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# Ruth Rendell and Barbara Vine – Family Matters

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This article traces themes and preoccupations that work across Ruth Rendell's work, writing both as Rendell and also as Barbara Vine. It investigates the ways in which the use of a pseudonym allows her to delve deeper into areas that she also explores as Rendell – the dysfunctional family and heredity, both in relation to physical disease and the fruitless search for origins, the latter discussed by her through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Ruth Rendell was one of the most prolific British crime fiction writers of the twentieth century, continuing to produce work right up until her death in May 2015, her final posthumous novel *Dark Corners* being published in October of that year. In 1996, she was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in 1996, and a Labour Life Peer, sitting in the House of Lords as Baroness Rendell of Babergh, in October 1997. She won numerous awards throughout her life, but arguably has not yet been awarded the critical recognition that she deserves. There are similarities between her and Patricia Highsmith, whose writing has only recently begun to receive such critical attention although she died 21 years ago, in 1995.

Both authors were concerned largely with the psychological, and in Rendell that is combined with a concentration on the vicissitudes of the family: this essay addresses these two aspects of her work. First, I consider these issues in respect of her work as Ruth Rendell. Then I examine the reasons why Rendell adopted Barbara Vine as a pseudonym, focusing on issues concerning femininity (in an abstract and psychoanalytically oriented sense) and her arguably deeper exploration of the family within the Vine texts. I utilize psychoanalysis to argue that both Rendell and, especially, Vine penned texts that echo and illustrate the

human drive to search into one's history (and even further, into one's prehistory), in a fruitless search for origins and originating causes, in order to give meaning to seemingly intractable problems in the present day.

Rendell was most widely known as the creator of Chief Inspector Wexford, primarily because many of the stories in the Wexford strand of her work were successfully adapted for television, proving very popular and running over many years. On the surface, the Wexford novels display an "Englishness" that needs no explanation, similar to Colin Dexter's Morse novels or the television series *Midsomer Murders*, set as they are in the predominantly middle-class southern English fictional town of Kingsmarkham. However, the Wexford novels work to reveal the conflicts and anxieties that lie beneath the attractive surface of the town, exposing social divisions and dark forces at work under the pristine exterior. Rendell uses the characters that surround Wexford in his day-to-day life to make her points. Mike Burden is a central character whose politics and opinions are in general more conservative than Wexford's, but Rendell does not fall into the trap of merely using the personality and opinions of a character such as Burden as a foil for Wexford. Instead she focuses on both his and Burden's families and the ways in which their lives, troubles, and experiences both influence and pose a challenge to what might otherwise be for both policemen, in their different ways, predictable and institutionally led ways of thinking. Wexford's relationships with his daughters Sheila and Sylvia (the latter more strained and problematic) form backdrops to many of the novels. In *Kissing the Gunner's Daughter* (1992) his belief in the fundamental innocence of teenage girls almost blinds him to murderer's guilt. In *End in Tears* (2006), the main storyline of a daughter's murder is interwoven with maternity, both of the murdered girl and her stepmother, but also with Sylvia's surrogacy. In *End in Tears* it is Wexford and not his wife Dora who accepts Sylvia's decision to act as a surrogate; his attempt to prevent the situation fracturing the family serves to highlight that the most important family relationships in the series are between the father and his daughters: "Only in *End in Tears*, when she believes Sylvia is about to destroy their family, does she behave uncharacteristically, her emotions oscillating between coldness and rage" (Leavy 198). In the Wexford novels, Rendell explores family dynamics, and the complexities of the father/daughter relationships echo Sigmund Freud's theorization of "family romances," in which he argues that, for the child, the price of freeing oneself from the

authority of the parents is both necessary and painful: “The freeing of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development” (74). Sheila is the favored child, a beautiful and successful actress who leaves Kingsmarkham to live in London, while Sylvia remains local, her various causes and relationship disasters functioning as a constant thorn in Wexford’s side, while at the same time highlighting the ways in which familial relationships are complex and ambiguous. As Freud comments on such relationships:

If anyone is inclined to turn away in horror from this depravity of the childish heart or feels tempted, indeed, to dispute the possibility of such things, he should observe that these works of fiction, which seem so full of hostility, are none of them really so badly intended, and that they still preserve, under a slight disguise, the child’s original affection for his parents. The faithlessness and ingratitude are only apparent. (74)

Rendell, especially when writing as Vine, foregrounds family dysfunctionality and the secrets and lies that, often through hostility, reveal both love and obsession. In the Wexford novels, the neurotic subplots involving his daughters play themselves out through the series since Rendell has time to develop them and offer eventual resolution of sorts. Aligned with Wexford’s role as a parent is his status as police officer, upholder of the law in both its legal and moral manifestations, thus magnifying the usual paternal authority that is challenged by both daughters.

While the non-Wexford strands of her work have also been adapted for television, the stability and longevity of the Wexford marriage, despite the subplots described, contributes to the great success that the television Wexford series enjoyed. Rendell’s first published novel was *From Doon with Death* in 1964, which featured Wexford and set the pattern for this strand of her output. It is, however, easy to forget that this first novel set a pattern that runs through all the strands of her work, since it transgressed the social mores of the time by its plot, which foregrounded lesbian obsession, an unusual choice of subject for a new writer trying to break into the crime fiction genre at that time. The 2009 novel *The Monster in the*

*Box* was Wexford's last case as a serving police officer, but contrary to rumor (fueled by a 2009 interview in *The Daily Telegraph* in which Rendell said that she did not want to write any more Wexfords, a report denied by her publisher), this was not to be his last case. The next Wexford novel, *The Vault* (2011), finds him retired and spending part of his time with wife Dora in his successful actress-daughter Sheila's coach house in a desirable part of London. This allows him a sense of freedom, both owing to the lack of rules and protocol that he was bound to before retirement and because it introduces an alternative environment to Kingsmarkham, the setting of the majority of the Wexford novels. However, the Chief Inspector also misses the power and sense of identity that his previous role provides, and *The Vault* and a further very recent Wexford *No Man's Nightingale* (2014) allow Rendell to develop the character of Wexford into the uncertainties yet nonetheless liberating potential of older age.

Although the Wexford novels do contain a stability that Rendell's other works do not, insofar as there are recurring and consistent characters, and their main focus is on the police investigation, Rendell explores difficult and challenging themes within them. *Harm Done* (2010) takes on the controversial topic of pedophilia, and the Wexford texts in general grapple with contemporary cultural, political, and gender issues, both through the cases that he investigates and through a constant re-examination of both his and his closest colleagues' family situations. In *Murder Being Once Done* (1972), the Chief Inspector convalesces in London with his police officer nephew Howard, a Detective Superintendent, and becomes involved in a murder that leads to discoveries including religious cults, families, and deceit.

Apart from the Wexford texts, which can loosely be described as police procedurals, albeit ones not afraid to address difficult and transgressive issues, Rendell wrote novels in which the police are, if anything, secondary to the main themes and preoccupations of each. She used the crime fiction format to examine particular themes, such as adult illiteracy in *A Judgement in Stone* (1977); social misfits, the lonely, and delusion in, among other novels, *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* (1994); and romantic obsession in *Going Wrong* (1990). These are primarily psychological crime novels, shifting the emphasis from the whodunit to the whydunit. Rendell did not shy away from difficult or complex social issues: her protagonists are often unsympathetic, socially isolated, and/or suffering from mental health issues

without sufficient family or state support. She was particularly interested in following the ripples that spread out from their actions, the consequences of choices for both the protagonists and their victims.

She investigates these consequences both in respect of the limits of legality and punishment (often in the Wexford novels) and through her ability to recognize the multiple layers of damage and hurt, to victim and aggressor alike. Under the Vine pseudonym, beginning with *A Dark-Adapted Eye* and continuing throughout all the fifteen novels under that name, Rendell arguably emphasized and explored the psychological even further. The differences between the Rendell stand-alone novels and the Vine-penned works are not so much a question of a change of focus but a deepening of the degree of preoccupations within them. These texts delve into the past, usually shifting from past to present and back throughout the novels. *A Dark-Adapted Eye* (1986) focuses on the effect of class and illegitimacy in middle-class mid-twentieth-century English life; *Asta's Book* (1993) includes a crime (as does *A Dark-Adapted Eye*) but one which is peripheral to the main theme of questionable maternity; *The House of Stairs* (1988) investigates the psychological consequences of living with the possibility of hereditary disease; and *The Chimney Sweeper's Boy* (1998) shows the devastating effects of a life lived in denial of one's sexuality. Throughout the Vine novels, she consistently linked physical, moral, and psychological denials, cover-ups, and omissions, gauging the effects of these on her protagonists. The importance of a wrong decision or a human misunderstanding is always emphasized, and both intended and unintended consequences are forensically examined.

Rendell was credited by fellow writers such as P. D. James and others as having shifted the genre by her concentration on the psychological rather than merely wanting to provide a gripping plot and suspense for its own sake. Ian Rankin argues that she also provides a bridge between the Golden Age of Crime Fiction and the new, urban style: "There is a tension within her – there were things she couldn't do in a Wexford book, so she invented Barbara Vine. Her Vine novels often discuss the bizarre nature of London – the haves and the have nots walking in the same park but never meeting" (qtd. in Brooks, "Dark Lady").

Numerous themes in Ruth Rendell's novels can be discerned by a critic attentive to the multiple strands of her work. These can be defined either using the Rendell/Vine distinction, or by being divided into three; the Wexford series being perhaps her best-known output, featuring a police inspector and spawning a popular UK television series, as outlined previously. Secondly, the stand-alone Rendell novels cannot be easily categorized, as their themes and preoccupations are wide-ranging, though they very often address particular contemporary social and cultural issues such as class, education, and feminism. These are often played out with the setting of what can be loosely termed "dysfunctional" families, and extended to others, servants, relatives, or general "outsiders," living within a family home. A renowned example of this is the 1977 *A Judgement in Stone*, which begins with the classic opening line: "Eunice Parchman killed the Coverdale family because she could not read or write" (1). In this novel, as in many of the other stand-alone Rendell texts, the past of the characters is of prime importance; the deadly and explosive collision between Eunice and the Coverdales has everything to do with class, their histories, and the total inability for any rapport between these disparate lives, while living under the same roof.

In relation to this, Louise Conley Jones argues in her essay "Whydunit" that, while murder is usually a focus, "the rest of the work is concerned with elucidating why the criminal committed the crime, while keeping the reader wondering if the criminal will be caught" (498). Lee Horsley notes, "Rendell uses the capacity of the crime novel to explore the complex social causes of criminal behaviour" (61). In *A Judgement in Stone*, Eunice does not even think about trying to escape, acting instead in her characteristically bovine manner as if the murders had never taken place, until she is caught by a chance discovery, which in itself is another theme that runs through both Rendell and Vine texts.

Clearly, the novels published as Ruth Rendell (especially the stand-alones), but to an extent also the Wexfords (through the reflective nature of the Chief Inspector himself), do frequently address questions that are also to be found within the Vines. Shared preoccupations include the nature of the past, heredity, and certain inescapable social mores within rigid restrictions of class and gender structures that stultify and dampen hope and aspiration. In that case, why does Rendell employ the pseudonym, and what specifically characterizes a Vine as opposed to a Rendell? This question is not static or stable, either;

recently, critics have argued that the Vines and Rendells were moving closer together in terms of their themes and preoccupations. Val McDermid, when writing about Rendell on the day of her death, comments, “When her imagination presented her with a story that clearly couldn’t be forced into the Wexford mould, that needed more scope and depth than the psychological Rendells offered, she gave herself the means to maximise its potential in another form.”

Adding the novels that Rendell penned as Barbara Vine to her overall output provides both general readers and Rendell scholars with an enormous body of work with multiple themes and preoccupations. The texts singled out in the essay all represent aspects of the ways in which, writing as Vine, Rendell reflects on families and their secret histories. They include the first Vine text, *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, *The House of Stairs*, and *Asta’s Book*. In 1997, the author said in an interview:

I never kept the fact that I was Barbara Vine a secret. It was just a way of doing a different kind of book. The characters are deeper and they feature not so much murder as accidental death or societal pressures. I thought it would be a minor strand, but they’ve turned out to be as popular as my other books. (“Confessions” 14)

From the late 1980s to the late 1990s, Vine herself engaged with discussion of the pseudonym, both in the form of a letter in the first American paperback publications of *A Dark-Adapted Eye* and *A Fatal Inversion* (the second Vine novel, published in 1987), and in 1997 on the Penguin website. She explained what she perceived to be the difference between Ruth and Barbara (Barbara was her middle name and Vine her great-grandmother’s maiden name, and her Scandinavian grandparents always called her Barbara as they could not pronounce *Ruth*):

Growing up with two names doesn’t make you into two different people. It does give you two aspects of personality, and Ruth and Barbara are two aspects of me. Ruth is tougher, colder, more analytical, possibly more aggressive. Ruth has written all the novels, created Chief Inspector



Wexford. Ruth is the professional writer. Barbara is more feminine. It is Barbara who sews. If Barbara writes, it is letters she writes. ("Confessions" 15)

This juxtaposition, asserted by the author herself, that there is a gendered division between Vine and Rendell, illuminates the question and nature of her choice to write under a pseudonym. From the perspective of her reader, it is perhaps less clear-cut than she appeared to articulate, as will be discussed later. Rendell's own comments concerning her pseudonym allow for an investigation into the similarities and differences from the Rendell novels for several reasons, one being that both reviewers and readers tend to comment that the Vine penned works are substantively more chilling than either the Wexfords or the stand-alone Rendells are.

*Psychological, feminine, and less cold and analytical:* are these the terms we can adopt as the defining features of the Vine output, and how do they in effect contradict each other? Many readers find the Vine novels substantively more disturbing than either the Wexfords or the stand-alone Rendell novels, in fact chilling. Both Rendell and Highsmith have been argued to have "feminized" the crime fiction genre, but not in some nonaggressive, gentle way, but perhaps in a more disturbing, more domestic, less overtly macho and more passive-aggressive manner. As we know, female murderers tend to kill by less bloody means, by poisons and the like, rather than thrusts of the knife and the pummeling of fists. Having said that, the murders in two of the novels to which I will be referring are sudden and violent outbursts, in the throes of exploding anger and betrayal. Susan Rowland argues, "Rendell has stated that she needs the writing identity of Barbara Vine in order to find the psychological freedom of Vine's distinctive works" (127). So the term *psychological* is added to the mix outlined herein. According to Nick Turner, "Having established herself as a genre writer, it is difficult to convince scholars that she is capable of more, the praise has come not from scholarship, but from critical journalism. The Vine novels may not be crime fiction, but they are still suspense fiction, which no matter what its literary qualities maybe, is seen as generic" (103).

Debates concerning the perceived distinctions and validity of the genre fiction as a distinct entity to be considered separately to literary fiction continue. The use of pseudonyms is nothing new. C. Day Lewis, for example, wrote crime novels under the pseudonym Nicholas Blake, including a classic study of love, hatred, and revenge in *The Beast Must Die* (1938). More recently, Joyce Carol Oates has published a series of detective fiction and mystery texts under the name of Rosamond Smith, not, according to her, because these were less important works, but because she wanted to get away from her better-known writing identity. Oates and Lewis, however, are both authors for whom the majority of their published works are considered “serious” or “literary.” For Ruth Rendell writing as Barbara Vine, there appears to be, at least in Turner’s eyes, an assumption that she is attempting to “convince scholars that she is capable of more” or in other words, could in fact transcend the label of crime fiction writer and with it the negative connotations that arise from being cast as a genre writer. To some extent, the academic community has drawn crime (and more broadly popular) literature into the canon, and it is becoming if not legitimated, then at least accepted. It is fair to say, however, that there is even today a point where those who have no other, more “acceptably literary” persona, are nonetheless still on the defensive when it comes to its claiming of an artistic status without reservation.

Laura Marcus argues that while crime fiction is

seen as a popular and lesser subset of high or “proper literature” . . . it is nonetheless a paradigm of literary narrative: . . . the literature of detection, with its complex double narrative in which an absent story, that of a crime, is gradually reconstructed in the second story (the investigation), its uses of suspense, and its power to give aesthetic shape to the most brute of matter, has been seen as paradigmatic of literary narrative itself. (245)

Marcus’s argument is refreshing; however, in respect to Rendell writing as Vine, it is essential to resist any temptation to use the pseudonym to indicate that the author herself (as reviewers have tended to argue) believed that she was somehow engaged on a more “literary” mission with the Vine novels. Instead, the Vine novels concentrate on

psychological themes that are present in all her work, arguably taking them further, while both the Rendell stand-alones and Wexfords do the same with other of her enduring preoccupations, such as social justice and deprivation. In *The House of Stairs*, the narrator Lizzie introduces evil as embodied in the character of Bell, into her own life and that of her aunt Cosette. This novel contains many of the main characteristics of a typical Vine text: Lizzie lives with the anxiety that she will inherit the genetic Huntington's disease, a preoccupation that has blighted her life and her thoughts of her own future since the age of fourteen. Being told of something over which one is powerless at a particular time that then seeps into and infects a life is a key theme of the Vine texts, adding the weight of an almost Greek mythological belief in fate and predestination that is fruitlessly resisted but in many ways perversely accepted. Lizzie reflects, "I was fourteen when they told me. They were right, they had to tell me, but perhaps they could have waited a few more years. What harm would it have done to wait four years? I wasn't likely to have a baby" (18). "They" tell her at fourteen about the hereditary disease that will go on to kill her mother. One characteristic of Barbara Vine novels is that they tend to shift backward and forward between time periods, and in *The House of Stairs* Lizzie often reflects in the present day about how her choices at the time of the main events of the novel are fundamentally affected by uncertainty about her own future – an anxiety that characterizes and dominates her youth. By shifting back and forth in time, Vine adeptly conjures up certain specific times and places (in *The House of Stairs*, bohemian West London at the turn of the 1960s/70s) that evoke an uneasy juxtaposition of nostalgia and a sense of foreboding. The reasons for this are often vague and unclarified, though focusing on feelings that the central characters are both passive and accepting of their fate. This is exemplified by Lizzie, who often annoys readers and reviewers by her passivity in simply allowing Bell back into her life in the present day, when she well knows that the person she earlier considers a close friend, and who is for a time her lover, is destructive, manipulative, a compulsive liar, and even psychopathic.

In Greek mythology, destiny or predetermination, along with fate, is viewed as a way of demonstrating the unavoidable "natural" order into which we, as irrelevant human beings, are consigned. There are strong elements of fate in Vine, with her emphasis on the nature of hereditary illness and doubtful parentage, for example, but hers is a modern, chaotic

universe, and she is most interested in how families, friends, and their secrets, betrayals, and lies turn a predetermination into a manmade catastrophe. Tragedy turns into farce. People seem incapable of asking the questions or seizing opportunities to turn their lives around. Even if they do ask questions, they somehow are not the “right” ones, and ever more veils are drawn around the secrets and lies of the past. This is perhaps primarily because in Barbara Vine’s universe, the worst things happen by accident rather than design. Writing as both Vine and Rendell, the author is uninterested in filling in the gaps that often in fact reach back into the individual’s prehistory.

This can be applied to Swanny in *Asta’s Book*. She is the daughter (biologically or not) of Asta, whose diaries have become famous as chronicles of the life of a Danish immigrant woman in London, running from her arrival in the first years of the twentieth century. The book begins with a diary entry from 1905: “When I went out this morning a woman asked me if there were polar bears on the streets of Copenhagen” (3). It ends in 1988, when Asta’s granddaughter Anna tries to unravel the complexities of heritage, identity, and an old, solved murder, while simultaneously conjuring up a complex dialogue of a particular reading of a century, through the eyes of an “outsider,” as Asta always considers herself (although she always believes herself to be superior to the British).

*Asta’s Book*, the most sweepingly historical of the Vine texts, exemplifies the complex double narrative that characterizes these novels. As mentioned previously, it traces Asta’s life, from her emigration from Denmark to London as a young woman of twenty-five in 1905, when she begins writing the diary, until after her death in the 1990s, by which time the diaries have become famous as benign commentaries most notable for their longevity and feeding the public interest in the perspective of a woman whose life encompassed major world events while remaining focused on the minutiae of the everyday. Yet pages are found to be missing from the diary, surely a metaphor for the ways in which, as human beings, we can never reach any “explanatory truth” – it always escapes us, is always somewhere else, in some lost pages, some ellipses in our memories or perhaps in the head of another person who denies us ultimate knowledge. Through her use of such techniques, Vine exposes the incidents and events that trigger family disaster and a lifetime of lies (exemplified in *The Chimney Sweeper’s Boy*), but at the same time, demonstrates that

there is no one specific moment or cause. Rather, she points to the fantasies, lies, and mythologies that weave around an event, that might, in another family, another culture, or another place, barely cause a ripple.

It is useful to consider the Vine works as a paradigm of a psychoanalytic approach to the functioning of the psyche that echoes her archeology of the past, utilized as an essential tool to gain an understanding (or in fact to recognize the impossibility of ever reaching a full and clear understanding) of the present. One of Freud's great discoveries, which is often ignored in other psychological theories, is that meaning happens retrospectively. The act and process of detection by the analyst (or in crime fiction, the figure of the detective or the family member – often the latter in Vine) attempts to trace the originary meaning, which evades and often confuses the protagonist. In this way of thinking, there is no set "event" that happens and can be traced. Rather, the process of tracing is itself implicated in the trauma that the "event" is presumed to precipitate. In psychoanalytic theory, it is an originary, constitutive human identity that we as human subjects search for, and it can be argued that crime fiction, specifically with a psychological focus as practiced in the Vine novels, echoes that theoretical standpoint. For Jacques Lacan, in his "return to Freud," the mirror stage is the first of a series of identifications that sets the human baby on the path to an identity that is fundamentally "lacking." This, as he articulates in the "mirror stage" essay, happens between the ages of 6 and 18 months:

This development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the individual's formation into history: the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation – and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an "orthopedic" form of its totality – and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity which will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. ("Mirror" 78)

The argument that Lacan makes here, that the human baby is plunged into history and the discourses that surround and construct it, does not imply that the human being has any

experience of “full” identity, since before this moment we cannot speak of existence prior to this as a subject position. The mirror stage is rather a precipitation of the subject the human baby will become. The child’s first object is thus itself, and is as such for Lacan, narcissistic. This stage (or point, because it remains with us throughout) is termed the *Imaginary*, the emphasis being on *image* rather than any common-sense notion of imagination. In relation to literature, this approach allows a level of suspicion toward fixed and originary events. If nothing exists before the dialectic of identifications, then where can the “truth” of a person, or of a past, begin? Following on from that, the child, while retaining elements of the Imaginary instigated by the mirror stage, enters what Lacan calls the Symbolic realm, which takes the place of Freud’s castration complex and constitutes the child as a human subject, in both meanings of the word, both a subject, and subjected to, language. For Lacan, when the child learns to name, when it enters into a pregiven language, something is lost.

Thus, Lacanian psychoanalysis founds human subjectivity on *loss*, a loss that is irretrievable. A central tenet of Lacan’s theory is that there is no presymbolic unity to which we can hark back. The human being *becomes* a subject through these processes – this is the price of being human. There is thus no “true self.” It is only at this moment that the unconscious is formed – in other words, it does not exist as a preexistent area of the brain, but rather comes into being at the point where words solidify us in a symbolic universe. The unconscious is the underbelly of language. Or, to use the most common paraphrase of Lacan’s work, the unconscious is structured like a language, meaning that the unconscious and language are fundamentally bound together and inseparable. However, it is a central tenet of Lacan’s works that language as an explanatory framework always falls short, never able to encapsulate or explain loss. While the ostensible link between psychoanalysis and crime fiction may be expressed as the search for “the truth,” Barbara Vine, like Lacan and Freud, challenges us to face the possibility that a single, defining “truth” is always absent.

Freud, in his work that Lacan draws upon, tentatively works through problems such as why human beings cannot merely follow the path that the pleasure principle might be seen to lead us on for immediate gratification and at all costs. Freud developed the beyond of the pleasure principle to begin to explore the self-imposed limits that forever restrict our

attempt for love to keep us together. Lacan comes back to this and asks why love always seems to tear us apart. Love and the family, two key and interlinked themes that psychoanalysis repeatedly teaches us, are based on a fundamental loss, one that is irretrievable, and that nonetheless we attempt to recuperate, often in various doomed scenarios. In the Vine novels, the (mainly female) protagonists/narrators reach back into the past in order to try to make sense of the present, to give recent history some sort of narrative and explanatory framework, in other words, some meaning. This, as in Freud and Lacan's theorizations, always falls short, and the reader is left, along with the narrator, in limbo. Sometimes Vine utilizes the idea of a previously committed crime and traces its ripples to the descendants of those caught up in the prior narrative, and at other times she analyzes the effect of physical hereditary disease through transgression or through the physical taint of the past.

In psychoanalytic terms, the phase when the human child enters the world of the Symbolic is also the point at which sexual difference is instigated. Instead of being a reductive, biologically based given, the moment of entry into the Symbolic Lacan situates as the point in which the human baby becomes gendered through language – as “I,” “she,” and “he.” The fate of the woman, who Freud freely admitted not being able to understand even after a lifetime of psychoanalytic practice, is to become “othered,” for she is defined against the symbolic phallus, which, as Lacan is quick to point out, men do not possess either. What he means by this is that the phallus, as signifier of power and control within patriarchy, serves as the dividing symbol of sexual difference:

For the phallus is a signifier, a signifier whose function, in the intrasubjective economy of analysis, may lift the veil from the function it served in the mysteries. For it is the signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole, insofar as the signifier conditions them by its presence as signifier. (“Signification” 579)

Vine focuses on the ways that predominately but not exclusively female characters search for the reassurance of certainty in respect of origins, of maternal truths, and of presymbolic meanings, but this is not limited to a reductive notion of the female centered text nor to

her status as a female author. A comment I made about a contemporary of Rendell's, Highsmith, is also apposite here: "Her portrayal of women can be read as an intervention into the impossibility of situating 'woman' in an stable place; instead, she exposes the ways in which women are always necessarily positioned in a certain relationship with the Other (of masculinity, discourse, phallic signification, and so on)" (Peters 135).

To return to *Asta's Book*, a coldness in her narrative renders her and it strange and "foreign," positioning the woman at the center of this story to add to the othering of femininity. Vine was partly Swedish, and she uses the sense of geographical, social, and linguistic otherness, of uprootedness, to account for Asta's detachment from local gossip and her seeming unawareness of some events that occur around her. The novel is like a puzzle; clues abound that gradually expose Asta's link to a once notorious 1905 crime. Through the often seemingly banal everyday nature of the diaries, the truth of that crime is eventually revealed. The novel plays on the different cultural norms and attitudes, along with the changing opportunities available to women, as the century progresses, but it also exemplifies Vine's theme of the weight of the past casting long shadows that prove inescapable. Swanny, Asta's daughter, biological or not, fails to make her life anything more than daughter and wife: "Her mother treated her like a child. Her husband put her on a pedestal and adored her, gave her everything she wanted and expected nothing from her, only that she should be there, but he never consulted her about anything" (292). It could be argued that Swanny is Vine's most clearly drawn example of an adult who remains trapped in a childlike interdependency. Here the unequal relationship with her husband exacerbates the desire to "know" her origins, something that, for Lacan, remains at the level of fantasy. Psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe explains:

The imaginary dual relationship is based on the conviction that it is possible to give/find/get "it." In practice, this turns into misery and torture, with the result that there is often a swing to the other extreme, the conviction that nothing is possible, that there is no point in anything, and that everything is the same. This reaction remains within the dual imaginary relationship, although it is now tinged with bitterness and disappointment instead of hope and expectation. (68)



The mystery at the heart of *Asta's Book* pivots around Swanny's heredity – who she is and whether or not Asta is her biological mother. If not, then who is? Is she the abducted child of Lizzie Roper, or Asta's apparently (according to the diaries) slow-witted servant Hansine? As Asta approaches death and becomes increasingly senile, Swanny's desire to know her origins and thus (as she sees it) her identity, becomes increasingly urgent, prompting her to ask, "Who am I *moder*? Where did you get me from?" (205). Asta only replies, "You're mine *lille* Swanny, all mine. Do you want me to tell you where mothers get babies from? Don't you know?" (205). As Verhaeghe points out, the demand to know can lead, in extreme cases, to an inability to act, an erasure of agency. In *Asta's Book* the weight of the past that encroaches on Swanny's later years and, in some respects, determines her entire life, stems from uncertainty not only of the more common question over paternity, but also of maternity. This is exacerbated by the letter she receives after her photograph appears in *The Tatler*:

There was no address, no date and no salutation. *You think yourself very high and mighty but your airs and graces are quite a joke when you know you are really nobody. You are not your mother's child or your father's. They got you from somewhere when their own one died. Off a rubbish heap, for all you know. It's time you knew the truth.* (77)

This pushes Swanny into a downward spiral of anxiety, propelling her to return time and again to her question, repetitively asking Asta the "truth" of her origins, while Swanny plays a cruel cat and mouse game with her that is never openly acknowledged between them: "Swanny said she felt like taking hold of this little old woman and shaking her, seizing her by the throat, torturing the truth out of her – tell me, tell me. She kissed her meekly and went away to cry" (91). Anne, Asta's granddaughter, and the narrator of the book, represents the third generation; fond of her aunt Swanny, she sets out, after Swanny's death, to "solve" the old mystery. Anne discovers that Swanny is the daughter of the Ropers' servant Florence, while, unbeknownst to her, the murdered bodies of Lizzie Roper and Maria Hyde, lay upstairs. The macabre image of this scene, a servant sweating through a solitary labor in a box room off the kitchen while the corpses of two women lie upstairs,

is the stuff of gothic crime fiction, but the mystery is not that of the murders of Lizzie Roper and her mother, but of Swanny's origins, her "not knowing" being the "crime" that haunts her life. The desire to "know," to find out the truth of one's origins, is an impossibility according to psychoanalytic theory. The murder may be solved, but detection is focused elsewhere in this novel, and it is clear throughout that Vine plays with the murder narrative, thus virtually dispensing with anything more than a brief nod to the traditional crime fiction formula (yet cannily utilizing its tropes), in which some kind of resolution is achieved by the solving of a crime.

The sinister nature of the house is key here. Vine portrays place, especially houses, in a visceral and strangely hypnotic fashion – they act almost as characters themselves, and the ways in which their presence affects and changes lives is a key theme in several of her novels. In *A Fatal Inversion*, none of the disastrous events that occur would be brought into play had not Adam inherited Ecalpemos (much to his father's annoyance at this disruption of "the natural order of things"). Ecalpemos is of course "someplace" spelled backward, and in that novel the country house represents a suspension of time and conformity to rules and laws – just some place, without roots. Vine's descriptions of houses and the changes that human beings undergo because of their environment are meticulously described. The house in *The House of Stairs* represents alternatives: claustrophobia or freedom, the stultifying suburban order or the seeming promise of regeneration and undermining of traditional social order. Much of the "suspense" in this novel, as in *Asta's Book*, is based on the question of maternity, in this case known but tainted by heredity. In *The House of Stairs*, Lizzie knows that she is her mother's biological daughter, but this is a knowledge that brings with one certainty the possibility of inherited disease, in her case down the maternal line. Lizzie, the novel's narrator, gives the first indication of her potential, at that point unspecified, condition. At the moment when she spots Bell, newly released from prison, she has been enduring a taxi-driver who argues for the forcible sterilization of the unfit: "I especially might have been offended – if I had been listening, if I had taken in more than the gist of it" (7).

We view Lizzie as a reliable narrator throughout *The House of Stairs*, despite her awareness of the extent to which Bell has played her as a dupe in her scheme to persuade Mark, her

lover who masquerades as her brother, to beguile Cosette into marriage and thus gain access to her fortune. Vine bases the novel loosely on Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), while expanding on and updating the themes of betrayal and complicity to the "swinging" London of the late 1960s. Later on in the text, Lizzie loses Cosette, who has acted as her substitute mother, as Cosette holds her responsible for introducing evil and chaos into her life in the person of Bell. Betrayed as Cosette and Lizzie have both been by Mark (introduced to Cosette as Bell's brother but in actuality her lover), Cosette blames Lizzie for innocently telling Bell the story of *The Wings of the Dove*: "Cosette said with quiet bitterness, 'she didn't need to read it. You told her the story. You gave her the whole marvellous idea. I suppose you told her what a close parallel there was to the situation here. Only I'm not young and beautiful and I wasn't dying'" (260). Lizzie is unfairly cast out from the previous love and protection that Cosette has offered her since childhood, which makes Lizzie's passivity seem extraordinary, but it reveals a fatalistic attitude perhaps instigated by the threat of hereditary illness that marks her life. At the end of the novel, the reader is left to wonder if a ringing phone is Cosette, offering forgiveness and redemption, or if she will be abandoned to Bell, who she appears incapable of resisting, a passivity reinforced by anxiety at the possible onset of the disease she dreads:

The phone is ringing. I start, of course I do, and in the seconds that separate its rings, wonder if I can in fact have a happy ending, wonder who will get to me first, Bell, who may be my fate, or Cosette, who would certainly be my salvation. Or will it be that third possibility on which Bell pins her faith ... I put out my hand to stop her getting up and I cross the room to answer the phone. (282)

*The House of Stairs* ends on an ambiguous note; the reader is left to decide whether Lizzie will be doomed or saved, both of which options depend on the actions of other women who have dominated and steered her life up until this point.

Similarly, in the first Vine text, *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, the question of femininity, as outlined herein, is paramount. This novel concentrates on family secrets, secrets that lead to catastrophic consequences. The first line, "On the morning Vera died, I woke up very

early,” (7), establishes from the start the outcome of events that the novel gradually unfolds. In contrast to much crime fiction, this tactic dispenses with suspense at the outset. The novel demonstrates Vine’s eye for the subtle strictures of class, genteel lower-middle-class life in the mid-twentieth century, and the very English taboo on revealing anything about the self, the “stiff upper lip.” The situation, deemed extreme, beyond the moral pale, and incomprehensible to the general public back in Vera and Eden’s time, would be impossible today since it would no longer cause ruin, humiliation, and horror: “What would poor Vera make of the moral climate of the present day? I can imagine her look of mulish incredulity. A sexual revolution has taken place. What happened to her and Eden could not have happened today” (25).

When Vera cracks, it is mainly due to the extreme toxicity of her particular family situation, but also to the crass intrusion of money into the mix, the final match that ignites the sudden fire of emotion and violence that erupts into a world seemingly ruled by manners and protocol. Dean A. Miller argues:

Rendell illustrates that those with power and wealth, the results of education, birth, and occupation, can still do almost anything they wish within the structure of an orderly society, simply because they are removed from the world of police suspicion. (73)

In *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, the power that comes through money when secrets and lies are hidden behind the veneer of responsibility comes to the fore. The order of society is disrupted. Vera and Eden’s brother, the father of Faith, the narrator, attempts to erase the “disgrace” from his personal history: “He never spoke of it again. His twin was erased from his mind, and he even made himself – incredibly – into an only child. Once I heard him tell someone that he had never regretted having no brothers and sisters” (10). As the title of the book suggests, Faith has to adapt her eye to the darkness of her family history in order to seek out a truth from it, when events had been covered over through shame and the fear of how society would judge the family. Even Vera’s trial is studiously ignored by her family:

This morning's post has brought from Daniel Stewart part of the transcript of Vera's trial. Until now I have kept myself in ignorance of what went on at the Central Criminal Court during that week in the summer of 1950. My father too, died in ignorance of it. (279)

This novel pivots around one main dyad, ignorance and the gradual and partial gaining of knowledge and thus understanding. The reader is left in the dark as to which sister, Vera or Eden, is James's biological mother; similarly to the other Vine novels discussed here, ambiguity around questions that might be thought to have clear right or wrong answers, is key. By establishing from the first page that a murder has been committed and a woman executed for it, the whodunit and even the whydunit are rendered irrelevant. The novel paints neither Eden nor Vera in a particularly good light, and both claim Jamie as their own child, Eden out of expediency and Vera from her pathological love for him. Parentage is disputed, as in *Asta's Book*, yet the consequences are more severe and transgressive. Rowland points out that Rendell/Vine is fascinated by "mothering as a source of intense, even sublime emotions" (10), and Vera's maternal obsession with and love for Jamie do not depend on her having given birth to him. It takes the intervention of an investigative journalist to begin the process of opening up what is previously deemed forgotten: "But did I, after all, particularly want a Vera-book to be written? I had succeeded quite well at the business of forgetting her" (15). Faith, as she adapts her eye to the darkness, comes to recognize that nothing is ever forgotten. In Vine's universe, things are covered over, but they always lurk beneath the surface, usually malignly.

Libby Brooks argues, "It is the banality of hatred and violence, the inevitability of ordinary people being pushed to commit acts of extraordinary transgression that she writes about best." Here Brooks refers to the author as Ruth Rendell (as mentioned, it is becoming more difficult to tell Rendell/Vine apart, as the recent stand-alone Rendell novels become more Vine-like in their emphasis on the psychological). This does not of course compromise the point that the Vine novels are and were always intended to be, more psychological. Instead, it demonstrates the extent to which Rendell eventually shifts her interest in all areas of her writing toward the psychological. While class, money, education, and so on, are foregrounded in her Rendell texts, these things are certainly not absent in the Vine

novels, either. Vera in *A Dark-Adapted Eye* loses a child because of money and power, and the wealthy Cosette allows the dreadful events of *The House of Stairs* to unfold because she is rich and can easily afford her throwaway generosity. But Cosette's generosity, far from making those around her happy, feeds their greed, making them want more and do less and become metaphorically fat and greedy as they sponge off her. What Cosette wants, her youth, she cannot have, and in this novel, Vine paints one of the most powerful portraits of the tragic nature of the middle-aged woman who wants to be desirable and desired, in possibly the most youth-focused era of modern times.

The banality of hatred and violence that we see in Vine's work may in fact be feminine in a different way than Rendell herself articulates. While men are certainly present, and sometimes protagonists in the Vine texts, their masculinity often hides transgressive secrets (as exemplified by Gerald Candless in *The Chimney Sweeper's Boy*). Male authority is regularly displaced from the center of the Vine texts, in contrast to Wexford's stories (Wexford inarguably demonstrates a streak of what would be termed "feminine intuition," especially in the more recent novels). Yes, letters, feminine letters, are the key form of narrative in *Asta's Book*, letters about the domestic details of life, not reflections on the big political or legal conundrums of the day. *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, *Asta's Book*, and *The House of Stairs* all use contemporary female narrators whose detective work unravels the past as it affects the present and the future (while Lizzie is an integral part of the historical storyline, Faith is more of an observer, and Ann investigates events that happened before she was born). If this is a feminine, nonlinear narrative, concerned with detail, then that serves to render it more, not less, anxiety-inducing, and downright disturbing.

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