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Edgar Allan Poe and Alan Parsons: All That We See or Seem is Nevermore

Kimball Gardner

Since their beginnings in the mind of a brilliant, misunderstood man, the works of Edgar Allan Poe have captured the imaginations and fears of audiences throughout the world. After his death, when his popularity began to grow, Poe's works became more widely read and studied by both scholars and authors. As technology began to advance in the twentieth century, his works began to be adapted into short films and later, feature-length films. And, in the late twentieth century, a young progressive rock group named the Alan Parsons Project offered their adaptation of several of Poe's works. In this paper, I will discuss their work on "A Dream within a Dream" and "The Raven," from their album *Tales of Mystery and Imagination—Edgar Allan Poe* and how their adaptation enhances Poe's effect. Specifically, the Alan Parsons Project captures and enhances the effect of surreality and torment in the two poems through their use of rhythm and tempo, key and special effects, dynamics, and lyrics. As a result, the audience of these two songs can approach the coordinating poems with added insight, thus making their reading more impactful. Carl Sederholm had a somewhat similar approach in one of his papers, as he wrote, "Heavy metal music questions the cultural and psychological dimensions of human power, particularly as it manifests itself in madness and violence" (Sederholm 194). Though the Alan Parsons Project is not a heavy metal band, their music accomplishes a similar feat: it investigates the dream-like dimensions of these two poems, thereby manifesting itself in madness.

Before we can attempt to analyze the adaptation, we must first be generally familiar with the effect in both poems. Beginning with "A Dream within a Dream," several phrases reveal a sense of otherworldliness: "My days have been a dream," "Is it therefore the less *gone*?" and, of course, "All that we see or seem / Is but a dream within a dream" (Poe, "A Dream within a

Dream,” 70). Furthermore, the reader perceives a sharp feeling of torment, especially in these lines: “If hope has flown away,” “I stand amid the roar / Of a surf-tormented shore,” and “Grains of the golden sand— / How few! Yet how they creep / Through my fingers to the deep / While I weep—while I weep! / O God! can I not grasp / Them with a tighter clasp?” (70). Especially in this last selection, the reader can visualize the narrator standing on the beach of a foreign world, weeping as the sand slowly falls through his or her hands. Eric Carlson provides his insight: “The point lies in the ironic resemblance of lovers and sand, both fleeting” (Carlson 95). The poem ends with this desperate question: “Is *all* that we see or seem / But a dream within a dream?” (70, emphasis in original). Rather than just the surreal statement from the first stanza, the narrator has become so tormented that he or she seeks longingly to find an answer to the madness.

“The Raven” also provides the interesting effect of surreality and torment. The surreal is manifest in the setting and situation itself: a man, who has just lost his beloved Lenore, being visited by a talking raven in the middle of the night. It feels very nightmarish in quality, especially when the reader comes across such lines as “Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing” (Poe, “The Raven,” 58). On top of that, the steady beat of the rhythm and the unique rhyme scheme cause the surreal effect. The torment, much like in “A Dream within a Dream,” comes in the second half of the poem. As the narrator becomes more comfortable with the bird, he begins asking several questions: “Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!” (59), “Forget this lost Lenore!” (60), “Is there—*is* there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!” (60), and, finally, “Take thy form from off my door!” (61). To all of these questions, the bird simply replies, “Nevermore.” The repetition of this very unsatisfying answer to incredibly meaningful questions is enough to drive anybody mad, and it is

the core of torment in this poem. Carlson has a similar claim: “[The narrator’s] inability to know whether the raven is a bird, demon, or prophet—to know what, if anything lies beyond time—turns into the ideal torment. Thus, the narrator is not insane but shattered because his universe is disjointed” (Carlson 98). Rather than finding solace in his grim visitor, he only finds more sadness and turmoil.

With all that being said, I am now prepared to discuss the Alan Parsons Project’s adaptation of both poems. Though music is not a typical form of adaptation, when dealing with such classic texts as these, it can be very enlightening. Linda Hutcheon wrote, “My more restricted double definition of adaptation as process and product is . . . broad enough to allow me to treat not just films and stage productions, but also musical arrangements and song covers” (Hutcheon 9). Basically, she says that adaptations of works can include arrangements such as those done by the Alan Parsons Project.

The first thing to note in these two songs is that they are joined together by a segue. This means that once the first song, “A Dream within a Dream,” finishes, “The Raven” starts right on its heels without any breaks, silences, or pauses, much like a continuous, constant dream. The one consistent part of both songs (besides the key, which will be discussed later) is the rhythm. The constant, steady beat of the electronic bass drum provides a stable backbone that feels somewhat familiar. Ironically, this familiar aspect adds to the horror of the piece because it is *uncanny*. This is according to Sigmund Freud’s definition: “The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (220). Basically, it is when something unsettling is simultaneously familiar to us, making it that much more terrifying. In the case of these songs, the steady beat and the drums provide something familiar yet also off-putting, which help drive them forward. It keeps the listener grounded somewhat while the

extremely foreign aspects (to be discussed in the next paragraph) seem to surround and consume the listener. Also, the beat is not very fast, but it is not slow enough to be boring. Rather, it seems reminiscent of a heartbeat. It could be that this is an allusion to “The Tell-Tale Heart” and the beating of the dead man’s heart which drives the narrator insane. Since this is the third track on the album, after “The Raven,” this doesn’t seem completely improbable. However, it may just be simpler, and the slow beat could be mimicking the ticking of a clock and inevitability of time passing away. Either way, the effect of the beat is suspenseful, thus adding to the ethereality and torment of the pieces.

The key of these songs is a minor one, and is therefore automatically not happy or positive. Due to the rest of the context, the key does not sound sad; rather, it sounds mysterious and somewhat macabre. It is another major component in the effects of the songs, helping—along with the rhythm—to drive forward the tone of the surreal and torment. However, the minor key alone is not enough to accomplish this. The special effects of the vocals and instruments are another very important component of the songs. First, the vocals in “The Raven” are extremely distorted through the use of an EMI vocoder, producing an unsettling electronic sound. Mike DeGagne, a music critic, wrote the following in one of his reviews of the album *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*: “The EMI vocoder is used throughout ‘The Raven’ with the Westminster School Boys Choir mixed in to add a distinct flair to its chamber-like sound” (DeGagne). This “chamber-like sound” enhances this electronic sound with echoes and a sort of hollow sound, perfect for producing an ethereal-like effect.

This surreal sound is also furthered by the keyboard and synthesizer effects in both songs, more especially in “A Dream within a Dream.” These synthesizers sound very foreign, and the sequence of notes being played on them are very dreamlike. This is a good example of what

Thomas Leitch calls transposing: “A far more frequent strategy is to transpose the setting of a canonical classic to the present in order to show its universality while guaranteeing its relevance to the more immediate concerns of the target audience” (Leitch 100). In this case, the canonical classic is obviously Poe’s poetry, and the target audience is any listener of progressive rock in the ’70s and ’80s. The Alan Parsons Project fulfills this strategy by projecting the effect of Poe’s work onto the modern canvas of progressive rock through these electronic effects. In so doing, they do their part to preserve its relevance for many more years—though their role in classic American literature certainly will ensure that on its own.

Yet another important component of these songs is the dynamics. In “A Dream within a Dream,” the volume basically always stays at medium. It begins with a fade-in from silence, suggesting the gradual feeling of falling asleep. Once it has finished fading in, the song stays at a medium volume while the beat and synthesizers come together to create the feeling of being in a dream. Little by little, the instruments build to a louder volume and climax, and then return to a quieter volume again. Frankly, this song is simply a preface for “The Raven,” setting the mood of the surreal and otherworldly. The listener descends into the dream-world with the band as they prepare to present to the listener the strange, nightmarish confrontation with the raven.

As the song changes from one to the next, it does so in soft dynamics. The beginning shows the narrator very confused, wondering what’s tapping on his door. The song then builds as he finds the raven and starts to get worried and unsettled. It then builds toward a loud, intense climax with the full range of instruments and vocals on display. The vocals are extremely important to this song as they follow these dynamics, and by the end, the vocalists are nearly shouting. Jeffrey Meyers writes, “‘The Raven’ portrays (like so many of Poe’s stories) the monomaniacal obsession of a melancholy man who is hovering on the edge of madness”

(Meyers 163). The Alan Parsons Project captures this idea perfectly in the swelling climax of “The Raven,” as the melancholy merges with the madness. But then, after everything boils down, the ending is soft and somewhat resigned.

Finally, the lyrics in these two songs adds a unique feeling of foreboding as well as enhancing the effect of surreality and torment. Though “A Dream within a Dream” does not have technical lyrics, the 1987 remix of the song does include the following quote by Edgar Allan Poe, read by the brilliant narrator Orson Welles:

For my own part, I have never had a thought which I could not set down in words, with even more distinctness than that with which I conceived it. . . . There is, however, a class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are *not* thoughts, and to which, *as yet*, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt to language. These “fancies” . . . arise in the soul (alas, how rarely!) only at epochs of most intense tranquility—when the bodily and mental health are in perfection—and at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with . . . the world of dreams. (Poe, “Marginalia,” 117, emphasis in original.)

At the end of this quote, Eric Woolfson and Alan Parsons attached the following: “And so I captured this ‘fancy’ where all that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream” (Alan Parsons Project, “A Dream within a Dream”). By combining the immortally terrifying words of Edgar Allan Poe with the masterfully horrifying voice of Orson Welles, the Alan Parsons Project creates one of the greatest introductions to an album ever. It is one full of apprehension, yet curiosity; fear, yet wonder; and foreboding, yet intrigue. It is sublime. They show the listener with this quote that they plan to take the listener on a journey through the world between dream and waking. And that journey plunges into the sublime territory of the surreal and of torment.

After this introduction, and once the instrumentals of the song have come and gone, the listener then is taken into the lyrics of “The Raven,” already established to be sung through the distorting vocoder. The lyrics of this song are heavily based on the words in the poem, but because the song is much shorter, the lyricists needed to be extremely selective with the words. The first stanza introduces the feeling of mystery, as the singer wakes up at midnight to a tapping sound at the door; but he cannot see anything “in the darkness.” However, in the next stanza, the listener begins to feel the strangeness and fear as the singer encounters the raven and its accompanying shadow. The fear builds and by the end of the stanza, the singer piques the listener’s curiosity by singing, “It spoke the one word / That I shall hear for evermore” (The Alan Parsons Project, “The Raven”). After this, an interlude of guitars and drums separates the inevitable answer: “Nevermore.” After a short, quiet break, the intensity picks back up until another, quieter stanza: “And still the raven / Remains in my room / No matter how much I implore. / No words can soothe him / No prayer remove him. / And I must hear for evermore / Quoth the raven, nevermore” (The Alan Parsons Project, “The Raven”). This is where the torment begins. The singer is nearly begging the raven to leave, to give him some inkling of peace. Yet the raven remains, and the singer realizes that he must forever hear that dreaded word, *nevermore*, for the rest of his life. “Despair is exteriorized in the refrain; the ‘Nevermore’ takes on a cumulative power like a threnody that fleshes out pain and prolongs the ominous mood. The bird is in effect clawing at the student’s heart, forcing him by the very nature of his enigmatic replies to face his inner desolation, the negative world in which he is submerged” (Knapp 87). The Alan Parsons Project captures this effect wonderfully. After building up the entire song to this point, it ends with the singer nearly shouting the word *nevermore* over and over again, repeating it fifteen times, as well as including the word *never* five times in-between. The effect

of torment is palpable in the final minute of the song, and the listener can easily feel the horror and realization that the singer will never find an adequate answer to his questions and longings; the listener can easily feel him going mad.

The inspiration for this work came from Eric Woolfson, one half of the creative genius of the Alan Parsons Project. According to their official website, “Eric has always been inspired by great creative minds, whether authors, architects, or psychoanalysis. He regards Edgar Allan Poe as probably his greatest musical inspiration because not only were his works fascinating, his life was even more intriguing” (“Memories”). Poe’s works are full of incredible material for adaptations because they can be interpreted in so many ways. However, I find it fascinating that the Alan Parsons Project was able to stay true to Poe’s original effect and both capture and enhance the feelings of surreality and torment in both “A Dream within a Dream” and “The Raven.” Through their mastery and use of several musical elements—rhythm and tempo, key and effects, dynamics, and lyrics—they pay a wonderful homage to Edgar Allan Poe. As a result, readers of these timeless poems will be able to approach them with added insight and feeling, making their reading much more valuable and effective. And perhaps through listening to these adaptations, the reader will see what Poe was trying to capture in these two poems: “the waking world blend[ing] with . . . the world of dreams” (Poe, “Marginalia,” 117).

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