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## Nella's Motives in *The Lost Apothecary* by Sarah Penner

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Authors often use motives to develop characters, plots, and conflicts in a story. The emergence of motives in a literary work is also diverse; one of the purposes is to enrich the reader's understanding of the complexity of the character. This article aims to reveal the motives of the main character, Nella, who decides to become a murderous pharmacist in the 18th century in London. The focus of this study is on how Nella's personality is depicted and reveals the reason why she becomes a murderer apothecary. This study uses a qualitative research method by applying the New Criticism theory to examine the development of its main character. This study shows that Nella is depicted as a figure who cares about other women and is a skilled healer. Then, Nella experiences character development by becoming a murderer. The motives lie behind the reasons she wants to help other women kill their men by selling deadly concoctions. It can be concluded that Nella uses her skills in pharmacy in the wrong way to support other women with a justification that she cares for them, which plunges her into a bigger problem.

## INTRODUCTION

Literary study revolves mostly around examining character motivations, as knowing a character's behavior usually calls for exploring their fundamental reasons. The female pharmacist in 18th-century London, Nella, in Sarah Penner's *The Lost Apothecary*, illustrates how good intentions could turn into ethically dubious behavior. Nella starts with noble intentions of aiding ladies in need. Still, she turns into a killer, therefore generating a dilemma between her sympathetic nature and her choice to contaminate males in the city. This begs the issue of why a figure like Nella would go from healer to murderer. Which influences guide her moral choices, and how do these goals fit the more general ideas of the book?

*The Lost Apothecary* is Sarah Penner's debut novel, released in March 2021. This novel won awards as the best debut novel in 2021 and the best historical fiction novel in the same year. This historical fiction novel has three main female characters in different time settings. The three main characters of the woman are Nella, Caroline, and Eliza. They have their point of view. So we feel like we're seeing three different storylines. However, they complement each other. There are two different time settings in this novel. Caroline lives nowadays, and the setting says it was 2021, the same as when it was released.

Meanwhile, Nella and Eliza lived in the same era in London in the 18th century. The stories have themes of mystery, murder, and relationships spiced with secrets, hatred, and lies, which end in betrayal. The three main characters are also connected uniquely to give the reader a unique sensation.

When Nella, in the 18th century, used a glass vial with a small bear on it to store her poison, Eliza had to jump into the Thames River with the vial to protect her best friend, Nella. In the future, Caroline discovers the glass vial with the bear on it and traces the untold history of London, the history of a female apothecary who made poison. However, they are emotionally connected through the betrayals of men.

Nella is a kind-hearted woman. Since childhood, Nella's mother has taught good values from inside a small apothecary for women. Finally, these good values must be tainted with the poison that small apothecary produces. The poison that eventually killed many men in the city of London in secret. So why did Nella do this? What motive makes Nella, who is supposed to be an apothecary who treats people, become a murderous apothecary?

Everyone must have motives in every action. Motive appears across social-living species and is likely to have provided survival and reproductive benefits throughout human evolution (Anderson et al., 2015). The statement shows that motive is the reason that makes a person survive. Motivation can make someone want to continue their life. However, apart from being a reason to survive, motive also encourages humans to act to achieve a specific goal or purpose (Gopalan et al., 2017). There are positive motives and negative motives. A positive motive is when someone thinks about positive side effects when choosing to do something, while a negative motive is when someone realizes that there are adverse side effects that will appear when doing something. However, the person tries to cover up the adverse side effects (Hughes & Trafimow, 2012).

This research will analyze Nella's motives for becoming a murderous apothecary in the novel *The Lost Apothecary* through intrinsic elements of character and characterization in new criticism theory. Character is the moral, mental, and social traits stably present in an individual. Meanwhile, characterization is how the traits of a character or individual are portrayed in a text (Temmerman; Boas, 2017). Sophisticated characters and characterization of the characters in the novel can help researchers understand the motivation and behaviour of the characters (Minderop, 2016).

This study aims to find Nella's motive to become the murderer apothecary in *The Lost Apothecary*. Readers can learn from the issue of study not to corrupt their abilities. Even though people's intentions are good, it will not satisfy the ending if the way is wrong. This research also helps other researchers apply new criticism theories through character and characterization. The term New Criticism first appeared in 1941 in a book entitled "The New Criticism" written by John Crowe Ransom. Since then, this theory has been continuously used to analyze literary works. This literary theory focuses on examining what is in the text. New criticism analyses literary works without bringing in extrinsic elements of literary works, such as the author's biography, environmental background, the writing period of a literary work, and other elements outside of the text (Tyson, 2006). This analysis will focus on the intrinsic elements, especially the character and characterization, to expose Nella's or the main character's motives for becoming a murderous apothecary.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher has not found previous research for Sarah Penner's literary work *The Lost Apothecary*. So, the author uses a book review that examines the intrinsic elements of the novel, especially the characters and characterizations, as literature review material.

"This book is not a procedural or a study of the psychosis of a serial killer. It creates an affinity for the reader with Nella, Eliza and Caroline. We root for the three main characters, wanting them to find a way around the problems that escalate surprisingly" (Bryce, 2021). A book review article by Bryce, "The Lost Apothecary Is A Poisonously Good Read," said that the Book is a captivating work of mystery, murder, trust, and betrayal.

Nella Clavinger was an apothecary who owned a special apothecary that was cured for a good cause: to help needy women. Nella helped women of that era to escape the bondage of cruel husbands, fathers, brothers, or employers. Meanwhile, Eliza Fanning is narrated as a 12-year-old maid. She is young, intelligent, loyal, yet superstitious. The author portrays Caroline Parcewell as a visitor from Ohio in London who intends to celebrate her 10th wedding anniversary - only to have it cancelled because her husband is having an affair. Caroline had wanted to be a historian. However, she did not pursue it because she got married. After an adventure in London mudlarking and discovering an old apothecary's bottle, Caroline returns to pursue her dream. (Bryce, 2021). This review is more about the author's point of view on the storyline and interest in the relationships between the women in the novel. It briefly describes the main characters in the novel but does not describe their physical characteristics.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The researchers will analyze the motives of the character Nella using a qualitative method because "the available and reliable information is the main source of data." (Singh, 2006). The researchers will use new criticism theory using the close reading method, focusing only on the text in the novel *The Lost Apothecary* without looking at extrinsic elements. The primary source of this study is the novel *The Lost Apothecary* by Sarah Penner. Other sources like books and journals strengthen the theory and structure of this analysis. After using the close reading method, the researcher created the table data to prevent missing the details of each sentence, especially Nella's Chapter.

Furthermore, the writer tries to understand Nella's character and characterization through the point of view of the story in the novel *The Lost Apothecary*. This novel has several points of view because each main character has a chapter. To find out in detail the motives behind Nella's character and her actions as a murderous apothecary for decades, researchers need to read and understand Nella's surface from all three points of view. Researchers make table data and then interpret it until they understand the novel, the

character and characterization of Nella, and finally, determine the motives that urged Nella to become a murderous apothecary.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Characterization

Nella is a 41-year-old apothecary. However, her pale face, sunken cheeks, and black shadows make Nella look older than the average 41-year-old woman. "My cheeks, too, once flushed with vitality, were sallow and sunken. I had the appearance of a ghost, much older than my forty-one years of age" (Penner, 2021). Nella had never paid much attention to her appearance. Nella's hair was stiff and clumpy, and she was skinny. Nella felt like a ghost because of how tired and dishevelled she looked.

Nella suffers from several physical ailments but doesn't care about them, like the pain in her joints. Nella had been experiencing pain in all of her joints for many years, in addition to joint pain throughout her body. This pain in her joints was something Nella took for granted. In addition to feeling pain in her joints, Nella also often experienced irritation on her skin due to direct contact with the poison she made. "some evenings, and my fingers were so distended and stiff, I felt sure the skin would split open and expose what lay underneath" (Penner, 2021). One day, her finger was lumpy and felt stiff because she had been making poison for too long. Nella thought the lump might explode.

On her last attempt, Nella even sacrificed her entire hand to the deadly poison of the Blister beetles.. "My fingers, too, were raw and bloodied, but that was expected; I'd dug more than a hundred blister beetles out of the fields near Walworth, plucking each one from its nest, removing each one from its beloved kin" (Penner, 2021). Nella picked up hundreds of beetles with her bare hands, leaving her entire hand blistered and blood oozing from her fingers. At the end of Nella's life, she even suffered from a cough so severe that she bled.

"I spit the blood clot into the ash, without even a desire to take a drink and wash the sticky residue from my tongue. I felt no thirst, nor hunger, and I had not urinated in nearly a day. I knew this did not bode well; when the throat ceases to beg, when the bladder ceases to fill, it is nearly over" (Penner, 2021).

Nella was a 41-year-old woman who suffered from both internal and external illnesses. Her stature did not look healthy, and she also suffered from many diseases inside her body.

## **Character**

### ***Has High Empathy for Fellow Women***

Nella is sincere in serving her customers. Nella always imagined how desperate the women who came to her shop to buy poison were. Nella imagined the pain and suffering they experienced due to the man's betrayal because Nella also felt the same betrayal, namely Frederick's betrayal, which caused Nella to miscarry and not get pregnant again.

### ***Have a Firm Commitment***

In the 18th century, apothecaries had an oath that every apothecary had to abide by. Therefore, Nella had strong principles as an apothecary. However, Nella had violated that oath by making, storing, using, and selling poison that killed many people. However, in running her illicit apothecary, Nella has rules she will not break. Nella's principle was only to help women who were betrayed by men and only use poison to kill the men who crossed the women. Nella's customers are women who are victims of men's crimes "or transgressors: a new wife or a vengeful widow. A nursemaid or a courtesan" (Penner, 2021). Nella also kept the secrets of the women she had told. As a poison seller, Nella treats her customers professionally. Nella always fulfils her customers' orders on time. Nella would stay up all night to make the poison that would be taken at daybreak.

### ***A Genius Apothecary***

Nella is a very smart apothecary. Since childhood, Nella has learned everything in her mother's apothecary shop; Nella has learned colours from the bottles of medicines. Nella recognized the taste of the hundreds of herbal ingredients in the apothecary. Nella even learned and memorized the names of great herbalists from a book called "The Pharmacopoeias," even memorizing their Latin words. Over time, Nella learned more and more about the use of herbal medicines, from safe doses that could be used to cure to amounts that could be used to kill. Nella wrote down her poison recipes in her apothecary of poison notes. Nella would tailor the poison concoction to the physique and intelligence of the man who was the target of the assassination. Afterwards, Nella would instruct her customers on how to use the poison best so that the victim would appear to die naturally rather than being poisoned.

Nella is also very good at hiding her illegal work. Apart from making accidental deaths look like natural deaths. Nella also hid her illegal apothecary very well. Nella divides her apothecary room into two by installing wall shelves. The first room is an open space that is easily accessible to people. Anyone can open the front door of Nella's

Apothecary because the door is unlocked. Still, people usually think they have come to the wrong place because it looks different from an apothecary. The room only contained barrels of half-rotten wheat grains. The room also looked dirty and unkempt, so people thought that after Nella's mother died, there was no one to continue the apothecary. People who did not have anything to do with Nella's dark apothecary shop would turn away, and so far, there has been no curiosity about what is behind the walls.

### ***Cares about Others***

Nella is a caring person, as seen from her interactions with her little customer, a 12-year-old girl named Eliza. Nella treats Eliza very well. She even teaches Eliza many things she knows, just like Nella's mother taught her when Nella was a child. Nella grew up with love and affection from her mother. Nella's mother passed on many good things about the world of apothecary before her death at the age of 21. Nella's mother said that an apothecary should give women a sense of comfort. Nella's mother always taught her to help weak women.

After analyzing Nella's character and characterization in *The Lost Apothecary*, the researcher found three motives that made Nella become a murderous apothecary:

### ***Protecting Woman***

Nella and her mother were great apothecaries. They knew just the right amount of medicine to treat and save people who were sick and even dying.

Many good remedies are poisonous in great quantities or when prepared a certain way. She taught me these quantities and preparations for my own safety, and for the safety of our patrons and our patrons' safety. Besides, just because my mother did not use poisons against anyone does not mean she did not know how (Penner, 2021).

The special women's pharmacy founded by Nella's mother saved women from dangerous illnesses and death, especially those related to women's illnesses, such as the pain of menstruation or childbirth. And so it was that Nella continued to be driven to save women, both from their illnesses and from life's problems caused by men. This urge to protect women led Nella to become a murderous pharmacist. Nella helps women by killing the men who cause them suffering, fear, and misery.

In the late 18th century, women did not feel secure. Often, the men in their immediate environment cause insecurity. It didn't matter if they were nobles or servants. "Heartache is shared by all and favors no rank" (Penner, 2021). Nella's mother teaches Nella the knowledge of medicine. Nella's mother knows how to turn medicine into poison. However, Nella's mother chose not to use it. "my mother's knowledge was a weapon she never once

used" (Penner, 2021). Nella later used the weapon to fight the cruel men who tortured women.

In *The Lost Apothecary*, some of the women Nella helps are in a threatened position. First was Eliza, a 12-year-old maid who her mistress abused, "He had begun to touch me in ways that I did not like" (Penner, 2021). This happened from the time Eliza experienced menstruation and puberty. Her physique began to change from a child to a beautiful girl. Her mistress, Mr. Amwell, began to do terrible things to Eliza. So, when Mrs. Amwell asked Eliza to give the poison from Nella's apothecary to kill her employer, she felt finally protected "I felt like I was protecting myself," I said. "Because he meant to do me harm" (Penner, 2021) because her employer's death meant Eliza was saved from harm.

The novel also tells the story of a younger sister who wants to kill her older brother, who is greedy for inheritance. So, the sister protects her family from greed by killing her brother using Nella's poison. "Ms. Bechem's brother was a greedy man. She discovered a letter—he meant to kill their father in a week to inherit a great estate. "She killed her brother so he would not kill their father?" (Penner, 2021). The women could not just run away because they were in a weak position. They have to face all those fears.

According to Nella's principles, The best apothecary knew intimately the despair her patient felt, whether in body or heart. "And though I could not relate to this woman's place in society—for there were no gatehouses or footmen to be seen in Back Alley—I knew, firsthand, her inner turmoil" (Penner, 2021). Nella always help woman that need auspices. Nella doesn't look at the social status of her patients, if there are women who need help, Nella will definitely help them.

Every patient who comes to Nella's dark pharmacy must be a woman who can no longer bear the fear and misery in her life. They come to Nella's apothecary shop for security and protection. "Nella had done nothing wrong in my eyes. Indeed, she had just saved countless lives, my own included" (Penner, 2021). Nella maintains this goal by making poisons for women so that the threat in a woman's life, namely a bad man, can end. The women who come to Nella's shop can no longer imagine how long they will continue to suffer and feel threatened because of men. So Nella's purpose in becoming a killer pharmacist is to protect the lives of women from the men who pose a threat to them. Nella is a saviour for women.

### ***Heal The Pain***

Nella spent her childhood at home with her mother. Her mother opened a small apothecary for women. The apothecary aims to help women: "My mother founded the

apothecary shop at 3 Back Alley to heal and nurture women, and I would preserve this until the day I died" (Penner, 2021). Therefore, Nella's life has always been dedicated to caring for and treating women.

Since childhood, Nella has been instilled with the principle that her apothecary is a refuge and a place for women to heal themselves. So Nella is strongly determined to preserve her mother's apothecary as a place to heal and care for women. "My mother had held tight to this principle, instilling in me from an early age the importance of providing a haven—a place of healing—for women" (Penner, 2021). The next motive that drives Nella to become a killer pharmacist is to cure women.

Nella thinks that revenge is a cure. "Nella told me about betrayal and vengeance as medicine" (Penner, 2021). Hence, Nella takes revenge by using poison as a remedy to treat women's pain. The urge to cure women of the pain caused by men makes Nella a murderous pharmacist who is not only an apothecary but also a killer.

Being a poison maker for revenge hasn't stopped her from making medicine that is used for treatment, either. Nella still makes medicine to treat diseases.

Just because a woman has rid herself of one malady—a devious husband, for instance—does not mean she is immune to all other maladies. My register was proof of it; interspersed among the deadly tonics were also many healing ones (Penner, 2021).

In Nella's entry notebook, there are medicine orders and poison orders. "On my register pages, I wrote things such as nettle and hyssop and amaranth, yes, but also remedies more sinister: nightshade and hellebore and arsenic. Beneath the ink strokes of my register hid betrayal, anguish...and dark secrets" (Penner, 2021). Both medicine and poisons are used to heal women. Initially, the revenge was intended for Nella's life, to punish Frederick, who had ruined Nella's life. However, as time passed, the secret spread by word of mouth. Spread by women who were victims of men's crimes.

I do not know who Rissa told first, or who that person told next, but the web of whispers began to spread. At some point they started leaving letters, and I was forced to build a wall in my shop to remain unseen. I had not the heart to close up the place of my mother's legacy, no matter how I had spoiled it (Penner, 2021).

Nella's apothecary shop became notorious for selling poison in secret, which is why it was hard for Nella to stop being a murderous apothecary all her life. Nella continues to help women take revenge on the men who inflicted pain on them. Nella continues to help women heal the wounds caused by men's crimes.

### *Empathy*

Empathy, the ultimate motive of Nella being a murderous apothecary, can change the reader's view of Nella's character. Nella killed many people with the poison she made in her small drugstore. However, this cannot be separated from the motive of empathy. Nella's empathy for women with the same fate drives her to continue making deadly poisons. "I know what it is to watch my child fall from my body at the hands of a man. And while my story is terrible, every woman has faced a man's wickedness to some degree. Even you" (Penner, 2021). Nella decided that she had to help the women who men had harmed because she had felt the same way, and it hurt like hell.

She did not take orders from all the customers. In the novel *The Lost Apothecary*, Nella continuously records every detail of her female customers' demands in a parchment paper notebook with a cowhide cover. Nella records every name of the person to be killed with the potion from her apothecary and why the person should be killed. So that only certain people could get the poison from Nella's apothecary. To avoid getting caught and making the death seem normal, Nella also carefully explains how to utilize what she makes; this is why Nella's Apothecary shop has survived for 20 years and has helped women take revenge and escape from the pain they suffer. Nella's poison customers are only women who want to kill the man who hurt them. Nella does not accept poison requests to kill or harm other women. Nella still wants to keep the apothecary rules that her mother left her to help women give women a sense of comfort and security.

Some data shows that Nella firmly refused requests to harm women and firmly said that her small apothecary shop would continue to help and protect women. Nella's poison helped many women escape the pain they felt from betrayal, infidelity, violence, and even lewd acts committed by men. Because Nella is an apothecary with principles, "The best Apothecary was one who intimately knows the despair her patient felt, whether in body or heart" (Penner, 2021). Therefore, she always tries to understand each woman's case and help them eliminate the source of their pain.

Even at the end of the story, when Nella finally decides to let women hurt women, the reason is to protect other women's secrets. Because the client who requested this threatened to leak Nella's drugstore, the identity of Nella's customers would be revealed. When the secrets of Nella's apothecary shop begin to be shown, Nella only thinks that the secrets of the female customers who had been guarding her are willing to die to protect these secrets. Nella's empathetic motive towards women makes her murder seem like not a crime. It is a way to help women despite the suffering in their lives.

However, empathy is still a negative motive. Although Nella's goal was good, to help women escape the pain of men, the way she did it was wrong. Nella commits an illegal act by selling poison that is used to kill. Nella's work has many adverse risks, apart from the risk of being caught by a legal officer at that time. Nella also developed a severe illness from dealing with poison throughout her life.

## CONCLUSION

After analyzing the character and characterization, the researcher found three motives that drove Nella to become a murderous apothecary. The motive is to protect women, healing the pain, and empathize with women with the same fate as Nella. It was not easy for Nella to start her dark apothecary. Her life has been problematic since the beginning. Never knowing her father's love, losing her mother at a young age, and being betrayed by the first man she loved were all difficult stories that Nella Clavinger experienced. She would not have chosen a life of betrayal and revenge if she had the chance. She wanted to end all the sad things in her life. However, her empathy for women drives her to continue killing through the poison she creates. Her heart was intense, but it was a pity that a great betrayal destroyed it. Even after her betrayal, Nella still cares about the Fate of Women and helps them escape, and that means making her life more complex as she has to endure more secrets, revenge, regret, and other offences. Nella was involved in more pain because of the pain she did not let go of. Nella's motive for becoming a murderous apothecary is a negative motive that has many adverse risks. Nella could not continue her life well because she continued to help avenge the women; Nella continued to be overwhelmed by fear and anxiety because of her illegal actions, and at the end of her life, Nella also died. From this analysis, we know that although one of Nella's motives is to help women, it will not end well if her methods are wrong. It is better to be sincere with the trials in our lives and not use our abilities to commit illicit acts.

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