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Shad Christian Fagerland
Iowa State University

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Reading like a writer: A comparison of the interpretive strategies of creative writers and literary critics

by

Shad Christian Fagerland

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The idea for this study emerged as a result of my own dichotomous existence as a student of both creative writing and literature. Moving back and forth between the creative writing workshop and the literature classroom, I have observed that the two disciplines explore substantially different sets of questions in relation to the texts they encounter. Standing between the two fields, I have often felt torn. Like a literary critic, I am interested in studying published works in order to better understand how the world of literature functions, but the questions which I find most fascinating are the questions which typically emerge not in the discourse of contemporary literary theory but rather in the creative writing workshop: How does literature work to achieve its effects? What constitutes good writing? What minimal structural elements are necessary in order to craft a poem or story which strikes the reader as complete, satisfying, meaningful? What strategies have established authors used to give their work power and depth? To what extent can an author consciously control the creation of a literary work, or, conversely, to what extent is the writing process intuitive, subconscious, non-rational?

My interest in pursuing such questions within the discipline of literary criticism has led to some awkward conversations with literature professors, most of whom either misunderstand my interests outright or else view such research questions as outdated remnants of a formalist brand of criticism which has long since been shelved. At one point, for example, having failed to locate an interested member of the creative writing faculty, I met with a literature professor in order to design an independent study course in the history of short story form. When asked about my theoretical interests, I carefully explained that I wanted to study the short story from a writer's perspective, that I assumed authors constructed stories in order to achieve certain emotional effects, and that I wanted to better understand the evolution of the form by noting at which stages of history authors began
employing which stylistic and structural techniques. "So you're a formalist," the professor said. But I knew that this label did not quite fit, so I tried to articulate how I had been frustrated by the formalist essays I had encountered, how it seemed to me that rather than seeking to understand how stories were structured, to open themselves to texts in order to learn their compositional secrets, formalist critics tended to begin with the assumption of perfect textual unity and then to proceed not to analyze the text so much as to prove its worth, to prove that all aspects of the text which might appear unusual or out-of-place were in fact crucial parts of the work's "organic unity." I explained that, instead, the kind of criticism I was interested in was similar to the discourse of the creative writing workshop, a discourse in which the reader does not assume that the text is perfect but rather seeks to understand how it works to achieve its effects, noting points of particular interest or clarity, sometimes even observing that the text is flawed in some way and then offering suggestions how it might better achieve its full potential. "You assume the text is flawed? Sounds like deconstruction," the professor said, and with that unlikely thought I abandoned the independent study outright, bemused. It was evident that the professor and I were speaking different languages, that I lacked the vocabulary to properly express my own attitudes and assumptions about literature in a way that made sense to a professional within the discipline of literary criticism. Two things became clear to me in the aftermath of that experience: critics think in terms of theory, and yet there is no theory to account for the interpretive strategies which creative writers regularly employ in the writing workshop.

This lack of creative writing theory can be partially explained by the fact that literary theorists have not gone out of their way to understand the theoretical assumptions underlying the discourse of creative writing, which they tend to view as a separate discipline of only peripheral interest to the academic study of literature. However, perhaps more to the point, creative writers themselves have failed to effectively articulate their own theoretical assumptions. Of course, the history of workshop education is quite brief—although individual
workshop courses had been offered at the University of Iowa as early as 1897, the first MFA
degree was not conferred until 1941, and it was not until the 1960s that graduate writing
programs began attracting significant numbers of students (Bishop 8). This brief span could
help account for the discipline's failure to articulate its own theoretical premises. On the other
hand, however, the history of literary criticism in the university is nearly as short, but this
discipline has been virtually saturated with theoretical writings. A more likely hypothesis for
the lack of creative writing theory is that while in the field of literary criticism theoretical
writings are considered to be equally as valid as textual commentary in terms of publication
credits and thus critics can devote their time and effort to exploring theory, creative writers,
on the other hand, view such cerebral concerns as theory as potentially harmful distractions.
The goal of writers—to produce the highest quality imaginative literature—is much more
practical than it is abstract, and thus all time spent musing about the broad theoretical beliefs
of the field is time not spent writing. Whatever the reason, however, the fact remains that the
theoretical assumptions underlying the interpretive strategies of creative writing as an
academic discipline have not been sufficiently explored.

The present study is an attempt to remedy this situation by giving formal recognition
to the interpretive strategies typically employed by creative writers. Three main questions
govern my research: Are the disciplines of creative writing and literary criticism really as
dissimilar as my informal observations have suggested? If so, what specific assumptions do
writers hold which differ from those typically shared by critics? And how, if at all, might the
interpretive strategies of the writing workshop prove useful to the discipline of literary
criticism?

Several potential benefits could emerge from this study. For one, such an attempt to
critically examine the discipline of creative writing might encourage creative writing
instructors and program coordinators to more openly examine their own assumptions, thus
helping to strengthen and unify the discipline. As Bishop argues in "A History of Creative
Writing & Composition Writing in American Universities," such an attempt to acknowledge the theoretical tenets of the field is long overdue, as "it often seems that creative writers have moved into the mainstream of English departments without understanding or reviewing their own history . . . and without reconceptualizing graduate and undergraduate creative writing programs" (7). As a result, creative writing programs have evolved in relative isolation. This study will provide the beginning of a discourse devoted to broad questions of where the field currently stands and whether or not this approach is the best one to take. Additionally, this study might prove useful to literary critics, as it will give formal recognition to a set of interpretive strategies which has previously remained unnoticed in the academic discipline of literary studies. Perhaps other critics, unfamiliar with the discourse of creative writing, have been as intrigued as I have with the questions that absorb writers and thus can use this study to launch a new school of criticism which explores certain questions which have not yet been recognized as critically important.

My research on this topic comes from two sources: 1) published works by creative writers and literary critics concerning the nature of literature and/or the proper function of textual commentary; and 2) a series of interviews with eight professors in the English program at Iowa State University. The two sources complement each other well, as the written texts suggest how creative writing and literary criticism have historically differed while the interviews help to establish to what extent these differences are still evidenced by contemporary practitioners of the two disciplines. The first chapter of this study will focus on the published literature. Then the second chapter will explore the results of the interviews, noting particular areas of agreement and disagreement between the disciplines of creative writing and literary criticism. Finally, the third chapter will conclude the argument by summarizing the key differences between the disciplines and also suggesting what, if anything, the interpretive strategies of creative writers might contribute to the field of literary studies.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars and Critics

At one point, the prominent literary critics and commentators—figures like Coleridge, Poe, Arnold, and Emerson—were themselves creative writers. Before it was possible to study literature in the university, the individuals most qualified to discuss what specific works of literature mean or why some works are better than others were the same individuals who had indisputably established their knowledge of the subject by publishing their own successful creative works. Even as late as the 1930s, creative writing and literary criticism were intimately linked; Graff suggests that creative writing was considered a close ally of the discipline of literary criticism by the original New Critics, figures like Rene Wellek, William K. Wimsatt, Austin Warren, and Kenneth Burke, who had come to their university positions "on the strength of their poetry rather than their criticism" (153). However, when graduate creative writing programs began to appear in the university, the disciplines were destined soon afterward to go their separate ways. Today, in the contemporary American university system, literature and creative writing are taught as entirely distinct disciplines, peripherally connected by the fact that both deal with imaginative texts but divided by different forms of academic training, alternative methodological practices, and separate systems of vocabulary. As a result, the roles of artist and critic have been neatly split: those who write literature spend their time writing and teaching others to write, while the task of interpreting literature and determining its significance falls upon a group of scholars who have been trained in literary interpretation and the application of various theoretical approaches yet may have little or even no experience with producing literature themselves. Of course, there are exceptions; certain contemporary figures—Joyce Carol Oates, David Lehman, Dana Gioia, to name a few—have forged reputations for themselves in the fields of both creative writing and literary criticism,
but for the most part these people are the exception rather than the rule. At any rate, while the fact that the discourse of textual commentary is monopolized by non-writers is not inherently problematic—after all, simply lacking a background in creative writing does not prevent an individual from appreciating and understanding the literary experience—it has, however, resulted in an insufficient exploration of issues relevant to creative writers in the public domain of published literary criticism. While writers once dominated the field of literary criticism, they have now been marginalized, as virtually the only way to gain entry into the increasingly specialized discourse of literary studies is to undergo training in a Ph.D. program.

The story of how the discourse of textual commentary moved so comprehensively out of the hands of the artisans and into the hands of the academics is linked to the evolution of university literature departments. As Gerald Graff observes in *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, from virtually the time of their inception, English departments have been plagued by battles between so-called "scholars" and "critics." Early scholars, intent on establishing the study of literature as a subject fit for the scientific research model of the German university, strove to make literary studies systematic, concerned with discrete, observable facts, and thus early literature programs concentrated upon such subjects as philological and historical inquiry. Critics, on the other hand, aligning themselves with the cause of humanism, rebelled against such a scientific mode of inquiry into literature. As Graff points out, "We tend to forget that until recently the terms were considered antithetical: scholars did research and dealt with verifiable facts, whereas critics presided over interpretations and values, which supposedly had no objective basis and therefore did not qualify for serious academic study" (14). Scholars, as Graff quotes Albert Feuillerat, believed that the scientific method provided "a salutary reaction against the vague and unsupported constructions of those who, in an age of inductive analysis, still believed in the haphazard
inspirations of mere subjectivism" (143). Critics, on the other hand, accused scholars of accumulating mindless facts for no conceivable purpose or application.

The scholarly approach dominated literature departments until at least the 1930s, when criticism began to gain a foothold in the universities. One figure of fundamental importance in the academic legitimization of criticism was Norman Foerster, whose book *The American Scholar* was an "all-out humanistic polemic against the scholarly establishment" (Graff 138). Foerster attacked both philological and historical approaches to literary studies, suggesting that rather than following the traditional role of the scholar, "the task of rendering our knowledge more and more exact and thorough," literature departments should adopt the role of the critic, "rendering our standards of worth more and more authoritative and serviceable" (139). Thus, the role of the critic involved discussing "standards of worth" (which would come to be interpreted by the New Critics specifically as standards of aesthetic worth), suggesting that critics were assigned the task of evaluating texts, determining which are better and why, while scholars were assigned the task of understanding texts by referring to linguistic and historical background.

Foerster, who had argued so strenuously for the goals of criticism over those of scholarship, was also an instrumental figure in the founding years of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which went on to become widely recognized as the leading graduate writing program in the country as well as one of the first organized attempts to study creative writing as an academic discipline. (Earlier versions of the formalized study of creative writing had been attempted by Dean Le Baron Russell Briggs of Harvard "early in the century" as well as at the Breadloaf Writers' Conference [Stegner 47].) Foerster joined the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1930, and expressed a deep conviction to both literary criticism and creative writing. As Wilbers describes him in his history of the program, "A traditionalist in his defense of a liberal education based on a broad study of the humanities, but a rebel in his conviction that both criticism and creative work should occupy a central position in higher
education, Norman Foerster was himself a paradox" (71). Yet this "paradox" of linking creative writing with literary criticism proved to become a key aspect of the program's mission, which, as Foerster described it, involved "the endeavor of an independent mind to render clearer some part of human experience through any form of literary activity" and which he specifically opposed to the study of literature "as if it were a branch of science" (Wilbers 44).

This ongoing battle between scholars and critics, crucial in the early development of creative writing as an academic discipline, still accounts for many of the differences between creative writers and literary critics today. The "workshop method," which involves "writing by the participants, criticism, and general discussion of 'artistic questions'" (Wilbers 35), is based primarily on an attempt to render aesthetic judgments, to discuss literary standards of worth and apply them directly to given texts. The workshop method was in its inception, and remains today, much more closely aligned with the goals of criticism than with those of scholarship. Its purpose is not to study, interpret, or analyze creative works, nor is it to explore background questions of linguistics or history, all of which have traditionally been roles of the literary scholar. Instead, the purpose of the workshop is to evaluate creative works, to determine what pieces work better than others and to explore as openly as possible the criteria underlying these aesthetic judgments. Begun as a specifically non-scholarly enterprise, creative writing instruction has remained unabashedly unsystematic, still based on "haphazard inspirations of mere subjectivism." As Stegner describes it, the typical workshop is dominated by free discussion instead of teacher-centered lecture, a format "which, with luck, may lead to some sort of illumination or consensus" (61).

If the historical struggle between scholars and critics is to be used as an effective analogy of the contemporary differences between the interpretive strategies of creative writing and literature programs, it should be noted that the term "literary critic," now commonly used to refer to individuals who publish academic essays in the field of literary studies, is therefore
problematic. Since this is the current term of choice, I will continue to refer to literature professors and scholars as literary critics. However, for the purposes of this study, the activities with which literary critics are typically involved—explicating individual works, tracking down historical sources of phrases and ideas, deconstructing literary works in order to argue the indeterminacy of language, reassessing literatures by historically underrepresented groups in terms of power struggles—are scholarly, not critical, activities. The activities which the critics originally represented when fighting to gain access to the university—resisting the more openly academic and systematic approaches to literary studies as well as evaluating the worth of different pieces of literature by examining standards of value—resemble the contemporary role of the creative writer rather than the literary critic, who should, perhaps, more aptly be called the "literary scholar."

Many creative writers today still exhibit a distrust of scholarly approaches to literary study. One good example of this point of tension between the disciplines can be found in Alberta Turner's *Fifty Contemporary Poets: The Creative Process*. In an interesting scholarly study of how poems evolve during the writing process, Turner sent a questionnaire to a hundred contemporary poets. The questions explored various aspects of the composition and interpretation of poems: How does a poem start? How does a poem change through the process of writing? What specific principles of technique are used to edit a rough draft into a completed poem? Can a poem be paraphrased? How might a poem be taught to a novice?

While about half of the poets agreed to participate in the study, these seemingly innocuous questions sparked an angry torrent of responses from several others. One wrote, "This is disgusting. Truly. Don't you see that you will just reduce everyone to their lowest common denominator—thus most boring answers? The language you use is out of 1984 or the CIA" (1). Another complained, "Accounting for things is lengthy, tedious, and finally incomplete. . . . I'm afraid it's the intrusion of mystery in what we do that makes poems
interesting" (1). Another responded simply, "As a poet my primary concern is not with the facilitation of understanding. Therefore I am not inclined to answer your questions" (1).

Turner concludes that responses such as these reveal "an attitude of distrust toward the traditional academic approach to poetry" (2). Clearly, a good number of the poets initially contacted to participate in this study believed that attempting to answer such questions about a writing process which is ultimately ineffable is not only fruitless, but indeed even detrimental to the art of poetry. As one poet explained,

> It is difficult for me to imagine any worthwhile poem coming from (conscious) attention to all these things. Granted that any poet will in some way be paying attention to many of these things in actual composition, too much thinking about what he is going to do in a poem may rob the poem of mystery and surprise. In fact, I think that too much of this kind of thing might end by drying up some of the sources of poetry itself. (2)

Interestingly, however, while clearly believing that the reductionary method of questioning represented by this study ultimately proves harmful, this poet does concede that there is a way to talk about poems that

> adds to and deepens them, that explores the world of thought and experience from which the poems emerge, and without attempting to reveal too much. In discussing my own poems, I try to do this, aware that the poems may be saying things I never thought of when I wrote them. I need to concede a considerable area to what I don't know and can't know, and perhaps don't wish to know. Only to understand in a way I do not quite understand. (2)

Underlying this answer, as well as the complaints of the previous poets, is the assumption that poetry is mysterious, unexplainable, even irrational. If this is the case, than any systematic, scholarly approach to understanding it is doomed to fail and might even, in its mechanistic attempt to do so, end up crushing the life out of the process it sought to illuminate. Instead of a scholarly approach, this particular poet suggests an alternative discourse, a method of discussing poetry which also accounts for the life underlying the
individual poem, for the mysterious way which poems have of speaking beyond, even in spite of, their authors.

**Against Poststructuralism**

In recent years, disagreement between creative writers and literary scholars over the bases of scholarly methodology has centered much more on the application of poststructuralist literary theories than on philological or historical lines of inquiry. Although the goals of the literary theorists are clearly not the goals associated with early literary scholarship (i.e., "rendering our knowledge more and more exact and thorough"), many writers have perceived contemporary literary theory to be a dangerous new facet of the same old academic study of literature, filled as it is with specialized jargon and rhetorical moves which make little sense to anyone outside of a small circle of specialists. That contemporary creative writers, especially those who teach creative writing at the university level, tend to remain dubious of these contemporary theoretical practices is virtually indisputable. A quick glance through any random issue of a journal devoted to the study or teaching of creative writing (of which there are scant few—Poets & Writers and the AWP Chronicle are two notable titles) reveals any number of complaints about the crimes perpetrated in literature departments: deconstruction, the use of literature for ideological rather than aesthetic ends, the destructive tendency to over-intellectualize a field which should be fundamentally driven by passionate emotion and even awe. Most writers are, at best, uninterested in the discourse of poststructuralist theory, while some, at the extreme, are openly hostile toward it.

In one representative attack of contemporary critical practices, AWP Chronicle editor D. W. Fenza reveals his distaste of poststructuralist criticism in no uncertain terms: "Fast, easy, and titillating in a vague, cerebral way, it is a burlesque of a travesty of a farce of a substitute of a dim simulacrum of useful criticism" (15). While much of his argument is
directed specifically against deconstruction, his scope is in fact broad enough to encompass the "entire arsenal of high-tech literary theories: New Historicist, deconstructionist, Bloomian, Marxist, Hegelian, Heideggerian, Freudian, structuralist, Jungian, hermeneutical, archetypal, and countless permutations" (14). His essay builds to a list of twelve reasons why creative writers have disagreed with contemporary criticism, a list which, because of its broad scope as well as its effective encapsulation of the bitterness underlying these complaints, is worth quoting in full:

The objections to specialized literary enterprises (New Historicism, deconstruction, etc.) are many: (1) such critical schools present students with models of terrible prose; (2) they teach students the faults of literature rather than the virtues, meanings, and pleasures of literature; (3) they evaluate works by political criteria rather than aesthetic criteria; (4) they denigrate authors by making them seem disposable, besides [sic] the point, like mere unwitting conduits through which language, society, or the unconscious (the real authors) express their latest will-to-oppression; (5) they grossly inflate the values of lesser works, as the new critiques praise them for being politically correct, or for being "exemplary" in a questioning of literary values that suspends all judgments so that one work is as good as the next—creating a recommended reading list so vast that only an immortal, professional reader could make use of it; (6) they have turned English departments into secular churches of idolatry, opportunism, and hypocrisy; (7) they are so highly specialized that they can only be understood by other specialists, thwarting possibilities for public debate, estranging the general reader, and further constricting literature's already limited audience; (8) they contribute to the dissipation of scholarship by upholding the apotheosis of subjectivity over objectivity, intuition over reason, attitudes over logic, impressions over research, and style over content; (9) they over-emphasize sex so that literature is seen, not through the mind's eye, but through the mind's crotch; (10) they foster separatism and resentment, the fighting of fascism with fascism; (11) they are dangerously subversive-cultural sabotage perpetrated by the radical Left; (12) they are ludicrous social and political failures, unable to subvert or teach due to an inclination to preach to like-minded colleagues. (20)

The sheer number of complaints provided here reveals that creative writers disagree with contemporary criticism on many different grounds, from aesthetic to political to moral to ideological. And the tone in which the list is written shows that this disagreement has extended beyond mere intellectual debate into the realm of heated emotions, suggesting that
creative writers feel that contemporary theory is not only irrelevant to their concerns, but is in fact specifically threatening toward them. Writers believe, according to this argument, that contemporary critical practices, placing political, intellectual, and moral agendas over aesthetic ones, are detrimental to literature as an art. Rather than illuminating great pieces of literature, Fenza complains, critics seek to "humiliate" them, showing that they are full of "evasions, lies, and lies of omission" (17). Creative writers disagree with contemporary literary criticism because its intention is not to understand individual pieces or even to study how and why literature works, but rather to use existing literature to achieve extra-literary ideological ends even at the risk of neglecting or even harming the overall art in the process, upholding inferior works as examples of quality literature simply because of the political ideas they endorse and condemning well-crafted texts for not being "politically correct."

Fenza is not alone in his critique of contemporary criticism. Poststructuralism has been attacked by creative writers and literary traditionalists alike in works like Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature*, Harold Fromm's *Academic Capitalism and Literary Value*, and Frederick Crews's *The Critics Bear it Away: American Fiction and the Academy*. One particular creative writer/critic who has devoted much of his career to the critique of poststructuralist theory is David Lehman, who argues in works like *Signs of the Times* and "Deconstruction After the Fall" that contemporary theory, especially in light of the recent discovery of Paul de Man's anti-Semitic wartime tracts, "will never again be a harmless thrilling thing--we have seen how it can be used to fudge facts, obfuscate truths, distort and mislead" (Deconstruction 5). His complaints against contemporary criticism are many, and closely resemble Fenza's list: theory has become too complicated for anyone outside of a small group of initiates to decipher; critics assume that communication is impossible, which contradicts plain common sense as most people observe instances of genuine communication every day; theory is being used by its initiates not as a way of understanding literature, but rather as a way of establishing credentials in order to climb in the university. One of Lehman's
major points of concern is that contemporary criticism tends to overshadow the text: "In the past . . . it was clear that the duty of criticism was to engage with poetry, whereas today the idea of an autotelic criticism has taken hold." He concludes from this evidence that many literature professors betray a "perverse indifference" to literary works, and thus that it is not surprising that writers and critics are engaged in an "unhealthy competition" (8).

As an alternative to the discourse of literary criticism, writers like Fenza and Lehman perceive the creative writing workshop to be a place "where one could talk about books in a public tongue, and talk about them as if they were extensions of one's life—books as talismans or friendly accomplices. In writing workshops and seminars, stories and poems are spoken of as works with meanings, rather than as texts with 'endless indeterminacies'" (Fenza 20). Other writers agree that the writing workshop, as opposed to the literature classroom, is a place free of academic jargon, where the fact that texts can and do communicate can be taken as an indisputable point of reference, and where the deep connection between literature and life can be explored. While this characterization of the writing workshop might seem naively Utopian, it does at least highlight a few interesting points of difference between the disciplines: writers assume that linguistic communication is possible, while poststructuralist literary theory emphasizes the endless "slide" of language; writers appreciate texts for purposes of craftsmanship rather than for extra-literary ideological ends; writers perceive that poststructuralists are indifferent or sometimes even hostile to quality works of literature for political rather than aesthetic reasons; and writers perceive their profession to be free of academically elevated systems of vocabulary. In short, writers have reacted quite strongly against the political/academic approach to studying literature, an approach they associate with the discourse of poststructuralist literary criticism.
The Writing Process

Although most creative writers seem to want nothing to do with poststructuralist theory, others actually prefer some of its aspects over those of strictly formalistic approaches to literary study. Specifically, they believe that poststructuralism gives more open recognition to the arbitrary, mysterious nature of the writing process than has been given in the past. As Tom Andrews, a poet and teacher of creative writing, argues in response to the aforementioned Fenza essay,

I am not arguing that an author's intention is irrelevant or that authors are "disposable." Rather, I want to acknowledge what Stafford calls the "luck" involved in any piece of writing—the disruptions and stray impulses that work out, the bonuses that come from play and random association—and to welcome critical approaches that include the accidental and "indeterminate" ways by which novels, poems, stories, essays, and plays actually get created. For me this inclusion makes deconstructive theories more to the point of my concerns as a writer than, say, New Critical theories. (14)

Like some of the poets cited in Turner's study of the creative process, Andrews acknowledges that the process of creating poems is inherently ineffable, determined by "random association" and "luck," and therefore concludes that a system of literary study which attempts to account for these unconscious influences is superior to one which places the author in supreme conscious command of the text. Similarly, Turner concludes after analyzing the results of her survey that the responses of the poets accumulate evidence to support the recurrent suspicions that poets cannot create poems, they can only edit them, that the precise moment when the emotional reaction to experience is going to fuse experience into an artifact of words cannot be planned or predicted but only invited, induced; that too much intellectual manipulation may stop the process of creation; that the greatest part of craftsmanship is recognizing what has happened after it has happened; that poets as poets distrust and look down upon poets as critics and that even in telling what they think they know about their poems, they are uneasy and emotionally sure they must be telling lies about them. (19)
As suggested in statements like these, writers are hesitant to accept scholarly approaches which fail to account for the non-rational nature of poetry, a nature inherently tied to the mysterious process of its creation.

Perhaps expressing the response of the typical creative writer when asked to discuss the writing process, Vassar Miller carefully dodges the question: "Just as . . . it must be more wonderful to serve God than to discuss Him, so it is more engaging to write a poem than to describe the process of writing it" (114). However, numerous creative writers have attempted to discuss the unpredictable nature of the writing process anyway, suggesting even while attempting to shed light on the process that literary creation ultimately resists rational explanation. Michael Benedikt, heartily disagreeing with the model of the writing process espoused by Poe in his famous essay "The Philosophy of Composition," an essay in which Poe "credited himself with working out all the details of his poems ahead of time," suggests instead that he writes "mainly by discovering, each poem being an expedition into my unconscious" (50). Joyce Carol Oates writes in a journal entry: "Why write? To read what I've written" (163). Richard Eberhart, discussing his view of literary creation in his essay "How I Write Poetry," argues,

In the final analysis, although there is no final analysis, the deepest things about poetry seem to me to be mysterious. They go beyond the mind into the vast reservoir and region of the spirit and appear to be not entirely accountable to reason. I cannot go so far as to say that the deepest things about poetry are irrational, but I would include irrational perception and components in my view of poetry. (20)

Donald Finkel suggests that the inspiration for poems "emerges in flashes rather than in logically developed patterns" (147). Anton Chekhov, when asked about his method of composition, "picked up an ashtray. 'This is my method of composition,' he said. 'Tomorrow I will write a story called "The Ashtray""" (Prose 228). Linda Pastan, arguing that ideas never consciously intended tend to find their way into poems through the act of creation, says that "you learn by writing. I do think there is more in a poem than I realize was there as I wrote it."
Often a reader will be able to pinpoint it in a way that the author couldn't or didn't think to" (159). Donald Hall, similarly, argues that "the act of writing the poem is an enormous and almost unequaled collaboration of conscious and unconscious processes," suggesting that even in the act of revising first drafts, which is typically viewed as a conscious, rational effort, "there are always excursions back into the unconscious. One cannot say that the unconscious provides all the content, the conscious all the form. . . . I write something as I am revising, and I do not know why I do it. I do it because it sounds good. Then a day later or a week later I may understand what I have done" (191-2).

Clearly, then, creative writers are concerned with the writing process, and are also convinced that the unpredictable and non-rational nature of this act influences their perception of what literature is and how it should be discussed. Literary critics (particularly formalists), on the other hand, do not typically recognize this aspect of literary creation, and thus some of their conclusions strike writers as questionable. For example, novelist Joan Didion writes about an experience with some literary critical colleagues who were attacking F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon* because of its "imbalance" and the "creaking deus ex machina aspect to the plot." Didion claims that while she agreed with their specific points of criticism, she still thought that the novel was "a brilliant piece of work." In the course of arguing with the critics about the novel, she realized that the reason she liked the novel and the critics did not was because her experience as a creative writer had taught her about the recursiveness of the creative process:

Finally I realized what the argument was about, what the difference in our thinking was, and it was quite a radical difference. They were looking at *The Last Tycoon* not as a fragment of a novel in progress but as the first third of a novel for which we were simply missing the last two-thirds. In other words they saw that first third as completed, frozen, closed—the interrupted execution of a fully articulated plan on Fitzgerald's part—and I saw it as something fluid, something that would change as he discovered where the book was taking him. (528)
Didion concludes that this difference was so fundamental that it could hardly be reconciled: "They [critics] saw a novel as a plan carried out. I saw a novel as an object discovered. They saw the process as an act of intelligence. I saw it as a mystery. They saw the writer as someone who has a story to tell and writes it down. I saw the writer as someone who discovers the story only in the act of making it up" (528).

This perception of the text as "fluid," as open to eventual change, is an intriguing aspect of creative writers' treatment of texts which descends directly from their experience with the creative process. In the workshop setting, of course, texts are approached not as finished products, but rather as works-in-progress, pieces which carry with them a certain potential for greatness yet need not have achieved such potential in their present form. However, many writers also approach published texts in a similar fashion, not as "completed, frozen, closed" but rather as debatable acts which are open to discussion and suggestion.

**Reading Like a Writer**

Richard Ford once said in an interview that "a story is a manufactured thing whose purpose is to get you through it" (Atkinson 56). This statement effectively captures another assumption which creative writers bring to texts: even while the creative process is ultimately mysterious, pieces of literature are made, not born, constructed in light of specific standards of readability which have been established by previous texts. Writers thus tend to approach creative works as constructed objects, viewing the actions of the characters, the specifics of the plots, and the particular words and images as rhetorical strategies chosen by the author in order to make the piece in some way more readable. Ford elsewhere expands on this notion:

Stories, and novels, too--I came to see from the experience of writing them--are makeshift things. They originate in strong, disorderly impulses; are supplied by random accumulations of life-in-words; and proceed in their creation by mischance, faulty memory, distorted understanding, weariness, deceit of almost every imaginable
kind, by luck and by the stresses of increasingly inadequate vocabulary and wanting imagination—with the result often being a straining, barely containable object held in fierce and sometimes insufficient control. And there is nothing wrong with that. It doesn't hurt me to know it. Indeed, my admiration for the books I love is greater for knowing the chaos they overcame. (65)

In this response, Ford acknowledges both that texts are constructed, "makeshift" things, and also that the creative process which leads to their creation is fiercely unpredictable. Thus, this view denies that pieces of literature emerge as the result of careful, rational plans yet simultaneously acknowledges that they are human constructions, pieced together by individual authors amidst a mixture of conscious and unconscious influences.

Other authors have also emphasized the constructed nature of literature. As Didion observes,

It is very common for writers to think of their work as a collection of objects. A novel, to a writer, is an object. A story or an essay is an object. Every piece of work has its own shape, its own texture, its own specific gravity. This perception of the work as an object is not usually shared by the reader of it, and seems to be one of the principal differences between writers and people in other lines of sedation. (525)

This perception of works of literature as "objects" comes from writers' shared experience with shaping the rough, uncontrolled elements which emerge initially in the creative process into acceptable aesthetic forms. The task of the writer is "to give the clatter a shape, to find the figure in the carpet, the order in the disorder." Crafting a creative piece involves working through the "clatter" of various sources of inspiration, finding the pattern in their patternlessness and making of this pattern a work of art. It is certainly not a matter of simply transcribing the clatter verbatim: "I don't mean at all that this object comes 'naturally,' any more than a piece of sculpture comes 'naturally.' You don't find a novel or a story lying around in your unconscious like a piece of driftwood. You have to hammer it, work it, find the particular grain of it" (525). Thus, since so much work is involved to shape the rough
materials of inspiration into finished products, writers are more apt than are readers (and often critics as well) to perceive their works as artificial, manufactured things.

This tendency to refer to works of literature as "objects" which are "constructed" by authors makes it tempting to draw a comparison between this writerly approach and that of the New Critics. After all, the method of explication associated with New Criticism was based upon a model of literature as aesthetic object. As Wimsatt and Beardsley argue in "The Intentional Fallacy," a literary work is "detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it," suggesting that the text, like a sculpture, painting, or other work of art, is a physical entity (1384). The task of the critic, then, was to treat the work of literature on its own terms, without regard for historical or sociological matters, in order to determine to what extent the given piece of literature worked as an aesthetic object. So to a certain extent, the assumption that texts are constructed objects can be seen as an extension of the New Critical aesthetic perspective.

However, while creative writers do tend, like the New Critics, to focus more closely on the text than on sociological or historical background information, the similarity between the approaches ends there. In practice, the method of textual interpretation employed by creative writers bears little resemblance to that of New Criticism. The New Critical method was deductive, as the New Critics assumed that certain textual features--like ambiguity, unity of theme, or metrical consistency--were necessary in order for a given work to be considered quality literature. Thus, the New Critical practice was to "test" the work against these various features to determine whether or not the work measured up. As Graff observes, however, this method was problematic because in their fervor to establish the complexity and unity of various canonical texts, the New Critics often presupposed the quality of the given work: "It soon became clear that an explicator using the conventions of analysis developed by the New Critics could hypothetically justify almost any feature of a literary work as an organically harmonious part of the total structure" (229). The point of New Critical explications was not
so much to understand how a given piece was structured as it was to prove that the piece was structured well. As Hershel Parker points out in his study *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons*, New Critical explication became almost a game, as critics vied to use their complicated analytical system to prove that any text, even those which contained outrageous editorial flaws, were in fact fully unified and harmoniously structured. As R. S. Crane put it, many of the New Critics had taken "the high priori road," a method of interpretation "that employed critical concepts not as 'working hypotheses,' to be tested against the facts of the text, but as all-embracing propositions or 'privileged hypotheses' that could not but be 'confirmed' by the facts, since these hypotheses tautologically predetermined 'the facts' in advance" (Graff 234).

Creative writers, on the other hand, are not interested in this kind of a priori explication, as it contributes little to an understanding of how literature actually functions and thus provides no insights which can be used to improve their own writing. The writerly method is more inductive than deductive; although writers often carry certain presuppositions about what quality literature must accomplish, they are more apt than formalist critics to allow individual texts to challenge and alter their sets of aesthetic criteria. Thus, rather than testing texts against absolutely preestablished criteria, creative writers more often read in order to determine what the text can teach them about the way it is structured to achieve its effects. They are interested in identifying and evaluating the choices the author made while constructing the text in order to determine which are effective and which can be used in other situations for similar effect. When a creative writer approaches a text in this way, two overriding questions govern the process: 1) How can the elements of this text be practically applied to improve my own writing? and 2) What aspects of this text are distinctive or instructive?

The first question, which is the simpler of the two, often leads writers to approach texts as manuals describing various practical points of writing strategy. Providing an example of this approach, Ford explains how workshops had taught him to "read like a writer".
Certain books had practical lessons to teach. Nuts and bolts: how to get characters efficiently in and out of fictional rooms (Chekhov was good here); how to describe efficiently that it was dark (Chekhov again); how to weed out useless dialogue ("Hi, how are you?" "I'm fine, how are you?" "I'm okay. Thanks." "Good to hear it." "Good-bye." "Good-bye." That sort of stuff). I learned that a good opening ploy in a novel was to have Indians—if there were any—ride over a hill screaming bloody murder. I learned that when in doubt about what to do next, have a man walk through the door holding a gun. (57)

Here, Ford suggests that writers can read texts for the very practical purpose of helping to improve their own writing by picking out specific phrases, transitional techniques, or plot concepts that can be applied in other works. It is interesting to note that in this approach, the writer makes no claims for the overall meaning of the work in question. The point is to explicate the text not for surface or allegorical meaning, but rather for rhetorical strategy.

The second question—how the structures of given texts are distinctive—is more complicated but leads to some interesting analyses. In one good example of a creative writer analyzing a text in this way, Vladimir Nabokov summarizes his lecture about Chekhov's short story "The Lady with the Pet Dog":

All the traditional rules of storytelling have been broken in this wonderful story of twenty pages or so. There is no problem, no regular climax, no point at the end. And it is one of the greatest stories ever written.

We will now repeat the different features that are typical for this and other Chekhov tales.

First: The story is told in the most natural way possible, not beside the after-dinner fireplace as with Turgenev or Maupassant, but in the way one person relates to another the most important things in his life, slowly and yet without a break, in a slightly subdued voice.

Second: Exact and rich characterization is attained by a careful selection and careful distribution of minute but striking features, with perfect contempt for the sustained description, repetition, and strong emphasis of ordinary authors. In this or that description one detail is chosen to illumine the whole setting.

Third: There is no special moral to be drawn and no special message to be received...

Sixth: The story does not really end, for as long as people are alive, there is no possible and definite conclusion to their troubles or hopes or dreams.
Seventh: The storyteller seems to keep going out of his way to allude to trifles, every one of which in another type of story would mean a signpost denoting a turn of the action . . . but just because these trifles are meaningless, they are all-important in giving the real atmosphere of this particular story. (Prose 231)

One the one hand, this analysis of the text is formalistic, as Nabokov refers strictly to the text, not to background biographical information. However, it is also distinct from a typical New Critical explication because rather than assuming that the story's quality is determined by its adherence to certain "rules," this analysis instead takes as a fundamental assumption that the story is great (based on the effect it has on the reader) and sets out, from there, to determine how and why it is great by inducing which particular aspects of the text make it effective. Nabokov does not deny the existence of rules (he even lists three "rules of storytelling"), but he does imply that these rules are hardly absolute, as a story which breaks all of them can still be considered "one of the greatest stories ever written." This analysis, then, bases the assumption of literary quality on the text's effect on the reader, not the text's adherence to predetermined criteria. It is also noteworthy that Nabokov's analysis is hardly a scholarly one. His choice of phrases to describe Chekhov's story are the language of everyday conversation, not the jargon of academia: the story is "told in the most natural way possible"; "there is no special moral to be drawn"; "the story does not really end"; "the storyteller seems to keep going out of his way to allude to trifles." In the words of the literary scholar quoted earlier in this chapter, this interpretive approach is unabashedly guided by "inductive analysis" and "the haphazard inspirations of mere subjectivism." Literary explications by creative writers continually resist the need to make the study of literary works a systematic and objective enterprise.
Evaluation, Not Analysis

As their discipline is based on the concerns of criticism rather than scholarship, one striking aspect of creative writers' treatments of texts is their tendency to evaluate rather than analyze, to render aesthetic judgment rather than to interpret meaning. Because evaluating aesthetic quality is such a crucial aspect of the writing workshop, many writers rebel against the now commonly accepted belief that literary quality is completely relative to the reader or to the culture from which the given work emerged. In his essay "Reconstructing Contemporary Poetry," for example, poet Robert Wallace complains that the new selections in the second edition of The Heath Anthology of American Literature fail to effectively capture the best American poetry because the editors employed "a racial or ethnic criterion" when selecting the authors for inclusion (16). For example, among the generation of poets born between 1931 and 1955, non-whites outnumber whites by a ratio of 9 to 1, and of the three white authors selected, all are female (16). Wallace argues that selecting authors on the basis of gender and race, a practice based on the assumption that textual quality is relative to culture, threatens "the integrity of the art itself" as political criteria come to supersede aesthetic criteria: "They [the editors] impose what can only, in the end, be called a racist standard on contemporary poetry and, moreover, rushing into the vacuum of postmodernism, promote both a narrow view of excellence and the abnegation of critical judgment" (18).

Specifically, the Heath's editors show a "preference for easy poems over hard ones, for simple over complex, for spontaneous over formal, for arbitrary over disciplined. Paying attention (close reading) is out; the relativism of postmodern theory (one text is as good as another) is in" (17). Wallace quotes several passages of newly selected poems and suggests that while some do indeed seem to be of literary interest, others are "merely pious or derivative," and certain authors are outright "yawners." The selection of so many poems of inferior aesthetic quality reveals that "political correctness, not literary excellence, is the point," that "students,
of course, are not intended to engage these works intellectually or critically, but as an exercise in ethnic piety" (15). Thus, this critique of contemporary critical relativist beliefs reveals that from this creative writer's perspective, literature should be evaluated by aesthetic rather than political criteria.

Other creative writers, sharing Wallace's belief in the necessity of aesthetic judgment, have sought to evaluate the current state of the art to determine whether or not contemporary poets are still producing quality literature. As Fenza suggests, criticism should serve "to strike a balance between where literature has been and where it is going" (17). Along these lines, Joseph Epstein's essay "Who Killed Poetry?" argues that contemporary poetry is inferior in quality to modernist poetry because "whereas one tended to think of the modernist poet as an artist . . . one tends to think of the contemporary poet as a professional: a poetry professional" (16). This professionalization of the discipline is linked to the institutionalization of poetry within the university, as graduate writing programs have led to smaller, more specialized audiences and, consequently, have encouraged the production of formulaic poetry. As a result of writing workshops, Epstein argues, so much contemporary poetry is so similar that its formula can even be defined: the typical contemporary poem is "a shortish poem, usually fewer than forty lines, generally describing an incident or event or phenomenon of nature or work of art or relationship or emotion, in more or less distinguished language, the description often, though not always, yielding a slightly oblique insight" (19). Epstein then paraphrases a few poems by representative contemporary poets and states:

A poem, the New critics held, cannot be paraphrased, but in paraphrasing—summarizing, really—these poems I do not think I am doing them a grave injustice. I bring them up only because they seemed so characteristic, so much like a great deal of contemporary poetry: slightly political, heavily preening, and not distinguished enough in language or subtlety of thought to be memorable. (18)

Because so much contemporary poetry is so similar, and because writing workshops have encouraged the production of a vast number of journals devoted to poetry, popular audiences
no longer express any interest in the art. Poetry is dying, and it is up to the critic to do what is possible to save it. Specifically, Epstein argues, "a start might be made by deciding who are the greatly overrated [poets]" (19). Thus, creative writers feel that through evaluative criticism, they can contribute to the continued integrity and even survival of their discipline by monitoring the field as it currently stands, rewarding those poets who are the most intellectually and lyrically advanced and revealing why certain overrated poets are not particularly noteworthy.

Along the same lines, poet and critic Neal Bowers argues in "Hazards in the Poetry Workshop" that writing workshops have become the primary means for young poets to gain experience, and thus poets today grow up learning not only "the craft of poetry but also the business of poetry" (58). While acknowledging that allowing so many young writers to explore their writing in a place "where poetry is given a kind of legitimacy it doesn't have in the world at large" is a noble goal, Bowers believes "very strongly that there is a flaw in the workshop itself which leads to an inevitable sameness and that this sameness has been adopted as the norm" (60). As a result, too much poetry appearing in contemporary journals is dull, bland, and formulaic. The problem, Bowers suggests, lies in the workshop method itself, which teaches students that poetry is "manufactured." The cure for the blandness of contemporary poetry, then, requires reformation at the level of the workshop: "To make things better, we must admit that there is a workshop style of poetry and that it has too often slipped out of the factory and into the marketplace before being finished, because the factory (i.e., the university poetry monopoly) and the marketplace are often indistinguishable" (63). Once this is acknowledged, poetry instructors can help reform the workshop by bringing more literature into the classroom, "not student poetry but poems drawn from all eras and corners of English, American, and World literature" (64). By recognizing that there is a problem with contemporary poetry and by working to fix this problem at the level of the poetry workshop,
Bowers concludes, creative writing instructors can help to ensure the continued quality and integrity of their art.

Essays like these suggest that creative writers are concerned with aesthetic quality and that they consequently reject the popular notion that literary quality is completely relative to the reader. Although Wallace, Epstein, and Bowers all use different terminology, all three indisputably accept that some works of literature are better than others—that, for example, predictable, "formulaic," or "derivative" poems are inferior to surprising, original, and heartfelt ones—and that it is the job of the writer/critic to keep an eye on the current field and determine which poems and poets are noteworthy and which are less so. The fact that these writers believe they are fighting for the very survival of their discipline lends their work a certain urgency which many literary critical analyses of texts lack. By evaluating the contemporary literary scene, writers hope to improve the art and thus invite a wider readership among the general public.

**Conclusions**

This brief review of relevant literature suggests that in many ways, the alternative approaches to literature espoused by contemporary creative writers and literary critics are analogous to the historical differences between scholars and critics. Creative writers align themselves with the purposes of criticism, resisting more scholarly and scientific approaches to literary study and evaluating the quality of texts by exploring and expanding our sets of acceptable standards of value. Furthermore, writers tend to believe that the evaluation of literature should be based on aesthetic, textual criteria, and thus many writers resist poststructuralist theories, which evaluate texts for political rather than aesthetic ends, threaten to supplant the author in favor of the reader, and utilize inflated academic jargon rather than more common, understandable language. Writers also believe that the process of writing is
mysterious and irrational, yet simultaneously credit the author of the text for shaping the flurry of inspirational sources into a pleasing aesthetic shape. Thus, creative writers tend to read texts as constructed objects, interpreting them not for surface meaning but rather as systems of structural choices applied for specific rhetorical effect, choices which might also be employed in other texts.
CHAPTER 3. THE INTERVIEWS

In order to examine to what extent some of the assumptions about literature outlined in the previous chapter are actually held by current practitioners in the field of creative writing, I held a series of interviews with eight professors in the English program at Iowa State University. Four professors each from the disciplines of creative writing and literature volunteered to participate, and in order to preserve their anonymity, no names will be used. The purpose of these interviews was to determine whether or not the responses of the literary critics and the creative writers to specific questions differed substantially from one another, and if so to speculate why the responses might have differed by examining their underlying assumptions. If the literary critics and the creative writers respond to these questions in consistently different fashions, then this will provide further evidence regarding how and why the disciplines differ.

I should also make clear at this point that I do not intend this project to be construed as an attempt at solid empirical research. Due to the broad nature of the questions asked in the interviews, the responses are difficult to categorize according to a consistent and objective set of criteria. Furthermore, the results of a study with such a small pool of subjects lack statistical significance in the face of the enormous numbers of writers and critics practicing in this country, and thus I avoid the tendency to generalize my findings to the overall beliefs of these disciplines on a national level. However, the responses to the research questions do provide interesting anecdotal evidence that many of the concerns about literary criticism historically expressed by creative writers are still held today by current practitioners of the field. The results of these interviews suggest that at this specific university at this specific time, at the very least, creative writers and literary critics do base their textual readings on different assumptions about literature.
Of the four literary critics who volunteered for this study, three were women. All four had earned Ph.D.'s in literature from American universities, and three were tenured. One professor specialized in Victorian Literature, one in British Literature, one in American Literature, and one in Medieval Literature. Three critics listed New Criticism as the dominant theoretical school of their graduate training, and all of these professors to some extent still considered the "close reading" practice of the New Critics to be a central aspect of the criticism they currently publish; however, while close formal analysis of texts informed their work, all three of these professors also indicated that their criticism was rarely limited to strict New Critical practices. One professor's research tended toward grammatical and syntactical readings as well as the History of Ideas, another concentrated upon intellectual history, while the third professor's criticism branched off into the more contemporary grounds of New Historicism, the redefinition of the canon, and feminist theory. The one critic who had not been trained as a New Critic had, instead, been trained in a variety of different poststructuralist theoretical schools—Marxist, New Historicist, Psychoanalytic, Feminist—and currently publishes work in the field of cultural studies. The critics also brought with them various degrees of experience with the field of creative writing. Three of the four had written poems or stories in the past, but none of them considered creative writing a major part of their current interests. One, who had also taken a graduate poetry workshop, taught one or two sections of a freshman creative writing course in graduate school, but suggested that this was several years ago and that it was difficult now to remember exactly what went on in the workshop classroom.

Two of the creative writing professors participating in the interviews were women and two were men. Like the literature professors, three of the four creative writers had been tenured. However, they were much more varied in their academic training than were the literary critics: one had earned a Ph.D. in Creative Writing, one an M.A. in English with a creative thesis, one an M.A. in English with a literary critical thesis, and one an M.A. in
English with no thesis. Similarly, they had experienced vastly different backgrounds in the formal study of creative writing. One professor had taken between fifteen and seventeen creative writing workshops, one between eight and ten, one only one or two, while the other had never taken a single workshop course. All of the creative writers indicated that one of the key reasons they had been selected for these teaching positions involved their publication histories. When asked about the literary theoretical schools which had been dominant during their graduate training, the creative writers were less certain, but two of the four indicated New Criticism, one indicated a mixture of formal and poststructuralist techniques, and one suggested that questions of theory had not been as prevalent at that time as they are today. Only one of the writers had ever published any criticism, and none of them believed that literary criticism was a significant current interest.

It turns out, happily, that the eight volunteers provide ideal subjects for participation in this study, since none of the critics expressed much interest or experience in the field of creative writing and none of the writers, similarly, were experienced in the discipline of literary criticism. Therefore, I feel comfortable that each interviewee's responses to these research questions reflect primarily the assumptions of one specific discipline.

The interviews were fairly informal and conversational, each consisting of two major sections. In the first section, I asked a series of open-ended questions which encouraged the subjects to explore certain aspects of their own assumptions about the nature of literature and the function of textual commentary. Then, in the second section, I explored how these assumptions play out in practice by having the subjects comment on a couple of brief poems, one by Bill Hampton, a student author from Sturgis, South Dakota, and one by Wallace Stevens, an established, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. The rest of this chapter will outline the results of these interviews.
Section One: The Questions

This section of the interviews consisted of several open-ended questions designed to encourage the interviewees to discuss the nature of literature and the function of criticism. Each question was chosen to highlight a specific area which my research suggested might be a typical point of disagreement between the fields. The questions included:

- Why does literature exist?
- Do you believe that some pieces of literature are better than others?
- Is there an objective set of criteria determining literary quality?
- Concerning the work you do—either your personal writing/criticism or your teaching—why do you think it is important that this work get done?
- When you teach, what do you most hope that your students take away from your classes?
- Do you believe that there are any tensions between the disciplines of creative writing and literary criticism?
- Have you personally observed any differences between the ways creative writers and critics read or respond to texts?

The responses to these questions yielded some interesting results which highlight several differences between the disciplines. I will outline the responses to each question in turn.

Why does literature exist? I chose this question for two reasons. For one, I wanted a question which was left deliberately broad in order to test whether or not one group of interviewees would be more troubled by the question's ambiguity. If contemporary literary critics are indeed filling the role of the historical literary scholars, I suspected that with their more systematic and scientific background, they would be concerned with the need for precise
definitions, while the creative writers, in their anti-scholarly fashion, would express fewer reservations. The second reason I chose this question was because I suspected that the two disciplines might provide different reasons for literature's existence, thus indicating the presence of different assumptions about literature which might help account for some of the distinctions between the fields. Specifically, I anticipated that creative writers, due to their own intimate connection to literary creation and their knowledge that writing tends to emerge out of personal experience, would indicate that literature serves an important personal function, that individuals feel the need to capture their experience and that the public world of literature has thus emerged as a result of this private need. On the other hand, because so much contemporary literary theory is politically oriented, I anticipated that the literary critics would be less inclined to recognize literature as personal communication and more inclined to view literature's function as social: for example, literature exists in order for the powerful to remain in power, or to provide entertainment for the middle classes, or as a cultural means of airing grievances.

True to my expectations, I found that, as was the case with most of the more blatantly open-ended questions in the interviews, the critics generally responded to this question with confusion and requests for more data. One asked, "Well, do you mean in the contemporary world, why are people still writing books, or do you mean why are there English departments, or do you mean why has there ever been literature?" Another separated the question into two different issues: "If you mean, why do people look in their hearts and write . . ., that's one question. And if you mean, why do people study and canonize certain works and call them literature as opposed to popular or whatever, that's another thing." Specifically, the confusion expressed by the critics surrounds the ambiguity of the definition of the word "literature." They were unwilling to view literature as an autonomous fact which has a similar meaning across situations and times. As one put it, "It seems to me that literature is a cultural expression, it does certain kinds of work, and it's amazing the kinds of work it can do. It
doesn't mean the same things in all times and places, that's all there is to it. . . . It seems to me that it's always embedded in culture and works differently in different situations." Another suggested that literature exists for two quite different reasons, depending on how the term is defined: "If you say, why do people tell stories or why do people work with words, I think I would answer that there's an innate need to do so. I think a lot of times things happen in a person's life that don't make sense until they become a story." This particular response struck me as similar to what I anticipated the creative writers would say, but then the professor went on to suggest that according to another definition, literature was an "invention of the academy": "Why do we call it literature or canonize some things over others, that just comes from the last century or so of upper-level education. You didn't teach vernacular literatures for quite a long time in universities, so I think that's more of an invention."

The creative writers, on the other hand, were less troubled by the need for definitions. They tended to respond quickly to this question with answers that related to literature's ability to capture experience and help author and reader alike better understand the world. One creative writer said immediately, "I think it's easy. It's to tell us who we are." Another writer, speaking of both writing and reading, suggested, "People write it because they feel a compelling need to explain things that happen in the ordinary world and they use fiction as a vehicle for that. I think people read it because they long to understand their own world and they're enthralled by visiting new ones." Another writer said, "I think why people are so turned on by really good writing is that it tells you what you already know. You nod and you go, 'Oh God, that's exactly the way it is: that's the way it is to fall in love, that's the way it is to feel alone, that's the way it is to feel lost.' So it makes you less alone in the world." On the whole, the creative writers' responses were conspicuously void of references to the politics of literature. None of them suggested that literature was constructed or invented for a political purpose, instead believing that the function of literature is to help capture experience and also to make life more intelligible and less isolated. Furthermore, because many of the writers'
responses focused on literature's ability to influence the reader--either to show the reader something already known but never previously articulated or even to help the reader share experiences that might be quite foreign to the reader's everyday experience (as one writer put it, literature is "an invitation to a place you've never been")--these writers seem to presuppose the possibility of communication through the text.

Overall, then, perhaps due to their more scholarly training, the critics found this question to be difficult due to the different connotations of the word "literature." None of the critics had a simple answer to this question, instead preferring to view literature as a political, historical, constructed fact, as "cultural expression" or an "invention of the academy." Only one critic mentioned literature's more personal function, the ability to make sense of experience. The creative writers, on the other hand, consistent with a less scholarly approach, expressed less concern with the need for definitions and took a personal rather than a political position, focusing on how literature can be used to communicate and make experience less isolated and more intelligible. The difference between the responses of the two groups suggests that the literary critics were more concerned with issues of relativity than were the creative writers; the critics were hesitant to respond to this question since the meaning of literature is relative to the particular situation in which it is being explored, while the creative writers were more willing to jump out with a suggestion of what literature "universally" means. The issue of relativity might prove to be an important distinction between the two disciplines.

*Do you believe that some pieces of literature are better than others?* This question was chosen to determine whether either group tended to be more evaluative than the other. My research in the first chapter suggested that creative writers, consistent with the goals of criticism rather than scholarship, tend to evaluate the texts they encounter and thus must carry as a fundamental assumption the belief that some works are better than others. On the other
hand, I suspected that the literary critics might regard the question as moot, suggesting that their job does not require them to evaluate textual quality.

As with the previous question, the critics tended to see the question of literary quality as a very complicated issue. Only one critic responded with an outright "yes," while the other three answers were more tentative and complex. The issue of definition came up again in one critic's response: "It goes back again to that question of what you think of as literature. The question is: better for what? . . . So I would have to say it depends on how you define literature, which way you're looking at it." Another critic suggested that each reader upholds certain criteria for evaluating what is "meritorious in a work of literature," but avoided generalizing these standards to a universal statement about literary quality because, "Of course, all of our judgments about the merit of something are based on personal standards." Another critic captured the complexity of the issue very thoroughly:

I think it's very relative. Some literature I like better than other literature, and I can explain what I like about it or what I don't enjoy particularly about another piece that you might like better, so I have my own judgments about that. But I would probably stop short of saying, for example, why don't we consign *Moby Dick* to the junkheap because I don't care for it. Its aesthetic doesn't appeal to me. So do I think that a little poem by a British woman poet is better than *Moby Dick*? I do think so, but I'm not sure you would think so . . . . I do think literary value is relative to the reader, it's a cultural construct that's very politically loaded, that the most popular literature of the day tends to serve the prevailing political and economic interests of the day, and as those change, then we may lose interest in that literature and find something else.

The key point which these observations share in common is the belief that the question of literary quality is relative to the reader and the particular use to which the reader wishes to put the given work. Also, the issue of definition arose again in response to this question, and one critic commented specifically on the political, social criteria underlying a culture's aesthetic judgments.

The creative writers, on the other hand, uniformly agreed that some pieces of literature are better than others. One writer responded to the question with an immediate, "Yeah, of
course," and another said, "Yes, absolutely." However, a couple of writers were also careful to note that personal taste does not necessarily coincide with literary quality. As one put it, "I mean, there's lots of good writing that I say, 'Oh, I know this is good writing, but this isn't for me.'" Another stated, "There is, to my mind, stuff that works and stuff that doesn't work, and it isn't always taste that determines that. My taste does not run to experimental fiction, for example, but I can read an experimental fiction story and I can tell whether it works and why sometimes it doesn't work." One writer claimed that, despite a relative lack of experience with poetry,

I know a good poem when I read one. I know what's full of shit. Also, once you're a certain age and you're published a lot, I have confidence that even though I'm not really trained in a scholarly way in poetry, I know what works, I know when someone uses magic language and it's wonderful and it's right there, and I know when someone's just showing off.

The writers' responses suggest that some pieces of literature are better than others, and also that personal taste is not the ultimate factor in determining literary quality.

To compare the responses of the two groups, then, one critic believed that some pieces of literature are better than others while the others suggested that literary quality is relative to the reader and the intended use of the given work. The creative writers, on the other hand, unanimously agreed that some works are better than others and also avoided viewing literary quality as a purely relative affair. Although the writers recognized that personal taste can vary from reader to reader, they also expressed the belief that literary quality somehow supersedes judgments based purely on personal standards. Consistent with the responses to the previous question, the critics again expressed more concern with issues of relativity than did the creative writers.

*Is there an objective set of criteria determining literary quality?* I chose this question to get at what my research suggested might be a significant area of difference between critical
and scholarly discourses. On the one hand, I suspected that since their positions as writing instructors require them to evaluate the quality of given texts, the creative writers might assume that there is in fact an objective set of criteria against which they base their evaluative judgments. On the other hand, however, my research also suggested that rather than beginning with a priori criteria, writers often read to learn what aspects of specific texts make those works successful and thus the writers might be hesitant to suggest the existence of objective criteria. Therefore, I was particularly interested in the writers' responses to this question. In any case, however, I suspected that, consistent with the aura of relativity surrounding contemporary theory, the literary critics would unanimously deny that an objective set of criteria exists.

As expected, none of the critics answered this question affirmatively. One dismissed the question by stating,

That's moot. It doesn't matter to me. I think there are so many things you can do with literature, and things can be absolutely fascinating and critically important for completely different reasons, and aesthetic quality is only the beginning of the list. . . . It's not disabling to me to not have a sense that there's a rock-solid aesthetic criterion for books. That doesn't bother me at all.

Other critics suggested that their formalist training had taught them to appreciate certain aesthetic criteria—such as ambiguity, symbolism, precise word choice, and economy—but that they had nevertheless gone on to deny the existence of an objective set of literary quality criteria. As one responded to the question, "No. And this is a close reader telling you this. And in fact I would go on to say that I don't even think the New Critics thought that; I think they're being painted with a biased brush now that their day is over." Another stated,

Well, from my formalist training, I have a long list of all the complicated, neat things you can do as you write. And I like those things; they do enhance the value of a piece for me. So I haven't given up those New Critical tools. But a published list like they had in the 19th century—high art should do ABC, the next lowest art does this, this,
and this, the distinctions between high art and low art, popular and academic--I think those are all contrived, actually.

Interestingly, one critic mentioned that while there is not necessarily a single objective set of criteria, certain genres do exhibit a "lifespan," and individual works from within that lifespan can be judged as better or worse than others: "So an objective set, no. But does Shakespeare represent the art of the sonnet in its highest and best form? Yes... The sonnet after Shakespeare is not very good. ... So I do believe in a certain kind of a lifespan of a genre, but as far as objective? No, and certainly not across cultures or across times." So while one critic acknowledged that individual genres might establish their own sets of criteria, none of the critics believed in an overall objective set of criteria determining literary quality, instead preferring to believe that, as suggested by their responses to the previous question, literary quality is relative to the reader.

The creative writers, on the other hand, turned out to be quite willing to accept the concept of an objective set of criteria. A couple of writers answered the question directly in the affirmative. One stated that one of the primary goals of teaching creative writing is to get students to recognize the objective criteria making up good writing and then went on to state,

But then there's room for good taste. I mean, there's lots of good writing that I say, "Oh, I know this is good writing, but this isn't for me." I don't like very self-consciously poetic writing, I don't like novels that are so rich you have to work so hard to get through them; I mean, that's my particular taste. Like, for example, The English Patient, which I hated as a book and hated as a movie. I recognize that that was good writing, but I just thought, "Well, it's not good writing that I like." There's even some crappy writing that I'd rather read.

This acknowledgment of a set of literary criteria which supersedes personal taste is a fascinating aspect of several of the writers' responses. When asked what some of the particular criteria might be, one writer provided a few examples: "A certain amount of complexity and depth; the idea of surprise and delight but not off-the-wall surprise; an attention to the richness and beauty of language; the ability to develop narrative tension that
makes you want to read on." Along the same lines, two of the writers, perhaps uncomfortable with the phrasing of the question, denied the existence of objective criteria, but then when expanding on their answers suggested that there are in fact such criteria, whether or not they acknowledged it. For example, one writer, after stating that there are no objective criteria, said, "There is, to my mind, stuff that works and stuff that doesn't work, and it isn't always the taste that determines that." When asked what aspects of a text might make it "work," the writer responded, "A lot of the time we're trying to see what it [the text] wants to be. Does it want to move the reader emotionally? Does it want to be ironic, cool, kind of hip? Does it want to be sincere? Is it so sincere that it calls attention to itself?" So while this writer claimed not to believe in objective quality criteria, the response implies that work which fulfills the expectations of "what it wants to be" is better than that which fails to do so. Another writer denied the belief in objective criteria, but then stated, "But I think there's certain standards you can apply that suggest a sort of hierarchy, and I think it has as much to do with the integrity of the effort as it does with the product. I think there's a lot of literature out there that the author really didn't work very hard at, that really didn't mean very much to them, they just kind of knocked off." These two writers, then, claimed not to believe in a set of objective criteria, but their answers, referring to hierarchies of quality and texts which work or fail to work, in fact betrayed the unacknowledged assumption that literary quality is in fact determined by certain criteria, whether or not these criteria are completely objective.

In sum, then, the two groups responded quite differently to this question. All four of the literary critics denied the existence of objective criteria, while two of the writers accepted the notion and the other two writers denied the belief but then provided answers based on the assumption that the quality of texts can be determined by referring to certain sets of criteria: whether or not the text achieves the effects it seems to strive for, whether or not the author seems to have worked hard at the text.
Concerning the work you do—either your personal writing/criticism or your teaching—why do you think it is important that this work get done? When you teach, what do you most hope that your students take away from your classes? These two interrelated questions provided the opportunity for the two groups to discuss what they ultimately hoped to contribute through their work, and I anticipated that the responses might again be divided along political/personal lines. I suspected that the critics might respond with more politically-oriented reasons, suggesting, for example, that they study literature in order to give voice to previously underrepresented minority groups. On the other hand, I suspected that the writers would see the benefits of their work as a more personal affair; for example, helping individual students to express themselves.

The responses of the critics to these questions varied a great deal. Taking the first question quite literally, one critic discussed the importance of publishing criticism in order to retain a position in the academy: "You need to publish to survive in this field. To publish or perish is true." The other three critics all suggested that working with the literatures of other people and times is important for certain ethical, intellectual or political reasons. As one put it, understanding what others have written is important "simply because what people have done is important." Another said, "I just think that the work of generating and getting for myself cultural awareness is important. So how culture works, and how we construct meaning, and how we have done so in the past, and things we have conveniently forgotten, I think all that makes for a better world." Another critic suggested that "the humanistic function of literature is one of the most important things literature does, and so by expanding the range of literature that's readable now, I think that's a contribution to understanding the human situation." Concerning how these beliefs about the benefits of literary studies translate into teaching, the response of one critic is fairly representative:

I think I want [the students] to be excited about reading and about learning. It's really more of an attitude than the content, although I do want them to read, and I think
that's important, especially for majors, to have a picture of what this field of literature in English looks like, so I think that matters. But what I really most want them to do is to be amazed and get psyched so that they'll keep reading, and so that they'll read deeply, not just for the surface—you know, just kind of getting the plot and never going further—and I want them to keep asking why, and to articulate connections or observe disconnections with regard to ideas, themes—the stuff that makes up our culture. And I want them—this particularly pertains to the freshmen, but others too—I want them to be critical consumers of their own culture, critical participants in it, so they really read.

Although none of the other critics gave so expansive an answer, the rest of their responses are similar to this one. The critics seemed to believe that the function of teaching is to get students to read deeply and critically, which requires the teacher to make literature fun for them. As one critic put it, "When I teach, I like to give people good reads. That is important to me. I want people to have pleasure in reading, and I want them to actually have that as something they can study, their own pleasure. . . . Plus I like them to be readers." If students do learn to appreciate reading, some of the critics assume that this habit will translate into better citizenship, increased cultural awareness, or any of literature's other possible "humanistic" benefits. One critic, however, disagreed with the notion of the beneficial nature of literary studies: "I've never been all that impressed by arguments that show how useful the humanities are. I'm certainly not impressed by arguments that say they're going to make us better people, that they're going to improve the moral level of society, that they're going to provide us with a set of values to live by, because I don't know if the humanities can do any of that." Instead, this critic suggests that studying literature is "an exercise of the mind," which is backed up by an "implicit faith that knowledge has got to be better than ignorance." Overall, however, the consensus of the critics was that it is important to encourage students to read deeply so that they can better understand and participate in society.

Interestingly, the creative writers also suggested that one of the primary purposes of their work is to teach students to be more appreciative readers. As one writer suggested, it is important to have students read published contemporary work in the workshop classroom.
because "we come to writing from being voracious readers. When you see a good writer almost anytime—or even a bad writer—they just read everything they can get their hands on. But not all students who are, say, 19 years old or even 25, have that reading interest that you want them to have." Another said,

I feel like in my writing classes, primarily—and I think this might be contradictory—I'm teaching them to be really good readers. With the majority of the students, what I try to do—because the majority are not writers, they're not made to be writers, actually they don't want to be writers—I hope not to turn them off to writing, not to make it seem like this onerous, burdensome thing, so I like to use a lot of humor and so on in the class and maybe tease them into reading things they might not have read. . . . This isn't a reading culture anymore. It's pretty much a TV culture and I think there's a big loss there, so I think I'm doing something good.

Another writer agreed that the purpose of creative writing instruction has more to do with fostering reading skills than with teaching writing per se: "For me, teaching fiction is less teaching fiction than teaching writing appreciation, like what makes good writing." Along the same lines, another writer wanted to teach students "love of language and artful language and human expression. Love, I'm trying to teach them love, and that's true! That's where it has to be, somehow. I don't know that there is a book I like that doesn't feel loving somehow, in anticipation almost of its next word." At least one writer, then, suggested that teaching students to be appreciative readers also helps them produce better writing. Interestingly, however, a couple of other writers implied that fostering the habit of reading is an end in itself and serves as a worthwhile goal even if it does not necessarily translate into better writing. Of course, practicing specific writing skills does enter into the workshop classroom: one writer teaches narrative structure because students "don't know how to shape a story and create narrative tension to get someone interested"; speaking of teaching the writing process, another said, "I'm primarily providing an opportunity for the students to recognize in their own individual work what others are recognizing as working." So while some of the skills taught in the writing workshop pertain directly to writing, one of the interesting implications of the
responses to these questions is that at least some of the writers suggested that the ultimate goal of teaching writing is not necessarily to make students better writers, but rather to get them to read in more quantity and depth.

Although the responses of the two groups to all of the questions so far have been quite distinct from each other, sometimes even directly opposite, here finally is a point of agreement: the point of the classroom is to encourage students to read more and to read deeply.

**Do you believe that there are any tensions between the disciplines of literature and creative writing?** I chose this question specifically because I wished to test whether one discipline would indicate a greater feeling of tension than would the other one. If, for example, creative writers unanimously agreed that they had experienced tension between the disciplines while literary critics sensed less tension, this might suggest that the literary critics simply paid less attention to tensions that did in fact exist. I guessed that the responses to this question might also help determine whether one discipline is more firmly empowered in the university than is the other; if so, the marginalized discipline would probably remain painfully aware of the imbalance of power and thus perceive more tension than would the empowered discipline.

I discovered, however, that both groups of interviewees did perceive a certain amount of tension between the disciplines, although one critic disagreed: "I am not myself aware that, say, people teaching creative writing think that what's going on in the literature courses is messing up their work, nor do I have a sense as a literature teacher that what's going on in creative writing classes is somehow messing up what I'm doing." According to the other three literary critics, however, the primary source of tension between the fields lies in the fact that creative writers typically do not have enough training to teach literature courses, yet sometimes the university allows them to do so. One critic commented that "the institution of
a course which was a creative writing course but could be used as a literature class—557—was a decision that was fraught with tension." When asked why this tension existed, this critic provided two different reasons:

Well, part of it is just bottom-line economics: how many classes do we have, how many can we fill . . . So part of it is just the pursuit of enrollment, and that's all. But I also think that some of it has to do with professionalism, that I have been through the mill, I am a professional reader. Someone who does not have a Ph.D. does not have that certification.

As another put it, the study of literature is a discipline which is completely separate from the discipline of creative writing: "Are you in the discipline? Then you should teach in it. Are you not? Then you shouldn't." Another said,

Among the literature faculty generally, there's the perception that creative writers don't have the proper training and range to be teaching literature per se. The construction [of literature], yes, they teach that brilliantly, but there's something without the Ph.D.'s in literature, that a lot of them don't have, and continuing critical publishing, which a lot of them don't have, and without that, they don't bring to the literature classroom enough of what you ought to bring to say that you're teaching literature. And so there's a little bit of tension between our M.A.'s and our M.F.A.'s and our Ph.D.'s . . . Nor do I have the skills, of course, to go in and teach creative writing.

These responses imply that literature and creative writing are separate disciplines and should remain that way. (Summing up this attitude quite well, when asked how the two disciplines are different, one critic said bluntly, "Tell me how they're the same.") In other words, even though writers with significant publishing experience certainly understand a great deal about how literature functions, knowing how literature functions is not sufficient training for teaching literature as an academic study, which is a different discipline and necessitates something further, like a deeper background in theory, criticism, and literary history. Two of the critics seemed aware of the apparent elitism underlying this view and tried to distance themselves from the typical attitudes of their critical colleagues, implying that while it is certain that some critics believed that creative writers were not qualified to teach literature,
they did not share these beliefs personally. Only one critic genuinely took personal credit for believing that writers without Ph.D.'s are not qualified to teach courses in literature, while the others tended to note the elitism of the literary discipline as if it were separate from them. As one commented ironically, laughing, "The real active critics, or scholars, are going to see themselves as elite, and writers—I mean writers, you know, they're just making it up!"

The responses of the creative writers to this question varied a great deal. One writer, when asked whether there was tension between the disciplines in this department, said, "No. I feel much more sympathetic with these literature people than with these business and tech-writing types." The other three writers, however, observed some sort of tension; but, interestingly, they did not seem to feel especially troubled by literary criticism, instead seeming simply uninterested in it, while they did perceive that critics were troubled by their relative lack of academic training. One writer, suggesting that critics typically explore subjects which writers find uninteresting, commented humorously, "In Waiting for Godot, one of the characters calls another 'critic,' and it just withers him. It's the worst thing you can do to somebody." Another writer observed that tension arises because writers tend to receive greater attention than critics do: "I think one of the things that rankles the critics in some places is that the writers get attention for what a lot of critics believe is frivolous. There are a lot of people who believe—they wouldn't say this—but they believe that literature worth reading has already been written." Another writer viewed the tension between the disciplines as a struggle of politics rather than academic differences:

The battle has a lot to do with the fact that literature people were really the first people in English departments. And then others started to join in: technical writing, business writing. . . . And this is part of the fighting: the literature people think that creative writers aren't as prepared because they have M.F.A.'s, or they have M.A.'s, or they have publications that allow them to teach. And there is a kind of elitism there in the literature world, where they say, "We had to go to school so much longer than you." That doesn't take into account that creative writers have to spend years and years and years learning how to write, and that literature people couldn't just step over the line and write.
While this writer did note a certain tension between the disciplines based on academic training, it is interesting that this tension is perceived as coming from the perspective of the critics, not from the writers. On the whole, then, some of the writers perceived that critics might be troubled by their position in the university, but none of the writers suggested that they were personally opposed to what took place in the literature program.

The responses to this question were unexpected. I had anticipated that critics, as practitioners of an established, respected academic discourse, would be perceived as more firmly empowered by the university, and thus that writers would observe more tension between the disciplines than would the critics. What I found, however, was the opposite: for the most part, the critics sensed more tension than did the writers, believing that the disciplines of criticism and creative writing are separate and that those trained as writers are not qualified to teach literature. Similarly, the only tensions observed by the writers reflected the critics' perspective, not the writers' own. Clearly, then, the responses to this question suggest that at this university, the literary critics are more concerned and defensive about the creative writing program than the writers are about the literature program. The reason for this might be that the literature program has been declining in recent years, attracting fewer and fewer students, while the creative writing program has become one of the department's largest. Thus, while literature might be a more powerful discipline than creative writing nationwide, at this university the opposite seems to be the case. However, it is interesting to note that unlike writers like Fenza and Lehman who have publicly attacked contemporary critical practices for being detrimental to the art of literature, the writers participating in these interviews expressed no great concern about the discipline of literary criticism except to suggest that it simply did not interest them.

*Have you personally observed any differences between the ways literary critics and creative writers read or respond to texts?* I chose this question for two reasons. For one, the
specific nature of the differences is the central topic of this study, and therefore I wanted to
give the interviewees the chance to directly articulate their opinions on the subject.
Furthermore, however, I was interested in testing whether one discipline knew more about the
practices of the other than vice versa. The most interesting, and also the lengthiest and most
complicated, results of the first section of the interviews emerged in relation to this question,
and they do serve to illustrate some key differences between the disciplines.

Because of their relative lack of experience with creative writing classrooms, most of
the critics were not able to identify many differences between the ways critics and writers
read. The one critic who had taken a graduate poetry workshop recalled that in this
workshop, "People would respond with things they like or don't like. Tentatively--this is not
an absolute--but there was some tendency, I think, to respond emotionally to those texts."
The critic went on to suggest that the instructor of this class was very supportive: "So he
would not criticize or attack a text; it was a real supportive atmosphere. But in the literature
classroom, first of all, the text was pre-existent and older, so it had attained the status of
artifact. They weren't in process: they were products." This critic concluded that in a typical
literature classroom, "You had an intellectual approach to literature, as opposed to an
emotional one." These observations—that creative writing classes deal with works-in-progress
and tend to be emotional while literature classes deal with pre-existent texts and tend to be
intellectual--are about as specific as any of the critics managed to be. One critic had served on
several creative writing thesis committees, and had observed there that "the formalist tools are
still used a lot as you generate a text. You're having to make all these decisions about
everything that's going into it at every moment. . . . And so the very specific, word-by-word
construction of the text that's so carefully refined by creative writers matches formalist critical
training very well." This critic, in other words, did not perceive a genuine distinction between
the interpretive strategies of the two disciplines, instead believing that creative writers
approach texts similarly to the way formalist critics do. Another critic had previously invited
Neal Bowers, a creative writing professor, to speak about his work in this critic's literature classroom, and observed that "there was nothing he [Bowers] said in the course of his talk that I said, 'This totally upsets what I've been teaching them.'" The only minor difference this critic had with Bowers' comments was that Bowers "may allow a greater latitude in what's permissible [in a reading of a text] than I might." So this critic, like the previous one, observed no substantial difference between the ways creative writers and critics read texts. Overall, then, the brief and shady responses to this question suggest that the critics were, for the most part, relatively unaware of what takes place in the creative writing workshop.

It is not surprising that the creative writers would have more to say about the differences between the disciplines than would the critics, since literature classes are a requirement of any collegiate English program and thus the writers had all spent a considerable amount of time in the literature classroom during their training. All of the writers to some extent expressed a disinterest with the kind of textual analysis they associated with literary criticism. As one put it,

I think I read for enjoyment, primarily, and I'm not sure what they [critics] read for, unless it's a different type of enjoyment. I try to enjoy the story; they may be enjoying the context or the ideas that may be derived from it. . . . I don't think I've ever read a book that I liked that I thought was written for critics. I'm just not interested in the word-games and the scene-games and the character-games, the complexity-for-its-own-sake type of writing. I don't care if it's giving me the secrets of the universe if it's not emotionally moving. That's why, actually, I have not gone for a lot of writers that a lot of other people go wild for. They're not singing my song. So they're smart; so what?

This statement suggests a few things: that critics do not read to enjoy stories as writers do, that critics enjoy complexity and "games," and that critics favor the intellectual aspects of the literary experience over the emotional ones. Another writer expressed a similar opinion, saying that, for the most part, literature classes are interesting, but the danger is that they may tend to take too cerebral a perspective on literature and thus miss what the texts are supposed
to do, which is to "create this empathy in you, create this awe and understanding of the world. Some of that is almost ineffable, you can't really explain it, and then [in the literature classroom] you're writing these papers on—you know, papers get very small—'The Nature of Some Symbolic Small Thing.' And so you lose the impact of what the whole work is."

Speaking of the radically different natures of the two disciplines, another writer discussed a previous office-mate, who had been a literary critic: "I know my office-mate was into deconstruction, psychoanalysis and all that stuff and I could hardly talk to her. I mean me and the guy next door spoke a different language." This writer went on to say, "Theory is not interesting to me. . . . I'm interested in something that brings light to the text and in my experience, a lot of this theory doesn't; it's sort of about itself." When asked about some of the specific differences between the ways the two disciplines approached texts in graduate school, this writer said, "They [critics] were generally much more interested in meaning than I was. I'm still not terribly interested in meaning. I'm interested in effect." Furthermore, this writer stated,

> What a lot of criticism does, it sometimes seems to me—I'm not that confident in that generalization because I don't know enough to do that—is that you go to a text to find what you already expect to find, instead of looking to see what the text brings to you that's new and different. Sometimes that's good. You learn certain things. But I don't think that's how I find literature interesting, as another component of a social fabric that tells us something about society. It seems more personal to me.

This writer, then, suggested that writers take a more personal, less social approach to literature, and also that critics tend to approach texts with pre-established conclusions in mind. Another writer similarly argued that critics read texts to find what they expect to find, saying that "some people will actively misread you to really fit in their agenda." One particular writer had a great deal to say about the different ways the disciplines read, suggesting that "we [writers] are looking at the underside of the work. We're looking at it in a maker's point of view." Elaborating on this comment, the writer said that the way creative writers read texts is
analogous to a person who, when shopping for clothing, would "lift everything up and look inside to see how it was made, to see if there was a connection between the price tag, the quality of the material, and the seams." This writer went on to observe that writers can read two ways, one more like a literary critic might and one from the perspective of a maker:

Part of me wants to approach a piece of literature as a made, finished thing, not up for debate—you know, that's just the way it is—and I think this might be a more critical, traditional literary approach. We look at what's in there and what's not in there, and then we connect it to other theories, other writers, and all of that. But there is never a moment when you're in that literary mode when you say, "Gee, I wish they would have written this sentence differently," or, "Shouldn't this paragraph have been over there?" or, "Maybe this character should have this other quality." Like Iago, he doesn't have any redeeming qualities, and like Joe [Geha] says, if you want to make a sympathetic character, just give him an ache, like an ache in his side that he thinks about at night before he goes to bed, and immediately people are going to like him a little bit better. So you can't imagine someone in literature studies saying, "Shouldn't Shakespeare have given Iago an ache in his side?" It's just ridiculous. But in creative writing, the text is more open to those kinds of ideas.

This passage suggests that even when writers are reading as established and canonical an author as Shakespeare, they do not necessarily approach the text as a finished product, instead assuming that possibilities which never entered into the text might have improved it. Thus, this writer concluded, "In the literary way [of reading], the writer is sort of God-like sometimes, you know? And in the creative writing way, the writer is just like a collaborator, a partner, maybe." This writer believes, then, that while critics approach the text as a finished product in order to "connect it to other theories, other writers, and all of that," writers tend to critique the text more openly and evaluatively, entertaining the possibility that it might have been written better. This writer also suggests, however, that writers are able to move back and forth between the two modes of reading.

In response to this specific question, then, the creative writers displayed a much greater awareness of differences between the disciplines than did the literary critics. The critics believed that there is no significant difference between the interpretive strategies
associated with the two fields, that creative writers read much like formalist critics, or else that workshops tend to be emotional while literature classrooms tend to be intellectual. The creative writers, on the other hand, identified several points of difference between the disciplines: criticism tends to over-intellectualize literature, thus missing its emotional effects; critics pick out small details and, in focusing on these minor points so exclusively, fail to acknowledge the broader overall effects of the given work; critics approach texts with pre-established conclusions in mind while writers are more interested in learning what new and fresh ideas texts can bring to them; critics are more interested in how social theories may be applied to works of literature while writers are more interested in how the works function to achieve effects; critics assume that the text is a completed product while writers, even when reading published material, constantly evaluate and critique the text, introducing alternative possibilities which might improve the text; criticism deals more with society while writers see literature as more personal and individual; writers read for enjoyment while critics read to understand the context or the ideas contained in the text; and writers are less interested in textual meaning than they are in effect.

Two other points of difference between the interpretive strategies of the disciplines emerged during the course of the interviews but were not explicitly mentioned in the responses to this particular question. Because these points help to further establish some of the differences between the fields, however, they are worth mention here.

One point which arose with striking regularity in the interviews with the literary critics was the idea of using a text to better understand the culture from which it emerged. In fact, for the most part this seems to be the critics' overall goal: while on the surface they are dealing with actual texts, the fundamental purpose of their work is not to understand how these texts function so much as to study what the texts reveal about the particular sociohistorical environments from which they emerged. One critic referred to works of literature as "historical documents" which reveal the intellectual trends of their times. Another expressed
interest in understanding women's literature as a "response to the lives they were living," thus implying that the function of reading literature is as much to understand the conditions of the authors' lives as it is to understand the specific texts. Another critic suggested that works of literature are "the leavings of a culture," referring to texts as "artifacts." And although this critic was careful to point out that the word "artifact" is not a precise word because it implies that literature is "static like a lump" rather than a "fluid thing" which experiences physical and editorial changes over the years, it was still evident that this critic's primary interest was in texts as "traces of a civilization." Another critic stated that one of the most interesting aspects of literature is that it reveals how people make meaning at any given place and time:

> Just the very fact that people are making meaning and that you can learn that by seeing the difference and complication of books brings a great awareness of how people make meaning and what they shut out—again, there's my psychoanalysis. But it seems to me that one reason I like teaching American literature is that I'm confronting Americans with the unconscious of their history, and then they have to deal with it, and it's a revelation.

These responses all suggest that the critics are interested in what literature reveals about the people who wrote it and the social environments or "civilizations" surrounding these people. According to this view, then, the text serves virtually as a container of ideas, and is useful insofar as these ideas reveal something about the text's culture and time.

Such sociohistorical concerns are conspicuously absent from the responses of the writers, however, who tend to focus on literature's more personal and individual aspects. Rather than society, the writers seemed to believe that literature is actually about individual people, both the people who serve as characters in the text and also the people who will later serve as the audience of the text. One writer explained that the task of the writer involves "figuring out what people feel and what they want and how to produce certain bonds with my readers." Similarly, another writer said, "One of the reasons that I like writing is to meet people." One writer, recounting a negative experience in a college literature class, explained that the professor was analyzing *Death of a Salesman* in a very intellectual way:
I remember coming to this class and suddenly seeing this professor in a whole new way, because he didn't seem emotionally involved. You know, I cried when I read it, and I was so angry I had to leave the class. I couldn't talk about it in this pick-apart critical way, because it was a real work to me and Willie Loman was a real person. So I thought that what we were doing in class was really derivative and smarmy and intellectual.

These responses suggest that writers believe that literature is about the experience of individual people more than it is about the revelation of social truths.

Of course, one of the main reasons for this particular difference between the disciplines probably involves the different situations under which writers and critics encounter texts. As one critic astutely observed, "I think there's always a difference between what's going on when you're trying to write a work of literature, and what's going on when people are later examining it. For one thing, I don't think Dante wrote his poem in order to provide some useful information for Medieval scholars in later centuries." This humorous observation helps to highlight one of the fundamental differences between the literature classroom and the workshop: by the nature of their profession, critics work with texts which have already been written, some of which were written centuries ago in languages which only slightly resemble Modern English and some of which were written in national and cultural environments which are quite foreign from our own. Because these cultural, linguistic, and historical barriers can profoundly affect the meaning of a given work, and because written literature is the best (and sometimes the only) way for a contemporary reader to understand and experience these alternative cultures and times, it certainly makes sense that critics would focus more on these aspects than would creative writers, who primarily deal with contemporary literature, often with the author of the given work immediately present. Rather than recognizing how culture is reflected in texts, then, writers have another purpose; as one critic suggested, "A writer's first concern is probably that he wants someone to read what he's written." Thus, the discourse of the creative writing workshop rarely involves discussion of the sociohistorical
ideas contained in the text, instead focusing on overall structural or syntactical strategies which can make the text appealing enough that it can be published, thereby allowing later readers to make such critical observations.

The other key distinction between the responses of the critics and the writers was the heavy emphasis which writers placed on the unpredictable, mysterious nature of the writing process. The fact that creative pieces seem to "write themselves," to emerge as a result of the writing process rather than through a rational, preconceived plan, was commented upon by three of the four writers but escaped the attention of all but one critic. One writer provided an example of how a creative work can have a "life of its own":

I think sometimes the writer does not know what she is doing and whatever it is is really working, but she doesn't know it, and you have to tell her, "You think you're writing a comic piece here, but this person is heartbreaking, and you don't know that that's really what you're doing." Sometimes I'll show that to a person and they'll say, "Oh, yeah!" and they'll see it, they'll agree. Sometimes they'll say, "I don't want to do that." ... Sometimes the writer is aware and wants a specific effect and sometimes the work itself seems to be working against the effect the writer is trying to put together. So I think that sometimes a piece has a life of its own that the writer is not necessarily conscious of. That's certainly true of my own work.

This response is interesting for a couple of reasons. For one, it illustrates that authorial intention plays a significant part in the creative writing workshop, as the instructor in this example first acknowledges the author's apparent intention but then explains that the piece is contradicting this goal. Furthermore, this response suggests that through the writing process, texts might succeed on vastly different grounds than were intended; the writer in this example responds, "Oh, yeah!," recognizing that, in spite of her intention to write a comic piece, the piece is in fact working well as a tragedy. Writers, then, are not necessarily guilty of what Wimsatt and Beardsley term the "intentional fallacy": they do not necessarily base their aesthetic judgments purely on whether or not the author has achieved through the text the intended effects. Instead, they use the workshop setting as a vehicle for reflecting to the
author what effects have been achieved so that the author may then decide whether or not to alter the work in order to affect the audience differently. Similarly, another writer noted the effect which the writing process can have on a creative piece. Discussing how some writing instructors are more "formulaic," crossing out lines and editing the language of poems, this writer said, "For me, it's hard to draw a line through a line of poetry, because someone with intent wrote that line. They had a reason for it. So while some people might cross out the first five pages and say, 'Start the work here,' I want to understand why someone had to write five pages to get to that point." Like the previous one, this response implies that intention is an important aspect of the writing workshop, but also suggests that studying the way a piece unfolds in the process of writing is an important way of understanding what this intention might be. Another writer suggested that experienced creative writers make better judges of works-in-progress specifically because of their knowledge of the writing process. According to this writer, writers know "what shapelessness might mean in a piece at a certain point, or what certain weaknesses might mean at a certain point." In other words, writers recognize that creative works emerge through a gradual process which involves shaping and weeding out problems at various stages, while literary critics do not necessarily acknowledge this. In these particular interviews, however, one critic did provide some very insightful comments on the writing process:

I think in some way our minds make connections that we're not always self-conscious of. The same thing could be true of writing a scholarly article. If you're thinking in terms of an overall message you want to say, your mind is operating in a way that it begins to make connections to make the whole thing hang together. And it's not that carefully thought out, each and every word you put down, but the words fit because that's the way your mind is operating.

At least one critic, then, recognized that the writing process is non-rational, leading to results which might never have been consciously planned. Interestingly, however, this critic reached a different conclusion about process: "It is indeed possible that the writer intended one thing
and accomplished something quite different. But at that point I would say very likely this indicates ineptness. While the writers seemed willing to grant that the writing process can very successfully lead a creative work away from its intended effect, then, this critic instead suggested that a work which fails to achieve its intended goal is the result of a shortcoming on the author's part. Perhaps, then, here is further evidence that critics tend to view literature as a "container of ideas": the text is intended to convey certain ideas, and if it does not, then it is an inferior text, perhaps useful for later critics, but not successful in its own right. The writers, on the other hand, are more willing to work with the writing process, accepting that works can propel themselves in unanticipated directions without sacrificing their aesthetic worth.

**Conclusions.** This section of the interviews uncovered several interesting points of difference as well as similarity between the two disciplines. It would be helpful at this point to review some of the more noteworthy results of this section of the interviews before moving on to examine how the critics and writers responded to an actual text.

On the whole, the responses of the critics exhibited a few recurrent themes. For one, the critics as a group were more concerned with the need for precise definitions than were the writers, viewing some of the more open-ended questions as vague and problematic. For another, the critics tended to believe that literature is a socially constructed entity, not a pre-existent fact with a universal purpose and value. Similarly, three of the four critics believed that literary quality is completely relative to the reader and the intended use of the text, and thus denied the existence of an objective set of criteria determining literary quality. Furthermore, none of the critics displayed a great deal of familiarity with the writing workshop, and thus were not able to identify many differences between the interpretive strategies of the two disciplines, seeming to believe instead that creative writers approach texts much as formalist critics do. The critics also suggested that creative writing and literary
studies are separate disciplines, involving different types of training and different agendas, and consequently believed that creative writers who had not earned Ph.D.'s in literature should not be permitted to teach literature courses. Finally, the critics suggested that one of the main purposes of reading literature is to understand something about the society from which the literature emerged, thus implying that they read texts as vehicles for extra-textual knowledge.

The creative writers, on the other hand, exhibited less of a concern for definitions, focused on the individual rather than the social aspects of the literary experience, and assumed that literature exists in order to help people make sense of their experience. This view presupposes the possibility of linguistic communication, as texts, through the realm of language, invite readers into worlds beyond their personal experience. The writers unanimously agreed that some works of literature are better than others, and also suggested that there is indeed an objective set of aesthetic criteria determining literary quality. They perceived more differences between the two disciplines than did the critics, suggesting that the type of analysis they associated with literary criticism was, for the most part, uninteresting, overly cerebral, and self-absorbed, exploring texts with predetermined political conclusions in mind rather than allowing the text to influence the reader. The writers expressed less of a concern for textual meaning than they did with textual effect, and were inclined to read for emotional enjoyment rather than intellectual stimulation. Furthermore, even when reading published works, one writer suggested that writers habitually make critical and evaluative comments as if the work were still in process, regarding the author of the text as a collaborator rather than an authoritarian figure who has fixed the text rigidly in its current form. Finally, three of the writers discussed the unpredictable nature of the writing process and the relationship of this process to authorial intention, while this issue was mentioned by only one critic.

Most of this is, perhaps, as should be suspected. The assumptions upon which the creative writers' responses are based—the belief in objective criteria underlying literary quality,
the faith in the communicative capabilities of language, the belief that the author is a collaborator with a text which is not entirely pre-determined, the focus on the unpredictable nature of the writing process—all seem quite necessary to a discipline which regularly renders aesthetic judgments on creative works-in-progress.

**Section Two: The Readings**

In order to provide a concrete example of how the assumptions of the two disciplines play out when interpreting actual texts, the second section of the interviews required the subjects to respond to two brief poems. I instructed the interviewees to respond to the poems as if they had encountered them in their professions (the critics were asked to imagine either that they were teaching the poems or writing about them, and the writers were asked to discuss the poems as if they had received them in a workshop), and I did so because I wanted their answers to reflect the typical interpretive strategies of their respective academic disciplines, not simply their own personal tastes.

The first, untitled poem was written by Bill Hampton, a relatively unknown poet who composed this piece while attending college at Northern State University in Aberdeen, South Dakota:

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Block as the night,
the wind, a square
letter placed on a constructed sky.
The moon, a cube,
dirty and pitted from the touch of small hands.
Animals of the night
stacked upon another
carefully fitting the form of life, bricks in a wall
until the careless came.
Tumbled down came the meticulously placed.
The stacked creatures crushing
one another, the placement
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and order no longer there.
The careless with their
projected perfection and symmetry and thoughtless equilibrium
spherical, cylindrical, tetrahedron
all now, the world perfect.

I chose this poem for a couple of reasons. For one, I was curious whether or not the fact that this poet has not received very wide recognition would be evident to either of the groups of interviewees simply by reading this single work, and for that reason I did not include the author's name with the poem. I anticipated that the creative writers, accustomed to making evaluative comments about creative works, would be more likely to perceive the poem as unpolished and thus suggest that the poet was a relative beginner. Furthermore, the vagueness of the imagery in this poem invites the reader to do quite a bit of interpretation, and I was interested in whether the two groups of interviewees would interpret such a vague set of images in predictably different ways, thus revealing some of the themes and ideas to which the groups habitually return. As in the previous section, I will first outline the responses of the critics and then contrast these with the responses of the writers.

Two of the four critics expressed a significant amount of confusion upon first reading the poem. One stated immediately, "I can't say that I've fully grasped the sense of the poem." But then this critic quickly began to work through the piece line-by-line, idea-by-idea, assuming that it must make sense if read correctly. During this process, the critic commented, "My first inclination is to read it rather as I was trained to read something: look at the text. Not to immediately say, 'How would I use this?' Instead, I'd say, 'What is somebody saying to me? What are they trying to show me?" This critic also expressed an inclination to read poetry "formalistically, grammatically, syntactically." Thus, for this critic, the process of reading a poem involves examining the language of the work very minutely to discover what meaning the piece contains, what specific ideas it attempts to communicate. Working through the poem on these grounds, this critic was drawn to a few specific spots. For one, the
opening three lines seemed ungrammatical, moving from the singular "moon" to the plural "letters." Additionally, this critic was drawn to the image of the "careless": "The meanings to that word: careless meaning clumsy or careless meaning not giving a damn. Both of these ideas may be working here. The identity of the careless, what constitutes the careless. . . ."

This critic also commented on the geometrical images as well as the notion of order and structure, observing, "I see in the poem a kind of objection to geometrical rigidity. That, by the way, would begin to give hints as to a fundamental viewpoint of the nature of reality or what social order ought to be. . . . It may have a political view against anything regimented, anything strict and rigid." Later, after working through a few more of the lines, the critic concluded that "it isn't the idea of symmetry or order or structure that's being attacked here, but a particular form of it that is being applied." The conclusion of the poem, then, struck this critic as ironic: "The world is perfect to the careless with their projected equilibrium; it is not perfect to the narrator of this particular poem." After analyzing the poem on these grounds, the critic complimented it: "I don't find this something that I'd say, 'This is really bad stuff.' It has an intellectual content. There is something here being said." This critic even drew a comparison between this poem and the works of Shelley:

Shelley presents these same problems: syntactical problems, pronoun reference, and ambiguity as to whether you're to read it one way or the other, and it makes a difference as to which way the poem goes. That's not the first time I've read Shelley and I still have those questions: that's the text; it's never going to change; the ambiguity is always going to be there. That will be true of this [poem]. It's always going to be printed that way, and I suppose I'm not the only one to wonder what to make of those [first] three lines.

Overall, then, this critic responded to the poem by trying to understand it on the grammatical and syntactical level, assuming that even though the text might contain ambiguity, it is still capable of communicating certain intellectual ideas if read carefully.

Another critic responded to the poem quite similarly, initially expressing confusion ("I don't know what I would do with this poem") but then working carefully through the poem in
order to understand what it might mean on a basic, linguistic level. This critic commented initially on the unexpectedness of the first line: "'Block as the night': you would expect a word like 'black,' so you're surprised that it's 'block.'" The ungrammatical nature of the first three lines also troubled this critic, as did the term "constructed sky": "I really don't like that term very much; that's a term from criticism that seems to be inserted into the poem, and that strikes me as kind of strange." The image of the stacked animals reminded this critic of "the form of life": "I think of cells; cellular structure is like that." However, this critic also observed, "Animals aren't really like that. What could this person be talking about?" This statement, referring to the author and implying that even while the image of the stacked animals does not make immediate sense, it must mean something, indicates that this critic, like the previous one, reads primarily to understand what is meant to be communicated by the work. This critic also commented explicitly on the image of the careless: "The other thing that really confuses me is that the careless, whoever they are, seem to cause the falling apart of the structure, but the careless have symmetry and equilibrium. So if they have those things, why is there this disorder?" The overall conclusion this critic drew was that "somehow there's a change from a sort of stasis of squareness to the multiplicity of spheres, cylinders, and tetrahedrons, and then the world perfect. I mean, on the one hand it says that there was this order, and now the order is no longer there, but then the world is perfect. So the disorder must be more perfect than the ordered world. But I don't know why." Thus, while this critic's method of working through the poem was similar to the previous critic's—commenting on the language and imagery of the poem piece-by-piece in an attempt to understand what ideas the poem is trying to communicate—this critic draws a more negative conclusion, suggesting that the poem leaves some crucial questions unanswered: "And so I would not teach this poem if I had the chance."

One critic, unlike the others, did not express any initial confusion with this poem, instead stating immediately, "That's really interesting." Then this critic proceeded to address
some of the issues that would come up if this poem were being taught: "First of all, it would depend on what course I'm teaching it in, so the cultural context we've been studying all the way through would matter." Imagining that the poem was being taught in a women's literature course, this critic picked up on "the children's nursery imagery, the animals, the blocks stacked up." The process of teaching the poem, then, would involve asking the students a series of questions designed to get at different levels of textual meaning. Initially, I'd ask what [the students] think is really going on in this poem. Maybe my students would say that it's nighttime and the children have gone to sleep, they've picked up their toys. . . . So something about that time period after the children go to bed and their mother might be sitting in her robe, they've fallen asleep, she's read the book, the lights are low, and before she gets up to go back to her job, this is the poem she thinks.

After exploring the dramatic situation of the poem, which this critic called the "literal reading," the questions would then move on to reflect the narrator/mother's interpretation of the situation on a more thematic level, asking, "What's going on here?" Next, this critic would comment on words that are "heading for the same thing": "blocks," "squares," "bricks," "symmetry," "perfection." The identity of the careless, as with the previous critics, was also of concern to this one, as was the question of whether or not the last line should be taken as ironic. Offering a tentative conclusion about what the poem is about, this critic suggested that after this series of questions, "I'd try to get [the students] to something about the squares and circles and containerization of life being phony perfection, and then I'd wonder whether we are to have a negative view of the careless or a positive view of them, and then I'd probably go back and associate children with carelessness and adults with structure." Through a series of questions, then, this critic explored the poem on a variety of levels: "So there's reader response going on, there's attention to the formal qualities of the text, there's a sort of hesitant biographical interpretation, there's cultural context, there's course context, and that's about it." While exploring many of the same issues as the previous critics had in their more text-based
readings, this critic also expanded the reading of the poem to imagine the dramatic situation of the narrator.

The final critic's response to this poem was based on a series of questions, similar to the previous critic's approach. This one, however, was especially troubled by the fact that no author's name was provided: "You're not going to tell me who wrote it or how it was chosen? I mean, if I were teaching it, I would want to know those things." And though clearly not very impressed with the poem ("I wouldn't write on it; I just wouldn't... It's completely uninteresting to me"), this critic did attempt to understand what the poem was communicating, exploring it in terms of "sources of imagery." Noting that the images of the poem are largely geometrical, this critic suggested that the way to teach this poem would be to ask the students, "What discourse is this? Where are the images coming from?" Examining the poem in that way, the students would see that "these words have a history and a meaning." Another crucial line of questioning would involve how the narrator of the poem is constructing meaning: "How is this voice we see here trying to construct the world? Using what knowledge?" This critic noted that the students might point out that the poem was "choppy and centerless." The "cohesive force" in this poem is "the voice that never appears, the 'I' that never appears. I mean, every sentence is a fragment, and what is being repressed in this poem is what holds those fragments together." Generalizing this discussion of the poem into an overall statement of teaching strategy, this critic said that it would involve exploring "questions of how meaning is being constructed."

The responses of the four critics to this poem primarily centered on questions of meaning. Some, focusing on grammar and syntax, asked what the poem might mean on a surface, "literal" level. Others asked what the poem might have meant to its author or narrator. Some suggested what the poem might mean in terms of specific social situations, and one explored what the poem might communicate about the way meaning is constructed. Interestingly, at least two of the critics did not express a great deal of personal interest in this
poem, yet all of them worked through it with the assumption that it had something to communicate, whether or not they cared to explore what that might be. Only one critic, implying that the poem does not contain the necessary information to make its message apparent, delivered a negative evaluative comment about the poem, and even that was fairly veiled. Clearly, then, the critics perceived that their task in discussing this poem was not to evaluate it, to judge whether or not it is a successful work, but rather to explore its meaning, to express what ideas it communicates on different levels.

The responses of the creative writers, on the other hand, treated textual meaning only peripherally, if at all. Instead of the ideas that the poem communicates, the writers were more interested in whether or not the poem works successfully to deliver an emotional effect. Two of the writers did not think very highly of the poem. One in particular had very little to say about it:

I think it kind of comes to something at the end: "spherical, cylindrical, tetrahedron / all now, the world perfect." I guess some place in the middle, I thought, gee, this is kind of clotted. . . . So it's kind of clotted in the middle: "The moon, a cube," the animals of the night, stacked upon each other; so you've got animals, you've got shapes, stacked animals . . . I don't know. But really, half the stuff I read in The New Yorker I think, "What's this about? I don't get it."

This writer's response, in its brevity and lack of detail, differed considerably from the responses of the other writers, and this might be due to the fact that this writer admitted to not having a very substantial background in poetry and even to not being an especially big fan of poetry (earlier in the interview, this writer had suggested, "I think you can get away with more in poetry. Poets would deny it, but let's face it: it's shorter, and sometimes you can get away with this kind of obscurity because it's poetry.") At any rate, the crux of this writer's response was to attempt to understand the situation of the poem, much like the critics had done. However, this writer's analysis was much more superficial and less systematic than the investigations of the critics; quickly recognizing the difficulty and the ambiguity of the text,
the writer essentially dismissed the poem, suggesting that while the piece might have a meaning, mining for it would not be worth the trouble. Later, this writer made a few more comments about the poem, claiming that "it just seems inelegant -- clunky, burdened by metaphor." The writer did, however, grant that the poem arrives at a "settled feeling at the end." Interestingly, these later comments were evaluative rather than analytical in nature, involving not a quest for meaning but rather an aesthetic judgment. So while this writer's response was more similar to those of the critics than were the other writers' comments, this response still differed markedly from the critical strategy in that it was less systematic, more evaluative, and ultimately more dismissive of the text.

Another writer judged the poem to be of poor quality but also substantiated this belief in further depth. Upon the first reading of the poem, this writer's first reaction was, "It looks to me like the kind of thing you write when you type up a bunch of things and cut the slips of paper and throw them away, then put them all together arbitrarily. It looks like it was arbitrarily put together from typical poetic-sounding phrases." When asked what specific aspects of the poem seemed arbitrary, the writer stated, "It doesn't connect. It doesn't flow. The images are asking the reader to do more work than the writer is. 'Animals of the night, stacked together' -- Where did that come from?" The use of abstract rather than concrete images also troubled the writer: "Projected perfection and symmetry and thoughtless equilibrium' . . . All this abstraction there, this has no place in poetry. Even though it's unified, I suppose, by the idea of geometric shapes all the way through -- but so what? It doesn't do anything for me." Clearly, then, this writer's comments all centered on evaluating the quality of the poem as a work of art rather than trying to understand what the poem might mean in its present state. Ultimately, in this writer's opinion, the poem is unsuccessful because it fails to create in the reader any kind of emotional involvement. The issue of process also emerged in this writer's response:
What it looks like to me is that the writer has laid images next to each other to see if they'd look like they would work, and this looks like maybe somebody's rough draft, which is fine. I mean, that may be a good way to work poetry, to take interesting lines and lay them next to each other and look and see what works, but I think that it needs to be shaped. It doesn't do anything to me.

This writer, then, assumed that the poem might be an earlier draft of a potentially more successful work, granting that this technique might be an effective way of composing poetry but suggesting that at this point, the poem's relative shapelessness reveals that it has not yet been carefully refined. When asked what suggestions to give the poet in a workshop setting, this writer said,

To improve it, I would utterly simplify it, taking out all the abstraction even though he's talking about mathematics, which is abstract. And then I would focus on just one thing—just the sky, just the night. I'd get the animals out of there; they have nothing to do with the organization, the symmetry, the form. And then I'd want it to make me feel something. I don't care to just work out a puzzle. And it does puzzle me, and a puzzle really won't move me just because it is a puzzle. It doesn't do anything to me to solve it, to say that this is interesting. It's not. It's interesting to me when I see that there's a heart there, that somebody's hurting, that somebody feels.

These suggestions—to unify the poem by culling out abstractions and focusing on a single image, and also to introduce emotion into the piece—stem, this writer claimed, from one basic definition of art: "Art is the expression of emotion. That doesn't mean the expression of an interesting idea or a spiritual notion; it means emotion, and if there's no emotion there, I'm not interested." This writer's comprehensive response to the poem reflects many of the assumptions about literature expressed by creative writers in the previous section of the interviews: a belief that some literary works are better than others and thus that individual works are improvable; a belief in an objective set of criteria determining literary quality (good art is emotional rather than intellectual, concrete rather than abstract, unified to singular images); and the tendency to provide evaluative rather than analytical comments, commenting more on the poem's success or failure to achieve effect than on its meaning. The complaint
that "the images are asking the reader to do more work than the writer is" is also noteworthy, relating back to the previous writer's quick dismissal of the poem and highlighting a key difference between the approaches of the critics and the writers to this piece: when confronted by ambiguity or by apparent shapelessness, the critics expressed more of a willingness to attempt to understand the text as it stands, assuming that it must mean something, while the writers' immediate reaction was, instead, to suggest that the poem should be changed.

Another writer was much more appreciative of the poem in its present state and also more tolerant of the poem's ambiguity. This writer's first reaction was to state, "I suspect this was written by somebody who is well known, if I had to guess." When asked what aspects of the poem made it seem like the product of an established poet, the writer produced a few different observations. For one, "It feels like it's taking risks that have a kind of self-assurance to them. 'Block as the night,' I mean that's a risk." Furthermore, "The ending, 'The careless with their projected perfection,' those are nice rhythms. I wish I'd written that ending; that's one of my tests, when I'm jealous." The writer also noted a few further points of interest:

Nice repetition, nice vowel sounds. There's a lot of economy here that I think is interesting. Risky juxtapositions. I like it, even if it came off a Corn Flakes box. So I think it's fresh, I think it's surprising—I like surprise—I think there's comic risk in this piece, and it doesn't let me rest. Maybe the end lines are taking up a series of puns and I'd never get it, but that's all right in my opinion.

While this response was considerably more positive than those of the previous two writers, it still resembles the comments of the writers much more than those of the critics because of its tendency toward evaluative judgments. By claiming that the poem would be acceptable even if the meaning of the poem's puns remained ambiguous, not letting the reader rest, the question of what the poem might mean took second stage in this writer's comments to the fact that the poem was successful, unpredictable, and full of risk. Again, then, this writer, like the previous two, responded to the poem with evaluative rather than analytical comments.
As a group, the responses of the creative writers were much more evaluative than those of the critics, focusing less on the possible meanings of the poem than on the degree to which the poem succeeds in creating noteworthy effects in the reader. The writers who judged the poem to be uninteresting or of inferior quality did not bother to understand the poem as it stands, and the one writer who perceived that the poem was working successfully toward a satisfying effect viewed the question of the poem's meaning to be somewhat moot.

While the critics focused on grammar, syntax, or what the poem reveals about social truths or the construction of meaning, none of these issues proved to be of any significance to the writers, who were more interested in determining whether or not the poem "works" than in what it might signify.

In addition to the previous poem, I asked the interviewees to respond to another brief poem, "Dance of the Macabre Mice" by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Wallace Stevens:

In the land of turkeys in turkey weather
At the base of the statue, we go round and round.
What a beautiful history, beautiful surprise!
Monsieur is on horseback. The horse is covered with mice.

This dance has no name. It is a hungry dance.
We dance it out to the tip of Monsieur's sword,
Reading the lordly language of the inscription,
Which is like zithers and tambourines combined:

The Founder of the State. Whoever founded
A state that was free, in the dead of winter, from mice?
What a beautiful tableau tinted and towering,
The arm of bronze outstretched against all evil!

I chose this poem because it provides an interesting counterpart to the first. On the one hand, the imagery in this poem is equally as vague of that of the other, thus creating a great deal of ambiguity which requires the readers to create their own interpretations. This particular poem, however, was written by a well-established poet, a poet whose reputation brings with it
certain expectations. When presenting this poem in the interviews, I indicated to the interviewees that Wallace Stevens was the author in order to test whether either group would tend to respond more favorably to this poem simply on the basis of the author's status. I suspected that the critics, accustomed to working with "canonical" authors like Stevens rather than contemporary, virtually unknown poets like Hampton, would exert more of an effort to understand this poem, as if the name of the author carried weight which should make the poem more meaningful. Similarly, I suspected that the creative writers might deliver evaluative comments based on their previous familiarity with and appreciation (or lack thereof) of Stevens' poetry.

As expected, including Wallace Stevens' name with the poem did not go unnoticed: several of the interviewees commented directly on the fact that this was a Stevens poem. As one critic complained jokingly when shown the poem, "Oh, man, Wallace Stevens! You need to have a Ph.D. just in Wallace Stevens!" The writers responded similarly. One quipped, "The second poem is by Wallace Stevens, so it's terrific, right?" Another said, "Well, I'm glad I've never had Wallace Stevens in a workshop, because I wouldn't know what to say to him. I don't know how to read Wallace Stevens, and what I love of Wallace Stevens is the most accessible of it." The fact that Stevens had written the poem continued to dominate most of the comments about the poem, even down to referring to the piece: rather than calling it by its title or even calling it "the poem," the interviewees almost unanimously kept referring to it as "the Stevens poem."

Interestingly, the critics tended to render more evaluative judgments on this second poem than they had on the previous one. While all four of the critics analyzed or at least questioned the first poem in an attempt to determine what it might communicate, only one critic took the same approach with the second one, analyzing it line-by-line and concluding that "the whole thing sounds political, anti-establishmentarian and specifically American." The other critics were quicker to dismiss this poem. One stated, "Regarding the Stevens poem: In
truth, nothing about the poem is interesting to me except its baffling obscurity. I'd be unlikely to assign it and even less likely to write about it—unless, maybe, I were inquiring why no one discouraged Stevens from publishing it." Similarly, another critic stated, "I really don't like this poem very much. The references are obscure. . . . I can't imagine writing about it in a scholarly essay—I just would never choose this poem to analyze." The reason for this tendency to dismiss the Stevens poem might, honestly, have something to do with pure time constraints, since this poem was discussed late in the interview process and the critics, thinking about what they had to do next, might not have had time to deliver in-depth responses. However, it might also indicate a tendency on these critics' part to draw conclusions about specific works based on prior familiarity with the authors. Perhaps, knowing that the poem was written by Wallace Stevens and also knowing that Stevens either did not greatly interest them or else was simply too obscure to understand, these critics felt more comfortable delivering quick evaluative judgments and thus avoiding having to deliver lengthy analyses than they might if the poet had been unknown. However, I am hesitant to draw conclusions from these results because of the time factor.

The responses of the creative writers to this poem were fairly similar to their responses to the first one. Again, while one writer expressed some bafflement about the meaning of the text ("I don't have a clue what it means"), all of the writers tended to respond evaluatively rather than analytically, indicating whether they liked or disliked the poem rather than what they thought the poem signified. One claimed to like it "because the language and the images surprise me in a delightful way . . . almost like a Bob Dylan song or a Rimbaud poem, the imagery startles and is fun even though I can't really draw a neat fitting meaning out of it. Frankly, I don't know what it means. But does it have to mean? Can't it just BE, like, say, an old medallion to the thumb?" Interestingly, another writer referred to the same line (from the Archibald MacLeish poem "Ars Poetica") in response to this poem, yet disagreed rather than agreed with it: "I know, I know -- poems shouldn't have to mean but be. I think that's a
crock. That's why poets get away with so much." Despite feeling confused about this poem, however, this writer ultimately delivered a fairly positive judgment about it: "Whatever he's talking about ('the bronze arm outstretched . . .') seems hopeful, life affirming." Also delivering an evaluative comment, another writer concluded, "That one's more accessible than a lot of Stevens, and I like it fine." When asked what might be said to the poet in a workshop setting, this writer answered,

What would I say? I'd say, 'Cool!' And I certainly wouldn't want to monkey around with it. I'd say about it about what I felt about the other poem, and that's that the person who wrote it seems pretty self-assured. My sense is that these are chances that were consciously taken, and even though I may be a little uncomfortable with certain things, I'm not comfortable enough with my own take on the overall design that I'd go in and meddle with it. He really sees his poems as parables, as parabolic. And that's fine, that's playful.

What is notable about the creative writers' responses to this poem is that they generally took a much more positive view of this poem than they did of the previous one. This could suggest a few different things: Perhaps the writers, who exhibited a good deal of familiarity with Stevens' work, decided that since the poet has a solid reputation in the field, the poem must be of fairly high quality. Or perhaps the criteria which contemporary writers call upon to judge the quality of poems are ultimately based on the work of poets like Stevens, and thus they recognize elements such as the ambiguous imagery, the playfulness, and the life-affirming philosophy as marks of good poetry. Or even, if one is to grant the assumption that some pieces of literature are indeed better than others, perhaps the writers recognized that this poem was simply of higher quality than the previous one, and thus deserved praise rather than condemnation. At any rate, for whatever the reason, all but one of the writers responded much more positively to the poem by Stevens than they did to the poem by Hampton.

Overall, the responses to these two poems revealed some fairly consistent differences between the types of textual commentary delivered by critics and creative writers. The critics
expressed a much greater concern for textual meaning than did the writers, who instead tended to explore whether or not the texts worked to deliver satisfying emotional effects. Furthermore, while references to social or psychological factors appeared in some of the critics' responses (inquiring into a poem from the perspective of women's studies or exploring what a poem reveals about how people construct meaning), these concerns were absent from the responses of the writers. Finally, the critics seemed concerned with extra-textual information, wanting to understand what the text communicates about intellectual history, society, or psychology, and thus the text itself seemed slightly secondary to them: they were concerned with what the text communicated, not how the text was constructed. The writers' responses, on the other hand, were very text-based, treating each poem as an individual entity which either worked or failed to work on its own terms. If they perceived that a text was indeed working to deliver a satisfying emotional effect, the writers did not especially care what the text meant, what ideas or truths it signified.
CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that creative writers and literary critics have indeed approached texts with different assumptions about the nature of literature and the purpose of textual commentary, and that many of these differences are still in evidence today. The interviews revealed that the critics, while representing several different literary theoretical approaches, did share certain assumptions: they expressed greater concern than did the writers for precise definitions; they thought of literature as a cultural construct; they suggested that the determination of textual quality is relative to the reader, thus denying the existence of an objective set of criteria; they had little familiarity with the discipline of creative writing and thus could identify few differences between the fields; they suggested that creative writing and literary criticism should remain separate and that creative writers without Ph.D.'s should not be permitted to teach literature courses; and they believed that one of the main reasons to read literature is to understand something about the time and culture from which it emerged. The creative writers, on the other hand, shared certain beliefs which contradict those of contemporary literary criticism: the writers rejected more scholarly approaches to the study of literature, approaches they associated with the cerebral concerns of critics; they expressed faith in the communicative power of language and were troubled by theoretical approaches which make the author seem "beside the point"; they acknowledged the mysterious nature of the writing process yet simultaneously viewed texts as objects which are constructed for rhetorical purposes; they read pieces of literature as "open" and "fluid" rather than "frozen" and "closed"; they assumed that some pieces of literature are better than others and, consequently, expressed more willingness than literary critics to accept that certain objective standards of aesthetic criteria can be applied to determine the quality of texts; and they were less interested in literary meaning than in ultimate emotional effect.
In practice, these different assumptions led to significantly different analyses of actual texts. The critics focused on textual meaning, seeking to determine what the texts communicated about the authors or the intellectual or cultural environments from which they had emerged. They expressed greater willingness to work through difficult passages of the texts, and when confronted by ambiguous sections, assumed that the text must communicate something if read in the right manner. The presence of Wallace Stevens' name on one of the poems did, however, seem to make the critics more likely to dismiss the text without explicating it. While their approaches were alternately grammatical, syntactical, cultural, and psychological, then, all of the critics' readings were focused upon a similar attempt to understand what the texts might communicate. The creative writers, on the other hand, viewed the question of textual meaning as peripheral. Rather than analyzing the texts in terms of content or using them to understand the environments from which they had originated, the writers were interested in evaluating them in terms of effect. If the poems struck them as ineffective on an emotional level, the writers suggested that certain aspects of the pieces should be changed, and if the poems seemed to be working well toward an emotional effect, they did not bother to examine what, specifically, the poems might mean. The presence of Wallace Stevens' name, moreover, did not cause them to treat the second poem differently than they had the first, except that their responses to the Stevens poem were, as a whole, more positive than were the responses to the poem by the less experienced author. Clearly, then, the writers approached these texts as evaluators rather than as interpreters, perceiving the purpose of textual commentary to be the determination of aesthetic effectiveness rather than the illumination of possible meanings.

Lest it seem that I am endorsing the opinion that the disciplines of creative writing and literary criticism have nothing in common, I should reiterate that both groups of interviewees suggested that the main purpose of their teaching is to encourage students to read more deeply and appreciatively. This shared belief in the fundamental importance of reading
suggests that creative writing and literary criticism are simply two different sides of the same coin. As one critic put it, "When it comes down to the individual student, there should be a recognition that what we're all trying to do is get them to tap into their human energy and do creative things which can also be rigorous and disciplinary." Instructors on both sides expressed dismay over the fact that American culture is no longer a reading culture, and so both the creative writers and the literary critics believed that they were fighting the same battle. For this reason, I wholeheartedly agree with one critic's suggestion that "the idea that we're at odds is really destructive."

In fact, my research has convinced me that the two disciplines do misunderstand each other in ways that keep them unnecessarily divided. On the one hand, the writers I interviewed tended to assume that critics take overly dry and intellectual approaches to literature, thus failing to appreciate the art's more personal and emotional aspects. This assumption has led most of them to ignore the discourse of literary criticism entirely, thus causing them to miss out on the many fascinating aspects of literary studies that are currently being explored by critics around the country. It would help writers like these to understand that many of the critics got involved in their field for the same reasons the writers did: they loved to read, longed to understand more about the world of literature, and hoped to help the next generation appreciate the literary experience as much as they did. And while the writers tended to view critical discourse as uninteresting, the critics tended to view creative writers as underqualified, assuming that even though creative writers might know quite a bit about the writing process, they should not be allowed to teach literature classes to students. It would help these critics to understand that the more aesthetically-oriented, evaluative approaches which creative writers bring to texts are not peripheral to the study of literature at all, but are in fact seeking to answer certain important questions: How does literature work to achieve its effects? How do certain structural or syntactical choices influence the ultimate emotional impacts of a work? On what criteria are our aesthetic values based, and how effectively do
these criteria work? What can individual texts teach us about how they are structured? Even while creative writers are primarily interested in aesthetic questions while literary critics are more absorbed by cultural questions, I think that it would benefit both disciplines to begin regarding themselves not as completely separate enterprises, but rather as alternate approaches to the same overall question: What can literature teach us?

As a student of both disciplines, I am convinced that they have enough in common to mutually benefit each other if they would work together. Yet is it possible, at this point in their evolution, for the two disciplines to begin to reconcile their differences, or are there simply too many negative feelings on both sides of the issue? In his textbook Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies, Rob Pope offers one interesting way to merge the disciplines. Intended to be used in literature classes, this textbook offers a methodology which requires students to "engage in structured yet playful rewriting of any text they meet" (xiv). The instructor gives assignments based on several different aspects of the texts: students might be asked to rewrite stories from different cultural perspectives, in the forms of different genres, or with different endings; they might be asked to imitate the styles of certain poets, or rewrite sections of plays with new characters inserted. This method of teaching allows the instructor to bring critically important questions to bear in the classroom, while also encouraging the students to understand literature not as a distant, scholarly enterprise, a world of dry, closed texts, but rather as a fluid, living discourse in which texts are open to creative reinterpretation. Merging aspects of literary criticism and creative writing, this alternative classroom environment enables students to understand literature from a critical perspective while simultaneously experiencing the writing process first-hand. Ideally, such an approach would teach students that, indeed, literary criticism and creative writing are ultimately concerned with the same fundamental phenomenon. This approach demonstrates that it is indeed possible for the two disciplines to work together
constructively. It would ultimately prove beneficial to both creative writing and literary criticism to actively seek out such ways of merging critical and creative strategies.
WORKS CITED


