

IN POSSESSION OF THE LETTER: KATE CHOPIN'S "HER LETTERS"

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The scandal surrounding the publication of Kate Chopin's 1899 *The Awakening* tarnished its author's reputation and "effectively removed the novel from wide circulation and influence for fifty years following its publication."¹ The book was derided by Chopin's contemporaries as "trite and sordid,"² and the behavior of its heroine, Edna Pontellier, was described by reviewers as "shocking," "sickening," and "selfish."³ The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed a dramatic reappraisal of the text and of its main character, and a regeneration of Chopin's reputation. In particular, feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter have embraced the text as one which depicts and contests restraints upon female expression and behavior. Showalter asserts for instance that in *The Awakening*, "Chopin went boldly beyond the work of her precursors in writing about women's longing for sexual and personal emancipation," and thus she characterizes the text as "a revolutionary book."⁴

Given all the attention to and debate surrounding *The Awakening*, it is particularly interesting to note that, as Peggy Skaggs has observed, Chopin experimented with the same themes of female sexual awakening, adultery, and gender constraints in several of her short stories, including her obscure and brilliant short story "Her Letters," published in *Vogue* in 1895.⁵ Indeed, given the representation of Edna Pontellier as a woman ruled by passion to the extent that she abandons all maternal and social obligations, conforming as it does to the stereotype of the female as irrational and easily swayed by passion, I will argue that "Her Letters" is in fact in many ways a less problematically feminist statement than *The Awakening*. As in *The Awakening*, a conflict is structured in "Her Letters" between social expectations that the wife's subordinate her personhood to the needs of her husband and female desire for independence and recognition of sexual and social equality. That is, a contest is structured between possession by another and self-possession. The conclusions of the text are that women, like men, do indeed have sexual needs and desires, and that love, not social or financial status, is the foundation for marriage.

At the same time, "Her Letters" also has a more general and un-

canny conclusion that also turns on the double meaning of the term possession, considered both in the sense of ownership and control of property by an individual and in its opposite sense of control of an individual by an entity or idea. While highlighting the desire for self-possession, the disturbing effects of a bundle of letters on first the unnamed wife and then the equally anonymous husband demonstrate the ways in which subjectivity is constructed from without—that is, following psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the ways in which language and culture construct or constitute identity. Indeed, “Her Letters” is a decidedly Lacanian text, one which demonstrates at every turn the manner in which the subject is subject to the signifier.⁶ In “Her Letters,” the unavoidable conclusion of the text is that neither husband nor wife possess the letters; rather, the letters possess each—and deprive each of life—in turn. The “truth” of each character, the wife and the husband, is figured as that which comes from without.

“Her Letters” opens with an upper-class woman contemplating and preparing to destroy a bundle of letters. She manages to consign six letters to the flames of her fireplace before she is overwhelmed with emotion and unable to proceed further. The letters, to which the woman has a powerful affective attachment, are the only evidence of a passionate extramarital affair. The woman, who is dying from an unspecified disease, had hoped to be able to destroy the letters before her death, rather than let her husband, whom she regards fondly but does not love, discover the letters after her death. However, she cannot bring herself to obliterate the last remnants of “the days when she felt she had lived.”⁷ Instead, she attaches a note to the bundle of letters reading, “I leave this package to the care of my husband. With perfect faith in his loyalty and his love, I ask him to destroy it unopened” (97).

The remaining three short sections of the narrative concern the husband’s discovery of the letters and this request and the dramatic ramifications. The letters and the note occasion an epistemological—and, ultimately, ontological—crisis for the husband: all his assumptions concerning his marriage are destabilized and he is forced to reassess his past marriage in light of the *possible* contents of the letters. The widower resists the temptation to read the letters and follows his wife’s instructions by sinking them into a river. However, he becomes obsessed with the secret of the letters, haunted by his unconfirmable suspicions. Convinced that there is no secret “save one” that a woman would choose to have die with her—the secret of a sexual indiscre-

tion—the husband attempts to confirm his suspicion by first meticulously probing his wife's belongings, and then interviewing both her friends and his. However, no evidence supporting his suspicion is uncovered. Unable to bear the weight of his uncertainty, the husband ultimately commits suicide by drowning himself in the same river into which he earlier had discarded the letters.

Her Letters

In the brief first section, the reader discovers a passionate, emotional woman who has been unfaithful to a husband whom she respects and cares for, but for whom she does not feel love. Her extramarital affair has been over for four years and the letters are her only connection to a recollected past of vitality and passion. She cannot bring herself to destroy the letters, cannot give them up. Indeed, she feels that the letters are the only thing keeping her alive: “she had been feeding on them . . . they had sustained her, she believed, and kept her spirit from perishing utterly” (95). The woman, however, is pained by the thought of her husband's response should her secret infidelity come to light. She is extremely aware of the fact that an intrinsic quality of writing is its persistence and iterability, that is, that her letters can survive her and produce effects beyond the context of the closed circuit of her correspondence with her lover. Surveying her letters spread out upon her desk, she considers, “before her were envelopes of various sizes and shapes, all of them addressed in the handwriting of one man and one woman. He had sent her letters all back to her one day when, sick with dread of possibilities, she had asked to have them returned” (95). The woman's “dread of possibilities” is the fear of discovery inspired by the fact that writing persists and continues to function even in the absence of its producer and intended recipient.⁸ Part of the uncanniness of writing is precisely this automatic functioning, the way in which, at the instant of its production, it distances itself from its producer and takes on a life of its own.

The woman believes that her letters are keeping her alive, sustaining her and keeping her spirit from “perishing” (95). Her relationship to the letters and the sustenance they provide plays on the notions of incorporation and consumption. She has metaphorically been “feeding upon them,” and, in a vampiric literalization of this trope, she actually attempts physically to incorporate one of the letters: “She crushed it between her palms when she found it. She kissed it again and again.

With her sharp white teeth she tore the far corner from the letter, where the name was written; she bit the torn scrap and tasted it between her lips and upon her tongue like some god-given morsel” (96). This literal move toward incorporation is especially suggestive of Freudian melancholia. Rather than let go of the letters, let go of the other, allow the past to assume its position as past, the woman both figuratively and literally attempts to consume the other, to incorporate the lost love object into herself.⁹ The woman would rather have the letters than memories or thoughts: “How desolate and empty would have been her remaining days without them; with only her thoughts, illusive thoughts that she could not hold in her hands and press, as she did these, to her cheeks and her heart” (96). The letters displace the necessity of memory. She wants the letters to be *there*, in front of her. Her resistance is precisely to accepting the loss, the absence, of the other, her lover. Her attempt is rather to “eat the other,” to “cannibalize” or incorporate the love object rather than to accept its loss.

However, it is clear that in this melancholic attachment it is the woman herself who is being consumed. The unavoidable conclusion of the text is that the letters themselves are the true center of agency within the story, as well as its center of both life and death. Although the text does not detail the nature of the woman’s disease, the logic of the text insists upon a correlation between the letters and her physical sickness. Her illness begins when she becomes “sick with the dread of possibilities,” and accelerates with the return of letters “in which every word of untempered passion had long ago eaten its way into her brain” (96). She who would eat the letters is being eaten by them. This reversal leads to the conclusion that what the woman is suffering from, figuratively if not literally, is *consumption*. She is consumed by the letters—letters which are more active and alive than she is.

Compared to the foregrounded presence of emotion contained in the letters, as well as to the intense materiality of the letters themselves, the woman herself is ghostly. Her lack of strength—the text describes her as “far from strong” (95)—is implicitly contrasted with the vitality, agency, and substance demonstrated by the letters. These letters, which are both hers and not hers, survive her, persist when she dies, and act where she cannot. At the same time that the letters are anthropomorphized—corporealized or concretized as passionate bodies that burn—the woman fades, wastes away. Or rather, in this text which features the transubstantiation of bits of paper into “god-given morsels” and refers to the lover’s conversion of the “water in her veins to wine”

(96), the letters which sustain her spirit at the expense of her body effect a “spiritualization.” Her “untempered passion” makes clear that this is, in a sense, a passion play. The woman martyrs herself to the other within, feeding the other at her own expense. Her melancholic attachment to the letters reveals that she does not possess the letters, but, rather, is possessed by them. She will—and does—die to preserve the after-life of her lover’s letters.

Inscribing Gender

The “her story/his story” structuring of the text in which the husband is eventually driven to suicide by suspicion of infidelity on his wife’s part indicates the extent to which “Her Letters” is explicitly concerned with gender and gender expectations—and the ways in which these expectations turn on the notion of “possession.” Indeed, gender expectations and their violation are foregrounded throughout the brief narrative at every turn. In the opening section, the reader is introduced to an educated woman of means. That she is financially secure is evident from the fact that she has servants—she has “given orders” not be disturbed and a fire has been lit in the room—and that “her room” itself is described as a “luxurious apartment” (94). The woman herself is presented as aristocratic in bearing; she has a “long, sensitive face” and “long and delicate and blue-veined” hands (102). That she is educated is evidenced by the fact that she has a writing desk and that, later in the narrative, the husband, seeking clues that will confirm his suspicions, searches through the woman’s impressive library. Following careful scrutiny of the woman’s writing desk, the husband “began a second and far more exhausting and arduous quest than the first, turning, page by page, the volumes that crowded her room—books of fiction, poetry, philosophy. She had read them all” (102). These details—the woman’s comfortable financial status, the fact that she has her own room with a writing desk, her aristocratic mien, her extensive library—simultaneously work to suggest both the financial dependence of the nineteenth-century upper-class woman upon her wealthy husband and the woman’s independence of thought. As in *The Awakening*, Chopin depicts a conflict in “Her Letters” between social expectations that woman subordinate thought, expression, and personhood in marriage to the needs of her husband—the wife as object to be possessed—and female desire for social and sexual equality—self-possession.

The parallel with *The Awakening* is heightened by the fact that the wife in "Her Letters," trapped in a loveless marriage, at some point experienced a sexual "awakening" and engaged in a passionate extra-marital affair. The reader learns that the woman's primary motivation for attempting to destroy the letters is that "she shrank from inflicting the pain, the anguish which the discovery of those letters would bring to others; to one, above all, who was near to her, and whose tenderness and years of devotion had made him, in a manner, dear to her" (95). The narrative juxtaposes the recollected ecstasy of her illicit affair to this perfunctory if not uncomfortable relationship with her husband. "Her Letters," like *The Awakening*, asserts that women, like men, do indeed have sexual needs and desires, and implicitly criticizes nineteenth-century attitudes toward female sexuality that proclaimed the contrary. And, like *The Awakening*, "Her Letters" implicitly argues that love, not social or financial status, is the foundation for marriage.

Throughout "Her Letters," Chopin plays with the conventional gender roles of narrative fiction. Indeed, the presence of the letters as evidence of the wife's amours turns the entire tradition of the epistolary novel in which the female protagonist recounts the assaults upon her virtue and her successful resistance on its head. Aware that she is approaching death, the wife considers that she soon will have to "part with her treasure" (95). The treasure that she will have to surrender here is not her chastity, but precisely the evidence that she has been unchaste. The wife, as the active agent who engages in a passionate affair and demonstrates little love for the husband whom she controls and who dotes upon her, is cast in the typical role of the rakish husband. The husband, as the betrayed lover who drowns himself, assumes the stereotypical role of the female protagonist in the sentimental novel. The result is a political text that, by revealing masculinity to be contingent upon control of female sexuality and contesting the assumptions that females are by nature docile and passionless, concludes that loveless marriages in which the subordination of women is assumed are recipes for disaster.

In this way, "Her Letters" is a more directly feminist statement than *The Awakening*. One could argue that Chopin's representation of Edna Pontellier as a woman ruled by her passion to the extent that she abandons all maternal and social obligations is in fact a regressive representation of femininity, supporting as it does the stereotypical and derogatory correlations of femininity with irrationality and irresponsibility. The wife in "Her Letters," although perhaps sharing Edna's "nar-

cissism," abandons neither her husband nor her social obligations. Her affair, passionate though it may have been, is carefully concealed and at no point in the narrative can the wife's emotion be said to displace her logic. (In fact, her irrefutable logic displaces her husband's reason!) Indeed, the representation of the wife in private as loving and passionate, contrasting as it does with the characterization of her by others as intelligent, accomplished, and passionless, culminates in a well-rounded character who is a remarkable synthesis of stereotypical male and female characteristics. And her consideration for her husband, despite the agonizing injunction of the letters, arguably makes her a more sympathetic character than *The Awakening's* Edna Pontellier. In contrast to the wife, in "Her Letters" the husband seems more pathetic than sympathetic. After his long devotion to a woman who did not reciprocate his affections, the fact that his suspicion of his wife's affair obsesses him and drives him to suicide suggests that the "man-instinct of possession" (99) is both misogynistic and untenable in a society in which women express their sexuality and independence. As with *The Awakening*, Chopin allows some small degree of sympathy for the abandoned male husband, but suggests that disappointment is inevitable for husbands who conceive of their wives as property instead of people when their wives begin to assert themselves.

However, in a fascinating contrast with *The Awakening*, in "Her Letters" a strong woman—or the memory of a strong woman—controls a weaker man and propels that man toward suicide by drowning. In "Her Letters," the wife is demonstrated to have dominated the husband during her lifetime.¹⁰ It is the man's "tenderness and years of devotion" that have made him, "in a manner," dear to her. The narrator tells the reader that "every line of his face—no longer young—spoke loyalty and honesty, and his eyes were as faithful as a dog's and as loving" (98). In these details, the husband is likened both to a faithful servant and a loving pet. He has been a tender companion to a woman he has always known as "cold and passionless but true, and watchful of his comfort and his happiness" (98). There have been no pretenses of passion in this marriage, nor does the wife, as demonstrated by the library and her private room, seem to have surrendered or masked her thoughts and identity.¹¹

The wife in "Her Letters" was perceived by others as domineering, beautiful, and cold. In an attempt to discover if any of his friends had been his wife's secret paramour, the man questions his acquaintances: "Foremost he learned that she had been unsympathetic because of her

coldness of manner. One had admired her intellect; another her accomplishments; a third had thought her beautiful before the disease claimed her, regretting, however, that her beauty had lacked warmth of color and expression" (102). In these responses, the femininity of the wife is called into question. She is characterized as intelligent and accomplished, yet cold and unsympathetic. The husband, who demonstrates dog-like devotion to a woman who does not reciprocate his affection, is in turn, according to traditional representations of gender, "feminized." However, this inversion of the stereotyped power dynamic is acceptable to the husband, and perhaps this is because, despite the inversion of gendered social power relations, the reversal still does not radically disrupt the status quo. That is, despite the woman's independence of thought and lack of passion, she remains the husband's *property*. She may have a room of her own in which to write, but it remains in his house. And her coldness and lack of passion are acceptable in a culture that denies the sexual nature of women—her "frigidity" is not unusual. What is most threatening to the husband's masculinity and most subversive of traditional gender expectations is not the wife's frigidity, but the possibility instead of the "heat" of extramarital passion, which would undermine the wife's position as her husband's possession.

That what is in question here is ownership rights and male control of female sexuality is indicated by the husband's consideration of the possible contents of the letters: "What secret save one could a woman choose to have die with her? As quickly as the suggestion came into his mind, so swiftly did *the man-instinct of possession* creep into his blood. . . . The agonizing suspicion that perhaps another had shared with him her thoughts, her affections, her life, deprived him for a swift instant of honor and reason" (99, emphasis added). Observe the careful phrasing here: what disconcerts the husband is that another man has "shared" with *him* his wife's attention. Even in this consideration of an extramarital affair, his wife remains passive, an object to be possessed. There is no sense of her having been an active agent in the liaison. This one detail alone indicates the gulf that exists between the "her story" and the "his story" of the text. The contrast here between the active, passionate woman revealed in the first section and the husband's conception of the wife as an object to be owned or shared seemingly without her consent could not be more dramatic. Indeed, the irony of the story is, despite the husband's assumptions concerning his wife's passivity, she is the active one who engaged in an affair, requested the

return of the letters, manages to burn a few of them, and enjoins the task of destroying the remainder upon her husband. He, in contrast, is the character subordinated throughout: to society's definitions of masculinity, to his devotion to his wife, and to the past. Concerned about the possibility that his wife was possessed by another, it is the husband himself who becomes "possessed."

His Letters

The husband's narrative similarly turns on the dual meaning of possession. Falling in possession of the letters, he becomes "possessed" (101) by the notion that he did not in fact possess his wife as property. In the interstice between the first and second sections, the woman dies and the remaining three sections—the bulk of the brief narrative—detail the husband's response to the discovery of these letters and the wife's agonizing request that the letters be destroyed unopened and unread. The "her story" of the first section and the "his story" of the remaining sections never fully mesh; although the reader can confirm the husband's suspicions as correct, the husband himself is driven to suicide not because of disgrace but because of uncertainty.

As the husband himself appreciates, the wife's request is a bold stratagem; to discover her unfaithfulness, he himself would have to be unfaithful to her memory and to her dying wish. Although the husband himself does not believe in an afterlife, cannot "think of her in any far-off paradise awaiting him" (98–99), he is haunted all the same by his wife's request and the secret it protects. Although he feels that "there [is] no smallest part of her anywhere in the universe, more than there had been before she was born into the world," his dead wife has "embodied herself with terrible significance in an intangible wish, uttered when life still coursed through her veins; knowing that it would reach him when the annihilation of death was between them, but uttered with all confidence in its power and potency" (99). The request to dispose of the letters is not merely a request, but figured as a spell, a conjuration. The written characters of the note address him "like a voice speaking to his soul" (99).

After contemplating the letters and the instructions in amazement for half an hour, the man decides to act. However, he does not consider burning the letters. Rather, the man presumes that his wife had a different fate in mind for the letters: "He did not for a moment think of casting the thick package into the flames to be licked by the fiery

tongues, and charred and half-revealed to his eyes. That was not what she meant" (99). Burning here is clearly allied with intense, indiscreet sexual passion; in giving over "her letters" to be "licked by fiery tongues," the man would, in essence, become voyeur to an affair which had excluded him. Destruction by burning is also correlated with vision and revelation: in a recapitulation of the crisis of the narrative itself, to burn the letters would be at least momentarily to "half-reveal" their contents. Embraced by the flames, the "truth" of the letters would burn briefly and brightly before his eyes, before being consumed entirely and disappearing.

In contrast to the woman's intention to burn the letters, the text itself is persistently concerned not with burning but with drowning, in both literal and metaphorical senses. The story begins on a day during which "the rain was falling steadily from a leaden sky in which there was no gleam, no rift, no promise" (94). Significantly, the man comes across the letters on a day "much like that day a year ago when the leaves were falling and rain pouring steadily from a leaden sky which held no gleam, no promise" (97). That the husband should eventually drown himself seems the natural culmination of a tale in which it rains steadily with no hope of abatement. However, although the weather is the same, the repetition of the description is not exact, highlighting the fact that although there is still neither "gleam" nor "promise," a "rift" has been introduced, symbolic of the separation of man and wife by the latter's death and foreshadowing the mental separation the letters incur.

That the husband rejects the option of burning the letters bears witness both to his continued respect for his wife's modesty and discretion—he will not become voyeur to her affair—and his own psychic conflict: the man can neither accept the truth of his wife's infidelity nor deny it. Within the symbolic framework of the narrative, for the man to burn the letters would be for him to accept his wife's passion for another. To watch the letters go up in flames would be to watch the destruction of his whole conception of their marriage together. Instead, the man attaches a paper-weight (itself perhaps symbolic of the "weight" of the papers upon him) to the letters, walks to a bridge in the rain, and drops the package into a "deep, broad, swift, black river dividing two States" (100). Letting go of the letters, "he could not follow its descent through the darkness, nor hear its dip into the water far below. It vanished silently; seemingly into some inky unfathomable space" (100). His sense is that he has flung the package back to his wife, "in that

unknown world wither she had gone" (100). In drowning the letters, the man shies away from confronting the traumatic truth. Instead of the painfully bright light of revelation, the man opts for the preservative repression of denial and darkness. The "broad, swift, black river" dividing "two States" is symbolic of the man's own mental state—standing in the "very center" of the bridge (100), the man is caught between past and present. His past having been uprooted by the unconfirmed possibility of infidelity, the man himself has become unmoored, begins to drift. In his dreams, he sees, "the dark river rushing by, carrying away his heart, his ambitions, his life" (102). The black river between two states defines his world; he feels himself to be "alone in a black, boundless universe" (100). The husband's ontological crisis is precipitated by what he perceives to be an assault upon his manhood.

The suspicion of adultery deprives the husband not just of "honor and reason," but of masculinity itself. The occasion of his discovery of the letters is described as "that night when the darkness had closed around him and engulfed his manhood" (103). Masculinity is here revealed to be relative, contingent upon the ownership and control of women conceived of as property. The husband is "unmanned" by the suspicion that his wife has been "possessed" by another. Part of this "unmanning" is that he himself becomes "possessed," haunted by the thought that "there is but one secret which a woman could choose to have die with her" (103). This unmanning takes the form of a loss of "honor and reason." Masculinity therefore is connected to the husband's ability to control his wife's sexuality, as well as to logical, linear thought processes.

Indeed, the wife's request of her husband is such a bold gesture because it is precisely *unreasonable*: it forces him into a space in which traditional gender expectations *cannot* be met. The linchpin of the story is the fact that the husband obeys the wife's request and destroys the letters unread. In so doing, he is figured as a sort of reverse Pandora; although he is consumed by curiosity—and apprehension—he respects his wife's command. However, although he subordinates his own curiosity, he also subordinates his own initiative; his wife's dominance of him persists even beyond her death. In acquiescing to her demand, the husband continues in his "feminized" position within the power dynamic of their relationship. But had he opened the letters, not only would his suspicions of his wife's infidelity and his "dishonored" position—his status as cuckold—have been confirmed, but in letting curiosity and emotion override "duty," he would have been cast in the role

of Pandora and again been “feminized,” this time by letting curiosity win out over respect and duty. The very fact of the letters combined with the wife’s injunction against reading them structures a chiasm of gender and writing which the husband cannot negotiate with his sense of masculinity intact.¹²

The irony of the husband’s possession of—and by—the letters is that his wife becomes more present in death to him than she ever was during his life. Following receipt of the letters, she becomes a person for him rather than a possession; her otherness, the fact that he may never really have known her, becomes apparent. The wife “embodie[s] herself” in her writing (99), the letters revive the wife, give her a presence and a materiality that she had not assumed in life for the husband. The prospect of her adulterous affair can only suggest to the husband that she was something other than his possession, that she had secret feelings and encounters which would force him to alter his entire conception of her as a person and of their relationship together. Indeed, the question of her chastity is precisely a question of her *body* and of ownership and control of that body. Her absent body—a body significantly that was also in a sense absent during their marriage and her passionless relationship to him—is rendered spectrally present by the material fact of the letters.

If the letters revivify the wife in some fashion after her death, in contrast, the husband is rendered figuratively dead from the moment that he discovers them. The letters consume him in the same way that they consumed her. Deprived of his reason, his rationality, by his suspicion of his wife’s infidelity, he is also deprived of a reason, a purpose, for living:

It seemed no longer of any moment to him that men should come and go; and fall or rise in the world; and wed and die. It did not signify if money came to him by a turn of chance or eluded him. Empty and meaningless seemed to him all devices which the world offers for man’s entertainment. The food and drink set before him had lost their flavor. He did not longer know or care if the sun shone or the clouds lowered about him. A cruel hazard had struck him there where he was weakest, shattering his whole being, leaving him with but one wish in his soul, one gnawing desire, to know the mystery which he had held in his hands and had cast into the river. (103)

In relinquishing the letters, the husband has relinquished life and spirit as well. Animated solely by the “mystery” of the letters, he is as one

already dead—zombified. Past and future collapse and dissolve into a static moment of present obsession for the husband and the uncanny agency of the letters renders the husband first figuratively and then literally dead.

The step from the man's metaphoric drowning in the past and his own insecurities to his actual drowning at the end of the story is a short one. Haunted by the thought that "there is but one secret which a woman could choose to have die with her" (103), the thought indeed "possessing him" (101), the husband returns to the bridge that he visited on the night when he had discarded the letters and throws himself into the river. His suicide literalizes the operative metaphor of drowning governing his representation in the text: from the moment of discovering the letters, he has been overwhelmed and "engulfed" by the potential revelations they contain.

The most important thing about the letters in "Her Letters" as concerns the husband is precisely that they go unread by him. The husband can speculate concerning their contents—and the narrative in fact validates his suspicion as correct—but the actual contents of the letter remain a blank, a secret, a "mystery which he had held in his hands and had cast into the river" (103). Unable to read the letters, the man is also unable to read his own past. His assessment of the past is contingent upon the unknown contents of the letters; the husband, like the letters, is the site of a gap, an intolerable secret. In "Her Letters," the letters are fetishized by the husband as the locus of *truth*. If only they could be read, all answers would be known, the past would be fixed. The letters are presumed to offer solutions to crises of mortality and identity. The husband would know if his wife had actually been unfaithful and would thus be able to redefine or "fix" his past relationship with his wife. The letters in this way are a projection of fantasy for the husband—impossible objects which, if they could be possessed and interpreted, would reveal all.

However, the husband is forced to arrive at the same uncanny conclusion as the unnamed protagonist of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd"—that there are some texts that will not allow themselves to be read, some things that can never be known. Indeed, as in Poe, these "resistant" texts are connected with crime: in the case of "Her Letters," with a secret affair, with unsanctioned passion, and the violations of the marriage bond and the husband's trust. The death of his wife and his destruction of her letters dispel the fantasy of the "knowability" of the other. The husband in "Her Letters" cannot live

with his suspicion and can find no secure ground upon which to build a future when his conception of the past itself has been disrupted and left unresolved.

In "Her Letters," a mystery pertaining to the past emerges and takes over the present, disordering possibilities for the future. Indeed, the past itself is revealed as a mystery, as something other than what the husband thought it was or needs it to be. For the husband in "Her Letters," the tantalizing possibilities of the letters precipitate a crisis of memory in which the widower can no longer be sure that his recollections of his life with his wife in fact reflect the true state of affairs—the past is wrenched free from its moorings. In a sense, the husband's unconfirmable suspicion suggests that the past in fact never was there, that his wife was not the person he had imagined her to be. Ultimately, this haunting suspicion and concomitant destabilization of the past displace the present to such an extent that any possibility of a future is foreclosed and the only resolution is suicide.

Dead Letters

What arrives for the husband in "Her Letters" along with the haunting presence of the unreadable letters is the inescapable fact of castration in the Lacanian sense. The dilemma for the husband is explicit: the unavailable letters not only hold the truth concerning his wife's marital fidelity, but the letters become his truth—the truth of his past and the truth of his identity as man, husband, and lover. His obsession with the irretrievable letters and the irresolvable question of his wife's fidelity forecloses all future possibilities. He cannot live with his epistemological uncertainty and the concomitant awareness of ontological lack. Recognition of this essentially "castrated" state prompts him to take his own life.

What haunts in "Her Letters" is the secret of another. The wife's secret, secreted in her letters, becomes fetishized as the husband's truth—an unrealizable truth. The two stories of "Her Letters" are structured around a formal repetition: a woman receives letters from her lover which engulf her. She passes them on to her husband who in turn is overwhelmed by the letters. Each, in turn, becomes subject to the signifier—their identities take shape in relation to the perceived contents of the letters. In the process, the haunting power of writing is made manifest: the letters "possess," and, ghost-like, they intercede between presence and absence. For the woman, her melancholic at-

tachment to the materiality of the letters prevents the past from assuming its place, prevents her from having to mourn the loss of her love; for the husband, the same letters conjure up the wife while simultaneously foregrounding her absence. "Her Letters" is thus a story of "dead letters"—but in the peculiar sense of letters *from* the dead, from the past, which arrive at their destinations. Indeed, the letters are precisely "living-dead" letters, signifiers that hold a strange vitality, exercise an uncanny agency, and, in the process, drain the life out of their recipients.

If "Her Letters" raises the question of the ownership of letters, and of writing more generally, the uncanny agency of the letters, the way in which the letters and their real or presumed content possess first the wife and then the husband, suggests that one is in fact owned or "possessed" by writing. In a reference to the characters in Poe's "The Purloined Letter," which could just as easily be applied to the wife and husband in Chopin's "Her Letters," Lacan writes, "Falling in possession of the letter—admirable ambiguity of language—its meaning possesses them."¹³ For Lacan, this is an example of the ways in which language—the symbolic—constructs identity, the way in which the subject is "traversed" by the signifying chain.¹⁴ It supports Lacan's fundamental philosophy that "it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject."¹⁵ "Her Letters," like "The Purloined Letter," is fundamentally a story about the effects of the signifier upon the subject. The letters are the material support for the woman's "true" identity as a passionate, independent subject. In contrast, the mere fact of the letters assaults the husband's conception of self. The truth of both characters' identities depends upon their relationships to the real or imagined content of the letters. Both wife and husband are subject to the signifier. What this suggests is that the letters are neither "her letters" nor "his letters." Rather, there is a problematic third term that interrupts the his/her dichotomy. The letters are in fact the Other's letters, letters from the Other. Both wife and husband "fade" beneath the weight of the signifying chain. The truth of the subject comes from the Other. This is made most obvious by the husband's questioning of his and his wife's friends in the attempt to confirm his suspicion—following the revelation that his wife perhaps was other than his imaginary projection of her, his address is to the other to find out precisely who he was and is. The uncanny quality of "Her Letters" thus derives from its demonstration of the uncanny agency of language itself: the way in which language possesses rather than is possessed.

If *The Awakening* is a “revolutionary book,” to recall Elaine Showalter’s praise, because it illustrates gender constraints and “women’s longing for sexual and personal emancipation,” “Her Letters,” illustrating as it does the ways in which gender expectations can constrict and disorder the lives of men as well as women, must also be considered as a revolutionary text. Indeed, “Her Letters” may even be more radical than *The Awakening* in that the wife in “Her Letters,” rather than *seeking* sexual and personal emancipation, clearly has *found* a degree of each. It is also apparent that the two drownings represented by the two texts have much in common: Edna’s fatal swim is the culmination of her “awakening” and her ensuing placelessness; her personal desires are incommensurate with society’s expectations and, rather than become a pariah, she commits suicide. In a similar manner, the husband in “Her Letters” is subject to an “awakening,” his realization that his wife was a person, rather than an object, and a person who potentially differed from his conception of her. His sense of placelessness, of being “caught between two states,” which precipitates his suicide, results from the unmooring of his past and his obsession with the possibility of his wife’s infidelity. The text makes clear that this state of affairs is the result of constraining gender expectations: where the “man-instinct of possession” is thwarted, manhood is “engulfed.” “Her Letters” thus demonstrates that gender expectations pertaining to men can be just as damaging as those operative for women.

“Her Letters,” however, ultimately is bleaker in tone than *The Awakening*. Edna ends her life as a result of an understanding on some level of the constraints upon her. She becomes aware to a certain extent of the manner in which she as subject is subject to the signifier, that is, the ways in which her identity and the social positions which she can occupy are rigidly delimited by language and culture. Her suicide is her response—some would say defiant response—to her “awakening” to the fact of castration. In contrast, the husband in “Her Letters” does not resist social gender expectations—rather, his despair derives from his inability to satisfy the expectations placed upon him. His suicide is by no stretch of the imagination a positive act of refusal or self-affirmation, but rather a negative act of resignation in the face of the inevitability of castration. Or, to put it differently, “Her Letters” ends with a “negative apocalypse.” What the husband is left with is precisely the intolerable recognition that the “truth” of his wife and of his past are unavailable, and hence his identity as husband and man are put into question. The secret of the wife, swallowed up by the river, be-

comes his truth—a truth that he cannot possess. The husband's search for the unavailable truth of the other and the past—and the manner in which he constantly seeks his truth outside of himself, by putting questions to the others, to the Other—is what makes this text so dark (and so Lacanian) through the intimation that the mortal condition is precisely one of loss and possession, of unavailable truths and subjection to the signifying order of language and culture.

Notes

¹ Nancy A. Walker, ed., "Introduction: Biographical and Historical Contexts," *The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin (New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1993), 14.

² Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin* (New York: Ungar, 1986), 352.

³ Walker, 14.

⁴ Elaine Showalter, "Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book," in Walker, ed., *The Awakening*, 170.

⁵ Much better known is Chopin's 1894 short story "The Story of An Hour," in which a woman's response to the news of her husband's death is a sense of elation over her liberation. When the news turns out to be false and she is surprised by her husband's return, the shock literally kills her.

⁶ Much of Lacan's work focuses on the role that the symbolic realm of language and culture plays in constituting identity. Especially pertinent to this essay are "The agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), and "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988).

⁷ Kate Chopin, "Her Letters," in *A Vocation and a Voice: Stories*, ed. Emily Toth (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 97. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁸ Jacques Derrida observes in "Signature, Event, Context" that "to write is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten." See Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Alan Bass (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1988), 8.

⁹ Freud writes of melancholia that “The ego wishes to incorporate this object into itself, and the method by which it would do so, in this oral or cannibalistic stage, is by devouring it.” See Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), in *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff, trans. Alix Strachey (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 171.

¹⁰ A reader’s response to this essay noted that the wife’s control over her husband and the method in which she passes the letters on to him suggest a sadistic streak. Indeed, the perversity of the story derives precisely from the “catch-22” of the letters and the injunction against reading them. One may speculate that the “passing on” of the letters is punitive toward the husband and is designed to torment him. One may also postulate the reverse and propose that the preservation of the letters is an act of confession motivated by shame and contrition. However, there is little evidence to support either interpretation. Given the woman’s mental state—dying and overwhelmed by a melancholic attachment to an affair long since past—it is not even clear that the woman necessarily values the letters more than her husband’s happiness. After all, she did request that the letters be returned so that they could be destroyed. There is no denying that the passing on of the letters has dramatic ramifications for the husband which make the act seem cruel indeed; however, it is difficult to determine the motivation for this act.

¹¹ It seems significant in this context that the story makes no mention of children. This suggests that their marriage was one entirely devoid of passion and intimacy.

¹² To the extent that Chopin rewrites the Pandora myth here, she reveals that Pandora’s situation was a double-bind, that the consequences of her not opening the box would have been just as woeful—perhaps even more so because what the husband is deprived of in “Her Letters” ultimately is *hope*.

¹³ Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on “The Purloined Letter,” 44.

¹⁴ Lacan, “Seminar,” 43.

¹⁵ Lacan, “Seminar,” 29.