

## Behind the Mask: A Psychological Exploration of Emily Nelson's Sociopathic Traits in A Simple Favor Movie

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to showcase the personality disorder of a single character in “A Simple Favor” movie. Applying a qualitative method, the researchers employ a descriptive qualitative method to examine the characteristic type of the main character’s sociopathic personality disorder. The findings reveal that the main character named Emily Nelson exhibits a complicated sociopathic personality disorder defined by three interconnected dimensions: narcissistic, amoral, and aggressive characteristics traits of a sociopath. Emily's narcissism is shown by her arrogance, entitlement, and deceptive behavior. Her amoral behavior indicates a serious absence of guilt for her detrimental deeds. The latter sociopathic characteristic she displays is aggressiveness. Emily’s aggression is purely utilitarian and expressive. The study highlights the utility of psychological frameworks in analyzing fictional characters, enriching literary and film criticism by providing deeper insight into character motivation and complexity. The recommendation includes analyzing a broader range of characters across different films or literary works to identify common patterns and unique features in the depiction of sociopathy. Besides that, comparative studies would enhance understanding of how antisocial personality disorder is represented in popular culture. The study exclusively analyzes the character Emily Nelson from “A Simple Favor” movie, focusing on her sociopathic traits as depicted in a fictional narrative. This limits the generalizability of findings to real-life cases of sociopathy or antisocial personality disorder, as film characters are constructed for dramatic effect and may not fully align with clinical realities

**Keywords:** *Anti social; personality disorder; sociopathic; psychological approach; personality trait*

### Introduction

Literature, including film, has always played an essential role in human life, serving not only as a source of entertainment but also as a medium to reflect social, moral, and psychological aspects of humanity (Rainsford, 2014). By depicting intricate human experiences and personality characteristics, films serve as a literary form that not only captivates but also educates and motivates audiences (Rainsford, 2014). The psychological thriller “A Simple Favor”, directed by Paul Feig and adapted from Darcey Bell's novel, explores the multidimensional personalities of its characters, with Emily Nelson's character being notable in particular. The plot of the film revolves around the friendship that develops between the protagonist and antagonist characters, who had never anticipated themselves to become friends in the first place. The film highlights the importance of women, especially mothers, regarding their conduct in society. It is essential to prioritize understanding how the filmmaker conveys the narrative's meaning. This film serves

as a comprehensive case study for investigating the manifestation of personality disorders in fictional characters and how these representations aid people in comprehending such disorders. Additionally, a significant focus of this research is an investigation of the personality issues seen in Emily's character. This condition is termed antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), also known as sociopathy (Millon, 2010). Emily is depicted as a confident and successful woman who possesses dark characteristics, including exploitation, pathological lying, and manipulation, which are indicative of a personality disorder. The use of a psychological framework in literary works allows researchers to gain deeper insight into characters’ inner lives and mental states (Persson, 2003). Myriad publications (Goodwin et al., 2021; Hare & Neumann, 2008; Widiger & Mullins-Sweatt, 2009) highlight the use of psychological frameworks in analyzing film characters, demonstrating how these analyses can reveal deeper meanings and address contemporary issues.

Building on existing literature, this

research applies Sociopathy, a type of antisocial personality disorder, is defined by a disrespect for society standards, manipulative behavior, absence of guilt, and the exploitation of others for personal benefit (Millon, 2010). to showcase the characteristics shown of Emily Nelson as a sociopath. Similarly, Frederick (2006) claims that antisocial personality disorder is a mental illness characterized by impulsivity, irresponsibility, lack of concern, deviance, and unruliness. This individual can be classified as having a personality disorder that exhibits distinct characteristics from other personality disorders. Sociopaths, characterized by their pervasive disregard for societal norms and others' welfare, present a complex portrait in the realm of psychological studies and societal discourse. There are five characteristics (sub-types) of sociopaths defined by (Millon, 2010). they are; narcissistic, amoral, alienated, aggressive and dissocial. The American Psychiatric Association (2013), defines ASPD as enduring behavioral patterns that violate prevalent moral and ethical standards, frequently causing harm to others (Tara, 2019).

Several studies offer important findings that inform and distinguish this research, for instance a study by Tara (2019) examined on the analysis of women's languages used by Stephanie and Emily in "A Simple Favor Film ". In this study, Tara examined linguistic features and functions used by Stephanie and Emily, highlighting how their language reflects underlying traits. This study's linguistic analysis provides a complementary perspective to this research, which delves deeper into the psychological motivations behind Emily's behavior and links it to the established characteristics of sociopathy.

Another compelling study also conducted by Veronika et al., (2017) who examined antisocial personality disorder and its variants as depicted by the protagonist, Emma, in the film *The Bad Seed*. They stated that the protagonist exhibits antisocial personality disorder. The protagonist in *The Bad Seed* exhibits five criteria for antisocial personality disorder: deceitfulness, manipulateness, aggression and irritability, impulsivity, and a deficiency in empathy and regret. The variety of antisocial personality disorder is characterized by a pure form, wherein there exists a drive for dominance. Additionally, jealousy is another aspect exhibited by the main character. It harbors jealousy towards people who have embraced a prosperous existence, motivated by a covetous want for retribution to reclaim what it perceives as its own. Among the five features of antisocial personality disorder exhibited by

Emma, the most prevalent traits identified were a deficiency in empathy and an absence of guilt.

Suhendar, (2018) examined the criteria, causes, influences, characteristics, and moral messages associated with Kevin in their analysis of antisocial personality disorder in the film "We Need to Talk About Kevin." The criteria for Kevin's antisocial personality disorder are deceitfulness, impatience, aggressiveness, reckless disregard for the safety of himself or others, and a lack of remorse. The reasons of Kevin's antisocial personality disorder are attributed to hereditary factors, resulting in reduced responsiveness, and environmental influences stemming from familial neglect. Kevin's behavior poses a threat by influencing others. The moral imperative associated with antisocial personality disorder is that individuals should refrain from causing harm and engage in effective communication with the affected person. Consequently, Kevin exhibits traits of hostility, a propensity for deceit, and the capacity to harm others without feeling any guilt.

This research is peculiar because it maps Emily Nelson's complicated features using recognized sociopathy and antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) frameworks in a targeted, thorough psychological investigation of her character in *A Simple Favor*. This has not been done in previous studies. Although previous studies have looked at antisocial characteristics in movie characters or linguistic features of Emily and Stephanie (e.g., Tara, 2019), none have methodically evaluated and characterized Emily Nelson's personality using accepted psychological theories such as Millon's typology. By linking particular film evidence with psychological constructs, this study distinctively highlights Emily's complex sociopathy—her combination of charm, deceit, manipulation, and amorality—in contrast to previous research on other films (such as "*The Bad Seed*" conducted by Veronika et al., (2017) or "*We Need to Talk About Kevin*" conducted by Suhendar, (2018) which typically list antisocial criteria or discuss causes and moral implications. By bringing this gap, the research distinguishes itself from earlier works that either concentrated on other characters, lacked theoretical rigor, or did not offer such a thorough psychological character study of Emily Nelson herself. It also advances our understanding of how sociopathic traits are constructed in fiction and highlights the importance of incorporating psychological theory into film analysis. This research bridges this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of Emily Nelson's sociopathic traits in "*A Simple Favor* movie, specifically examining how her complex

personality, influenced by a blend of manipulation, deceit, and charm, aligns with established criteria for sociopathy. Therefore, our current research proposes the following research question; What traits of Emily Nelson as a sociopath are depicted in the movie "A Simple Favor"?

## **Method**

The research method in our study is descriptive. The data acquired are in the form of words or images rather than numbers (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Qualitative research is the process of gathering and analyzing nonnumerical data, such as language. Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N. (2018) asserts that qualitative data can be analyzed using grounded theory or thematic analysis and captured using diary accounts or in-depth interviews. Taylor, S.J., et al., (2016) emphasize that qualitative research is concerned with the subjective significance of an experience to an individual and can be employed to develop hypotheses and theory from the data. Besides that, the study is performed through library research, analyzing pertinent psychological ideas by and previous investigations on personality disorders, in conjunction with a detailed examination of the film's content. The guidelines for sociopathy and antisocial personality disorder, as proposed by (Millon, 2010) and supported by Frederick & Maniaci, (2005) establish the theoretical basis for analyzing Emily Nelson's behavior and interactions in the film.

The study adopts a qualitative approach to analyze Emily Nelson's sociopathic traits, as this method allows for in-depth exploration of complex, context-dependent behaviors. Unlike quantitative methods, which prioritize numerical data, qualitative analysis is better suited for interpreting dialogues, motivations, and interpersonal dynamics in a narrative. This aligns with the study's goal of uncovering how Emily's sociopathic traits manifest in her interactions, rather than quantifying their frequency or severity.

In the analysis of the film "A Simple Favor," two data sources are utilized: the movie clip and the subtitle file. The main source of the data is the film's video. The movie video file is sourced from [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). The movie alone becomes subject to the analysis where the researchers follow the actions of the main character and find her sociopathic traits characterized in the story line. While the secondary data source is the subtitle file downloaded from [www.subscene.com](http://www.subscene.com). The data collection was conducted by observing, note-taking, and identifying the data. The data were further evaluated through description, interpretation, and conclusion formulation.

The researchers performed a

comprehensive and methodical analysis of the film A Simple Favor by carefully watching the movie and scrutinizing its script in detail. This unique methodology guaranteed a precise comprehension of the characterizations and narrative context. Subsequently, the researchers identified the sociopathic characteristics demonstrated by Emily Nelson by employing pertinent psychological theories, substantiating their findings with direct evidence from particular dialogues and scenes in the film.

The data analysis started with the selection of the movie as the main subject. The researchers subsequently reviewed the film repeatedly and analyzed the screenplay to thoroughly comprehend the subtleties of Emily's character and her behavioral manifestations. Upon acquiring this comprehensive understanding, the researchers gathered and examined literature and references relevant to sociopathy and antisocial personality disorder to substantiate their analysis.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This study's results indicate the presence of antisocial personality disorder in the main character of A Simple Favor. The following discussion will elucidate the traits of the sociopathic type exhibited by Emily Nelson. Emily's characteristics encompass four types: narcissistic, entitled, amoral, and aggressive.

### ***The characteristics type shown by Emily Nelson as a sociopath***

#### **Narcissistic**

The initial types of sociopaths that Emily has is narcissistic. This is demonstrated by Emily's manipulative behavior and her complete lack of regret for her actions. Additionally, there is no barrier that will prevent them from accomplishing their objective. In this instance, the researchers determined that Emily is a narcissist, as evidenced by the following:

#### ***Manipulative***

Initially, the researchers asserted that Emily was manipulative, as evidenced by her manipulation of her mortality in the river, which was motivated by her desire to improve her life. As evidenced by the dialogue below,

*"I did this for Nicky. I hated that job: I never got to see him. And you clearly only had one book in you. We couldn't exactly live off the faculty buffet the rest of our lives. I was going to buy us our freedom and it would have worked perfectly ... if you just hadn't shacked up with Miss Zucchini fucking Cookie." (min 1:22:24)*

Thus, the researchers come to the opinion that this character is manipulative since she twisted her death in the river in order to bring about a positive shift in her life. Similar to most individuals

with antisocial personality disorder, they exhibit a high degree of sophistication in their deceit for personal gain, employing diverse strategies to attain their desired objectives (Millon, 2004). Besides that, it corresponds with Frederick's (2006) assertion that manipulative or deceitfulness is a criterion of antisocial personality disorders.

Another evidence that Emily is narcissistic is her gaslighting of Stephanie regarding her conviction that she can effortlessly acquire any male she desires. It has been demonstrated in this conversation:

*"Why are you such a masochist? You could have a man in your bed any time you want."* (min 1:05:43)

Another dialogue that shows Emily is manipulative is when she left her twin on the bus. She said they would return together but did not keep her promise to Faith, her twin sister. This can be proven in the dialogue below:

*"We said goodbye with tattoos", and parted ways in Corpus Christi. She was going to head to Mexico. I was going to drift north. We had a time and place to meet in six months, when the smoke cleared. I bought a one-way ticket to New York City and I never looked back."* (min 1:30:14)

Emily's most recent exchange demonstrates her manipulative nature when she criticizes Stephanie for being deceived and tricked by her and Sean, her husband's, plans for her fabricated death. As illustrated in the dialogue below:

*"Sorry, Steph. I know you thought it was real. But let's look on the bright side. Your web site went viral thanks to me. Now you can sell those ad banners."* (min 1:36:55)

An individual with antisocial personality disorder manipulates to assault or sway the emotions and mindset of her adversary, enabling her to dominate the person and achieve her objectives (Frederick & Maniaci, 2005). Thus, she will employ any means that creates confused and weakness in the victim. Our results are also in line with the research conducted by Veronika et al. (2017), which suggests that the protagonist, Emma, manipulates her father by inducing feelings of guilt and prompting him to query whether he is correct and his daughter is mistaken, or the situation is reversed.

If Tara (2019) studied linguistic traits and communicative functions to reveal character dynamics, this study examines Emily's psychological motivations for language and action. As Tara noted, Emily's strong and forceful speech may indicate narcissism and manipulation. The new study links language use with psychological frameworks to extend Tara's findings and better comprehend Emily's sociopathic nature.

### ***Amoral***

An immoral individual is a type of psychopath that lacks morality and possesses no sense of regret (Millon et al., 2016). Based on the movie, Emily distinctly demonstrates this trait of amorality. She never experiences guilt for her actions that adversely affect others. To further on the explanation of the amoral characteristic type, below is the evidence.

### ***Lacking sense of guilty***

The first instance of Emily's lack of guilty occurred during her teenage years. Emily perpetrated an offense against her parents by attempting to eliminate her residence, endangering the lives of her family members. This can be demonstrated in the subsequent dialogue:

*Stephanie: "Bring it on. But first tell me why you killed your father and sister"*

*"I have a gas can in hand as they watch the bedroom wing of the mansion burns from the front lawn."* (min 1:29:52)

The subsequent discussion occurs when Emily commits murder of her twin sister, Faith, in the river. Emily was entirely indifferent to the fact that Faith was her sibling. He murdered Faith without feeling any guilty. As seen in the following dialogue:

*"I know. I'm sorry. It's just things have changed." She shoves Faith under the water. Faith goes limp and floats".* (min 1:34:40)

### ***Having goal attainment satisfaction***

Emily is prominently gloating about her inappropriate conduct. She informs Sean that she stole his mother's ring, a family heirloom. She undertook this exclusively for her personal gratification. This can be demonstrated in the subsequent dialogue.

*"Guess what I found? Not joking, my darling, I took it and I have no intention of giving it back. If you tell your mother that I found it, I'll tell her I stole it. What do you think will be worse for her? Thinking she lost her ring or knowing that her son married a thief?"* (min 57:00)

From the quotation above, we can see Emily's conduct—stealing Sean's mother's ring and then openly gloating about it—demonstrates a clear pursuit of a personal goal: to obtain the ring and derive pleasure from both the act itself and the subsequent emotional impact on Sean. Her dialogue, *"Guess what I found? Not joking, my darling, I took it and I have no intention of giving it back. If you tell your mother that I found it, I'll tell her I stole it. What do you think will be worse for her? Thinking she lost her ring or knowing that her son married a thief?"* reveals not only the accomplishment of her goal (acquiring the ring) but also her enjoyment in exerting psychological power over Sean. In psychological terms, goal attainment

refers to the successful achievement of a desired outcome or objective, which often results in satisfaction or gratification for the individual (Frederick & Michael Maniacci, 2005). Research shows that when individuals achieve goals—especially those they deem important or personally meaningful—they experience heightened satisfaction and positive emotions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Throughout the narrative, Emily used intimidation and psychological tactics to control others in her surroundings. She not only devises evil plots but also openly discloses in her deeds, as seen by her mocking confession to Sean regarding the theft of his mother's ring, and her willingness to exploit secrets for manipulative. This conduct exemplifies a lack in empathy and guilt, characteristic of sociopathy, and particularly emphasizes her aggressive inclinations—she not only manipulates for personal advantage but also derives pleasure from the pain and weakness she causes on others.

Another evidence that shows that Emily has no guilt is described in a dialogue with Sean in the restaurant. They talk about their secret to Sean all this time and ask him to work together to cover up the secret about the insurance. This can be proven in the following dialogue:

*"Except you can't keep a secret. Even in the dark, you almost ruined everything. I was just gonna lay low until the insurance money came through. Anyway, the clock is ticking. Nancy Drew knows too much and if she fucks up that insurance money, then I'm taking you down with me."* (min 1:23:50)

Emily views the insurance money as a highly desirable objective, and her behavior reflects the idea of successful agency: she thinks she can overcome challenges and influence people to achieve her goals. Her aggressive control over the issue and lack of regret clearly demonstrate that she finds fulfillment not only in earning money but also in beating others and establishing her power.

The aforementioned excerpt illustrates Emily's deficiency in empathy and her tendency to use control through her power. Individuals diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder have no remorse for the repercussions of their actions, or they may exhibit complete apathy towards their conduct (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Our finding corroborates the findings of Veronika et al. (2017), who assert that individuals may display indifference towards having harmed or stolen from others, and those with antisocial personality disorder often connect responsibility to the victim for being foolish, powerless, or deserving of their plight.

### **Aggressive**

Aggressive is the type of sociopath that has a deep fulfillment of hurting or frightening others. This gives them power and a strong sense of importance, dominance, and control. The researchers found that Emily is a typical of an aggressive one, this can be proven from the following situations

### ***Having deep fulfilment of hurting or frightening others***

This characteristic of sociopathy is shown in the conversation between Emily and Stephanie at their children's school playground, where Emily warns and criticizes Stephanie for capturing her photograph. At that point, Emily's words appear severe and threatening to Stephanie. This can be demonstrated in the subsequent dialogue.

*"Erase it now or I'll slap an injunction on the whole fucking yearbook"* (min 16:06)

From the above excerpt, Emily illustrates the aggressive subtype of psychopathic by her persistent use of intimidation, manipulation, and emotional damage to establish dominance and satisfy her ambitions. Individuals that have antisocial personality disorder often exhibit impatience and hostility, frequently engaging in physical confrontations or committing acts of physical, verbal, or mental violence (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Suhendar's (2018) analysis of Kevin in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* discovered symptoms of antisocial personality disorder, including deceitfulness, violence, recklessness, and a lack of remorse, as well as environmental and inherited factors. The current study equally recognizes Emily's aggressive and amoral characteristics, notably her readiness to carry out harm on even her close relatives (e.g., the murder of her twin sister) without regret. Suhendar's research examined the cause and ethical effects of antisocial personality disorder, but this study specifically delineates the psychological typology of sociopathy, classifying Emily's behaviors into narcissistic and amoral subtypes. This distinction enhances the comprehension of the distinctive expressions of various sociopathic tendencies in characters, with Emily's charm and manipulation juxtaposed against Kevin's more obvious hatred and irresponsibility. The other type of sociopath is found in the dialogue when Emily mocks and speaks rudely to Stephanie. This can be proven in the dialogue below:

*"Necessary prologue. Got it. Keep going, Dark Side. Swear on your father's grave. Ha! You're a brother fucker!"* (min 20:51)

The excerpt where Emily mocks Stephanie with the harsh and provocative statement, *"Necessary prologue."* Understood. *Persevere, Dark Side. Vow upon your father's grave. Ha!*

"You're a brother fucker!" indicates many sociopathic characteristics, particularly the aggressive and hostile behaviors frequently exhibited by sociopaths. This conversation demonstrates Emily's deep fulfillment in hurting or frightening others through verbal abuse and psychological intimidation. Sociopaths regularly employ such strategies to assert authority, manipulate emotions, and unsettle their targets, finding satisfaction in the suffering they cause.

This situation underpinned by a claim from Holmes et al., (2001) who argues that aggressive sociopaths are defined by their deep satisfaction in causing pain or fear onto others, which grants them a sense of dominance, significance, and control.

## Conclusion

Emily Nelson, the main character in Paul Feig's *A Simple Favor*, demonstrates a complicated sociopathic personality disorder defined by three interconnected dimensions: narcissistic, amoral, and aggressive characteristics. Emily's narcissism is manifested by her arrogance, entitlement, and

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