

# A Dream Within a Dream



## POEM TEXT

1 Take this kiss upon the brow!  
 2 And, in parting from you now,  
 3 Thus much let me avow —  
 4 You are not wrong, who deem  
 5 That my days have been a dream;  
 6 Yet if hope has flown away  
 7 In a night, or in a day,  
 8 In a vision, or in none,  
 9 Is it therefore the less *gone*?  
 10 *All* that we see or seem  
 11 Is but a dream within a dream.

12 I stand amid the roar  
 13 Of a surf-tormented shore,  
 14 And I hold within my hand  
 15 Grains of the golden sand —  
 16 How few! yet how they creep  
 17 Through my fingers to the deep,  
 18 While I weep — while I weep!  
 19 O God! Can I not grasp  
 20 Them with a tighter clasp?  
 21 O God! can I not save  
 22 *One* from the pitiless wave?  
 23 Is *all* that we see or seem  
 24 But a dream within a dream?



## THEMES



### REALITY, ILLUSION, AND CONTROL

The poem explores the idea that reality is an illusion. The speaker asks if all life—everything that “we see”—is just a “dream within a dream.” The speaker might be thinking of reality in the most literal sense here—as in, people are basically living in the [Matrix](#)—but also could be thinking about the subtler idea of *objectivity*. That is, perhaps the speaker is suggesting that people are doomed to view the world through the prism of their own perceptions and experiences. In this sense, the poem may be questioning if it’s ever possible to know the objective “reality” of anything at all. And because the world is ultimately unknowable, the poem implies, people aren’t really in control of their own fates.

The poem begins with the speaker saying goodbye to someone, implied to be a lover. This other person has said that the speaker’s “days have been a dream,” and the speaker agrees. It’s not clear if this is meant in a positive sense—as in, this relationship has been really great and dreamy—or in the sense that the relationship, and the speaker’s life itself, is not in line with how things actually *are*; that is, the speaker has been living in a sort of fantasy world. Either way, the lover’s comments and the pain of saying goodbye lead the speaker to express a kind of hopelessness, rooted in doubt about the nature of reality and control. Indeed, perhaps this doubt stems from the way that something like love can seem so certain before, one day, it’s suddenly gone.

The speaker then introduces *another* layer of unreality: the speaker claims that *all* of life is not just a dream, but a dream *within* a dream. The speaker is anxious about lacking control over the world, so much so that the speaker isn’t even sure if they’re living in their *own* dream, or if the speaker’s world is just part of someone or something else’s wider dream! Maybe the speaker is talking about being a dream in the mind of some greater being, God perhaps. This is supported by the appeals to God in the second stanza—though these could just be figures of speech, as the speaker grows increasingly distraught (“O God!”). Either way, reality is presented as a kind of illusion—not necessarily in the sense that people are being actively deceived, but that there is no way of *knowing* for sure what is real. And, either way, the poem implies that this means people are not really in control of their lives.

The second stanza then finds the speaker suddenly alone. Standing on a beach, the speaker tries to confirm the reality of the world by grasping at the sand—yet this sand keeps slipping through the speaker’s fingers. The constantly shifting shoreline



## SUMMARY

I’ll kiss you on the forehead to say goodbye. Now that I’m leaving, let me say this: you weren’t wrong to say that I have been living in a dream. But what does it matter? I’ve lost all hope, so whether it is night or day, whether life is a vision or nothing of the sort, would that make me feel any less hopeless? *Everything* that we perceive is nothing but a dream within a dream.

I stand on the coast, hearing the deafening sound of the surf as it pounds on the shore. And I grasp at grains of golden sand. Even with just a few grains in my hand, they seem to escape my grip and fall back into the water, while I cry and cry. Dear God, can’t I hold onto the sand more firmly? Dear God, can’t I save a single grain from the water? Is *everything* we perceive really just a dream within a dream?

also seems to speak to the speaker's lack of certainty and control. The speaker wants to find something solid to hold onto, but is faced only with relentless and ongoing change.

Finally, to intensify this sense of doubt and uncertainty, the poem restates its earlier claim—that life is just “a dream within a dream”—as a question. That is, even the speaker's strongly held intuition about the *unreliability* of knowledge is uncertain too! All in all, then, this amounts to an argument that human life is built on the shakiest of foundations—and perhaps that the nature of reality is beyond the limit of human understanding.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-5

*Take this kiss upon the brow!  
And, in parting from you now,  
Thus much let me avow —  
You are not wrong, who deem  
That my days have been a dream;*

"A Dream Within a Dream" poem opens with a kiss, which the speaker gives to an unspecified addressee. It's a kiss "upon the brow," so it isn't *necessarily* a romantic kiss—but that does seem the most likely scenario given what follows. In other words, the speaker is probably talking to a lover. The gentle [consonance](#) and [assonance](#) of the line convey the affection of the kiss:

Take this kiss upon the brow!

It's an interesting opening to a poem because it happens without any attempt to establish a *context* for the kiss—it just happens. There is a sense of urgency, then, and perhaps even desperation. This is confirmed by lines 2 and 3, which reveal that the speaker is "parting" from the addressee—and in fact is doing so right "now." These lines suggest that the rest of the stanza will be the speaker's words of goodbye—the words that the speaker feels most need to be said given that these two people are having to go their separate ways (though, again, the circumstances of this are not clear).

Following the dash at the end of line 3, the speaker offers up some parting words—which themselves are a response to something that the addressee has evidently said before. "You are not wrong," says the speaker, in other words confirming that the addressee was correct to say the following: that the speaker's "days have been a dream." It's worth taking note of the vagueness of this scenario—there is no sense of who the speaker is meant to be, nor the identity of the addressee. It's not even certain whether the addressee is one individual, or

many. However, this ambiguity feeds into the poem's central idea: that reality is one some level fundamentally illusory or unknowable. To that end, there is something child-like and wondrous about the [alliteration](#) across lines 4 and 5:

You are not wrong, who deem  
That my days have been a dream;

These /d/ sounds are playful, almost like trickery—like the kind of stuff the Mad Hatter might speak in *Alice in Wonderland*. At this point, it's also not known if the idea put forward in these lines is meant *positively* (viewing life as a kind of dream come true) or in the sense of life being a kind of illusion. There's also the possibility of a sort of in-between interpretation—that this means the speaker has been living in a sort of fantasy world, not really understanding the reality of the relationship with this unknown addressee.

### LINES 6-11

*Yet if hope has flown away  
In a night, or in a day,  
In a vision, or in none,  
Is it therefore the less  
gone  
?  
All  
that we see or seem  
Is but a dream within a dream.*

Lines 6 to 9 represent the speaker's response to the notion that the speaker's "days have been a dream" (a phrase leveled at the speaker by the unspecified "You" of line 4). Essentially, the speaker expresses a kind of hopelessness—"hope has flown away"—and then wonders whether it actually makes a difference if the speaker lives in a dream or not. It could be "night" or "day," and life could be a "vision" or not—the feeling of lost hope would be the same, the speaker says.

Again, the poem is steeped in ambiguity, not giving the reader any sense of what this hope is, nor how or why it has "gone." Maybe the speaker's lover has just ended the relationship—hence the "parting" taking place—and the speaker is thus devastated, and would be devastated even if the relationship wasn't as great or solid as the speaker had initially thought (that is, if the speaker had been living in a "dream" in the sense of not being in tune with the reality of this relationship).

That's definitely not certain though! In any case, the [enjambment](#) after "away" gives the line a quickening pace suggestive of flight, and the [anaphora/diacope](#) of the repeated "in" suggests both a troubled mind *and* the speaker's point that the circumstances around this hopelessness are not all that relevant to how the speaker actually feels:

Yet if hope has flown away  
 In a night, or in a day,  
 In a vision, or in none,  
 Is it therefore the less *gone*?

Whichever way reality is cut, in other words, the speaker's *feeling* remains the same. And this actually feeds into the poem's main worry/anxiety: that life is an illusion. Philosophers have long wondered whether life is real, especially focusing on the way that dreams seem to provide convincing sensory experience (which then turns out to be a figment of the imagination). The speaker has an instinctive belief in the world of emotion and feeling—sensing this hopelessness to be true. But basing a sense of what is real and what is not merely on an individual's own perceptions and feelings amounts to a kind of isolation in which someone can trust nothing outside of their own immediate experience. The rest of the world—even friends, family, and lovers—*could* be an illusion, despite the feelings they *evoke* being real.

To further complicate things, the speaker then offers a new take on the idea put forward in line 5 (that their "days have been a dream"). Now, with what seems like a surprisingly confident tone—one which will be undermined later in the poem—the speaker states that:

All that we see or seem  
 Is but a dream within a dream.

The [alliteration](#) here—as in lines 4 and 5—is riddle-like. This statement extends the idea of life as a "dream" beyond the speaker and to an inclusive "we"—presumably relating to all of humanity. Furthermore, it's not just "days" that are a "dream," but every aspect of human experience—"all that we see or seem." That is, everything human beings perceive and are. And just to intensify this even more, that "dream" is itself contained "within a dream!"

It's impossible to say conclusively what all this amounts to, apart from an anxious and unsettling atmosphere of uncertainty. It's possible that the "dream within a dream" relates to something religious, an idea gently supported by the later appeals to "God" in lines 19 and 21. Perhaps the speaker is suggesting that human life is a dream within the dream of some greater entity or being.

### LINES 12-15

*I stand amid the roar  
 Of a surf-tormented shore,  
 And I hold within my hand  
 Grains of the golden sand —*

The second stanza presents an entirely different scenario from the first. Whereas the first stanza depicted a farewell between the speaker and an unspecified addressee (probably a lover),

the second finds the speaker alone on a beach. It's a disorientating change of setting in keeping with the poem's overall atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty.

The speaker finds no comfort in this natural environment, instead detecting malice and suffering. The [personified](#) shore "roar[s]" in pain, "tormented" by the relentlessness of the waves. Humanity has often looked upon the sea or ocean—its vastness and its constant state of change—as symbols of the mysteries of life, and that's what the poem seems to be tapping into here. Of course, the shore isn't *really* suffering at the hands of the "surf," but the speaker's doubt and anxieties about the nature of reality cause the speaker to *perceive* pain in the surrounding environment. In a subtle way, then, even this personification speaks to the poem's idea that reality is an illusion: the speaker doesn't see the world as it is, but as it seems through the speaker's individual perspective.

And as if trying to hold onto the most humble building block of reality, the speaker grabs fistfuls of sand. The [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) of "hold" and "hand" almost has an exasperated sound to it, conveying the speaker's troubled state of mind. Perhaps, too, the "golden" color of the sand offers up some kind of promise of riches—not in terms of money, but knowledge—that can never be realized.

The grasping of sand is a [metaphor](#) for the speaker's predicament: the speaker wants to hold onto life, to know that at least some small part of it is real—but certainty slips away every time. In a more literal sense, the sand also relates to the senses—and though these *seem* to confirm what is and is not real, they can't be trusted either (because life could all be a dream, or a dream within a dream!).

### LINES 16-18

*How few! yet how they creep  
 Through my fingers to the deep,  
 While I weep — while I weep!*

Lines 16 to 18 continue to focus on the sensation of sand passing through the speaker's fingers. This is a [metaphor](#) for life itself slipping away—whether it's through the inevitable onward march of time or the speaker's increasing sense that reality is an illusion. The grains of the sand seem to "creep" through the speaker's fingers back to the water, another moment of [personification](#) that gives the sand a sense of deliberate deception. That is, the speaker feels like the world is conspiring against the speaker, the sand refusing to confirm that anything—even a mere grain of sand—is real.

This brings on the poem's emotional peak—though it is, at the same time, a kind of extreme emotional low. The speaker is reduced to weeping, this uncontrollable outpouring of emotion conveyed by the immediate repetition of the phrase "While I weep" in line 18 (a technique known as [epizeuxis](#)).

The /w/ [alliteration](#) in this line places extra emphasis on this

phrase and helps to convey the speaker's confused and pained state of mind: "While I weep — while I weep!" This repetition also suggests a sense of futility; the speaker returns to the *same phrase*, and within that phrase even the *same sounds*, yet still cannot make sense of the world; the words, like the grains of sand, slip through the speaker's fingers. The three [end-rhymes](#) of lines 17-19 (creep/deep/weep) also contribute to this effect, as though the speaker is stuck in some kind of hellish puzzle (which, in a way, is exactly what the speaker is saying by talking about "a dream within a dream").

### LINES 19-24

*O God! Can I not grasp  
Them with a tighter clasp?  
O God! can I not save  
One  
from the pitiless wave?  
Is  
all  
that we see or seem  
But a dream within a dream?*

Line 19 begins with [apostrophe](#), the speaker appealing to God for help—though it could also just be an expression of exasperation without too much religious intent. If it *does* relate to God, though, perhaps it makes sense of the "dream" of life being contained within another dream—perhaps God's dream.

The final six lines of the poem then have a uniform structure, consisting of three [rhetorical questions](#) across pairs of two [enjambéd](#) lines (19-20, 21-22, 23-24). The first of these sees the speaker wondering how to prove *anything* is real about life. In vain, the speaker wants to hold tighter to the grains of sand—but they still fall through the speaker's grasp. The rhymes throughout this section also have a kind of claustrophobic, suffocating effect: grasp/clasp, wave/save, seem/dream. Indeed, the rhyme all throughout the poem works almost like a trap, exerting its hold on the speaker's thoughts.

The second question, in line 21, is an expression of helplessness. The question also begins with another appeal to God, using [anaphora](#). The speaker feels unable to "save" even one grain of sand from the merciless "waves." The reasoning behind wanting to save a grain of sand from the [personified](#) menace of the water is that the water restores the grains to their state of flux—which the speaker reads as a symbol of life's uncertainty. In other words, the water is continuously changing—"torment[ing]"—the shore. The shore, made up of grains of sand, is never really knowable because it is always being altered by the pounding waves.

And it's on this uncertain note that the third [rhetorical question](#) ends the poem. Notice how lines 23 and 24 restate lines 10 and 11—only this time, even the sense of reality as an illusion is an uncertain premise too! The speaker's doubts and anxieties have folded back in on themselves, a kind of nightmarish

feedback loop. The poem, then, ends on a note of utter confusion—highlighting the speaker's inability to grasp whether anything about life is actually real.



## SYMBOLS



### SAND

Sand in the poem represents certainty and control—two things the speaker simply cannot grasp. Instead, grains of sand slip through the speaker's fingers, and the speaker cannot stop this process any more than the speaker can stop the waves from pounding on the shoreline. No matter how much the speaker tries to get a firm, solid grip on reality, that reality keeps "creep[ing]" away.

The image of sand slipping through the speaker's fingers also evokes the image of an hourglass, which, of course, is used to mark the passage of time. Indeed, sand is often used to represent time—think of the common phrase, "the sands of time" and how this, in turn, suggests how everything will eventually turn to dust. The invocation of sand here thus suggests that life itself is slipping away from the speaker. The speaker's failure to hold onto the "Grains of golden sand" represents the fact that the speaker feels a total lack of control over time, life, and reality itself.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** "Grains of the golden sand"
- **Lines 16-17:** "How few! yet how they creep / Through my fingers to the deep"



## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) is used throughout "A Dream Within a Dream." Note, for instance, the repeated /d/ sounds across lines 4 and 5:

You are not wrong, who deem  
That my days have been a dream;

The /d/ sounds here link "days"—a word that stands in for life generally—with "dream." Life, therefore, is linked with illusion and unreality. But what's also notable is the way that the alliteration here seems to increase the riddle-like quality of the poem, as though the speaker is trying to figure out some vital puzzle about life. Sounds are repeated and fold in on one another, echoing the speaker's confused vision of reality as an illusion within another illusion.

Similarly, note the alliteration in line 18 of the words "while" and "weep." Not only is the phrase "While I weep" repeated (an

example of [epizeuxis](#)), but the phrase itself includes repetition of the /w/ sound. Again this creates a sense of circularity, of reality folding in on itself; the speaker wants clarity but just repeats the same thing, returns to the same words and sounds without new understanding.

Later, the /h/ alliteration of "hold" and "hand" lends line 14 a breathy quality, and gives a sense of the speaker's exasperation—contrasting with the two hard /g/ sounds in the following line that emphasize the "golden[ness]" of the sand. And, of course, the poem's last two lines closely imitate the ending of the first stanza—copying the alliteration of /d/ and /s/ sounds found in lines 10 and 11 (now framed as a [rhetorical question](#)). The poem thus ends close to where it began, without any newfound clarity or certainty. Again, the speaker returns to the same sounds, as if repeating them will bring about some new understanding—but it doesn't.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "m," "m"
- **Line 4:** "d"
- **Line 5:** "d," "d"
- **Line 7:** "l," "a," "l," "a"
- **Line 8:** "l," "a," "l"
- **Line 9:** "l," "l"
- **Line 10:** "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "d," "d"
- **Line 14:** "h," "h"
- **Line 15:** "G," "g"
- **Line 18:** "W," "l," "w," "w," "l," "w"
- **Line 19:** "G," "g"
- **Line 23:** "s," "s"
- **Line 24:** "d," "d"

## ANAPHORA

[Anaphora](#) first pops up in lines 7 and 8. Here, four phrases begin with "In a" or "or in." This helps the speaker illustrate a point about the notion that the speaker's "days have been a dream" (evidently put forward by an unspecified addressee, likely a lover). Essentially, the speaker is underscoring how hopelessness feels the same whether life is real or not. The anaphora reflects this, listing out a bunch of vague scenarios one after the other. Perhaps this hopelessness refers specifically to a break up or the dissolution of a relationship: this could happen in the night or day, in dream or not, yet in all of these scenarios, the speaker would feel that "hope" has gone. In a way, then, the anaphora suggests that maybe it doesn't matter if life is an illusion; it still affects the speaker's experience.

The other example of anaphora comes in lines 19 and 21, during the poem's closing [rhetorical questions](#). Both lines actually begin with [apostrophe](#), the speaker appealing to "God" for help which doesn't seem to come. The repeated "O God!"

shows the intensity of the speaker's feeling. The anaphora continues with "Can I not," emphasizing the speaker's *inability* to take control of the world.

#### Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "In a," "or in," " a"
- **Line 8:** "In a," "or in"
- **Line 19:** "O God!," " Can I not"
- **Line 21:** "O God!," " can I not"

## APOSTROPHE

"A Dream Within a Dream" uses [apostrophe](#) twice, in two identical examples. This an anxious and troubled poem that meditates on the nature of reality, suspecting life to be an illusion. This anxiety and confusion about reality intensify towards the end of the poem—indeed, line 10 and 11's statement about life being "a dream within a dream" actually becomes a [rhetorical question](#), showing the increasing sense of uncertainty. The apostrophe in lines 19 and 21—"O God!"—are both part of this intensified emotion.

On the one hand, they can be interpreted as a direct appeal to God: religion is one way of explaining the world, giving it a more understandable or comforting narrative. But the speaker seems a long way from finding any comfort in God, and so the apostrophe can also be read as the exasperated expressions of a vexed and troubled mind. Indeed, the call to God can even highlight God's *non*-existence—the lack of reply and the speaker's continuing questioning give this apostrophe a desperate, almost tragically funny kind of sound.

#### Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "O God!"
- **Line 21:** "O God!"

## CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) is used frequently in "A Dream Within a Dream." Much of this comes in the form of [alliteration](#), which is covered in that specific entry of this guide.

The first consonance comes in the very first line, and has a subtle effect. Here, the speaker gives an unseen addressee a "kiss upon the brow"—the gentle tenderness of this kiss is rendered through the soft consonance and assonance present in the line, which give it an almost sing-song quality:

Take this kiss upon the brow!

More moments of significant consonance come at the start of the second stanza. Lines 12 to 15 are packed with consonant sounds, increasing the poetic volume of the lines (that is, making them feel elevated and literary) and thereby conveying

the noisiness of the shore on which the speaker stands. The speaker perceives pain in the shore, imagining that the waves are a kind of torturer preventing the beach from ever being at rest. It's as though the lines themselves are "roaring," overflowing with guttural /r/ sounds and deep, resonant /d/ sounds:

I stand amid the roar  
Of a surf-tormented shore,  
And I hold within my hand  
Grains of the golden sand —

Both of these sounds, not coincidentally, repeat in the phrase "dream within a dream," suggesting the way that question hangs over everything the speaker experiences.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "k," "s," "k," "ss," "n"
- **Line 2:** "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 3:** "m," "m"
- **Line 4:** "d"
- **Line 5:** "d," "d"
- **Line 6:** "h," "h"
- **Line 7:** "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 8:** "n," "n," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 9:** "th," "th," "n"
- **Line 10:** "s," "s," "m"
- **Line 11:** "d," "m," "d," "m"
- **Line 12:** "d," "d," "r," "r"
- **Line 13:** "r," "t," "r," "nt," "r"
- **Line 14:** "n," "d," "h," "d," "n," "h," "nd"
- **Line 15:** "G," "ns," "g," "d," "n," "nd"
- **Line 16:** "w," "w," "w," "p"
- **Line 17:** "p"
- **Line 18:** "W," "w," "p," "w," "w," "p"
- **Line 19:** "G," "C," "g"
- **Line 20:** "c"
- **Line 21:** "c"
- **Line 23:** "s," "s," "m"
- **Line 24:** "d," "m," "d," "m"

#### DIACOPE

[Diacope](#) appears in the final line of each stanza—in the phrase that gives the poem its title. This repetition of the word "dream" conveys the speaker's sense of confusion, the way that the speaker is trying desperately to make sense of a reality that seems to be slipping through the speaker's fingers. When the word "dream" first appears in line 5, its meaning is very ambiguous: does the fact that the speaker's "days have been a dream" mean that those days have been really great, really romantic and dreamy? Does it mean that the speaker has been living in a fantasy, projecting ideas and feelings onto a

relationship that didn't really exist? Or is "dream" even broader and all-encompassing, suggesting that the speaker's entire reality is an illusion?

It isn't clear, and the diacope of lines 11 and 24 makes things even more confusing. Not only have the speaker's days been "a dream," but now the speaker wonders if everything—all the people see or seem, all that people perceive or are—is in fact a dream *within* another dream. Not only is the speaker's reality illusory, but it in fact is part of the illusory reality of someone or something else. This statement is vague and ambiguous, which is part of the point: the speaker doesn't fully grasp the nature of reality, and the language of the poem is fittingly vague, circular, and repetitive.

#### Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "dream," "dream"
- **Line 24:** "dream," "dream"

#### ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) is used quite frequently in "A Dream Within a Dream." In a way, it's a device of necessity. The lines in "A Dream Within a Dream" are fairly short, roughly organized around three stresses in each. Sometimes, the speaker needs longer phrases to get across what the speaker wants to say—and so enjambment has a general function in allowing the speaker greater freedom of expression. Of course, taken more intentionally, the enjambment broadly reflects the speaker's confusion and anxiety. The speaker's thoughts tumble from one line into the next just as versions of reality—of dreams within dreams—seem to spill across their borders.

In line 6, the enjambment also subtly conveys the idea of something "[flying] away." Here, the speaker talks about their lost hope. The enjambment leaves a small blank space on the page, indicating absence and loss. Later, line 12's enjambment creates space around the word "roar," the white space almost making it feel louder, allowing the word to echo. There is some especially effective enjambment in lines 14 to 17. Here, the speaker discusses the way that sand slips through the speaker's fingers—a [metaphor](#) for the speaker's inability to grasp reality. Lines 14 and 16 are both enjambed, creating a sense of that slipping, the phrases needing the lines below to complete their sense. Line 21 mimics this enjambment too—indeed, the three [rhetorical questions](#) of the poem's ending follow the same pattern.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "deem"
- **Line 5:** "That"
- **Line 6:** "away"
- **Line 7:** "In"

- **Line 10:** “seem”
- **Line 11:** “Is”
- **Line 12:** “roar”
- **Line 13:** “Of”
- **Line 14:** “hand”
- **Line 15:** “Grains”
- **Line 16:** “creep”
- **Line 17:** “Through”
- **Line 19:** “grasp”
- **Line 20:** “Them”
- **Line 21:** “save”
- **Line 22:** “One”
- **Line 23:** “seem”
- **Line 24:** “But”

## EPIZEUXIS

[Epizeuxis](#) is used just once in "A Dream Within a Dream"—in line 18. This represents a kind of emotional peak for the speaker, a moment of intense desperation and despair. The speaker is frustrated by an inability to understand the world, to know whether anything about life is real—or if life itself is all an illusion. The epizeuxis repeats a short three-word phrase:

While I weep – while I weep!

This repetition makes the speaker's weeping seem uncontrollable, an outpouring of emotion that the speaker simply cannot contain. It heightens the poem's sense of drama; though the first stanza expressed similar sentiments to the second, it seemed a bit more restrained. This line sets up the searching, desperate series of [rhetorical questions](#) that end the poem on a note of sheer and bewildering confusion.

### Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 18:** “While I weep – while I weep!”

## METAPHOR

[Metaphors](#) pop up twice in "A Dream Within a Dream." In line 6, "hope" is turned from something abstract to something more tangible and real. The speaker has lost hope, which is said to have "flown away." This metaphorically relates hope to some kind of flying creature. The mention of flight is useful to the poem's overall message of confusion and doubt about the nature of reality. Humans, of course, can't fly—but it's something they sometimes *think* they can do in their dreams. Likewise, the image of something flying away out of human reach seems to chime nicely with the speaker's worry that the true nature of reality is becoming more and more distant.

In the second stanza's metaphor, the intent is pretty similar to the above. Here, the speaker tries to hold onto grains of sand,

seeing in them a kind of representation of reality: perhaps even the atomic or molecular world. But these keep slipping through the speaker's fingers, metaphorically representing the speaker's inability to gain any solid knowledge about the world. The sand also evokes an hourglass, and the idea of time slipping through the speaker's fingers. The speaker cannot hold onto life any more than knowledge, cannot control the forces that govern the world.

### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-9
- Lines 12-18
- Lines 19-22

## PERSONIFICATION

"A Dream Within a Dream" uses [personification](#) in the second stanza. Essentially, there are two simultaneous personifications going on at the same time: that of the shore and that of the water. The shore is characterized as being in pain—indeed, it "roars" in agony. This is because the "surf" "torment[s]" the shore, probably because it keeps the coast in a constant state of change and—in the speaker's perception—uncertainty. Think of how the water literally reshapes the shoreline, carrying sand to sea and depositing it back on land.

Of course, the shore doesn't *really* feel tormented. The speaker projects the speaker's own troubled and anxious state of mind onto the surrounding environment. This personification continues in line 22, when the speaker calls the waves "pitiless." Essentially, the waves are unrelenting in the way that they change the shape of the shoreline—and the speaker views reality to be much the same. This reflects the poem's idea not only that reality is an illusion, but that people also don't have control of their world; life, time, and reality all slip through people's fingers like grains of sand.

### Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-15:** “I stand amid the roar / Of a surf-tormented shore, / And I hold within my hand / Grains of the golden sand —”
- **Lines 21-22:** “O God! can I not save / One / from the pitiless wave?”

## RHETORICAL QUESTION

Even though it's a short poem, "A Dream Within a Dream" contains a number of [rhetorical questions](#). The first question appears in lines 6 to 9. Essentially, the speaker asks whether the nature of reality makes any difference to the way the speaker actually *feels*. The speaker senses that "hope" to have "flown away"—and wonders if this feeling would be the same whether the rest of the world is real or not. In other words, say the poem is indeed about a breakup; if this breakup happened

at night or during the day, in a dream or not, would the speaker still feel this hopelessness?

It's worth noting that lines 10 and 11 are *not* a question, and seem to make a fairly confident statement that life "is but a dream within a dream." But even that knowledge—a kind of certainty about uncertainty—starts to elude the speaker in the second stanza. Standing on a shore, the speaker tries to grasp fistfuls of sand—but feels the world slipping away, out of the speaker's control. And then, after the speaker's weeping in line 18, the poem ends on not one, not two, but three rhetorical questions. The tone of the ending then is searching, doubtful and, above all, anxious. The speaker wants to save the sand from the waves, which keep the shoreline in a state of constant change (a [metaphor](#) for the speaker's inability to find certainty about the world). And as if to underscore this doubt and uncertainty, the poem's final two lines restate the last two lines of the first stanza—except this time, even they come in the form of a question! Even the knowledge of *uncertainty*, then, becomes a possible trick played on the speaker—leaving the poem on a note of utter confusion.

#### Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-9:** "Yet if hope has flown away / In a night, or in a day, / In a vision, or in none, / Is it therefore the less / gone /?"
- **Lines 19-24:** "O God! Can I not grasp / Them with a tighter clasp? / O God! can I not save / One / from the pitiless wave? / Is / all / that we see or seem / But a dream within a dream?"



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

Form-wise, this is a rather complicated poem: the stanzas aren't the same length, the meter varies all over the place, and the rhyme scheme regularly breaks with its established pattern. Altogether, this makes the poem feel unpredictable; it's hard to get a grasp on its form, just like it's hard for the speaker to get a grasp on reality.

Specifically, "A Dream Within a Dream" consists of two stanzas of unequal length, with eleven and thirteen lines respectively. Both stanzas portray the speaker's troubled mind and the worry that reality is an illusion. The first is addressed to an unseen addressee, possibly a lover, whereas the second is altogether more isolated. In this stanza, the speaker stands alone on a shore, weeping at the inability to understand reality and the fleeting nature of life.

Of particular note is the way that the end of the second stanza revises the end of the first. Lines 10 and 11 have an almost confident air about them, in that the speaker puts forward the poem's main idea—that life is a "dream within a dream"—with a degree of authority and belief. Lines 23 and 24 close the poem with identical words, except this time they are phrased as a *question*. So even the knowledge of uncertainty becomes something to doubt too! This adds another layer of riddle-like confusion to the poem.

### METER

The meter of "A Dream Within a Dream" is not all that precisely defined. The poem probably adheres mostly closely to [iambic trimeter](#)—which means there are three [feet](#) in each line, each with a da-DUM stress pattern. Lines 3 and 4 follow this pattern neatly:

Thus **much** | let **me** | **avow** —  
You **are** | not **wrong**, | who **deem**;

There are lots of variations to this metrical scheme throughout, though, which keeps the poem from becoming boring or too predictable. Often, these tweaks draw emphasis to certain words. Indeed, the first line begins with an extra stress, making it a line of iambic [tetrameter](#) with a missing first syllable (technically this is something known as catalexis). Thus gives the line a sense of urgency befitting the farewell kiss between the speaker and the unspecified addressee:

Take | this kiss | upon | the brow!

Much of the poem does this, adding a stressed syllable in the first beat. In fact, all three of the first feet in lines 6-8 can be read in the same way:



## VOCABULARY

**Brow** (Line 1) - Someone's forehead.

**Avow** (Line 3) - To avow something is to say it with authority.

**Deem** (Line 4) - To "deem" something is to regard it in a specific way. The unspecified addressee "deems" that the speaker has lived in a dream.

**Amid** (Line 12) - This means in the surrounded by (in the middle/midst of).

**Surf-tormented** (Line 13) - The shore is tortured by the constant breaking waves (according to the speaker).

**Clasp** (Line 20) - To clasp something is to grab it tightly.

**Pitiless** (Line 22) - This means that the waves show no mercy and are indifferent to the speaker's concerns.



Yet | if hope | has flown | away  
 In | a night, | or in | a day,  
 In | a vi- | sion, or | in none,

Yet these could just as easily be read as [anapests](#) (da-da-DUM): Yet if **hope**; In a **night**. There are, in fact, lots of anapests popping up in this poem. This keeps things unpredictable and interesting. These lines in particular have a playful, almost riddle-like quality. This fits well with the sense that the poem is a kind of conundrum, the speaker's troubles implicitly challenging the reader to consider whether their own reality is real or illusory.

## RHYME SCHEME

"A Dream Within a Dream" is a rhymed poem, but it doesn't follow a regular rhyme scheme. For the most part, both stanzas consist of [couplets](#) (rhyming pairs). But, again, Poe doesn't keep things simple; the stanzas have different lengths, the meter sees [anapests](#) popping up all over the place, and there is also an instance in each stanza in which *three* lines, rather than two, share the same rhyme sound. Making things even more complicated, these triplet rhymes placed at different points in each stanza! The rhyme scheme in the first stanza is:

AAABBCCDDEE

In the second stanza, the rhyme scheme is:

AABBCCCDDEEFF

The lines in this poem are relatively short, though, so the rhymes come thick and fast. These rhymes are almost all [perfect rhymes](#) too, except for the [slant rhyme](#) of "none"/"gone" in lines 8 and 9. This gives the poem a riddle-like sound, as though the speaker is being tied in metaphorical knots. It's also worth noting the repeated rhyme pair of "seem" and "dream." These two words sum up the speaker's dilemma neatly: is life as it *seems*, or is it all a dream—or even a dream within a dream!?



## SPEAKER

The speaker in "A Dream Within a Dream" isn't clear—the reader doesn't get any biographical information about this person. What *is* clear, however, that this person has some serious doubts about the nature of reality. In a way, the speaker's exact identity doesn't matter all that much, since the speaker is pondering more universal questions about the nature of existence.

In the first stanza, the speaker bids goodbye to another character: a "You" that is also left totally ambiguous. Perhaps this person was the speaker's lover, given the "kiss" the speaker gives, but it's hard to tell. The speaker expresses hopelessness, before asserting—with a degree of confidence—that everything people experience is "a dream within a dream." In the second stanza, the speaker cuts a more isolated figure. Gone is the

companion from the first stanza, leaving the speaker alone with their troubled doubts about the nature of reality. The speaker grasps at sand in an effort to confirm that something, anything, is real—but even this seems to confirm the fundamental unknowability of life, and the speaker's inability to exert any control over the world.



## SETTING

Fittingly for a poem that questions the fabric of reality, "A Dream Within a Dream" does not have a stable sense of time or place. The most reliable fact about the setting is that these are thoughts of the speaker's mind, which questions whether life is real or a dream. The first stanza takes place in the world of human relationships, ambiguously depicting some kind of farewell. Is this between two friends? Lovers? Where is this happening? None of that is clear! The second then sees the speaker violently removed from the world of human relationships, however undefined it may be, and now standing along on a shoreline where the "surf" seems to "torment" the sand. This "shore" is intentionally vague, underscoring the speaker's lack of certainty about their reality—indeed, all reality. Perhaps the speaker really is on a beach of some sort, or perhaps this is all happening within the speaker's mind.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Edgar Allan Poe was also a prominent critic in American literature, praising work that helped to establish a distinctly American literary tradition (as opposed to copying a British one). Writers whose work Poe praised included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville. He was also a big admirer of Charles Dickens's novels—indeed, Poe's famous poem "[The Raven](#)" was directly inspired by Dickens.

Many of Poe's poems portray a troubled speaker, whose sense of certainty about the world—or ability to exert their control on that world—has been diminished. But Poe's literary output was by no means limited to poetry, and many of his short stories are considered classics of the genre. He helped establish the Gothic genre in American literature, and also explored detective fiction and sci-fi. This poem shares a number of elements with the Gothic genre, namely death, the supernatural, and a fantastical setting.

It's also worth noting that Poe is far from the first—or the last—writer to draw a link between the shore and deep questions about the nature of life and reality. William Blake, for example, wrote in his poem "[Auguries of Innocence](#)":

To see a World in a Grain of Sand

And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
 And Eternity in an hour

This doesn't seem far from the sentiment in Poe's poem, though Poe's is far more doubtful. Like Blake's speaker, Poe's interprets the (unknowable) nature of the entire world through something so small as sand. "[Dover Beach](#)" by the English poet Matthew Arnold also makes for an interesting comparison.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem was first published in 1849 in *The Flag of the Union* periodical, during the American Antebellum Period. This was a time when the United States was experiencing a period of relative tranquility. Of course, though still a number of years before the American Civil War, the debate around slavery was nevertheless intensifying at the time. Though born in Boston, Poe grew up in slave-owning Richmond, Virginia. His writing, however, does not ever explicitly address the issue of slavery. Indeed, this particular poem deliberately takes place in an ahistorical setting. That said, some interpretations of the poem do draw a link between it and the California Gold Rush in 1848, which brought around 300,000 people to California hoping to find their fortunes (this interpretation is also disputed).

What can't be disputed is the poem's focus on the nature of reality—and whether that reality is real or an illusion. This is an age-old philosophical problem, expressed succinctly in the dream hypothesis. Put crudely, this questions the reliability of waking life by pointing out the apparent realism of dreams—the way that they seem real at the time. Indeed, dreams can even *feel* real while providing the dreamer with an experience that they know—in their waking mind—is impossible (flying, for example). Plato and Aristotle both considered the problem of dreams, as did later European philosophers like René Descartes and Arthur Schopenhauer. Questioning the nature of reality is by no means confined to philosophy: a film like *The Matrix* is a good contemporary example of the same line of questioning.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Letters From Poe](https://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/index.htm) — A collection of Poe's correspondence. (<https://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/index.htm>)
- [Descartes and Dreams](http://www.messagetoeagle.com/rene-descartes-dream-argument-know-not-dreaming/) — An article that discusses French philosopher René Descartes's take on the philosophical problems posed by dreams. (<http://www.messagetoeagle.com/rene-descartes-dream-argument-know-not-dreaming/>)
- [More of Poe's Poems and Life Story](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edgar-allan-poe) — Check out resources on Poe from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edgar-allan-poe>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxg7OFFtWQE) — Listen to the poem read by Tom O'Bedlam. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxg7OFFtWQE>)
- [Radio Documentary](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b008ncs4) — A BBC documentary looking at Poe's life and work. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b008ncs4>)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER EDGAR ALLAN POE POEMS

- [Annabel Lee](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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