



Reading Information in Crime Fiction: A Linguistic Analysis of Ruth Rendell's *The Bridesmaid* (1989)

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Abstract

Crime fiction is a popular genre which deserves a close analysis of its overall communicative devices. It is the aim of this paper to analyse Ruth Rendell's *The Bridesmaid* (1989), allegedly considered one of the masterpieces of this well-known genre. Our study endeavours to identify, on the one hand, features which characterize this kind of fiction and, on the other hand, passages where the reader may feel in that state of disappointment due to the author's provision of unrequired information. The latter is undoubtedly one of the basic standpoints typically employed to deny the literary status to this genre.

Keywords: Ruth Rendell; *The Bridesmaid*; Crime fiction; Stylistics; Narrative voice.



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1. Introduction

As readers of fiction we often meet interesting novels that will not provide explicit, full details of the events outline or the character's physical and psychological features. Implicit hints are, then, necessary elements in fiction to make the story all the more interesting for the active, educated reader. It has been called the "subtext of a text", and it is essential when reading a novel by Jane Austen or Charles Dickens.

On the other hand, popular fiction: romance, spy fiction, crime fiction, science fiction... does not need a careful reading or a rereading for it is quickly read and easily understood (McRae, 1997; Montgomery, 2000).

The interest this kind of fiction provokes is not only literary but also sociological. A linguistic and literary analysis of these works is worth as they are an excellent way of perceiving literary techniques and mechanisms which are completely "overt" or patent. Also, a sociological insight is necessary because this fiction sells tens of thousands of copies per work, whereas "more pretentious" works, let us say within the higher literacy canon, sell hundreds or a few thousands (Amorós, 1968; Berger, 1992).

Nash (1990), describes this genre as a "disposable article" and believes that you may read one and may want more, but not the same one again. Some of the reasons for its 'best-selling' in comparison to more elevated fiction may be its fewer psychological and philosophical pretensions and its *accessibility* to all kind of readers. We also have to bear in mind its merit in keeping the reader interested by means of the *disposition* of the episodes or the touching on people's ordinary feelings and desires such as love, passion, triumph, danger, emotion... (Montgomery, 2000).

A clue to understand the *facility* of popular fiction is the fact that the narrative conventions are "simplified and more or less fixed, whereas in writing of more advanced pretension the conventional game is free, diverse, endlessly modified..." (Nash, 1990). In other words, within the limits of the numberless possibilities of variations, we may say that situation and style are highly *predictable* in popular fiction.

2. Crime Fiction: A Paradox of Unrealistic Realism

According to Worthington (2011) crime fiction is, basically, a popular genre which deals with a crime and its investigation. In Seago (2014): "It is about the transgression of a country's legal, moral and social values, about understanding how and why this transgression occurred and, with the solving of the case, it is about returning to the normative centre of that society".

Within the scope of popular narrative fiction, "crime fiction" is an extremely popular genre which has attracted the keen attention of scholars (Priestman, 2003; Rzepka and Horsley, 2010; Scaggs, 2005). Nevertheless, it still deserves a closer analysis of its overall communicative devices. To start with, its aims frequently lack any pretension of literacy excellence, ignoring, therefore, any attempt at complexity. In spite of this, the readers may probably find upsetting the mere piling up of explicit information which on many occasions turns fiction into a kind of news or "police" report. In pragmatic terms, the reader is left little inferential work in this passages and may feel somewhat underestimated and naïve.

The novel analysed in this paper is Rendell (1990,1989), recognised as one of the master pieces of this well-known genre. According to the editorial note in the Arrow Books edition, "Ruth Rendell is crime fiction at its very best". It also praises the "[i]ngenuous and meticulous, beguiling story lines and wry observations...".

Ruth Barbara Rendell, or Baroness Rendell of Babergh, was an English author who received a long list of honours and awards. Up to the publication of *The Bridesmaid* (one of her best sellers with several reprintings) she

had already received eight major awards. The thriller or psychological murder mystery under analysis in this work was adapted for film by the French director Claude Chabrol in 2004 with the title of *La Demoiselle d'honneur*.

3. Analysis of *the Bridesmaid*

3.1. The Characters, Their Actions and the Moralizing Process

As we could easily predict in this type of fiction, the two main protagonists in the story are a young man and his girl:

Obviously, Philip, our young “hero” knew –he couldn’t help knowing- that he was good-looking and attractive to girls. (...) He looked rather the way Paul McCartney had done when young. An old record sleeve of one of the Beatle’s albums showed him his own face smiling. (p.63)

Philip is the embodiment of the citizen, honest, sensitive, and hates violence above all (Amorós, 1968; Nash, 1990). Then, where does the conflict spring from? The conflict is called Senta, our female protagonist, no less wonderful in appearance.

Our quiet and peaceful hero becomes obsessed, dangerously infatuated by this passionate, fascinating, green-eyed girl, who resembles his ‘beloved’ statue Flora, and whose skin was “white as the inner side of some deep seashell” (p.58). The reader discovers soon that this childish woman is nothing else but a “femme fatale”; from a symbolic point of view, she is the representation of evil, a devil disguised in the most attractive female body who exerts an irresistible attraction upon our good protagonist. She is a twentieth century Eve tempting Adam.

She also shares the characteristics of vampires (she cannot stand daylight) and wild animals (she reacts as a wild feline when contradicted). But he cannot escape the magnet of her sexual appeal even when she begs him to prove his love for her by killing someone. Senta is so possessive that she claims: ‘*I don’t want to have you, Philip, I want to be you.*’ (p.77), just as Cathy Earnshaw claimed “I am Heathcliff!” in *Wuthering Heights*.

Though there are no explicit ‘here’s how’ recipes of moral conduct, we perceive a moralizing tone which is typical in these novels. Our “heroine” comes out to be a schizophrenic murderer, but she will not get the male protagonist to commit any crime for her. As someone who has gone against divine and human laws she will have to pay her debt with society and, after a complicated succession of events, we are offered an almost cinematographic ending when the police-cars sirens are heard coming to take her with them.

Though the reader may have felt sympathy towards her, there is no possible redemption for somebody who has committed two murders. Not even for the male protagonist who becomes a victim, for he is her accomplice as his attraction for her prevailed over his common sense.

The general course of actions is predictable, but the presentation of events is highly elaborated, and researched in detail. Besides, in an attempt to touch on social problems, the author also portrays the figure of Cheryl, the protagonist’s sister, an obsessed gambler who steals money in order to gamble. The police will discover her and through a set of coincidences this will be the piece of mechanism which will provoke the two protagonists’ flaw.

The moral is clear: what goes around comes around.

3.2. Language and Style

3.2.1. The Narrative Voice

According to Dutta-Flanders (2017), suspense in plot-based stories is created through non-linear, causative presentation of the narrative. In this novel, the reader is kept interested because the narration is presented not by an omniscient narrator but by one who is just a “transmitter” of the thoughts and feelings of one of the characters, Philip. In this way, the turn of his thoughts guides or “misguides” the reader; in other words, the reader is not provided with all the necessary information which would place him in a better position, and this creates the suspense.

A frequent element in fiction of this type is the presence of passages in which the field of narration is widened but “unaccompanied by an onward movement of the plot”, this is what Nash (1990) names dilation.

This element is present throughout our story in the form of the supplying of the information from the protagonist’s perspective and the participating in his inner speculations. The turn of his feelings or his discoveries exert a powerful influence over the readers for they are meticulously described.

We can observe how *verbs of cognition and perception* (in Halliday (2004, 1985)) prevail (“*Philip thought, Philip conjectured, Philip noticed, Philip reflected, Philip remembered, It occurred to him that...*”); modals such as *would* or *might* and the reflexive questions characterise the speculation about the eventual, and the past perfect tense is the repeated form which evokes the retrospect.

Why had he got the idea into his head that Arnham meant only to drive them as far as Buckfurst Hill Station? Nothing had been said. Perhaps he really was in love with Christine and put himself out for her as a matter of course. Or it might be that he felt under an obligation on account of Flora. *Philip thought* the earlier awkwardness had quite passed... (p.23)

In other people’s homes as he so often was these days, *Philip found himself speculating* about all sorts of oddities and incongruities. Why, for instance, did she keep a pair of binoculars on the windowsill in here? To watch birds? To observe the behavior of neighbours? (p.42)

But why on earth had Arnham told Christine Flora looked like her? Or had perhaps been wishful thinking on her part? She looked like no real woman Philip had ever seen, though *he thought* quite suddenly that if he ever saw a real woman with that face he would at once fall in love with her... (p.52)

The man hadn't followed him. *Philip was certain* he had done the more sensible thing and gone back into the house to phone the police. He saw his job lost, a conviction recorded against him for a criminal offence. But be reasonable, keep your head, the man hadn't seen his car, hadn't taken a note of the number... (p.53)

These features characterize Free Indirect Thought (FIT). But also Philip's "stream of consciousness" appears as Free Direct Speech (FDS) in the middle of these musings as in the last example: "But be reasonable, keep your head...", where the voices both of Philip and the narrator seem to be conflated.

3.2.2. Descriptive Devices

a) *Descriptions of habitual or unimportant events* are given in a quick, concise flow or succession of *short juxtaposed sentences* which resembles news or police reports:

Philip drove home, made himself coffee, baked beans on toast, ate an apple, took Hardy round the block... (p.122)

At home he changed out of his suit and hung it up to dry, dried his hair on a towel... He cooked an egg and bacon... The telephone rang and his heart hit his ribs... (p.135)

It was gone ten-thirty when he got back to his letter. Christine wanted an early night. A quick scan of her appointments book had shown her she was doing a shampoo, trim and blow-dry at nine next morning. Philip sat on his bed, rested letter paper on the T.V. Times and the T.V. Times on his old school atlas on his knees... (p.289)

b) *Hidden relevant information*: This technique of a quick succession of events is also used when the author wants to provide the reader with some relevant information, but she does not want a special attention to be paid to it at that particular moment in the plot.

For instance, a woman called Rebecca Neave's disappearance will prove to be a key event at the very end of the novel, but up to that moment it would have seemed something tangential to the plot. The first hint of this fact appears at the opening of the novel and the narrator provides us with the following information in a concise way full of details which resembles a police report:

Rebecca disappeared at about three on an autumn afternoon. Her sister spoke to her on the phone on Wednesday morning and a man who was a friend of hers, a new friend who had been out with her just four times, phoned her on lunchtime on that day, that was the last time her voice was heard. A neighbour saw her leave the block of flats where she lived. She was wearing a bright green velvet tracksuit and white trainers. That was the last anyone saw of her. (p.8)

c) This amount of details is useful in the disentangling of the plot and is usual in the descriptions, but a remarkable feature is the presence of details which seem completely unnecessary for the understanding of the novel and somewhat out of place. This *profusion of unnecessary details* is intended to provide a realistic scene, but the reader may find it "shocking":

He saw his car, the Jaguar, parked in one of the marked slots in a small parking area designated for employees of the company whose building abutted on to it. (p.32)

When the protagonist is wrapping the statue in order to give it as a present, we are told:

She had provided tissue paper to wrap the statue in. Philip had wrapped it in a second layer of newspaper, that morning's paper... Philip had quickly rolled the statue up in this paper and then bundled it into the plastic bag that Christine's raincoat had been in when it came back from the cleaners. (p.14)

And when Philip hides the statue, the readers are provided with similar information, probably intended to make them visualize a typical boot full of varied objects:

He transferred Flora from the back of the car to the boot, wedging her comfortably between the spare wheel and a cardboard crate of wallpaper sample books he was carrying with him. (p.54)

In the description of a house or of a street we find the same technique:

Protruding over the rim of one of the dustbins was a blue plastic bag, provided no doubt by the local authority's refuse collection service. (p.52)

A dog came along the pitted concrete from Samaria street, busy in pursuit of some unknown goal, perhaps the same dog which had deposited the heap of turds on the step. (p.137)

After the intervention of some characters or after a gesture, the reader is sometimes provided with a completely unnecessary explanation that can easily be inferred and gathered from the situation:

She was indicating that she approved of Arnham... (p.17)

it was a roundabout way of asking what he didn't want to ask and knew the answer to, anyway. (p.37)

d) There is an *excessive specification of time and place deixis*. We are told not only the hours, dates, places or distances which may be relevant, but even those which are not.

He stopped work. What about all the times he had worked Saturdays without overtime? It was twenty to five and he was in West Hampstead, ten minutes drive away even at a bad time for traffic. She wouldn't expect him at ten to five. (p.125)

There he had a hamburger in McDonald's and afterwards two pints of bitter in Bidy Muligan's. It was getting on for half-past eight but still broad daylight. (p.127)

At nine o'clock he put the little dog on the lead and walked him two or three miles about the streets. (p.203)

e) *Specification of measures and volumes* is also habitual, with a technical detailed rendering of features. For instance, when the protagonist enters a gaming house in search of his sister we are told that

There was a Demon Dynamo in here. There was a Space Stormer and a Hot Hurricane and an Apocalypse and a Gorilla Guerilla. He passed along the aisles... At a machine called Chariots of Fire a thin pale boy with a felt-head haircut succeeded in aligning a row of Olympic torches and the coins came cascading out. (p.268)

f) *Intensified sensory perception*: Descriptions are intended to appeal to the senses, especially when referring to Senta.

-Sense of smell:

The smell of shampoo was rich and almondy in the air, or a worse smell if, as occasionally happened, she had been doing a perm. Then it was rotten eggs. (p.32)

A smell of rotten eggs crept up the stairs. (p.192)

The smell of the place was new to Philip... it smelt very subtly of an accumulation of various kinds of ancient dirt, dirt that was never removed, never even shifted from one surface to another, one level to another, of food crumbs years old, fibres of unwanted clothes, dead insects, cobwebs, grains of mud and shreds of excrement, silt liquids long dried, the hair of animals and their droppings, of dust and soot. It smelt of disintegration. (p.75)

The smell was strongest here, in the well of the staircase. But inside Senta's door it faded. There the damp sour smell of decay was overcome by the perfume of incense sticks... (p.79)

-Sense of eyesight:

The bright green of the grass, the darker richer colour of the foliage were soothing to the eyes, curiously pacifying... Philip thought about Senta, her body as white as marble... (p.97)

Her hair spread out on the pillow beside his face in silvery points. It glittered like long brittle slivers of glass. The flush had faded from her face and it was white again, pure, lineless, the skin as smooth as the inner side of an ivory waxen petal. Her wide open eyes were crystals with the green fluidity tinting them like weeds in water. (p.101)

She must have put a more powerful bulb in the lamp since it was last on, for the higher wattage revealed the room in every aspect of its squalor, the dust on the wooden floor that showed as a clotting of grey fluff round the skirting board, the spiders' webs and dark gritty deposits on the cornices, the chair whose wicker was coming unraveled, the dark old stains and spills on rug and cushions. (p.190)

-Sense of touch:

He ran his fingers through her hair, holding the tresses of it in his fingers, feeling the sharp healthy harshness of the strands. (p.101)

-Sense of hearing:

...a hissing sound came from her between clenched teeth... It was a different voice, low, coarse, vibrating with rage. ... her voice rose and it was like a siren howling... (p.102)

Her voice was stony now, remote. (p.112)

The sounds were terrible, mechanical seemingly, short staccato shrieks tearing out of her wide open mouth from which the lips curled back in a snarl like a tigress. (p.113)

She sounded weak and breathless as if she were ill. (p.113)

-Sense of taste:

She sat cross-legged on the bed, picking out of the box the chocolates she liked best, and drinking the wine out of one of a pair of cloudy bottle-green glasses she had... (p.99)

The water had a dead metallic taste. (p.113)

g) *Constant repetition of traits*: The most outstanding or characterizing features of a character, place, etc. are insistently repeated when this person, place or motif reappears in the novel, as if it were a serialised novel providing recurrent information to help the readers recall it:

Flora ... stood about three feet high and was a copy in miniature of a Roman statue. In her left hand she held a sheaf of flowers, with the other she reached for the hem of her robe, lifting it away from her right ankle... But it was her face which was particularly beautiful... Flora's face was how a beautiful living girl's might be today, the cheek-bones high, the chin round, the upper lip short and the mouth the loveliest conjunction of tenderly folded lips. It was like a living girl's but for the eyes. Flora's eyes, extremely wide apart, seemed to gaze at far horizons with an expression remote and pagan. (pp-10-11)

He turned to look at Flora once more, at the marble face which certainly wasn't Christine's face or that of any real woman he had ever known. The nose was classical, the eyes rather too wide apart, the soft lips too indented, and there was a curiously glazed look on the face as if she were untroubled by normal human fears and doubts and inhibitions. (p.17)

He began to notice too the empty space in the garden where Flora had formerly stood. (p.32)

...it was possible to see from the French windows the birdbath and the patch of concrete where Flora had stood. (p.36)

Women are typically characterised by the way they dress:

Cheryl, who had nothing to carry but was wearing high heels with her very tight jeans, said... (p.13)

She [Christine] was wearing a pink linen dress with a white jacket. She had white beads and pink lipstick and looked the sort of a woman who would scarcely stay single for long. Her hair was soft and fluffy and the sunglasses hid the lines under her eyes... she had left off her engagement ring. (p.13)

Fee, of course, was wearing her own engagement ring. The better to show it off, Philip conjectured, she carried something called a clutch bag in her left hand. The formal dark blue suit with a too-long skirt made her look older than she was... (p.14)

Cheryl sprawled on the settee, her legs apart and stuck out on the rug. She was obliged to sit like that, of course, because her jeans were too tight and her heels too high to permit of bending her knees and setting the soles of her feet on the floor. (p.18)

Cheryl was dressed in her customary jeans and black leather ... (p.55)

Sometimes the characters are associated to a particular word, like Christine who always uses the word "nice" or Philip who tends to be accompanied in the descriptions by words like "phobia":

Such and such a thing was nice, everything was very nice, the carpets were particularly nice and of such a good quality. Philip marveled at her transparency. (p.20)

'Yes, but, dear, you got us all that nice ham and the strawberries and cream...' (p.151)

Violent death fascinates people. It upset Philip. He had a phobia about it. Or that that was what he called it to himself sometimes, a phobia for murder and all forms of killing...(-...) He hid his phobia, or tried to hide it. (p.7)

...this phobia of his was real enough and sometimes it extended to the human beings who allowed violence to occupy their minds. (p.28)

h) *Personification of objects vs. depersonification of human beings:*

The disappeared Rebecca Neave is never described as a woman, but as a "collection" of body parts. Most probably the author's intention is not to consider her as a relevant character, as it turns out to be:

When the others watched television he watched it with them... Left to himself, Philip would have taken no interest in her [Rebecca Neave's] disappearance, still less speculated about her. ... He would never have looked at the photograph of *her pretty face, the smiling mouth and eyes* screwed up against the sun, *the hair* blown by the wind. Rebecca disappeared at about three on an autumn afternoon. Her sister spoke to her on the phone on Wednesday morning... That was the last time *her voice* was heard. (pp.7-8)

On the other hand, Flora, the statue Philip "adores", is not only named as a woman, but she is treated as a human being:

'What would you say if I said I'd like to give Flora to him as a present' [Christine said] (p.10)

He suddenly found himself thinking of Flora as a symbol of his mother... (p.12)

Philip put Flora down on the step while he shook hands...

'And who's this?' Arnham said.

The way Philip had set Flora down she did look like a fifth member of their party. Her wrappings were coming off. Head and one arm poked out of the hole in the cleaning bag. Her serene face whose eyes seemed always to be looking beyond you and into the distance, was now entirely uncovered as was her right hand in which she held the sheaf of marble flowers...

'You remember her, Gerard. She's Flora who was in my garden and you said you liked her so much. We've brought her for you. She's yours now.' ... Christine persisted. 'For a present. We've brought her for you because you said you liked her.' (pp.15-16)

...they set Flora up in a position where she could contemplate her own reflection in the waters of a very small pond.

'She looks just right there,' said Christine, 'It seems a shame she can't stay there for ever. You'll just have to take her with you when you move.'

... there was a chance, Philip thought, for he knew his mother, that Christine would say a formal farewell to Flora. It would be like her. He wouldn't have been surprised to hear her say goodbye and bid Flora be a good girl. (p.17)

'I have left Flora to look after the house! Love, Gerry.' (p.26)

Flora is, in fact, Senta's marble *alter ego*; the human emotions Senta lacks seem to be present in Flora. Their descriptions are also parallel:

He could see the little statue (...) He could see her eyes and her lovely mouth and the waves in her hair, the diagonal weave in the fillet which bound it, the almond curves of her fingernail... It was Flora. Not a look-alike or a copy, but Flora herself... She was unique. (p.43)

She looked like no real woman Philip had ever seen, though he thought quite suddenly –and rather madly- that if he ever saw a real woman with that face he would at once fall in love with her. (p.52)

...she was different... This must be Senta. (...) She was extraordinary. ... perhaps the most remarkable thing about her to him, the most exciting thing, was her resemblance to Flora. Her face was Flora's, the perfect oval contour, the straight, rather long nose... the widely separated calm eyes, the short upper lip, the lovely mouth... (p.58)

Senta stood as still as a statue (p.59)

He saw the madness in her face again, in the unfocused gaze... It was Flora's face. (p.256)

She came back into his room and saw Flora in the corner for the first time.

‘She looks like me!’ (...)

His eyes went from Senta to the statue and he saw the resemblance. (...) They were twins in stone and flesh...(p.72-73)

In Philip’s rollercoaster of emotions, when he is disappointed with Senta, he is so with Flora:

An unexpected thing had happened. He felt no desire for her... as unerotic as stone Flora. (p.177)

...there was no more desire than if it were a stone girl that lay there, life-size in marble. (pp.179-180)

He had held her in a mechanical way, his arm becoming a clamp strong enough to support another human being in its hinged angle. it was rather like the way in which he had carried Flora to Arnham’s house. She felt a heavy and lifeless as stone. (p.259)

i) **Literary descriptions:**

Fee did come in, sweeping in swiftly like a human breeze... (p.37)

It was the most beautiful time of the year and the ornamental trees were in fresh new leaf, many of them in blossom, pink or white. Tulips were in bloom. These were among the few flowers he knew by name, the velvety brown and gold things which filled the end of Mrs Ripple’s garden he thought might be wallflowers... Over this spilled and sprawled a carpet of purple and yellow alpine plants.

Surveying this tumbled spread of flowers, sheltered to some extent by the branches of the tree with its rose-coloured blossom, stood a small statue in marble...(p.179)

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the communicative devices in Rendell (1990,1989), one of the masterpieces of crime fiction, has revealed how suspense in this novel is achieved by means of the presentation of the information through a third person narrator who is not omniscient, but a mere “transmitter” of the masculine protagonist’s thoughts and feelings. Their voice is conflated and the narrator becomes aware of the events at the same time his protagonist does, a fact which guides or ‘misguides’ the readers in the way the author intends.

Since the information is supplied from the protagonist’s point of view by means of numerous verbs of cognition and perception, and reflexive questions, among other resources that characterized Free Indirect Thought and Free Direct Speech respectively, the readers are let to participate in his inner speculations, feelings and discoveries, which are meticulously described.

Rendell also relies on the detailed description of relevant events, but also on the description of habitual or unimportant events by means of short juxtaposed sentences, a technique that, on many occasions, serves to hide key data in order to avoid a premature disentangling of the plot.

On some other occasions, the profusion of unnecessary details is used in order to portray a realistic scene. Besides, the excessive specification of spatial and temporal dimensions, or of measures and volumes, deliberately hides relevant information which may go unnoticed by the reader.

On the other hand, descriptions appealing to the readers’ senses are made explicit especially when referring to the female protagonist Senta, who is characterized by her particular smell or look. In this same way, the most outstanding features of a character or place are repeatedly presented to the readers, as if they were the addressees of one of Dickens’s serialised novels.

In conclusion, even if this type of popular texts does not need a “careful reading”, they deserve a deep linguistic, literary and sociological attention, since they make use of “overt” literary techniques and mechanisms which are able to ‘captivate’ their readers.

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