

# Literary journalism:the window and the mirror



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report: Literary Journalism: The Window and The Mirror report A. Functions in society B. Characteristics II.

Two early examples III. As opposed to other works that only include non-fiction THE CREATED AND THE CREATIVE Think of a newspaper. Of all the events that occur daily around the world, or in your own city, and how they™re neatly organized into columns, with the occasional highlighted quote from an interview. The formality of it all. The journalists™ name in capitals right under the title, maybe accompanied by a thumbnail of the latter™s countenance, and picture the actual article: an accurate recall of the who, what, when and where bursting with the facts with which each citizen casually updates himself every morning on the way to work. Such is the traditional journalism.

A droning, detached voice, a text scattered with dates and names and shy adjective here and there, a text that, upon reading, cannot be identified as anything besides what it actually is: a newspaper article. But, as it always happens, along comes a new genre that changes everything: a blend between the immersing descriptions of fiction found in novels, short stories and the likes, and the accuracy and the informative quality of journalism.

The literary in literary journalism isn™t the actual story or the events chronicled; it™s the way the article is written, which is like realistic fiction would be- think of legal thrillers and such, credible, realistic stories that are fictional. Thus, the journalistic tone of a simple Morning Report (forgive the Lion King cameo), that lists concrete facts concisely and clearly, is lost to a more narrative, descriptive tone. But don™t be fooled by the absence of that report vibe, (I implore the reader to kindly bear with my terms) because the journalism is still there: the content is strictly the actual events that

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occurred, with the unbiased report of events that characterizes journalistic articles.

The limit here, an iron-if slim-border dividing fiction from journalism written like it, would be that of recounting the bare truth, with absolutely no fiction attached to fancy the story up. Now, this is actually something about the genre that I find interesting, since the descriptive style used must require much more research on the journalist-slash-novelist™'s part, since the environment he sets is far wider than what traditional journalism is limited to, and in order to make sure that everything mentioned is as factual and as reliably accurate as a journalistic report should- must- be, the writer must conduct interviews, read reports, and maybe even visit the setting of the events he wishes to chronicle via this new method of reporting facts to the public. Think of how hard it is for a fiction writer to come up with a character and to bring it to life through descriptions of his activity and interactions, being that in said case they come from the writer™'s own imagination, meaning that he is free to do with the character as he sees fit. But then, besides the responsibility that a journalist carries to inform the public just by bearing the occupation, the creative non-fiction writer has the duty of doing so with the literary grace of a novelist. So, in this case, the characterization must fit into the style, but the character is already created, and there is absolutely no possibility of tweaking or adjusting the bits of the puzzle to fit together. The only way to go is to know the real actors of the story inside out, to know the story itself inside out, and to reconstruct the scene exactly as it was.

Everything must be verifiable. And reality being what it is, journalists would probably have to search like hound dogs for the scattered pieces. And then, of course, comes the risk of the inaccurate portraying of a character, and how this character, being real, may object. This, at least to me, the credibility blended into the style of fiction, the limits within which a writer is confined, and how the author intends to simultaneously earn the trust of the readers with which a journalist is lavished, is one of the really impressive achievements of this genre.

Capote, for example, claims to be perfectly accurate in recounting the entire Clutter murder story in *In Cold Blood*, and, frankly, having read the book, the quotes, the scenes, the backgrounds of the characters, all with sketched with literary quality down to the last detail, even the Saturday midnight beauty rituals of Nancy Clutter, I wouldn't believe it (Note to the reader: My intention is not that of questioning the accuracy of the facts, merely showing how I'm awed at his ability as a writer within the difficult requirements and criteria of this genre. Five years doesn't even begin to tell you how much work I think that novel would require.). Now, note how the function of the author as a medium between the environment and those who live in it is conserved, whereas this medium changes his way of connecting these two poles. Whilst the goal of the narration remains, the goal of the narrative style is altered.

Instead of merely stating each dimension of the event occurred, the scene is reconstructed (Mark Masse, who we'll later quote on another point, talks about the unit of construction in new journalism as being scene, as opposed to traditional journalism, where it is fact) via the literary tools exclusive to

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creative writing that an author puts to use in his descriptions. As one of the most prominent internet bloggers on literature, the person who uses the pen-name Sonja, puts this paradigm shift, Rather than answering the informational who, what, when, or where, it depicts moments in time (Finding Your Voice Blog, 2007). Now, a reason for this could be how, by definition, journalism is based on current events, and though these may be revisited in some cases, this condition of traditional journalism established its ephemeral doom, as Jenny McKay says so in her paper on Daniel Defoe, whom we™ll later talk about.

The literary aspect of the new genre works to fight this grim sentence to oblivion, so that the reader is encouraged to read creative non-fiction works, through the entertaining style, and, on the way, re-visits the past to enhance his worldview. But all this begs the question: why journalism..? We can see maybe the artistic merit and seductive quality of the blend with the literary style, but what is so important about being acquainted with what happens around you, if not as a simple way to kill time on the bus.

.? According to the previously mentioned Mark Masse, a professor, literary journalism can be seen as a window and a mirror. The mirror corresponds to the journalism: the importance the goal of being informed may well be to encourage the reader to reflect on human nature and the human condition as he puts it.

The window, on the other hand, is the literary part- personally, I™d say it is a stained glass window- seeing as it enhances this reflection through a style that defines and reconstructs reality more clearly. But who started with this

sudden taste for the vitrification of journalism..? I™ II do you one better: I™ II tell you who started journalism itself.

And, to our immense luck (more to mine, since I have to study for Algebra and it™ s already something like two in the morning! But, as Nancy Clutter would say, a lady™ s always in a hurry, but she always has time.), this journalist had traces of the literary style in his work. Daniel Defoe is the name of the creator.

Yes, he is the author of Robinson Crusoe. But he™ s also a journalist. He was actually sentenced to the pillory for writing about no-no subjects that he observed. But behold, he wrote *The Storm: or, a Collection of the most remarkable Casualties and Disasters which happen™ d in the Late Dreadful Tempest, both by Sea and Land*. Beautiful title; we™ re gonna stick to just *The Storm* from now on. Now this is a miracle. The Great Storm of 1703 was chronicled in this book, based solely upon eyewitness accounts that he requested via newspaper advertisements; he was able to piece together the experiences of Britain slashed to pieces by the hurricane that visited the Isles in late November through a legitimate journalistic- type investigation.

Now, the narrative style included some descriptive interjections that could be described as pertinent to the literary style. To quote a little line from the book itself: : “ No pen could describe it, nor tongue express it, nor thought conceive it unless by one in the extremity of it! [towns] looked as if the enemy had sackt them and were most miserably torn to pieces”(Wikipedia). Now, you can see the faintest use of similes in his description, which contribute to the immortalization of the ambient he captured in time. This, in

turn, these scenes he now brought to the reader™s mind are not fictional, yet they are the building blocks of the book-length recount (it isn™t a novel per se, despite the use of the literary conventions evidenced; the book is more like a recompilation of loose eyewitness accounts that construct the scenery of Britain during the Storm), which obeys the not-fact-but-scenes aspect of literary journalism. As Jenny McKay concludes: The Storm, then, is worth reading both for its own sake and for its significance as a founding text for both journalism and the novel (McKay), which sets in stone the pertinence of this author to the literary journalism genre.

And now, I™ll quote McKay quoting Anthony Burgess, the British author, who realizes how Defoe has contributed to the literary aspect of journalism, and how this can act as a motor for the creation of the realism genres: Defoe, in his absolute devotion to the craft of reportage™, (1966: 12) was our first great novelist because he was our first great journalist™, (1966: 7). Burgess is drawing attention here to Defoe™s contribution to the development of realism as a literary convention and noting the links between this development and early attempts by journalists including Defoe to make a literary record of reality (McKay). Another unexpected author of literary non-fiction could actually be (drumroll please) Dickens. A cute little book called Sketches by Boz: An Illustrative of Every-day Life and Every-day People is the manifestation of the journalist in the author of A Christmas Carol. Basically, it is a compilation of short little descriptive pieces about everyday London, divided into sections, three of which are non-fiction, based on his own observations of the interaction of people within the city. Hint: most of the little stories were included in newspapers and periodicals.

Now, it isn't perfect evidence of journalism, since fiction is obviously published in newspapers as well, but it could serve as a tiny mirror, lodged between the rest of the articles the newspaper carried, serving the purpose of providing the reader a real account of the habits of people just like him. Now that's journalism, isn't it..

? The narrator is a little undefined, and some, in this case the voices of the sources Ian Wilkinson consulted when writing his thesis, would say that the lack of consistency of the character/narrator's personality and voice makes for the inference that polyphonia is used: I needed help, and so turned to the sagacious theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who said, rather whimsically, Go back to the text, but this time listen to the voices in the sketches " its polyphonia. Listen to Boz and the language he uses. Does it belong to him? Is it consistent? Isn't it true that he double voices and ventriloquizes social heteroglossia? (Wilkinson)Yes, maybe Wilkinson is on his way of creating a new style of writing dissertations. But back to the point! Polyphonia is obviously something that isn't used in traditional journalism (imagine the weather report to the style of Juan Rulfo! That would be odd.

), so there we get the literary quality of the text. Now, the journalistic quality is the tricky one. In creative non-fiction, what is usually recounted is an actual event, a point in history that stands out: the Clutter murder, the Great Storm, etc. But here it's the study of the habits of a certain community, which could respond more to anthropology than to journalism, yet the distinction is not quite clear. So, yes, this could be considered, as proven by some of the aspects the work contains, literary journalism. But of course, we must be careful: we are reminded that everything within the latter must be <https://assignbuster.com/literary-journalismthe-window-and-the-mirror/>



perfectly accurate, which is the restriction we stressed so arduously, and because actual evidences of how the characters™ lives really were at the time of Dickens™ observation are not available, we cannot verify the facts presented. That leaves us with the doubt: fiction containing reality, or literary journalism..

? Talking of polyphonia and fiction containing reality, we are reminded of a genre that is almost exclusive to Latin America. Yes, magical realism. So, how is this related to literary journalism.

.? We cannot say, under any circumstances, that the journalism is there. Why..

? Journalism is a hundred per cent accurate. Its guiding principle is the trust of the readers, how they count on the author to recount everything as it was. And I really doubt that everything in One Hundred Years of Solitude happened. But the United Fruit Company massacre happened, right..

? Here is the realism. Here is what breaks this genre apart from ordinary fantasy: how everything revolves around a real situation or event. Now, back to Europe. Something like magical realism minus the magic is used in writing Les Miserables. Even a real character is used, General Lamarque and how his death started the June Rebellion, and the entire backdrop of the struggle against the Legitimists, and everything in between.

Yet the story of Jean Valjean and Javert, of Cossette and Marius, and of the innkeeper and his wife is entirely fictional. But it wouldn™t be out of place. It would have something of a historic context to which the fictional story is

applied, expressing maybe the writer's own views in the process, but it cannot be classified as journalism because it isn't true. And it is this, as I've attempted to stress throughout the essay, that makes the literary journalist so accomplished. The condition he holds is that of balancing on a tightrope of a hair's breadth, dwindling between his own genre and the incomplete version of the latter, quivering at the thought of a false step, of a region of the imagination that wandered astray and sent what defines his work crashing down in an enormous yet silent avalanche. The literary journalist is first and foremost a journalist, owing a huge responsibility of accuracy and truth to his audience, but he also seeks the artistic merit of his work, the immortalization of the commitment he made and kept, the duty every writer holds of leaving an imprint in the reader, of creating scenes of demolishing them, and, most importantly, arousing emotions, in this case those of empathy towards our fellow humans, a sense of understanding, if not the aim to enhance this understanding.

And this is the outcome of two worlds colliding: of truth and art, of reality

and how it's told, of the created and the creative. () report report () ?-X