

Lightman's methods in einstein's dreams



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Einstein's Dreams, Alan Lightman criticizes people's struggles to hold onto time through hyperbole, nameless characters, average themes and simplistic syntax. The people in Lightman's vignettes have a common problem: how to slow down time; whether to hold onto youth or save a moment for eternity. Although sometimes they cannot name the cause of their dissatisfaction, the characters are constantly plagued by the feeling that they are not living life to its fullest, and they feel trapped by time. One method that Lightman uses effectively to argue his point in Einstein's Dreams is hyperbole. The vignette which shows people living in tall houses merely to hold onto youth seems ridiculous at first look; however, on reflection it is not as absurd as it seems. The people in the vignette attempt to live life to its fullest extent by building their houses on stilts on the tops of mountains because they have heard that time moves more slowly further away from the earth. (22) In today's society, people do bizarre things to appear and feel younger—men sometimes struggle with midlife crises by trying out a new car, sport, or even finding new, younger women to make them feel more youthful. For women, this is often most obvious in terms of appearance, whether in the form of a haircut, clothing or cosmetic surgery. The irony of the high house vignettes is that the people in them gradually lose sight of why they are living these difficult ways, but continue their lifestyles, which cause them to grow “thin like the air, bony, old before their time.” (24) In this vignette, Lightman compares these people to those in present-day society who pack their lives to gain the most opportunities, ultimately giving themselves more stress and making them age faster. The nameless characters and repeating scenarios in Einstein's Dreams convey a sense of universal frustration to the characters in the vignettes. He continually references scenarios involving nameless

lovers, parents, and children who struggle with the same problems; aging without truly living life and losing loved ones. Although these people live in worlds of fantasy that the reader can barely imagine, their lives have a personal connection to the reader because the struggle they face are things that every person must go through, whether buying new clothes or losing a job. (27) Lightman's nameless characters carry a heavy sense of unremarkability: they are shopkeepers, lawyers, and chemists. They make love to their wives and get up for work each morning; they return home each night to dinner, stopping by the market on the way to pick up groceries. In other words, they are every person. On 4 May, 1905, Einstein dreams of two wealthy, dissatisfied couples out to an annual dinner. They discuss food, business, and their children; perhaps the same subjects as they discussed last year. (36) Although they have achieved everything that society desires, these people live bored, mundane lives. Through this story, Lightman shows that success is not always as sweet as it appears; even those who should be happy are plagued by a sense of discontent. Lightman's use of simplistic language and syntax convey a dull, ordinary feeling to his vignettes, reinforcing the universal feeling of the stories. In general, his verb usage is simple and to the point; rather than using flowery words: "A cloud floats in the sky. A sparrow flutters. No one speaks." (45) The sentences are short and concise, revealing everyday scenarios in their true beauty. Lightman also adds mundane detail to the stories. In describing a picnic, he slowly and carefully lays out the scene, so that the reader can see the entire picture in his head: "The son and his very fat wife and the grandmother sit on a blanket, eating smoked ham, cheese, sourdough bread with mustard, grapes, chocolate cake." (136) These details are highlighted to show just

how ordinary his characters are; how many people have sat outside on a warm day, eating and enjoying the company of family? Lightman's choice to write simply makes his stories easier to connect to. Through his hyperboles and his ability to capture society as a whole, Lightman shows that time leaves no one exempt from dissatisfaction and despair. He offers little consolation, but gives one bright spot of hope. In his vignette about the end of the world, Lightman shows a seemingly perfect world, a world where everyone has lost their struggles with time and finally joins hands in loving unity. Age, position and achievements no longer matter; the only thing that matters is love. Perhaps this is the only real solution: in a world where every second is precious, people can finally set aside their worries and stop trying to hold onto what is lost, instead embracing each passing moment.