

## Power and Oppression Symbols in Sarah Penner's *The Lost Apothecary*

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### Abstract:

This article analyzes the use of symbols in Sarah Penner's novel *The Lost Apothecary* through the lens of symbolism theory. Symbolism is an important element in literary works that enriches the story and allows readers to interpret deeper meanings behind the literal text. This study aims to explore the meanings and messages conveyed through the novel's symbols, particularly those related to themes of power and oppression. The data were collected through close reading of the novel, focusing on the identification of symbols within the narrative. The data were then analyzed using a qualitative method, focusing on how each symbol contributes to the development of the novel's themes and character growth. The analysis results show that these symbols play a significant role in shaping both the development of the story and characterization. For example, the poison vial symbolizes the hidden strength of women and the oppression of power inequality. This article hopes to provide new insights into the role of symbolism and facilitate further research on the role of symbolism in literature.

**Keywords:** Symbolism; Power; Oppression; Meaning.

### Abstrak:

Artikel ini menganalisis penggunaan simbol dalam novel *The Lost Apothecary* karya Sarah Penner dengan menerapkan teori simbolisme. Simbolisme merupakan elemen penting dalam karya sastra yang memperkaya cerita dan memungkinkan pembaca untuk menafsirkan makna yang lebih mendalam di balik teks literal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi makna dan pesan yang disampaikan melalui simbol-simbol dalam novel, khususnya yang berkaitan dengan tema kekuasaan dan penindasan. Data dikumpulkan melalui pembacaan mendalam terhadap novel, dengan fokus pada identifikasi simbol dalam narasi. Data kemudian dianalisis menggunakan metode kualitatif, dengan menyoroti bagaimana setiap simbol berkontribusi terhadap pengembangan tema dan pertumbuhan karakter dalam novel. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa simbol-simbol ini memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk perkembangan cerita dan karakterisasi. Sebagai contoh, botol racun yang menyimbolkan kekuatan tersembunyi perempuan serta penindasan terhadap ketimpangan kekuasaan. Artikel ini diharapkan dapat memberikan wawasan baru tentang peran simbolisme dan memfasilitasi penelitian lebih lanjut mengenai peran simbolisme dalam sastra.

**Kata kunci:** Simbolisme; Kekuasaan; Penindasan; Makna

## INTRODUCTION

Symbolism, which involves the use of symbols in novels or literature, can represent the ideas, thoughts, or concepts intended by the author. These symbols can reveal the deepest meaning of the novel beyond the literal text. Somani (2023) argued that symbolism opposes both straightforward exposition and detailed portrayal. The symbolism technique is crucial in literary analysis as it enables a deeper exploration of meanings and a comprehensive understanding of the author's message. In *The Lost Apothecary* by Sarah Penner, symbolism theory plays a crucial role in revealing themes of power and oppression. By analyzing these symbols, we can understand how they work to uncover the deeper meanings and messages intended by the author. This article will explore how the symbolism used in *The Lost Apothecary* conveys important messages to readers regarding power and oppression.

Although numerous studies have explored symbolism in literature, specific research on the use of symbolism in Sarah Penner's *The Lost Apothecary* remains limited. For instance, there are analyses of *Le Livre de Monelle*, which interpret particular symbols using a semiotic approach (Hoerotunnisa et al., 2024), studies of symbolism in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, which focus on the symbolic relationships between characters and their environments (Hayder, 2009), and examinations of symbolism in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, which investigate symbols of human struggle (Zain, 2021). This research aims to fill that gap by exploring how the symbols employed by Sarah Penner enrich the narrative and themes of the novel through the lens of symbolism theory. Understanding these symbols is crucial for appreciating how the novel addresses themes of power and oppression. This analysis is expected to provide new insights into the hidden meanings behind the symbols in Sarah Penner's *The Lost Apothecary*.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Symbolism

Symbolism is one of the literary tools used by writers to convey meanings and abstract ideas through the use of symbols. As noted by Fadaee (2011), "... it is a kind of figure of speech used for increasing the beauty of the text and has figurative meaning in addition to its literal meaning." Writers often use symbols to depict specific objects, thereby enhancing the reader's understanding of the author's intended message. Turner

(1975) observes that “... individuals may add personal meaning to a symbol's public meaning, either by employing one or another of its standardized modes of association (such as color, texture, shape, habitus, etc.) to introduce new concepts within its semantic orbit or by incorporating it into a complex of purely private fantasies.” In a literary context, these symbols frequently represent power, authority, politics, and other themes. Turner (1975) further asserts that “symbols are seen as instrumentalities of various forces-physical, moral, economic, political, and so on-operating within isolable, changing fields of social relationships.”

In literary studies, the use of symbols has been analyzed in various works to explore and understand how these symbols can deepen reader interpretation and support central themes, such as power and oppression. Several previous studies, including those conducted by Hoerotunnisa et al. (2024), Hayder (2009), and Zain (2021), have examined the role of symbolism in reinforcing the author's message and conveying social criticism through symbolic representation.

The research conducted by Hoerotunnisa et al. (2024), entitled *Analysis of the Elements of Symbolism in the Novel Le Livre de Monelle* by Marcel Schwob, examines the symbolism in *Le Livre de Monelle* through a semiotic approach. The study identifies more than twenty symbols that reveal deep meanings related to freedom, sorrow, and life changes. The research method used is descriptive qualitative which uses data to interpret the symbols in the novel. In this study, Hoerotunnisa found that symbols such as the meadow, ember, snakeskin, and rose serve not only as decorative elements in the plot but also convey deep meanings about courage and sacrifice.

The next research is entitled *Symbolism in Thomas Hardy's The Return of the Native* by Hayder (2009), aims to explore how environmental symbols in the novel influence characters and reveal major themes, such as the conflict between nature and modernity. Using a symbolic analysis method, Hayder identifies the significant role of symbols in portraying character personalities and uncovering deeper meanings of modernity and idealism. His findings, such as the portrayal of Egdon Heath as a central symbol of human helplessness, reflect characters' attitudes toward nature and their culture.

The last study, conducted by Zain (2021) titled *An Analysis of Symbolism and Meaning Found in The Old Man and The Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, identifies the symbolism of colors, elements, and animals that reveal themes of life's struggle and the

value of courage in the novel. Using a qualitative analysis method and close reading techniques to collect data from the novel. Zain shows that the symbols of colors, water elements, and animals in the novel in adding aesthetic aspects and conveying deeper meanings.

However, there is a research gap in the analysis of symbolism related to themes of power and oppression. Although the studies by Hoerotunnisa, Hayder, and Zain provide valuable insights, the main focus of their research emphasizes themes such as freedom, courage, or the conflict between nature and modernity, without explicitly addressing symbolism related to power structures. For instance, while Hayder successfully explores environmental symbolism, his findings primarily focus on the human-nature relationship rather than power and oppression. Similarly, Zain emphasizes the aesthetic aspects and personal resilience of the main character in the novel without exploring power dynamics.

In addition, the approaches used in these studies are primarily qualitative and descriptive, focusing on gathering symbolic data for narrative interpretation. This study requires a deeper approach to uncover how symbols can enrich a story and add meaning to the novel. It will focus on exploring the role of symbolism in depicting the dynamics of power and oppression experienced by the characters, providing insight into how symbols in *The Lost Apothecary* contribute to the development of this theme.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method to explore the symbols in Sarah Penner's *The Lost Apothecary*, with a main focus on the deeper meanings of these symbols. A qualitative approach was chosen to enable in-depth narrative analysis, allowing for an understanding of how symbols can convey deeper meaning. According to Onwuegbuzie et al. (2015), qualitative data analysis techniques are effective for literary analysis, as literary works contain a range of qualitative data, such as literary review and author interpretation, allowing for a deeper understanding of the meaning and context of the work. The researcher uses a case study format, focusing on prominent narrative and symbolic elements in the novel. Close reading is applied to analyze and interpret symbols in specific passages to reveal the deeper meanings of symbols associated with certain objects and events.

The main instrument in this study is Sarah Penner's novel *The Lost Apothecary*, which is analyzed to identify symbols related to the themes of power and oppression. To ensure accurate interpretation, this research is also supported by additional sources, including studies on symbolism and analyses of symbols in other literary works.

The research procedure begins with data collection from Sarah Penner's novel *The Lost Apothecary* as the primary source. The data collection process was conducted using the close reading method which requires careful reading and comprehension of the novel to identify specific symbols in objects and events, especially those related to the theme of power and oppression.

The next step involves data analysis to identify the meanings of the symbols that have been identified. These symbols are analyzed to uncover deeper meanings related to the research theme. The researcher also uses supporting literature and previous studies to compare and validate the interpretations.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of symbols in Sarah Penner's novel *The Lost Apothecary* reveals themes that reflect power and oppression. Based on the analysis, this study identifies symbolism that appears in various forms. Symbols like a hidden apothecary, poison vials, and medicinal plants are the main findings of this research.

The symbol of the hidden apothecary represents a safe space for women where they can seek knowledge and support, both physically and mentally. Meanwhile, the symbol of the poison vial serves as a source of power that is used as a tool for women to fight oppression. Lastly, the symbol of medicinal plants illustrates the knowledge and skills that women possess in the field of medicine, demonstrating that they can also resist oppression through a deep understanding of medicine and nature.

These three symbols are interconnected and create a deeper understanding of women's struggles against power and oppression in society, which serves as the main theme of this study. This study provides new insights into the role of symbols in emphasizing the theme of power and oppression in Sarah Penner's *The Lost Apothecary*. Symbols such as the hidden apothecary, poison vial, and medicinal plants serve as means for women to express their strength and resistance within society.

## **Hidden Apothecary**

The symbol of the hidden apothecary plays a crucial role as a representation of a safe space for women, where they can find freedom and support. Not many people know the location of Nella's hidden pharmacy, which is located in Back Alley at the back of London. The location is kept secret and is known only to women who need Nella's assistance in obtaining specific poisons and medicines. Nella carefully designed the apothecary to ensure that only women in need and in urgent circumstances can discover it.

Nella started the illegal practice after a traumatic experience of being betrayed and hurt by her former lover, Frederick, who left her after she was pregnant with his child. This traumatic experience drove Nella to establish the hidden apothecary as a safe space or refuge for herself and other women facing injustice. Her apothecary consists of two rooms, with the front room used as a disguise. The front room contains a few barrels of pearl barley, designed to mislead people into thinking that the apothecary is closed. The second room was a small pharmacy where Nella made poisons and medicines.

The design of the hidden apothecary, concealed behind a cabinet and disguised with unremarkable materials, reflects Nella's careful consideration in creating the space. She created it so that women facing similar situations could seek support or even revenge that they could not obtain through other means.

The moments when characters like Eliza or other women come seeking help at the apothecary illustrate the space that Nella has created as a refuge and a means of control over the injustices they face in their daily lives. The existence of this hidden apothecary reflects how women try to create a safe space that are removed from societal pressures. This apothecary serves as a symbol of protection for women who wish to escape oppressive situations and the limitations imposed on them by society. Within the apothecary, women can comfortably talk about their problems, feel understood, and even gain knowledge. Thus, the hidden apothecary becomes a place where women acquire inner strength, distanced from society that oppresses women.

## **Poison Vial**

The symbol of the poison vial represents women's power to resist oppression in order to protect themselves or seek revenge for the injustices they have experienced. In a social context that often places women in oppressive positions, the poison in the vial not only as a means of self-defense but also as a symbol of resistance against societal norms that are

perceived to restrict and constrain a woman's freedom. In this study, the poison vial illustrates that the women in *The Lost Apothecary* possess control over their own lives and have the means to defend themselves against injustices from anyone who seeks to harm them, particularly men. This symbol emphasizes the importance of women's ability to advocate for their rights against the injustices they face in the novel.

An important example is the moment when Eliza receives the poison vial from Nella to confront a dangerous situation. Eliza is a 12-year-old girl who initially visits Nella's apothecary seeking herbal remedies, not poison. However, after hearing Nella's story and learning about the poison, Eliza becomes intrigued by it. Her awareness to protect herself from dangerous situations made her feel urgent to get the poison. She feels that Mr. Amwell, her employer's husband, often treats her poorly and manipulatively. The poison was seen by Eliza as the only way to defend herself amid the helplessness and limitations she faces at that time. Her decision to accept the poison reflected her courage in taking risks to combat the injustices she experienced.

In one of the studies on women's power in literature, Tosi & Pinnavaia (2023) argue that actions that may appear weak, such as the use of poison, can actually reflect hidden strength. In this context, Richard's statement in the novel *Richard II* that "some kings are killed by their wives" illustrates how women can utilize their abilities to resist oppression.

The poison vial also symbolizes the choices and control that women often lack in their lives. By accepting the poison offered by Nella, Eliza seeks to reclaim her rights and control over her fate as an individual, even though she realizes the enormous risks involved. Poison vials provide women with the means to resist the forces that oppress them. Eliza's actions demonstrate that the courage to act, even when confronted with highly dangerous situations, represents a powerful form of resistance against the injustices she endures.

### **Medicinal Plants**

Medicinal plants represent women's knowledge in the field of healing, illustrating how they can utilize nature to free themselves from oppression and injustice. Medicinal plants are not only a symbol of resistance, but also an affirmation that women also have abilities to rely on their knowledge as a source of strength. In this novel, medicinal plants mean that women also have enough expertise to survive and fight against injustice through a deep understanding and knowledge of natural resources.

The moments when Nella prepares remedies, whether for healing or protection, reflect the strength women possess through their knowledge. Nella makes poisons using medicinal plants such as nux vomica and belladonna, illustrating women's courage in confronting oppression and injustice. One significant moment occurs when Nella imparts her knowledge to Eliza about the medicinal plants used in the poison and the side effects of the poison. Nella provides a thorough explanation of how nux vomica works to gradually kill its victim, revealing that:

“In the hours after ingesting nux vomica, most victims suffer a rigid spine. They may arch backward, like their body has been strung into a bow. I have never seen it myself, but I have been told it is horrifying. Indeed, the cause of a lifetime of nightmares” (Penner, 2021, Chapter 5).

This quote not only illustrates the dangers posed by the poison but also highlights Nella's expertise and knowledge in transforming medicinal plants into weapons against injustice. The use of these medicinal plants demonstrates that women are not only passive or reliant on existing structures, but are also able to survive and resist in ways that often go unnoticed by the general public.

These three symbols reflect the strength and knowledge possessed by women in *The Lost Apothecary* to combat oppression and injustice within societal structures. These symbols illustrate how women not only struggle to survive but also take the initiative to fight against injustices in pursuit of their social rights. By understanding these symbols, readers can appreciate the struggles faced by the characters in Sarah Penner's *The Lost Apothecary*.

## CONCLUSION(S)

In *The Lost Apothecary*, Sarah Penner skillfully employs symbolism to explore themes of power and oppression. Through the characters Eliza and Nella, Penner effectively depicts how women confront oppressive situations and restrictive social structures, as well as their struggle to reclaim their rights. Symbols such as the hidden apothecary, the poison vial, and medicinal plants reflect women's strength and ability to resist the injustices and oppression they face.

By referencing previous studies, we can see that *The Lost Apothecary* serves not only as a work of fiction but also as a reflection of important and relevant social issues.

Therefore, this novel is a literary piece that advocates resistance against the oppression experienced by many individuals in society.

Through this symbolic approach, Penner effectively provokes readers to think about the complexities of power and the struggles faced by the characters in confronting injustice, making *The Lost Apothecary* a work rich in meaning.

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