Synopsis of “Life Is A Dream”:

Basilio, king of Poland, has had his son Segismundo imprisoned all of his life because it has been prophesied that the son will bring disaster to the country. The king tells his subjects that his son died after childbirth. After his son has grown to be a man, the king reveals to his court that his son lives, and allows the court to vote in favor of allowing the son to become heir. However, the son turns out to be violent, killing a man and attempting rape. For this he is drugged and returned to his prison, and told upon waking that the previous day’s events were merely a dream. Still, his jailer scolds him for his un-princely behavior, which prompts remorse in Segismundo. Rebels against the king, who have found out about the treatment of Segismundo, break him out of prison. The rebels defeat the king’s army; however, Segismundo doubts again if he is in reality or a dream, finally deciding that even in a dream we have to behave well because “God is God” and forgives the king. The play ends in a wedding.

Characters:

**Basilio, King of Poland** – a well-meaning yet foolish king who locked his son in a tower due to his belief in an astrological prophecy.

**Segismundo, his Son, prince of Poland** – Raised in captivity, a good hearted man who wrestles with his anger and confusion at the circumstances he finds himself in. Segismundo speaks in long poetic soliloquies using many references to nature, since his upbringing has been amongst the mountains and wildlife.

**Clotaldo, a Nobleman** – The man who raised Segismundo from a child, whilst also being his guard in the tower. Sometimes bumbling, he is a loyal and honourable servant to his King.

**Astolfo, Duke of Muscovy** – With florid language, Astolfo uses his charms to woo his cousin Estrella. He plans to marry her in order to claim his Uncle’s throne.

**Estrella, a Princess** – The kings niece and the object of Astolfo’s affections. She loves Astolfo but questions his love due to the portrait that hangs around his neck.

**Rosaura, a Lady** – Strong willed, intelligent and beautiful, Rosaura comes to Poland to revenge an affront made to her by Astolfo.

**Clarin, her Servant** – A simple man with clever wit, but at times selfish and cowardly, Clarin is a keen observer and excellent complainer.

Themes of the Play:

A few central ideas constitute the major philosophical themes of the play: the opposition between destiny and liberty, the topic of life as a dream, and the theme of free will. These central themes overshadow other themes present, like the education of princes, the model ruler, power, and justice.

The play is a derivation of the Christian legend of Barlaam and Josaphat, itself a derivation of the legend of the early years of Siddharta Gautama, which modern spectators may know from the film Little Buddha that illustrates so the Hindu-Buddhist concept of reality as illusion. Another religious concept is that of free will against predestination. Catholic Spain favoured the Counter-reformation that defined the human will as able to choose the good (in cooperation with God's grace), against the Calvinist conception of the total depravity of the human will unless it is predestined by God to be renewed by grace. Segismundo chooses pardon against the oracle.

Analysis of the Ending:

There have been many different interpretations of the play’s ending, where Segismundo condemns the rebel soldier who freed him to life imprisonment in the tower. Some have suggested that this scene is ironic – that it raises questions about whether Segismundo will in fact be a just king. Others have pointed out that Calderón, who lived under the Spanish monarchy, could not have left the rebel soldier unpunished, because this would be an affront to royal authority.

It is worth considering that Segismundo’s transformation in the course of the play is not simply a moral awakening, but a realization of his social role as the heir to the throne, and this role requires him to act as kings act – which includes punishing rebels. So while this action may seem unjust, it is in keeping with his new social status as the king.

It may well be that, rather than intending his audience to see this action as purely right or wrong, Calderón purposefully made it ambiguous, creating an interesting tension in the play that adds to its depth.
Biography of the playwright:

Pedro Calderon de la Barca, often referred to as simply Calderon, is one of the most revered dramatists of the "Golden Age" of Spanish literature and theatre. He was born in 1600 A.D. to a prominent family. His father was Secretary to the Treasurer. Both of his parents died by the time he was 15.

He studied first at Colegio Imperial, a Jesuit college in Madrid. He then went on to the University of Alcala (1614-1615) where he studied law. He completed his education at the University of Salamanca (1615-1621) which is the oldest University in Spain. He did not go on to use his law degree.

He entered the household of a constable and began writing plays in 1923 for the court. It was not long before he was appointed to management of the theatre of Buen Retivo. Phillip IV was fond of him and became his primary benefactor, which perhaps explains the volume of material Calderon put forth in his lifetime. Calderon wrote 120 comedias, 80 autos sacrametales, 20 short comedic "extremeses."

In 1637 he received the great political honor of being appointed to membership in the Order of Santiago, which led him to take part in the campaign against the Catalan uprising in 1640. He retired from the military in 1642.

After the death of his mistress in 1648 and birth of his son Pedro Jose, he took orders and entered the priesthood. 1651 he was ordained to priesthood, and was considered an exemplary minister.

He continued his dramatic labours until his death in 1681. Although he is said to have given up writing secular plays for the commercial theatre, in his 81st year he wrote his last secular play Hado y Divisa de Leonida y Marfisa in honor of a Royal wedding.

Play Resume:

120 comedias including some collaborative works (regular dramas)

70 or 80 autos sacrametales (sacred allegorical dramas on the Eucharist). Often compared to English Mystery plays of the Middle Ages.

*Allegorical means: symbolic representation, often something with hidden religious meaning.

*Eucharist is a sacrament to commemorate the last supper, as in Holy Communion.

Most of Calderon's early plays were secular, although plot motives followed same three themes throughout his career: loyalty to the king, devotion to the church, and protection of honor through revenge. Calderon's later dramas are of a deeply religious nature.

Life is a Dream, is believed to have been composed in 1934-35 and was first published in 1936. It explores the conflict between free will and predestination. It is also another example of revenge, though with a happier outcome than many of Calderon's plays, several of which deal with the murder of an adulterous wife.

Calderon developed a series of mythological themes that reflected the tastes and interests of the Spanish Court during the waning years of the Golden Age. His Characters are less individuals than they are personifications of primitive passions.

Calderon initiated what has been called the second cycle of spanish golden age theatre. Polishing and perfecting the dramatic forms and genre of spanish theatre that is said to have been pioneered by Lope de Vega.

Calderon’s strength lay in his capacity for poetic beauty and dramatic structure and philosophical depth. He was a perfectionist who would rework his plays even after they debuted. He is also known for reworking the plays of other dramatists, improving their depth of complexity and unity. (Moliere, Cornielle, and Shakespeare were also known to do this).

Today he is often referred to as the Shakespeare of Spain. His works traveled to the New World in the 16th century following Conquistadors to Cuba, Mexico, and Peru. They were staged to convert the indigenous population to christianity. His work had universal appeal and adaptable story lines.
Life Is A Dream

*Some of his most famous titles include:

- El médico de su honra (The Surgeon of his Honour)
- La vida es sueño (Life is a Dream)
- El Alcalde de Zalamea (The Mayor of Zalamea)
- La Dama duende (The Phantom Lady)
- Casa con dos puertas (The House with Two Doors)
- El Mágico prodigioso (The Mighty Magician)
- La Devoción de la Cruz (Devotion to the Cross)
- El Gran Teatro del mundo (The Great Theatre of the World)
- El Gran Mercado del mundo (The World is a Fair)
- El Pintor de su deshonra (The Painter of His Dishonour)
- El Prodigio de Alemania (The Prodigy of Germany)

(in collaboration with Antonio Coello)
A discussion of the playwright's contemporaries and what was going on in theater while they wrote;

1500 Spain received stories of magic, passionate love, and oriental splendor from the recently ousted Moors. From the north came the ideals of Chivalry and knighthood.

Spain refused to avail themselves of the marvelous model which the drama of the Greeks provided.

Cervantes was one of Spain's first dramatic geniuses.

Lope de Rueda followed. Regarded by some as the real founder of national drama in Spain.

Lope de Vega was born two years before Shakespeare. All the dramatists in Spain after his time were followers in his footsteps, and is considered to have been at the beginning of Spain's Golden Age of Drama. He was called the Spanish Phoenix and Prodigy of Nature. He broke new ground and a sampling of his work will show every species of drama that has existed in Spain. Lope wrote 2200 plays and a large number of poems. Although the volume is impressive, the quality varied. Two of his plays are considered the worst tragedies ever written. Lope's strength lay in his spontaneity and naturalness of his work.

Calderon outshines Lope de Vega in modern consciousness. As Shakespeare adapted the formulas of Marlowe and Fletchers, so did Calderon accept the dramatic framework set down by Lope de Vega.

Calderon usually put all the exposition into a monologue at the beginning of the first scene, whereas Lope was known for taking the audience directly into the center of action. The Golden Age of Spanish Drama came to a close with Calderon.

* Here is a list of other contemporaries of Calderon from Around the World.

Aphra Behn (1640-1689) (England)
Edme Boursault (1638-1701) (France)
David-Augustin de Brueys (1640-1723) (France)
Michelangelo Buonarroti, Jr. (1568-1642) (Italy)
George Chapman (ca. 1560-1634) (England)
Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725) (Japan)
Pierre Corneille (1606-1684) (France)
John Crowne (ca. 1640-ca. 1703) (England)
William Davenant (1606-1668) (England)
Thomas Dekker (ca. 1572-1632) (England)
Jean Desmaretz de Saint-Sorlin (1595-1676) (France)
John Dryden (1631-1700) (England)
George Etherege (ca. 1635-1691) (England)
Molière (1622-1673) (France)
Philippe Quinault (1635-1688) (France)
Paul Pelisson Fontanier (1624-1693) (France)
Jean Racine (1639-1699) (France)
Charles Perrault (1628-1703) (France)

* Other notable events from this period in history.

During Calderon's life, Shakespeare, Lope De Vega, Rembrant and Moliere were alive and active in the arts.
Spain was siding with the Catholics in the Thirty Years War.
Galileo was developing theories that the earth moves around the sun which upset the church, he was forced to deny his ideas and sentenced to house arrest for the rest of his life by the Pope.
Isaac Newton was born during Calderon's lifetime.
Manhattan was being bought for $24 by the Dutch.
King Sigismund III of Poland died.
Phillip III ruled as King of Spain Naples and Sicily from 1598 - 1621. Pious but lacking in intelligence he left the government duties to his favorite Duke, whilst he pursued his own pleasures.
Phillip IV ruled from 1621 - 1665 and was intelligent but lacked interest in affairs of state. The country declined politically and economically under his reign and included a humiliating loss in the war with France in 1659.
It was the beginning of modern science (with a separation from faith), a time of inventions, astronomy, and struggles with the supernatural (witch trials were beginning to occur). The invention of the printing press enabled knowledge to spread far and wide. Science moved away from imagination and deduction and toward observation and experiment.