A Masterful Plot:
An analysis of Barbara Vine’s novel “The Brimstone Wedding”

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Barbara Vine is Ruth Rendell, one of Britain’s most accomplished crime fiction writers. She was educated at the County High School for Girls in Loughton, Essex. After graduation, she worked as a journalist for Essex newspapers. She was fired after writing an article on the local Tennis Club’s annual dinner, which she had not actually attended, thereby missing the untimely death - in mid-speech - of the after-dinner speaker.

Parallel to her perennially beloved and popular Wexford novels, she wrote psychological crime novels exploring themes such as sexual obsession, the effects of misperceived communication, the impact of social chance and coincidence and the (in)humanity of the criminals involved. In many of these books the protagonists are severely isolated and socially disadvantaged, and Rendell explores, in a convincing and often spellbinding manner, the ways in which their circumstances have an adverse impact on them as well as on their victims. She analyzes and brings to light the collision between society and the individual, particularly where circumstances drive the individual to behaviour that society regards as somehow abnormal. She excels at what Val McDermid called “the delicate filleting of the characters’ psyches.”

The (longer and more ambitious) novels she published under her nom de plume from 1986 (Barbara is Rendell’s own middle name and Vine her grandmother’s maiden name) inhabit the same territory as her psychological crime novels while they further develop themes of family misunderstandings and the side effects of secrets kept and crimes committed. Writing as Barbara Vine, Rendell became famous for her elegant prose and sharp insights into the human mind, as well as her ability to create cogent plots and characters. Rendell has also injected the social changes of the last 40 years into her work, bringing to public awareness such issues as domestic violence and the changes in the status of women, and rather
more pedestrian changes like computers, the advent of e-mail and the Internet, and the blessings of air-conditioning. Her experiences as a member of the House of Lords (she was created a Life Peer in 1997) are reflected in her novel *The Blood Doctor*, and changes in legislation on homosexuality caused her to write *The Chimney Sweeper’s Boy*. These novels of psychological suspense also have the recurring theme of long shadows cast by events of the past.

Her novel *The Brimstone Wedding* opens with a chilling line, “The clothes of the dead won’t wear long. They fret for the person who owned them.” It introduces one of the *leitmotifs* of the story, the heroine’s being prone to superstition. This seems to run in the family, as her mother is obviously quite superstitious herself. In practically every chapter, some superstition is introduced which has a direct bearing on an issue arising in the course of the action. There are 310 pages in 25 chapters which are grouped into 4 parts. Part I comprises chapters 1–8, part II chapters 9–11, part III chapters 12–19, and part IV chapters 20–25.

This novel, in which events of the past and the present are skillfully interwoven, employs a sometimes confusing array of time levels and viewpoints. There is first of all the omniscient author’s voice, speaking in the novel’s present as well as in the flashbacks. The author’s voice is frequently joined by Jenny - the heroine - speaking in the first person. As to the present time of the novel, there is direct narrative from Jenny, and information from Stella related by Jenny. Stella herself does not speak in the first person. The flashbacks, except for factual information provided by the author, are told by Jenny and, in chapters 23–25, by Stella, on the tapes she recorded. The tapes which Jenny inherited and assumed to contain just recorded music represent another popular device frequently employed in crime fiction. It is, like a letter, a vehicle for a confession, or for presenting, in some other way, the solution of the crime, just like Poirot’s gathering of the suspects for the final revelation, but unlike the assembly of living people, a letter or a tape can even be introduced after the death of the person who wrote or recorded it.

What, then, constitutes a good plot? How is it constructed? There are a few standard ways of putting together a *whodunit*. One is to tell the story chronologically and work towards a climax when all is revealed. Agatha Christie’s novels are mostly constructed in this fashion, the Poirot series as well as Miss Marple’s adventures. Poirot customarily assembles all suspects in a room and explains *coram publico* how it happened and then identifies the culprit. The opposite approach was adopted in the popular *Columbo* TV series. The plot - that is to say, the crime - happened right at the start, the viewer witnessed, how it happened and who committed it, and could then sit back and watch Columbo unravel the mystery. The element of surprise is paramount in either technique.

In printed crime fiction, more subtle elements are often employed, such as parallelism of events,
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flashbacks and other manipulations of time and place which are often too elaborate to show on the silver screen, and are therefore either eliminated or simplified when a detective story is turned into a movie. The most satisfactory plot in a chronological presentation of events is - in this writer’s opinion - one in which the reader is kept on tenterhooks until virtually the last page when he must realize that he has overlooked one - or multiple - hints, although they were in plain view all the time. This happens in *A Brimstone Wedding*. (The technique in the Columbo-style approach is not really all that different. The challenge for the viewer is to pinpoint where the culprit slipped up, thus enabling Columbo to find the decisive clues and to assemble the pieces of the puzzle.)

We first meet the heroine herself, Genevieve Warner (known to everyone as Jenny), a woman who volunteers to look in on the residents of Middleton Hall, an upmarket retirement home. The story moves forward from the moment Jenny becomes care assistant to Stella Newland, an elegant old lady diagnosed with lung cancer, and ends with Stella’s death. During this time, the story behind the story is told in flashbacks. Stella tells Jenny certain events of her past life which weigh heavily on her mind. She usually drops some hints, and leaves Jenny to agonize over them for a while before she offers any explanations. Jenny’s struggle for answers to the questions that surround Stella teaches her strange but valuable lessons about herself and about the significant people in her life - parents, sister, husband, lover - lessons, and ultimately truths which enable her to escape from a life bound by tradition and superstition.

The first of Stella’s secrets is revealed in chapter 2. Stella shows Jenny an old document which turns out to be the title deed to a house. Most of what follows centers around this house, in the present as well as in a past chain of events. The clandestine possession of a house may not in itself be a particularly strange thing, but the fact that Jenny - still a comparative stranger - gets to hear about it while Stella’s own children apparently know nothing about this piece of real estate and should never be told, makes it slightly ominous. Further, the house can be seen from the top floor of Middleton Hall, and when asked if she chose the retirement home because of its proximity to the house, the answer is in the negative. In fact, had Stella known about the proximity beforehand, she might have settled elsewhere, although - and here another hint is dropped - Jenny happened to be a care assistant at Middleton Hall. In other words, Jenny is the prime reason for Stella having selected this location. Stella’s children don’t know about the house and don’t know that their mother is familiar with the neighbourhood. As it turns out, a single bizarre coincidence has brought her to the one place and the one person who will allow her to unlock the dark secrets of her heart.

Stella offers Jenny a key to the house and asks her to check on its condition. She asks her “to drive carefully” when she goes for an inspection of the house.
Stella’s advice to Jenny “to drive carefully” recurs frequently and is also something of a leitmotif. Her fear of driving, of getting in a motor vehicle at all, is easily overlooked at this stage. We are barely 30 pages into the story, but the pivotal points have been well established by now.

Upon visiting the house, Jenny found pictures of children and animals on the walls of the dining room, and an ancient red Ford Anglia in the garage, a few years older than herself. She could easily ascertain this, as her own father had once owned exactly the same model. The car had scorch marks on the bumper. In the refrigerator, she discovered, among moldy remnants of food, a bottle of champagne. Also, in a drawer, she found a photograph of a man and a woman whom she did not recognize. Upon mentioning this to Stella later on, the old lady confirmed that the woman in the photograph was herself. (She asked Jenny to get her the photograph on her next visit to the house, and when Jenny did so, it occurred to her that she now had a place at her disposal where she could take Ned, her lover, for their secret encounters.)

When Jenny, after her first visit to the house, returns to a spot nearby where she has an assignation with Ned, she is irritated by another car that she first mistakes for Ned’s, as it looks exactly like his, but is in fact driven by a woman she doesn’t know. The juxtapositions of facts, events, places and time frames are steadily increasing. This is a moment that cries out, as it were, for some application of lateral thought to bring together all these seemingly unconnected events. The woman will turn up once again at the same spot, and much later, in a pub where she will have some eye-opening facts to relate to Jenny.

Another bit of foreshadowing is Stella’s request of a tape recorder, ostensibly for recording music. Her son Richard who shows up for a visit confirms to Jenny his mother’s love of chamber music and promises to bring her a tape recorder on his next visit. Although Stella is ready to confide in Jenny, she cannot bring herself to tell her the story directly, face to face. She can tell it only to the non-judgmental ear (or rather microphone) of a tape recorder.

Then comes a first substantial flashback (Jenny talking to Stella) which takes us a while back in Jenny’s life with her husband Mike, a builder, and to the first meeting with Ned (a married man with an asthmatic daughter), who will become her lover. We also find out that Jenny’s parents are separated. The flashback continues after the main story has been moved ahead three days. Jenny has established a firm rapport with Ned, and Stella, when told about it, observes that she understands this “only too well” which is not just a polite reply but a reference to a similar event in her own life. When asked for more details regarding the house, Stella tells Jenny that it has not been lived in for 24 years, that it was neither let nor sold, that she was in fact afraid to sell it.

The next clue is in the form of a person, the actress Gilda Brent. When Stella hears that Jenny likes old films and often visits her friend Philippa who is a real movie buff, she asks her if she is familiar with
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the name. These clues often appear as cliffhangers right at the end of a chapter. They may not be taken up again until a good while later, and in the meantime, other hints may get dropped. This helps to keep the reader permanently on edge, and to quicken the pace of events.

Chapter 5 starts with Stella’s attempts to use the tape recorder which Richard, her son, has brought her. Her purpose is to “set on record something that no one knows but me….” In the course of the first recording session, we learn the reason why she selected Middleton Hall while inspecting several residential homes:

“[Jenny] would probably say that fate directed me to her. Yet I had never met her, never thought of her since that day, but when I heard her name….”

To be sure, Genevieve is an old-fashioned and unusual name, a name which one would be bound to remember, especially if the connotations were disturbing or upsetting. Stella’s fear of driving is again brought up here, in a reminiscence to what must have been a car accident:

“… the smell of smoke and the tiny glass cuts on my hand. I could almost see the blood on my fingers. But I looked at her, I was intrigued by her. In the beautiful face was something of a face from long ago, a tilt of the eye, a colour in the cheek, a curve of the lip.”

In other words, the name Genevieve evoked in Stella the memory of some accident and immediately, her mind was made up. She informed her son that the search was over and that she was going to settle in Middleton Hall.

Most readers will probably overlook the significance of this point, but it is the second most important clue of the whole novel, skipped over easily enough, to be sure.

Finally, there is mention of an obituary of an artist, a painter and illustrator of children’s books. Now the inventory of people and events is complete. Chapter 5 closes with Stella wondering whether she will ever be able to tell Genevieve her secret. And if so, “is it because she is the only possible person to be the recipient of my - what? My confession.” This implies that Stella is not just reporting events, but that she is entangled in them, perhaps even criminally involved. She is not making this confession for Genevieve, but because she is there, and “because of a child’s face seen twenty-four years ago.”

Chapter 6 opens in Jenny’s present time, with information about her relationship (or rather lack thereof) with her husband Mike. As a builder he is often away on weekends, and over time, they have
become quite indifferent to each other. Some years back, Jenny’s grandmother had prepared a “love potion” for Jenny to administer to Mike to win him back, but she had kept it and now gave it to Ned, and it worked (this is again part of the superstition which permeates the whole novel), and she and Ned become lovers.

They had no place to go when they met, but he assured her that he would leave his wife and daughter, an idea which Jenny abhorred. She had asked both her friend Philippa and Ned about the actress Gilda Brent, and both knew her. Philippa had seen several of her movies, and Ned had actually contemplated casting her for a part in a film some 15 years earlier, only to discover that she had seemingly disappeared. Because of a proximity in age and Stella’s rather nebulous remarks, in connection with the fact that her own daughter Marianne happened to be an actress, it had occurred to Jenny that Gilda might be Stella herself, and, after a dull weekend with Mike away in Norwich to watch some sports event, confronted her with this deduction the following Monday, only to be told by Stella that this was, in fact, not the case, and to which she mysteriously added: “I wish she had been.” 10

A few days later, Jenny watched one of Gilda’s old movies with her friend Philippa, and talked about it with Stella the next time they met. Having heard before from Stella that Gilda was dead, she inquired about the cause of her passing and was told that Gilda had died in a car crash. Not sure that Jenny had grasped the significance of the preposition, Stella repeated, “in a car crash, not of a car crash.” 11) Afraid of having said too much, Stella then made Jenny promise that she would not repeat this piece of information to anyone.

On the occasion of another of Richard’s visits to Middleton Hall, Jenny finds out that Stella’s fear of being in a car has nothing to do with her husband’s death, because he was taken ill on a train and died in a hospital soon after. Richard himself thinks it is a bit of a mystery, but is not inclined to ask his mother for the precise reasons of her phobia.

When Jenny mentions to Stella the bottle of champagne that she found in the refrigerator at the cottage, she is very surprised. “Genevieve, did we really leave that in the fridge? It - it can’t be. After so long?” Stella really gets worked up about this piece of information which to her is an important reminiscence, and she feels the need to smoke a cigarette in spite of her rapidly declining health. Jenny knows now - as does the reader - that Stella must have been to the house with someone who was not a family member. During this conversation, Stella finally reveals to Jenny that she bought Molucca, her cottage, for £4,000 with the money she got from the sale of her father’s house which she had inherited after his death. She wanted to have something of her own, since everything else belonged to her husband, even the house they were living in at the time was entirely in his own name (although she inherited it after his death). But by then
she had been owning Molucca for five years. She used the cottage for her clandestine assignations with Alan, just as Jenny is meeting Ned there in the present time of the novel.

Chapter 9 (and part II of the novel) starts with a flashback on Stella’s early life in London. She had two boyfriends, Alan Tyzark and David Conroy, but both relationships came to nothing, and in the end, she married her boss, Rex Newland, the head of a firm of solicitors. After being married for five years, a daughter was born, and Rex, disappointed that it wasn’t a son and irritated by Stella’s very slow recovery (she had spent most of her pregnancy in bed), took up relations again with a former girlfriend (although Stella called her his mistress). Jenny tries to make an educated guess at the girlfriend’s identity and assumes it must be the actress Gilda Brent.

However, it was Alan who eventually got married to Gilda Brent, and Stella sets Jenny straight on this point. The girlfriend or mistress was a woman called Charmian Fry, and Stella found out about the affair from her own father-in-law who saw nothing strange in the notion that if a man cannot get from his wife what he is entitled to get, he can go and get it elsewhere.

Information about Jenny’s father is sparse, and dispensed piecemeal. We know that her parents were separated when she was 8 years old. Later we find out that he still shows up at the pub sometimes, accompanied by another wife or girlfriend. In chapter 5, we are informed of his death, at the age of 55, and later still, of the fact that, after his marriage had failed, he had a series of wives and girlfriends, the final one being two years younger than Jenny. When Stella hears about his death, her sorrow seems genuine, although there is no suggestion that she could have known anything about him, let alone been acquainted with him.

The circumstances of his death yield another easily overlooked clue. He had seemed fit and healthy, and just before his death he had been working on a car that he intended to sell, and an interested customer had already had a look at it. This suggests that he is a kind of car mechanic or used car dealer. There is another clue to this effect when Jenny, disappointed by the meager turnout at the funeral, notes that his

“... former partner in the garage business sent a wreath of yellow chrysanthas and ivy in the shape of a bull-nosed Morris, but he didn’t come himself.” 12)

A little later, we learn that Jenny’s mother “chucked him out” and, later still, (ch. 15) when Stella asked her how old she was when her parents divorced, and who left whom, we are given the reason:

“He’s got someone else, a woman called Kath. He’d promised to give her up but one night when he
was late home again and he’d been seeing her, Mum said it was the last straw and to go and not come back.” 13)

Surprisingly, Stella then asked whether this could have been in late August or early September which Jenny tentatively confirms. Why would she ask that question? And rather than asking it at all, or perhaps at what time of year it happened, which would be strange and unexpected enough, she obviously had a fairly accurate idea of the time already. What does she know about Jenny’s parents’ separation? What business is it of hers? How is she involved in it? - This is another hint which this reader, at any rate, completely ignored.

In chapter 11, Stella confesses to having had a love affair with Alan that Gilda did not know about until much later. Another hint is placed when Jenny, on one of her visits to Stella’s cottage, finds a dress in the upstairs wardrobe that is Stella’s in every respect - except for the fact that it is soiled. No further explanation is given for its condition, and Jenny thinks that

“… it was like a dress to wear to a wedding, a bridesmaid’s or even a bride’s. But the bride had dug a ditch or lit a bonfire.” 14)

This flippant and even heartless thought will later attain some gruesome reality.

Within a few pages, the stage is set for the fateful course of events which bring the novel to its climax. After a fight with Gilda which Stella has the misfortune to witness, Alan turns away from her and proposes to Stella - in a strangely matter-of-fact way when driving her home - to become lovers. Stella agrees, although her husband had just turned away from his mistress Charmian after a fight and had resumed sexual relations with her. The following year, her second child Richard was born, and she could not be sure whether the father was her husband or her lover.

The parallelism of events is also apparent in chapter 12 (the first chapter of part III of the novel). Just as Stella continued her illicit affair with Alan, Jenny keeps seeing Ned on the side. Other than Alan, however, Ned has a family, a wife and a seriously asthmatic daughter to whom he is devoted.

In chapter 13, Stella confirms (not to Jenny, but only to the reader, by way of her secret tape recordings) that Alan is the father of her son Richard. It came out through a blood test which had to be done because the boy suffered from anaemia. Stella was afraid that, eventually, Richard’s looks would betray his parentage, but Rex died of a heart attack before this could happen.

An uneasy friendship then developed between the three women who did not really like each other,
Charmian still in love with Stella’s dead husband, and Stella in love with Gilda’s living husband, and Gilda always feeling superior to both of them.

After some time - several months, according to Stella’s daughter Marianne - Charmian, unable to get over her lover’s death, shot herself in the barn of her farm, and the same day Stella told Alan that he, and not Rex, was Richard’s father.

We also learn that the tapes which Stella has been recording so far were just practice tapes, to get used to the device. She intends to erase all of them and start over for the “real thing”. She muses on the unpleasant associations that some things have for her, cars, fires, and - ploughs. What seems to be a bit incoherent is actually another important hint. Stella experiences a physical revulsion whenever she comes across the term plough, be it as a crossword clue or as a constellation in the sky. (Alan used to call her “my star” since Stella means star.)

The structure of the novel is getting more complicated at this point, as the reader is now occasionally overtaking Jenny in his knowledge of Stella’s secrets, by virtue of being offered the occasional glimpse of (or rather eavesdrop on) Stella’s tapes that Jenny knows nothing about yet.

While Stella and Alan are installed in their love nest, Jenny’s present time marriage to Mike disintegrates more and more. They still share a home and a bed, but try to keep out of each other’s way as much as they can, Mike through his work as a carpenter and Jenny through her volunteer work as a carer.

Hearing more about Stella’s secret life at Molucca, Jenny wonders whether the red Ford Anglia that is still kept in the garage there might be Gilda’s car, but Stella neither confirms nor denies this. She only says that Charmian’s suicide note to Rex “was the start of it”.

In a conversation with Ned, Jenny learns about Somerset House in London where public records pertaining to birth, marriage, divorce and death are kept, and asks him to find out when Gilda Brent died. This is around the time of Stella’s 71st birthday. Ned has a friend perform the investigation but there are no pertinent data. Gilda seems to have vanished from the face of the earth. Jenny assumes she must have died in 1970 but Ned insists that he spoke with her agent as late as 1979. Also, as she was a successful actress in her day, there should have been an obituary in one of the national papers, but none could be found.

During another conversation at the nursery home, Stella shared with Jenny some reminiscences about Gilda’s motion pictures which they used to go and watch together as soon as they came to local theatres, and Stella surprised Jenny with the admission that at one of these movie outings, Alan made the first joke about getting rid of Gilda by killing her. She added that she remembered the date of this outing more clearly than her wedding day or her children’s birthdays, thus giving it some ominous quality.
Eventually, Gilda got wind of her husband Alan’s illicit affair, but rather than suspecting Jenny (whom she thought too old for Alan’s taste), she set her sights on exposing Priscilla, the wife of another member of the Newland family. Ironically, she confides in Jenny - the actual culprit - to discuss Alan’s affair and to search for means to end it. Jenny reproaches Alan for not leaving Gilda when there was still time, to which Alan jokingly responds “you should have let me kill her.” The reader cannot be sure at this point how much of that statement is playful and how much is serious.

At her next visit, Jenny confesses to Stella that she is using Molucca for secret meetings with Allen to which Stella surprisingly responds with an expression of gladness that the house is used by happy lovers, and that she herself and Allen were always happy there, always, except for the last time. This, to Jenny, sounds like a dark and sinister omen (which it is). The conversation then continues with Stella telling Jenny that Gilda continued to suspect one woman after another to be Alan’s secret lover, and that she even stalked him on a visit to Norwich, but it all came to nothing. Asked why Alan did not leave Gilda since she was obviously going out of her mind, Stella replied that, in the end, he did leave Gilda to be with her. Jenny then leaves the room to look after some other patients, but when she passes Stella’s door again on her way out of the building she thinks she can hear indistinct talking inside the room, and assumes Stella is talking to herself.

Allowed once again to eavesdrop on Stella’s recordings, the reader - but not Jenny - now gets this information: In the summer following Rex Newland’s death, everyone went on vacation, Gilda went to France, Stella’s children were taken care of, so she and Alan decided to spend ten days at Molucca. The “killing Gilda” game was over, now they started playing honeymoon. But it was not to be. At this point, we only learn that during the next three days, something terrible must have happened, something which terminated their relationship. Expecting that finally they could spend a whole night in each other’s arms, they found that they couldn’t. They did spend two nights at Molucca, the longest nights of their lives, but not in the way they had dreamed about.

Stella tidied and closed up Molucca, leaving a bottle of champagne and some ham in the refrigerator, and a soiled dress in her bedroom wardrobe - things which eventually Jenny found. She left Gilda’s car in the garage, knowing that no-one would ever trace it, but also realizing that she could never sell the cottage as long as it was there.

Back home, she felt the symptoms of an oncoming flu and decided that she would never drive a car again. When she tried to think of Alan, she found she could think only of burning fields, a green scarf and blood on the grass.

From the above passage we can deduce that Gilda must have shown up during their last stay at the
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cottage. The question is how and why she left without her car - or whether she left at all. There is, after all, the earlier hint that “she only went there once, and that was on the day of her death.” 17)

Faced with the ruins of her marriage, Jenny decides to leave Mike and informs her lover Ned about it. They make an assignment to meet at Molucca the next day. Jenny makes all the necessary preparations and waits for him to arrive, but he does not come. When the phone finally rings, it is not Ned, but Richard, who informs her that Stella who has grown very weak wishes to see Jenny as soon as possible. This jolts her back to reality, and she tries to call Ned, but she only gets his answering machine.

Jenny’s marriage ended after 13 years, and her mother called the 13th anniversary the Brimstone Wedding. This explains the title of the novel. Everyone is familiar with Silver and Golden Wedding anniversaries, but there are many other names for minor wedding anniversaries. The parallelism between Jenny’s and Stella’s lives continues here. Brimstone is explosive, its smell sulphuric. It carries connotations of fire and destruction which are symptoms for Stella’s doomed love affair as well. - This chapter also gives an account of Stella’s last few days and ends with her death.

In part IV, Jenny keeps trying to get hold of Ned, she even enlists Richard’s help who, with his voice of authority as a doctor and his upper-crust accent, succeeds in finding out from various sources that Ned has gone to Switzerland on vacation and will be back in the New Year. If Jenny still had any doubt that Ned had “ditched” her, she has her proof now. Richard gives her Stella’s dressing gown and the tape recorder with the tapes, as Stella had intended.

Later, when Jenny is in her mother’s pub to drown her sorrows in pink gin, a lady enters the bar whom Jenny recognizes. It is Linda Owen, the blonde woman who twice passed her in a car at Thelmarsh Cross 18), the turning where she was waiting for Ned prior to taking him to Molucca. Over a couple of drinks, Linda sets Jenny straight about Ned’s true personality. He has been befriending other women as well, Linda included, meeting them at the very same intersection, turning their heads with promises of love and marriage, only to dump them when he got tired of them. Linda assures Jenny that Ned will never leave his wife or his sick daughter whom he truly loves.

At home, distraught and bewildered by what she has just learned, she has to face Mike and tells him she is leaving him. Unable to take it all in, he shows no reaction and Jenny packs her personal things and leaves. When she finds that Mike followed her to her mother’s pub, she escapes to Molucca. She sees Mike again in the pub on Christmas Eve. He gives her a letter from Stella’s solicitors, which has arrived in the meantime, and she is astonished to learn that she has been left Stella’s house.

So Jenny takes possession of her new home and, thinking about the events which happened there during the three fateful days all those many years ago, she understands the significance of Stella’s last
communication, written down by her daughter Marianne and handed to her when Stella was already unconscious, that "there is nothing in the house or the garden." It means that Gilda is dead, but not buried at or anywhere near the cottage.

Further events distract Jenny’s mind: there is an announcement on TV that Ned made a documentary about Gilda’s disappearance entitled “The Lady Vanishes”, based on the details he had gleaned from Jenny. Also, Mike asks her for a divorce. A passing remark about never having listened to the music on Stella’s tapes is followed up by her decision to listen to them during a walk in the fens.

Spellbound, she learns the truth. While Alan and Stella were at Molucca, Gilda suddenly showed up to have it out with Alan. The trip to France had been a ruse. She had followed him to the house the previous week but had still not guessed the identity of his companion. Finally she understood the truth. After lots of things were said, and lots of threats made, she eventually decided to leave, but her car would not start. Alan offered to drive her back to town and Gilda insisted that she, as his rightful wife, sit next to him in the passenger seat, with Stella in the back - a fatal mistake. Alan was speeding in order to dispatch Gilda as quickly as possible, and dispatch her he did - at some sharp turn he did not realize quickly enough that a huge combine harvester was parked half on the road and half on the grass verge. The violent impact catapulted Gilda who was riding shotgun straight through the front window into the field. A split-second before the impact, Stella, desirous for physical contact, had thrown her arms around Alan from behind, thus acting as a safety belt and protecting him from potentially fatal contact with the steering wheel or the front window.

They found Gilda a few yards into the field at the foot of a big tree. Alan suggested to let her rest until they could get help. Soon a small van approached. It was the mechanic from a nearby garage, on his way home. He immediately understood the nature of the accident and, trying to establish the facts, asked the question that turned everything around and made all the puzzle pieces of the novel click into place (except the final one): “Just you two, was it?” With Gilda out of sight, it seemed the logical question to ask, but it gave Alan the decisive idea and he answered in the affirmative: “Just the two of us”.

The mechanic decided that there would be no need to involve “the fuzz” (the police) and then left to get his tow truck. Meanwhile, Alan checked on Gilda, to “move her out of the sun.” When he returned to Jenny who was sitting on the grass verge, he told her that Gilda was dead.

The mechanic returned, their car was towed to the garage. In the office, Stella noticed a framed photograph of two small girls and a baby boy, presumably the mechanic’s children. After the paperwork was done, the mechanic drove them home and jumped the battery of Gilda’s car so that it could be moved. Upon leaving, the mechanic mentioned that thanks to the accident he’d get home late once again. In
Stella’s words,

“His wife had told him this was his last chance. If he was late again ‘he’d had his chips’, she was throwing him out, so since he’d be late anyway now he was going to keep a date he’d made with a woman called Kath and get home really late. Might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.” 22)

These were exactly the same words that Jenny had used months earlier when describing to Stella the reasons for her parents’ divorce. Now she heard Stella using them in connection with the accident. Things have come full circle - for those readers who picked up on it. Rendell is generous enough even to repeat the girlfriend’s name - Kath - although there is no logical reason why the mechanic should have divulged the name of his paramour to complete strangers.

This is the last (and most outspoken) hint that points to how all the persons in the novel are connected. But the reader’s attention is torn away yet again from putting two and two together, as there is still the question of what happened with Gilda.

Alan had left the Anglia’s engine running and suggested to go and get Gilda, at which point Jenny nearly jumped out of her skin. She felt remorse for not telling the truth, for not asking for an ambulance and also doubted if Alan had told her the complete truth about Gilda’s death. She realized that they had maneuvered themselves into a corner from which they could not escape. They had to follow through with their fabricated story and that meant that Gilda had to disappear. They picked up Gilda’s body at an opportune moment when there was no traffic on the road, and took her back to Molukka. After resting and bathing, they went out to dinner, although Jenny could not eat anything, then returned home. They spent the following day performing routine tasks and chores, and before nightfall faced the inevitable together.

On the other side of the tape, Stella described how they found a field that had recently been burned, and part of the hedge had been uprooted to enlarge the field. Some half-burned logs were still smoldering. This was where they put Gilda’s body and incinerated her. When the funeral pyre had turned to cinders and ashes, Alan assembled a makeshift petrol bomb to make sure there were no recognizable parts left behind. They battled the feeling of sickness with gin that they drank straight from the bottle. At daybreak, when their work was finally accomplished, they returned to Molucca and slept in separate rooms, like the night before.

In the afternoon of the next day, after going through their bathing and dressing routines, they were on the road again, driven by terror and fear of what might await them in the field, but to their immense relief, they found that it had already been ploughed over. The farmer had lost no time and taken advantage of the fine weather. Where there had been ash and destruction, they now saw rich, freshly turned, chestnut brown earth, ploughed in parallel lines.
But Gilda’s presence and subsequent death at Molucca had ruined any hopes of a future together. The fire was between them, the ploughing over of the site, and the fifteen unexplained seconds that Alan had held the scarf over Gilda’s face when she was lying in the field. Also, Alan realized that he could never be a widower now, and never get married again, since there is no legal death without a body. Although Gilda was gone, she was, and would always be, more present than ever. Stella and Alan went their separate ways; she saw him just once more and then never again.

Coming to the end of the tapes, Jenny realized that they were left to her for a purpose, and she makes it very clear - to those readers who missed all clues from start to finish - that she understood the last piece of the puzzle. The mechanic who had put the idea of disposing of Gilda into Alan’s head by asking "Just the two of you, is it?" had been her father. One of the girls in the photograph on the mechanic’s desk had been herself. From this moment on, her life was irrevocably linked with Stella’s. Hearing her unusual Christian name mentioned at Middleton Hall ended Stella’s search for a suitable nursery home to live out her remaining days. This revelation is given three paragraphs from the end of the novel, on the last page. Rendell truly kept her audience on tenterhooks right to the end.

Note:
My first intention was to compare this novel with another one called An Unkindness of Ravens which the author wrote under her real name Ruth Rendell, and the title was supposed to have been “Two Masterful Plots”. However, the scope of this paper became so large that I will discuss the other novel in a separate paper.

Footnotes:
1 ) This review originally appeared in the Manchester Evening News. My source is www.twbooks.co.uk/reviews/mcdermidonrendell.html
2 ) I used the Penguin paperback edition published in 1996.
3 ) p. 36
4 ) p. 117
5 ) This character is fictitious, but there existed a real life actress named Gloria Brent at the time. Some movie titles and actors’ or actresses’ names are genuine, too.
6 ) in this case, at the end of chapter 4
7 ) p. 56
8 ) p. 56
9 ) p. 59
10) p. 71
11) p. 79
A Masterful Plot

12) p. 133
13) p. 194
14) p. 135
15) p. 168
16) The vast former London residence of the Dukes of Somerset today houses the Courtauld Institute and the Public Record Office.
17) p. 72
18) p. 248, with ref. to pp. 36 & 117
19) p. 267, with ref. to p. 237
20) p. 289
21) p. 290
22) p. 294

Sources


Online Source
