Martin Dressier: The Tale of an American Dreamer Short Guide

Martin Dressier: The Tale of an American Dreamer by Steven Millhauser

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Contents

Characters

Martin Dressier himself is more than just the ideal entrepreneur (though he is certainly that too). It seems fair to suggest that the text as a whole presents Martin as something of a metaphor for America, or, at least, for twentieth-century America. He is the wide-eyed boy who never grows up, the ambitious youth who at times feels "a kind of inner straining at the leash, an almost physical desire to pour out his energy without constraint"; and by portraying Martin as such, Millhauser seems to be suggesting something similar about the character of America. While Martin is a remarkably "fiat" character, this seems to be an intentional move on Millhauser's part rather than an unfortunate accident. Upon the book's publication, some reviewers saw this as a fault, but it would seem more convincing to suggest that Martin's overall "blankness" is an essential part of his character. Not only is this blankness an important commentary on the structure of Martin's (and thus American) desires, it also seems fair to suggest that Millhauser's book operates more like a fantasy or allegory than a realist novel, and thus that Martin's characterization follows the rules of a genre different from the one contemporary critics usually expect and encounter.

In the opening chapters of the novel, Millhauser sketches a number of characters who represent authority and experience for young Martin, but who are eventually left behind as Martin surpasses the limitations that keep them in whatever social niche they occupy. Martin's father, Otto Dressier, keeps a small cigar store, but is soon seen to lack Martin's understanding of promotion and networking. Charley Stratmeyer, one of the day clerks at the Vanderlyn Hotel, introduces Martin to life at the hotel, and the fifteen-year-old Martin soon gains more favor from the hotel managers than Charley could ever hope for at twenty-two.

Finally, Alexander Westerhoven and George Henning, the men in charge of managing the Vanderlyn, bring Martin into the business only to be pushed out themselves by the young entrepreneur later on in the novel.

As a group, these characters function as the background against which Martin asserts himself. They are all more or less benign influences, but they are all, for one reason or other, out of step with modernity, and as such are doomed to be anachronisms in the world Martin is quickly creating.

Martin creates his "new world" with the help of three key figures: Walter Dundee, the engineer; Rudolph Arling, the avantgarde architect; and Harwinton, the psychology student and advertising agent. If Martin's father, Charley, and the management at the Vanderlyn Hotel represent the past, Dundee, Arling, and Harwinton represent the future—they could, in fact, be said to be the novel's depiction of the process of modernization. Dundee, who ends up becoming Martin's partner, represents the technological side of "progress." Though not as artistic as Martin, he nonetheless sees the coming technological future. When we first meet him, he is predicting that "the old push-button buzzers [will] be driven out by telephones within ten years." The Austrian Rudolph Arling is the only character in the text capable of matching Martin's ability to dream. Having

designed a magnificent "Pleasure Dome" in Vienna, Arling has come to "the country of the future" to create fantastic new structures. When Martin meets him, he has just designed a new cylindrical department store so radical that the business partners who commissioned it have rejected the plan. It is Arling who first gives shape to Martin's drive towards totalization by announcing an age of "inner or enclosed eclecticism, by which he meant . . . the tendency of modern structures to embrace and enclose as many different elements as possible." Arguing that the American sales catalogue encloses more than any epic, Arling offers us what may well be the best theory of what Martin's hotels—and thus, allegorically, American culture—are attempting to achieve. Finally, Harwinton, the advertising agent, is another character who seems slightly unreal; he too is more the embodiment of an idea than a real man.

Martin ultimately comes to believe that Harwinton is God, because "he saw the world as a great blankness, a collection of meaningless signs into which he breathed meaning." At such a moment Millhauser is no doubt attempting to draw the reader into thinking about the significance of advertising in modern life, and, it is precisely this moment—when advertising first bursts upon the scene—that we can see its "worldcreating" capabilities. If Dundee and Arling create the material of Martin's new world, Harwinton confers its meaning.

While the men of the book are more or less broken up into mentors, competitors, and partners, the women are broken up— perhaps too conventionally—into nurturing mother figures, desired objects, and seductresses. As indicated early, Louise Hamilton serves as the bildungsroman's older seductress, initiating Martin into "manhood" in rather typical fashion, and later in the novel Marie Haskova, a maid in one of Martin's hotels, serves almost exclusively as a sexual object. The "three Vernon women," as they are designated throughout the text, are also split up in terms of this scheme.

Mrs. Vernon and Emmeline are the nurturing figures, while Caroline serves as the unattainable object of desire. When we are introduced to the Vernon women, the two daughters are each described with a single word: "Mrs. Vernon laughingly introduced herself and her two daughters: Caroline (fair) and Emmeline (dark)." Clearly "fair" and "dark" are meant to convey more than simply the girls' differences in hair color and complexion. These adjectives are meant to indicate the extensive yet predictable differences between the two sisters: Emmeline is down to earth, rational, good at business, and slightly masculine; Caroline is quiet, detached, neurotic, and incredibly beautiful. Indeed, these two sisters seem to be archetypes or caricatures rather than round characters, and this may once again have more than a little to do with the fact that Millhauser is presenting us with a dreamlike, fairy-tale version of late-nineteenthcentury New York rather than a meticulously realistic account of history. Yet this fact could also be read as a failing on the protagonist's part to see beneath these superficial character-cliches. Indeed, Martin himself comes to believe that he may have married the wrong sister, and the novel as a whole leads us to believe that he may be right—and he may well have chosen the wrong woman precisely because of his "dreamy" disconnection from reality.

Social Concerns

As its subtitle suggests, Steven Millhauser's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Martin Dressier: The Tale of an American Dreamer, is ostensibly concerned not so much with a variety of particular social issues, as with the primal myth of American society itself: the American Dream. The novel begins like a folktale or fairy tale: "There once lived a man named Martin Dressier, a shopkeeper's son, who rose from modest beginnings to a height of dreamlike good fortune." Like one of Horatio Alger's youthful heroes, Martin goes from rags—helping out in his immigrant father's cigar store—to riches, ultimately becoming New York's foremost real estate developer. Millhauser's version of turn-of-the-century New York City seems to function just like Alger's ideal America: with a little hard work and a little bit of talent, anyone can become a millionaire.

Indeed, Martin faces very few obstacles in his rise to success, as each step up the entrepreneurial ladder is made with shocking ease, and each episode in the narrative of Martin's "education" is a textbook example of American free enterprise. Martin rapidly learns about window displays, wordof-mouth advertising, chain stores and expansion, signs, and brand-name advertising. His success is a function of his willingness to explore the new possibilities offered by two of the main engines behind American progress: advertising and technology.

Yet for all its similarity to Alger's novels, Millhauser's work is not a simple imitation of an Algerian rags-to-riches story. For one thing, Millhauser is writing in 1996 rather than 1896—and this all too obvious fact makes all the difference. While modern technology and modern advertising are rather transparent today as we turn from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, at the turn of the last century they were in their nascent stages. In fact, as Millhauser presents it, Martin Dressler's time is nothing less than the birth of modern American cultural and economic life. By returning to the world of the nineteenth-century ragsto-riches story, Millhauser is presenting us with the mythological foundation of American society, and thus "defamiliarizing" its constitutive elements.

When Martin encounters Harwinton, one of New York's first ad-men, he is startled to learn that advertising is, in fact, a science: "a system of measurable strategies for awaking and securing the attention of buyers" that could be developed out of ideas such as those presented in William James's early work on psychology. As Harwinton explains advertising to the novel's naive protagonist, he is also presenting the reader with Millhauser's own implicit analysis of advertising's position in contemporary culture: Let me explain something, Mr. Dressier.

The world sits there. It may have a meaning. As a private citizen, I am entitled to believe that it does. But as an advertiser, I train myself to experience the world as an immense blankness. It's my job to provide that blankness with meaning. . . . A man comes to me with a cake of scouring soap.

He wants me to sell it for him. I see a white lump. It's my job to make this white lump, which has no meaning, except in the most limited and practical sense, the most

important thing in the world. I create a meaning for it. I create desire. To have this soap is to have what Aristotle says all men desire: happiness.

Harwinton's dizzying explanation of advertising as creation ex nihilo would seem to produce both hope and anxiety: Harwinton's worldview offers tremendous opportunities for creativity and success, but only if one accepts the idea that this creative success happens within an entirely meaningless, empty world.

This brings us to the heart of Millhauser's implicit critique of the American Dream.

While he is in no way offering a politicized critique of capitalism, he does attempt to foreground the very fact that the Dream is a dream—and, thus, the fact that the desire for success that underlies the American Dream may well operate according to the logic of dreams. If Harwinton the advertising agent is creating meaning out of nothing, Martin Dressier is trying to create whole new worlds out of nothing with his hotels in order to satisfy his vague desires for success. Martin is always a little bit unclear about what he wants: at times it is Caroline Vernon, at times it is her sister Emmeline; at times it is a hotel, at times it is something more. As he sits with Emmeline Vernon (soon to be his sister-in-law), Martin attempts to articulate exactly what it is that he wants, but fails: "'Listen, Em. I don't know what I want. But I want—more than this.' He swept out his arm lightly, gracefully, in a gesture that seemed to include the restaurant in which they were seated, but that might have included, for all he knew, the whole world."

The insatiable desires that drive both Martin and the marketplace never stop.

As the novel runs towards its conclusion, Martin begins to build larger and more fanciful hotels. He starts out by including boutiques, cigar stores, gardens, and restaurants—trying to produce a building capable of offering all manner of goods and services. Yet even these additions seem incapable of offering precisely what Martin dreams of; none can offer the "more than this" that he constantly aspires toward. So, as the novel takes a turn away from periodpiece realism, Martin begins adding more elaborate attractions. Martin comes to believe that both hotels and department stores are steps leading towards his ultimate dream because, in Martin's mind, "each sought to be a little world in itself, each brought into a single large structure an immense number of juxtaposed objects serving a single idea." Thus, in the "New Dressier," we find a "secret hotel" composed of seven underground levels including "a landscaped park with real squirrels and chipmunks (the first level), a complete department store (the second, third, and fourth levels), a series of Vacation Retreats (the fifth and sixth levels), and a labyrinth (the seventh level)." The vacation retreats themselves included, among other things, "a campground with tents in a brilliantly reproduced pine forest with swift-flowing streams" and "the deck of a transatlantic steamer, with canvas deck chairs, shuffleboard courts, and hand-tinted films of ocean scenery displayed on the walls." Martin seems no longer content with offering his clientele every product available in the world, he now seems intent on offering the world itself: he is now offering life itself as a commodity. With Harwinton's help, he comes up with a new slogan for his hotel: "MORE THAN A HOTEL: A WAY OF LIFE." Here again Millhauser seems to be commenting on the present as much as the past. The commodification of life or "lifestyle" is a major feature of modern

life. From Martha Stewart's Living to personalized Internet Web sites (where all of your desires can be "bookmarked" on-line, making you part of a virtual community), "living" and "identity" have become objects for consumption.

While advertising has long promoted lifestyles, attempts to offer encyclopedias of life seem to be a rather recent phenomenon.

Indeed, the desire to have "real life" presented in easy-to-consume packaging is contradictory, but it is precisely this contradiction that interests Millhauser. Through Harwinton, for example, Millhauser offers us the paradox of the real estate market: It was Harwinton's belief that every city dweller harbored a double desire: the desire to be in the thick of things, and the equal desire to escape from the horrible thick of things to some peaceful rural place with shady paths, murmuring streams, and the hum of bumblebees over vaguely imagined flowers.

With Harwinton's help, Martin is able to create a hotel that satisfies both of these desires. The hotel has a view of the river and the park, yet it is at the same time the expression of the city's relentless advance, indeed, of America's relentless technological and economic progress. Martin himself recognizes that the hotel is "a massive contradiction: a modern steel-frame building sheathed in heavily ornamented masonrywalls meant to summon up a dream of chateaux and palaces." It is an artificial fabrication meant to reproduce, supplement— even replace—nature. One room includes an artificial cave with a real waterfall; another turns into a forest complete with imitation pine and oak trees. While Millhauser is perhaps pushing the logic to extremes, his description of Martin's hotel is different only in degree from the current fascination with sport/utility vehicles—vehicles designed to connote the rugged outdoors, but most often used for trips to the mall.

Techniques

Given the thematic importance of dreams and dreaming in the novel, it is not surprising to find Millhauser using a variety of techniques to create mystery, obscurity, and even confusion. For instance, he creates a certain amount of obscurity by offering the reader crucial "absences" at key narrative moments. When Martin proposes to Caroline, we do not actually read of the event itself, merely of events surrounding it.

Martin actually asks Emmeline rather than Caroline, and he does this by, in part, asking her to try the engagement ring on—but Millhauser never mentions the ring itself.

Instead, we are left to guess what it is that Martin takes out of "the blue velvet box" to offer to Emmeline. So rather than the proposal to Caroline we get a proposal to Emmeline, and rather than a direct proposal to Emmeline we get a complicated game with the ring, and rather than the ring itself Millhauser jarringly informs us of the fact that "the inside of the blue velvet box was violent black." Moreover, when the wedding itself finally arrives, it is not even described: "And the wedding came, the wedding that he had been hearing about for a long time; it was soon over. Martin smiled and waved his hand and stepped into a waiting carriage. He was very tired." The disjunction between the text and the events it is circuitously describing is akin to Martin's peculiar disconnection from the world.

The novel moves further and further away from realism as it proceeds towards its conclusion. At some point, though it is not clear precisely where, the descriptions of Martin's hotels cease to play by the rules of conventional narrative realism. The early hotels and restaurants are presented as fantastic, of course, but Millhauser's descriptions slowly morph into surreal dreamscapes; he offers us long, intricate, and convoluted sentences to describe intricate, mysterious, subterranean places. Millhauser's prose takes on the colorings of fairy tales and myths. For instance, when describing the Grand Cosmo, Millhauser begins four successive long sentences with the ominous words "It was said . . ." (we are not told by whom), the last of which spirals deeper and deeper—like the hotel itself—into a paradoxical mixture of obscurity and light: It was said that under the thirteenth level a maze of interconnecting passageways had been constructed. . . . It was said that in the darkness of that sub-subterranean realm, in a forest the color of black tourmaline, wild children, abandoned at birth and speaking no language, were raised by wolves and lived the life of animals. . . . It was said that in moss-stained halls at the ends of crumbling corridors, statues tormented with human longings came to life. . . . It was said that to descend into the world beneath the world was to learn the secrets of heaven and hell, to go mad, to speak in tongues, to understand the language of beasts, to rend the veil, to become immortal, to witness the destruction of the universe and the birth of a new order of being; and it was said that if you descended far enough, . . . through realms of blackness so dark that it stained the soul black, you would come to a sudden, ravishing brightness.

Appropriately enough, it seems as though the text's poetic images and repetitions are, at this point, almost lulling the reader into a hypnotic state, allowing the reader to experience Martin's dreamlike, hallucinatory reality.

Themes

In Martin Dressier, Steven Millhauser is indeed concerned with the social implications of the American Dream (and, in foregrounding the very fact that this pillar of American culture is a dream), but he is also equally interested in dreams and hallucinations as such. Not only is Martin "living the American dream," he is in an important sense "dreaming" his life. Millhauser presents Martin's experiences of the world as heightened, hallucinatory experiences that flirt with the boundary between reality and dreams. This is evident throughout the novel, such as in the moments at which Martin feels as though everything is "too much, too much—the whole world was trembling—at any moment it would crack apart." Martin feels dreamily disconnected from his environment: "Then the dreamfeeling would come over him, as if his real life were not here, where it seemed to be, but over there, a little off to one side, just over there."

Many of Martin's key experiences, especially those with women, seem to happen in this liminal dream-space of disjunction and dislocation. Martin's first sexual experience, for instance, is shrouded in mystery and at times verges on the hallucinatory. Mrs. Hamilton, a "powerful and far from unattractive woman" arrives at the hotel where young Martin is a bellboy and begins to draw him "close to her in some puzzling, secret way."

It is not surprising to find an episode involving the young hero's seduction by an experienced older woman in a bildungsroman like Martin Dressier, but Millhauser's description of the act itself is striking for its emphasis on dream. "Everything seems like a dream," Mrs. Hamilton says to Martin: That's what they say, you know: life is but a dream. As in that child's song—how does it go? Merrily merrily. Life is but a dream. My pulse is absolutely racing. . . .

Is this a dream? My heart's racing, racing: can't you feel it? Can't you? Silly boy, what's wrong with you? Here, place your hand here, on my poor racing-away heart.

Yes. Yes. Don't you know anything? Come here now. Here now. Yes. . . . And Martin entered her fever-dream, at first awkwardly, then easily: it was all very easy, easy and mysterious, for he barely knew what was happening, there in the dusk of the parlor, in a world at the edge of the world—Mrs. Hamilton's dream.

Indeed, this moment with Mrs. Hamilton is merely the first of Martin's many dreamlike experiences with women. On his wedding night for instance, his new bride Caroline refuses his sexual overtures, so Martin sleeps with Marie Haskova, a worker in one of his hotels; yet it is unclear whether Martin is making love to Marie, to Louise Hamilton, to Caroline, or to Alice Bell, since all appear to him during the act itself.

Millhauser summarizes the peculiar logic of the situation: "if he had been unfaithful to Caroline by coming here on his wedding night, he had also been unfaithful to Marie, who had taken him in without a word, without a reproach, only to find herself secretly replaced, in her own bed, by Caroline."

The interchangeability of these women is striking, even disturbing, but Millhauser seems to be making an interesting point about desire's "slippery" nature. If Martin finds himself wanting more and more in the business world without ever really knowing precisely what he desires, he also finds himself more than a little confused about his romantic desires. His love for Caroline, for example, seems more a product of the structure of Martin's relationship with the Vernon women rather than of any actual quality possessed by Caroline herself. Caroline is simply the sister with whom Martin has the least contact. He spends innumerable evenings dining with Emmeline and Mrs. Vernon while Caroline lies sick in the hotel room upstairs, and it is Caroline's very inaccessibility that draws Martin to her. His desire seems to be produced by the seeming impossibility of its very fulfillment, and by his lack of knowledge about its object (when Martin actually comes to know Caroline intimately, he is less pleased with her). Caroline herself seems to recognize the shallowness of Martin's affection, in the end strangely attempting an exchange in which she offers her sister to Martin as a new object of desire.

The recurrent motif of interchangeable women is most perfectly summarized when Martin himself comes to believe that he has three wives rather than one, and that his "real" wife is actually the least real of the three: "Of the three wives, Emmeline and Marie Haskova were the most vividly present to him, the most solidly there, whereas Caroline seemed a ghost-wife, a dreamwife—though he wondered whether it wasn't precisely her lack of substance that allowed her to haunt and hover, to invade the edges of other women." While this surreal state of affairs certainly is not out of place in the dreamscape of Millhauser's novel, it seems clear that there is at least an implicit critique of male desire at work here. Martin's very confusion—his indifference even—concerning the women in his life betrays his inability to conceive of others (particularly women) as real figures rather than as mere players in his dream-life.

Hand in hand with the thematic importance of dreams and fantasy comes the inevitable question of the opposition between dream and reality. Yet the importance of this thematic opposition extends beyond simple questions like, Did Martin really have sex with Mrs. Hamilton or was he/she just dreaming about it? The opposition between dreams and reality is absolutely central to the novel's main narrative line, as the hotels Martin constructs are fantasies themselves, attempts to transcend the status of hotel and become new "ways of life" (as Harwinton puts it). Furthermore, the hotels Martin creates draw parallels between the dream/reality opposition and the oppositions between technology and nature, imitation and imitated, copy and original. The hotels are not only hallucinatory representations of reality—or at least as much of it as Martin can possibly squeeze in—but also fully fledged alternative realities. Some have argued that the "postmodern" era is signaled by the dominance of the copy or "simulacrum," that we now live in a world where the image (i.e.

the Gulf War as televised on Cable News Network) has overtaken the "real" (the actual war itself). Whether this is an accurate portrayal of contemporary experience or not, it seems at times as though Millhauser is offering us an allegory of this particular postmodern trend. Indeed, it seems clear that Martin's goal in creating the Dressier is to create a model which will, in some sense, supercede the original. Martin strives towards

an absolutely encyclopedic imitation of the world; each new version of the Dressier is not simply a hotel, but rather a little world in and of itself. Martin sees the hotels as ultimately pushing beyond the limits of the real city itself: "The department store and the hotel were little cities within the city, but they were also experimental cities, cities in advance of the city."

But the move towards dreamlike imitation does not end here. Towards the novel's conclusion, Martin begins to hire actors to act as though they were guests: "In return for free room and board he would invite a troupe of out-of-work actors to sit in the lobby chairs, stroll about, play billiards in the billiard rooms and write letters in the writing rooms, to talk, to laugh—to create, in short, the atmosphere of a peacefully flourishing community." The hotel (the imitation of the world) is now an imitation of itself, and this brings us full circle, back to Martin's first visit to the old Vanderlyn Hotel with Charley Stratemeyer, where Martin sees some actors practicing in one of the rooms and is frightened by his inability to distinguish performance from reality.

Martin sees three women sitting, looking remarkably like the three Vernon women, and he cannot discern whether they are actresses or residents or hallucinations: "The three women were a sign, demon-women summoned up from deepest dream. For a building was a dream, a dream made of stone, the dream lurking in the stone so that the stone wasn't stone only but dream, more dream than stone, dream-stone and dream-steel, forever unlasting." We are left asking ourselves where Millhauser leaves us when Martin slips "out of his life . . .

through a crack in the world"—and what, exactly, the author is saying about America through his American Dreamer in this odd conclusion. If Martin is indeed being "punished for something deeper than crime, for a desire, a forbidden desire, the desire to create the world," perhaps Millhauser is taking aim at the constitutively hubristic American Dream, suggesting that the world produced by advertising, technology, and capitalism may in fact be a modern Tower of Babel.

Key Questions

Both the form/style of the novel and its thematic content offer possibilities for discussion. Clearly the crucial issues surrounding America and the American Dream must be explored, as Millhauser's interest in the interrelationships of technology, advertising, capital, and imagination at the turn of the century could not be more clear. Yet the novel's magical qualities, while more difficult to pin down, are equally important.

Millhauser's prose style is most profitably examined through close readings of the various "fantasy sequences" found throughout the text (i.e., the love scenes, the descriptions of Arling's architecture, the descriptions of what goes on beneath the hotels).

1. The "American Dream" is no doubt an idea with which most of us are acquainted, but are we all sure about precisely what it involves? Discuss the various connotations of this phrase. Who says these words, and when? Is it an ideological concept—i.e., is it used to support the interests of a particular portion of society? Do we still believe in the American Dream? Why might Millhauser be making use of this wellworn concept at the end of the twentieth century? How is Martin connected to the American Dream? If we agree that he embodies it, what can we conclude about the novel's position on the Dream?

2. While Martin Dressier begins rather "realistically," we soon shift to a magical world that transcends the turn-of-thecentury New York one would find in history books. When does the novel break with the conventions of realism, and why? Is the shift sudden or gradual? What is Millhauser attempting to accomplish with this technique?

3. Advertising clearly plays a major role in this novel. From Martin's early interest in window displays and cigar-store Indians to his later interest in Harwinton's work, we are constantly presented with examples of the mysterious power and cultural importance of advertising. Why does advertising play such an important role? Why does Martin come to believe Harwinton to be God? Does advertising have a special relationship to American life in the twentieth century?

4. If Martin's hotels are metaphors or symbols, what are they metaphors or symbols of? Is the hotel a metaphor for the city? For the country? For the capitalist consumer economy? Why might Martin be attempting to contain the entire world within each hotel?

5. Given Harwinton's definition of advertising, could it be said that the Vernons "advertise" Caroline? Is Martin's desire for Caroline similar to his desire for entrepreneurial success? Is love at all similar to the sort of desire created by advertising?

6. Why does Martin have difficulty mentally distinguishing the women in his life? How can we understand the significance of his "three wives" (Marie, Emmeline, and

Caroline)? Does the novel push us towards a moral judgment of Martin, or towards a more allegorical reading of his confused desires?

7. How are we to understand the novel's peculiar ending? Is Martin's ultimate failure believable? How does it fit in with the novel's thematic concerns?

Why does he fail? Is he really being punished for "the desire to create the world"?

Literary Precedents

There are a number of significant literary precedents for Millhauser's work. Critics and reviewers often point out Millhauser's similarity to Jorge Luis Borges and Franz Kafka; and, indeed, there is an important similarity here. All three authors make use of the tropes and narrative styles offered by folktales, fairy tales and myths in order to tell very modern stories about very modern social, political, and psychological dilemmas. The magical hotels Martin builds owe more than a little to fictional structures such as Kafka's "Great Wall of China" and Borges's "Library of Babel." But if Millhauser's work owes its stylistic and philosophical debts to Borges and Kafka, it borrows its subject matter wholesale from Horatio Alger.

In novels such as Struggling Upward, The Store Boy, and Ragged Dick, Alger offered tales of boys much like Martin Dressier to a voracious reading public. Millhauser is self-consciously appropriating the Algerian rags-to-riches tale in order to thoughtfully engage with the inexorable progress of American consumer society that Alger was celebrating.

Related Titles

Two constants in Millhauser's work— including, of course, Martin Dressier—are a fascination with children or childlike perceptions of the world, and a fascination with the fantastic and magical. Millhauser's first work, the novel Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer, 1943-54, by Jeffrey Cartwright (1972), is the story of an eleven-year-old author told by his twelveyear-old friend. His next novel, Portrait of a Romantic (1977), is also a tale of childhood, with its narrator, Arthur Grumm, recalling his early teen years. While Martin Dressier is not exclusively the tale of Martin's childhood, one could easily argue that Martin never "grows up" in any real sense. His comportment towards the world is still colored by a childlike awe and excitement, even at the very end of the novel. It is a short step from this childlike view of the world to the fantasy that Millhauser writes so often. Millhauser's other works—the novel From the Realm of Morpheus (1986); the novellas Enchanted Night (1999) and Little Kingdoms: Three Novellas (1993); and the short story collections In the Penny Arcade (1986), The Barnum Museum (1990), The Knife Thrower and Other Stories (1998)—offer readers numerous magical spaces and objects that rival the hotels of Martin Dressier: secret underworlds beneath baseball games (Morpheus), board games come to life (Barnum Museum), automatons, mysterious groups of teenage girls meeting at night (Enchanted Night). Millhauser's surreal landscapes and rather daring conceits are very well suited to short fiction, and reviewers have often indicated their preferences for his shorter works.

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