coleridge "forces" readers to approach his "vision in a dream" as "an occurrence that opium made possible" (Youngquist 895).

3.3 Motivational/Cognitive Causes

In addition to physiological/affective causes, motivational and cognitive factors are likely to aggravate writer's

block. Motivational and cognitive causes of writing blocks often overlap and can exacerbate each other; therefore, a holistic approach that encompasses both motivational and cognitive factors is adopted here.

The motivational cause of Coleridge's block lies in a lack of motivation. As far as he was concerned, writing was a trade rather than an enjoyment. Apart from the wounds in his emotional and romantic well-being, Coleridge struggled with financial difficulties throughout his life. The need to earn money to support his family and repay debts could have imposed a significant burden on his creative mind, potentially leading to a focus on writing for financial gain rather than for personal expression. When becoming a means to earn a living, writing, which used to be meaningful and pleasant, became exhausting and intimidating and felt like an obligation to Coleridge and he finally lost the inner drive to continue with it. His frustration with being a professional writer could be found in his letter to his publisher, Joseph Cottle, in which he claimed to be "forced to write for bread", and his "happiest moments for composition are broken in upon by the reflection that [he] must make haste" (Coleridge, The Letters 154-55). Obviously overwhelmed by the great pressure of meeting deadlines and expectations for high-quality work, Coleridge warned against pursuing writing as a career, as he knew exactly what writers are burdened with.

Motivational causes range from finding writing boring to fear of criticism. According to Boice, the "interference of internal censors" is the most popularly cited cause of writing blocks, a situation in which writers have accepted or exaggerated the warnings and criticism of teachers or other authoritative figures (Boice, "Writing Blocks and Tacit Knowledge" 25). They cannot refrain themselves from recalling the past experiences of "stifling assignments, stultifying formats, and scarifying writing evaluations that can hinder the writing process" (Huntington x). Generation of ideas and writing momentum will be suppressed by fear of receiving harsh criticism and rejection. In Coleridge's case, this authority figure was Reverend Mr. James Boyer, headmaster of Christ's Hospital, the great Charity School of London where discipline was highly praised and disobedience would only incur heavy punishment. Under Boyer's rigorous guidance and requirements, Coleridge's preference in literature was molded and a conception that poetry had "a logic of its own as severe as that of science" (Bloom 122) was also deeply imprinted in his heart and his writing practice. Boice's research shows that early classroom trauma causes blocking later in the student's academic career, for they believe in a necessity to follow rigid, inappropriate or nonfunctional rules stipulated by the authoritarian teacher (Boice, "Psychotherapies for Writing Blocks" 185). Nevertheless, this internalized belief is nothing but "composing-process assumptions and misleading assumptions" according to Rose (Rose, *Writer's block* 5). Trapped in the confines of these rules, writers can become blocked. Fears that they may not meet the standards in line with those rules and encounter ferocious criticism add to their evaluation anxiety and produce a lack of self-confidence. It might be the reason why Coleridge kept *Kubla Khan* unfinished and unpublished for so many years. Coleridge's self-doubt and insecurities, particularly in his later years, could have undermined his confidence as a writer. The fear of not living up to his own or others" expectations might have caused him to hesitate and avoid writing altogether.

Another common motivational/cognitive cause is perfectionism which has a "kinship to fears of failure" (Boice, "Writing Blocks and Tacit Knowledge" 26). Writers may set standards which are unrealistically high, revise their works again and again and strive to present the best versions. According to Rose's research, students who are classified as high blockers, or those who frequently experience writer's block, share a set of common behaviors and mindsets, including a perfectionistic approach to their work, an obsession with grammatical rules and the structure of essays, and a habit of extensively editing their writing at the early stages by deleting and reworking sentences. Additionally, these students tend to devote more time to planning and organizing their writing rather than engaging in freeform writing (Rose, *Writer's block* 70-83). Coleridge, likewise, held high standards and perfectionist tendencies. He often felt dissatisfied with his work and sought to achieve an unattainable level of perfection. This relentless pursuit of perfection could have resulted in procrastination and a fear of failure, and ultimately hindered his ability to write. With more devastating symptoms shown in his block, he ceased drawing enjoyment from writing

and even worse, he completely loathed writing: "I compose very little, and I absolutely hate composition, and such is my dislike that even a sense of duty is sometimes too weak to overcome it." (Coleridge *The Letters, I* 181) The direct result of Coleridge's aversion to writing on the behavioral level is procrastination, whose components include "self-disparagement, emotional cycles of good intentions followed by shame, fear of failure and task aversiveness, poor self-confidence and task-management skills, and busyness displays combined with patterns of bingeing work" (Boice, "Writing Blocks and Tacit Knowledge" 26). To summarize, Coleridge procrastinated the composition tasks due to fear of failure, perfectionism, or simply not feeling motivated to write any more.

4. Representations of Coleridge's block in Kubla Khan

Kubla Khan itself reflects the creative challenges encountered by Coleridge. The symbolism employed as well as the relationship between the preface and the poem is going to be examined to provide a deeper understanding of the obstacles Coleridge faced.

4.1 Imagery & Symbolism

The role of imagery in poetry is to evoke associations and comparisons, and it is one of the significant features of Romantic poetry to use subtle and implied objects to convey thoughts and emotions. Coleridge excels at weaving meaning into his vivid imagery, and it is through a careful analysis of these symbolic elements that the true depth of his poetry becomes apparent, lending both weight and complexity to his works. Many critics view Kubla Khan as an allegory of poetic creation. To a British like Coleridge, the Orient is an exotic place with ancient and brilliant civilization, a place remote and mysterious enough to endow the poet with endless imagination and inspiration. The palace and gardens of Xanadu epitomize the boundless possibilities of creative power and serve as a utopian sanctuary for the poet's artistic endeavors within his imagination. The "Pleasure Dome" is a key imagery of the poem, closely adhering to the central theme the poet wishes to convey, exemplifying the poet's quest for artistic excellence and his yearning for a perfect, romantic realm of the spirit.

The sacred river Alph is another pivotal image. It runs through "wood and dale" (26), reaches "the caverns measureless to man" (27), sinks "in tumult to a lifeless ocean" (28), "a sunless sea" (5). (Coleridge, "Kubla Khan," 297-98) With its natural vitality and strength, the water of the sacred river is "both the central image that informs Fancy and the figural representation of its poetic activity" (Raiger 663). Expressions such as "ceaseless turmoil seething" (17), "fast thick pants" (18), "a mighty fountain momently forced" (19) all suggest a hidden formidable force. The river, symbolizing a source of poetic inspiration with its breeding power, rushes down with unstoppable momentum, indicating the poet's overflowing creative passion; however, the ultimate destination of the river is a lifeless sea. The termination of the river might potentially represent the demise of the abrupt cessation of the poet's creative passion and imaginative capabilities, akin to the helpless predicament of creative paralysis Coleridge encountered in his later literary endeavor.

In the third stanza, "I", as a poet, seeks to draw inspiration from the "symphony and song" (43) of a "damsel with a dulcimer" (37). In this sense, the "Abyssinian maid" (39) who plays the dulcimer plays the role of "Muse" for the poet who aspires to build a dome in the air that "all who heard should see them there" (48), something to be admired and shared by all, like a perfect piece of artwork, instead of "a miracle of rare device" (35) built by the Khan. At the end of the poem, the poet envisions that when endowed with inspiration, he "on honey-dew hath fed" (52) and "drunk the milk of Paradise" (54) with "flashing eyes" and "floating hair" (50). Nevertheless, the expressions such as "could I", "'twould" and "I would" used in the lines "Could I revive within me/Her symphony and song, /To such a deep delight 'twould win me" (42-44), "I would build that dome in air" (46), are associated with the subjunctive mood, showing how much the poet longs for the recovery of poetic inspiration while suggesting the

slim chances for that to happen. The dreamlike fragments reflect the author's peak of happiness and despair in the abyss after venting his creative passion, as well as the reappearance of the light of hope and the painful struggle.

4.2 Preface's Relation to the Poem

The main idea of the 1816 preface to *Kubla Khan* is condensed in the two subtitles: "OR, A VISION IN A DREAM" and "A Fragment", which respectively direct towards the origin and the stylistic feature of the poem. Framing the poem as a product of the Romantic imagination, the preface provides a context for the poem's composition and its fragmentary nature. Unlike the poem's final celebration and longing for the marvels of creative inspiration, the preface subtly reveals the poet's admission of his lost inspiration and his resigned frustration as the lines he believed to be divinely inspired "had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast", "without the after restoration of the latter" (Coleridge, "Kubla Khan" 296). Coherences could be found between the preface and the poem. The most apparent one would be the Khan's eminent achievements. In the preface, Coleridge mentioned being reading Khan Kubla commanding a palace to be built in "Purchas's Pilgrimage" the moment he fell asleep, which fully accounts for the core figure and the content of the first two stanzas in the poem. Another coherence lies in the seclusive state of the author and the Khan. When composing the poem, Coleridge was retiring to a "lonely farm-house" (296). He secluded himself from the hustle and bustle of the outside world, devoting himself entirely to literary creation, all in the pursuit of the right mindset and inspiration for writing. Similarly, under Khan's order, a grand palace was to be built. "Walls and towers were girdled around" (7) to avoid the noise of the river and the turmoil of war. The writer's "temporary retreat from the world symbolized by the walls and towers of revived Gothic" (Mercer 61) could not help him escape the inner torments bought by guilt, diffidence and self-dissatisfaction. Likewise, the Khan had to leave the palace under the call of war and return to the battlefield to confront the enemies.

With the unusual narrative about the composing process of *Kubla Khan*, the fragment of the poem *The Picture; or, the Lover's Resolution* in the second part of the preface is, under most circumstances, neglected. The cited poem is about a young man who is captivated by an image that embodies his ideal of beauty and love. He is so obsessed with her that he could see her face appear upon the water. The speaker experiences a profound sense of loss and longing when the illusion dissipates, which mirrors Coleridge's own feelings of creative frustration, as he was troubled with the limitations of his circumstances, including his opium addiction and financial struggles, which hindered his ability to complete his poetic works. The young man in *The Picture* is ultimately faced with the reality that this image is a mere illusion, unattainable in the physical world. Similarly, Coleridge often faced the challenge of translating his rich, imaginative visions into tangible, completed works of art. The gap between his ambitious ideas and his ability to realize them on paper must have been a source of significant frustration. Coleridge's inclusion of *The Picture* in the preface to *Kubla Khan* might be a way for him to comment on the universal dilemmas faced by artists: the tension between creative vision and the ability to execute it, the conflict between artistic aspirations and the demands of daily life, and the challenge of maintaining inspiration in the face of disappointment and failure. These lines thereby serve as an echo to *Kubla Khan*, attesting to the author's obsession with poetic creation as well as his helplessness and resignation to the reality.

Coleridge's writing block, as mentioned in the preface, is symbolic of the creative struggle many artists face. Coleridge's claim that he composed the poem in a dream and then lost it due to a visitor's interruption mirrors his struggles when writing the poem. The interruption by the visitor could be interpreted as a metaphor for the various distractions that Coleridge faced in the real world, including his failure to realize political ambitions, his health issues, material hardships, mental turmoil, as well as external criticism and expectations. The unfinished state of the poem itself indicates the obstacles and sense of frustration in the poet's creative process, and the inability to complete the poem after the interruption can be seen as a reflection of his block or the challenge of recapturing a

moment of inspiration once lost. Hence, the "visitor" could be a part of Coleridge's artistic fabrication, with his intrusion being an effort to rationalize the author's exhaustion of creative power.

5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of writer's block has been a source of intrigue and fascination for both scholars and artists alike. The multifaceted nature of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's creative block and its manifestations in his masterpiece *Kubla Khan* could be explored through an in-depth examination of his life experiences. Coleridge's writer's block could be a result of a confluence of external and internal factors. On the one hand, the turbulent historical context of his times, marked by political instability and social upheaval, along with the disillusionment of his political ideals, undoubtedly had a profound impact on his psychological state. The constant state of flux and uncertainty may have hindered his creative process, as Coleridge worked strenuously, trying to find his place within a rapidly changing world. Additionally, his unhappy marriage and heavy family responsibility, and financial difficulties added an additional layer of emotional turmoil that likely affected his ability to focus and channel his creative energies into his writing. On the other hand, internal factors such as his poor physical and mental health, opium addiction, ambivalence towards writing as a profession, lack of motivation, fear of evaluation, and perfectionistic tendencies all contributed to his writing block. These factors were interconnected and mutually reinforcing, creating a vicious cycle that impeded his ability to sustain the concentration and mental clarity required for poetic composition, ultimately shaping the predicament of his literary creation. With an analysis of the reasons for his block, Coleridge's suppression of the poem for almost twenty years, which appears "not mysterious but predicable" (Richardson 8), is now understandable.

The fragmentary nature of the poem, with abrupt shifts in perspective and the incomplete stanzas, reflects the disjointed and incoherent thoughts that often accompany writer's block. *Kubla Khan* is not only a description of a dream-like palace but also a profound exploration of the poet's psychological state of literary creation. By examining Coleridge's block, valuable insights could be gained into the intricate relationship between constraint and creativity. Furthermore, this study challenges the traditional view of writer's block as an entirely negative experience that halts artistic progress. Instead, it highlights the ways in which constraints can become a source of artistic inspiration, as the obstacles Coleridge faced pushed him to explore new avenues of expression and push the boundaries of poetic form. The Romantic movement, with its emphasis on individual experience, emotion, and the supernatural, offered a framework within which Coleridge could explore his own block.

Coleridge experienced a constant transformation of identity throughout his life. In his youth, he co-wrote the English Romantic poetry collection *Lyrical Ballads* with Wordsworth; in his middle and later years, he devoted himself to literary criticism, political philosophy, and religious interpretation. In whatever field he ventured, he could be hailed as a "master", and he never stopped paying attention to political and social issues or questing for the path of human development. The exploration of Coleridge's block enhances the appreciation of the complexities of the creative process and the ways in which artists navigate and respond to the challenges they face in their artistic endeavors. The analysis of Coleridge's block in *Kubla Khan* sheds new light on the poem whose incomplete status is not to be seen as a mark of failure or deficiency but rather as an artwork brimming with potential and possibility. The gaps and silences within the text invite readers, to engage actively with the poem and to envision alternative meanings and narratives. In this way, Coleridge's block emerges as a source of inspiration and a testament to the triumphs of the creative process.

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