

Martin Dressler – Discussion Topics

Opening paragraph – The book begins like a fairytale. Is Millhauser suggesting that the American Dream is a fairytale? Look at the final comma of the paragraph. Why is it there?

Martin – What does he want? Why does he want it?

Actors and Acting – Why does the troupe of actors at the Vanderlyn make such an impression on Martin? At what point does he think about the two feet on the bed again? Why? Why does Martin hire actors at the end?

Caroline and Emmeline – Their relationship? In what ways is each married to Martin? How does Martin view each? Examine Caroline's character. What do we know about her? How does she feel about Martin? Is Emmeline's character as obvious as it appears?

Women/Sex – What is the significance of the other women in Martin's life? Mother, Mrs. Hamilton, Alice Bell, Dora and Gerda, Marie Haskova? Is there a difference between love and sex for Martin? What is his attitude toward love and sex?

Past/Present/Future – Although Martin seems to be future-oriented, many times in the novel he retreats to the past. What is the significance of doing this? At what points in his life does he do this? In what ways does he know the past to be important?

Grand Cosmo – Why does Martin build this? What is he really trying to do? When does the book shift from reality to a dreamlike state? Is its failure inevitable?

Use of Color (sun and shade), Piled images, Tecumseh, Life of the City, El Train, Brooklyn Bridge – Why does Millhauser use these repeated motifs? What is the significance of each?

The Ending – When you were nearly done with the book, what assumptions did you make about the ending? What is the tone of the last few pages? What do you expect that Martin will do? Is this a satisfying ending? Does Martin wake up?