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# “A City within a City,” “a World within a World”

## A Stylistic Analysis of Millhauser’s *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*

### Abstract

*This paper aims to provide the first stylistic analysis of Steven Millhauser’s 1997 Pulitzer Winner Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer (1996). The novel depicts Martin’s progression from working in his father’s cigar shop to being a self-made businessman passionate about hotels. While literary scholars have discussed the novel’s themes at length, the linguistic aspects of Martin’s emotions and state of mind—expressed through metaphors, tautology, symbolism, and personification—have been under-researched. This article, anchored in naturalistic reader-response studies (Peplow and Carter 2014), seeks to observe how readers conceptualise the main themes of the novels—i.e., the American dream, the idea of multiple worlds, and Martin’s character development, using a sample of the first 60 English reviews presented by the Goodreads algorithm.*

*The frameworks employed to analyse the text emerge from those reviews and the analysis focuses on the passage most cited by Goodreads reviews. I first use foregrounding theory which observes stylistic choices that stand out against the rest of the text. This theory is often argued to explain effects (real) readers might perceive (see Miall and Kuiken 1994). I then use Text World Theory (TWT) (Gavins 2007) as a result of the foregrounding analysis and to account for readers’ observation of multiple worlds in the novel. TWT underpins how mental representations of a text are constructed. Overall findings show that richness of readers’ mental representation is mapped onto the complex stylistic choices present in the novel.*

**Keywords:** *figurative language, foregrounding, Goodreads, Martin Dressler, text world theory*

*For the Grand Cosmo was not a tourist attraction or a hotel for transients, but a world within the world, rivaling the world; and whoever entered its walls had no further need of that other world.*

(Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler, The Tale of an American Dreamer*)

## 1. *Martin Dressler*: synopsis and themes

*Martin Dressler* (Millhauser 1996) is a third-person narrative occurring in the late 19th-century New York City, and depicting the story of Martin Dressler, a hardworking self-made man hoping for his great American Dream of unique real estate to thrive. The novel begins with Martin's childhood where he works at the family cigar and tobacco shop. Martin develops a taste for business from a young age, and expands the family business by selling Dressler's tobacco at the Vanderlyn Hotel, where he eventually becomes a bellboy. He is recognized for his determination and sense of business, leading to multiple promotions. Martin then opens a chain of restaurants and luxury-goods shops, before opening two new-concept and extravagant hotels: the Hotel Dressler and later on the New Dressler. Throughout his business ventures, Martin meets the Vernon women, a mother and her two daughters Caroline (whom he marries) and Emmeline (who becomes his business partner). However, as Martin focuses on his hotels, the Vernon women slip out of his life. Martin then launches what he describes as his 'dream' hotel: the Grand Cosmo (GC henceforth). The GC features gardens, seas, woods, and mazes, which confuses the clientele. The extravagant concept of the hotel eventually leads to its demise as it is a less and less viable business and faces foreclosure. *Martin Dressler* received praise from literary critics who viewed it as a "wonderful, wonder-full book" (Burroway 1996). Academics in the fields of literature and narratology have discussed the novel, but no linguistic analysis was conducted. Those literary and narratology researchers consensually view *Martin Dressler* as a portrayal of the concept of the American Dream, which can be defined as "endless prospects [that] await every industrious American" (Magness 2004, 1), a symbol of hope for a generation of self-made individuals (Basak 2012; Février 2011; Saltzman and Millhauser 2001; Barrineau 1999). Martin's dreams are a representation of the great American Dream as his character evolves from being a retail assistant at his father's cigar shop to being a real-estate prodigy, and eventually crumbles, thus showing the flaws in the concept of the American Dream itself: it is an unsustainable and unobtainable notion.

## 2. Approaches to reader-response

Cognitive stylistics "offers a range of theories and concepts for investigating the interaction between texts and readers' mental representations, knowledge structures and cognitive processes" (Bell et al. 2021, 5). Stylisticians explore readers' responses to texts through empirical studies of literature (ESL), or more naturalistic studies of readers (NSR) (Whiteley and Canning 2017; Peplow and Carter 2014, 440). Whilst ESL focuses on engaging directly with readers through surveys or other experiments, NSR "considers readers in more natural habitats

such as book groups” (Peplow and Carter 2014, 441), and both approaches allow for “concrete readers’ reaction” to texts (van Peer 2001, 337). The benefits and drawbacks of both approaches with a review of existing literature in reader-response studies can be found in Peplow and Carter (2014).

NSR research such as that proposed in Swann and Allington (2009) focuses mostly on book groups: ‘real readers’ discuss a text’s entirety in a more natural setting. However, this also has some limitations, primarily that researchers do not have control over the data—‘real readers’ might focus on one aspect of the text and ignore another (Peplow and Carter 2014, 449). The term ‘real-readers’ refers to individual sharing their reading experiences (in the case of book reviews they are unprompted), as opposed to analysts or the concept of an exemplary or implied reader (Thomas 2021, 180). To avoid confusion, the term ‘reader’ is used throughout this paper. This paper uses an NSR approach akin to Nuttall and Harrison (2020) or Doche and Ross (2022) by collecting reviews from Goodreads. The framework employed for the analysis and the extract to analyse is determined by the reviews, using a completely bottom-up approach, as suggested by Peplow and Carter (2014, 442), or as Kuijpers (2021, 225) puts it, “research questions should inform which methods are used, not the other way around.” I chose Steven Millhauser’s *Martin Dressler, The Tale of an American Dreamer* (1996) for this research because despite winning the 1997 Literary Fiction Pulitzer Prize, it has mixed reviews on Goodreads.<sup>1</sup> However, although literary critics discuss the novel and its themes in length, little research on the linguistic aspect of the novel was conducted, which I intend to remedy with this paper.

This paper aims to observe how readers respond to the novel, what key themes they identify, and how those views emerge from linguistic choices. Since the research questions, extract understudy, and framework of analysis of this paper stem directly from readers’ reviews, they are introduced in section 3. I draw on readers’ reviews from Goodreads to showcase how the novel is discussed, compared to the key themes identified by literary experts as discussed in section 1. Based on those reviews, I conduct an analysis of a textual example using foregrounding theory (Leech 2008; Short 1996; Mukařovský [1932] 1964), Conceptual Metaphor Theory (hereafter CMT) (Kövecses 2002; Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and Text World Theory (henceforth TWT) (Whiteley 2011; Gavins 2007; Werth 1999). I argue that the combination of

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<sup>1</sup> As Doche and Ross (2022) argue, reader-response in stylistics has exclusively focused on commercial and critical successes. For example, Nuttall and Harrison (2020) focus on *Twilight*, Nuttall’s work (2017) is on the Orange prize-winning *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, and Allington (2016) focuses on Booker Prize-winning *The Inheritance of Loss*.

those theories chosen based on the data collected illustrates how readers create a rich mental representation of the novel, protagonist, and themes.

### 3. Online reviews of *Martin Dressler*

I observe whether the novel's key aspects discussed by critics were also discussed by readers. To accomplish this, I collected reviews from Goodreads, the largest community of readers in the world, accounting for more than 65 million members and reviews displaying what readers think of books. It is a valuable tool for stylisticians, offering an alternative to professional reviews (Nuttall and Harrison 2020), as shown by the increasingly common use of Goodreads reviews in stylistics (Mason 2019). On Goodreads, *Martin Dressler* has at the time of writing (February 2022) 588 reviews and 9,535 ratings averaging at 3.57 out of a 5-star rating system. The book's rating is composed of 53% of 4 and 5 stars and 45% of 3 stars and below. This even share of the ratings indicates that readers have mixed opinion about the book, as opposed to critics who mostly view it positively.

To conduct a qualitative analysis, I collected the first 60 reviews (10% or so of the total of reviews). To do so, I employed a method akin to Nuttall and Harrison (2020, 42, 57) by using the website's 'default' sorting category for the 'most interesting reviews'—meaning reviews most 'liked' by other Goodreads users. I also opted to only consider reviews written in English. During the collection process, the reviews were anonymized and numbered: first the letters GR (Goodreads Review), followed by a number 1 to 5 indicating the score given to the novel, and ending with a full stop and the number of the reviews in my dataset. For example, 'GR5.16' is the 16th review in my dataset and attributed the novel a 5-star rating. My dataset is distributed as such:

- 5-star rating: 7
- 4-star rating: 17
- 3-star rating: 15
- 2-star rating: 17
- 1-star rating: 4

In some instances, the star-rating does not necessarily reflect the positive or negative opinion of readers, and in multiple occasions reviewers voiced their difficulty in rating the book, such as GR3.40: "This is a tough book to rate/review. I shouldn't be surprised because others also seemed

ambivalent about it. I feel like I liked it more than I should though the end truly disappointed me.” This phenomenon could explain the higher number of 2, 3, and 4-star ratings.

The first most common theme (35/60, 58%) discussed by readers is the novel’s depiction of multiple worlds. Interestingly, the notion of the GC hotel being a world of its own is expressed once in the novel (“For the Grand Cosmo was not a tourist attraction or a hotel for transients, but a world within the world, rivalling the world; and whoever entered its walls had no further need of that other world” [Millhauser 1996, 212]). However, readers’ discussion of the novel’s multiple worlds does not only reflect the GC’s farfetched architecture being its own world within New York City, but also Martin’s dreams being blurred with the reality, as shown by the selected examples across ratings below:

- GR4.3: “The hotels grow more fantastical and the whole book becomes divorced from reality”
- GR5.4: “the Grand Cosmo—Dressler’s last attempt at creation—seeks to hold inside of it an entire city, perhaps an entire world by extension”
- GR 5.7: “Martin Dressler dreams to rival the God and to create his own perfect world within the world...”
- GR2.9: “He eventually acquires the hotel he originally worked for and he builds a whole world of his own. The world he builds is a hotel that is not a hotel, The Grand Cosmo, that incorporates elements of a theme park”
- GR2.48: “Never being completely satisfied, Dressler tries to make the biggest dream possible: a city within a city”
- GR2.50: “sometimes his [Martin’s] dreams become lonely places that remove him too far from the real world”
- GR4.51: “Can you achieve happiness from a dream - something which by nature is elusive, malleable, illogical, always morphing into the next dream? [...] can a dream coexist with reality?”

The second theme mentioned by readers is the complexity of the novel’s style and the impact this has on the lack of character advancement for Martin’s (28/60, 47%):

- GR3.1: “There is such a tiny character arc for Martin as well - he only achieves enlightenment during the last 5 pages of this short novel”

- GR4.3: “What a beautiful piece of writing; it’s almost magical in the way *it conjures up not only images, but sounds and smells* as well” (my emphasis)
- GR4.13: “The pacing was strange -- overly fast at parts, painfully slow at others. But again: this is a dream; this is the story of a dream. And dreams don’t make sense”
- GR3.22: “This style is challenging in a novel, but overall he did better than I thought he would at holding my attention”
- GR4.27: “there’s a sentence that lasts six pages if you’re into that sort of thing”
- GR3.30: “The characters and the writing style are rather stiff and one-sided; but as I finished it up, I realized it was an allegory about The American Dream”
- GR2.33: “Nearly every sentence wants to enchant or enrapture the poor, bored reader. And there are too many, too many, far too many lists of ‘wonders’ for my taste”
- GR1.59: “historical fiction needs either compelling characters or plot. This book had neither, at least within the first 100 pages”

The third theme discussed by readers is the GC’s allegorical nature and its embodiment of the American Dream (23/60, 38%). The idea of the American Dream is announced in the title of the book, however, the symbol of the GC is not directly expressed. Yet, readers perceive it and link the symbolic nature of the GC to the world of its own it represents in the novel, for instance:

- GR1.15: “The story sounded like an interesting take on the American drive to make things ever bigger and better. Maybe that’s what Millhauser meant to do, but he got lost somewhere checking into the Grand Cosmopolitan or Grand Martini or whatever the name of that white elephant hotel was”
- GR3.41: “Martin’s wing, like Icarus, is his final hotel The Grand Cosmo. Every previous hotel has failed to achieve the image and tugging in his dream, but finally with the Cosmo he evolves his hotel into something else, a world within a world”
- GR3.12: “It is left to the reader to decide the Grand Cosmo’s meaning”

Based on those examples, the analysis I conduct is focused on observing how the readers’ perceptions of the GC, the American Dream, the notion of worlds and Martin’s character are linguistically built. The passage referred to most often by readers (14/60, 23%) is the end of Martin’s dream or the failure of the GC, and therefore this is the passage I selected to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What stylistic choices suggest to readers that the GC is an allegory of the American Dream?
- RQ2: How does Martin's character evolve and how is this process represented?
- RQ3: How are the potential different worlds perceived by readers represented in the text?

#### 4. Stylistic analysis of *Martin Dressler*

I argue that a stylistic approach to text analysis would help me to address the three research questions (RQ) presented in section 3. The broad scope of those RQ calls for a range of stylistic tools, allowing for a better understanding of readers' perception of the text. Thus, I conduct a stylistic analysis using the theory of foregrounding and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to demonstrate the allegorical nature of the GC and Millhauser's rich style. I then use Text World Theory (TWT) on the same passage to emphasize how the text world(s) are built in the novel.

##### 4.1 *Foregrounding and metaphor analysis*

The theory of foregrounding has for principle that foregrounded textual elements stand out against the norm of the rest of the text, either by deviating from this norm or by creating repetitions (Short, 1996). There are two types of deviation: internal deviation occurs when linguistic elements deviate from the text itself, which requires a pattern to be first constructed in the text so that linguistic elements can deviate from it (Short 1996, 36-37). External deviation occurs when linguistic elements deviate from a language norm (here the English language). Linguistic elements can also be foregrounded by parallelism: they create a pattern or a repetition within the text. Research has shown that the theory of foregrounding has the potential to explain textual effects that readers might observe, which is why I chose this approach for my first analysis (Miall 2007, 162; Van Peer 2007, 99-101; Miall and Kuiken 1994, 393-395). I discuss the foregrounded linguistic elements in the passage observing categories akin to Leech and Short's checklist of stylistics tools (2007, 60-64): lexis, syntax, figures of speech.

The passage I aim to analyse was chosen because it is the most cited one in my dataset (14/60, 23%). The examples below show with my emphasis direct reference to the passage in question:

- GR3.1: [...] There is such a tiny character arc for Martin as well—he only achieves enlightenment *during the last 5 pages of this short novel*. Also, it seemed a bit

unrealistic especially towards the end how *Martin seemed to wave a magic wand and his dreams would just appear in his hotel.*

- GR5.16: [...] Only after the double failure of the Grand Cosmos and of his marriage to Caroline does Martin admit to himself that he had "*dreamed the wrong dream*" in his unexamined pursuit of the world-substituting hotel complex and in his lack of attention to his own desires, both in his life work and in his need for love.
- GR3.41: [...] towards the end of the novel, Martin issues actors to fill in the empty Cosmo to give it life. Martin notices three women which slowly turn into *demon-women summoned from his deepest dreams*, possibly similar to the furies of Hades.
- GR4.42: [...] One can see it as a tragic fall yet Martin is strangely content with his life, "*For he had done as he liked, he had gone his own way, built his castle in the air. And if in the end he had dreamed the wrong dream, the dream that others didn't wish to enter, then that was the way of dreams, it was only to be expected, he had no desire to have dreamt otherwise*" (288). Interestingly Martin dreamt of riches at a young age and was swallowed in his dream and when he finally woke up, it was like he never travelled that long trek to riches for he was once more became a man with no wealth.

This is likely because the passage in question is crucial in the storyline and four pages from the end of the novel. The GC Hotel, Martin's biggest real-estate project and investment, faces foreclosure. In the scene prior to the passage selected, Martin met with investors and realises the GC is a failure and must close. The passage details Martin's reaction and thought process at the news:

And indeed he was tired, so tired that he could barely lift his head, though at the same time he felt intensely alert.(1) The GC would soon pass away, even now it was fading, becoming dreamlike as he watched.(2) Already he could hear it falling, falling like white snow.(3) The three women were a sign, demon-women summoned up from deepest dream.(4) For a building was a dream, a dream made 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.(5) Friendly powers had led him along dark paths of dream, they had been good to him—to him, Martin Dressler, son of Otto Dressler, seller of cigars and tobacco.(6) For really he had travelled a long way, since the days when he rolled out old Tecumseh into the warm shade.(7) For he had done as he liked, he had gone his own way, built his castle in the air.(8) And if in the end he had dreamed the wrong dream, the dream that others didn't wish to enter, then that was the way of dreams, it was only to be expected, he had no desire to have dreamt otherwise.(9) And as Martin in his chair sat deeply asleep and yet entirely awake, for so it seemed to him, as Martin in his dream-chair slipped in and out of dream-thoughts that were the clear thoughts of day, he became aware of something just out of reach of his mind, something that needed attending to.(10) (Millhauser 1996, 288-289, my numbering)



This foregrounding analysis addresses all the RQs, though the complexity of the multiple worlds in the text is further explored using TWT in section 4.2 below. I argue that Martin's character evolves through his emotions, implicitly communicated through syntax and figurative language (Pager-McClymont 2021). Abbott (2008, 118) suggests this is frequent in literature: "verbal narration [...] draws on figurative language, particularly metaphors. Often on the page what is internal to a character comes out in metaphorical language." Moreover, observing Martin's emotional reaction to the GC's failure conveys how meaningful the GC is in the novel.

The lexical field of death—or end of (material) life, and grief is present in the passage, and is foregrounded by parallelism as it creates a running theme. It is composed of the repetition of the word "stone" (repeated six times in sentence 5) which could represent a headstone, along with terms such as "pass away" (2), "fading" (2), "falling" (2), "unlasting" (5), "end" (9). This lexical field represents the death of the GC, the end of Martin's American Dream as suggests the phrase "for a building was a dream, a dream made stone" (5), which can have two meanings: the building of the GC is Martin's dream and is made of stone but is now transformed into a figurative headstone in light of the imminent foreclosure.

Furthermore, there are three syntax structures that contribute to indicating Martin's feelings of grief. First, the structure of the subordinating conjunction "for" followed by a subject is repeated four times: "for a building" (5), "for [really] he" (7, 8), "for [so] it" (10), this repetition is foregrounded by parallelism, and it creates a pattern within the text. This structure conveys a sense of justification on Martin's part: when facing the end of the GC, he evaluates the choices that led him to this moment. This could suggest that he does not understand how this is the ending the GC has, or he has yet to come to terms with this tragic event and its repercussions, as an individual might do when losing a loved one suddenly. This last point is further discussed below.

Secondly, tautology is omnipresent in the extract.<sup>2</sup> There are seven instance of tautology structured as such: clause 1 describes a basic idea, clause 2 repeats this idea adding a detail, and both clauses are juxtaposed by a comma. This is demonstrated by the following examples, though overall this structure can be observed in sentences 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10:

- Sentence 1: and indeed he was tired (clause 1), so tired that he could barely lift his head (clause 2)
- Sentence 3: Already he could hear it falling (clause 1), falling like white snow (clause 2)

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<sup>2</sup> Tautology can be defined as when "the same proposition is repeated in different words" (Wales 2011, 359).

- Sentence 6: Martin Dressler (clause 1), son of Otto Dressler (clause 2)

The recurrence of these structures throughout the passage renders them foregrounded by parallelism and creates a pattern. They indicate how lost Martin feels after losing the GC, and potentially his sense of self. Indeed, the repetition of ideas could be mimicking Martin's difficulty processing the information he was given and needing to let go of his dream/hotel. This repetition could be an example as to why certain reviews mentioned finding the writing complex to grasp or not understanding if the narration was that of event or Martin's stream of (un)consciousness. Sentence 6 is equally syntactic and semantic: "Martin Dressler, son of Otto Dressler, seller of cigars and tobacco. For really he had travelled a long way, since the days when he rolled out old Tecumseh into the warm shade" (6, 7). These two sentences are structured as eulogies: Martin's full name is stated, followed by his family relations (here his father) and their profession, and then a summary of Martin's life experiences and accomplishments. This is significant as it contributes to portraying how Martin feels about losing the GC (grief), and it conveys that the hotel, his big American Dream is closely tied to his own sense of identity (Magness 2004, 9) and the end or death of the hotel his synonym to the end of his own purpose.

There are multiple instances of figurative language relating to the theme of death or loss throughout the passage. These expressions are foregrounded by external deviation as they deviate from the literal norm of the English language. Firstly, the personification of the hotel can be observed in sentence 2: "the GC hotel would soon pass way." This indicates how much the hotel means to Martin, the hotel represents his big American Dream, his sense of self, to the point that losing it to foreclosure is equal to the loss of a loved one. Furthermore, other metaphorical expressions are used to convey this: "it was fading, becoming dreamlike" (2), "he could hear it falling" (3). Those metaphors and simile, like the personification described above, convey that the business loss of the hotel is grasped by Martin figuratively, thus showing that the hotel was more than just a hotel to him. These metaphorical expressions suggest that in this instance, material loss is a synonym for emotional loss because of the allegorical nature of the GC: it embodies the "all American Dream" (Saltzman and Millhauser 2001, 592).

Drawing on CMT (Kövecses 2002; Lakoff and Johnson 1980) allows me to represent the correspondence between Martin's feelings and the figurative language used. CMT claims that one conceptual domain A (the target domain) is understood in terms of conceptual domain B (the source domain), allowing it to observe the metaphor mapping A IS B. As I demonstrate elsewhere (2021), figurative language such as iconicity and pathetic fallacy can be implicit cues of characterisation as they allow for a representation of characters' emotions. Similarly, in this

particular passage, Martin's feelings about his MATERIAL LOSS are the target domain and DEATH is the source domain, thus generating the cross-domain mapping MATERIAL LOSS IS DEATH. The target domain of MATERIAL LOSS englobes Martin's loss of his career, his hotel, and his American Dream, and overall, the metaphor indicates that his emotional reaction to those losses is grief. Furthermore, the allegorical embodiment of the GC as the American Dream is observed by readers, as discussed above. Crisp explains that allegories and conceptual metaphors share common traits, though allegories are "radically extended linguistic metaphors" (2001, 8). Allegories' metaphorical mapping occur without explicit reference to the metaphor's conceptual target, but their source domain is clearly evoked (Sullivan 2014, 352-353; Crisp 2001, 9). Crisp also states that "abstract personification is widespread in allegory, although it is not a strictly necessary allegorical property [...] it is for us moderns at least a strongly prototypical one." (2001, 13). This is reflected in the passage as the GC hotel is personified through sentences such as "the Grand Cosmo would soon pass away" (2). In this example, the euphemism 'pass away' (mostly used to indicate a human being's death) personifies the hotel, highlighting the value it has in Martin's eyes.

Stockwell (1999) creates a cline of visibility of metaphoric forms from most to the least visible based on readers' effort. Allegories are in sixteenth position, showing that they are less visible and require more effort on the reader's part to be perceived. Sullivan (2014) builds on Stockwell's cline by using multidimensional scaling. In all Sullivan's analyses of visibility, dimension, and economy, allegory is classed amongst the least visible and least used metaphoric forms (Sullivan 2014, 362). These characteristics are salient to the GC as the linguistic element of allegories can be observed in the GC's depiction in the passage—and in the novel. Firstly, the GC is directly personified as shown by the example in sentence 2 and by the lexical field and conceptual metaphors of DEATH. Furthermore, the GC as a hotel is explicitly referenced, as well as its characteristics of being Martin's dream. However, embodiment of the American Dream through the hotel is not explicit or directly referenced (although admittedly the title of the novel does allude to the topic). Therefore, the concrete aspect of the hotel makes the GC the source domain, and the subjective and abstract nature of the American Dream makes it the target domain, thus fulfilling the definition of allegory as per Crisp (2001) and Sullivan (2014), and could explain how this particular allegory is so visible to readers.

Finally, Martin's feelings of denial as a stage in his grieving process (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2005, 8) are expressed through oxymorons.<sup>3</sup> Oxymorons are repeated and are thus foregrounded

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<sup>3</sup> Oxymorons are defined as "juxtaposition of apparently contradictory expressions for witty or striking effects" (Wales 2011, 298-299).

by parallelism because of the pattern they construct: “and indeed he was tired, [...] though at the same time he felt intensely alert” (1), “forever unlasting” (5), “Martin in his chair sat deeply asleep and yet entirely awake” (10), “he became aware of something just out of reach of his mind” (10). Each of these oxymorons are used in sentences that describe Martin’s actions or thoughts, and the combinations of opposite ideas juxtaposed as they are in the examples provided has two effects. Firstly, it showcases how confused and in denial of reality Martin is, the oxymoron is almost a syntactic icon of his state of mind. Secondly, it provides the text with a more ‘dreamlike’ tone: it is difficult for readers to identify if in these sentences Martin is indeed awake or if he is dreaming, thus blurring the lines between his reality and the “dream-world” (Giovanelli 2013). This idea is reinforced by the repetition (seventeen times) of the word “dream(s),” which is foregrounded by parallelism because it contributes to the running theme of the American Dream (in Martin’s case embodied by the GC), and the blurred lines between the reality and the dreamlike aspects of Martin’s world(s). This last point is further discussed in section 4.2 below.

This foregrounding analysis has shown that Martin’s implicit emotional reaction to the situation is conveyed through complex stylistic choices: syntax and figures of speech (RQ2). Furthermore, it was shown how the GC is stylistically presented as the allegory of the American Dream (RQ1). The notion of multiple worlds (RQ3) was partially addressed, but the use of TWT in section 4.2 provides a more in-depth analysis.

#### ***4.2 Text World Theory analysis***

TWT has a three-tiered structure: the discourse-world, the text-world, and sub-worlds. The discourse-world is where writers/readers or speakers/listeners conceptualise their background knowledge and text production details. The text-world is the participants’ representation of the text in their mind through world-builders of time, place, enactors, events, and descriptions. At times, text-worlds migrate away from the original text-world through ‘world-switches’ (Gavins 2007, 48) of time, space, enactors (deictic shifts) or through attitudes expressed through modality: boulomaic (expresses desire), deontic (expresses obligation), and epistemic (expresses degree of certainty). Moreover, metaphors (micro and mega) and negation create new world-switches: “metaphor-worlds” and “negated worlds” (Gavins 2007, 158-159, 122 respectively). As Stockwell explains, text-worlds are “conceptual spaces” and some can be “triggered by [...]

metaphors (which are literal in the sub-world but metaphorical in the text-world), negatives (positive in the sub-world and negated in the text-world)” (2005, 149).<sup>4</sup>

I apply TWT to *Martin Dressler* because of my dataset: 58% of readers observed that narration features multiple worlds (see section 3), and as shown by expressions such as “a world within a world” (GR5.7, GR5.16, GR3.41), “a city in the city” (GR2.48), “dreamswirl” (GR4.13), “morphing into the next dream” (GR4.51), “impossible to pin down [...] this is a dream; this is the story of a dream” (GR4.13), “otherworldly wonders [...] Millhauser describes that feeling of hyperlinked virtual worlds in a physical way” (GR4.21), “Martin himself digs within his dreams to try to draw out a new world to create in the physical world” (GR3.41). TWT is most fitted to explore how readers conceptualise those worlds. To do so, I apply TWT to the same extract of the novel analysed in section 4.1 above, demonstrating that in this instance, foregrounding and TWT analyses complement each other in showing how the style of the text contribute to the readers’ mental representation of it.

At the discourse-world level, *Martin Dressler* features two participants: the author Steven Millhauser and the reader. They do not share the same spatial or temporal locations, thus rendering the discourse-world “split”: the text is the primary means of communication between the participants (Werth 1999, 54-55). The text-world level departs from the initial discourse-world because the narration occurs in 19th-century New York, whereas the novel was published in 1996. In the extract understudy, the original text-world (TW1) is composed of Martin sitting on a chair, feeling tired (sentence 1). Figure 1 below displays the text-worlds present in the extract and their world-switches (W-S) in bold.

In sentence 2, the phrase “The GC would soon pass away, even now it was fading” contains a world-switch because of the epistemic modality with the modal verb “would.” This indicates Martin’s certainty regarding the GC’s fate, thus creating a second text-world (TW2). It is noteworthy that this phrase also contains the verb “pass away” suggesting that the GC is a personified being and can thus die. For the sake of clarity, and because the metaphorical representation of death and grief was discussed in section 4.1, this world-switching element is not discussed further and TW2 is counted as one text-world. Additionally, in sentence 2, the phrase “becoming dreamlike as he watched” contains another world-switch: the simile in the adjective “dreamlike” renders this new text-world (TW3) a metaphor-world (Browse 2016, 25).

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<sup>4</sup> This explanation of TWT is brief, for a more detailed discussion see Werth (1999), Gavins (2007), Whiteley (2011), Giovanelli (2013).

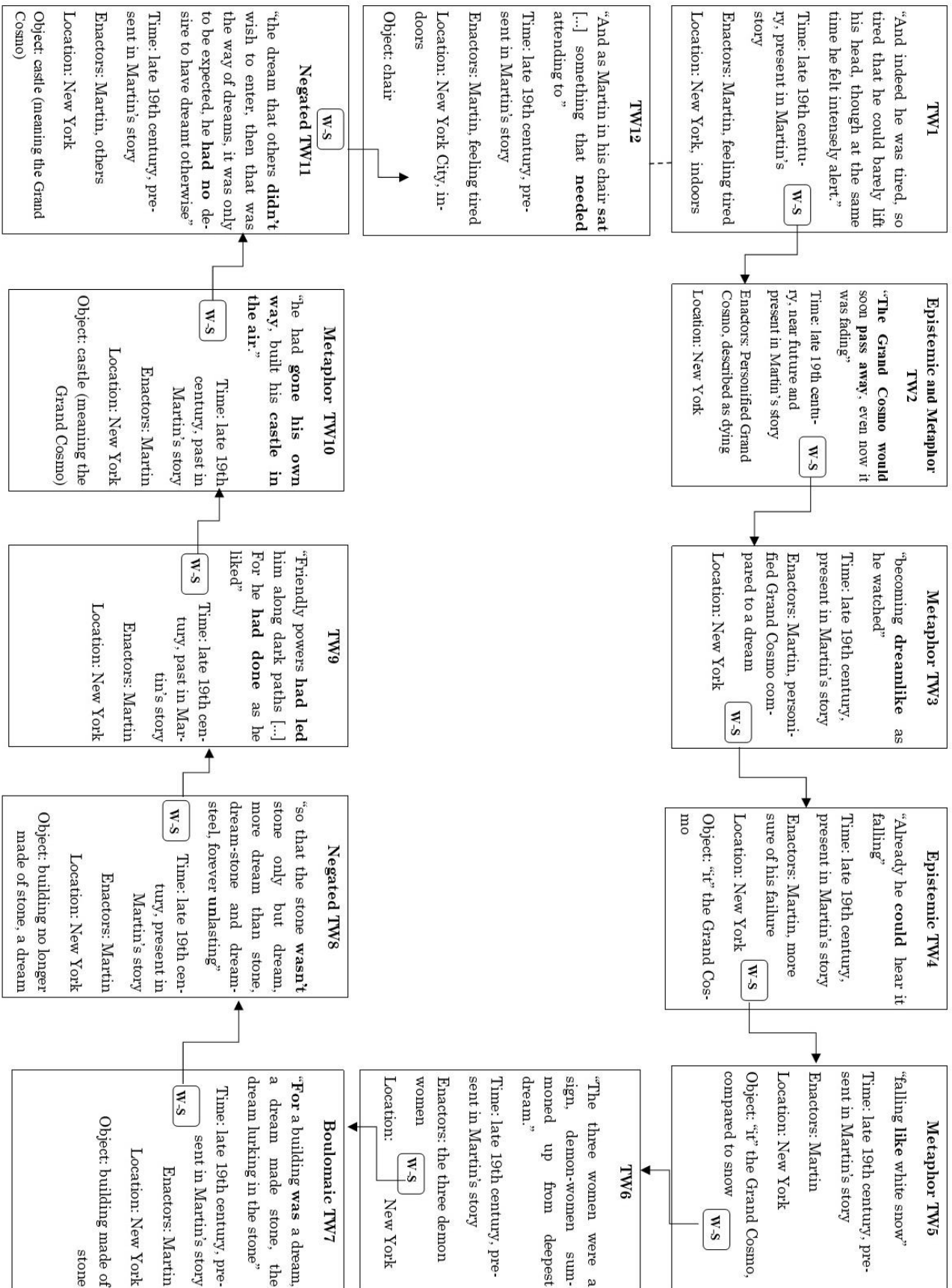


Fig. 1: The text-worlds in a selected paragraph of *Martin Dressler*

The source domain DREAM's characteristic mapped onto the target domain GC is its abstract nature: a dream is a subjective concept, and although the GC is a building (literally concrete-made), its failure has rendered it as abstract in Martin's life as a dream. This further emphasizes the metaphorical nature the GC holds within the novel—meaning its allegorical representation of the American Dream.

Sentence 3 features the phrase “Already he could hear it falling” which contains the world-switch modal verb “could,” thus creating an epistemic text-world (TW4) in which Martin seems surer of the GC's fate than he did in TW2. Moreover, the phrase “falling like white snow” is also present in sentence 3. It includes the world-switching simile “like white snow,” creating a metaphor-world (TW5) in which the GC and snow are alike. The most salient characteristic of the source domain SNOW mapped onto the target domain GC is its transient nature, mimicking the hotel's short-lived success. Sentence 3 observes a similar structure as sentence 2: the first part of the sentences are epistemic text-worlds (TW2 and TW4), whereas the second part of the sentences are metaphor-worlds and share the same target domain of GC (TW3 and TW5). Therefore, these repetitions are foregrounded by parallelism, and could reflect Martin's stream of (un)consciousness, circling around the GC's fate. The idea of circling around the GC is particularly evident given that it is the target domain in all metaphor-worlds, as shown by Figure 1, which also portrays that circling effect in its shape.

Sentence 4 departs from the text-worlds discussed so far as new enactors are introduced “the three demon women” in reference to the Vernon women. This world-switching prompt creates TW6, which could be considered as a metaphor-world because of the phrases “were a sign” and “demon-women,” which are figurative suggesting a symbol to reflect the negative influence the Vernon women had on Martin's life.

Sentence 5 also departs from the text-worlds discussed so far because of the switch in modality creating a boulomaic text-world (TW7). In the phrase “For a building was a dream, a dream made stone, the dream lurking in the stone,” the concept of “dream” is repeated, signalling the wish Martin had for the GC to stay open as it embodies his American Dream, and the description of said dream could be interpreted as a desire on Martin's part. Furthermore, the rest of sentence 5, “so that the stone wasn't stone only but dream, more dream than stone, dream-stone and dream-steel, forever unlasting,” generates a world-switch because of the negation it features (“wasn't,” “unlasting”), thus creating a negated text-world (TW8). This negated TW8 is in direct opposition with the boulomaic TW7, and I argue that this is crucial in the storyline: this contrast shows Martin processing that his dream embodied by the GC has failed. The contrast highlights

Martin's acceptance of the situation, as opposed to being in denial as he had been so far in the narration.

Sentences 6, 7, and 8 from "Friendly powers had led him along dark paths of dream" to "For he had done as he liked" create a new text-world (TW9) because of the change in tenses: so far the past simple ("was," "summoned") was used, whereas here it is the past perfect ("had led," "had travelled"). This world-switch conveys Martin's thoughts or dream process of earlier times in his life and the journey he took to lead him where he is now. As discussed in section 4.1, it is also structured as a eulogy, suggesting that the failure of the GC symbolises the death or end of Martin's professional career. The second part of sentence 9 "he had gone his own way, built his castle in the air" contains two metaphors which cause a world-switch to a new metaphor text-world (TW10). The first metaphor occurs in the clause "he had gone his own way," which is an instance of the known conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY (Kövecses 2002, 4). This metaphor links the following metaphor with Martin's reflection of his life. The second metaphor "built his castle in the air" is novel (Kövecses 2002, 242-243) and refers to the GC with a fairy-tale like image, thus further conveying the allegorical aspect of the GC to the American Dream, rendering it almost fictional.

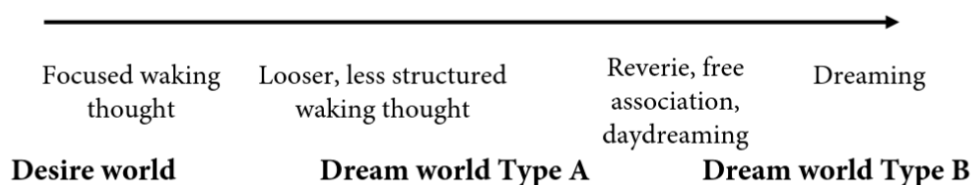
Sentence 9 features the phrase "the dream that others didn't wish to enter, then that was the way of dreams, it was only to be expected, he had no desire to have dreamt otherwise" which creates a negated text-world (TW11) due to the world-switching negation of "didn't" and "had no." The negation used creates a contrast between Martin and "others," due to the eccentric nature of the GC, although, according to Brands (2003), the concept of the American Dream was sought by most men and women content to accumulate their modest fortunes a little at a time, year by year by year. This pursuit of the American Dream became a prominent part of the "American psyche" (Brands 2003, 42), particularly the time the text-world is set (19th century). The negation emphasizes the evaluation that Martin conducts on his own life: he has no regret, even when facing his failure.

Finally, sentence 10 departs from the previous text-worlds, as it returns to a text-world close to the original one (TW1) in which he is sat in his chair. This world-switch is prompted by a change in tense: the past perfect used in sentences 6, 7, 8, and 9 is no longer employed, instead, the narration returns to the past simple ("Martin in his chair sat deeply asleep"). However, this new text-world (TW12) differs from TW1 due to the ambiguity that is described: in TW1, Martin is tired, but not yet asleep. In TW12, the situation is more ambiguous because of the combination of tautology and oxymorons ("awake and yet entirely asleep," "slipped in and out of dream-thoughts that were the clear thoughts of day," "he became aware of something just out of reach



of his mind”). Because of this ambiguity, the passage’s last text-world can be interpreted differently by readers, as Martin can be thought of as sitting in his chair thinking, which would mean that TW1 and TW12 are one and the same. The other possibility is that Martin fell asleep whilst sitting in his chair, and in this scenario, TW12 and TW1 differ because of Martin’s state, and the world-switching mirrors his stream of unconsciousness, mimicking a vivid dream. These two possibilities (represented by a dashed line on Figure 1) convey that in the extract—and novel—multiple text-worlds are presented, and their boundaries are at times blurred, rendering the line between Martin’s reality and his dream-world equally blurred.

In Giovanelli’s model of dream worlds (2013, 73-74), there are two types of dream worlds, and they can be placed on a continuum:



**Fig. 2:** Giovanelli’s Desire Dream continuum (2013, 73)

The text understudy features operators of Type A such as epistemic modality (e.g., “could,” “would”). However, elements from Type B such as irreality (e.g., “demon women,” “castle in the air”) are also present, indicating that from TW2 onwards, the passage sits between Dream world Type A and Type B. Therefore, there is no clear indication of which type is most represented in the text, and to thus fully determine if Martin is awake or asleep, or if TW1 and TW12 are one and the same.

The GC’s allegorical nature renders it a distinct world, dream, and city within the original text-world of the novel. Using TWT allows us to understand how those worlds, despite their blurred lines, can create a rich mental representation of the novel’s themes of architecture and American Dream for readers. Overall, this TWT analysis complements the foregrounding analysis and emphasises the complexity of the text-world intertwined within the text and the blurred lines they have. This resonates with the readers’ reviews of the novel featuring multiple worlds, showing that readers expand the text-world into the discourse-world. Indeed, stylistic choices recurring throughout the novel and exemplified in the analysis presented in this paper seem to trigger a strong mental representation of the novel and its elements. The way those elements such as Martin’s perspective or the GC hotel were not only noticed, but they were also used by readers to formulate their reviews. Interestingly, those stylistic choices were consensually

referred to in the dataset presented, regardless of the star rating the readers attributed the novel.

## 5. Discussion and concluding remarks

In this paper, I used Goodreads reviews to understand how readers conceptualise the key themes in *Martin Dressler* following a bottom-up approach to text analysis by basing my method on the dataset, akin to Nuttall and Harrison (2020) or Doche and Ross (2022). I first used foregrounding theory and CMT on the extract of the novel most frequently mentioned in my sample of Goodreads reviews, and I evidenced that the complex style of the novel (particularly the use of syntax and imagery) allowed for an ambiguous communication of Martin's emotion and stream of (un)consciousness to readers, generating the metaphor MATERIAL LOSS IS DEATH. Martin feels grief and loss (of the hotel, of his dream and of self), and the use of literary devices such as oxymoron, tautology and metaphors convey his inability to come to terms with his (material) loss. Those devices also create blurred lines between Martin's reality and his wish, between his stream of consciousness and his dream, or between the reality of New York and the GC are blurred, so much so that in the extract, it is up to readers to interpret whether Martin is in fact awake or asleep.

Furthermore, by using TWT on the same extract, I showcased the varied text-worlds presented in the novel. The analysis evidenced that readers expand the text-world into the discourse-world and conceptualise the allegorical aspect of the GC as world of its own: a city of its own in New York, a world of dreams for Martin. In the end, by following his hunger for business and real-estate, Martin built a world in the image of his American Dream, so farfetched that it defied reality.

Finally, the three research questions put forth in section 3 were answered with the combination of frameworks used. The use of a bottom-up approach throughout the process means that the method of analysis is shaped by the stylistic elements of the text observed by readers. This could potentially be extended to the choice of passages to analyse, as done in this paper. However, this approach has limitations: it is research specific and relies on researchers' previous knowledge of frameworks—hence the process cannot claim to be fully bottom-up. It also requires analysts to be more flexible in their research, and depending on the data or text under study, such flexibility might not always be possible. However, in this research, using a bottom-up approach allowed for a detailed analysis of readers' reviews and for the observation of how style informed readers' mental representation of the novel.

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