

Epistolary Literature and Journalism: Theoretical and Practical Aspects

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ABSTRACT

The relevance of the research problem is caused by the lack of a single complete system for determining the subgenre differences in the epistolary genre in literary criticism. Thus, this research is devoted to the problem of clarification of the difference between epistolary literature and epistolary journalism in their development over time. The comparative analysis of the main aspects of the epistolary genre of fiction and journalism was conducted. The research also provided a survey of 360 respondents: 180 writers and 180 journalists. The aim of the questionnaire was to confirm or to refute the hypothesis: there are some key differences between epistolary literature and epistolary journalism, which suggest that they are two varieties a single of the epistolary genre. Moreover, the paper bridges the gaps in the epistolary terminology. The content of the paper will be useful to journalists, researchers of the epistolary genre, and literary critics.

KEYWORDS

literary criticism, epistolary literature,
epistolary journalism, the perception of epistolary
subgenres, stylistic features of a letter

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Introduction

The epistolary genre, being flexible and plastic due to the nature of its predecessor – the oral dialog, is capable of adjusting to the communication stylistics (Beshukova, 2014) and the genre of the text (Quinn, 2015), and transform, when needed, within the framework required in any given discourse (Pearl, Lu & Haghghi, 2016). This happens even with the foreignness of the originally spoken nature of the epistolary genre in regards to the text genre (Kauffman, 1988).

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Therefore, it is relevant to divide the epistolary genre into several variants of its use: everyday epistolary (private correspondence between persons), journalistic epistolary (a letter that can be addressed to one person or an entire community, but is published in this or that form in mass media or other channels of mass communication), and fiction epistolary – the conveyance of the thoughts of an author of a fiction work using all the rules of the epistolary genre (Fesenko, 2008; Senichnikina, 2015).

This research analyzes the nuances related to the distinguishing of subgenres in the general epistolary genre.

Literature Review

Modern studies of the epistolary genre fail to come to a single and clear definition of terminology – whether or not the epistolary genre should be considered an independent genre with its distinguished subgenres or a part of fiction (Jolly & Stanley, 2005; Nim, 2014; Jansson, 2006; Kuryanovich, 2015).

The nature of the epistolary genre makes it so plastic that it can adjust to fit the needs of communication in the communicants' environment (Couldry & McCarth, 2004). This is explained by the fact that the epistolary genre is a direct descendent of oral communication – mediated, written dialog communication between people unable to engage in direct oral dialog (Vinogradov & Skvortsov, 2014).

If the epistolary genre is used in a fiction text, it transforms to fit the needs of the text and acquires the attributes of a fiction text. Its expressive means are modified in accordance with the author's intent, the plot of the work, and its characters (Kuryanovich, 2013). Furthermore, according to Ye. Senichkina (2015), the entire factual nature of the epistolary genre, as its main stylistic feature, in this case is subject to the artistic intent, i.e. the documental nature of the letter is transferred into the mythopoetic sphere of the author.

If the epistolary genre is used in mass media, it acquires the attributes of social evaluation (Serdali et al., 2016), public expression (Adams, 2009), and bears the signs of a request or appeal to a specific addressee or a wide audience of readers (Buchanan, 2014; Kachkayeva, 2014), depending on the context of the published letter, etc.

However, it is worth noting the lack of a single opinion that would organize an orderly system of differences between these subgenres of the epistolary genre (Kuryanovich, 2014). Therefore, this research makes an attempt to determine the specific differences and similarities between fiction and journalistic epistolary and to check empirically the hypothesis regarding their different nature.

Aim of the Study

This study aims at outlining the boundaries between epistolary literature and epistolary journalism by determining the distinguishing features of each category and analyzing the survey of journalists and writers.

Research questions

The research questions were as follows:

What are the main features of letters of epistolary literature and epistolary journalism?

What are the differences in the purposes of using letters by journalists and writers?

Method

When dividing the subgenres of epistolary literature and epistolary journalism, this research made a list of features that should be used to differentiate and identify said subgenres.

An empirical sociological study was carried out to prove the necessity of distinguishing these genres for the purpose of correct work with the epistolary genre.

The survey included 360 respondents, including 180 journalists who used the journalistic epistolary genre at least once in their professional activity and 180 writers who used the epistolary literature technique (they included letters of characters in their works or organized the entire text or part thereof in epistolary form) at least once.

According to the logic of the research, the respondents were divided into two groups. The questions for the first group (journalists) were as follows:

- Have you ever written letters in the journalistic style using mass media and mass communication channels? (Two answer options)
- For what purpose did you write a public letter? (Four answer options)
- In your opinion, does the epistolary form of text in journalism differ from the epistolary form of text in fiction? (Two answer options)

After the first group of respondents answered the questions, it was familiarized with the abovementioned differences between the epistolary genre in fiction and that in journalism.

The questions for the second group (writers) were as follows:

- Have you ever written letters in your works for the purpose of artistic expression? (Two answer options)
- For what purpose did you write a letter in your work? (Four answer options)
- In your opinion, does the epistolary form of text in journalism differ from the epistolary form of text in fiction? (Two answer options)

These were followed by open-ended questions:

- Compare a journalistic letter about the divestiture of nickel deposits and a letter, which was stylized to fit the journalistic style, about a similar topic from a fiction work. Do they differ? If so, then how?
- In your opinion, would it be reasonable to divide the epistolary genre into epistolary literature and epistolary journalism?

Data, Analysis, and Results

The letter itself is a combination of facts of various styles and fictional facts; it also performs the function of a delayed dialog, i.e. it has a set of genre-defining features that are in effect regardless of the context in which they are used. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the epistolary genre exists only because its genre-defining features are consistently observed in this or that interpretation, regardless of their use in a respective functional style of a language – a business



letter will have its special constructions, but the structure of the letter – the address, the greeting, the main part, and the conclusion – will be preserved; the same applies to a scientific letter, private letter or a letter of a fictional character to another/other character/characters.

We identified the following features, while analyzing the epistolary genre:

- Dialogical structure of correspondence (the author of the letter, regardless of its subgenre, uses the structure of the letter, implying the postponed dialogue of the author/authors and the addressee/addressees).

- The content of the letter usually determines its shape. If the letter is written in formal language, its form will correspond to the generally accepted rules of the formal correspondence. Similarly, the letter, implying the use of the epistolary genre in literature, with a high degree of probability will be stylized as a personal, business, scientific or any other correspondence, but it will use many techniques of artistic expression.

- The narration in the letter is always first person and singular, with the exception of journalistic letters that may begin from a group of authors, respectively, its addresser will be several/many authors, and the letter will be written in plural.

- Framing – the letter, regardless of the subgenre, in any case, has a framing, corresponding to the rules of the epistolary genre: it uses the address, the greeting, the final forms of the conclusion, dating, and signatures.

- The principle of keeping intimate and dialogical nature of the letters. The author may address the letter to general public (for example, using letters as artistic technique in the design of a literary work), but as a rule, its vocabulary will be drawn from a particular author to a specific recipient.

When defining the characteristics of epistolary literature, we have identified the following distinguishing features, in addition to the genre forming that we have listed above:

- The use of framing address to current characters/character of literary works in artistic epistolary sub-genre. Therefore, if the novel featured the character M and character N, then their correspondence may have the nature of personal everyday correspondence on various subjects, or it may be an appeal of M or N to the public, but it will remain the appeal of a literary character to other characters in singular or plural.

- The use of a large number of expression means in the artistic epistolary subgenre. It is clear that such means can be used when writing an everyday or journalistic letters, but the original purpose of any literary read is an appeal of the reader's consciousness to the space of the literary work, respectively, all used techniques will be focused on "turning" the reader to the reality depicted in the literary read.

- The purpose of a letter in an epistolary subgenre of art is to show the personal experiences of the hero-author of the letter of certain plot events of the novel. Sometimes the author can totally change the story of his work or turn the unexpected side of work to the reader using a letter.

When defining the characteristics of epistolary journalism, we have identified the following features, in addition to the genre forming that we have listed above:

- Handling through media channels. This can be media (newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, online media), and equally it could be the channels of mass communication, which have nothing to do with the media – personal communication, communication through organization, communication via the Internet – for example, sites that support public petitions (Change.org and others)

- Personalized character. As a rule, the text of a publicistic letter is addressed to the person – not to man, but to a public figure, not to a narrow circle of recipients, but to interested persons.

- Emotional intensity. In contrast to fiction epistolary literature, journalistic epistolary is characterized by the use of manipulative technologies. Largely, journalistic epistolary uses it as a tool to change public opinion, attitudes of society. The similar artistic epistolary techniques can be used, but mostly, the journalistic writing is characterized by specific methods of psychological manipulation, not artistic expression.

- Everyday form. In most cases, journalistic epistolary operates with slang and colloquial expressions, which are designed to change the consciousness of society in the direction of the point of view of the journalistic message author.

- A wide range of subjects. If art epistolary is aimed at revealing the relations between the characters or clarifying the individual parts of the artistic reality, that journalistic writing has the nature of the problems important for society, or for the author of the letter, who wishes to draw public attention to the letter categories and problems.

- The impact function, both from the information and emotions. When implemented in journalism, a letter ceases to perform its main function – delayed communication between two people, and becomes an effective manipulative tool, which helps to influence a wide audience with the purpose of forming its opinions and behavior modification.

- The combination of expression and standardization. An interesting effect has the combination of psychological manipulation techniques that are aimed not only and at the rational side of individual and mass perception of the main message of journalistic writing, but also at emotional acceptance of the basic idea of writing. This allows perceiving the ideas contained in the journalistic letter from a less critical point of view.

In the study, we have set the task to prove that there are several subgenres in the epistolary genre, and tried to focus on the epistolary fiction and art journalism. Let us present the results of empirical research.

174 journalist responded positively to the question of whether they ever wrote letters in a journalistic style, using the channels of mass media and mass communication. Six respondents gave a negative answer (Figure 1).

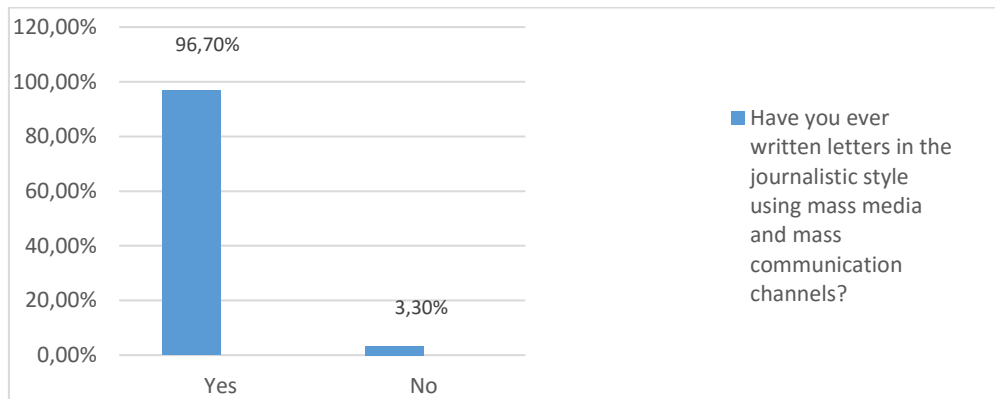


Figure 1. The proportion of respondents, writing and not writing journalistic letters

Answering the second question, the results were as follows: the majority of respondents (110 people) wrote a public letter to change public opinion in favor of the author's perspective, 30 people – in order to attract public attention. Other journalists stated informing society about the problem, as well as forming the desire of society to act according to the text of the letter (14 and 26 responses respectively) among the objectives of writing public letters (Figure 2).

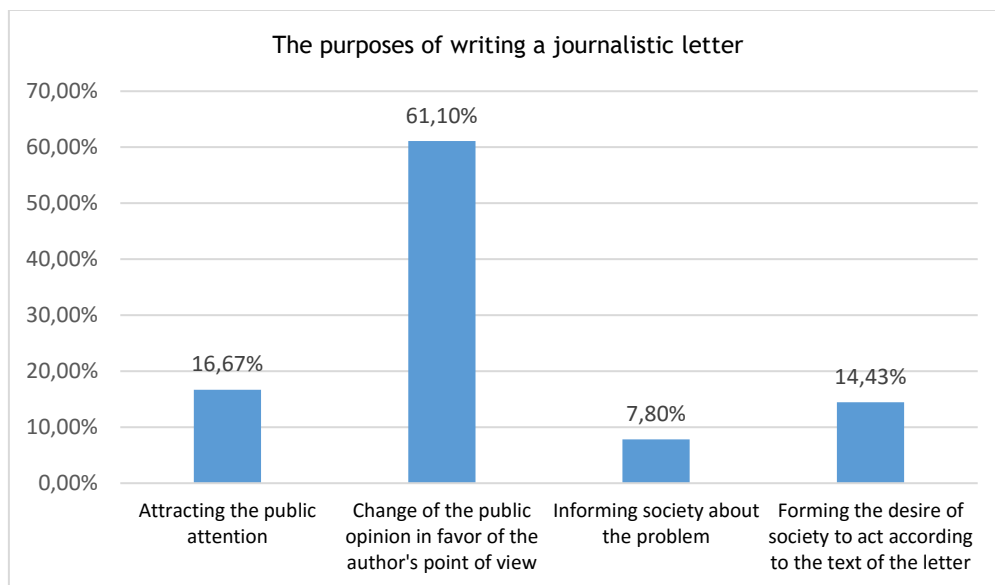


Figure 2. The respondents' answers on the purposes of writing a journalistic letter

Therefore, we see that from the point of view of the purpose of writing journalistic letters, journalists mostly believe that nonfiction letter is to change public opinion in favor of the author's point of view.

Summarized results of the answers to the third question prove our assumption that epistolary journalism and art epistolary differ from each other. Therefore, 156 respondents believe that the epistolary form of the text in journalism is still different from the epistolary form of the text in the fiction literature (Figure 3).

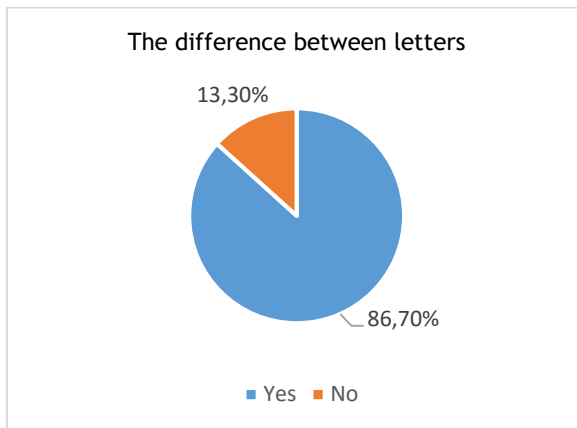


Figure 3.The difference between letters in journalism and in literature

Having acquainted with the differences between the epistolary in literature and epistolary in journalism, we have conducted the second part of the research.

Let us represent the summarized results of the second stage.

The survey showed that the majority of writers (170) have written letters in their works in order to strengthen the artistic expression. Ten people answered that they have not use this technique (Figure 4).

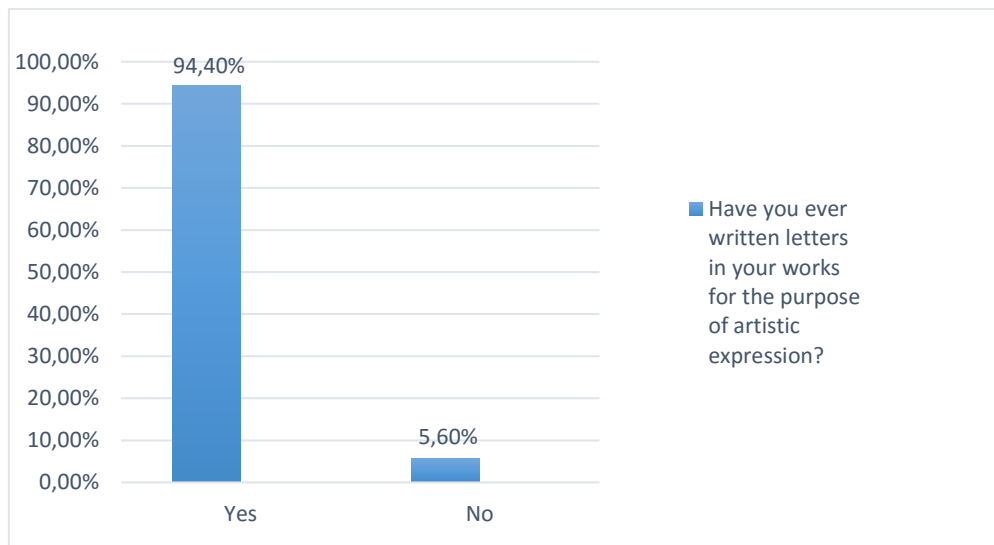


Figure 4.The ratio of respondents who have and have not written letters in literature

Answering the second question, the results divided as follows: 142 respondents determined the strengthening of artistic expression of the text as the main purpose of writing a letter in the fictional work. 14 people use this technique to reshape the reader's opinion in favor of the author's point of view of the ("for" or "against" the character), the same amount of people use it to inform the reader about the events in imaginative reality or actions of the character. 5.5% of respondents have marked the role of the letter in drawing the reader's attention to some information/problem (Figure 5).

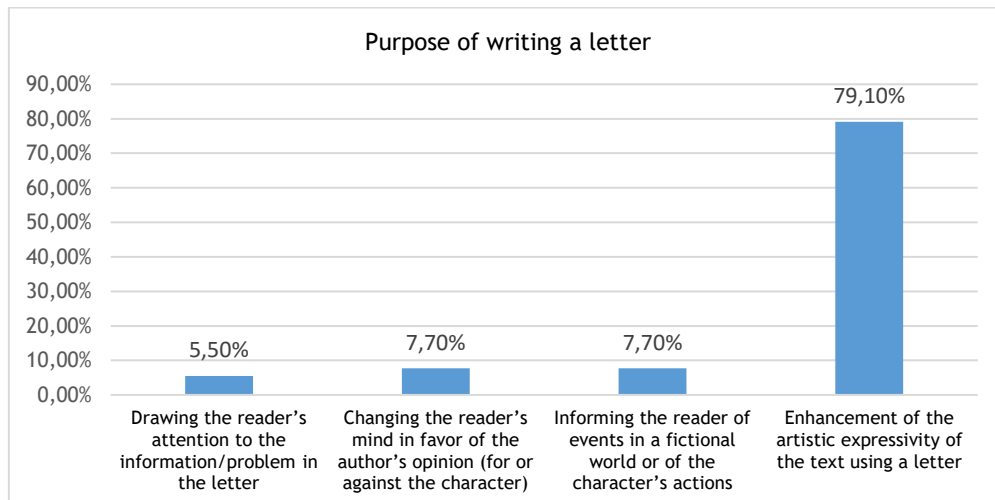


Figure 5. Responses according to the purpose of writing a letter in fictional work

Thus, we see that according to the purpose of writing a letter in fictional work, writers generally pursue an aim to enhance the emotional impact on the reader, using the letter as a mean of artistic expression.

Moreover, 156 writers subscribe to an opinion that the epistolary form of the text in journalism differs from the epistolary form of the text in the literature. These results fully duplicate the position of journalists (Figure 6).

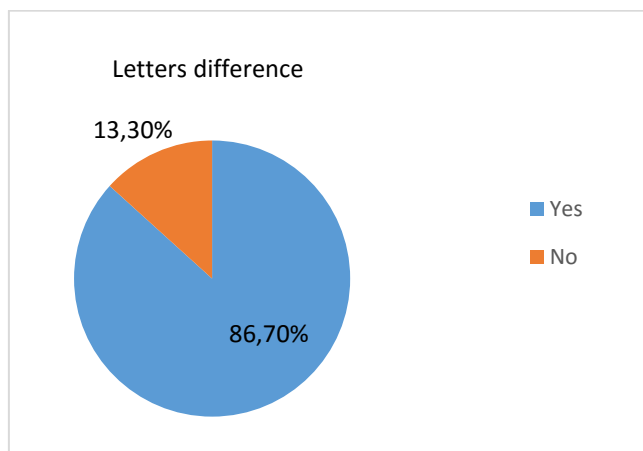


Figure 6. The difference between letters in journalism and literature

The answer to the question “Compare journalistic letter on closing the development of nickel deposits and a letter on the order of journalistic style on the same topic from the fictional work. Do they differ from each other? If so, what are the differences?” evoked the following answers:

- letter in fictional work is focused on the characters and does not go beyond the literary work, in journalism it is always aimed at the society, the reader;
- letter in literature makes the reader to go through the events in the imaginative reality, in journalism – to be concerned about major social problems

- classical techniques of artistic expression are commonly used in the literature, journalism also includes methods of manipulating the reader's minds.

The answer to the question "How do you think, would it be justifiably to divide the epistolary into epistolary in literature and epistolary in journalism?" evoked the following reaction – 100% of respondents agreed with such a prospect.

Therefore, we can say that the epistolary genre should be divided into sub-genres of journalistic letter and letter in literature, as they have different characteristics and authors use them for different purposes.

Discussion and Conclusion

It should be noted that scientists have developed a theory, according to which the stylistically epistolary is a syncretic tool for presenting information of different styles as a letter with all features of this genre (Neroznak et al., 2007)

In addition, Je. Nozhkina (1993) and L. Kauffman (1988) have described mistakes in the terminology in the epistolary genre that existed in the 20th century. It should be noted that problematic aspects of sub-genres differentiation determined by scientists are important both for literary and media discourse.

The findings of our survey showed that the majority of journalists (61.10%) have written public letters in order to change the public opinion in their favor. Only 7.7% of the respondents were the writers, who have expressed such a position. This fact indicates the differences between the use of letters in journalism and literature. Similar trends are also observed in the study of D. Randall (2008).

Summarizing the results of the experiment, we can observe that the majority (156 people) of the respondents in each of the two control groups agree that the epistolary form of the text in journalism differs from the epistolary form of the text in the literature.

Thus, a letter in literature makes the reader to go through the events in the imaginative reality, in journalism – to be concerned about major social problems. At the same time, respondents noted that classical techniques of artistic expression are commonly used in the literature, while journalism also includes methods of manipulating the reader's minds.

In this regard, we can conclude that it is advisable to mark out two sub-genres as parts of epistolary genre – epistolary literature and epistolary journalism.

Implications and Recommendations

The results of the research should be compared with existent concepts of the epistolary genre, both in literature and journalism. This would allow us to make conclusion about the consistency of the proposed concept. We suppose that epistolary genre would take its place in journalism, linguistics and literary studies, which would allow studying it completely, accepting the results of hypothesis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.



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