

and contempt. And as we have seen, conflicting associations are also evoked by the words *magic*, *elves*, and *hunters*. Perhaps, then, our deconstruction of “Mending Wall” should make us reconsider other binary oppositions that inform our culture, such as masculine/feminine, individual/group, and objective/subjective.

As this reading of “Mending Wall” illustrates, deconstruction does not try to resolve the thematic tensions in literary texts into some stable, unified interpretation, but rather tries to sustain those tensions in order to learn from them. That a literary work has conflicting ideological projects that are not absorbed in some overarching purpose or theme is not considered a flaw, as it was for New Criticism, but a necessary product of the instability and ideological conflict inherent in language, and they are a product that can enrich our experience of the text. This is a vision of art as a seething cauldron of meanings in flux. As a dynamic entity tied to both the culture that produced it and the culture that interprets it, art becomes a vehicle for understanding our culture, our history, our language, and ourselves.

It is important to remember that all writing (or, more broadly, all communication), including our deconstruction of a literary text, continually deconstructs itself, continually disseminates meanings. In other words, strictly speaking, we do not deconstruct a text; we show how the text deconstructs itself. The process just outlined, then, helps us to observe how “Mending Wall” deconstructs itself and to use our observations to learn about the ideological operations of language. But we must remember that the meanings we derived from our analysis of the poem constitute only a “moment” in the text’s dissemination of meanings, which it will continue to disseminate as long as the poem is read.

### **Some questions deconstructive critics ask about literary texts**

The following two questions summarize the two deconstructive approaches discussed above.

1. How can we use the various conflicting interpretations a text produces (the “play of meanings”) or find the various ways in which the text doesn’t answer the questions it seems to answer, to demonstrate the instability of language and the undecidability of meaning? (Remember that deconstruction uses the word *undecidability* in a special way. See page 259.)
2. What ideology does the text seem to promote—what is its main theme—and how does conflicting evidence in the text show the limitations of that ideology? We can usually discover a text’s overt ideological project by finding the binary opposition(s) that structure the text’s main theme(s).

Depending on the literary text in question, we might ask one or both of these questions. Or we might come up with a useful way of deconstructing the text not listed here. These are just two starting points to get us thinking about literary texts in productive deconstructive ways. Keep in mind that not all deconstructive critics will interpret the same work in the same way, even if they focus on the same ideological projects in the text. As in every field, even expert practitioners disagree. Our goal is to use deconstruction to help enrich our reading of literary texts, to help us see some important ideas they illustrate that we might not have seen so clearly or so deeply without deconstruction, and to help us see the ways in which language blinds us to the ideologies it embodies.

The following deconstructive reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is offered as an example of what a deconstruction of that novel might yield. It is important to note that a brief deconstructive reading of the novel has already been presented in the chapter on Marxist criticism. The Marxist reading of *The Great Gatsby*, you may recall, had two components. First, it showed the ways in which the text offers a powerful critique of capitalist ideology; then it showed the ways in which that critique is undermined by the text's own fascination with the capitalist world it condemns. The second component of this reading is a deconstruction of the first because it draws on elements in the novel to show the limitations of the text's own anticapitalist ideology. Thus, as we noted earlier, because deconstruction helps us understand the hidden operations of ideology, it can be a useful tool for any critic interested in examining the oppressive role ideology can play in our lives. In fact, Marxist and feminist critics had often used deconstructive principles in their analyses of literature and culture before those principles were developed as part of a theory of language and called *deconstruction*, and they still use them today.

In the deconstruction of *The Great Gatsby* that follows, I will argue that the novel's overt ideological project—the condemnation of American decadence in the 1920s, which replaced forever the wholesome innocence of a simpler time—is undermined by the text's own ambivalence toward the binary oppositions on which that ideological project rests: past/present, innocence/decadence, and West/East. This ambivalence finds its most conflicted expression in the characterization of Jay Gatsby, the romantic embodiment of the novel's covert fascination with the modern world it condemns. Although this deconstructive reading of the novel is much broader than the Marxist deconstruction described above, their shared focus on American decadence gives them, as we shall see, some elements in common.

**“. . . the thrilling, returning trains of my youth . . .”:  
a deconstructive reading of *The Great Gatsby***

Toward the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), narrator Nick Carraway, thoroughly disillusioned by his experience in the East, reminisces about his youth in Wisconsin:

One of my most vivid memories is of coming back west from prep school and later from college at Christmas time. Those who went farther than Chicago would gather in the old dim Union Station at six o'clock of a December evening. . . .

When we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air. We drew in deep breaths of it . . . unutterably aware of our identity with this country. . . .

That's my middle-west . . . the thrilling, returning trains of my youth and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name. (184; ch. 9)

Such nostalgia for the past emerges in various ways throughout the novel and lends emotional force to what I will argue is the text's most pervasive and overt ideological project: the condemnation of American decadence in the 1920s, which replaced forever the wholesome innocence of a simpler time. The grotesque portrayal of the modern world, the painful disillusionment of two hopeful young men—Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby—as they are initiated into the harsh realities of that world, and the nostalgic representations of an idealized past create a novel that deeply mourns the passing of America's innocence during the decade following the end of World War I. As we shall see, however, this belief in an idealized past corrupted by the decadence of the present is, in *The Great Gatsby*, an unstable ideological project. For it is deconstructed by the text's own ambivalence toward the binary oppositions on which that project rests—past/present, innocence/decadence, and West/East—an ambivalence that finds its most conflicted expression in the characterization of Jay Gatsby, the romantic embodiment of the novel's covert fascination with the modern world it condemns.

There is little to redeem the modern world portrayed in *The Great Gatsby*. It's a world run by men like Tom Buchanan and Meyer Wolfsheim, and despite their positions on opposite sides of the law, both characters are predators consumed by self-interest, capable of rationalizing their way around any ethical obstacle

to get what they want. It's an empty world where selfishness, drunkenness, and vulgarity abound, where the graceful social art of dancing has become "old men pushing young girls backward in eternal graceless circles" and "superior couples holding each other tortuously, fashionably, and keeping in the corners" (51; ch. 3). Unlike life in the Wisconsin of Nick's youth, there is no sense of permanence or stability. The Buchanans are forever "drift[ing] here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together" (10; ch. 1). Jordan is always on the move among hotels, clubs, and other people's homes. And even George Wilson, with the scant means he has at his disposal, thinks he can solve his problems by pulling up stakes and moving to the West. Anonymity and isolation are the rule rather than the exception. None of the characters has close, lasting friendships, and the alienation of humanity seems to be summed up in the "poor young clerks" Nick sees on the streets of New York City, "who loitered in front of windows waiting until it was time for a solitary restaurant dinner—young clerks in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moments of night and life" (62; ch. 3).

Furthermore, the superficial values that put the pursuit of social status and good times above every other consideration are found among every group portrayed in the novel, regardless of the class, gender, or race of its members. The middle-class and working-class characters—such as the McKees, Myrtle Wilson, Myrtle's sister Catherine, and Gatsby's menagerie of party guests—are as concerned with social status and as hungry for amusement as the wealthy Buchanans. The female characters who attend Gatsby's soirées are as shallow, selfish, and drunken as the male partygoers, if not more so. And the black characters Nick sees one day on his way to New York, the only black characters in the novel, are as superficial and status-conscious as the white characters: from the back seat of their chauffeured limousine, they roll their eyes "in haughty rivalry" (73; ch. 4) toward the luxury car carrying Gatsby and Nick. The only characters who don't seem to exhibit these behaviors, George Wilson and Michaelis, the man who owns the restaurant next to Wilson's garage, are apparently too busy or too poor for such concerns: their energy is devoted to surviving the hopeless poverty of the "valley of ashes" (27; ch. 2), a location that is itself an indictment of the culture that produced it. Indeed, one could say that the "valley of ashes" is a metaphor for the spiritual poverty of the modern world:

a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally . . . of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. (27; ch. 2)

Nick Carraway, the narrator and apparent moral center of the novel, enters this corrupt world with all the innocent blindness that youthful vitality and optimism can create, oblivious, at first, to the "foul dust" (6; ch. 1) and "abortive sorrows" (7; ch. 1) that are the inevitable products of such a world. In the

world in which Nick grew up, fathers gave sons advice about “the fundamental decencies” (6; ch. 1); sons graduated from Yale just as their fathers had before them; young men were considered engaged to be married if they had been seen in the company of the same young woman too often; and no one could have imagined that “one man” could fix the World Series, as Meyer Wolfsheim did, “with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe” (78; ch. 4). It is early summer in 1922 as Nick arrives at his rented cottage in West Egg to begin a new career and a new life, and we see his enthusiasm in his description of his new neighborhood, with its “great bursts of leaves growing on the trees . . . and so much fine health to be pulled down out of the young breath-giving air” (8; ch. 1). Even New York City, where Nick works as a bond salesman, seems young and virginal to his eager eyes: “The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the *first* time, in its *first* wild *promise* all the *mystery* and *beauty* in the world” (73; ch. 4, my italics).

By the end of the summer, however, Nick has turned thirty and feels he has nothing to look forward to but “a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair” (143; ch. 7). He has discovered that the Buchanans and their lot are “a rotten crowd” (162), and he has “had enough of all of them” (150; ch. 7). Thus, after spending a single summer in the East, Nick prepares, as the novel closes, to return once again to the Midwest, longing for the order and predictability of the life he knew there, sick of the spiritual bankruptcy of life in the modern world. As he tells us at the beginning of the novel, in a retrospective prologue to his narrative, “When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart” (6; ch. 1). And to complete the progression from Nick’s youthful optimism to disillusionment, the novel ends in the autumn of that same year, “when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry stiff on the line” (185; ch. 9): the time of year when nature’s decay underscores the spiritual exhaustion that results from Nick’s sojourn in the East.

Of course, Gatsby is part of the corrupt world Nick enters when he moves East, but “Gatsby . . . was exempt from [Nick’s] reaction” because, as the narrator observes, “Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams” that elicits Nick’s “unaffected scorn” (6; ch. 1). It is Gatsby’s quality as a romantic dreamer—his “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” and his “romantic readiness” (6; ch. 1)—that insulates him from the corrupt world in which he lives and, therefore, from Nick’s censure. Indeed, Gatsby has all the makings of a romantic hero, American style. His rags-to-riches success evokes the American romantic ideal of the self-made man, and even his boyhood “schedule” at the back of his Hopalong Cassidy book

recalls the self-improvement maxims of Benjamin Franklin, an icon of America's romantic past. Gatsby's status as a war hero increases his value as a romantic symbol as does the fact that his meteoric financial rise was accomplished to win the woman of his dreams. His boyish good looks, his quiet, gentlemanly manners, and his flawless grooming accentuate his youth and innocence. Finally, his absolute devotion to Daisy, epitomized in the idealized image of the young lover "stretch[ing] out his arms" (25; ch. 1) toward the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, "trembling" (26; ch. 1), completes the romantic incarnation.

Unfortunately, Gatsby's unique romantic qualities, which echo the chivalry of ages past, ill suit him to survive the shallow vulgarity of the time in which he lives. Indeed, it is the empty values of the modern world, embodied in Tom and Daisy Buchanan, that crush Gatsby: when Daisy abandons him during his confrontation with Tom at the hotel in New York, "drawing further and further into herself" (142; ch. 7), Gatsby "br[eaks] like glass against Tom's hard malice" (155; ch. 8). With his death, which is the direct result of his chivalrously taking the blame for Daisy's hit-and-run killing of Myrtle, the modern world loses forever the gift that Gatsby had brought to it: "an extraordinary gift for hope . . . such as [Nick] ha[s] never found in any other person and which it is not likely [he] shall find again" (6; ch. 1). Indeed, that Gatsby's "romantic readiness" and "gift for hope" can't survive in the modern world depicted in the novel is one of the text's severest indictments of that world.

Juxtaposed against the fast-paced, shallow decadence of the American 1920s are passages that evoke an idyllic past, passages that serve to remind us of what it is America has lost. One of the most effective is the passage quoted at the opening of this essay, the passage in which Nick reminisces about his youth in Wisconsin. Phrases such as "the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle" and "a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air" (184; ch. 9) evoke open spaces—clean, white, and shining—that invigorate not just the body but the spirit as well. "[T]he real snow" refers, of course, to the enormous quantity of clean, white snow that falls in Wisconsin and lasts all winter, as contrasted with the sooty snow that becomes slush under the wheels of New York traffic. But the phrase also reinforces the notion that life in the Midwest of Nick's youth was more real, more genuine, than the artificial atmosphere he associates with his adult life in the East. Certainly, life in the Wisconsin of Nick's youth was more stable and secure as well. For as this same passage indicates, "dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name" (184; ch. 9), which suggests a sense of permanence and personal connection among residents of the community that Nick doesn't find in the East.

This contrast between past and present, between innocence and decadence, between West and East, is heightened by the narrator's description of his dreams about the East, which immediately follows his recollection of Wisconsin winters:

Even when the East excited me most . . . it had always for me a quality of distortion. West Egg especially still figures in my more fantastic dreams. I see it as a night scene by El Greco: a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque, crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and a lustreless moon. In the foreground four solemn men in dress suits are walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a drunken woman in a white evening dress. Her hand, which dangles over the side, sparkles cold with jewels. Gravely the men turn in at a house—the wrong house. But no one knows the woman's name, and no one cares. (184–85; ch. 9)

The images of human alienation here—the hundred grotesque houses, the drunken woman, the men who deliver her to the wrong house because they don't know her name and don't care to know it—are reinforced by images of an alienated, exhausted nature that contrast sharply with Nick's description of the Midwest of his youth: unlike the clean, bracing, Wisconsin sky, the Eastern sky is "sullen" and "overhanging," and even the woman's cold jewels have more "sparkle" than the "lustreless" Eastern moon.

Other references to an idyllic past revolve around Daisy and Jordan's beautiful "white girlhood" (24; ch. 1) in Louisville, where, Nick imagines, Jordan "first learned to walk upon golf courses on clean, crisp mornings" (55; ch. 3). This is a romantic past where, Jordan recalls, she walked on "soft ground" in her "new plaid skirt . . . that blew a little in the wind" (79; ch. 4) and where Daisy was

by far the most popular of all the young girls. . . . She dressed in white and had a little white roadster, and all day long the telephone rang in her house and excited young officers from Camp Taylor demanded the privilege of monopolizing her that night. "Anyways for an hour!" (79; ch. 4)

This is a world in which young girls made bandages for the Red Cross and a handsome young officer named Jay Gatsby "looked at Daisy . . . in a way that every young girl wants to be looked at sometime" (80; ch. 4). This is a world of virginal romance: "clean, crisp mornings," "soft ground," new skirts, white dresses, white roadsters, ringing telephones, and handsome young officers. And the young Jay Gatsby was not immune to its charms:

There was a ripe mystery about [Daisy's house], a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors, and of romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender, but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year's shining motor cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered. (156; ch. 8)

Only such an idyllic past could produce the deed worthy of its romantic ambience: Gatsby's committing himself to Daisy as "to the following of a grail." (156; ch. 8)

Perhaps the most powerful passage that evokes an idyllic past forever vanished is the one that closes the novel. As Nick sits on the beach the evening before his return to Wisconsin, he muses on

the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (189; ch. 9)

In this passage, all the losses represented in the novel—the loss of values in modern America, the loss of a nation's innocence and vitality, the loss of Gatsby's dream—are associated with a loss of global historical magnitude: the original loss of a pristine American continent that was exploited, polluted, and destroyed by Europe's lust for more colonies and greater wealth.

Clearly, *The Great Gatsby* paints a grim picture of America in the 1920s. However, the novel's representation of this culture's decadence is undermined by the text's own ambivalence toward the binary oppositions on which this representation rests. As we have seen, the novel associates America's innocence, now vanished, with the youthful vitality of the past, especially as it is invoked by the text's descriptions of the West. In contrast, America's decadence is associated with the present-day setting of the novel—the modern world of the 1920s—and with the East, where Nick gets his first taste of the selfishness and superficiality that mark the decline in national values. If we examine the instability of these oppositions—past/present, innocence/decadence, and West/East—we will be able to see how the novel deconstructs its own ideological project.

The novel's evocation of an idyllic past in order to underscore, by contrast, the spiritual emptiness of modern America creates an unstable opposition between past and present because it undermines the text's own awareness that the past was not idyllic for everyone. Certainly, Jay Gatsby's past was not so. "His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people" (104; ch. 6), and his father tells Nick, "He told me I et like a hog once and I beat him for it" (182; ch. 9). In fact, Gatsby found his past so unacceptable that he reinvented it: he left home, changed his name from Jimmy Gatz, and "invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end" (104; ch. 6). As a penniless young lieutenant "he

let [Daisy] believe that he was a person from much the same strata as herself” (156; ch. 8), and he tells Nick, “My family all died and I came into a good deal of money. . . . After that I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe . . . collecting jewels . . . hunting big game, painting a little” (70; ch. 4). In this context, even Gatsby’s singular determination to “repeat the past” (116; ch. 6) is really a determination to escape the past. For the past he wants to repeat is his initial liaison with Daisy, which was built on an invented past. Thus, for the character who embodies the novel’s notion of the romantic past, the romantic past is, in reality, a tissue of lies.

Another problem with the opposition between past and present in *The Great Gatsby* is its link to the novel’s opposition of innocence and decadence, which is itself an unstable opposition. For example, although Nick is the novel’s chief spokesperson against the decadence of the age, he is very much attracted by it. Nick says,

I began to like New York, the racy adventurous feel of it at night and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye. I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that *in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove.* Sometimes, in my mind, I followed them to their apartments on the corners of hidden streets, and they turned and smiled back at me before they faded through a door into warm darkness. (61; ch. 3, my italics)

Although Nick doesn’t complete the thought, the italicized portion of the passage makes it clear that he imagines himself following these women into the “warm darkness”; their smiles are smiles of invitation. In other words, the “racy adventurous feel” of the city is produced, for him, by the infinity of illicit sexual possibilities it offers. This is not the Wisconsin of Nick’s youth, with its “interminable inquisitions which spared only the children and the very old” (185; ch. 9), and he’s very glad it isn’t.

A similar attraction to the decadence the novel condemns is revealed in the narrator’s attraction to Jordan Baker. For she is not the “great sportswoman” who would “never do anything that wasn’t all right” (76; ch. 4), as Gatsby believes. She’s a cheat and a liar, and Nick knows it. Although he dismisses her dishonest behavior as if it were not a serious flaw—“Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply” (63; ch. 3)—it’s her dishonesty that, in fact, attracts him because he believes it serves to mask a secret, illicit sexuality that he wants to experience: “I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young in order to keep that cool, insolent smile turned to the world and yet satisfy the demands of her hard, jaunty body” (63; ch. 3).

It's interesting to note in this context that Nick seems to have great difficulty leaving the scenes that epitomize the superficial values he condemns. For example, he's among the very last to leave both of the parties he attends at Gatsby's house. Even more puzzling, he doesn't seem to be able to extract himself from the drunken revel at Tom and Myrtle's apartment:

I wanted to get out and walk eastward toward the park through the soft twilight, but each time I tried to go I became entangled in some wild strident argument which pulled me back, as if with ropes, into my chair. (40; ch. 2)

Nick says that it's the "inexhaustible variety of life" that "simultaneously enchant[s] and repel[s]" him (40; ch. 2), but it seems to be the inexhaustible vulgarity of the modern world that, beneath his overt revulsion, fascinates him. And so we see him at the novel's close, once again the last to leave, lingering on the beach at West Egg long after Tom, Daisy, Jordan, and Gatsby are gone.

Another problem with *The Great Gatsby's* opposition of innocence and decadence is the concept of innocence itself. As the above discussion of Nick implies, he is fascinated by decadence because he is innocent—that is, inexperienced—and therefore hungry for knowledge of the world. Analogously, Nick falls prey, at least for a time, to the decadence he condemns because he is innocent—that is, ignorant—and doesn't understand the kind of moral danger that is confronting him. In other words, the concept of innocence, because it includes the concepts of inexperience and ignorance, has built into it, so to speak, a vulnerability to decadence that is almost sure to result in a fall. Thus, it is not unreasonable to say that innocence leads to decadence; in fact, it creates decadence where before there was none.

A particularly revealing problem with the novel's opposition of innocence and decadence is seen in the characterization of George Wilson. In many ways, he is the only truly innocent character in the story. He harms no one, he trusts everyone, and he is rather childlike in his simplicity. Unlike Nick, who is fascinated by his first encounter with decadence, George's first experience of it—in the form of his wife's infidelity—literally makes him ill: "He had discovered that Myrtle had some sort of life apart from him in another world, and the shock had made him physically sick" (130; ch. 7). Yet George's innocence is portrayed not as a positive quality in its own right but as an absence of qualities of any kind. Wilson has almost no personality at all. As Michaelis notices, "when [George] wasn't working, he sat on a chair in the doorway and stared at the people and the cars that passed along the road. When anyone spoke to him he invariably laughed in an agreeable, colorless way" (144; ch. 7). He didn't even have a friend, Michaelis learns without surprise: there wasn't even "enough of him for his wife" (167; ch. 8). Thus, in a novel that mourns the loss of innocence, innocence

is portrayed as ignorance, as the absence of qualities, as a kind of nothingness. And although decadence is overtly condemned by the narrator and by the novel's unsympathetic portrayals of decadent characters, the text seems to find decadence infinitely more interesting than innocence. Innocence is boring; decadence is not.

The thematic structure supported by the binary oppositions past/present and innocence/decadence is tied to a geographic structure that opposes West and East. As we have seen, the innocence of the past is associated with Nick's Wisconsin and the Louisville in which Daisy and Jordan grew up. And though Gatsby's youth in North Dakota and Minnesota was an unhappy time in his life, the novel nevertheless associates the West with the innocent dreams of seventeen-year-old Jimmy Gatz, who "loaf[ed] along the beach [of Lake Superior] . . . in a torn green jersey and a pair of canvas pants" (104; ch. 6) before he ever met Dan Cody or heard of Meyer Wolfsheim. In contrast, the decadence of the present is associated with the East, specifically with New York in the 1920s. However, the opposition between West and East in *The Great Gatsby* isn't entirely a matter of geography. For example, Chicago and Detroit are in the Midwest, yet the novel indicates that they share the decadence of New York. Neither is the opposition between West and East entirely that between countryside and city, for Nick's innocent youth, as well as the girlhoods of Daisy and Jordan, were passed in Midwestern cities.

The real distinction between West and East in the novel is the distinction between pristine nature—the "real snow" of Nick's Wisconsin and the "old island that flowered once for Dutch sailors"—and the corrupting effects of civilization. That is, regardless of the geography involved, the word *West* invokes, for Americans, untouched, uncorrupted nature. The word *East*, in contrast, is associated with old, corrupt societies. Therefore, the "old island" Nick refers to, though it is New York's Long Island, is associated with the word *West* not only because it is west of the European civilization that colonized it, but because when the Dutch sailors first arrived there, it was pristine.

In *The Great Gatsby*, however, nature, even at its most youthful, energetic, and magical, is inextricably bound to the corrupt civilization of modern America, and this tie between the two further deconstructs the opposition between West and East. Nick associates nature with civilization, for example, in his opening description of early summer in West Egg. He compares the "great bursts of leaves growing on the trees" to the way "things grow in fast movies" (8; ch. 1). And in the very next sentence after he describes the "fine health to be pulled down out of the young breath-giving air," he speaks, in the same exalted tone, of the "shining secrets" he will learn about making his fortune from the "dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities" he bought, which "stood on [his]

shelf in red and gold like new money from the mint" (8; ch. 1). Similarly, the text can't separate the beauty and vitality of nature from the corrupt power of the wealthy who "own" it, as we see in the following description of the Buchanans' home:

The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run. (11; ch. 1)

Although the estate is on the edge of the sea, one of the most powerful natural forces on earth, nature, in this passage, is utterly domesticated. The wild grasses that normally border the ocean have been replaced by a lawn that "jump[s] over" objects like a trained dog, while vines adorn the house like jewelry. Yet the sensuous beauty of the lengthy description of the Buchanans' home, of which this passage is but a small part, suggests that the text is unaware of how images such as "the fresh grass outside . . . seemed to grow a little way into the house" (12; ch. 1) use the purity of nature to validate the decadent civilization it decorates. Indeed, the beauties of nature are often referred to as if they were manufactured by civilization, as when Nick, attending one of Gatsby's parties, says that "the premature moon [was] produced like the supper, no doubt, out of a caterer's basket" (47; ch. 3). And the blending of nature and civilization is complete when the products of civilization are described as if they were products of nature, as when we're told that "two windows" on the second floor of the Buchanans' house "*bloomed* with light among the vines" (149; ch. 7, my italics).

We see the instability of all three oppositions—past/present, innocence/decadence, and West/East—in the person of Dan Cody, "a product of the Nevada silver fields, of the Yukon, of every rush for metal since Seventy-five" (105; ch. 6), a "florid man with a hard empty face—the pioneer debauchee who during one phase of American life brought back to the eastern seaboard the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon" (106). In the person of Dan Cody, and the historical period he represents, we see the past, not the present, associated with decadence, and we see the West corrupting the East.

The most pervasive source of the novel's ambivalence toward its own ideological project, however, is its characterization of Jay Gatsby. As we have seen, Gatsby is portrayed as a romantic hero: a rebellious boy, an ambitious young roughneck, an idealistic dreamer, a devoted lover, a brave soldier, a lavish host. The physical descriptions of his person also generate an ambience of innocence, vitality, and beauty: "[T]here was something gorgeous about him" (6; ch. 1), with his "gorgeous pink rag of a suit" (162; ch. 8), "his tanned skin . . . drawn attractively tight on his face" (54; ch. 3), and his "rare smil[e] . . . with a quality of eternal reassurance in it" (52; ch. 3). He is like a romantic knight of ages past somehow

displaced in history, lost, with his “incorruptible dream” (162; ch. 8), in a time too superficial to appreciate him. Yet he is also the romantic embodiment of the modern world the novel condemns. That is, by romanticizing Gatsby, the novel also romanticizes the corruption that produced him, the corruption in which he willingly and successfully participates.

“I raised him up out of nothing, right out of the gutter” (179; ch. 9), says Meyer Wolfsheim, the man who fixed the 1919 World Series and the most sinister representative of the criminal world the novel offers. And through bootlegged liquor and fraudulent bonds, Gatsby made his extraordinary fortune in record time. Like the characters the novel condemns, Gatsby succeeds in a world of predators and prey. His illegal, and thus often imperfect, liquor is sold over the counter to anyone with the money to pay for it, and his false bonds are passed in small towns to unsuspecting investors. Some of the people who buy the liquor may become ill from it; some may die. All of the small investors who buy the fraudulent bonds will lose money that they probably can’t afford to lose. And when the inevitable mistakes are made and the law steps in, someone will have to be sacrificed, as Gatsby does when he sacrifices Walter Chase.

Even the protagonist’s desire for Daisy—which creates, for many readers, the most romantic image of him—is not free from the taint of his underworld view of life: when Gatsby first courted Daisy at her parents’ home in Louisville, “[h]e took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously—eventually he took Daisy” (156; ch. 8). Gatsby did not just make love to Daisy; he “took” her “ravenously and unscrupulously.” This language resonates strongly with his dubious association with Dan Cody before meeting Daisy and with his criminal activities subsequent to their initial affair. Gatsby’s “incorruptible dream” (162; ch. 8) is thus mired in the corruption he participated in to fulfill it.

The novel’s confusion of the opposing worlds Gatsby represents is largely responsible for the problematic nature of the closing passage we discussed earlier. Let’s look at it again. As Nick stands on the beach at West Egg for the last time, he tells us that he

became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (189; ch. 9)

Although Nick reminds us that the “fresh, green breast of the new world,” that setting “commensurate to [our] capacity for wonder,” “vanished” to make “way

for Gatsby's house"—that is, was obliterated by civilization—Nick also associates this “enchanted” dream of the Dutch sailors with Gatsby's dream, which Gatsby attempted to fulfill through the criminal means of the corrupt civilization of which he was a part. For Nick says, “[A]s I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock” (189; ch. 9). In other words, the text associates the “fresh, green breast of the new world” with the “green light at the end of Daisy's dock,” thus tying the romantic sublime of pristine nature to the corrupt civilization that replaced it—in the form of Gatsby—in a way that makes the two, emotionally if not logically, almost impossible to untangle. Furthermore, the “vanished trees,” the pristine past, “*pandered in whispers*” (my italics). To pander means to pimp, to sell one's services to help satisfy another's vices. Thus, pristine nature, the innocent past, cannot be separated in this passage from the civilization that exploits it, just as Jay Gatsby cannot be separated from the corrupt world that exploits and is exploited by him.

*The Great Gatsby* condemns the modern decadence that, the novel suggests, replaced the innocent America of the past, an America associated with the unspoiled West. But this ideological project is undermined by the inseparability in the text itself of past and present, innocence and decadence, and West and East. Nevertheless, the novel's nostalgia for a lost past, an innocent past, a happier past, is a nostalgia shared, at least according to Western literature of the last several hundred years, by people from every age. Although our deconstructive reading of *The Great Gatsby* surely will not eliminate an emotional investment of such long standing, it can help us understand the ideological limitations of that investment. In addition, our analysis of Fitzgerald's novel illustrates the validity of deconstruction's view of fiction. According to deconstruction, fiction, because it is made of language, embodies the ideologies of the culture that produces it. Fiction can therefore show us the various ways in which our ideologies operate to create our perceptions of the world. In other words, as our deconstructive reading of *The Great Gatsby* demonstrates, fiction doesn't represent the world as it really is; it represents the world as we perceive it to be. And for deconstruction, the world as we perceive it to be is the only world we know.

### **Questions for further practice: deconstructive approaches to other literary works**

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