

A dream within a dream commentary

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Edgar Allan Poe addresses questions about the reality of life in his existential poem, *A Dream Within a Dream*. The poem contains two stanzas that delve deep into the reality of reality, and as confusing as it sounds, the speaker is very concerned – even distressed – over this issue. Poe bases the philosophy found in the poem on Plato’s philosophy on knowledge, as laid out in *Theaetetus*. When the poem opens, the speaker is asking for his beloved to give him a kiss goodnight.

All that it takes is this one kiss to send the speaker into musing about the uncertainty of reality. In lines 4 and 5, the speaker affirms his beloved’s statement that his “ days have been a dream.” While she is simply enchanted by his love and saying that being with him is like living in a dream, the speaker begins to ponder the idea of his life actually being a dream. He turns to ask his beloved if it makes any difference when hope leaves. “ Is it therefore the less gone?” he asks.

In other words, the speaker is asking himself if there was any hope in the first place if all of reality is only a dream. Indeed, in the concluding lines of the stanza, the speaker inquires, “ Is all that we see or seem but a dream within a dream?” The speaker realizes that everything he perceives could be one, big illusion. Not only does the speaker present the idea that life is an illusion, a dream, but that this dream is within a dream. When a person wakes up from this dream, he will still be dreaming. The speaker fears that he will never experience ‘ real life’.

In the second stanza, the speaker is no longer beside his beloved, but standing on a “ surf-tormented shore”, amid the roar of the ocean. The

setting and imagery in the second stanza is entirely metaphorical. The shore is spoken of as an ocean shore, yet it represents the shore of the speaker's mind, which is tormented by relentless waves of doubt. The speaker has come to a point of complete skepticism of the world around him, though he does not want to be in such a state. As the stanza continues, the speaker becomes distressed, frantic, frustrated, and finally desperate. He clutches a handful of the "golden sand" and watches as it "creeps" through his fingers to "the deep"; to the ocean; to the questioning, existential abyss of his mind.

The grains of sand create a metaphor to the speaker's hopes, experiences, friends, loved ones, reality. He is figuratively and literally losing his grip on reality. To the speaker, it seems more and more inevitable that this will happen. He is distressed that he cannot keep hold of the world around him. In lines 19-20, the speaker questions God in a pleading and frantic tone, "Can I not grasp [the sand] with a tighter grasp?" This question can easily be turned into a statement: I cannot grasp them tighter. The speaker realizes that he cannot save reality from falling into the deep abyss of his mind, but he does not yet want to accept this.

Again, he questions God, asking to save even just one grain of sand from the "pitiless wave." The speaker is frustrated that he cannot even keep one life experience from falling into tormenting doubt. He concludes the stanza by repeating the question, "Is all that we see or seem but a dream within a dream?" The second stanza plays heavily on philosophical skepticism, or the doubting of knowledge and existence itself. Of course, without knowledge,

existence cannot be proved. This philosophy is first documented in Plato's Theaetetus. In these writings, Plato attempts to define knowledge.

By doing so, he can then prove existence. The definition Plato deems best is: knowledge is true belief with an account (proof). First, one must fully and truly believe that an event or object exists. Then, one must find proof that it exists. Plato next tries to define 'proof', so as to better define 'knowledge'.

He comes to the conclusion that to prove an event or object exists is to find the feature that sets one proof apart from another. One must find the uniqueness in every instance to prove it exists. In the second stanza of the poem, the speaker wholeheartedly wants to prove to himself that there is substance in his life. The problem is that all the metaphorical grains of sand he holds in his hand are alike. There is not one defining feature on any of them. The speaker cannot hold the grains in his hand long enough, cannot find enough defining features, to be convinced that he is living in reality.

Instead, the speaker becomes ultimately, though despairingly, convinced that all of reality is, in fact, a dream, and leaves the reader questioning his own state of reality. In two simple stanzas, Edgar Allan Poe describes one of the most unsettling questions known to man: the question of reality. It is one that cannot be entirely answered, though philosophers as far back as Plato have tried their best. For this reason, the poem ends in an open question to the reader, an *aporia*, that prompts the reader to add more thought to the concerning topic.