

Lost in a dream



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“ You may say that I am a dreamer, but I’m not the only one, I hope someday you’ll join us, and the world will live as one.” John Lennon’s “ Imagine” has reached far beyond the bounds of his time to embrace the sentiments of an ageless audience. Lennon invites his listeners to envision a society in which people do not anticipate the beauty and splendor of a heaven, but rather attempt to create this environment on earth. Manmade barriers no longer exist and life is a general “ brotherhood of man” in which people have a mutual respect for one another’s life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Humanity has long suffered the strife of reality and dreamed of a utopian society, similar to Lennon’s vision. This civilization would ideally be void of pain, want, and despair-all aspects of the shared human condition. Inevitably the daydream ends, the flower withers, and love is forever lost. Artists and poets are not exempt from this race of optimists who find their dreams obliterated by the cruelty of reality. Through several of his poems, Edgar Allen Poe struggles to find a compromise between the caustic world of reality and the fantastical images of dream life. His catalogue of poems concerning this subject matter and the discernment between the two worlds is unified by their progressing themes and titles. His poem “ Dreams” focuses on the happiness and innocence that dreams have given the speaker. Relating to the concept of childlike innocence lost, “ A Dream” proclaims that daydreams are the reflection of youthful aspirations never attained. Ultimately regressing to a pessimistic and jaded perspective, “ A Dream Within a Dream” claims that all dreams are futile and delusional. Throughout the progression of these works, Poe’s speaker reveals his sense of insignificance in a world enraptured with its own pointless and shallow endeavors. He dreams of an unattainable fantasy world far better than any

reality he can foresee. In childhood, every aspect of life has a sense of purity and innocence that permeates these memories. Children find time to be contented merely living and daydreaming. The speaker throughout “Dreams” invokes his memories of the past, desperately wanting them to last beyond the reverie and develop into reality. He feels as though a dream of “hopeless sorrow” is far better than the “cold reality of waking life” because a dream is temporary and ever changing (ln 4-6). A dream possesses the ability to conform to any expectation, regardless of physical barriers. Alas, reality is truthful and inescapable. There are expectations and demands of the outside world that govern man’s every move and thought. Within a dream world, man is commander of his own reactions, never judged or expected to do the conventional. Dreams have no conformity because individuals, apart from society’s rules, create them. As a boy, the speaker saw his future as a promising and welcoming adventure. He “reveled...in the summer sky, in dreams of living light/And loveliness,” wherein the beauty of nature embodied his hopes and dreams (ln 13-15). As inevitable as the setting of the sun and the changing of the seasons, the boy must grow to manhood, abandoning his imagination and fascination. Reality attacked innocence during its most vulnerable hour, leaving “behind its image on [his] spirit,” leaving him a jaded and caustic man (ln 22-23). Although he found pleasure during his childhood, this world of perfection and happiness can be revisited only in dreams. The capitalization of Paradise, Hope and Love exemplifies the reverence and value placed upon such entities. These aspects of dreams are all that give life purpose. The speaker claims that reality embodies all that is evil in the world while dreams possess the unique ability to perpetuate hope. Adolescence is traditionally a period evaluating

morals and purposes. It is the transition time from a life of unquestioning acceptance to critical analysis. This speaker in “A Dream” tends to believe that dreams may offer a glimpse of inner peace that can never be attained. Every morning, man is destined to wake from his dream of “joy departed” to fall victim to a daily regimen (ln 2). Inevitably, he “turn[s] back upon the past” to view his childhood, wherein life held this inexplicable wonderment (ln 8). He is bombarded by memories of his goals and hopes as a child. During this adolescence stage (a period of awakening), the once deemed pure past has a shadow of pessimism cast over it. People begin to realize that dreams of the past, while beautiful and idealistic, are impossible. Each night, the speaker retreats to his slumber to revisit days in which these dreams were conceivable, only to wake all too abruptly and “broken-hearted” (ln 4). The dream is unfinished and unfulfilled. The speaker finds himself wanting desperately to make these dreams his reality. The hope that has motivated his every action seems to be fruitless, leading to no ultimate state of contentment. While he feels alone in all of his endeavors, this hope serves as a “lonely spirit guiding” him through difficulties (ln 12). He clings desperately to concepts that strive to give him purpose in life. Dreaming, although inevitably interrupted by prolonged stints of reality, provides humanity with an idealistic hope for the future. Childhood and adolescence are merely paths that lead to adulthood and wisdom. Adulthood embodies many aspects of maturity-obligations, incredulity, and cynicism. Imagination and hope stand little chance against such formidable foes. According to “A Dream Within a Dream,” regardless of the exact moment and circumstance along the path, once hope is lost, it can never be regained. Man is merely a shadow of his previous existence without dreams because he has lost reason

to continue onward. His efforts to change society seem ineffectual within a world that has no purpose or place for him. Standing “amid the roar of a surf-tormented shore,” the speaker embodies a sense of helplessness and futility further perpetuated by the images of groping at sand in an hourglass (In 13). In this adult stage, he realizes his minuteness within the infinitely large universe and is petrified by such a concept. Throughout his life, both in the childhood and adolescent stage, the speaker fondly reminisces of his goals as a young boy. Not until this stage does he fully comprehend the fact that opportunities and time is passing so quickly. Unable to preserve one moment of a lifetime intact, the speaker claims that life is but a “dream within a dream,” an ephemeral image that is no more than a wish (In 24). Dreams do not last perpetually; therefore, the fact that life is a dream compacted to the extent that it fits within another dream merely intensifies its brevity. The final line within the poem questions existence, encompassing reality, dreams, and God. Without a predestined and distinctive purpose for his existence, the speaker contemplates his relevance to a world that may exist without him. He needs tangible evidence of faith-based concepts. Lacking any knowledge of the possibilities that his future holds makes him debate the purpose of today. Should the future be nonexistent, where in the grand scheme lies the past and present? Life is fleeting, and the opportunity to seize dreams becomes more and more rare with each fallen grain of the hourglass. As creatures with human nature and a sense of will, people tend to gravitate to John Lennon’s vision of a paradise in which peace, love, and harmony dominate. However, that same sense of nature and will forces people to question the possibility of such an idealistic existence. This sense of pessimism tends to derive from the emotional abuse endured by man on

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his way to maturity. Poe advocates that, as imperfect beings, humans are designed to hope, wonder, and question. There is no feasible line between an imaginary world and reality. In planning and anticipating a realistic future, some degree of dreaming and fantasizing is involved. Through the marriage between hopes and acceptance of duty, man finds heaven on earth. Reality is only as harsh as the rarity of dreams. While dreams survive, life remains bearable. Throughout “ Dreams,” the speaker realizes there is vast room for hope in a world of despair, proclaiming that dream life is more desirable than the real one. Further on the decent of optimism, “ A Dream” depicts the corruption of a world in which dreams are tainted. Purity of these dreams is crucial to the maintenance of a stable life. Hope plummets into the abyss of reality throughout “ A Dream Within a Dream,” wherein the speaker adapts the lessons learned from “ A Dream” and states that, without dreams, life is futile. Poe, a traditionally dark and cynical writer, includes himself with humanity in his struggle against his fear of impotency. He reveals his vulnerability and innermost fears of growing old and losing sight of the dreams he once held sacred. Poe adopts a tone of somber resolution to the inevitable cruelty of reality. His testament throughout these poems is to hold fast to dreams because time will wait for no man. Rather than wait until tomorrow to act on hopes, Poe insists that the present is all that is guaranteed and dreams of a society in which people act on such inclinations to form a heaven on earth. Like Lennon, Poe “ imagine[s] all the people living for today.”