The Veiled One Short Guide

The Veiled One by Ruth Rendell

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Characters

A reviewer of The Veiled One has called Reg Wexford "the coziest, most approachable, least angst-ridden detective in today's major-league crime fiction," seeing Wexford's essentially well-adjusted composure as a necessary antidote to the baleful murk through which he plies his trade. Wexford's England has nothing to do with the tidy vicarages and romantic moors of other British crime writers. He must function amid pretentious phoniness, like the shopping center decked out in pseudo-medieval castle trappings, and a suspect's home hung with all-enveloping ivy.

Wexford is mature enough, secure enough, to be able to see beyond the facade of this crime, which appears to be the work of a random-striking homicidal maniac. But when he is temporarily incapacitated by the explosion of his daughter's car, the investigation passes to his right-hand man Mike Burden, himself an edgy new father groping into a second family as uncomfortable to him as the just-bought jeans that replace his former business suits.

Burden's obsessive conviction that he has found the psychopath conceals both the identity of the real murderer and Burden's own capacity for error.

Finally, Wexford humanely unravels the entanglement, smiling wryly to himself when he hears Burden admit for the first time, "We live and learn."

Rendell consistently succeeds with her dispassionate portraits of aberrant criminal behavior. The Veiled One overtly plays an unnatural mother-son combination against Wexford's healthy relationship with his daughter Sheila, making Clifford Sanders, the disturbed son of the woman who discovers the garrotted body at the beginning of the novel, eerily real. Rendell's psychological study of Sanders reveals both his fears and the twisted love that underlie the murders which open and close this case.

Social Concerns

The title of Rendell's fourteenth Wexford novel suggests its principal theme, carried out simultaneously in the crime that Wexford must solve and in his relations with his family and environment: the classical Greek philosophical fallacy that if she is veiled "you can recognize your own mother and not recognize her" — "something to do with all of us and our parents, and with knowing and not knowing."

The veils modern society imposes on its members prevent individuals from distinguishing between the ideal and the real, with results that are all too often tragic.

Rendell explores several of these in her most richly textured Wexford novel to date. Her primary concern is to lay bare the twisted psychological motives behind the murder of a respectable middle-aged woman garrotted in a shopping center parking basement almost before Wexford's eyes. She also addresses sensitive current issues: a hypocritical media treatment of famine; the disregard of the old and infirm under the guise of a national socialized welfare system; well-intentioned but misguided police work that attempts to justify a brutal interrogation by achieving a suspect's confession and finishes in disaster; intrafamily stresses brought on by a parent's helpless preference for one child over another; a wrongheaded refusal to compromise and adjust in marriage. Wexford sums it all up: "It's not so much a depraved society that we live in as an idealistic one" — and as Rendell reveals them here, the ideals that these individuals espouse, no less than the society which encourages them, often create darksome veils of deceit and self-delusion.

One of Rendell's favorite causes, antinuclear lobbying, enters The Veiled One through Wexford's favorite daughter, a prominent BBC actress whose public protests seem to bring on a car bombing that nearly kills Wexford.

This "unveiling" turns out for the better; Sheila's father cringes at her wellpublicized ban-the-bomb protests, but Sheila's openness about her activities and even her divorce and new lover at last teach Wexford a vital lesson: so what if the neighbors see?

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Earlier in her career, Rendell subordinated character to plot, but her later books begin with her characters. She finds "abiding satisfaction" in contemplating perceptive portraits by Old Masters — "Slyness must lurk behind those eyes surely, cruelty in that thinlipped mouth" — and she creates their counterparts for her books, a technique that seems to lend striking verisimilitude to her depictions of distorted personalities.

For some time, Rendell says, she has also been reading and rereading the great Victorian novels, to learn "how to evolve and develop a story and cliffhang my protagonist at the end of a chapter." Each chapter ending of The Veiled One pulls inexorably into the opening of the next, an effect strengthened by Rendell's novelistic reticence, a technique she attributes to Ford Madox Ford's The Good Soldier (1915): the power to suggest and withhold information that she believes is essential to mystery fiction.

Chief Inspector Wexford made his debut in Rendell's From Doom to Death (1965), as a good-natured fifty-twoyear-old professional given to appropriate quotations and gentle self-directed irony. He has aged gracefully into a tolerant grandfather figure who can look unscathed into the darkest depths of human nature and come away still believing in the goodness of mankind. In The Veiled One Rendell also uses to advantage her exceptional talent for depicting how well houses reveal their occupants' characters; the explosion that sent Wexford to the hospital turns the home he and his wife have lovingly built over the years into an obscene heap of rubble and packs them off to live in the very neighborhood where the murder took place. Out of it all, however, Wexford salvages his hope and his sense of humor. At the close of the novel, one of Rendell's darkest, he still can grin as he sees workers beginning to rebuild his house, which serves as a metaphor for his new insights into his own family relationships. Rendell believes that "one should write to please oneself," and the development of her Wexford series seems to illustrate her success in doing so, since her protagonist continues to grow and flourish into a consistently more fully realized human being.

Related Titles

The Bridesmaid In The Bridesmaid (1989), Inspector Wexford builds his outer and inner houses out of solid sanity and decorates them with a cheerful optimism, taking for granted that most of his fellow humans have a capacity for goodness; those who do not he must lock up. The bad characters do not so much construct their homes as allow them to go to seed, producing the squalid decaying suburbs of Rendell's modern London that parallels her view of the contemporary British spirit.

Rendell feels that if people have a choice of where they live, their houses reflect their characters, but if they are trapped by circumstance, "the effect on them must sometimes be very bad indeed." Rendell dissects one of the worst of those effects, the fatal combination of bad luck and bad choices. In a tale of two intertwining obsessions, she eerily demonstrates that whatever people turn their backs on gets them in the end.

Young Philip Wardman at first appears the epitome of middle-class decency, caring about his widowed mother's happiness, looking as best he can after his sisters' welfare, and faithfully walking the family terrier. He has what he calls "a phobia" against violent death, but his irrational, passionate affair with Senta, an enigmatic woman he meets at his sister's wedding, leads him to just such an end.

Horrifyingly, as Wardman slips ever further into sexual bondage to Senta, who demands they each kill a person to prove their love for the other, he realizes the depth of his degradation.

Blinded by lust he cannot see that the choices he makes for her are wrong, leading him to ignore his family and even his own moral sense for the sake of a tawdry affair with a woman at the edge of madness.

Rendell has said that "the time for a blackness and whiteness of characters . . . has long gone by." She maintains that characters can become "so unpleasant that we lose interest in their fate," and that even the most repugnant must exhibit love for someone or something to sustain a reader's attention. The Bridesmaid twists this concept unsettlingly back upon itself: Only when Philip Wardman acknowledges that he has never really known how to love, that even as a boy he "fell out of love" with his adored cat once it grew old and decrepit, is he capable of knowing what crimes of the spirit he has committed. In Senta, a pathological liar and homicidal manic-depressive, Rendell has created a character so devoid of love for anyone or anything beyond herself, who is so filled with self-absorptive fantasy, that she no longer knows truth from reality. She is able to cloud the mind of commonsensical, decent Philip Wardman, who eventually learns to his own devastation what his love for her has cost him.

In several previous novels, especially Master of the Moor (1982) and The Killing Doll (1984), Rendell used two psychopathic characters who, unknown to one another at the outset, meet with fatal impact at the conclusion of her story. Bringing such figures into intimate contact in The Bridesmaid multiplies the pathological symptoms in its

atmosphere. Philip Wardman and Senta, with their respective obsessions, writhe indissolubly into one another from the start: during his first night in her foul-smelling basement lair, she tells him prophetically, "I don't just want to have you, Philip, I want to be you" — and by the end she has swallowed him up.

The House of Stairs The House of Stairs (1989) is a psychological novel: from the start, when the first-person narrator Elizabeth Vetch reveals that she has a fifty-fifty chance of developing genetically transmitted Huntington's chorea, Vine (Rendell) plays off the forces of heredity against people's "houses," again her metaphor for the restrictive environments they create for themselves. Now in middle age, Elizabeth is forced to relive events of fourteen years earlier when she glimpses Bell, a woman out of Elizabeth's past who has been released from prison, striding along a London street.

Bell's crime and even its victim are not revealed until the final pages of The House of Stairs, but along the way Vine explores several contemporary themes, most related to perceptions of female sexuality. Vine declares here that society still condemns an older woman's need for a younger man and makes aging itself bitterly unfair: "Why," asks Elizabeth, "do we have to be old for so much longer [than men]?" The "little lesbian theme" between Bell and Elizabeth results from Elizabeth's fear of passing on the disease in a normal marriage, and the responsibility Elizabeth feels for Bell's crimes stems from Elizabeth's love of literature, by which she unknowingly supplied Bell both a motive and a means of murder.

Vine also includes a secondary theme dealing with the process of writing itself, perhaps a comment on Ruth Rendell's career. Elizabeth turned her back on scholarly studies of Henry James and taught herself to produce salable fiction. Fourteen years later, she compares popular success with genuine achievement: "Writers perhaps don't achieve great success or fame unless they write from the heart," and looking back, she declares, "I might have at least tried to write something that was an examination of the human heart, but I didn't. I wanted money."

The women of The House of Stairs, as Vine's themes suggest, far overshadow their male companions. Each in fact builds herself a dwelling and in it, spiderlike, destroys a physical or emotional mate. At the death of her prototypic English husband who believed that a man's home was a measure of his accomplishment, Cosette, the replacement mother Elizabeth chose for herself, flings herself into a 1960s Bohemian lifestyle with drugged and alcoholic hangers-on she invites to her new house, the bizarre setting for most of the novel's action. Elizabeth Vetch's narrative passes one landing after another in Cosette's odd house until at the end she reaches the ominous room in the garret whose one window looks out into a void, a metaphor for the guilt-ridden life that her role in Bell's crimes has condemned her to live.

Elizabeth's fear of the disease that has killed so many of her relatives may also echo circumstances in Rendell's own life; her mother died of multiple sclerosis, and Rendell admits that even though that disease is not supposed to be hereditary, "I used to be very twitchy about it."

Vine rejects the format of traditional mystery fiction, which generally opens with the murder and proceeds to sort out clues to the killer's identity. With a Henry Jamesian reliance on exploring the psychology of the criminal, Vine prefers to dissect motives, shadow by shadow, without making clear until the end exactly what the crime is and who has been victimized. In The House of Stairs she employs an ultimate cliffhanger worthy of James himself, closing on a ringing telephone that will determine Elizabeth's future.

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