The oceanic mind: a study of emotion in literary reading
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Chapter 8

Closure and reader epiphany

8.0 Introduction
The third part of this work is a case study of aspects of affective phenomena during literary reading at the close of a novel. It will be spread across four chapters, which can be broadly divided into scene setting, reader responses, analysis and discussion. Having already considered various affective inputs during general acts of literary reading in Part II, I will now look into what happens from a cognitive-embodied perspective when readers become emotive while reading the closing lines of a particular novel. I will concentrate on two important scene-setting concepts in this case study: closure and reader epiphany. In addition to my theoretical ideas, I shall also present and discuss the responses to five related questions from the NRQ. I will argue two things: first, that an analysis of how readers process literary texts in emotive situations may justifiably focus on the close of a novel, and second, that the term ‘reader epiphany’, as a literary theoretical concept, should be re-evaluated and redefined in cognitive stylistic analyses.

8.1 Some preliminaries
The literary passage that I have chosen for an in-depth analysis is the closing lines of The Great Gatsby (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The main discussion on this text will take place in the next chapter, but preliminary issues must be dealt with here. Four methodological questions immediately spring to mind about my choice of text and my thematic approach: (i) Why just one text? (ii) Why this particular text? (iii) Why closure as opposed to another passage from the book? And, perhaps the most important question, (iv) what does closure have to do with reader epiphany?

The question ‘why just one text?’ has a pragmatic answer. Ideally, I would have subjects read a multitude of texts both within and across genres, and in future work I aim to do just this. However, given that this topic will be dealt with within the limits of a single part of this thesis, I have decided to focus on just one text, and to elect for analytic depth, despite the obvious methodological shortcomings. The answer to the second question ‘why this particular text?’ is more complex. First, I wanted to select a work that is well known, relatively short and critically acclaimed, both for its story and its distinctive style. These constraints, I thought, would all prove to be beneficial for an experiment with real readers, inasmuch as they could read the novel in a single sitting. With regard to the chosen text, The Great Gatsby, the book’s fame is evident from the fact that it still sells over three hundred thousand copies every year (Ruth Prigozy vii). The novel is also well under two hundred pages; it could be called a novella and can quite comfortably be read in a single day. The book’s critical acclaim is obvious from the fact that it has been at the top of the Scribner best-sellers classic paperback list unchallenged since the 1960s. Tony Tanner has described it from a stylistic perspective as “the most perfectly crafted work of fiction to have come out of America” (iv), while The New Yorker has called it “one of the most scrupulously observed and beautifully written of American novels”. This stylistic praise is echoed by Matthew J. Bruccoli who has said of the novel that “Fitzgerald sought to convey, by means of language and style, the emotions associated with the actual and fictional settings” (193).

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1 “Publisher’s Afterward” to the novel by Charles Scribner III (205).

2 Written in 1940 on the occasion of Fitzgerald’s death (see Prigozy’s “Introduction”, xiii).
The third methodological question, ‘why closure, as opposed to another text fragment from the book?’, requires a more detailed response.

8.2 Closure

There are a number of reasons why I have decided to focus on the closing lines of a novel. The first has to do with redrafting. It is well known that several writers have been known to spend considerable time paying close attention to redrafting the closing lines of their novels. One of Fitzgerald’s contemporaries, Ernest Hemingway, once told an interviewer that he rewrote the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times before he was satisfied. When asked whether there was some technical problem hindering him, he replied that he was just trying to get the words right. Such authorial anecdotes are not uncommon as we saw in the previous part. Style is of central importance to closing lines, perhaps more so than in any other part of the text. This claim is also supported in the domain of literary instruction. When teaching budding creative writers how to become successful novelists, Josep Novakovich offers the following advice: “no matter what type of ending you use, you must end skilfully and gracefully because this is the reader’s last impression of your piece which will cast light on the whole piece retroactively” (171). It is prevalent too in the domain of classical rhetoric, for instance in Aristotle’s advice that speeches should be rounded off not just with recapitulation but also by “bringing the listener to emotions” (260). Quintilian would later echo this in his comments on the essential role of stylistic affect (*affectus*) at closure.

A second reason for focusing on closure, as opposed to any another part of a text, is that readers work towards the ending and, although the journey itself should be seen as the most valuable part of reading, it is the terminus that is all too often given primary importance. The closing lines occupy a highly foregrounded position in this respect. A third reason pertains to analytic pragmatism. When using real readers in experiments it is easy to let them read poems or very short stories and then comment on them. Novels, however, by their very length, pose something of a methodological challenge. When using novels in reader response experiments, I believe that the beginning or the ending of a story poses fewer contextualising problems than a piece of text taken from the middle of a novel might. Indeed, endings might be even more suitable for study than beginnings, since the closing lines of a novel often embody the content of the whole text that has gone before. Barbara Herrnstein Smith appears to lend support to this in *Poetic Closure*, when she claims that “the sense of conclusiveness in the last lines of a poem, like the finality of the last chords of a sonata, seems to confirm retrospectively, as if with a final stamp of approval, the valued qualities of the entire experience we have just sustained” (4). Although this comment pertains to poetry, I believe that the same can be said about closure in novels.

The notion of ‘control’ is also important to reading at the close of a novel. Readers have control at all times during the reading process but this somehow seems more important at closure,

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3 This interview is cited in Newman, Cusick & Tourette (163).

4 Readers, of course, are capable of contextualising any isolated piece of text and bringing meaning to it. This is what human beings do. But for my particular study, I consider it important that subjects taking part in the experiment ideally had a gist of the plot and character development that has gone before.

5 It may appear here that I acknowledge only one type of ending. This is not the case. There are many ways to end a novel. Newman, Cusick and Tourette, for example, list four main types (i) the protagonist gets what he/she wants and lives happily ever after, (ii) he/she does not get what he/she wants and lives unhappily ever after, (iii) he/she realises that the goal was not worth it, and (iv) he/she discovers that he/she was better off without it in the first place (55). In short, an ending can be happy or sad; it can involve death or birth or even rebirth; it may be ironic or surprising, linear or circular. Moreover, some endings even provide, or appear to provide, no resolution at all.
when readers may try to optimise the affective input in their reading experience. For example, when reading at closure, readers can choose to stop and prolong the enjoyment. In doing so, they opt to save the best bit for later as they might some candy or chocolate treat. Something similar is seen in Alberto Manguel’s reflections on his own reading behaviour when reaching the end of a novel: “I don’t think I can remember a greater comprehensive joy than that of coming to the last few pages and setting a book down, so that the end would not take place until at least tomorrow, and sinking back into my pillow with the sense of having actually stopped time” (151).

A further reason for choosing closure as an appropriate place for the analysis and testing of reader responses is that many readers seem to be in a more affective mood at the close of a novel. Herrnstein Smith suggests that “the sources of our gratification in closure probably lie in the most fundamental aspects of our psychological and physiological organization” (2-3). Interestingly, she appears to be alluding here to what is known these days as ‘embodiment’, which refers to the grounding of meaning in the nature and make-up of our human bodies, especially in the way we perceive and interact with the world around us: a process that is as cultural as it is biological. Cognitive psychologist and embodiment specialist Raymond Gibbs Jr. has stressed the importance of the cultural basis of embodiment, especially in metaphor, by claiming that “recognizing that what is cognitive and embodied is inherently cultural [and] should be a fundamental part of how we do our work as cognitive psychologists, linguists and anthropologists” (Gibbs and Steen 156). There are crucial embodied aspects to endings in novels. Readers know when a story is ending. Their sensual input, both visual and tactile, will tell them this. There is thus a subconscious, visual-somatic preparation for the final lines which are to come. As Novakovich points out, “in a novel it is clear when the end will occur — the book ends physically. You can’t hide it, unlike in movies, in theatre, in symphony” (164-5). There are stylistic reasons as well for looking more closely at closure. This is highlighted again by Herrnstein Smith when she argues that poetic convention and styles in the study of closure are important for many reasons. One of these is that formal and thematic elements that typically appear at closure may activate conventional past experiences of similar discourses. For example, a repeated final line in a poem can seem familiar to a Western reader because such repetitions are found in nursery rhymes which are more often than not experienced in childhood (30).

The closing lines of The Great Gatsby have not only been remarked upon for their stylistic eloquence, but for the embodied effects that they have on a reader too. Prigozy, for example, says of the final lines, “Nick’s soaring language at the end is the triumph of style” (xxxii), later adding that “the charged prose lifts it above the first-person narrative pattern of the rest of the book” (xxxiv). Comments like ‘soaring language’ and ‘charged prose’ seem to suggest that a reader might become emoted at the end of this novel by a combination of various inputs that will most certainly include the language and style of the piece, as well other mind-based affective-cognitive phenomena discussed in Part II. There is an underlying suggestion here that some kind of epiphany, a felt sense of movement and elevation, may take place in a reader. I will explore this intuition empirically later.

8.2.1 Some experimental aspects of closure
In the above section I have presented several arguments as to why closure is an appropriate location to consider emotive effects in literary readers. However, these theoretical conjectures and literary anecdotes will benefit from seeing what a group of actual readers think about reading at closure. In the following subsection I will seek to collect some very basic qualitative data from thirty-six readers pertaining to three questions on how they read at closure. The questions are concerned with (i) whether readers read more slowly at closure, (ii) whether readers go back to

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6 See also Gibbs’ recent work Embodiment and Cognitive Science for an expansion on this discussion.
re-read the final lines more slowly if they have read quickly at closure, and, (iii) whether language and style have an effect on their reading speed, be this during the first reading or a subsequent (more or less immediate) rereading of the closing lines.

With regard to the first question I conjecture that when readers are coming to the end of a novel they will read more slowly. There is evidence that slow reading is generally beneficial. A basic principle is that the more one likes a book the more likely one is to take one’s time with it. In modern discourse psychology there is a phenomenon known as ‘wrap-up’, first described by Just and Carpenter (1980), which implies a slowing or even pausing at sentential, clausal and discourse endings. P. David Pearson describes it as follows:

In the sentence wrap-up stage the reader attempts to resolve any inconsistencies within the sentence and to search for referents that have not been assigned. The ends of sentences indicate that one thought has ended and another is to begin. Thus the reader knows that this is an appropriate place to attempt integration. Readers may also do some wrap up at the ends of clauses or at the end of units longer than a sentence (215).

The notions of “attempting to resolve inconsistencies and integration” during the reading of the wrap-up stage of a syntactic unit suggests a slowing down, perhaps leading to a brief pause. This in turn supports the general idea of a reduced reading speed at sentence endings and at the end of larger stretches of text as Pearson alludes to. In a discussion on the diverse contradictions, ambiguities and inconsistencies that a reader can come across while reading, van den Broek et al. (1999) state with regard to their landscape model of reading:

Once an inconsistency is detected, the reader needs to restructure the mental representation to re-establish coherence. This process, similar to that observed during wrap-up at the end of a text or sentence, takes time and hence reading slows down (87).

Very little of this research pertains to reading literature. In fact, most of it is not even based on processing real discourse. It chooses instead to focus on artificial texts manufactured for use in eye-tracking experiments. This is unfortunate since ‘inconsistencies; and ‘ambiguities’ are the very essence of literary discourse with its frequent use of style figures and foregrounded syntax and lexis. Drawing on what has been mentioned above, and more specifically on my own literary reading experience, I believe that readers may very well slow down at the close of a much enjoyed novel as the final clauses and sentences draw to an end. As in wrap-up, we do this in order to re-establish coherence while mapping all the salient points from the story that has gone before. In order to investigate this further, I posed this question to the thirty-six subjects who took part in my literary reading experiment.

Initially, I wanted to discover two things. The first is embodied in my conjecture that readers slow down at closure when finishing a much-enjoyed novel. However, I realised that given that these were all younger and arguably relatively inexperienced readers, aged between seventeen and twenty-six, haste, their lack of control and the urge of instant gratification might play a role in their reading habits. This, in turn, might result in them doing the opposite of what I predicted: speeding headlong toward the immediate thrill of completion, instead of slowing down and purposely holding off emotive gratification. I therefore built a question into the NRQ, which asked subjects whether they went back after reading quickly at closure to reread the closing lines of a novel in a much slower and much more attentive fashion. Here, I conjectured that if subjects said that they speeded up at closure during an initial, much-enjoyed reading, a majority would admit to going back and rereading the last few paragraphs more slowly. These then were my two

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7 This position is proposed by the literary critic and essayist Anatole Broyard in “Rereading and Other Excesses” (3 March, 1985).
predictions relating to the first two of the three questions in this section. In the results below I have also included some of the open responses.

**NRQ – Q.2**  
*When you feel/realise that you are reaching the end of a much-enjoyed novel does your default reading speed tend to alter, i.e. does it tend to (a) slow down, (b) speed up, or (c) remain the same?*

**Initial responses:**  
- Slow down = 11  
- Speed up = 24  
- Remain the same = 1

These initial results clearly reject my first hypothesis. A few of the twenty-four subjects who chose the ‘speed up’ option chose to supply an additional comment. Many of these were broadly the same in content and can be represented by the response of one subject who said “I often get so excited and curious that I can’t stop until I am finished”. Some, however, rejected the idea out of hand, while others were more reflective. One subject said “Yes, I often speed up, but after I have finished the novel I then regret I didn’t slow down”. Although my first hypothesis was soundly rejected, comments written by six of the eleven subjects claimed that their reading speed slowed down at closure.

| 1. | When I like the novel I slow down at the end because I want to stay ‘in the story’ |
| 2. | My reading slows down because I feel if I slow down then there is less of a chance that I will miss something important, something meaningful. I also slow down to avoid having to reread |
| 3. | I tend to slow down tremendously and read a sentence word for word instead of scanning it |
| 4. | As I realise that I am coming to the end of a good novel I slow down so that I fully understand everything that is happening, so that I can absorb it completely and enjoy it till the final letter |
| 5. | I don’t like finishing a book I like, so I slow down my reading |
| 6. | When I read a favourite novel I always have to cry near the end and my thoughts wander off, slowing down the reading process |

My second hypothesis was that of those readers who had said they speeded up at closure a majority would admit to going back almost immediately and rereading the closing lines far more attentively. Below is the question from the NRQ and the results. For logical reasons, only the views of the twenty-four reader respondents who said that they speeded up at closure have been included here.

**NRQ. - Q. 3**  
*Once you have finished reading a much-enjoyed novel do you tend to go back and reread the final few pages or paragraphs?*

**Initial responses**  
- Yes = 12  
- No = 12

Once again, my prediction was not upheld. However, if one were to take the reading habits at closure of all thirty-six subjects into consideration, just one third did not read slowly at closure at all, while almost two-thirds did, either initially or almost immediately after finishing. Some of the above twelve subjects who admitted to re-reading chose to add additional comments.
1. I usually read it a couple of times to understand the message of the book. It always touches me when the end of a book is very good.

2. Because the ending of a much-loved novel is usually one of the most important aspects of a book, and when I speed up at the end I don’t really enjoy it. So I reread it.

3. I think it’s because there is always something about an ending which makes you think - A good end to a novel always leaves me with a kind of hangover, especially when the ending is surprising or difficult to deal with. Therefore I tend to reread certain parts in an attempt to fully understand it.

4. Yes, I reread it more carefully and definitely at a slower pace.

5. Slower. To enjoy the ‘ride’ once more.

6. When I go back I reread more concentrated. I try to let the last words of the book resonate a little longer so that I can remember them better.

7. I read slower. A more normal tempo. But I don’t reread all the last pages I just look for the most exciting passages.

8. Speed reading means I lose some detail. That’s why I go back; to ‘savour’.

9. I sometimes do this because I don’t want the book to be over. I then read slowly.

We see that while reading at closure some readers in this experiment are “touched”, “given hangovers”, “enjoy the ride”, “allow the book to resonate in them”, “go in search of exciting passages”, “go back in order to ‘savour’”, etc. It can be said therefore that although my two hypotheses were rejected at a quantitative level, there does seem to be some evidence in the open responses that some readers do adjust their reading speed at closure and read more attentively. Hence, it is not implausible that the closing lines of a novel can be considered to be a significant place to study literary reading behaviour.

The third and final question with regard to reading at closure asks whether the actual written style of closing lines can affect the reading speed and the way a person reads. To find out more I posed the following question:

**NRQ – Q.9**

*Do you think the way in which the closing lines of a novel are written, i.e. the style (e.g. lexical choices, syntax structure, clause structure, punctuation, use of metaphor, etc) can affect the way you read (i.e. your reading speed and the chunks of text you read in one go, as it were, i.e. words, clauses, sentences).*

I make three predictions here: one main one and two secondary ones. The first, pertaining to the main portion of the question, is that the way subjects read at closure is affected by the style of the written piece. The first secondary prediction pertains to reading speed and points back to the previous testing in this chapter. My conjecture here is that reading speed can be affected by style. The next secondary prediction points forwards to an analytic discussion that will take place in the following chapter. It asks whether or not readers read in ‘chunks’ of text in emotive reading situations at closure. Here I conjecture that some reading subjects will indeed admit to reading in specific chunks of text. As can be seen below, the result of my main prediction was upheld: namely that the way subjects read at closure is affected by the style of the written piece:

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<th>Initial responses</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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1. If the closing lines of a novel consist of long and complicated sentences, I believe this affects my reading experience. I might have to re-read one or two sentences or parts of sentences in order to get the full gist of what is being said.

2. Sure, the way something is written has everything to do with how it is read. An author can choose to make the ending a thoughtful piece of reading because the reader is likely to want to read and fully understand it anyway.

3. If the sentences are very long and the writer uses a lot of ‘difficult’ words then it takes me longer to read the sentences. If the sentences are relatively simple, I do not have to think about the grammar and it is easier for me to get ‘caught up’ in the book.

4. An author should make his closing lines more complicated so that reader will think about them more.

5. If the closing lines of a novel are completely out of style with the rest of the novel, it annoys me. I don’t like overly long, intricate sentences as closing lines because you have to go back and puzzle them out, which is not what I want in closing lines. They are in my opinion supposed to finish the narrative. I prefer short, one-liner kind of sentences, preferably with a sort of punch-line effect. If a novel ends in a very difficult kind of paragraph, it can make me actively dislike the novel, even if I had been enjoying it up to that moment.


7. I think it only influences your reading style if the writer changes his style dramatically from what he has used in the rest of the book. The ending is always special, but if it is the same style as the rest of the book I don’t know if you would notice it as much.

8. When an author uses dots like these …. It makes me think about it immediately. If he uses open sentences or incomplete sentences or questions, it has the same effect on me.

These responses show a variety of things with regard to the importance of style at closure. For instance, they include the idea that “ellipses dots make readers think about their possible meaning”, which echoes the significance of ellipsis in such literary contexts. They further allude to the idea that longer sentences seem to take longer to read and, therefore, can cause irritation in a reader, although sometimes they may make the reader “think more”. On the other hand, shorter sentences may cause readers “to get caught up in the book”, while yet another respondent likes “one-liner sentences” that can produce “punch-line effects”. Other respondents comment on the necessity of stylistic change at closure, a shifting down of a gear, as it were, or, as one respondent puts it, “the ending is always special, but if it is the same style as the rest of the book I don’t know if you would notice it as much”. Others, such as respondent 5, expresses contempt for such stylistic strategies, irrespective of whether they be conscious on the part of the author or not. Two others state “the way something is written has everything to do with how it is read” and “style at closure affects the readability of a book”. It is difficult to draw larger conclusions from just thirty-six subjects, but for many of these readers the way they read at closure do appear to be significantly affected by the style of the written piece.

My first lower-level prediction was that reading speed could be affected by style at closure. This question is similar to the ones that we dealt with earlier in this chapter. Its purpose here was twofold. First, to check the validity of those aforementioned results and second to prepare the subjects in the experiment for the second sub-prediction pertaining to engaged literary readers reading in ‘chunks’ of text at closure. Many of the above responses somehow deal in passing with my first sub-prediction. Some responses point to the significant role that an author’s language and style can play in closing lines by either speeding up or slowing down readers. I wish to focus on the latter here. It may very well be the case that some authors attempt to slow down their readers, through their style, either purposely or unwittingly; this in order to prompt readers.
to reach an appropriate reflective state to process literary discourse and/or to achieve a highly emoted state or even a state of reader epiphany.

1. Sentence structure, etc always affects how fast you read. If at the end of a novel the sentences are long, with lots of sub-clauses and metaphors, then you can’t read fast (even if you want to because you want to know how it ends). If I read fast, then I’ll miss half of what is being said (this is especially the case for me when I read in English, especially 19th century novels like Austen, Hardy, Gaskell) so I have to read slowly

2. If it’s complicated and more philosophical, you’ll have to read slower and will have to think about it more to process your thoughts about it

3. If the style is in such a way that it adds to the pleasure of reading, then the reading speed will change. It may speed up because the language is as fast flowing as the story itself, but it may also slow down because you may wish to absorb every single word of the final part of that book you loved so much

4. Short sentences, for example, make one read faster. I think a good author is someone who can direct readers like this in subliminal ways. So style can affect the way I read very much

5. When something is written in a certain way, especially at the end of a book, it really can affect your speed of reading and how much you remember at the end

6. I guess if a sentence is written fluently, i.e. there are no weird constructions that break up the sentence or force you to pause, it’s much easier to read. Perhaps if there are difficult metaphors in the closing lines you slow down because you need to concentrate even better. Punctuation is essential for reading speed. A long sentence, without punctuation, can make you stumble over words or a construction

7. Endings with action make me read faster whereas endings with contemplation make me read slower

8. Long sentences with many short words make me read fast, whereas short sentences can get me to stand still for a moment and think about their meaning

There is some consensus about the idea that style can alter reading speed, even if different readers think different things. My first sub-prediction therefore has received some tangible support. It should be noted, however, that it is not only style and language that help to alter the quality and tempo of the act of reading at closure. One of the respondents suggested that “the style adds to the pleasure of reading”. Hence, other aspects, likes themes, and cognitive input, as alluded to in responses 2 and 7, are important as well. Affective literary reading, especially at closure, therefore appears to depend on a selection of blended affective input as I set out in the previous section. My second sub-prediction was that at closure some readers read in chunks of text. This is a very difficult concept to pin down in reader-response testing for a variety of reasons ranging from methodology to its textual embedding in the original question and the need for the two previous predictions (one main and one sub prediction) in order to get to this one. Perhaps because of my, in hindsight, opaque formulation of what a chunk of discourse is, responses were few.

1. Sometimes when a writer uses a lot of stylistic devices in the closing lines it makes it difficult to really get the ending and understand what the conclusion is, so that makes my reading speed go down. It will also decrease the chunks of text I read in one go

2. Lots of adjectives can slow down my reading and make me reread certain phrases

3. I tend to read more slowly at the close of a novel, but I don’t stammer. I get the feeling I’m getting sucked into the end of the story

4. The end of a novel has extra meaning, it has to offer closure and also give a feeling of satisfaction. I always hold my breath when I am reading the end of a novel, and I like to see this tension reflected in the language that is used. The more elegant, direct or meaningful and heavy the ending is, the better. Punctuation is always something that can determine speed at which you read. Also metaphors that

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5. Metaphors and disrupting style at the end always pull me into the novel and affect how I read it

These responses give almost no evidence that because of a slow-down in reading speed at closure subjects would be inclined to read closing lines in textual ‘chunks’. Only the first respondent appears to say anything directly relevant when he/she notes that stylistic devices not only make his/her reading speed slow down but also ‘decrease’ the chunks of text he/she reads in one go. Further, there is respondent two who claims that adjectival clusters can cause him/her to slow down. Notwithstanding, it can be concluded that this prediction has been soundly rejected.

There were, however, some very interesting comments in these responses about the role that the body and bodily processes play during affective, slow reading at literary closure. Such comments are significant because they were not asked for. Some focused on the body and on movement. For example, respondent 3 speaks of reading more slowly at closure but not stuttering (“stammer”) in his/her reading patterns. Rather he/she gets the feeling of being “sucked into the end of the story”. Somewhat similarly, respondent 4 admits to always holding his/her breath when reading the end of a novel in order to see if the tension caused by not breathing is reflected in the language that is used. Furthermore, respondent 5 speaks of “being pulled along into a novel at closure” by such things as metaphor and deviant (“disrupting”) style. These last three responses seem to be touching on something that is real for them, even if they do not have the terminology to explain what is happening to them. What is described here can, I believe, be discussed and labelled in cognitive linguistic and cognitive stylistic terms. In particular, this kind of highly-emoted text processing at closure can be discussed in embodied image-schematic terms. In chapter ten I will attempt to show in depth how this may work.

To summarise, our discussion has suggested that (a) that language and style at closure are important for affecting some readers, and that some readers are aware of this, (b) that few readers appear to slow down initially at closure when reading a much-enjoyed novel, but several more appear to go back and reread slowly almost immediately if they had originally read quickly, and (c) that little evidence has been found in the responses to support the claim that engaged readers appear to read in ‘chunks’ of discourse at closure, but some respondents made intriguing comments about movement, the body and being “pulled in” that seem worth exploring in a later chapter.

I believe that a major reason for slowing down at the close of a much-enjoyed novel is not just to “savour” the language and style, as one subject claimed, although this is extremely important, but also to prepare for savouring their mind-fed cognitive ‘output’ too. In such situations at closure, all of the earlier mentioned affective inputs — LRI, the mood, the location, the themes, the style and language — come together in a confluence of affective, oceanic cognition to produce the kind of feeling that some readers can, and do, experience. Furthermore, this event is on the cusp of the ‘reading – post reading’ stages, where the dominance of language in affective literary discourse processing situations gives way to the ascendancy of the affective mind. Perhaps it is when this blend of affective cognitive inputs is at its optimum state that the embodied mind takes that one extra step that leads to what is known as reader epiphany, a sense of felt movement, which represents the last of my four methodological issues set out at the beginning of this chapter.

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8 It should not go unnoticed that the notion of holding one’s breath while reading at closure is something that has come up in diverse reader responses in the NRQ throughout this work. I will comment on this more in the final chapter of this work.
8.3 Reader epiphany

Epiphany has several meanings. First, in its biblical sense it refers to a Christian feast day, January 6th, which commemorates the manifestation of the new born Christ to the three Magi. The etymological root of the word means ‘showing’ or more figuratively ‘bringing to light’. The notion of vision is thus paramount. Moreover, there is a clear classical precursor in the Greek term *epiphaneia*, which was a recurring event involving the ancient gods swooping down from their mountain domains to appearing before mortal men and women. In this sense, although the focus is still on ‘showing’, there is movement and apparition involved. In the literary, character-based notion of the word, epiphany involves a sudden manifestation or perception of the essence or meaning of something. This is the sense of the term most frequently used in mainstream twentieth-century literary scholarship to refer to heightened character emotion. The most-cited example from English literature takes place in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-15) and concerns the protagonist Stephen Dedalus’s revelation while watching a young girl wade in the ocean surf (185-6). An equally famous yet much earlier episode is William Wordsworth’s reference to ‘spots of time’ in his *Prelude* (II. 258). Such character epiphanies are usually triggered by a seemingly trivial incident that is often linked in some way to childhood or the memory of childhood locations.

Attempts have been made in the last thirty years to theorise epiphany. For instance, Morris Beja introduced the two terms ‘incongruity’ and ‘insignificance’ in the early 1970s. The first of the essentially philosophical terms indicates that an epiphany is irrelevant to the object or incident that triggers it. The second term suggests that an epiphany is triggered by a trivial object or incident (16-17). More recently, Robert Langbaum has added to these two criteria another four, which appear to be more relevant to the kind of cognitive description of epiphany that I am attempting to explore. The first of these is *psychological association*, which asserts that “the epiphany is not an incursion of God from outside; it is a psychological phenomenon arising from a real sensuous experience, either present or recollected” (44). The second, *momentousness*, suggests that “the epiphany lasts only a moment, but leaves an enduring effect” (44). The third pertains to *suddenness*, which entails “a sudden change in external conditions cause[ing] a shift in sensuous perception that sensitizes the observer for epiphany” (44). The fourth, *fragmentation*, suggests that “the text never quite equals the epiphany” (44). This final category is also referred to as the “epiphanic leap” (44). Langbaum makes some interesting observations here by emphasising the embodied and emotive reality of epiphany and by suggesting that epiphany is about far more than just what happens to characters.

I am interested in what happens to readers while reading literature, not in characters in stories. Perhaps what I am alluding to is something that other readers of literature have experienced. Perhaps you might recall a past reading event similar to the one I will now describe. Imagine I am reading a novel that I am very much emotionally engaged with and I am in an optimum mood and in a comfortable location. Moreover, the themes I am reading about are to my liking and the style is well-crafted and engaging. Furthermore, the mental imagery that is being deployed in my mind to flesh out events in the novel bear echoes of my indistinct childhood home and/or primary caregivers. On top of this, I am approaching the end of the book which I promptly finish. If all this were the case, perhaps I might suddenly realise that I am experiencing something strange. I might feel that I have somehow ‘moved’ even though I have not. By the time I have gathered myself I may notice that I have stopped reading. Perhaps the book has fallen away and I might be staring blankly into space. Aspects of this imaginative reflection may seem vaguely familiar and maybe they do not. What I am referring to here is the basis of what I will describe in cognitive embodied terms in this case study as reader epiphany. It involves

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9 Of course from a purely etymological perspective the Greek word *phainein* has its emphasis on ‘to show’ / ‘to bring to light’ rather than on movement.
Langbaum’s notion of a momentary psychological phenomenon arising from sensuous experience and leaving a lasting effect; a felt shift in sensuous perception.

The following two accounts, the first pertaining to poetry and the second to prose, show what I am trying to describe. The first example involves the twentieth-century beat generation poet Allen Ginsberg reflecting on his reading of “Ah Sunflower” by William Blake back in the 1940s, and how he felt at the end of the poem. The second example involves an avid adult reader engaging with the closing lines of our object of study, *The Great Gatsby*. Below, Ginsberg reflects on how during his reading of the closing lines he suddenly went into some altered state.

My body suddenly felt light, and a sense of cosmic consciousness, vibrations, understanding, awe, and wonder and surprise. Kind of like the top of my head coming off, letting in the rest of the universe connected to my own brain (40).

I believe this to be an example of reader epiphany at poetic closure. If epiphanies owe part of their attraction to “felt aesthetic impact” (179), as Philipp Wolf has claimed, then physiological aspects of such an epiphany are clearly observable in Ginsberg’s account of ‘vibrations’ and ‘his body suddenly feeling light’. Reading is cognitive processing, as Johan Hoorn and many other scholars have claimed, but there is a tsunami of affective cognition at work here that defies the rationalising label of ‘pure cognitive processing’. Jay Losey suggests accordingly that “epiphany describes a powerfully felt moment which occurs non-rationally” (379). Clearly, this type of cognition goes even beyond the affective cognition discussed in the previous chapter. It warrants a categorisation of its own, to which I will return later.

A second example of what might be seen as a reader epiphany involves the reading of the closing lines of *The Great Gatsby*. Looking back on her life from the position of an established writer and scholar, Alice Kaplan shares an intimate literary reading experience:

> It was afternoon, and the sun was coming through an especially large window that looked out towards the mountains. I looked up towards the window and let the sun shine right in my eyes. The sunshine made me realize I was crying. I put the book on the table, spine down, to wipe away my tears (58).

Here, Kaplan recalls how she was emotionally overwhelmed. Similar accounts appeared in my NRQ data, even though these were not expert readers. For example, one subject said “it always touches me when the end of a book is very good”, while another, almost echoing Kaplan, reported: “when I read a favourite novel I always have to cry near the end and my thoughts wander off, slowing down the reading process”. Interestingly, Kaplan’s gaze gets diverted from the book: she is staring up at a window as the sun streams onto her face. She is crying, something that she does not immediately realise. She has quite plausibly undergone a reader epiphany at closure. She reflects here on a childhood reading experience, but she is apparently unable to let go of it as an adult.

I have briefly discussed two real experiences of what might be seen as reader epiphanies at closure experienced by what we might term expert readers. Of course, this phenomenon may also occur at any part of a novel or poem. However, the two examples show how its effect might be enhanced at closure: perhaps because the close, ending, conclusion, coda or peroration of novels is a discrete unit and readers know when they have arrived at that final lap in the affective marathon that is literary reading. Joyce Carol Oates has observed that resolution should signal “a tangible change of some sort; a distinct shift in consciousness, a deepening of insight” (7). She goes on to add that this change need not necessarily be purely, or primarily textual, rather it can

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10 From Ginsberg 1966. This example is employed by Gibbs in his 2002 study of emotion and metaphor (in Csábi and Zerkowitz 13-14). It is from Gibbs’s study that I first learned of this episode.
be confined to the reader’s consciousness, or perhaps more plausibly, a reader’s sub-conscious.¹¹ At this stage we might postulate that literary reading-induced epiphany may be caused in part by a state of heightened emotion that is channelled by several of the affective inputs I set out earlier in this work and perhaps especially by style. I will return to this idea later; indeed reader epiphany will be an enduring theme throughout the four chapters of this case study, especially within the context of reading the closing lines of The Great Gatsby.

In the section that follows I am interested in finding out (a) how readers feel when they have just finished reading a much-enjoyed novel, (b) whether specific memories were triggered, and (c) if so, what the content of those specific memories was. Sections a and b make up question four of the NRQ, while section c pertains to question five. In relation to these I expect (i) that readers will look back and recall intense emotion at such post-reading moments, (ii) that specific memories are triggered, and (iii) that these memories will relate primarily to LRI and themes, including childhood, the childhood home, a primary caregiver, distance, death and the notion of the incommunicable.

**NRQ - Q. 4a**  *Try to recall the moment when you had just finished reading a much-loved novel. Can you remember the feeling at that moment? If so, can you say something about that feeling?*

My prediction was that readers would look back and recall intense emotion at post-reading moments, just as Alice Kaplan did. Astonishingly, all thirty-six subjects produced a written response, something that had not happened before in the NRQ experiment. Several subjects made short references to the kinds of emotions they remember having felt at the close of a much-enjoyed novel. These included happy, sad, disappointed, satisfied, baffled, tearful, reflective, overwhelmed and empty. Broadly speaking, these responses can be summed up under the heading ‘sad but satisfied’: sad at having finished the novel but satisfied for having read it. There were more detailed responses as well, which are listed below:

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<th>Response</th>
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<td>1. I felt a sense of dread the novel was over because I now had to find a new one</td>
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<td>2. I was really sad – a mood that could last for a couple of days actually</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. When I finish one of my most-enjoyed novels I always feel strange. I always wait a moment, close my eyes and think of the meaning of it. It feels like having a secret that nobody knows about</td>
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<td>4. I feel content and usually stay seated for a time afterwards. I think about the book but also other things</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. It was like I was still living in the story. I usually have a great feeling of satisfaction</td>
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<td>6. I am often in an accomplished mood. I feel kind of sad, but also content. The emotions I feel are strong, but I don’t know how exactly</td>
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<td>7. I felt the same emotion that the last few sentence contained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I felt happy about what had happened, and happy about myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. It is sort of coming out of a novel and back into reality. It’s a feeling of having to redefine myself with the new experience of the book</td>
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Interestingly, here we come across at least one response that appears to lend support to my claim in the previous part that literary reading involves ‘four confluvial stages’. Respondent 5, who is still “living in the story” after he/she has finished reading, is in a post-reading phase that might continue at a lower level of intensity into the non-reading stage and form intertextual material for deployment in new reading experiences.

¹¹ It should be noted that in her discussion her emphasis is on the short story.
Other responses were emotive in a philosophical sense, which suggests that the ending of literary texts can be concerned with far more than mere emotional gratification:

| 10. | Peaceful, with a clear mind, feeling good about what I had read and contemplating the content of the story |
| 11. | I felt like I had understood the world |
| 12. | When I finish a novel I always reflect on life in general. It gives me a positive feeling and also enriches my inner life |
| 13. | I felt as if I had reached a higher level of understanding |

The most interesting responses for this experiment were, however, those that clearly suggested heightened emotion combined with epiphanic aspects:

| 14. | Quite excited. Climactic (in the reading sense). Just like waking from a vivid dream or coming off a roller-coaster |
| 15. | Very emotional. Disappointed and euphoric at the same time. But also calm and focused (in a Zen sort of way) - taking it slow |
| 16. | I felt a sort of release |
| 17. | Thrilled. Heightened attention. Intense experiences and excited expectation |
| 18. | Excited, euphoric - Somehow I am still reading in my mind. |

These responses and references to “reaching a higher level”, “climactic”, “euphoric”, “feeling a sort of release” and “intense experiences” are all quite intriguing and will be discussed later, when I reflect on my own epiphanic reading experiences.12

The second part of question four is presented below. My predictions were that a majority would answer ‘yes’, and that specific memories would indeed be triggered. The results were as follows:

| NRQ – Q.4b | Were any specific memories triggered by this reading experience? |
| Initial responses | Yes | 18 |
| | No | 18 |

This exact split rejects my hypothesis. I cannot explain why 50% of these subjects said that specific memories were not triggered by this reading experience since memories are almost always used to give a sense of the visual to literary reading experiences. In hindsight, the word ‘specific’ may have been too constraining and too confusing. Perhaps, had I omitted it, more subjects might have been prepared to admit to experiencing memories, even of the type I was hoping to be able to record. The third and final question therefore, which is question five in the NRQ is only directed at the eighteen subjects who answered ‘yes’ to the above question:

| NRQ – Q.5 | If you have answered ‘yes’ to the above question (4b), could you please add some detail. (For example, did these memories pertain to a specific |

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12 In the original version of the NRQ I designed a question (number 7) asking directly about experiencing reading epiphany. In hindsight, I decided that my wording was too leading for the answers to be of any real benefit for my study. For this reason, they have been omitted from this thesis.
My prediction was that the specific memories recalled would show some overlap with my LRI claims from chapter three and the themes I described in chapter five.\footnote{Reflecting much later on the wording of the supporting sentence in parentheses, I find it potentially leading, even if I have attempted to keep things relatively vague.} There were eleven detailed responses from the eighteen who answered affirmatively.

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<td>1.</td>
<td>It was a bit of a blend. Some memories were concerned with a specific location, but also with my friends and a specific event was taking place. We were saying goodbye</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Some novels remind me of summer and being on holiday like earlier. The smell of the grass and the water is very intense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>It reminded me of myself, when I was young (8-12 years old).</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>The memories are blends of special persons and special events from my past</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I just read a novel about Jewish boys and it made me think of my childhood. I am not Jewish though</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Things you recognise, like relationships. Also descriptions of places I have been, locations that I remember. Sometimes my attention goes straight to that place instead of staying with the novel. That happens at the end of a novel but I am not sure that this is the only place it happens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>The novel I read seemed to describe very graphically a number of existing locations and buildings that I have visited. These memories were triggered quite extensively as well</td>
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On the whole these seven responses provide adequate examples of the LRI and themes I predicted: childhood, locations (annual holiday and closer to home), special persons from one’s past, etc. Response six is very rich in that it shows how remembrances of childhood locations can flesh out a reading experience, overriding the imagery and detail being prescribed by the words in the text, just as happened to Stevenson’s marooned Virgil reader discussed in chapter three. While these seven responses were rich, others tended to be more general.

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<td>8.</td>
<td>This is quite hard to remember but it reminded me of a mood I was in during a specific period of my life. I would like to tell you more about this but I just can’t remember</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>It made me think of my boyfriend. Of times when I had not quite understood why he did certain things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Any novel will trigger memories at the end and I tend to identify with (at least some) of the (main) characters. These memories are most often just flashes, along the lines of ‘hey, that happened to me’ or ‘boy, do I know how he/she feels’ or sometimes ‘geez, is the author way off here’. It depends very much on the novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>I read a book about London recently (Hawksmoor) and it reminded me of when I was there on holiday</td>
</tr>
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Perhaps it is wise to conclude that the data is mixed: some responses were exceptionally supportive of my overall predictions, while others were clearly not. Up until now I have presented reader epiphany mainly within a literary context. However, I need to introduce associated neurobiological, cognitive, psychoanalytic and linguistic aspects of epiphany-like phenomena in order for me to be able to draw links later.
8.4 Epiphany in the cognitive age

It is one of the aims of this case study to take the literary notion of reader epiphany and ground it in a more cognitive-affective embodied framework. This shift from the epiphany of character events to that of reading phenomena might seem whimsical, but significant steps have already been made in cognitive linguistics, cognitive psychology and psychoanalysis to describe the phenomenon of felt motion in the embodied human mind. I am thus attempting to show how cognitive stylistic analysis can in part account for felt motion in episodes of emotive literary reading at closure. In attempting to ground reader epiphany in cognitive stylistics, I am to some extent carrying out the claim of literary scholar Ashton Nichols that “cognitive studies can illuminate our understanding of a concept like literary epiphany” (472). I will briefly discuss some relevant theories, several of which will return in the subsequent discussion section.

In cognitive linguistics, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have started to develop an idea they term ‘empathic projection’, which is in some ways similar to felt movement during reader epiphany. In Philosophy in the Flesh (1999) the authors put forward an account of what empathic projection is:

In preparing to imitate, we empathetically imagine ourselves in the body of another, cognitively stimulating the movements of the other. That cognitive stimulation, when “vivid”, is the actual activation of motor programs with input to the muscles inhibited, which results in the “feel” of movement without moving. The experience of such a “feel” is a form of empathic projection (565).

Drawing on the earlier-mentioned simulation theory, as well as the workings of mirror neurons and proprioception, Lakoff and Johnson show how we can feel a definite yet discrete sense movement without moving at all. This is just what happens during reader epiphany. Another cognitive psychological account of felt movement in the framework of general emotional experience is put forward by Gibbs:

Our way of characterizing the felt dimension of emotional experience is in terms of ‘affective space’ or the space we move through as we experience distinct emotions … Affective space has a sensuous feel to it, a texture that makes it neither purely mental, nor reducible to the physiological body (20).

Gibbs emphasises here a sense of movement, as well as the space we move through, when emotions are experienced.14 In this same discussion he also speaks of the effect and sensation of travelling through this affective space: “moving through affective space has a textured palpitably felt dimension just in the way that we can feel different textures and substances we touch with our skin” (20). According to Gibbs, skin-deep textures are thus capable of distinguishing different emotions when moving though affective space. He adds that the work done on this “suggests that emotion is conceived of, and experienced in terms of, embodied movement through affective space in dimensions that are textured and have depth” (26). The felt sense of movement through affective space that Gibbs describes also might be valid for intense emotive episodes of literary reading: the kind of felt reader epiphanies that I will explore later.

What Gibbs describes with emphasis on emotive distance and emotive movement is in some ways reminiscent of D. W. Winnicott’s psychoanalytic notion of ‘transitional objects’ and ‘transitional phenomena’.15 Winnicott’s research, most of which is based on a blend of clinical

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14 This occurs in his discussion on felt experiences of ‘feeling moved by metaphor” (2002). Some of the main basic principles of this phenomenon are set out in Cataldi (1996).

15 The concepts are often used interchangeably to represent the same thing.
observations and theoretical conjecture, mainly focused on the concepts of ‘projection’, ‘travelling’, ‘creativity’ and ‘child-parent relationship’. A central concern in his work was the extremely personal intermediate space between internal and external reality, largely grounded in a person’s childhood experiences. The transitional object is the space between the infant and the mother, or, more specifically, between the unweaned baby and the mother’s breast. As the infant grows, the mother and her breast fade in its consciousness into a state of limbo and are replaced by a favourite soft toy or piece of material on which the infant continues to suckle. A similar transition takes place in childhood, whereby play takes the place of the object of attention. Finally, in early adulthood phenomena like “artistic creativity and appreciation” take on the role of play (5). As Winnicott himself put it, these latter phenomena are retained in adult life “in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work” (14). To my mind, it is the most abstract and hence most personal of the arts — like music and, above all, literature — that best facilitates the transitional phenomenon of adult life.

Felt epiphanic movement in literary reading also ties into what Roland Barthes described in relation to the visual perception of photographs. In Camera Lucida (1980) he discusses a phenomenon he calls punctum, which concerns a sudden, unexpected recognition of hidden meaning that shoots out of the photograph like an arrow to pierce the viewer. In theorising this, Barthes draws primarily on his own experience. The image that triggered his own personal punctum while rifling through a pile of old photographs was one of his long dead mother. When he started, Barthes had no idea which photograph he was searching for but when he found it he recognised it immediately. Although there are clear modality differences, Barthes’s search for his emotive release mechanism can be said to be similar to a reader’s search for heightened emotion while engaged with a literary text. For instance, literary readers attempt to first set out the appropriate conditions that match optimum place to optimum time to optimum mode. Thereafter, like Barthes’s reader they commence ‘looking’/reading with only partial knowledge of what they actually hope to encounter. The photograph of Barthes’s mother as a child was in many ways unexpected, since he had no guarantee of experiencing his punctum, just as there is no guarantee that a reader will become highly emoted by reading a specific novel in a specific location under specific conditions. However, the nature of the projectile, the punctum, is perhaps not really what is of central importance in this process, since the focus is never purely on style or themes. In a neurocognitive approach to reading, the projectile’s origin and composition are also relevant. In the context of a heightened emotive state of literary reading these include the five aspects of affective cognition: LRI, mood, location, themes and style.

8.5 Conclusion
I have attempted to set the scene for the three chapters to come, by discussing why I have chosen to look at the closing lines of The Great Gatsby and why the concepts of closure and reader epiphany are important to this study. Drawing on theoretical conjecture and reader feedback, I have shown how readers appear to value the closing lines of a much-enjoyed novel, either during

16 This is analysed in depth in Playing and Reality (1971), the roots of which lie in Winnicott’s 1951 paper, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena”.

17 Winnicott says that this space will remain important throughout the life of an individual, as it is “a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged” (12). It often symbolises the union of baby and mother.

18 It may be recalled that the notion of ‘the recollected mother’ played an important role in the Barber example in a discussion in chapter five.
a first reading or an immediately subsequent one. I have maintained further that readers pay attention to style and language at the close of a much-enjoyed literary work. These claims found partial support both in the reader responses and from some of the cross-disciplinary theories I have discussed. I also started to link reader emotions to reader epiphany at closure. The importance of reader epiphany will become clear in the next chapter, which will be primarily of an analytic nature. There I will investigate how the thirty-six readers in my experiment read the closing lines of The Great Gatsby.