

## An Analysis of The Mystery Elements in Sarah Penner's The Lost Apothecary

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### Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the mystery elements, specifically in the storyline of the novel *The Lost Apothecary* written by Sarah Penner. This study used a qualitative descriptive method and applied the theory of mystery concept formula from Wyatt & Saricks (2019). Data were collected by reading intensively the novel's narrative focusing on the events that reflect the storyline of the mystery. Then, analyze the parts of the mystery element contained in the novel. The mystery elements are found marked by, firstly the presence of a crime case committed by an apothecary and women in London in the 18<sup>th</sup> by poisoning and killing men who have done bad things to them. Secondly, the investigation process carried out by Caroline, an amateur detective to reveal the truth behind the mystery case. Lastly, the final revelation from the detective, Caroline. In this revelation, she finds the mystery answer of the bear apothecary vial, the apothecary shop's owner who turned out to be a woman, and the truth behind the secret London's hidden apothecary shop. The mystery elements in this novel are closely related to the process of investigating a mystery case until the truth is revealed.

**Keywords:** mystery; crime; investigation; storyline; genre fiction

### Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis elemen misteri khususnya pada alur cerita dalam novel *The Lost Apothecary* yang ditulis oleh Sarah Penner. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan menerapkan teori tentang formula konsep misteri oleh Wyatt & Saricks (2019). Data dikumpulkan dengan membaca narasi novel secara intensif dengan fokus pada peristiwa-peristiwa yang mencerminkan alur cerita misteri. Kemudian, menganalisis bagian-bagian dari elemen misteri didalam novel. Unsur misteri yang ditemukan ditandai dengan, pertama adanya kasus kejahatan yang dilakukan oleh seorang apoteker dan Wanita di London pada abad ke-18 dengan cara meracuni dan membunuh pria yang telah melakukan tindakan buruk kepada mereka. Kedua, proses investigasi yang dilakukan oleh Caroline, seorang detektif amatir untuk mengungkapkan kebenaran dibalik aksus misteri tersebut. Ketiga, pengungkapan terakhir dari seorang detektif, Caroline. Dalam pengungkapan ini, dia menemukan jawaban dari misteri botol apotek bergambar beruang, pemilik toko apotek yang ternyata adalah seorang wanita, dan kebenaran dibalik rahasia toko apotek London yang tersembunyi. Elemen misteri dalam novel ini berhubungan erat dengan proses penyelidikan sebuah kasus hingga terungkapnya sebuah kebenaran.

**Kata kunci:** misteri; kejahatan; investigasi; alur cerita; genre fiksi



## INTRODUCTION

For a long time, the mystery genre has been in great demand by readers (Wyatt & Saricks, 2019). The mystery genre not only provides entertainment to readers but, also contains meaning, messages, and stories about a hidden case that must be solved. This genre leads to stories that contain chaos so readers will be dragged into revealing the crimes committed by the main character so that orderliness can be returned (Wyatt & Saricks, 2019). Commonly, there is a detective who tries to collect a hint subsequently this could lead to a series of events behind a mystery case. In addition, some readers who read this genre only want to know “whodunit” (Wyatt & Saricks, 2019). This means that readers are commonly curious about the mastermind of all the mysterious events in the story.

There are many stories that contain this genre in literary works. One of them is a novel entitled *The Lost Apothecary*. The novel has an interesting storyline. The crime case committed by Nella in the 18<sup>th</sup> century develops into a mystery in the present day. Sarah Penner as a writer, explores the lives of 18th-century women who were connected to a crime mystery at that time. *The Lost Apothecary* is about the journey of a character named Caroline Parcell who investigates a mysterious bear vial that leads her to the case about the mystery of a secret apothecary hidden shop in the eighteenth century. Even though she has a problem related to her household, Caroline tries to piece together all the puzzles related to the apothecary shop. The owner was called Nella and she sold a poison, which was only known by word of mouth to the women of the town. In addition, there is a character named Eliza, a young girl who is also accidentally involved in the crime of the apothecary shop. The difference in timelines between the two characters makes the process of solving the mystery complicated. However, the process of solving the mystery of the apothecary shop contains a journey that makes the reader curious and guesses the truth.

*The Lost Apothecary* is a literary work that is interesting to examine. At the time of writing this article, no research has explored this novel. In addition, there is a time gap of approximately 150 years between the crime and the investigation process. The crime committed by the criminal characters occurred in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the investigation process is carried out in the present time. In several studies that have been conducted, normally the time gap between the crime and the investigation process is carried out in the same period and is not separated by a time gap of up to centuries. Lestari et al. (2020) explore a mystery case and the investigation process in a mystery novel. The researchers



revealed that there was a mystery case about the sudden death and the murder of a girl that occurred in S. Mara Gd's novel "Misteri Dian Yang Padam". In the investigation process, the detective character plays an important role in solving the case. In this study, the crime and the investigation process occurred in a relatively short period. The other studies conducted by Amalia & Hariani (2020) examined the investigation process carried out by the main male character in the novel to reveal the truth behind a case. Amalia & Hariani (2020) revealed that the main character did several ways to find information related to the crime of the criminal character. In the investigation process, the main character did not have any difficulties due to the time gap between the crime and the investigation process. Moreover, research conducted by Steere (2023) explores the first novel about a detective. The researcher explains how Sarah Leeson as an amateur detective tries to investigate a mystery case surrounding the Mrtyle Room. The crime and the investigation process occurred relatively in a short period. These studies only examine the mystery genre where the crime and the investigation process happen at the same period. Due to this reason, the researcher focuses on exploring the mystery elements in *The Lost Apothecary* since the crime and the investigation process depict an investigation of a crime that happened a hundred years ago.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Mystery is often associated with the genre that contains puzzles and is followed by a crime. However, in another interpretation, the mystery is a genre that is filled with chaos (Wyatt & Saricks, 2019). This means that the world in the mystery does not run in order, therefore the detective character plays an important role in restoring order to the chaotic world. The plot in the mystery genre will follow a series of events experienced by the detective in solving the mystery case. In the process, a detective must assemble the clues obtained to reveal the "whodunnit" in the mystery case. Unexpected plots and full of surprises are the reason that makes the mystery genre popular (Khayatovna & Rustamovich, 2023). In the plot, readers are often involved in finding out who the mastermind behind the crime is.

In the mystery genre, the investigator character has an important role in solving a mystery case in the story. In this genre, the investigator plays the role of a character who can reveal the truth behind the mystery case. The investigator is a character that is not only

experienced and expert but also can be played by an inexperienced character and not professionally expert in conducting the investigation such as an amateur investigator. There are three types of investigators in the mystery genre, private detectives, police detectives, and amateur detectives (Wyatt & Saricks, 2019). Moreover, the role of the investigator in a mystery story can also be the reason for the popularity of the mystery genre among readers (Wyatt & Saricks, 2019).

## RESEARCH METHODS

In this research, the writer analyzes and explains the mystery elements specifically in the storyline contained in the novel *The Lost Apothecary* by Sarah Penner. The writer used the qualitative descriptive method because the ultimate goal of this research is to explain all the data findings related to the mystery elements in the novel. Qualitative research is research that examines behavior, attitudes, and experiences through several methods (Dawson, 2019). Descriptive research is research by evaluating the phenomenon to be studied (N, 2019). The data is taken from a series of events related to the mystery and focuses more on Caroline Parcewell's point of view as a detective. In the data collection, the researcher marked the novels' parts or pages that showed the mystery elements' characteristics. The researcher scrutinized the parts included in the mystery elements and then matched them with the mystery of concept formula in the Saricks and Wyatt book. To ensure the accuracy of the analysis, the researcher discussed it with literary experts. Then the data that had been collected was converted into a descriptive narrative to answer the formulation of the research problem.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Crime

#### *Murder and Poisoning*

Based on the story of the novel the type of crimes that occurred are murder and poisoning. This crime was committed by the owner of the apothecary shop and the woman in the 18th century and took place in London. According to the novel, the murder was committed on several victims. Murder is carried out by giving poison to the victim's food until they die. It can be seen in the following quotation:

Very good," I said. "It will not take long. Within seconds, he may complain of a burning sensation in his mouth. Be sure to serve the eggs as hot as you

can so he does not know any better-perhaps underneath a gravy or pepper sauce. He will think he's only burned his tongue with the heat. Soon after, he will feel nauseous, and he will most certainly want to lie down. (Penner, 2021, p. 38)

This quotation explains the proper way to serve poisoned food to a victim. It is said by one of the criminal characters in the novel. In addition, the criminal character also explains how the poison works until the victim dies. Each poison has its own way both in its presentation and how it works.

### *The Victims*

There are several victims mentioned in *The Lost Apothecary* by Sarah Penner. The first victim is Frederick. He is one of the criminal character's lovers in the story. Frederick committed an act that made the criminal character feel wronged and betrayed. The following is a quotation from the novel: "Frederick was dead the next day. I read it that week, in the papers. Doctors blamed it on heart failure." (Penner, 2021, p. 115)

The quotation shows how Frederick was found dead and was not detected to have drunk poison. The truth is the two criminal characters helped each other to kill Frederick. The victim's lover goes to the apothecary shop to buy poison and the owner of the character who has the same grudge against Frederick decides to take revenge and help the criminal character. This can be seen in the following quotation:

Upon her asking, I hesitated but a moment, then dispensed her a deadly quantity, free of charge, and advised her how to best disguise the flavor. Just as Frederick had slipped a poison to me, I instructed Rissa how to do the same. That, child, is how it began. With Rissa. (Penner, 2021, p. 115)

The second victim is Thompson Amwell. He is the master of one of the criminal characters in the story. Just like the first victim, Thompson Amwell also did bad things to his wife and the criminal characters. In his case, the criminal was also helped by the owner of the apothecary shop to kill him. Thompson Amwell died after eating his poisoned breakfast. This can be seen in the following quotation: "At the same time, a servant descended the stairs, taking them two by two, his eyes wide and damp. "Mrs. Amwell," he cried, "I am s-sorry to say it, but he has stopped breathing." (Penner, 2021, p. 62)

The quotation explains the situation when Mr. Amwell's wife found out that he died. This was stated by the doctor who checked Mr. Amwell's condition. At first, the poison did not instantly kill Mr. Amwell, but the poison spread slowly until the victim was in pain then he finally died.

The third victim is Lord Clarence. In his case, there was a mistake that caused his death. The owner of the apothecary shop is involved again in this case. At first, the criminals wanted to kill the woman who was suspected of being his mistress. But something happened that caused Lord Clarence to become a victim. This was the following quotation: “She let out a wail and covered her face. “He is dead. Lord Clarence is dead.” My mouth dropped open. “H-how?” I stammered. “Did you not watch your lady’s maid give it to the mistress?” (Penner, 2021, p. 147)

The quotation above explains how the criminals were shocked about the result of their actions. The plan that was originally used to kill his mistress failed and instead killed Lord Clarence himself. In this part, the criminal who had the idea blamed the owner of the apothecary shop, because considered wrong in making the poison concoction.

## **The Investigation Process**

### ***Main Investigator***

The investigation in this novel is carried out by a character named Caroline Parcellwell. She can be categorized as an amateur detective because she is an ordinary character who doesn't have special expertise in conducting investigations like the police or detective. The events began when she was on vacation in London and participated in an activity called "Mudlarking". The purpose of this activity is to find small historical items along the side of the Thames River. While participating in this activity, Caroline found a small vial with a picture of an animal like a bear. At first, Caroline thinks that she must keep this vial. She stated: “Not only because I felt a subtle attachment to whomever this vial once belonged, but because I’d found it on a mudlarking tour”(Penner, 2021). Caroline felt the urge to find pieces of information about this vial after talking with the Bachelor Elf, someone who invited her to the mudlarking tour.

### ***Doing an Investigation in the British Library***

Based on the story, Caroline Parcellwell did a lot of her investigations in the British library. There is a huge time difference between the crimes committed by the criminal and the investigation process. The crime was committed in the eighteenth century while the investigation is conducted in the present days. As a result, Caroline can only get clues from news trails and records stored in the British Library. During her investigation, Caroline assisted by a librarian found several manuscripts, news, and the hospital woman's record

that mentioned the vial, apothecary shop, and the murder. This was the following quotation:

“22 October 1816  
To men, a maze. I could have show’d them all they wish’d to see at Bear Alley.  
That a killer need not lift her long, delicate hand. She need not touch him as he dies. There are other, wiser ways: vials and victuals.  
The apothecary was a friend to all of us women, the brewer of our secret: the men are dead because of us.  
Only, it did not happen as I intend’d.  
It was not her fault, the apothecary. It was not even mine.  
I lay blame unto my husband, and his thirst for that which was not meant for him”. (Penner, 2021, p. 60)

The quotation contains an explanation of a secret apothecary shop. In his writing, the author explains that the owner of the apothecary shop was involved in a poisoned murder case. The record mentions that greedy men were killed by women. This also explains that women do not need something big in carrying out their actions, only rely on poison, food, and vials. Another news trails were Caroline Parcewell and the librarian found in the British Library. This was the following quotation: “Gaynor lifted the earlier bulletin, dated February 10, 1791. The headline read “Bailiff Searching for Lord Clarence’s Murderer.”(Penner, 2021, p. 176).

The quotation contains an explanation of how Caroline Parcewell and her librarian friend found that the bulletin was included in one of the pieces of evidence related to the mysterious apothecary shop. In other findings, they found several matches related to the date of death and the murder newspapers at that time. They also found that the vial not only had pictures but also letters that could indicate the initials of the location of the apothecary shop. In her last finding in the British Library, she found a news bulletin about a woman who had committed suicide by jumping into the River Thames. At the same time, the owner of the apothecary disappeared when she was about to be arrested.

### *The Location*

In the process of her investigation, Caroline not only found clues in news bulletins and hospital records, but she also went to the location where the apothecary shop was located. The location of the apothecary shop was changed from Bear Alley to Back Alley in the present day. Due to the lack of preparation, Caroline was only able to explore the apothecary shop briefly and she found several books. Caroline suspected one of the books

contained a list of customers and the names of poisons they had bought. This was the following quotation:

Mr. Frere. S uthwark. Tobacco leav s, prep. oil. 3 May 1790. On acct  
of Ms. Am er, sister, friend of Ms. M nsfield.  
Ms. B. Bell. Raspb rry leav, crush'd plaster. 12 May 1790.  
Charlie Turner, May air, NV tincture. 6 Jun 1790. On acc of Ms.  
Apple, servant-cook". (Penner, 2021 : 160)

The quotation explains when Caroline Parcewell found a list of customer's names, and the types of poisons that they bought. The discovery of this book became strong evidence that could help Caroline Parcewell uncover the mystery of the apothecary shop. Moreover, at that location, she saw old shelves and the location of the room that did match the description of the clues she had previously obtained.

## **The Final Revelation**

### ***Revealing The Apothecary Shop Secret***

In her last investigation, Caroline assisted by a librarian managed to find the secret behind the bear apothecary vial. The librarian was amazed by Caroline because she solved the mystery of the vial and the apothecary shop. Caroline in her investigation found that the owner of the apothecary was a woman, though she "did not know the apothecary's name"(Penner, 2021). Caroline uncovered the dark secret behind the apothecary shop.

The owner of the apothecary shop not only sold medicine but also poison that could kill someone. The hidden location of the apothecary shop allowed this dark practice to take place in secret. Only women could order poison. These poisoning murders carried out by women were not conspicuous. They mixed poison into food so that it could be disguised. No one suspected the oddities deaths of these men; people considered it a natural death. Then one time a mistake was made by the owner of the apothecary shop and managed to reveal her crimes together with her costumers' women.

### ***Revealing the Murder***

The owner of the apothecary shop was indeed involved in the poisoning murder case committed by women in London at that time. this following quotation is the evidence: "I ran my fingers over the ink of her words, imagining what despair brought the woman to seek out someone like me. Not just an apothecary, but a murderer". (Penner, 2021, p. 11) In the quotation above it was stated by the apothecary shop owner. She declared herself as a murderer. Caroline discovered that the owner of the apothecary shop was a woman.



The first victim was Frederick. The owner of the apothecary shop worked together with Frederick's lover Rissa to take revenge for the betrayal he committed. The apothecary owner continues to help Mr. Thompson Amwell's wife to murder her husband. In this case, three perpetrators involved the owner of the apothecary, Mrs. Amwell, and her servant Eliza Fanning. As in the first case, this murder was carried out because Mrs. Amwell had a grudge against her husband. Mrs. Amwell bought poison in the apothecary shop and ordered Eliza Fanning to poison him. This was done to avoid the oddities.

In addition, in Lord Clarence's case, the murderer is also his wife and the owner of the apothecary shop. This was done because of the jealousy she felt due to her husband's affair. Although she did not intend to kill her husband, Lady Clearance was devastated by his death. The poison she planned to kill her husband's mistress ended up backfiring on her husband. This crime was committed as a form of resistance by women due to the bad treatment of men around them. The owner of this apothecary shop will seriously make poison if a woman orders it. The operational system of this shop is only known by women and is secretive. Only women have ever come for treatment or even secretly ordered poison.

## CONCLUSION(S)

The mystery elements in this novel are closely related to the investigating process of a case until the truth is revealed. In this case, Caroline as an amateur detective is tasked to find out the mastermind behind a mystery. The mystery that is portrayed is a crime committed by the owner of the apothecary shop and the woman to poison the bad man around them. In the investigation process, Caroline assisted by a librarian tries to put together the puzzles to reveal the truth behind the mystery case. The time difference in background between Caroline as a detective and Nella as a criminal makes the investigation process require full precision. Therefore, the evidence, crime scene, and eyewitnesses are limited. Hence, the three points of view in *The Lost Apothecary* can provide clarity to the readers regarding the revealing mystery case. Although Caroline still has questions that cannot be answered, in her final revelation she decides to continue her investigation in depth. Despite that, Caroline still successfully managed to find "whodunnit" through the investigation process in the present time. Nevertheless, another analysis regarding this novel still needs to be done.

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