

Recalcitrant Framing in Kate Chopin's "Her Letters"¹

(El enmarque recalcitrante en "Her Letters", de Kate Chopin)

*Sandra Argüello Borbón*²

Universidad Técnica Nacional, Costa Rica

Abstract

Short story theory in English allows for an analysis of certain particularities of the genre. This article addresses the story "Her Letters," by Kate Chopin, from the perspective of textual framing: intratextual, extratextual, intertextual and circumtextual views. The recalcitrance resulting from the interplay of these frames produces a reading of the story from the subversive position of the female protagonist and the letters she leaves upon her death, letters that frame the binomial silence/word.

Resumen

La teoría literaria anglosajona sobre el cuento permite un análisis de ciertas particularidades del género. En este artículo se estudia el cuento "Her Letters" de Kate Chopin, desde la perspectiva de los marcos textuales: intratextual, extratextual, intertextual y circumtextual. La recalcitrancia generada en el interjuego de estos marcos produce una lectura de la historia desde la posición subversiva de la protagonista y las cartas que deja a su muerte, que se enmarcan en el binomio silencio/palabra.

Keywords: literary theory, short story, framing, Kate Chopin

Palabras clave: teoría literaria, el cuento, enmarcamiento, Kate Chopin

¹ Recibido: 12 de agosto de 2018; aceptado: 29 de abril de 2019.

² Inglés como Lengua Extranjera. Correo electrónico: sarguello@utn.ac.cr.

Literary criticism should provide interpretative tools for re-creating literature, thus offering new possibilities for the readers to become part of the dynamics of the reading process. Short story criticism has long been concerned mostly with the formal aspect of the *shortness* of the genre and how it affects, defines and determines how readers construct meaning differently from how they do it when reading a *longer* narrative text like the novel. On the other hand, short story theorists such as Ian Reid and Austin Wright have seen in the genre's shortness a very productive ground for criticism by offering new possibilities to the reader's creative exchange with the text. Reid's definition of frames and Wright's understanding of recalcitrance prove to be two productive and thought-provoking points of departure for approaching a short story. Both concepts—frames and recalcitrance—grant the reader an active role in the process of ascribing meaning to the short story, while at the same time raising awareness of the readers' initial (intra- and extra-text) position. For a careful reading of "Her Letters," by Kate Chopin,³ Reid's classification of frames as circumtextual, intratextual, intertextual and extratextual⁴ makes it possible to grasp the dynamics that cause recalcitrance to be an ever-present force shaping what is said and what is left unknown in a story of patriarchal subversion.

As readers have come to expect from Kate Chopin's writing, there is an element of female liberation in "Her Letters." Before dying, the protagonist—a married woman—leaves her lover's letters in the care of her husband. She initially tries to dispose of the letters, but is able to burn only a few of them. She then writes a note to her husband indicating her wish to have the letters destroyed unopened after her eventual passing. The story, then, activates in the reader frames related to love, marriage, unfaithfulness, and the epistolary genre, among

3 Kate Chopin, "Her Letters," *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, Per Seyersted, ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1969) 400-404; page numbers are indicated in parentheses in the text.

4 Ian Reid, "Destabilizing Frames for the Story," *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey, eds. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1994) 299-310.

others. Since no engagement with a text is innocent, the reader brings her background of knowledge and textual experience that accounts for the way the text is approached and understood. For Reid, there are ways in which narratives virtually frame themselves, and there are ways in which they get framed by textual mediators (...) and by a whole range of assumptions that readers may bring to bear"; the text can and does become a ground for the reader to elaborate frames, as Reid says, they are "in the eye of the beholder."⁵

Austin M. Right⁶ defines frames as opposing forces:

In every short story—indeed, in every formed work of fiction—two opposing forces are visible: the force of a shaping form and the resistance of the shaped materials. Let us consider the resisting force. I call it recalcitrance or, as it resists the form, formal recalcitrance.

For these forces to emerge, collaboration is essential. Speaker/listener, sender/receiver, author/reader depend upon one another to communicate.⁷ What readers bring to the text, their subjectivity, is therefore a key element in frame elaboration. As individuals immersed in a certain culture and time, the readers themselves are a frame for the text. The importance of understanding and working with frames is that they allow for a continuous communication and interplay between text and readership. The readers become an active force in the reading process, since they make sense of the text while reading.

As Brown⁸ indicates, "the activation of a frame involves expectations; if these predictions are not fulfilled, a reader can of course shift frames." The shifting of frames thus depends on a reader's previous background knowledge which offers the possibilities for

⁵ Reid, 299.

⁶ Austin M. Wright, "Recalcitrance in the Short Story," *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey, eds. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1994) 115-129.

⁷ Susan McKenna, *Crafting the Female Subject: Narrative Innovation in the Short Fiction of Emilia Pardo Bazán* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

⁸ Suzanne H. Brown, "Discourse Analysis and the Short Story," *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey, eds. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1994) 217-245.

new understandings while engaging with a text. By choosing a short story by Kate Chopin, I am already bringing to the act of reading my own interests and knowledge in women's issues and feminism. My former contact with the text will allow for a pre-framing process in which the I-reader would, before reading the text once again, activate and re-activate previous frames and begin elaborating new ones as my knowledge and life experiences are continually evolving. Since the very beginning, the title of the story, "Her Letters," activates the frame of gender relationships, one that the I-reader has come to expect from Chopin's stories.

Austin M. Wright sees recalcitrance as engaging readers in a struggle between the vision of a potential and eventual unity and the obstructions to that vision. "It is from this point of view, form seen as behavior (constructive in the writer, perceptual in the reader), that the opposition of two forces appears: the shaping force versus the resisting force."⁹ To see form as behavior is to give it the possibility to be transformed, to be shaped and re-shaped as the reader begins to activate different frames in her mind. In "Her Letters," the two forces are thus related to the discourse of silence: to what is said and left unsaid, two opposites that do not reconcile, and thus become the tension in the story. This opposition between what is said and silence relates to other oppositions perceived in the text: letter-short story, man-woman, wife-lover. Throughout Chopin's story, the tension between those opposing forces creates the appropriate place for the reader's either-or frame of mind. After the narrator fails to burn the letters, she reflects:

Heaven grant, not the first, that very first one, written before they had learned, or dared to say to each other "I love you." No, no; there it was, safe enough. She laughed with pleasure, and held it to her lips. But what if that other most precious and most imprudent one were missing! in which every word of untempered passion had long

⁹ Wright, 117.

ago eaten its way into her brain; and which stirred her still to-day, as it had done a hundred times before when she thought of it. (400)

Readers are teased with the idea of an *imprudent* letter, but they will never know what the letter was actually about. The answer readers get is silence. But, compared to the husband, readers have a deeper understanding of the narrator, since they have been told about the content of the letters directly by their writer.

Circumtextually, those "material borders of a text," as Reid¹⁰ calls them, are in close relation to what the text seems to promise to deliver, even from the title itself; it creates expectation on the part of the reader. The reader might rightly assume that the story will reveal the content of the letters. The epistolary genre becomes a resisting force opposing the shaping force the short story genre would appear to impose. Just as the narrator in the story does, holding the paper in her hands and pressing the pages together, the reader—due to the physical existence of the book—can do the same. Their materiality acts also as a shaping force that the letters' silence resists by not fully revealing their content. The letters, as shown later, subvert themselves by not fulfilling their expected role to communicate.

Although never read as a (metaphorical) flesh-and-blood character, the letter brings complexity and diversity to the narrative as a (metaphorical) physical object capable of surrounding itself with a space of its own. Unlike an inserted picture or ticket stub, similarly inanimate objects disrupting the flow of the narration, or another physical object (such as a chair, table, tree) rendered material in literature, within the intimate space granted in the narrative a letter gains a specific voice of its own that it projects as separate from that of the narrator, thus complicating the spatial construction of the narrative.¹¹

¹⁰ Reid, 301.

¹¹ Alexandra McDowell Carley, "Materiality and the Literary Letter," *Honors Theses*, 94 (Lewiston, ME: Bates College, 2014). Available at: <<http://scarab.bates.edu/honorsthesis/94>>.

In Chopin's story, this specific voice of the letters becomes a silence that is only truly known by the protagonist, and in being silenced, this voice creates a gap that the husband is unable to make sense of. The husband is left in the dark, and the letters become the way that the female protagonist can place herself in the center of her own forbidden love story.

The opposition title/body centers around the reader's expectations to become acquainted with the content of the letters, as the title of the short story hints. The division of the story into four different sections also seems to suggest the epistolary genre, as traditional letters are written on separate, loose pages. This separation increases the opposition between other forces in the story such as husband-wife. Form then, as Brown¹² suggests, is a behavior, not a fixed entity. Through form, recalcitrance in Chopin's story is reinforced. There are two parallel stories that would never reconcile: the wife's and the husband's. The reader is a witness of this separateness and as such becomes an accomplice to the woman's love story.

Intratextual framing also facilitates a deeper, more active participation of the reader as a constructor of meaning. According to Wolf¹³, "Intratextual framings comprise all elements within the main 'text' that signal particular cognitive frames which are relevant to the reception of the work in consideration (or parts of it)." In the case of "Her Letters," as the title indicates, one of the most important frames is the epistolary writing of the protagonist. As Reid¹⁴ pointed out, "A text will sometimes seem to comment on aspects of its own genre though some little embedded episode, image or situation that serves as a part-for-the-whole-mirror, an inset reading model; this frames it intratextually." The genre of the letters (epistolary) somehow opposes the genre of the short story. Readers expect certain characteristics from

¹² Brown.

¹³ Werner Wolf, "Introduction," *Frames, Framings and Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006) 20.

¹⁴ Reid, 302.

a story, which are different from what they would expect from a letter. Commenting about epistolary fiction, O'Dwyer¹⁵ explains that it

purloins the letter and transforms it into a framing device that accentuates the voyeuristic and the secret. It positions us not just as spectators, but as detectives, sleuths and scopophiles who gaze through the keyhole and watch as the action unfolds.

In Chopin's story this voyeurism is enhanced by the fact that the reader is placed in a position of knowledge that is denied to the husband. We observe as the story unfolds and the husband finally commits suicide. The reader becomes a witness with a secret which places the female protagonist as the agent of her own, secret desire.

On the other hand, in a short story the reader expects different elements such as a diversity of narrators, shifting points of view and plot; aspects more closely related to what informed readers, as instructed by the canon, have come to label as "literature." This "part-for-the-whole-mirror" that Reid refers to becomes the letters that neither the reader nor the husband can read. They stand as a locus where the woman and her lover met; their clandestine nature is kept in the short story by not revealing their content. Likewise, the husband and wife, the "legitimate" relationship, meet at a certain point in the short story, though they can never reconcile. The more subjective type of writing, the letters, is the place where the woman can escape the dictates of society and thus subvert her role as wife. She becomes someone with passions and desires that could not be explored in her marital life, the institutionalized form of love. As Weinstock¹⁶ has pointed out:

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

15 E. O'Dwyer, "Love Texts: The Lacanian Gaze in Epistolary Literature in the 21st Century" (diss. (Sydney: University of Technology, 2014) 10.

16 Jeffrey Weinstock, "In Possession of the Letter: Kate Chopin's 'Her Letters,'" *Studies in American Fiction* 30, 1 (2002): 45-62. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/saf.2002.0000>.

is both misogynistic and untenable in a society in which women express their sexuality and independence.

Although the letters function as a sort of silence in the story, they are an ever-present resisting force that escapes the socially-determined gender roles. This is why the husband kills himself at the end; his “man-instinct of possession still in his blood” (401). Thus, for the reader, his encounter with his wife occurs at the short story, a more institutionalized literary genre when compared to the epistolary genre, which has served as a secret meeting point for lovers for much of history. As Sempreora pointed out, “Chopin creates a portrait of a woman whose stored love letters represent her conscious possession of both sexual desire and language to express that desire.”¹⁷

The resistance between letters/silence or knowledge/silence is at the core of the story. This resistance relates to intertextual framing: “intertextuality comprises devices by which a text signals how its very structure of meaning depends on both its similarity to and its difference from certain other types of texts.”¹⁸ Letters of the type found in the story belong to an old tradition: love letters. By making use of language as a way to transmit knowledge, letters are supposed to communicate something. Just as the woman at the beginning of the story places the letters “in the centre of the room” (402), so are the letters placed at the center of the narrative (even before reading, they are visible in the title). As O’Dwyer puts it:

Embedded in every love letter is a story of desire. Between lovers, the desire is to overcome a real or imagined separation. In epistolary fiction this desire transfers to the reader, awakened by the writer in a conscious appeal to our unconscious fantasy.¹⁹

¹⁷ Margot Sempreora, “Dead Women Talking: The Transgressive Manuscripts of Kate Chopin’s ‘Her Letters’ and ‘Elizabeth Stock’s One Story,’” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 65, 4 (2012): 451-464 (456).

¹⁸ Reid, 304.

¹⁹ O’Dwyer, 10.

Through the narrator, the reader knows that the letters were about clandestine love and guarded passion, but she is never allowed to read them. Their real words are forbidden to her eyes and that emphasizes the love letter's intimacy. So the knowledge contained in the letters is opposed to the silence readers, and mostly the husband, get as an answer for his suspicions of her wife's infidelity. The reader has a more privileged position than the husband does since he can only guess about the content of the letters, because of the note that the wife left before dying: "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" (400). The husband is placed in a moral dilemma that the reader is not; wisely enough, the woman appeals to his loyalty and love, two qualities cherished by institutionalized love.

"Her Letters" becomes a subversive short story in which knowledge belongs to the woman through the manipulation of her secret letters. In this story there is no direct speech on the part of the characters; the only time the reader gets the words from the woman they are in written form, a message to her husband. Wisely, the woman knows her husband will be curious, but unable to open the package. She knows he will be respectful of her will to leave the letters unopened. "She had made no mistake; 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" (400). For the reader, this becomes very ironic since the reader does know what the letters are about, even without being allowed to read them.

Accordingly, wife/husband is another opposition, one that is very ironic and reinforces the role of silence as recalcitrance. The reader knows that the wife is capable of feeling passion only for her lover. In her letters, "every word of untempered passion had long ago eaten its way into her brain" (399). In contrast, the husband could not find the "faintest evidence that his wife had not been the true and loyal woman he had always believed her to be" (403). This opposition becomes very ironic because it places the husband further in the realm of not

knowing, in the silence his wife managed to create and manipulate. In the books she read, the husband wanted to find some textual clue, but his inability to do so reinforces the recalcitrance created by the knowledge/silence opposition: “He had read them all; but nowhere, by the shadow of a sign, could he find that the author had echoed the secret of her existence—the secret which he had held in his hands and cast into the river” (404). The husband thought he knew his wife well, but the impossibility of finding a sign of her desire echoes his impossibility to “read” her real self, the one that, ironically, he thought he knew. His agony of “many an hour since that night when the darkness then had closed around him and engulfed his manhood” (405) is the agony of not knowing, of being unable to escape the world of silence in which she imprisoned him.

Furthermore, intertextual framing refers to the social conditioning that the reader brings to the text; the reader's background and socialization as a gendered being places him/her in a specific position while reading. In this sense, marriage is an important frame in “Her Letters.” Marriage as a social institution places people in a certain position according to their gender and social rules. As Brown²⁰ points out, “macro-propositions are formed according to macro-rules.” A macro-proposition or frame in our society is that marriage is sacred; this view thus influences how we consider marriage-related issues such as loyalty, fidelity and care. According to a traditional patriarchal view, a woman often has to “erase” herself as a desiring subject in order to become a wife. In “Her Letters” the woman subverts her position as wife to privilege her role as woman who is capable of feeling love and passion. For the husband, the fact that his wife could have been unfaithful is a surprise and a threat to his masculinity, since he always perceived her as “saintly.” This reinforces the issue of silence as a major form of recalcitrance.

²⁰ Brown, 217.

The husband never suspects his wife's unfaithfulness because he is sure of her role as wife: "He knew her to be cold and passionless, but true, and watchful of his comfort and happiness" (401). This position is the traditional role of a wife in a patriarchal, 19th century society. The reader, on the other hand, knows the woman was capable of passion. Since the wife's surrender to the tastes and desires of a husband is expected, the husband never questioned his wife's actions since she fulfills his other wishes of caretaker. The husband plays the traditional role of a well-off provider who is incapable of thinking about the woman he married as a sexual being who has needs and desires. It is ironic that the readers are given clues of the woman's passion and sexual desire for the lover. After she burns a few of the letters and feels remorse, she picks up one of them:

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. (402)

He is tormented by the suggestion of infidelity the letters stir within him. "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" (401). His *masculinity* is questioned, and he feels threatened; that is why he has to kill himself even though his wife is already dead. He is honorable and will not open the letters, but he knows he will not like their content. His suicide is not an act of mourning for the dead wife, but a patriarchal gesture of his expectations not being met.

Extratextually, "Her Letters" also places the reader in a position of knowing. This type of framing is characterized by Reid²¹ as unavoidable: "No text can be understood apart from what readers

21 Reid, 310.

bring to it;” besides, “it might be argued that extratextual framing is largely a tautological category in that hardly a sentence is conceivable without the activating of some extratextual frame or other.”²² All the instances of recalcitrance referred to above, allow the reader to enjoy the process of reading, an enjoyment that is further emphasized by the reader's superiority over one of the characters (the husband). This superiority arises from the fact that the reader feels he/she knows the woman more than her own husband does. As Wright²³ has pointed out,

If a form comes into view too easily and ceases to evolve as we reflect on it, we find it banal; if the process is stalled and our quest for a form is too stubbornly frustrated, we find the work chaotic. The “life” of a form (its power to interest us actively, to give us that immediacy and involvement which belong to all fiction we enjoy) depends upon our encounter with the resistance of the materials, the recalcitrance that seems constantly to be yielding to the shaping form.

“Her Letters” engages the reader by shaping the silence that surrounds the letters. It also involves the readers by placing them in a more knowledgeable position than that of the woman's husband. The said-unsaid interplay in the story's development makes the reader an accomplice of the text's subversions of patriarchal order. The title of the story suggests possession (hers), and thus makes the woman the only one who truly knows the words written in the letters. She appropriates herself through her secret. The husband is tormented by this idea, since he always seems to think about “his” comfort and “his” happiness. The letters become a subversive silence throughout the short story. They prevent the husband from gaining knowledge of his wife's infidelity, thus aiding her in her liberation from a loveless marriage.

The husband's suicide at the end of the story reinforces the oppositions that it is built around. The husband throws himself into the

²² Per Winther, “Frames Speaking: Malamud, Silko, and the Reader,” *Short Story Theories*, Viorica Patea, ed. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012).

²³ Wright, 117.

river where he had previously thrown the letters. Symbolically and literally, he wants to chase them and find out what they hid. He knows his life would be miserable from not being able to know the content. In sum, the opposition man/woman, letters/silence, words/silence, knowing/not knowing are all part of a major frame in the story, one which functions as a macroframe determining the husband's fate.

He no longer sought to know from men and women what they dared not or could not tell him. Only the river knew. He went and stood again upon the bridge where he had stood many an hour since that night when the darkness then had closed around him and engulfed his manhood. (402)

The short story subverts patriarchy by placing knowledge in the woman. She manipulates language through silence in a way that makes it impossible to bear within the patriarchal order, as represented by the husband. As the narrator points out, his manhood had been irreparably touched.

The story's various frames—circumtextual, intratextual, intertextual—reinforce the knowledge/silence oppositions at the core of the story. Silence becomes a type of recalcitrance that, as Wright²⁴ says, “saves the form from triviality, boredom, banality.” Silence, ironically, is a speaking voice in the short story, represented mainly by the letters. Silence here becomes knowledge, the powerful force that keeps the action going. The division of the story into sections does not let the reader to see husband and wife together; just as the short story is divided into sections, so are the opposing forces that shape the story's form, such as woman/man. Readers are never told who the lover is because at the end what is important is his presence in the letters: the only thing that reminded her that she was alive. The patriarchal order is thus subverted in form and content. Female desire cannot be silenced, despite the many silences present in the narrative.

²⁴ Wright, 116.

Chopin's heroine of "Her Letters" achieves an act of self-possession: she loves while she *possesses*; she comprehends the power of passion's written evidence; and finally, she protects the truth of her story from possession and judgment.²⁵ Through her letters she is able to express herself and escape the duties imposed by marriage, an institution that often relegates women to the role of caretakers, thus silencing their desiring selves. The epistolary genre, with its more personal connotation, has historically been a way that women have used to explore themselves fully, escaping the dictates of the canon that had long regarded letters as an inferior genre precisely due to their "personal" nature. But Chopin masterfully uses letters as a force resisting patriarchal order. My process of reading "Her Letters" thus activates my frames of gender relations and my conspiracy with the woman's subversion. I, contrary to the husband, do not need to know the letter's content. I become an accomplice to the woman and to all that she represents: the possibility for a woman to be the owner of her own truth.

²⁵ Sempreora, 457.