

DREAM HYPOTHESIS AND CONDITION OF DISSOCIATION AND DEREALIZATION IN THE SPEAKER OF EDGAR ALLAN POE'S- "A DREAM WITHIN A DREAM"

¹Priya Sharma

¹TGT, English

¹Department of English

¹MGD Girls' School, Jaipur, India

ABSTRACT: One of the biggest questions that humanity is faced by is- What is Reality? As humans, we have a chronic urge to understand the world, which compels in us a notion whether what we see around is real or not. But how do we know what is real and what is not; whether anything around us is real at all; which leads us to an even bigger question whether we are real or not. If we think about it hard enough there is high possibility that our brain will actually end up convincing us that we all live within our own subjective interpretations and nothing around us, including ourselves is real.

In the poem, A Dream within a Dream by Edgar Allan Poe, we see a speaker facing a similar kind of a mental struggle. The speaker of the poem puts forth the question- Is life but, "a dream within a dream." The speaker's doubts arises as he suffers with the condition of Dissociation and Derealization. "Dissociation and Derealization disorders are generally the mind's direct response to overwhelming turmoil in the face of unbearable distress." (Nowak) This condition is a result of his parting ways with his beloved. Poe's speaker embarks in a dreary argument where he questions the shaky foundation that reality is built upon. And he does so through a "dream argument" or a "dream hypothesis." According to the speaker of the poem, this world and all existing life is an illusion of sorts. This notion, that reality doesn't exist was first asserted by the Greek philosopher in his book 'Theaetetus', it was also talked about in Aristotle's 'Metaphysics'. Moreover, Rene Descartes's dream argument claims that dreams and waking life can have the same content.

A dream hypothesis on a very simpler level states that, the senses that we trust to distinguish reality from illusion should not be fully trusted. For instance, while dreaming one does not completely realize that they are dreaming. Instead, their senses tricks them into thinking that whatever is happening within one's dream is happening in reality as well. So, at any given point, we cannot be certain whether we are not in fact dreaming. Reality could be but an illusion, assisted by our senses into believing otherwise.

KEYWORDS- Derealization, dissociation, dream, dream hypothesis, illusion, life, loss, reality.

INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe was a literary pioneer, but his life was rife with horrors and tragedies. The sadness that he dealt with in his real life is clearly reflected in his works. Poe, in lot of his works confronted a number of dark themes, including grief, sadness, loss and even insanity. In A Dream within a Dream, Poe questions that nature of reality and life. He based his poem 'A Dream within a Dream' on an earlier work, 'Imitation' published in 1827, in his book 'Tamerlane and Other poems'. In 'Imitation' he explores the idea of the essential mystery of life;

"A dark unfathom'd tide

Of interminable pride—

A mystery, and a dream,

Should my early life seem;" (Poe, lines1-4)

These lines echoes, the idea that there is no real grip on reality and time, the same philosophical question posed in 'A Dream within a Dream'.

A modern philosopher A. Revonsuo writes: "the qualities of dream experience are identical with the qualities of waking experience." The same idea explored by Descartes in his 'Meditation on First Philosophy'. Descartes writes; "I ought no less carefully withhold my assent from matters which are not entirely certain and indubitable than from those which appear to me manifestly to be false, if I am able to find in each one some reason to doubt, this will suffice to justify my rejecting to whole" (Descartes 6), as he doubts the nature of reality and dreams.

Poe's speaker in A Dream within Dream explores the same idea, as he suffers with the condition of dissociation and derealization. Dissociation is a condition where a person feels disconnected with their surroundings and derealization refers to a feeling that the world around us isn't fully real. The main aim of this paper is to analyze how loss and other human emotions like sadness and grief paved a path for the speaker to dissociate with his reality, which led him to ask an even bigger question, as he doubts the nature of reality and real life altogether.

Analysis of the Poem

The poem starts with the speaker bidding goodbye to someone, most probably his supposed beloved. The speaker kisses on his beloved's forehead and says, as he is departing with her that she was not wrong and indeed his days with her has been nothing but a dream.

“You are not wrong, who deem
That my days have been a dream;”(Poe, lines 4-5)

The speaker with these lines is trying to insinuate that, his time with his beloved has been so beautiful that it must have been some sort of a dream or illusion. But now that his beloved is gone, he is rendered hopeless. Now, it doesn't matter to him whether it's a dream or a reality. “In a vision, or in none, / Is it therefore the less *gone*?” Even if it's reality or a vision, his beloved is gone and nothing can change that. The speaker further goes on questioning whether “All that we see or seem/Is but a dream within a dream.”(Poe, lines 10-11) Now the speaker is emphasizing on another layer of unreality by pointing out that what ever he sees or everything around him could be but a “dream” within another “dream”. At first, we see the speaker questioning real life as a dream, this uncertainty whether he was living a real life arises to speaker's mind as his time spent with beloved was so unrealistic and perfect, there's no chance that it would have been real, but now that his beloved has abandoned him, he feels as if he is experiencing another illusion, but this one's not as good or pleasant as the previous one.

In the next part of the poem, we find the speaker alone on a “surf-tormented shore”. Holding a handful of sand, he marvels at how few of the many grains on the beach he can actually hold within his hand. At the same time, he also marvels at the way the grains of sand escape his grasp and return to the waves on the beach. The speaker is completely helpless and in the end, he restates his opinion that life is nothing but a dream. “Is all that we see or seem/But a dream within a dream?”(Poe, lines 23-24)

DISSOCIATION AND DEREALIZATION

According to the American Psychiatric Association DSM-5(Diagnostic and Statistical manual,5th Ed.,2013), dissociation is: “a disruption of and/or discontinuing in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control, and behaviour” (p. 291)and according to ICD-10(International classification of Diseases, 10th Ed.;WHO,1992), dissociation is a “partial or complete loss of the normal integration between memories of the past, awareness of identity and immediate sensations, and control of bodily movements.”(p. 151)

All these definitions suggests that dissociation is a condition where a person feels disconnected from their surroundings. This may feel as if they're having an out-of-body experience or a separation from the current situation. A study published in Access Advances in Psychiatric Treatment notes a person dealing with dissociation can have certain experiences including having a “feeling that life is a dream, when everyone and everything seems unreal.” The speaker of Poe's “A Dream within a Dream” is suffering with a similar kind of a condition.

The poem begins with the speaker saying goodbye to someone, possibly a lover which hints loss. The sense of utter hopelessness is very much prominent in the first stanza.

“hope has flown away” (Poe)

This hopelessness arises as he has to part ways with his beloved. The speaker is unable to understand how something like love can feel so real one day, and then suddenly be gone as if it had been nothing but just a dream. The speaker expresses remorse and grief to such an extent that it leads him to doubt his reality. His doubt or dissociation is associated with the loss of his beloved. Dr. Romanoff says, “People who have experienced trauma may dissociate during the event and after, to protect themselves fully from experiencing the distressing situation, emotions or thoughts.” (Solis-Moreira) Our speaker is doing the same thing. He's questioning the foundation of reality as he tries to come to terms with the fact that his beloved is gone and now that she's gone it doesn't matter whether it is the daytime or night, whether his life is a vision or not.

“In a night, or in a day,

In a vision, or in none,”(Poe, lines 7-8)

These particular lines show how he further dissociates himself from his reality. Now he doesn't care about anything in the real world, which leads him to ask even a bigger question- Whether anything around him is real at all or is his life nothing but a dream. This break from reality or one's surrounding is actually a defense mechanism or a mind's way of escaping without actually moving or going anywhere. But this coping mechanism can disrupt a person's life immensely as in the case of our speaker.

DESCARTES' DREAM ARGUMENT

Up until now the speaker was questioning his reality as he was suffering with dissociation and derealization. But now he refers to an even broader question. He is dissociated with his reality to such an extent that he is questioning the basis of reality altogether. He poses the question- whether “All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream” An idea explored by Descartes in his ‘Meditations on First Philosophy’

Descartes in his ‘Meditation on First Philosophy’ wanted to find out what we can or cannot believe with certainty. Descartes in his ‘Meditation I: Of the things which may be brought within the sphere of the doubtful’ writes: “All that up to the present time I have learned either from senses or through the senses; but it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive; and it is wiser not to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived.” (Descartes 7)

Descartes explains the basis of his dilemma with the help of an example. He begins by telling us that he is seated in front of the fire but he dismisses the idea that it could be in fact real, because there have been times before when he has been deceived in his dreams when he thought he was seated by the fire only to wake up and discover that he has been dreaming. He further states that, “in dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment. And my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I now dream.” (Descartes 6)

He holds the view, that the experience of dreaming is similar to that of waking life. Hence both the experiences are somewhat indistinguishable from one another. The same question was asked by Chuang Tzu. He was a philosopher in ancient China. One day he dreamt that he was a butterfly flying around from flower to flower, and was quite certain that he was indeed a butterfly, but when he woke up, he realised that he was only dreaming. But this uncertainty or rather say certainty of his real state made him question the foundation of his reality. He asked himself the question, whether- “I Chuang Tzu dreaming I was a butterfly or am I now really a butterfly dreaming that I am Chuang Tzu?”

Our speaker is asking similar kind of questions. In the second stanza we see him completely dissociating with his reality. Now he is standing on a shore and not just any shore but a ‘surf-tormented shore’ which hints his own mental condition. The shore is being bothered or harassed by the surf of the ocean, just like his interpretation of reality is now bothered as his brain tries to cope the trauma of his beloved leaving him.

Now standing on the shore, he’s holding handful of sand. He wonders at how only a few of the many grains of sand he can actually hold, and as he wonders his hold on the grains of sand, he also notices how these few grains of sand escape his grasp and return to the waves of the beach. The speaker weeps as he sees the grains of sands gradually slipping through his fingers. He expresses remorse over his inability to hold onto them. The grains of sand definitely mean much more, they symbolize his life and reality. He weeps over his inability to clasp or hold onto his reality, he is moving away from his reality as these grains of sand are breaking free from his hold. As the speaker goes on showing his grief over the grains of sand, he describes his inability to keep even one grain of sand from slipping into the ocean. Just like his reality is slipping away from him, leaving him on this tormented shore.

“O God! Can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp
O God! can I not save

One from the pitiless wave?”(Poe, lines 18-21)

The speaker cries out to God for help and comfort. He asks God, if he can grasp these grains with a tighter clasp, or if he can save just one grain of sand from slipping into the water. He is very much aware of his disoriented reality. He knows he is moving away from his own reality which makes him question whether anything at all until now has even been real or not, and he again asks the same question:

“Is all that we see or seem

But a dream within a dream?”(Poe, lines 22-23)

The repetition of this question indicates the speaker’s inability to fight with his condition of dissociation and derealization.

CONCLUSION

Poe puts forth a speaker struggling to find the basis of reality. At first he questions his own reality, which stems as a result of his own condition- Dissociation and Derealization, which creeps into his system as he has to part ways with his beloved. He struggles to decipher whether his life with his beloved has been nothing but a dream. The speaker’s crippling mental state drives him to possible insanity as he gradually detaches himself from reality. As Descartes writes towards the end of his first Meditation, “...at the end I feel constrained to confess that there is nothing in all that I formerly believed to be true, of which I cannot in some measure doubt, and that not merely through want of thought or through levity, but for reasons which are powerful and maturely considered; so that henceforth I ought not the less carefully to refrain from giving credence to these opinions than to that which is manifestly false, if I desire to arrive at any certainty.” (Descartes 7), he comes to a conclusion that he cannot risk trusting his senses as he has been tricked by them before. Our speaker too is questioning whether he can fully trust his senses at this point as well. Even though both of their doubts arise due to different reasons, we find that both Descartes and our speaker asks the same question and draws the same conclusion.

REFERENCES

- [1] Gale. A Study Guide for Edgar Allan Poe's “A Dream within a Dream” Poetry for Students. Gale, Cengage Learning, 2016. https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=DK83DQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT3&dq=info:D0LutgiaOccJ:scholar.google.com/&ots=F1QNShhdP&sig=da4qHyDfs56k5Wk3669Ky_jDO4#v=onepage&q&f=false
- [2] Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- [3] “A Dream within a Dream”. Lit Priest, <https://litpriest.com/poems/a-dream-within-a-dream-summary/>.
- [4] “THE BUTTERFLY DREAM THE PHILOSOPHYPHILOSOPHY.” The Philosophy Foundation, <https://www.philosophy-foundation.org/enquiries/view/the-butterfly-dream#:~:text=The%20stimulus,that%20he%20was%20a%20butterfly.>
- [5] “Philosophy of Dreaming”. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/dreaming-philosophy/>
- [6] “Edgar Allan Poe- A Dream within A Dream”. GENIUS. <https://genius.com/Edgar-allan-poe-a-dream-within-a-dream-annotated>
- [7] Nordquist, Joseph. “What are Dissociation and Depersonalization?”. MEDICAL NEWS TODAY, Reviewed by Nicole Washington, 24 August 2022, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/262888>
- [8] “Dissociative Disorders”. National Alliance on Mental Illness, <https://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Mental-Health-Conditions/Dissociative-Disorders>
- [9] Moskowitz, Andrew. “What is dissociation?”. estd, <https://estd.org/what-dissociation>
- [10] Spacey, Andrew. “Analysis of Poem ‘A Dream within a Dream’ by Edgar Allan Poe”. Owlcation, 14 July 2022, <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Analysis-of-Poem-A-Dream-Within-A-Dream-by-Edgar-Allan-Poe>
- [11] Solis-Moreira, Jocelyn. “What is Dissociation? Causes, Symptoms and Treatment.” Forbes Health. 2 February 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/health/mind/what-is-dissociation/>

^[12] Nowak, Laurel. “What causes Depersonalization and Derealization? Addressing Root Causes and Avoiding Triggers.” BrightQuest, 24 August 2018, https://www-brightquest-com.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/www.brightquest.com/blog/what-causes-depersonalization-and-derealization-addressing-root-causes-and-avoiding-triggers/amp/?amp_js_v=a6&_gsa=1&usqp=mq331AQKKAFQArABIIACAw%3D%3D#aoh=16773000446711&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com&_tf=From%20%251%24s&share=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.brightquest.com%2Fblog%2Fwhat-causes-depersonalization-and-derealization-addressing-root-causes-and-avoiding-triggers%2F