

Navigating the Ontological Blur: A Stylistic Inquest into Poe's *A Dream Within a Dream*

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doi:10.63593/AS.2709-9830.2026.06.001

Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive stylistic analysis of Poe's 1849 poem *A Dream Within a Dream* that surpasses traditional approaches to Poe analysis, which focus primarily on biographies and themes. The gap in the existing body of Poe's work centers on how isolated linguistic elements of style have not been synthesized for a complete analysis of Poe's work as a body of literature. To fill this void in the current literature on Poe, this study employs a strict three-tier analytical model that integrates Sense, Sound, and Structure into one cohesive analysis of the poem. At the level of sense, linguistic style elements, including figurative language, denotation/connotation, and sensory imagery, are examined to illustrate how the poem translates the abstract quality of transience into the tangible reality of the physical world. At the level of sound, prosodic features are examined to demonstrate how the poem's sounds recreate for the reader the continuous ebb and flow of time while simultaneously inducing feelings of profound existential despair. At the structural level, irregular line lengths, variable stanza lengths, and extensive enjambment are examined to show how the poem's structural characteristics mirror the instability of human perception. Overall, the integration of these three disparate linguistic tiers demonstrates how Poe's intentional use of form creates an active representation that raises the question of an ontological blurring of the lines between reality and illusion. Finally, this analysis contextualizes Poe's poetic language within an applied linguistics framework, demonstrating the structural relationship between aesthetic inquiry and the integrated form of an aesthetic object.

Keywords: stylistics, Edgar Allan Poe, poetic rhetoric, prosody

1. Introduction

In this paper, the significant relationship between the form of literature and the meaning of language is explored by applying a detailed stylistic analysis to Edgar Allan Poe's lyric poem, *A Dream Within a Dream*, written in 1849. The chapter uses an interdisciplinary approach, grounded in applied linguistics, to introduce the reader to the study's research material and to show how poetically structured language constitutes an interrelated system that produces emotional and cognitive responses. Although there has been much research conducted on Poe's writing, much of the literature focuses either on biographical summaries or purely on formalistic summaries, and does not relate to the existential themes found in Poe's poems by identifying how the various linguistic structures create the coherent extent of ontological ambiguity that is found in *A Dream Within a Dream*. Thus, this chapter identifies a three-level methodological framework designed to analyze Poe's carefully blended semantic and structural values, and to use a rigorously text-based model to show how each formalistic choice Poe makes also constructs the ontological ambiguity demonstrated in his poem.

1.1 The Research Background

Stylistics is an interdisciplinary subject area within applied linguistics that studies literary works as “texts”; therefore, a literary piece’s meanings should be studied in conjunction with how the words of that text are arranged to work together to create a total meaning and the way they create an emotional response when those words are arranged in that method. Within this framework, poetry is at the highest level of study, as poetry contains the most tightly patterned language of any of the literary genres because poets create visual images through their word choices, use the sound of words to play with the meaning of their messages and use line length and stanza design and organization of the text on the page unlike any other poet (Kroll, 2020; Torremocha, 2015). In the current study, stylistics is used as a framework for analyzing Edgar Allan Poe’s *A Dream Within a Dream* by showing how the linguistic devices found in it interact with the poem’s formal structure to create a very evocative experience of reality, time, and loss. This structure uses language’s structure as the primary means of conveying an author’s perspective on creation to the reader, giving an existential perspective (Kroll, 2020; Torremocha, 2015).

The primary objective of this analysis is to specify and provide detailed textual evidence of the linguistic features Edgar Allan Poe uses to create both existential uncertainty and affective impact. Through an examination of specific ways in which the poet’s diction and imagery choices reflect the poem’s thematic concerns, such as transience, illusion, and the dissolution of certainty, this paper has elucidated the manner in which the poet encodes these themes using a lexicon that does not apply a purely bibliographic or biographical frame to the work. This analysis supports an expanded understanding of poetic rhetoric by establishing that sound and meaning influence each other; thus, the prosodic design of language works in tandem with its semantics to create impact. This methodological position stems from the view that rich stylistic description is a necessary part of how tone and mood of a work can be created through linguistics, which positions Poe’s lyricism within a rigorous linguistics paradigm and demonstrates how a literary theme alone, without the inclusion of stylistic detail, cannot accurately portray the experience of Poe’s writing. (Kroll, 2020; Smith, 1961; Torremocha, 2015).

At various points in Poe’s poetry, scholars have approached the analysis of his work from either a biographical or a formalist viewpoint, providing thematic summaries but not employing a consistent approach to language-related devices. While the analysis of Poe’s lyric works focuses on consistent themes, including time as a theme, the unreliability of perception as a theme, and the impact of bereavement as a theme, the analysis of these poetic works does not typically apply a linguistic base or methodology to explain how these themes are constructed from a linguistic perspective using the syntactical structure of the poem (Kroll, 2020; Smith, 1961; Torremocha, 2015). Therefore, the examination of *A Dream Within a Dream* contains an advanced stylistic analysis of how Poe’s word choice, imagery, rhythm, rhyme, and structural form are coherent and contribute to the experience of ontological anxiety.

Furthermore, this paper analyzes important issues in stylistics concerning how form relates to meaning in poetry. Among those issues is the question of to what extent, if any, one can interpret a poem semantically without also considering its phonological and textual properties. Certain authors interpret Poe’s poem with reference to his biography, whereas this paper’s stylistic approach examines the poem as a complete, cohesive system in which form and content mutually shape and support one another. Some scholars agree with the author’s assertion that Poe’s association with a unified poetic theory is warranted, while others question the possibility of decoupling literary form from contextual factors. The current synthesis acknowledges each of these perspectives while contending that adherence to a rigorous stylistic framework provides a more exact analysis of the poem’s experiential impact (Kroll, 2020; Torremocha, 2015).

In some empirical evidence, the analysis comprises a three-tiered approach. The first tier of this study includes an inventory of the formal items present in the poem, such as meter, line structure, stanzaic patterns, and syntactic distribution. By mapping the above-noted formal characteristics of the poem, the poem’s cadence and perception of time will be illustrated. Secondly, the poem’s figurative and tangible elements used to represent these items create an auditory effect that displays Poe’s fragmented ontology. The third and final tier of this analysis combines the information provided from the first two tiers into one united explanation as to how Poe appropriates ontological blurriness including the fluidity between what is real versus what is illusory by using an organized method to link semantic significance to a prosodic or formal configuration through every linguistic aspect of the poem (Kroll, 2020; Smith, 1961; Torremocha, 2015).

Overall, this stylistic analysis of *A Dream Within a Dream* serves as a revealing model of how a text-based linguistic approach can clarify aesthetic effects traditionally described as mood or theme. Evidence confirms how objective linguistic data directly link to a coherent and systematic description of literary forms; there are many examples of Edgar Allan Poe’s remarkable ability to develop a persistent and vividly meaningful analysis of uncertainty and possibility. Not only does this serve to improve Poe scholarship, through a serious consideration of stylistic methods but also continues to support the position that the study of rhetorical devices in

poetry cannot be separated from an in-depth study of linguistic form, because the success of rhetorical devices in poetry depend upon utilizing phonological, syntactic and semantic materials in a precise manner (Kroll, 2020; Smith, 1961; Torremocha, 2015).

1.2 Gaps

Individual devices have been regularly separated from each other in scholarly analyses of Poe's poetry; however, there has been little attempt to place these analyses together in one coherent, stylistic framework created to distinctly separate meaning, sound, and structure. Analyses of imagery are sometimes not clearly defined regarding which specific senses are revealed by particular imagery, and analyses of sound usually identify only rhyme, without identifying the specific patterns of assonance, consonance, and rhythm that support the meaning. Similarly, references to the poem's formal choices have typically received at best passing reference in the prevailing scholarly discourse and, in general, have not been considered as integral pieces of a common design. Thus, there is a gap in the literature regarding the use of a systematic approach to stylistically read that combines all of these elements into one analytical mechanism and, in turn, makes an explicit connection between each level of language back to the poem's central thematic concept of the impermanent and dream-like nature of being, thus demonstrating how form and content collaboratively create ontological ambiguity. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to fill this gap by situating a unified framework of sense, sound, and structure as mutual resources that drive Poe's investigation of transience and doubt (Aftab et al., 2024; Erjan, 2022; Khan et al., 2023; Stylistic Analysis of Langston Hughes' Selected Poems, 2020).

1.3 Announcement of the Current Research

This research undertakes a full stylistic analysis of *A Dream Within a Dream* by Edgar Allan Poe. After reviewing the author's life and works and considering the relationship between the poem and Poe's biography, the study examines the poem at the levels of sense, sound, and structure. Each level is illustrated with direct textual examples from the poem to demonstrate how Poe's linguistic choices work together to enact, rather than merely state, the poem's anxious meditation on the fleeting and possibly misleading nature of human experience.

2. The Author's Life, Work, and Writing

The biography of Edgar Allan Poe has had an inextricable influence on the development of his literary output, as the early loss of his parents and his adoption into the Allan family created a wild, aspirational, and often difficult course of development that shaped the aesthetic choices and thematic concerns of all of his writing (Napitupulu, 2023; Phillips, 2018; Ulugbekovna, 2020). Poe's family history includes the abandonment by his father and the early death of his mother from tuberculosis, resulting in unsustainable family arrangements culminating in an adolescence with John and Frances Allan, one that was characterized by financial difficulties yet instrumental in his training as a writer and in the development of his first body of literary work (Napitupulu, 2023; Oltean, 2018; Ulugbekovna, 2020). The author's biography aids understanding of his lifelong transition between aspiration and deprivation, as exemplified by his enduring theme of seeking to create innovative forms while exploring ethical ambiguity in his prose and poetry (Bowers, 2010; Tresch, 2016; Ulugbekovna, 2020).

Poe worked as an editor and critic all throughout the northern and mid-Atlantic cities and wrote many of his most famous poems and stories, such as *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Raven*, and *Annabel Lee*. His work in these cities reflects a cross-section of American Gothic and dark romanticism, and his influence is seen in the emergence of modern short stories and early detective stories. Additionally, personal loss, economic instability, and competitiveness with his colleagues helped shape the style, rhythm, and psychological depth of Poe's writing.

The underlying principle behind Poe's writings, as most explicitly articulated in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), is that the aesthetic experience in poetry is derived from its beauty, while melancholy is an acceptable emotional content for works of poetry. The death of a beautiful woman is considered by Poe to be the ideal subject matter for poetry. The manner in which Poe articulates these aesthetic values can be viewed as a self-reflective construct as well as an explanation of his emphasis on loss and mourning in poetry, connecting his aesthetic choices to an in-depth theory of affect and his artistic structure, which informs the quality of his well-regarded fiction (Meyer, 2013; Pahl, 2009; Pournara, 2022). The connection between Poe's life and emotional state and his critical writings, therefore, helps explain why his poetry and short stories focus on themes of absence, mortality, and the uncanny as structural components of form (Dita, 2019; Pahl, 2009).

As part of their broader scholarly debate on Romanticism, aestheticism, and the evolution of American literary modernism, researchers have incorporated Edgar Allan Poe's life and work into discussions of the latter issues. For example, Poe's biographical/historical pressures and how those pressures were utilized in developing his creative imagination; the cosmopolitan geography of Poe's life; how Poe's experimental/formal developments articulated distinct concepts of doubt and desire; how Poe's writing negotiates boundaries between beauty/horror, self/other, reality/dream (Ke, 2018; Møllegaard, 2016; Pournara, 2022). All these aspects of Poe's

life, work, and writing point toward the importance of a stylistic approach that considers life writing, critical theory, and textual form as three mutually reinforcing elements that shape the way Poe negotiated boundaries between beauty/horror, self/other, and reality/dream (Ivanchenko, 2019; Oltean, 2018; Phillips, 2018). Collectively, the life, career, and writings of Poe reveal a systematic, though contradictory, approach to authorship in which personal experience aligns with cultural audacity to form an enduring legacy of American Gothic modernism (Ivanchenko, 2019; Oltean, 2018; Phillips, 2018).

3. The Poem and the Author

The poem *A Dream Within a Dream* was first published on March 31, 1849, in *The Flag of Our Union* and is representative of the tumultuous final phase of Edgar Allan Poe's life, which ended with his death in October of that same year. It was written shortly after the passing of Virginia Poe, Poe's beloved wife; at a time when Poe's health and finances were failing; and in a decade characterized by themes of loss and uncertain reality, producing a poem centered on the idea of loss that cannot be undone and questioning whether experience may ultimately be experienced as dreamlike (Kroll, 2020; Smith, 1961; Torremocha, 2015). Many commentators on the poem interpret the "you" — the unnamed addressee of the first stanza — as a representation of a lost love; this is consistent with Edgar Allan Poe's long-held belief that the death of a beautiful woman is the most significant theme for the poet.

At the same time, the poem reflects on bigger ideas about the state we find ourselves in; it reflects on the day and how it is disconnected from the realities of the world we inhabit; and it suggests how the state of being disconnected from the life we have created leads to a disconnection between your identity and the physical manifestations of your true self. By being disconnected from the day or the experiences or the way in which you created your reality, as well as being disconnected from the physical manifestations of your existence, you lose all sense of reality and become subject to your own thoughts of what could be if only you could achieve your dreams. By including this distinction in the author's relationship with the poem, the author creates an opportunity to shift their grief from an individual experience to a philosophical consideration by examining death in relation to the nature of existence. By doing this, the writer also aligns with Edgar Allan Poe's statement that poetry must seek beauty and heightened emotion rather than biographical insight (Kroll, 2020; Smith, 1961; Torremocha, 2015).

The circumstances surrounding the poem's author will not provide an interpretation of the poem. As a result, by refraining from using specific names, places, and events, Poe encourages readers' access to implicit connections between affective experience and existential doubt. The tension between personal intention and universal commitment is a hallmark of Poe's stylistic method, thereby strengthening the relationship between form and feeling and creating a powerful dramatic effect. Critics who interpret the poem about Virginia's death informally connect how one experiences personal loss through public expression, yet the poem's stylistic interpretation emphasizes how its use of sound, word choice, and grammatical structure creates an interactive expression of uncertainty as well as a dynamic experience of existence. In addition to this outcome of double meaning, it is possible to achieve these forms of meaning within the formal structure of the poem (Aftab et al., 2024; Erjan, 2022; Khan et al., 2023).

As part of the general field of Poe studies, the poem *A Dream Within a Dream* represents a confluence between textual form, life-writing, and critical theorizing. As an instance from Poe's adult life, the way he composed this poem later in his life serves as a case study in how Poe's ongoing engagement with loss, memory, and the uncanny manifests in formal devices such as diction, imagery, and prosody. As such, the wider academic discussion about this poem has benefited from a stylistic perspective that treats life-history not just as a biographical note but as part of a broader, disciplined reading of how poetic formal devices articulate experiences of absence and the irreversibility of time. This analysis places a strong emphasis on the manner in which the poet has converted privately experienced grief into a universal meditation on the nature of perception and temporality; however, at the same time it acknowledges that the life of the poet is only one of many important factors in this work's aesthetic autonomy and its ability to depict the outside world (Napitupulu, 2023; Phillips, 2018; Stylistic Analysis of Selected Poems by Langston Hughes, 2020).

4. Research Methodology

A qualitative text image study that uses grammatical structure, sound patterns, and semantic choices in combination to create meanings for literature. Using causal history and isolated form critique, this methodological approach applies the text of Poe's *A Dream Within a Dream* as a complete system of interdependent constituents. The development of stylistics as an interdisciplinary point of reference for this methodology, and its relationship to poetic form and artistic effect, lends credence to the empirical design of this research. The analysis of textual data will enable mapping production to the poet's aesthetic choices based on shared qualitative descriptions.

A formal structural inventory of the text facilitates a full description of the poem using three distinguishing tiers. The first level is an inventory of the poem's structural and quantitative characteristics, including lineation (placement), stanzaic patterning, and the synchronous presentation of syntax and meter. This descriptive level isolates the poem's mechanical architecture: how structural cadences govern the reader's perception of time and pace through the placement of lines within stanzas.

Tier two of the framework shifts the analytical focus to the overlapping levels of sense and sound in the poem. On the sense level, this tier analyzes the use of specific figures of speech (e.g., metaphor, personification), semantic weight, and sensory imagery (i.e., tactile, visual, auditory, kinesthetic). At the same time, this tier analyzes the poem at the phonological level to identify and categorize sound imagery devices, including end rhymes, internal rhymes, assonance, consonance, and alliteration, and to examine how these sound devices create or reinforce shifts in the poem's mood.

Tier four synthesizes the data through the preceding three tiers to create a consistent linguistic rationale. Specifically, by tracing how the semantic significance of an experience intersects with its prosodic and formal structure, tier four describes how Poe's poetry takes a personal experience of grief and transforms it into a universal/philosophical meditation. This example of Poe's grief demonstrates how the "fluid, unstable boundary" between reality and illusion (the poem's central ontological ambiguity) is "actively created" through specific phonological, syntactic, and semantic choices rather than merely "stated."

5. Poetry Analysis

In this chapter, the author conducts a thorough, three-part analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *A Dream Within a Dream*, divided into the three categories of sense, sound, and structure. The sense analysis illustrates how images of touch, sight, and sound provide a grounding for emotions related to existential dread/uncertainty through metaphors, personification, and rhetorical framing. The sound analysis shows how Poe's use of rhyming couplets, iambic meter, and assonance, consonance, and alliteration replicates the breakdown of the "real" by using musicality and rhythm to portray emotions. The structure of *A Dream Within a Dream* is evident in irregular line lengths, asymmetrical stanzas, and enjambment, which mirror the instability of time and the human experience.

5.1 Sense

5.1.1 Figures of Speech

Poe develops the poem with a limited number of similar terms or phrases. There is an extended metaphor, maybe 6 or 7 examples of personification, and each of the three rhetorical devices used at the close can also be viewed as a type of refrain. The controlling metaphor and metonymy express the theme of loss in the original text's metaphor for loss of life or love, as expressed in lines 14-16: "Grains of the golden sand— / How few, but how they creep / Through my fingers to the deep." In these lines, the metaphor offers a concrete way to think about lost time. It creates a link to the concept of "lost time" as described through the metaphor expressed in lines 10-11 — repeated at the poem's close — and concludes with the statement, "all we see or seem / Is but a dream within a dream." Thus, the speaker connects all existential experiences as if they are nested dreams, creating an additional layer of unreality between the speaker and any stable truths.

To heighten the emotional significance of this unreality, the writer employs personification to make "hope" (the abstract thing) seem as though it can fly away from the speaker (line six). When hope is described as having wings and being alive, it heightens the feeling of loss by shaping the reader's perception of how something that is merely an abstract idea (hope) can actually leave the speaker. The way hope leaves the speaker corresponds with the use of symbolism in the environment by the "surf-tortured shore" and the "pitiless wave", where the surf-tortured shore and pitiless waves represent the continuous, unfeeling passage of time and death. The shore is, in essence, the intangible boundary of human life, constantly eroded by forces beyond one's control. While the poem does not offer definitive answers to these themes, it poses rhetorical questions such as "Is it therefore less gone?" and "Is all that we see or seem / Just a dream within a dream?" The use of these questions illustrates the speaker's own uncertainty and, in turn, invites the reader to experience the same epistemological uncertainty as the narrator.

5.1.2 Imagery

Sound is not widely present in the poem, with only one strong occurrence, while the imagery is largely limited to touch and sight. The tactile imagery's hold on the reader creates physical disappointment through the line "I have in my hand / Grains of the golden sand— / How many! Yet how do the grains / Slip between my fingers." Hence, the tactile disappointment parallels the narrator's inability to hold on to time or their love, as the sand is lost. The tactile frustration is visually identified through two contrasting images: the author begins with a close-up image of departure, "Take this kiss upon the brow," and moves toward the opposite end of the spectrum, the expansive shoreline scene with golden sand.

The auditory imagery of “the roar / Of a surf-tormented shore” provides an enhanced setting for the statement, as it not only heightens the sound of the sea crashing onto the beach but also reinforces both the violence and inevitability of the natural forces opposing the speaker. Finally, kinesthetic imagery ties the two together with “while they creep / Through my fingers to the deep.” By conveying a continuous sense of moving forward at an extremely slow, irreversible pace, the narrative’s time frame has successfully portrayed time as something to be physically experienced rather than merely thought of in the abstract.

5.1.3 Denotative and Connotative Meanings (Semantic Level)

In terms of semantics, the reader finds that many words in this poem have strong connotative indicators that go far beyond merely defining them literally or in a dictionary. For example, the word “dream,” when viewed denotatively, refers to thoughts/experiences you have while sleeping. However, when thinking of the word “dream” in that context and then applying it to all of what is not real, or has no substantiating evidence of truth (to life upon waking, etc.), its connotation expands to encompass several other ideas. Likewise, the phrase “golden sand” is also an example of extending the denotative definition of a word into another category. When looking at the denotative definition of “golden sand,” sand particles found along a beach are the first thing that comes to mind. When the adjective “golden” describes the noun “sand,” the adjective causes you to think of something that is probably of a precious value, and therefore, the sand becomes symbolic of precious and finite memories in a person’s lifetime.

The elements, as they appear in nature, have also been affected semantically. For example, looking at how the term “pitiless wave” is a denotation of something moving in a normal, everyday manner (i.e., ocean waters), but the application of the word “pitiless” creates a characterization of the sea as being heartless and cruel; therefore, the sea has now become an example of a non-characteristic, yet powerful agent that acts like time or death. In conjunction with that example, the phrase “surf-tormented shore” has been impacted in the same manner. A purely denotative definition of the surf-tormented shore describes the shoreline as an area of the beach that is consistently washed by ocean waves. However, by using the word “tormented,” the intense suffering that is typically felt or experienced by humans can now be similarly identified with the physical characteristics of the shoreline.

5.2 Sounds

Poe uses sound devices such as end rhyme, internal rhyme, rhythm, assonance, consonance, and alliteration to create the poem’s emotional and philosophical meaning. The poem’s rhyming pattern is almost exclusively based on couplets and AABB-type rhymes (e.g., “brow” / “now”, “deem” / “dream”), resulting in a sound pairing that gives the poem an incantation-like quality that suits a person caught in obsessive, repetitive thoughts. The poem’s structural use of a repeated line (the speaker’s last line of the poem is the same as the first two lines of the second stanza) repeats the same cycle as the repeated line occurs at the end of the first stanza. The circularity of the text establishes a cycle of haunting/unresolved themes and a cycle to the end of the work.

The rhythm of the poem controls its movement. The majority of the poem’s lines have an iambic meter and vary in syllable count, producing a rocking, wave-like rhythm that simulates how the surf moves as described in the text. In this case, the long “o” and “e” sounds created by repeated assonance in “How few! yet how they creep” slow the line down, mimicking the gradual retreat of sand left behind by the waves. In addition, the same “s” sound in the phrase “surf-tormented shore” illustrates consonance and creates a hissing effect that mimics waves hitting land.

The sibilant quality of this sound carries into the poem through alliteration, particularly with the word “see” in the phrase “see or seem.” In this case, the repetition of the same initial letter (“s”) connects both verbs, linking them phonetically as well as conceptually, creating an ambiguity between reality and appearance for the reader through word choice. Overall, the sonic landscape created by these literary devices culminates in many instances of repetition and anaphora-like repetitions, including but not limited to “While I weep — while I weep!” Each occurrence has a heightened emotional effect, illustrating the speaker’s sorrow with sound rather than simply by writing about it.

5.3 Structure

This poem has a total of twenty-four lines, divided into two stanzas, each varying in length from eleven to thirteen lines. The line lengths themselves are irregular; they range from approximately four to eight syllables, resulting in a halting, panting rhythm rather than a steady one. Most of the lines in the poem are grouped in pairs that rhyme (couplets), with just a few exceptions where three lines rhyme (triplets), such as in lines 18 and 19, as well as their surrounding rhymes on “grasp” / “clasp” and “save” / “wave.”

The grammatical form of these lines is not always whole, complete sentences; some of them run on to the next line (enjambment). For instance, the meaning of “Yet if hope hath flown away / In a night, or in a day” will not be resolved until you finish reading line seven. The continuing overflow of meaning at line breaks parallels the

central image of all things within the poem — hope, sand, time — disappearing consecutively and in greater amounts without ever being contained within a defined boundary. The division into two stanzas also represents a transition in both place and address — the first stanza addresses an unnamed “you,” connected with a moment of separation, whereas the second stanza addresses God instead of person, and includes a significant transition from a moment of intimacy associated with the person being left to being at sea on the shore. The break in structure at the level of form is the same as the breaking of the poem’s theme; from a specific loss of human contact to an abstract or philosophical discussion about the uncertainty of the external world.

6. Conclusion

The linguistic choices that Edgar Allan Poe makes at every level — sense, sound, and linear structure — within *A Dream Within a Dream* are deliberately designed to enact his central concern within the poem: that love, hope, time, and life itself may essentially be no more real than a dream. In terms of sense, Poe uses the extended metaphor of sand slipping through one’s fingers to give the abstract philosophical anxiety expressed in the poem a concrete, physical manifestation. This is accomplished through tactile and visual imagery and the use of words having other than or additional meanings. In terms of sound, the use of couplet rhyme, iambic meter with a wave-like rhythm, and the use of assonance, consonance, and alliteration create, almost physically, the ceaseless movement of the ocean and the ceaselessly repeated, obsessive nature of grief.

The poem’s two unequal stanzas, varied line lengths, and frequent use of enjambment at the structural level create a form of instability and ungraspability that is consistent with the poem. In the context of Poe’s numerous biographical losses, along with his professed beliefs that melancholy and the death of a lost female are the most appropriate themes for poetry, the theme of personal sorrow has been artistically crafted through style to become a universal expression of the transitory nature of human perception and the inevitability of temporal loss.

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