

work to position readers in order to guide their interpretations. Whether or not readers accept that guidance or are even aware of it is another matter.

Of course, there are many more reader-response concepts than the ones discussed above. Our purpose here is merely to introduce you to the main ideas, the general principles you need to know in order to read reader-response theorists and literary critics with some understanding of the issues they raise. Naturally, some literary works will seem to lend themselves more readily than others to reader-response analysis or at least to certain kinds of reader-response analysis. And unlike many other theories addressed in this textbook, a reader-response analysis of a literary text is often an analysis not of the text itself but of the responses of actual readers.

Mary Lowe-Evans, for example, analyzed the oral and written responses of college juniors and seniors in her literature class in order to learn how students today form attitudes toward a specific literary text and how those attitudes determine their interpretation of it. The text she used was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and she mapped the ways in which the following factors influenced students' interpretations of the novel: film versions of the novel (which created students' preconceptions of the text), her own interpretive prompts (whose story is this? what does the novel mean? is the narrator reliable?), and the determinate and indeterminate meanings in the text itself. Among other findings, Lowe-Evans confirmed the reader-response notion that interpretation is an ongoing process that evolves as readers use different interpretive strategies to actively work their way through a text. She also learned that preconceptions created by film versions of the novel, in which the monster is very different from Shelley's monster, facilitated certain interpretations of the story while frustrating others. Analogously, particular textual elements, such as the formal style of the tale's "Preface" and the epistolary format that opens the narrative (the story is presented as a series of letters from the narrator to his sister), counteracted the students' expectations of a superficial, entertaining monster story.

Whatever kind of analysis is undertaken, however, the ultimate goal of reader-response criticism is to increase our understanding of the reading process by investigating the activities in which readers engage and the effects of those activities on their interpretations.

Some questions reader-response critics ask about literary texts

The questions that follow are offered to summarize reader-response approaches to literature or, more accurately, to the reading of literature. Question 1 draws on transactional reader-response theory. Questions 2 and 3 relate to affective stylistics. Question 4 draws on psychological reader-response theory. Question 5

relates to social or psychological reader-response theory, and Question 6 draws on subjective reader-response theory.

1. How does the interaction of text and reader create meaning? How, exactly, does the text's indeterminacy function as a stimulus to interpretation? (For example, what events are omitted or unexplained? What descriptions are omitted or incomplete? What images might have multiple associations?) And how exactly does the text lead us to correct our interpretation as we read?
2. What does a phrase-by-phrase analysis of a short literary text, or of key portions of a longer text, tell us about the reading experience prestructured by (built into) that text? How does this analysis of what the text *does* to the reader differ from what the text "says" or "means"? In other words, how might the omission of the temporal experience of reading this text result in an incomplete idea of the text's meaning?
3. How might we interpret a literary text to show that the reader's response is, or is analogous to, the topic of the story? In other words, how is the text really about readers reading, and what exactly does it tell us about this topic? To simplify further, how is a particular kind of reading experience an important theme in the text? Of course, we must first establish what reading experience is created by the text (see Question 2) in order to show that the theme of the story is analogous to it. Then we must cite textual evidence—for example, references to reading materials, to characters reading texts, and to characters interpreting other characters or events—to show that what happens in the world of the narrative mirrors the reader's situation decoding it.
4. Drawing on a broad spectrum of thoroughly documented biographical data, what seems to be a given author's identity theme, and how does that theme express itself in the sum of his or her literary output?
5. What does the body of criticism published about a literary text suggest about the critics who interpreted that text and/or about the reading experience produced by that text? You might contrast critical camps writing during the same period, writing during different periods, or both. What does your analysis suggest about the ways in which the text is created by readers' interpretive strategies or by their psychological or ideological projections?
6. If you have the resources to do it, what can you learn about the role of readers' interpretive strategies or expectations, about the reading experience produced by a particular text, or about any other reading activity by conducting your own study using a group of real readers (for example, your students, classmates, or fellow book-club members)? For example, can you devise a study to test Bleich's belief that students' personal responses to literary texts are the source of their formal interpretations?

Depending on the literary work in question, we might ask one or any combination of these questions. Or we might come up with a useful question not listed here. These are just some starting points to get us thinking about literature in productive reader-response ways. Keep in mind that not all reader-response critics will interpret the same text, or even the same readers' responses, in the same way, even if they focus on the same reader-response concepts. As in every field, even expert practitioners disagree. Our goal is to use reader-response theory to help enrich our reading of literary works, to help us see some important ideas they illustrate that we might not have seen so clearly or so deeply otherwise, and to help us understand the complexities and varieties of the reading experience.

The following reader-response analysis of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is offered as an example of what a reader-response interpretation of that novel might yield. Using the principles of affective stylistics, Iser's notion of indeterminacy, and Holland's notion of projection, I will examine the way the novel continually problematizes our evolving perception of Jay Gatsby as we read, creating an indeterminacy that invites us to project our own beliefs and desires onto the protagonist. In addition, I will show how the novel's thematic content (what the novel "is about") mirrors the reader's experience reading it, that is, how the theme of the novel is the impossibility of establishing determinate meaning.

Projecting the reader: a reader-response analysis of *The Great Gatsby*

"Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once."

A thrill passed over all of us. The three Mr. Mumbles bent forward and listened eagerly.

"I don't think it's so much *that*," argued Lucille skeptically; "it's more that he was a German spy during the war."

One of the men nodded in confirmation.

"I heard that from a man who knew all about him, grew up with him in Germany," he assured us positively.

"Oh no," said the first girl, "it couldn't be that, because he was in the American army during the war." As our credulity switched back to her she leaned forward with enthusiasm. "You look at him sometimes when he thinks nobody's looking at him. I'll bet he killed a man." (48; ch. 3)

The speculation Jay Gatsby inspires in his gossip-hungry party guests, who have an obvious desire to be shocked, is, in two important ways, a prototype of the speculation he inspires in the reader of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Our credulity, like that of Gatsby's party guests, is continually "switched" in different directions as we make our way through Nick Carraway's narration,

and the final outcome of our speculation—our interpretation of *Gatsby* and therefore of the meaning of the novel as a whole—is largely a product of our own beliefs and desires, which the tale's indeterminacy invites us to project. In other words, *The Great Gatsby* dramatizes reader-response theory's concept of reading as the making of meaning, and the novel reproduces within the action of the story the reader's experience while reading it.

With Jay Gatsby as the "text" they decode, the characters in the novel model a reading experience that could be described by the following formula: projection + data gathered = confirmation of projection. In other words, the data that interpreters gather from the environment have one primary function: to validate for them the interpretation they've already projected or are in the process of projecting. For example, as we just saw, Gatsby's party guests perform all three steps of the formula in a single conversation. Although the outlandish rumors they rely on are inaccurate, rumors are the only data available, and they are hardly more shocking than the truth about Gatsby's criminal activities. More important, outlandish rumors fulfill the desire for scandal that prompts them to interpret Gatsby in the first place: it hardly matters, in terms of their enjoyment of the "text" that is Gatsby, which of the rumors they believe, as long as the rumor is sufficiently outrageous or provokes further shocking speculations. In other words, the party guests interpret Gatsby in order to be shocked, and their interpretations fulfill their desire.

Analogously, Tom Buchanan wants to believe that Gatsby is a crook with no respectable family background, and he hires private investigators to provide him with the evidence he needs to prove it. Daisy wants to believe Gatsby is her upper-class knight in shining armor, so she conveniently doesn't see through his veneer of wealth and status, which is as thin as the "thin beard of raw ivy" (9; ch. 1) covering the tower of his mansion. Wolfsheim wants to believe that Gatsby is "a man of fine breeding" (76; ch. 4) so he can "use him good" (179; ch. 9) in his underworld activities, and therefore he doesn't see the contradiction in a finely bred man, "an Oggford," being "so hard up he had to keep on wearing his uniform because he couldn't buy some regular clothes" (179; ch. 9). George Wilson wants to believe that Gatsby seduced and murdered his wife because this belief will permit Wilson to avenge Myrtle's seduction and death and achieve the emotional closure he needs. So Wilson readily believes the first story he hears: he asks no questions and has no doubts about Tom's explanation despite having seen Tom himself driving the "death" car earlier that day and despite Tom's unfulfilled promises to Wilson in the recent past. Finally, Mr. Gatz wants to believe that his son "had a big future before him": "If he'd of lived he'd of been a great man. A man like [railroad tycoon] James J. Hill. He'd of helped build up the country" (176; ch. 9). Mr. Gatz therefore interprets his son's boyhood "schedule" as proof that "Jimmy was bound to get ahead" (182; ch. 9), having swallowed

completely whatever improbable lies Gatsby surely told him about the source of his wealth.

I'm not suggesting that these characters have the ability or the opportunity to acquire more accurate information about Gatsby. My point is simply that the eagerness with which they embrace the information they acquire and the readiness with which they use it to construct what they choose to regard as the complete picture of Gatsby are products of the degree to which the information fulfills their own desires concerning the man.

It might be reasonable to conclude that the amount of inaccuracy produced by this sort of interpretation teaches the reader to try another method, that the novel discredits the subjective, self-serving interpretation represented by these characters. However, as we shall see, Nick Carraway—whose first-person narration guides us through the morally ambiguous world of the novel—interprets Gatsby through the lens of his own projections as well. Furthermore, he does so because, in the indeterminate world of the novel, there is no other way to interpret Gatsby. As we follow Nick through his “now-I-like-Gatsby; now-I-don't” narration, we are thrust, along with him, back and forth between opposing perceptions of the protagonist. Nick's opening evaluation of the character—in which he says that Gatsby “represents everything . . . [Nick] . . . scorns” and yet is “exempt from [Nick's negative] reaction” (6; ch. 1) to his Long Island friends—announces the paradoxical experience of Gatsby he will share with us as his narrative unfolds.

Nick's narrative creates an intricate pattern of reader sympathy for and criticism of Gatsby that would require an essay of its own to trace in detail, but a rough sketch of its contours should demonstrate the sense of indeterminacy this pattern promotes. After the paradoxical evaluation of Gatsby with which Nick introduces us to the character, noted above, the narrator takes us back to the beginning of his tale, or before the beginning, to a description of his own “prominent, well-to-do” (7; ch. 1) family in Wisconsin and his decision to go to New York and learn the bond business. Throughout the rest of chapter 1 the only feeling about Gatsby Nick shares with us is his curiosity about the man, which is revealed through his description of “Gatsby's mansion. Or rather, as [Nick] didn't know Mr. Gatsby, it was a mansion inhabited by a gentleman of that name” (9; ch. 1). In other words, we travel back in time with Nick and experience events as he experienced them unfolding in time. The “Gatsby” introduced on page 6 has become “Mr. Gatsby” on page 9 because Nick has taken us back to a point in time when he hadn't yet met the protagonist.

Our curiosity is raised when Jordan mentions Gatsby, a man she met at West Egg, and Daisy demands, “Gatsby? . . . What Gatsby?” (15; ch. 1), but Nick and the reader don't meet Gatsby until the middle of chapter 3, when the narrator

attends one of Gatsby's parties. Having excited our curiosity, and revealed his own, by his minute observations of what he can see of Gatsby's parties from the porch of his cottage, Nick's initial meeting with his neighbor initiates the pattern of conflicting interpretations of Gatsby that will characterize his experience, and ours, throughout the novel. Gatsby introduces himself to Nick, then smiles, and the narrator is charmed. Nick says,

It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it. . . . [I]t had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. Precisely at that point it vanished—and I was looking at an elegant young rough-neck . . . whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. (53; ch. 3)

In other words, Nick's positive impression that Gatsby is a charming gentleman is immediately followed by a negative impression that Gatsby is a phony.

This pattern is repeated until Nick leaves the party at the end of the evening. The narrator, catching a glimpse of Gatsby "standing alone on the marble steps," says, "I could see nothing sinister about him" (54; ch. 3). But in the very next sentence Nick wonders if Gatsby's innocent appearance is an illusion produced by "the fact that [Gatsby] was [the only one] not drinking . . . for it seemed to me that he grew more correct as the fraternal hilarity increased" (54; ch. 3). Again, as Nick bids Gatsby goodnight he implies that his host is insincere. Gatsby calls Nick "old sport," but "[t]he familiar expression held no more familiarity than the hand which reassuringly brushed my shoulder" (57; ch. 3). Then a few seconds later Gatsby smiles, and Nick likes him again—"suddenly there seemed to be a pleasant significance in having been among the last to go, as if he had desired it so all the time" (58; ch. 3)—and Gatsby's "Good night, old sport. . . . Good night" (58; ch. 3) feels warm and sincere. Finally, as Nick glances back at Gatsby from across the lawn as he heads home, he describes the protagonist in a way that underscores the ambiguity of his own response to him: "A sudden *emptiness* seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete *isolation* the figure of the host who stood on the porch, his hand up in a *formal gesture* of farewell" (60; ch. 3, my italics). Does this language emphasize Gatsby's coldness, which would decrease our sympathy for him, or his loneliness, which would increase it? Nick doesn't clarify his own attitude—perhaps he's not sure—so the reader is left, after a series of conflicting responses to Gatsby, to project his or her personal experience onto the protagonist.

Our next encounter with Gatsby occurs at the beginning of chapter 4, when the protagonist drives Nick to New York. During this scene, our attitude toward Gatsby is again shifted back and forth between positive and negative poles. Nick starts us off with the following account of his change in attitude toward Gatsby prior to their drive to New York, based on the half-dozen conversations he'd had with his neighbor during the month since they'd met:

[T]o my disappointment . . . he had little to say. So my first impression, that he was a person of some undefined consequence, had gradually faded and he had become simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house next door. (69; ch. 4)

Then, as Nick puts it, “came that disconcerting ride” (69; ch. 4). As Gatsby tells Nick the story about his wealthy family, “all dead now” (69; ch. 4), and his Oxford education, Nick says,

He looked at me sideways. . . . [And] [h]e hurried the phrase “educated at Oxford.” . . . And with this doubt his whole statement fell to pieces and I wondered if there wasn’t something a little sinister about him after all. (69; ch. 4)

Of course, Nick now believes nothing Gatsby says about his jewel collecting, “chiefly rubies” (70; ch. 4), big-game hunting, and painting, and only “[w]ith an effort” does Nick “manag[e] to restrain [his] incredulous laughter” (70; ch. 4). Gatsby’s war story, which he tells next, sounds just as exaggerated as the rest of his tale, and Nick feels as though he is “skimming hastily through a dozen magazines” (71; ch. 4). However, Gatsby then shows Nick a war medal with his name on it, and “[t]o [Nick’s] astonishment the thing had an authentic look” (71; ch. 4). When Gatsby produces a snapshot of himself with a group of fellow students at Oxford, Nick concludes, “Then it was all true” (71; ch. 4).

Nick’s belief in Gatsby is quickly submerged under his annoyance, however, when Gatsby says that Jordan Baker is going to make a request of Nick on Gatsby’s behalf: “I was sure the request would be something utterly fantastic and for a moment I was sorry I’d ever set foot upon his overpopulated lawn” (72; ch. 4). When Nick notes that Gatsby’s “correctness grew on him as we neared the city” (72; ch. 4), he seems to be implying again that Gatsby is a phony. Yet the scene ends with an incident that seems to leave Nick’s sympathies, and ours, again mired in ambiguity. When Gatsby is pulled over for speeding, he produces a piece of paper that not only gets him out of a ticket but also causes the officer who pulled him over to apologize. Gatsby explains, “I was able to do the commissioner a favor once, and he sends me a Christmas card every year” (73; ch. 4). While this incident certainly underscores Gatsby’s importance and therefore supports the story he just told Nick, how should we feel about the touch of corruption hinted at here? Nick’s response doesn’t help—“Even Gatsby could happen [in a place like New York] without any particular wonder” (73; ch. 4)—so we’re once more left on our own.

An analysis of the scenes that shape the reader’s evolving view of Gatsby through the rest of the novel reveals a similar pattern of opposing influences, as we see in the following summary of those scenes.

1. *Nick, Gatsby, and Wolfsheim have lunch* (73–79; ch. 4)—Our impression of Gatsby is shaped *negatively* due to Nick’s description of Gatsby’s close association with Wolfsheim, who is very negatively portrayed, and Nick’s suspicious comments about Gatsby.
2. *Jordan tells Nick about Gatsby and Daisy* (79–85; ch. 4)—Our impression of Gatsby is shaped *positively* due to Gatsby’s faithful devotion to Daisy, his fear of offending Jordan and Nick, and Nick’s sympathetic response to Gatsby’s plight.
3. *Nick and Gatsby arrange Gatsby’s reunion with Daisy* (86–88; ch. 5)—Our impression of Gatsby is shaped *negatively* due to Nick’s consistently cool responses to Gatsby’s attempts at friendliness, especially after Gatsby “obviously and tactlessly” (88; ch. 5) offers him a chance to make some easy money in exchange for arranging the reunion with Daisy.
4. *Gatsby and Daisy reunite* (88–94; ch. 5)—Our sympathy for Gatsby is shaped *positively* by Nick’s description of the protagonist’s total emotional investment in Daisy—his nervous apprehension before the meeting, his intense anxiety during the initial awkwardness with Daisy, and his overwhelming joy when he realizes she still loves him—and by Nick’s vicarious experience of the protagonist’s embarrassment and happiness.
5. *Nick and Gatsby wait for Daisy on Nick’s lawn* (95; ch. 5)—Our impression of Gatsby is shaped *negatively* by Nick’s catching Gatsby in an apparent lie about where he got the money to build his house and by Gatsby’s rude and defensive reply—“That’s my affair” (95; ch. 5)—when Nick asks him what business he’s in.
6. *Gatsby shows his house to Daisy and Nick* (96–102; ch. 5)—Our response to Gatsby is moved between *positive and negative* poles as Nick’s sympathetic description of Gatsby’s devotion to Daisy is interrupted in the middle by an ominous phone call that hints strongly at Gatsby’s hidden criminal life.
7. *Nick relates the real story of Gatsby’s youth* (104–7; ch. 6)—Our response to Gatsby is moved between *positive and negative* poles as Nick’s sympathetic description of Gatsby’s impoverished youth, boyhood dreams, hard work, and sobriety is interrupted twice by Nick’s observations that Gatsby’s dreams were in “the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty” (104; ch. 6) and that they inhabited a “universe of ineffable gaudiness” (105; ch. 6). At the end of the scene Nick says, “[Gatsby] told me all this very much later . . . when I had reached the point of believing everything and nothing about him” (107; ch. 6), thus reinforcing our uncertainty for some time to come.
8. *Tom and friends on horseback stop at Gatsby’s house* (107–10; ch. 6)—Our response to Gatsby is moved between *positive and negative* poles as Nick’s sympathetic description of Gatsby’s politeness in the face of his visitors’ rudeness is interrupted by his description of Gatsby’s “almost aggressiv[e]” attempts to push Tom into talking in order to learn more about him.

9. *Nick, Tom, and Daisy attend Gatsby's party* (110–18; ch. 6)—Our response to Gatsby is shaped *positively* by Nick's sympathetic descriptions of Gatsby's attentions to Daisy, by his angry defense of Gatsby against Tom's insinuations, and by his extremely poetic rendition of Gatsby's account of his early days with Daisy, though that rendition is somewhat undercut by Nick's *negative* reference to Gatsby's "appalling sentimentality" (118; ch. 6).
10. *Nick learns about Gatsby's new servants* (119–20; ch. 7)—Our response to Gatsby is *negatively* shaped by Nick's description of Gatsby's association with Wolfsheim's people and the protagonist's apparent failure to notice their sinister quality.
11. *Nick and Gatsby lunch with the Buchanans and Jordan* (121–28; ch. 7)—Our response to Gatsby is shaped *positively* by Nick's description of Gatsby's quiet good manners in the face of Tom's aggressiveness and Daisy's open displays of affection for her lover. This response is undercut somewhat at the end of the scene by Nick's *negative* observation, which hints at the protagonist's dark side, that "an undefinable expression . . . passed over Gatsby's face" (127) when Tom makes a veiled reference to Gatsby's criminal activities.
12. *Tom confronts Gatsby in the New York hotel suite* (133–42; ch. 7)—Our sympathy for Gatsby is shaped *positively* by Nick's description of Gatsby's honesty about his Oxford experience and his description of Gatsby's desperate and pathetic attempt to hold Daisy in the face of Tom's ruthlessness and her withdrawal.
13. *Nick meets Gatsby outside the Buchanans' house after Myrtle's death* (150–53; ch. 7)—Our response to Gatsby is moved *from the negative to the positive* by the change in Nick's behavior toward Gatsby after he learns that Daisy, not Gatsby, drove the hit-and-run car and Gatsby is taking the blame for her.
14. *Nick and Gatsby talk at Gatsby's house the morning after Myrtle's death* (154–62; ch. 8)—Our response to Gatsby is moved between *positive and negative* poles as Nick's sympathetic description of Gatsby's devotion to Daisy is interrupted by his statement that Gatsby "took" Daisy, "ravenously and unscrupulously" (156), under false pretenses.
15. *Nick makes Gatsby's funeral arrangements* (171–83; ch. 9)—Our response to Gatsby is moved several times between *positive and negative* poles as Nick's "feeling of . . . scornful solidarity" with Gatsby "against them all" (173) is repeatedly interrupted by reminders of the protagonist's criminal activities.
16. *Nick walks on Gatsby's beach the night before he heads back to Wisconsin* (189; ch. 9)—Our sympathy for Gatsby is *positively* shaped by Nick's poetic comparison of Gatsby's "wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock" (189) with the wonder inspired by the virgin American continent, the "fresh, green breast of the new world" (189).

Thus, while the text actively shapes the reader's response to Gatsby in each of these scenes, as we move through the tale we experience a significant degree of indeterminacy. For we gradually learn that the text will support two opposing interpretations of Gatsby: (1) Gatsby the criminal, who will hurt anyone and do anything to get what he wants, and (2) Gatsby the romantic hero, who has pulled himself out of poverty and devoted his life to Daisy as "to the following of a grail" (156; ch. 8). In other words, the novel gives us a protagonist who uses wholly corrupt means, including bootlegging and fraudulent bonds, to achieve pure ends—Gatsby's "incorruptible dream" (162; ch. 8) of winning Daisy and living the good life—and then asks us to decide if the ends justify the means. But the novel doesn't provide the kind of unequivocal evidence we need to answer the question.

A simple "no," the obvious "right" answer from an abstract moral perspective, does not adequately respond to the complexities of the question, given the wretched poverty of Gatsby's childhood and the novel's portrayal of the dumping ground Nick refers to as the "valley of ashes" (27; ch. 2) as the only alternative to the life lived by the rich and famous. Our perception of the contrast between wealth and poverty is reinforced throughout the novel by alternating descriptions of, on the one hand, the exciting world of Nick and his crowd and, on the other hand, the dreary world of the Wilsons, the McKees, Myrtle's sister Catherine, and such random characters as Gatsby's freeloading, vulgar party guests and the "poor young clerks who loitered in front of windows . . . in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moments of night and life" (62; ch. 3).

The simple conclusion that Gatsby's ends do not justify his means does not work for Nick either. But neither does the narrator simply conclude that Gatsby's ends do justify his means. As we have seen, it's through Nick that we learn about Gatsby's dark side: his criminal activities, his deception of Daisy, his invented identity, his association with Wolfsheim, and his insensitivity to the welfare of anyone but Daisy and himself. Yet it's Nick who is also Gatsby's chief defender, who experiences, for example, one of many "renewals of complete faith in him" (136; ch. 7) simply because Gatsby makes a small concession to reality by admitting that his Oxford experience was provided by a government arrangement for American soldiers after World War I. And it's Nick who concludes that Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch [of Nick's crowd] put together" (162; ch. 8). In fact, Nick's warm and frequent defense of the protagonist should, on the whole, tend to elicit our sympathy for Gatsby, even while the dark side of his characterization reminds us that Gatsby is not one of the good guys in the white hats. That is, without answering the question the novel poses, without suggesting that Gatsby's ends justify his means, Nick nevertheless sees Gatsby as the only person he met in the East who "turned out all right at the end" (6; ch. 1).

Why should Nick finally interpret Gatsby in such a one-sided manner, given the knowledge he has of him? The enthusiastic tone of Nick's frequent "renewals of complete faith" (136; ch. 7) in Gatsby suggests that, like so many other characters in the novel, Nick projects his own desires onto Gatsby. At the age of thirty, and still being financed by his father while he tries to figure out what he should do with himself, it is not surprising that Nick wants to believe life still holds promise because he is afraid that it doesn't. He fears that all he has to look forward to is, as he puts it, "a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair" (143; ch. 7). With one failed romance back home and one in New York, Nick wants to believe that the possibility of romance still exists. With his summer in New York—his latest in a series of adventures—having ended in disaster, he wants to believe in the possibility of fulfilled hope he sees in Gatsby: hope that a young man at loose ends can make the kind of outrageous financial success of himself that Gatsby has made, can fall so completely in love with a woman, and can feel so optimistic about the future. Indeed, as we see throughout the second half of the novel, Nick is so emotionally invested in Gatsby that, without hesitation and despite his own conservative upbringing, he facilitates Gatsby's adulterous affair with Daisy, Nick's own relative.

Nick's tendency to project his own desire into his interpretation of Gatsby seems unavoidable and feels natural given that his, and our, experience of the protagonist develops within a setting that is itself full of unanswered questions, contradictions, and multiple possible interpretations. The affective thrust of the novel as a whole thus invites us to project, like Nick, our own meanings onto the world of the novel in order to interpret it at all.

Even the briefest list of the text's indeterminacies would include the following unanswered questions, which my students frequently find disturbing. Why does Daisy marry Tom after receiving Gatsby's letter from Europe? As Gatsby returned to Louisville within three months of Daisy's wedding, didn't his letter tell her that she could expect him soon? Why is Daisy "so mad about her husband" (81; ch. 4) after only three months of marriage, given that she didn't want to marry him the night before the wedding? Given Tom's chronic infidelity, the couple's frequent relocations, and their apparent dissatisfaction with the marriage, what keeps Tom and Daisy together? What is Gatsby and Daisy's relationship like after their reunion? (Fitzgerald wrote that he, himself, "had no feeling about or knowledge of . . . the emotional relations between Gatsby and Daisy from the time of their reunion to the catastrophe" [*Letters* 341–42].) What's the real story of Nick's relationship with the young woman he left behind in his hometown? How do Nick and Jordan really feel about each other? What kind of person is Jordan? Given the novel's obvious rejection of Tom's sexist and racist attitudes, what are we to make of Nick's sexist and racist remarks, which the text offers without comment and seems to invite us to accept? (See, for example, Nick's remark in chapter 3,

page 63, that “[d]ishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply” and his reference in chapter 4, page 73, to three black characters in a limousine as “two bucks and a girl” at whom he “laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward [Gatsby and him] in haughty rivalry.”) Given the text’s unflattering portraits of the poor as well as the rich, is the novel anti-elitist or merely misanthropic? What are the “grotesque and fantastic conceits” that “haunted [Gatsby] in his bed at night” (105; ch. 6)? (Nick doesn’t tell us.) And which definition of *conceits* is operating here and elsewhere: “concepts,” “visions,” “affectations of style or speech,” or “self-flattering opinions”? What are we to make of the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, which hold such a prominent position in the novel’s imagery but could be taken to represent so many different ideas?

The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are, in fact, only one of many ambiguous images in a novel dense with vague, evocative descriptions that encourage readers to project their own meanings in interpreting them. For example, what is a “pale gold odor” or a “sparkling odor” (96; ch. 5)? What does it mean that a “gleam of hope” is “damp” (29; ch. 2)? What should we make of Gatsby’s “blue gardens” (43; ch. 3) or the hair that lies across Daisy’s cheek “like a dash of blue paint” (90; ch. 5)? How can Daisy’s voice, “struggl[ing] through the heat,” “moul[d] its senselessness into forms” (125; ch. 7), and what forms are thus produced? In addition, Nick’s descriptions often acknowledge their own inability to provide concrete, specific details by their frequent use of the words *indefinable*, *uncommunicable*, *unutterable*, *ineffable*, and *inexplicable*, an evocative diction that reaches the height of its ambiguity in such phrases as “[t]hat unfamiliar yet recognizable look was back again in Gatsby’s face” (141; ch. 7). If Nick can’t define, communicate, utter, or explain what he has in mind, then readers must imagine for themselves what he means, and such gaps in the text invite us to project our own experience and desires in order to make meaning.

That *The Great Gatsby* easily supports the many different theoretical readings contained in this textbook is a testimony to the novel’s indeterminacy. In short, there is so little determinate meaning in the novel that if we don’t project our own beliefs and desires onto the text, the only interpretation left us would be that *The Great Gatsby* portrays the indeterminacy of meaning in a morally ambiguous world. While I think that’s a useful interpretation of the novel, most readers, including myself, desire more closure than such an interpretation provides. It is interesting to note, in this context, a trend in critical response to Jay Gatsby. Despite the novel’s two-sided characterization of the title character, a significant proportion of critical response casts Gatsby as a romantic hero, as we see in the following examples. According to Marius Bewley, Gatsby is “all aspiration and goodness” (25); he’s “an heroic personification of the American romantic hero” (14) who represents “the energy of the spirit’s resistance” and “immunity to the final contamination” of “cheapness and vulgarity” (13). Jeffrey Hart agrees that

Gatsby is “a representative American hero” (34), and Charles C. Nash claims that “Emerson’s ‘Infinitude of the Private Man’ ” is “best represented by Jay Gatsby, for whom all things are possible” (23). Andrew Dillon believes Gatsby is imbued with a “sacred energy” (61), and Kent Cartwright says that Gatsby’s “dream . . . ennobles him” (229). For Tom Burnam, Gatsby “survives sound and whole in character, uncorrupted by the corruption which surrounded him” (105). Similarly, Rose Adrienne Gallo believes that Gatsby “maintained his innocence” to the end (43), or as André Le Vot puts it, Gatsby never loses his “fundamental integrity, his spiritual intactness” (144). Even when the protagonist’s darker side is acknowledged, it is excused. As Cartwright argues, “Gatsby can be both criminal and romantic hero because the book creates for him a visionary moral standard that transcends the conventional and that his life affirms” (232). Or as Andrew Dillon sums up what he sees as the protagonist’s merger of worldliness and spirituality, Gatsby is “a sensual saint” (50).⁵

Of course, Nick’s defense of Gatsby encourages readers to respond sympathetically to the protagonist. However, given the amount and kind of negative data about Gatsby that Nick himself provides, some additional factors probably influenced the response of those critics who see only the good in Gatsby. In other words, although Nick clearly wants us to exempt Gatsby, as he does, from our condemnation of Gatsby’s world, the narrator nevertheless provides us with more than enough data to problematize the sympathetic judgment of the protagonist he promotes. In fact, the critical controversy over whether or not Nick is a reliable narrator underscores this dimension of the novel’s indeterminacy.⁶

One possible explanation for a critical trend that ignores so much material in the novel, focusing only on the admirable elements in Gatsby’s characterization, is that the protagonist taps some personal belief or desire that many readers have in common and that encourages them to see Gatsby in a wholly positive light. And indeed, I found that most of the critics who idealize Gatsby also idealize what they see as America’s uncorrupted past, which they believe Gatsby represents. For these readers, Gatsby stands for a pristine America that was destroyed, as they believe he was, by the selfishness and vulgarity of people like Meyer Wolfsheim and Tom Buchanan.

Richard Chase, for example, sees Gatsby as part of “an earlier pastoral ideal,” in that he shares, with Natty Bumppo, Huck Finn, and Ishmael, an “ideal of innocence, escape, and the purely personal code of conduct” (301). Similarly, Marius Bewley argues that the “young dandy of the frontier, dreaming in the dawn and singing to the morning,” such as that described by Davy Crockett in 1836, “is a progenitor of Gatsby. It is because of such a traditional American ancestry that Gatsby’s romanticism transcends the limiting glamor of the Jazz Age” (128). Thus, Gatsby is seen as “the true heir of the American dream” (Bewley

128) before that dream was corrupted by the influence of the moral wasteland that continues to extend its borders farther into the core of American society. Indeed, one might argue that the American ideology of the “rugged individual”—variations of which include, among other types, the loner, the nonconformist, and the maverick—predispose many readers to see only the admirable side of Gatsby’s characterization.

Most of those critics who do not contrast the Jazz Age world of the novel with an earlier, pristine period of American history interpret Gatsby in nonidealized terms. Edwin Fussell, for example, believes that the novel represents Fitzgerald’s deliberate and scathing criticism of the American dream and of Jay Gatsby, the representative American. Neither Matthew Bruccoli nor A. E. Dyson idealizes Gatsby, and, like Fussell, they recognize that the protagonist does not transcend the corruption of the world he lives in: rather, he shares it. In other words, many critics seem to interpret Gatsby largely according to their own assumptions about America’s past. Perhaps the belief that America was once uncorrupted contributes to the vision of Gatsby as the representative of that pristine past, now gone forever. In any case, the degree to which the critics who idealize Gatsby completely ignore or actively excuse Gatsby’s darker side suggests that the projection of our own beliefs and desires, at least when powerfully invited by the text, is stronger than the correctives to interpretation the text provides.

The resistance of many critics to the correctives provided by the novel—the negative data about Gatsby—is mirrored in the text’s numerous references to reading materials that don’t accomplish anything, that remain unread or unfinished, that fail to impose their reality on their readers. For example, the books in Gatsby’s library are uncut, revealing that no one ever has read them. The magazine story Jordan reads to Tom Buchanan is unfinished, “to be continued in our very next issue” (22; ch. 1), and apparently doesn’t succeed in entertaining her as it is supposed to do, for she reads it in a “murmurous and uninflected” tone (22; ch. 1). The popular novel Nick reads while waiting for Tom and Myrtle to emerge from the bedroom of their apartment “didn’t make any sense” to him (34; ch. 2). Gatsby’s letter to Daisy from overseas, which was intended to prevent her marriage to Tom, fails its mission entirely and crumbles in her bath. Neither does Nick’s letter to Wolfsheim, entreating him to attend Gatsby’s funeral, achieve its purpose. Gatsby has a whole collection of newspaper clippings about the Buchanans despite which “he doesn’t know very much about Tom” (84; ch. 4). Nick has bought a whole set of books on banking to help him learn the bond business, but they do him no good: he admits to Gatsby that he’s not making much money (87; ch. 5), and he winds up quitting his job when he returns to Wisconsin at the end of the summer. Gatsby’s boyhood “schedule” for self-improvement, which he wrote at the back of his book on Hopalong Cassidy, a Western icon of the American “good guy,” implies a future dedicated to hard

work and clean living, yet Gatsby grew up to be a criminal. And ironically, the only text that does the job for which it is intended doesn't have any job to do: Tom is a bigot long before he reads *The Rise of the Coloured Empires*, so the book merely confirms the racist attitude he already has.

As these examples illustrate, the novel shows us what little power texts have to achieve their intended purposes. Even if texts do have meaning independent of readers, that meaning often cannot compete with the meanings we project. In a novel with the degree of indeterminacy we experience in *The Great Gatsby*, the power of readers' projections in the creation of meaning is especially foregrounded, both in the novel's thematic content and in the active reading experience the text promotes. Thus, Fitzgerald's novel illustrates a theory of reading-as-projection as it simultaneously invites us to project our beliefs and desires onto the text. And as a good deal of critical response to the novel suggests, this theory of reading, at least in terms of *The Great Gatsby*, seems quite accurate.

Questions for further practice: reader-response approaches to other literary works

The following questions are intended as models. They can help you use reader-response criticism to interpret the literary works to which they refer or other texts of your choice.

1. As the reader moves through each of the five sections of Kate Chopin's "The Storm" (1898), what reading experience is produced by the story's indeterminacy (for example, actions, characters, and images that are not clearly explained or that could have multiple meanings)? How is this reading experience reflected in the story's thematic content (for example, characters "reading," or decoding, other characters or situations)?
2. What does a line-by-line analysis of Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" (1975), or any other poem you would like to use, reveal about the ways in which the poem structures the reader's response as an event that occurs in time?
3. What does the history of critical response to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) reveal about the interpretive communities that have analyzed the novel? You might, for example, differentiate and analyze interpretive communities by determining the interpretive strategies used, the assumptions on which those strategies were based, and the readings that were thereby produced.
4. Using a narrative with a strong focus on issues of gender, race, and/or socio-economic class—for example, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970)—collect a series of brief response statements from your students (or classmates or