

Evaluating Creative Writing: The Criterion behind Short Stories' Assessment

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Abstract

Assessment is an essential aspect of creative writing. However, there is not a clear opinion of whether such assessment is subjective or objective, as both types are firmly supported by researchers. The ambiguity of the term creativity adds a problem to the assessment of creative works. Therefore, this study looks at how short stories are assessed in areas which require it such as magazines, workshops and competitions, in order to find out if there is a consensus in the systems used. Professionals that have the job of assessing creative writing were asked to explain how they do it. Through the identification of features in the responses, the results reveal that assessment of short stories in areas which require it is overwhelmingly subjective, even for some features which might be considered as objective in nature.

1. Introduction

The notion of evaluation in relation to creativity seems to be a problematic aspect in creative writing. Mozaffari (2013) says that “the question of whether creative writing can be assessed or not is hotly debated.” (2214). There seems to be a problem with agreeing on a criterion for the evaluation of creative writing since researchers do not reach a consensus. Opinions regarding the assessment of creative writing can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, there are those who think that creativity can only be assessed subjectively (Newman, 2007; Kantor, 1972). Their opinion is that creative work cannot be assessed by means of other than subjective criteria as it is the only source to estimate creativity. On the other hand, those who reject this idea, who have the opinion that this subjective criterion is a misconception, think that there should be a standard criteria for evaluating creative writing (May, 2007; Blomer, 2011; Mozaffari, 2013).

In the case of creative writing workshops, there does not seem to be a standard for assessment as there are in other subjects (Newman, 2007). This seems to happen too in other areas which have to assess creative works such as writing competitions or publishing houses. It is not known if they use a system to evaluate works, and that allows them to decide which ones are worthy of winning competitions or getting published, or if it is all based on the judges’ or editors’ subjective opinion. Some questions may arise from this which would be: Is it, in fact, possible to determine a standard by which creative works should be assessed? Also, is it feasible to expect all professionals who have the task of evaluating creative writing to use such a standard if ever created? No answers for these questions have been found and it may be because of this duality of opinions regarding the evaluation of creative writing. It may be possible to have all of the people who believe in a standard to use it but for those who believe

that that is not a possibility, even if created, it is debatable if they may use it. Another question may arise with regard to creative writing courses and workshops, particularly at university. Is creative writing a serious subject? The fact that there is no agreed standard of assessment, as there is in other subjects, may suggest that creative writing is regarded as a less important subject than Mathematics or Science. Moreover, in these workshops, what exactly is taught? Is it possible to teach creativity or it is writing which is taught? These two questions present a distinction that will be dealt with in the next sections and that is rather important to how creative writing is assessed.

There are quite a large number of books on the market that are supposed to help writers improve their creative pieces and provide them with techniques in order to achieve what they call a work meritorious of getting published. Some of these books even focus solely on how to get published (Ramet, 2001; Ferris, 2005) and are written by published authors, creative writing teachers or editors. They all suggest and try to explain what editors look for in a good creative piece of work. However, these books encounter a problem, which is that all the information and tips they provide are all hypothetical. What is meant by hypothetical is that they do not present real data on the efficiency of the tips they give to demonstrate the functionality of their suggestions, because they all simply decompose writing and the journey to getting published based on the experience of the writers of the books as editors or published authors. As they are deprived of proper research, it is impossible to know if what they suggest might work. It is important to understand that both academia and these books only provide non-verified information on the subject of the evaluation of creativity and creative works. The books are simply self-help books with the objective of helping to improve the writing of the readers. For its part, academia is centered on either presenting a framework to assess creativity with, or explaining why creativity cannot be assessed

objectively. However, those researchers who try to provide a standard for creative writing evaluation and accompany it with data proving the effectiveness of such a standard do not actually confirm that the standard is going to be or is being used outside of the investigation.

With these points in mind, the aim of this study is to investigate the different areas where the evaluation of creative writing takes a central position, these being creative writing workshops, competitions and magazines, and compare the systems used to evaluate creative works, more specifically short stories, in order to see if there is some degree of consensus among evaluating systems or if, alternatively, there is no objectivity.

1.1. The Definition of Creativity

Before entering into the assessment of creative writing, it is essential to define and understand what is referred to by creativity. To give a definition of creativity is important because when talking about the evaluation of a creative piece, supposedly “creativity” is the aspect being evaluated. Ergo, it is evident why the definition of creativity is important in the evaluation process. Giving a definition will subsequently clarify what is being assessed, in this case, in short stories when the assessment processes are studied.

Creativity is stated to have undeniable importance even if “it is relatively infrequently studied.” (Batey 2012: 56) Creativity is part of humankind, one of its most significant areas and resources, yet it seems to be one of the least understood (Maitland, 1976; Batey, 2012). Researchers have tried to define the concept of creativity in different fields with different, and yet similar, results.

1.1.1. Historical Review

It is important to understand that the historical background behind the term creativity has had an impact in how researchers have tried to define and understand the concept (Batey, 2012). Historically, there are three main definitions of creativity and two different perspectives which can be identified in relation to the definition of creativity, which are the Western and the Eastern perspectives.

The western perspective was dominated by the Bible and the story of the creation in Genesis. It defines creativity as referring to “a product that is new or original and useful or adaptive.” (Batey, 2012: 57) Creativity is then perceived as the original product of an individual which has some utility. In contrast, the Eastern perspective defined creativity as an “expression of personal truth or as self-growth.” (Batey 2012: 57)

Later on, during Aristotle’s time, a third definition was given to creativity which identified it “as a natural event that conformed to natural law.” (Batey, 2012: 57) Such an event was related to insanity and delirious inspiration (Albert & Runco, 1999). This definition of creativity leads to creative activity to be connected with the abilities and personality of the person.

The perspective that has dominated creativity research has been the western perspective of utility and novelty. In its beginnings, the western conceptions of creativity saw this concept as a result of divine intervention and associated with mystical powers, as believed by many Greeks. Nevertheless, there is a consequence with this last conception of creativity. As creativity was seen as something out of this world, or belonging to a celestial plane, it turned into a concept that was considered difficult to define and comprehend, and this difficulty to be defined and understood is something that is still believed nowadays.

1.1.2. The Definitions of Creativity

Creativity studies have adopted the Western perspective definition of creativity. For researchers in this field, creativity is all about originality-novelty and value-fulness. Creativity must be regarded as related something which is novel in relation to a particular sociocultural group and is proved to be adaptive to reality (Simonton, 1999; Barron, 1955).

The perspective on creativity presented in Aristotle's time led to scientific investigation in the area of the individual which led to a new definition of creativity as an intellectual trait. Psychological studies focused on this new perspective of creativity, being based on intellectual factors, like intelligence and personality (Batey & Furnham, 2006). However, researchers in creativity as a psychological concept have resisted providing an unambiguous definition, meaning a definition that includes everything that creativity is and what it is not. Creativity needs originality but originality is not sufficient. Creativity may be related to mental health issues but a creative person may be perfectly healthy (Runco, 2004). Therefore, for researchers in the area, creativity is related to individual abilities and personality but that may not be enough and more research may need to be done to be able to provide a clear definition of creativity.

From a metasociological point of view, creativity is considered to be ambiguous. It is used to characterize a person, a process, an activity, a producer and all of them together; however, the meaning of creativity changes when applied to any of them. According to Gotesky and Breithaupt (1978) creativity cannot be given a clear nor "scientifically useful definition." (26) For them, a creative product is a product which is considered and recognized as superior to other products produced in an established cultural and social tradition. The only conclusion they reach is that "the meaning of

creativity is established socially” (37) and the definition of creativity has to take into account the institution and process that assesses the superiority of the product.

Finally, the last definition of creativity taken into account is that of philosophy studies. Researchers in this field consider creativity to be a paradox. This paradox is based on the premise of the artist’s knowledge of the final result of his creative work (Tomas, 1964). In order for a product to be considered creative, the artist or producer “both knows and does not know what he is about to create.” (397) The meaning of this is that the producer does not know what the result of the creative process will be but he knows what he is doing. The artist lacks control in the production of the piece that is being created but has a kind of critical control, which is that he unconsciously knows what he is doing so that he can avoid mistakes, but consciously has no control over the product being produced. Philosophy researchers consider that the creator cannot know the results of the creation in advance for that result to be considered creative. Maitland (1976) gives a definition of creativity as being essentially creative performance, which is a particular way of performing any technique, method, action, or goal, which intends to produce an original work of art. Similarly to creativity studies, creativity is so defined as originality.

1.1.3. The 4Ps approach

An attempt to impose some order in this area is the classification devised by Rhodes (1961/1987) called the 4Ps approach. It belongs to creativity studies and it suggests the four main areas to which the definitions of creativity are related. This means that researchers may study creativity in relation to one of these approaches and therefore the definition varies accordingly. Table 1 presents these four areas to which the definitions of creativity relate and their definition and/or main characteristics. The definitions of creativity are suggested by the 4Ps approach to be broad, meaning that

they may include and take into account characteristics of more than one of the approaches. For example, creativity studies and philosophy studies have a predominantly product-oriented approach in relation to their *new and useful* definition of creativity. The psychological studies definition or approach to creativity is on its part clearly a more person-oriented approach. However, metasociological studies would prefer a product-oriented approach but which takes into account characteristics from the press-oriented approach.

Person	Creativity in relation to personal characteristics. It refers to creativity as a trait of personality, for example, which includes motivations and interests.
Product	Creativity in relation to the results of the creative process. It refers more to productivity than to creativity, which is a problem of this approach. Productivity does not imply originality, a trait assumed for creativity.
Process	Creativity in relation to the process of creation. Research on this area is limited and not given much importance.
Press	Creativity in relation to the pressure issued on the process or person by environmental influences such as culture, family or society. Rhodes (1961/1987) said that “press refers to the relationship of human beings and their environment.” (220) Research on this area focuses on the social implications of creativity.

Table 1: The 4Ps Approach

In the end, it can be determined that creativity, as stated previously, does not have a single definition agreed upon by researchers of all fields but has different definitions which in some cases share features. However, for the purpose of this paper, creativity has to be understood as it is defined predominantly. The dominant definition of creativity is oriented to a product which serves a purpose, as what is being dealt with in this paper is short stories, or creative writing, which is a product. Therefore, a short story is considered creative if it is original or new and useful, and that is what is being assessed if creativity is the part actually being assessed: the originality and usefulness of the short story (Rhodes, 1961/1987; Mumford, 2003; Gotesky and Breithaupt, 1978; Simonton, 1999; Barron, 1955).

1.2. The Assessment of Creativity and Creative Writing

As stated at the beginning, the focus of this study is on the evaluation of creative writings, or short stories, and therefore of creativity. Once it has been stated what creativity and a creative product is, we can move forward into the evaluation of creativity and creative writing. Previously, the problem with creativity and assessment was explored and the duality of this problem was stated. However, a further distinction has to be explored, which is that of “creativity” on one side and “writing” on the other side. “Creativity” is something ambiguous as originality may be regarded differently from different points of view. On the other hand, “writing” has norms; it has been standardized into features according to stylistic, format and grammar considerations.

A problem which arises in the evaluation of creative writing is whether the construct being evaluated is “creativity” or “writing”. We have already seen that creativity is understood in different ways, and it is not obvious how these might be evaluated objectively. How, for example, does one evaluate “originality” except on the basis of personal judgments? On the other hand, writing is a skill which can be taught, and there are norms which allow us to distinguish between good and bad writing. From this point of view, creative writing could be evaluated according to a system of rubrics, standards or checklists, such as that proposed by Mozaffari (2012), which will be later discussed, in an attempt to make evaluation more objective. Gotesky and Breithaupt (1978) discuss these standards, which they call art-standards, and state that:

The members of the art-institutions¹ use and apply fairly well-established art-standards; and such art-standards are not, in general, arbitrarily created. They develop out of the complex process of producing and evaluating the vast number of 'art-products' produced for selection and acceptance. (29)

¹ They mean by art-institution that “composed of housing, productive materials, tools, machinery, and persons who are more or less professionally engaged in the production, distribution, and composition of art-products.” (Gotesky and Breithaupt, 1978: 26-27)

These standards have the function to help the art-distributors, which in the study would mean the people in charge of evaluating creative works, determine and select the best among the products they receive. The principal idea would be that standards are being applied in institutions but in the case of creative writing these existing systems are unknown. Academia has tried to create different techniques to assess creative writing objectively with the purpose of presenting the best methods to assess creativity and a standard. However, the main problem with these studies is that it is unknown if the techniques proposed are being used in areas which have to assess creative works. Along with determining if there is a degree of consensus among systems used, this being either an objective system or contrastingly all subjective, this study will also try to determine what is being actually assessed, “writing” or “creativity”. In the following subsection, the techniques that have been presented by academia will be reviewed to determine how they assess creative writing and what they assess for the purpose of classifying the techniques accordingly and putting it into practice later on.

1.2.1. Assessment Techniques

The methods to assess creative writing can be divided into three categories: (a) based on theories of creativity, (b) based on attributes theoretically linked to creativity and (c) based on judgment of experts of the field (Mozaffari, 2012).

1.2.1.1. Based on Theories of Creativity

Theories of creativity try to explain the process through which creativity occurs. They regard the “individual” or the creator of the product and the way he or she creates and think of creativity as the attribute of a person. They are normally belonging to psychology and cognitive science. Divergent thinking is one of these theories, and it seeks ways to generate ideas about something (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In relation to this theory of creativity, tests have been developed in order to evaluate creativity

based on the premise of the theory, such as the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking. The problem with the tests based on the divergent thinking theory is that they are too broad as they seek the answer to “the question of how many uses one can imagine for various objects and therefore lack sufficient validity for evaluating creativity in domains such as writing” (Mozaffari, 2012: 2214). Moreover, the validity of these techniques has been questioned as they rely on the validity of the theory it is based on and most have been proved to be useless to assess creativity in writing (Baer & McKool, 2009).

1.2.1.2. Based on attributes linked to creativity

Assessment techniques based on attributes associated with creativity are most likely than not rubrics, and so they are objective techniques. They are able to include the characteristics relevant for assessment in a very organized way. In relation to creative writing, several rubrics have been developed to assess creativity, focusing in “writing”. Mozaffari (2012) states that there is a problem with these rubrics:

They either contain criteria which are too general (e.g. voice is distinctive, work is original, scenes and events are memorable, etc.), irrelevant to creativity (e.g. spelling, grammar, punctuation and syntax are correct, organization is clear, etc.) or left some important aspects behind. (2215)

Blomer (2011) suggested too that rubrics are the most consistent method of evaluating writing but that the majority of them have problems. These rubrics seem to lack validity because they seem to forget that creativity is achieved through language and therefore its assessment should be focusing on features of creative language such as images, voice, characterization and story. Mozaffari (2012) provides an analytic rubric that solves, theoretically, all the problems that the rubrics designed previously have by identifying the major attributes or qualities of creative language (see Table 2). According to the rubric, she analyses a piece of writing to exemplify “good” and “bad” writing (see Table 3).

Criteria	1. Poor	2. Fair	3. Good	4. Excellent
Image	No use of significant details (sole use of abstractions, generalizations and judgments)	Minimal use of significant details (they are significantly less than abstractions, generalizations and judgments)	Several use of significant details (they are significantly more than abstractions, generalizations and judgments)	Maximal use of significant details (there is no or just 1 abstraction, generalization and judgment)
Characterization	No use of characters' physical appearance, action, thought, symbol, etc. to reveal characters (complete direct characterization)	Minimal use of characters' physical appearance, action, thought, symbol, etc. to reveal characters	Several use of characters' physical appearance, action, thought, symbol, etc. to reveal characters	Maximal use of characters' physical appearance, action, thought, symbol, etc. to reveal characters (complete indirect characterization)
Voice	No use of images to make the voice appealing	Minimal use of images to make the voice appealing	Several use of images to make the voice appealing	Maximal use of images to make the voice appealing
Story	No use of narrative to convey purpose (purpose is conveyed through formal statement)	-	-	The use of narrative to convey purpose.

Table 2: Mozaffari's Framework

<p>Example 1: (Flat writing)</p> <p>Debbie was a very stubborn and completely independent person and was always doing things her way despite her parents' efforts to get her to conform. Her father was an executive in a dress manufacturing company and was able to afford his family all the luxuries and comforts of life. But Debbie was completely indifferent to her family's affluence.</p>	<p>Image: poor, the work is replete with judgments and generalizations: Judgment: <i>She was stubborn- She was independent- She was indifferent to her family's affluence.</i> Generalization: <i>She was doing her way- Parents' effort- All the luxuries of life and comfort.</i></p>
	<p>Characterization: poor, the character is developed directly through mere description.</p>
	<p>Voice: poor, there is no image to make the work appealing.</p>
	<p>Story: poor, the purpose is conveyed directly rather than through narrative (the reader is directly told that Debbie is stubborn and indifferent to her family).</p>
<p>Example 2: (Creative writing)</p> <p>Debbie would wear a tank top to a tea party if she pleased, with fluorescent earrings and ankle-strap sandals. "Oh, sweetheart," Mrs. Chiddister would stand in the doorway wringing her hands. "It's not nice."</p>	<p>Image: excellent, the work is free from abstractions, generalizations and judgments. Instead, it provides some details which imply the same concepts: <i>Debbie would wear a tank top to a tea party if she pleased, Debbie preferred her laminated bangles = she was stubborn.</i></p>

<p>“Not who?” Debbie would say, and add a fringed belt. Mr. Chiddister was Artistic Director of the Boston branch of Cardin, and had a high respect for what he called “elegant textures,” which ranged from hand-woven tweed to gold filigree, and which he willingly offered his daughter. Debbie preferred her laminated bangles.</p>	<p><i>“Not who?” Debbie would say, and add a fringed belt = she was indifferent. Mr. Chiddister was Artistic Director of the Boston branch of Cardin, and had a high respect for what he called “elegant textures,” which ranged from hand-woven tweed to gold filigree, and which he willingly offered his daughter, but she preferred her laminated bangles = her parents' effort, her parents' affluence.</i></p>
	<p>Characterization: excellent, the personality of the character is revealed through her actions rather than directly.</p>
	<p>Voice: excellent, as the above-mentioned examples show the work is replete with images to make the voice appealing.</p>
	<p>Story: excellent, narrative is employed to convey the purpose (Debbi is stubborn and indifferent to her family).</p>

Table 3: Sample analysis²

1.2.1.3 Based on judgment of experts of the field

Also called consensual assessment, the basis of this technique is that of a group of experts rating the creativity of products. There is not a set of standards and is, therefore, an assessment based on the subjective opinion of judges about what is considered creative in a specific field (Baer & Mckool, 2009). This type of assessment could be called “intersubjective evaluation”, as it is a survey of subjective opinions. The validity of this technique is then questioned by those who believe that creativity can be assessed objectively because in contrast to the previous two, there are no objective standards. This technique without a doubt assesses “creativity” and belongs to those who think of creativity as something which can only be assessed subjectively.

² Examples are taken from *Imaginative writing: The elements of craft* (Burroway, 2011).

2. Methodology

In order to answer the question presented previously on whether there is a degree of consensus in their evaluation systems or if there is no objectivity, professionals of the areas in which creative writing is assessed were contacted to collect the data required. More questions have been raised in the introduction such as what is being assessed or taught in workshops, writing or creativity, and that the study now aims to answer. The professionals contacted belong to three categories: (1) university teachers of creative writing, (2) competition judges and (3) editors of short stories publishing magazines. They were asked by means of electronic mails to explain as extensively as they could the system or methodology, if there is one, and process they apply or follow to evaluate creative writings. They were also asked to include any framework or rubric or any kind of extra materials they may use during the process of evaluation. If relevant and applicable, they were asked to include in their explanation the most relevant or indispensable features a short story must have to be awarded a prize, publication or a high grade. Short stories competitions are found in magazines and thus the e-mails sent to competition organizers also included questions regarding the differences in assessment in the submissions for competitions and the general submissions.

The expectations were mainly that systems of evaluation would exist, but there would be little consensus among them, and possibly a small portion would rely on subjective opinions to assess short stories. It was also expected that the writing part would be the one being given more relevance over creativity, meaning originality. In short stories workshops, the part which would be taught would be writing since teachers would consider that creativity cannot really be taught, so they would teach creative language, meaning how to express creativity through language in features such as voice or images.

2.1. System of evaluation of data

The data acquired was analyzed in order to facilitate the final answer to the research question, and the other questions presented throughout the introduction. In the explanations provided by the professionals contacted, different features of what they look for were identified and given a classification name, as they may have appeared with different phrasings. Therefore, the data was tabulated by means of looking for what they assess, or what is important for them in a short story. Table 3 exemplifies how data will be presented in the results. The contacted personalities are given labels according to the category they belong to so that university teachers are listed as Teacher, competition judges as Judge and editors of magazines as Editor. The professionals and the phrasing used to describe the feature, if there is, will appear under each feature identified. Then, the features will be classified as belonging to subjective or objective assessment, “creativity” or “writing”, to see where the consensus is. The next section will present the results of the study using this method and a brief description of the data.

Feature 1	Feature 2	Feature 3
Editor x: phrasing	Editor x: phrasing	Editor x: phrasing
Editor x: phrasing	Editor x: phrasing	Editor x: phrasing
Editor x: phrasing		

Table 4: Example of Data Analysis.

3. Results

The total of electronic mails sent was 103. To the category of editors of magazines specialized in the publishing of short stories were sent 25. To the category of competition judges, which sometimes included as explained previously short stories magazines, were sent 33 electronic mails. Finally, to the category of university teachers were sent 45 electronic mails. Out of the 103 mails, there were only 8 responses, which can be seen in full in the Appendix 1. From the responses, 7 belonged to editors and 1 belonged to teachers. Eight separate features were identified from the responses. Tables 5 to 8 show the features, with the respondents' exact wording. These features can be classified into subjective or objective features (see Table 9).

Effect on the reader	Originality
Editor 2: Absorb completely; Win the Reader over; Compelling.	Editor 2: New; Something that is not like anything read before; Unique.
Editor 3: Compelling; Will not leave The reader alone; Cannot stand the thought of not publishing	Editor 3: Feel important in some way.
Editor 4: Grab the reader; Pique the interest.	Editor 4: Have not recently published something similar.
Editor 5: Hold the interest; Challenge the reader	Editor 5: Pushing boundaries; Blending genres; Challenging genre; Something that is not like anything read before; Fresh and new;
Editor 6: Worthwhile or illuminating.	Editor 6: Not outright redundancy of previously printed works. Editor 7: Unusual; original.

Table 5: Analysis of Data (I)

Quality of language	Voice
Editor 2: Be taken by language; Surprised by individual sentences; Entertaining language.	Editor 2: Unique voice; Consistent voice.
Editor 4: Grammar and spelling.	Editor 5: Experimentation with voice and POV
Editor 6: Beautiful language. Teacher 1: Good writing takes significant rewriting; effort put into revision.	Editor 7: Distinctive and fluid voice.

Table 6: Analysis of Data (II)

Narrative structure	Identifiable genre
Editor 4: How stories show action (rising action structure); Complex story structure; Good plot; Circularity. Editor 5: Beginning and ending are important.	Editor 4: Clear expectations.

Table 7: Analysis of Data (III)

Emotionality	Accuracy of facts
Editor 3: Deep work. Editor 7: Strong, emotional core.	Editor 4: Get the facts right

Table 8: Analysis of Data (IV)

Subjective	Objective
Effect on the reader	Quality of language
Originality	Voice
Voice	Genre
Emotionality	Accuracy of Facts
	Narrative structure

Table 9: Classification of Features

The category of editors presents a higher number of respondents that refer to “Originality” and “Effect on the reader” as important in the assessment process (see Figures 1). Figure 2 shows the average of subjective and objective assessment features present in the responses, where a preference for assessment based on the subjective opinion of the editors, and sometimes of the volunteer readers that carry out the first reading of the submissions, can be appreciated. However, objective features have representative numbers too. This implies that short stories editors may use both subjective and objective assessment to evaluate creative works.

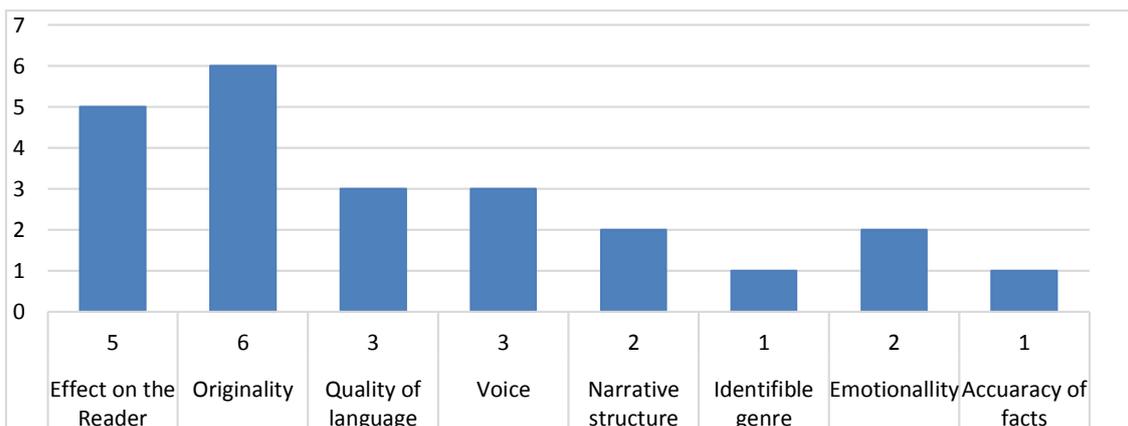


Figure 1: Features in Editors’ Responses

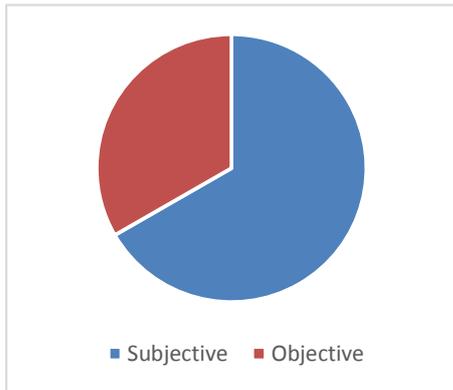


Figure 2: Average of Subjective and Objective Features

The category of the university teachers cannot be compared since there is only one response but that may be analysed and presented as follows. The single response only presents one of the features identified across responses for creative writing assessment this being “Quality of language”. However, this

does not imply that assessment in workshops is objective. This will be discussed in the following section.

In the case of the category of competition judges, there was not a single response out of the 33 electronic mails sent. This makes the analysis of data impossible in this area.

Taking into account the 8 responses and analysing the two categories together, we can see how creative writing is assessed outside of academia proposals. Figure 3 presents the features present in the data acquired for all categories.

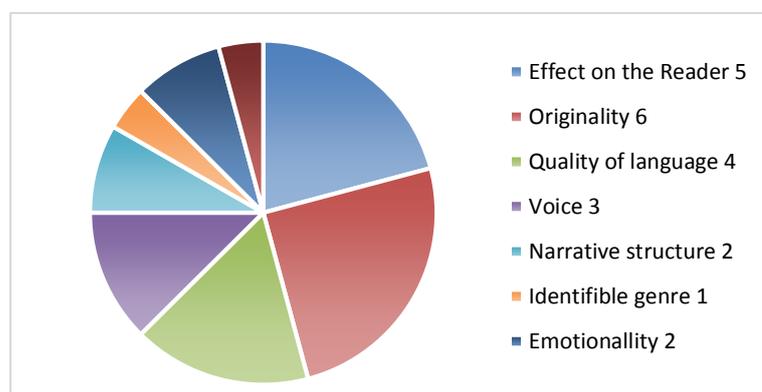


Figure 3: Features in all Categories

4. Discussion

Before interpreting the data, some comments on the difficulties of data collection can be made. Firstly, gathering data electronically implies that a lot of trust is put into the selected respondents as they have the choice to answer or not, which a face-to-face gathering of information would not give so easily. As a result, the number of responses, and of data, is unknown until the very end. Secondly, different persons may understand questions differently. The responses vary from one respondent to another, not just in length but also in how they understand what was asked. So, they vary in how they respond to the same question, apart from the obvious differences there may be in the processes and assessment techniques they use and explain. The phrasing was different when referring to the same thing and that is why feature categories had to be created to organize all the phrasings and similar ideas.

The purpose of this study was to find out if, taking into account the diversity of opinions regarding the assessment of creative writing, there was nevertheless some degree of consensus among evaluating systems. It was expected that some evaluating systems consisting of objectively evaluable features would be used, but that some degree of subjectivity would be present. The results, however, do not conform to this expectations.

In the area of publishing short stories, where assessment is essential to determine which stories are worth publishing, the most consensus was on subjectivity. Some of the responses stated explicitly that their processes are mostly subjective. Editor 1, for example, did not present any feature of the ones identified because the magazine responded with a simple *completely subjective here – no methodology – and we'd stay away from any magazine that felt otherwise*. Editors 2, 3 and 5 also used *very*

subjective, completely subjective or simply *subjective* to refer to their process of assessment. Only Editor 7 admitted to have a both subjective and objective process.

These processes may vary slightly. However, they all appear to depend on intersubjective evaluation, as they are surveys of subjective opinions of a number of readers. Some have a crew of volunteer readers or “slush readers” that are the first line of defense the short story has to go through, and that is totally subjective as no guidelines or standards are given to the readers as Editor 5 says:

If I define exactly what [our] Magazine is looking for and give our slush reader exact guidelines with check boxes to determine if a story should move ahead in the editorial process then eventually all of our stories are going to start looking the same.

Others have the stories go through different editors before getting to the editor-in-chief or they all read it at the same time and discuss it in an editorial board. Editor 5 explained very convincingly the subjectivity by which short stories are assessed when they said *[they] are all looking for the same thing: dark science fiction, fantasy, and horror that pushes the boundaries of genre, but what that means is different for everyone involved from the slush readers up to the editor-in-chief.*

Most of the respondents in the category of editors gave a similar response. There is no objectivity in their assessment because each of them looks for something in a story, which may be that it affects them in some degree, which is the feature identified as “Effect on the reader”. This feature is one of the most relevant, just behind “Originality”. “Emotionality” is the last subjective feature that is present though just a couple of responses identify it as important.

However, even if assessment is mostly subjective, objective features are also present in a majority of the responses. Even so, only one of the responses admitted to using extra materials to assess objectively. What happens it is not that they evaluate creative writing objectively, but that sometimes the editors take into account features

that are normally assessed objectively, but assess them subjectively. This can be seen in the feature “Voice”, which has been identified as both subjective and objective. This is because, in order for the short story to make it to publication, the voice cannot be, as Editors 2, 5 and 7 identified, inconsistent or familiar. Consistency can be identified objectively but originality is noticeably subjective. Therefore, editors assess a feature that would be objective such as voice but do so subjectively by means of looking for an original voice. Moreover, Editor 2 said that *sometimes we'll be taken just by the language in a story, it can be rewarding just to be surprised by individual sentences*. This means that writing may win over creativity in a number of cases, that “Quality of language” is important too. “Narrative structure” is also taken into account in a number of cases as being important in assessment. However, apart from Editor 4, editors do not use anything that can be considered objective assessment such as rubrics to assess these features. They seem to trust their subjective opinion in being able to identify “good” or “bad” writing and to ask for rewriting when necessary, as Editor 2 and 5 explain. Even so, sometimes stories that do not fulfil these features have been published because they have been enjoyed, as Editor 7 explained, meaning that other features such as “Effect on the reader” or “Originality” are more important.

In some cases, the selection process includes objective limitations, meaning characteristics that must be fulfilled in order for a short story to be considered for assessment, and that are important for some of the editors. Editor 6 explains them when he says that *there are some objective criteria that generally need to be met. We rarely run anything longer than seven thousand words, we rarely print "genre" fiction (sci-fi, Westerns, romance, etc.), and we wouldn't print anything pornographic, and so on*. Generally, the objective criterion that needs to be fulfilled is that the short story has to fit in in the magazine's style or preferred genre or genres of the editors. That is not

always the case though. Some editors look for something in the genre, like experimentation with genre, and for them that is relevant for assessment, included in “Originality”. On the other hand, Editor 4 presented a feature referred to as “Identifiable Genre”, which implies that genre must be clearly presented and identifiable.

Thus, it can be concluded that, for editors, short stories can only be assessed subjectively, as Editor 4 confirms with the words *if it wins enough of us over, we publish it* or Editor 3 explains by saying that *[the editorial board chooses] the pieces we can't stand the thought of not publishing. Stories that won't leave us alone.*

Regarding the area of university teachers of short stories workshops, the results were rather interesting. Because there was only one response in this area, an answer to the research question cannot be given but this single response gave some remarkable insights in the teaching of creative writing. The response given by Teacher 1 only presented one of the features that were being looked at in the analysis but it cannot be concluded from this that the assessment is objective in workshops. That is because, according to the response, *it is unproductive to actually put grades on creative work.* Teacher 1 believes that grading creative writing limits the experimentation with creativity and writing, and compromises the artistic choices that may be made by the students. Creativity cannot be assessed, as a consequence, and only writing may be assessed, and even then, only *the effort put into revision.* Therefore, assessment in the area of teaching regarding this single response is neither objective nor subjective because creative writing is not assessed. However, since they do assess something which is revision or rewriting, they must have some kind of objective standard to assess writing or maybe, like editors, they trust their subjective opinions to regard something as “bad” writing or in need of improvement. However, creative writing as is understood

is not assessed and therefore, there is no consensus of subjective or objective assessment.

This can be connected to the question raised in the introduction which asked what was exactly taught in the workshops and if it was possible to teach creativity or if only writing was taught. The expectations for these questions were that the part which would be taught would be writing since teachers would consider that creativity cannot really be taught, so they would teach creative language instead. The results corresponded to the expectations in this case, since Teacher 1's response implied that creativity is most definitely not taught and it is not possible to teach it because it is a personal thing, meaning that creativity in a short story is made out of the artistic choices of the author and artistic choices cannot be taught. Creativity may involve experimentation with writing and language and that cannot be taught either. What may be taught is how to improve the writing in relation to stylistics through the revisions and rewritings. One last question was presented in the introduction relating to creative writing, which was: Is creative writing a serious academic subject if it does not have a standard of evaluation like other courses such as Science or Mathematics? The fact that there is no standard could be related to creativity being an abstract concept difficult to assess by means of objective criteria. Without further responses however, the answer to this question remains unclear.

As seen in the results, there was not a single response from competition judges. It could be suggested though, that due to the close relation between competitions and magazines and the fact that a great deal of competition judges are also editors, that the results would have been similar to those in the area of publishing magazines. Regarding the process of assessment, it would not be too extreme to suggest that the assessment

would be done by means of the same kind of intersubjective evaluation already described.

Taking into account everything that has been said regarding the research question and the answer the study provides, it could be concluded that for those whose responsibility involves the evaluation of creative writing there is no objectivity in assessment, and that creative writing can only be assessed subjectively like Kantor (1972) or Newman (2007) postulated.

To bring this discussion to a close, we can return to a few questions which were suggested earlier. Firstly, is it possible to establish criteria for the evaluation of creative writing? The answer seems to be yes, but it is doubtful that creativity is what would be evaluated. Secondly, would professionals use it? The responses discussed in this paper suggest that they would resist such an attempt, and seem to agree that such a system would work against the very originality which they value. Another question is, can creativity be assessed objectively? The responses seem to agree that that is not the case. Creativity can only be assessed subjectively. Finally, is it “creativity” or “writing” which is evaluated in creative writing assessment? Since assessment is subjective, and the responses explicitly say they look for original work, then “creativity” would be the aspect mainly assessed.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the main findings of this study are as follows. Short stories are assessed subjectively by editors in short stories publishing magazines. Creativity is given the most relevance and is the most important aspect, the one being assessed, in creative writing. Moreover, creativity must be applied to writing, meaning that characteristics of creative language which are identified as belonging to writing, such as voice, images, and so on, must be original. Nevertheless, the study is not conclusive. The low number of results does not allow much interpretation and contrast of the data. The answer to the research question could be given more convincingly and accurately with a larger amount of data.

The contributions of this study can be identified as enlightening the methodology followed in areas where creative writing has to be assessed in contraposition of what some researchers like Mozaffari (2012) suggest with her rubric. Assessment in the areas studied is definitely different than what academia and those who support objective assessment of creative writing suggest. In areas that assess short stories, there does not seem to be objectivity nor are rubrics used. It is also different to what self-teaching books suggest is looked for, since they give a lot of relevance to writing characteristics. Short story writers may have faith in their artistic choices and be aware that creativity, meaning originality both in the story and the writing, is important and the most conclusive part in the evaluation of creative writing. Creativity, unlike writing, is not a technique that can be studied and applied. The “good” short story will always have some factor which is both easy to see, and at the same time, elusive.

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Appendix 1: Full Responses³

Editor 1:

Completely subjective here – no methodology – and we'd stay far from any magazine that felt otherwise!

Editor 2:

Thanks for getting in touch. What a daunting task you've chosen for yourself! I'll do my best to describe our process here at [our magazine], although it's very subjective and difficult to explain.

Our Editor always says he's looking for something that makes him miss his subway stop. He wants to read a story that absorbs him completely and makes him forget the real world. I am just looking for something new, something that is not like what I've read before. Good fiction will illuminate part of the real world in a new way, and I'm looking for that experience. But sometimes we'll be taken just by the language in a story, it can be rewarding just to be surprised by individual sentences.

I know that's all vague and subjective and in some ways seems to be dodging the question. But it really is a vague, subjective, and dodgy process. Here's how a short story ends up in our magazine. There are a few ways:

1. The Slush Pile: This is the least common way for fiction to make it into our magazine. We receive over 15,000 submissions every year during our nine month submission period. A crew of volunteer readers, roughly thirty of them, read those submissions. After two or three reads, it either moves up to me or is rejected. After I read it and think it is worth publishing, I take it to my co-editors on our editorial board.

2. Agents: Most of the fiction we publish comes from literary agents. They send us work by writers they represent, and our editors in New York and Portland each pick the best of those stories to bring to our editorial board.

3. Authors: If we have a relationship directly with an author, we'll sometimes see work from them via email or something. It's a fool proof way to get good, fresh work, but it sometimes means the story will need a lot of editing.

Once it gets to the editorial board, our entire staff reads it. We discuss its merits at a meeting. We listen to what everyone else sees in the story, we say what we like and don't like about it. We try to decide if it is worthy of publication, basically. If it needs work, we talk about what kind of editorial work we would be willing to do on it. Usually this process is pretty straightforward. We trust each other and know that each of us has different tastes, but has a gauge for what we think "good fiction" is.

It's often easier to say what good fiction isn't. It's not necessarily saying that something is bad, but just that it's not "good fiction" as Tin House sees it. This would be first and foremost any story that does not compel the reader to finish it. A story that has too familiar a structure. A story that has too familiar a narrator. A story that has anything in it that is too familiar will probably not get into the magazine. A story that has an inconsistent voice won't make it into the magazine. A story that seems to want to tell us something we already know will not make it into the magazine.

Basically, the story must be unique, it must explore a unique area of life, and it must be told in a unique voice. Of course, it must be compelling as well, and there are many ways to compel the reader: the language might be entertaining, the story might be suspenseful, the stakes might be high, and the philosophical inquiries of the story might be interesting. It can be funny, exciting, romantic, sweet, disturbing, or otherwise charming.

³ Responses have been edited to correct grammatical mistakes and erase the identity of the respondents and non-relevant information like greetings or farewells.

These are ways to win a reader over. If it wins enough of us over, we publish it.

I hope this is helpful. There is no rubric for us to hold short fiction up to, and there is no objective way for us to say what's good or bad fiction. We just have to have a sort of survey of subjective opinions and trust that it's right.

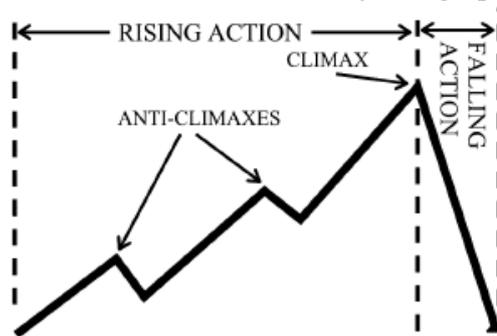
Editor 3:

For us the process is completely subjective. We're looking for compelling, deep, and artful work. Each piece we accept has to feel important in some way, even if it's a humorous piece. We receive so many thousands of stories every year and we have room to publish only 40, so we choose the pieces we can't stand the thought of not publishing. Stories that won't leave us alone.

Editor 4:

The answer to your question is complex, since there are different criteria for literary or genre short stories. Genre, in this case means science fiction and fantasy, which we publish, which may be literary but is not always literary fiction. Let's talk about adventure stories first.

First of all, I'd like to show you a graph of how stories show action.



Note the two smaller climaxes and then the large, grande finale climax. The longer the story, the more room there is for smaller climaxes. So a piece of flash fiction, generally a length of about 1,000 words will only have one climax, while a longer story will have as many as it takes. For an article on this, please read:

https://dokuwiki.noctrl.edu/doku.php?id=ger:101:2010:fall:bruce_reif

A good example of a piece of flash fiction with only one climax is our story, "Glitch."

"The Third Attractor," by Mjke Cole, is over 5,000 words and therefore has a more complex structure. First you have the mystery of who is the jazz saxophonist who understands her computer search for what separates AI-created and human: first climax. Then there is the second climax, at breakfast at the conference hotel, where the young researcher finds out that the modern jazz saxophonist is a priest, and also the keynote speaker at her math conference. And finally there is the scene at the end where the young researcher is called up to the dais by the keynote speaker, and their joint discovery is announced.

A good example of a very complex story structure is "Metamorphoses in Amber." In that story, you have the climax of the heist gone wrong, and the protagonist Flea getting shot and healing using amber. Then there was the crisis of his getting ill with an uncontrollable sex change illness male to female and a series of crises as he looks for a cure. First his meeting with Spider, then his illness getting worse, then his meeting with Mantis, then the proposed dangerous deal that might cure him. The action keeps rising as Flea gets sicker and the treacherous mantis traps him in her castle. Then Mantis lets him see the fire amber. In the final climax Flea tries to use the dangerous Fire Amber to try to change back into a man and it backfires and nearly destroys them all. So he uses the stolen amber from the St Petersburg amber room to damp it, and realizes he needs to

cooperate with the phoenix in the fire amber. The falling action, when he comes out of the amber cocoon as a woman, reveals that he has saved the phoenix from Mantis by becoming pregnant with it. Mantis is foiled in her attempt to change back into a man and Flea is resolved to protect the secret child.

"Metamorphoses in Amber is more of a series of rising steps, a sawtooth diagram rising ever high as the stakes are raised.

There are certain things that do not qualify as true stories under the above definitions. A "slice of life" story just tells about a day in an ordinary life. Many literary stories are slice-of-life vignettes but readers who are searching for entertainment don't seem to like them (they are often assigned by teachers and read unenthusiastically, in my experience.)

First, for an informative but humorous take on the subject, please read my short editorial, "Rejectomancy".

Obvious things like lots of spelling or grammatical errors will nix a story, as will sending stories outside of our scheduled reading periods, or sending things we specifically say we do not like or publish. But what else will get a story rejected?

The first thing we look at is the opening paragraph, not the cover letter. If we happen to know the name of the writer it is almost of no importance to us because we often get works written by well-known authors that have been rejected by other more profitable venues, for good reasons. Only the work counts. Does it grab us? And by 'grab us' I do not necessarily mean that you have to start with explosions or a chase scene: we are more looking for what I like to call a "What the hell?" moment: a question generated in the reader's mind that can only be answered by reading further.

Another thing we ask is whether the opening of tale sets clear expectations. For example, can I see if this will be an SF or F story right off the bat? Some stories are a mix of both, and that's fine as long as you do not mislead the readers. Finding out its one thing when you think it's another can be a great "reveal" that unravels a mystery, too, but it should not feel like the writer set us up for one thing and gave us another in an incompetent 'bait-and-switch' scheme. Misdirection has to be intentional, like a false trail in a mystery plot, to be acceptable. See our "Emmett, Joy and the Beelz" for a tale where you think it's a *deal with the devil* story and it turns out to be something else entirely.

Can I tell who the protagonist is almost immediately? Is it obvious even by implication that the lead character is male/female human, magical creature, alien, beast, angel, demon, or ghost? If I cannot tell, readers may form incorrect expectations and be blindsided by finding out that the character is male when they thought it was female, young when they thought it was old and the reader then gets thrown out of their suspension of disbelief.

Okay, aside from mechanical things like grammar and spelling and following the guidelines, you can now see why we might reject something that tells us nothing about the character, or fails to pique our interest with questions in our mind, or makes us wonder what sort of tale we are in or who it's about. Why a piece is *accepted* is more complex and has to do with the editorial team, various knowledge-based consultants, and slotting stories into an existing magazine that has certain goals and has published other (potentially too similar) things.

We publish half science fiction and half fantasy. And we get at least ten times more fantasy than science fiction, so we have to work on rewrites more in science fiction and be a lot more ruthless in pruning the fantasies. That's one element of an acceptance and I hear it's the same at other magazines in our field: there is just less SF

written than F, and that ups the chances for SF tales being accepted while lowering the odds for fantasies.

Another element of acceptance or rejection is that we might have already accepted or published something similar, and if that story was recent or is upcoming this will knock an equally good story right back to the author, with a regretted rejection. We'd have taken it otherwise. It happens.

Then we come to that hard to quantify thing, editorial style. A magazine like *Lackingtons* is all about the style of writing. *Analog* is all about science fiction and has more room for hard science and puzzle stories. *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* likes humor. Certain editors prefer subgenres such as slipstream or steampunk. *There is no substitution for reading several issues of a magazine* to try and pick up on an editor's sense of *style*. I, for example, enjoy stories with a hint of mystery, different cultures, good plot resolution, and circularity. I have an aversion to retold fairy tales, elves, vampires and an absolute horror of zombie fiction. I make my negative preferences known in our submissions pages, but the positive ones are most evident in what I publish. Another example: the former editor of *Realms of Fantasy* famously hated cat stories. It was in their guidelines for all to see.

I do not read everything submitted to us. I have first readers. My staff knows my preferences. They pass science fiction up to me, even if it's slightly flawed, and automatically reject zombie fiction.

Things that are passed up to me are what I call Second Opinion pieces. Here is what happens with those.

- Sometimes I have to let the stories rest after reading them until I am sure that they are right for us, or at least to get the best feel for why we rejected it, so I can let the author know they were so close with this one, and what was wrong.

- Sometimes I ask for a rewrite on certain lines. Example: I needed a new, different end for "The Fifer of Moments."

- It's a good story, but did they get the facts right? Sometimes I am not sure of a piece for knowledge based reasons. I have a stable of consultants on everything from atomic physics to far eastern mythology to psychiatric disorders. I send some stories off to one of these experts to ask if the writer got the scientific facts or mythology or symptoms correct.

Editor 5:

[Our magazine] currently has 26 slush readers. I divvy up all of the submissions – we typically get between 700 and 1,000 stories every month equally among them. As for guidelines as to what sort of stories we're looking for I tell the slush readers that we want dark science fiction, fantasy, and horror stories, stories that push the boundaries, that blend genre. (I also suggest reading a few issues of the magazine.) So right from the start, we are setting up a selection process that is very subjective. What someone considers boundary pushing or dark is going to vary from person to person. This is on purpose. If I define exactly what [our magazine] is looking for and give our slush reader exact guidelines with check boxes to determine if a story should move ahead in the editorial process then eventually all of our stories are going to start looking the same. [Our magazine] strives to publish fresh stories, stories that experiment with voice and POV. We want stories that are new.

Once our slush readers have read a story they simply vote yes or no on it. If they vote no, I send the author a letter declining their submission. If they vote yes, then I read it. When I'm reading stories I'm looking for several things. First, does it hold my interest? That may seem obvious, but the majority of the stories I pass on simply don't keep my attention. Second, do I feel like I've read stories like this one before? Some

plots have been done to death. We aren't interested in those. Beginnings are important, because you have to hook your reader, but the ending is just as important. Mostly I'm also looking for stories that feel like [our magazine] stories. I know that is very vague, but that is the best way that I can think to describe it. I've turned down stories that I loved because they didn't feel like [our magazine] stories. They were either not dark enough or there wasn't a strong enough speculative element or they were too rigidly defined by one genre. We want stories that challenge the reader and the genre.

After I read the stories, any that I feel would be a good fit for [our magazine], I send up to our editor-in-chief. He reads them about a month or so after I've read them. If he comes across one that he likes, we normally discuss it, dissecting what we feel are the strengths and weaknesses of the piece. Ultimately the decision of what stories are published comes down to [the editor-in-chief].

Selecting stories for [our magazine] is subjective. We're all looking for the same thing: dark science fiction, fantasy, and horror that pushes the boundaries of genre, but what that means is different for everyone involved from the slush readers up to the editor-in-chief.

Editor 6:

We don't have a rubric by which we judge submissions, fiction or otherwise. I know this is a slippery answer, but we generally just try to determine what would be a good fit for the magazine: what is in keeping with what we usually publish without being an outright redundancy of something we've printed in the past; what will be worthwhile or illuminating for our readers; what might fit into a thematically linked issue that we're putting together. As we say on our submission guidelines, we often don't know what we'll like until we read it.

With that said, there *are* some objective criteria that generally need to be met. We rarely run anything longer than seven thousand words, we rarely print "genre" fiction (sci-fi, Westerns, romance, etc.), and we wouldn't print anything pornographic, and so on.

Our process for unsolicited submissions is that a reader evaluates the piece and, if it seems like something we could potentially publish, he/she writes a comment sheet and passes it along to another member of the editorial staff. That reader then writes his/her own comments, and passes it along once again. For pieces that our head editor might be on the fence about, we have a monthly meeting where we discuss five to eight manuscripts and decide if they're right for the magazine.

Editor 7:

I would say that choosing stories for [our magazine] is both subjective and objective.

[Our magazine] has a very clearly defined "style" when it comes to its fiction. We lean toward stories that have a beautiful language to them, as well as an unusual story. We're most drawn to contemporary fantasy, and seek out stories with a strong emotional core. We like unusual stories with a fluid and distinctive voice, with specific and original images.

At the same time, there are stories that haven't fit this mold that we've enjoyed, so in that instance, it is more subjective as it comes down to the reader's personal preference. That's one reason we have a handful of readers, because everyone brings their own experiences and preferences to the table, so in that way, we expose ourselves to more and different kinds of stories than we would were it just one reader.

Teacher 1:

I can give you a short answer to the question. We feel it is unproductive to actually put grades on creative work because we feel it inhibits them from taking

chances in their work and, as you can imagine, aesthetics are subjective. Grading student work tends to reward the more careful and popular aesthetics and undervalue the experimental – or possibly vice versa depending on the professor. Instead we grade on the quality of the critical essays on craft that the student writes and the quality of the critiques the students write to each other in workshop. These are elements where grading does not compromise artistic choices. At times we do grade the effort put into revision. We feel that is fair and not discouraging, as it is pretty safe to say that any good writing takes significant rewriting.