

Robert Southey
***The Curse of Kehama* (1810)**

David Chandler

When he was a young man, Robert Southey developed a very interesting ambition: he decided that he wanted to write a series of long poems which would illustrate the world's major religions. He never finished this project, but he did write several long poems concerned with specific religions. *The Curse of Kehama*, which he spent several years writing, and finally published in 1810, is a poem about the Hindu religion. The story takes place in India. It brings together several themes of great interest to Southey. First, there is the abuse of power: Kehama is a corrupt, powerful man, a kind of king, a rajah. The poem is also about how suffering can lead to redemption: a deeply 'Romantic' theme, which we find in many romantic texts. The son of Kehama, taking advantage of his privileged position in Indian society, attempts to rape the daughter of a peasant. To protect his daughter, her father then kills Kehama's son. As a punishment for this peasant who has killed his son, Kehama then places a curse on the peasant, called Ladurlad, and it is this curse that I've chosen for you to listen to. It's the most famous part of the poem. What the curse is saying is that Ladurlad will experience every kind of pain and suffering, but he will not die. So he must live, and live and live in constant suffering, but without the ability to die. This makes him similar to certain other 'Romantic' suffering figures: perhaps most famously Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner'. But after lots and lots of suffering, Ladurlad is finally redeemed: he is able to go to the Hindu heaven. And on the other hand, Kehama, his tormenter, is punished and taken to the Hindu hell.

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