

A Man Called Ove Study Guide

A Man Called Ove by Fredrik Backman

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Plot Summary

The novel begins with a description of 59-year-old Ove struggling to communicate with a young man who is trying to sell him a computer. The conversation ends in frustration for Ove, who storms out of the store.

The narrative then begins a book-long sequence of explanations as to how and why Ove got to the point of needing and wanting to buy a computer. Chapters written in present tense describe his experiences in the more recent past: his frequent attempts to kill himself in the aftermath of his wife's death; how those attempts are continually foiled, albeit accidentally, by the sudden appearances in his life of people (and animals) who need his help; and by the development of unexpected connections and friendships with those people (and animals). Central to the narrative of this recent past is Ove's discovery that one-time friends up the road, Rune and Anita, are facing an extremely painful situation: Rune's Alzheimer's is getting the better of him, and Anita is struggling to take care of him. Plans are being made, without permission from either of them, to move Rune into a care facility. Over the course of the narrative, Ove becomes increasingly angry about this situation, eventually drawing on the support of a number of unexpected allies: his pregnant neighbor Parvaneh and her husband Patrick; the yuppie across the street (Anders); a pushy journalist (Lena); and three young men, each struggling to define their identities ... the diffident Adrian, the flamboyantly gay Mirsad, and the overweight Jimmy.

Intermittently dispersed throughout the novel's present tense chapters are chapters written in past tense that recount Ove's history: how his mother died when he was six; how he was raised by a strict but fair father, whose inspirational integrity guided Ove throughout his entire life; how circumstances led him to meet his beloved Sonja; how his life was changed by marrying her; and how other circumstances challenged and changed their marriage irrevocably. These circumstances include an accident that robbed Sonja of the use of her legs, and robbed both her and Ove of the child that they had both longed for.

All the while, these intertwined narrations draw vivid, and sometimes unexpected, connections between Ove's past and his present: while the past makes it clear, for example, that the friendship between Ove and Rune was strained for a long time, the present makes it very clear how Ove becomes willing to help and support his friend in spite of their decades-long estrangement. Narration also reveals how Jimmy's relationship with Ove and Sonja goes back into his childhood, and into challenging circumstances that are both surprising and moving, evocative of just how compassionate a human being the ostensibly curmudgeonly Ove actually is.

Eventually, and with the help of Ove and several unexpected allies, Rune and Anita withstand the threat to their marriage. Meanwhile, and as a result of the bonds formed during the battle, Ove's relationships with his friends and neighbors deepen and help him come back to life again ... that is, until an encounter with some young, violent robbers, puts Ove in the hospital. He almost dies, but both medical treatment and the

care / support of his friends enable him to live a few more years until he finally dies, seemingly in his sleep, leaving behind a legacy of compassion.



Chapters 1 - 4

Summary

“A Man Called Ove Buys A Computer That Is Not A Computer” Present tense narration. 59-year-old Ove tries to buy a computer, but struggles to communicate with the young, male, very skinny sales assistant. The frustrated assistant calls over another, younger colleague to try to help Ove out, and then says he’s going for lunch. Ove becomes fed up and leaves.

“(Three Weeks Earlier) A Man Called Ove Makes His Neighborhood Inspection” Past tense narration. Ove conducts his standard inspection of the neighborhood, making sure that everything is as it should be and confronting a mangy, indifferent cat along the way. He has a regular, specific routine and attitude: Ove, narration comments, “is the sort of man who checks the status of all things by giving them a good kick.”

Narration shifts to present tense as, back at home, Ove has his coffee the same way he and his wife always did; cancels his telephone line and newspaper subscription; and looks out his front window at his various neighbors, judging them for their youth and superficiality. He also contemplates putting a new hook in his ceiling, doing the job so well that the hook will remain in place long after the house is demolished and wondering how the real estate agents soon be coming to the house will react to that hook. Narration reveals that the day before, Ove lost his job, having been told by his superiors that time off would be good for him. Ove reflects on how little they know about him, and how careless and/or superficial they all are. His contemplations are interrupted by the sound of a neighbor’s car scraping against the exterior walls of his house.

“A Man Called Ove Reverses With A Trailer” Present tense. Ove confronts his new neighbors, people that narration refers to as the foreign-looking Pregnant One and the blond Lanky One. Ove takes control of their car and, in spite of it being a hybrid with a reversing camera and lots of beeping devices, he easily manages to get the car and trailer onto the street. After lecturing them on the parking rules put forward by The Residents’ Association, he goes back into his house and finds himself lost in a daydream that seems to last most of the day and is only broken by the arrival of the two young children of The Lanky One and The Pregnant One, who bring him a plastic pot of food and tell him their mother thought he looked hungry. After they leave, Ove fetches his box of “useful stuff” in preparation for installing the hook.

“A Man Called Ove Does Not Pay A Three-Crown Surcharge” Present Tense. The next morning, Ove goes through the house noting the little things about his wife that irritate him: the number of her coats, her habit of turning up the radiators, her silence. He then makes a trip (in his beloved Saab) to the local shopping center, a trip that involves an extended confrontation with a man driving a Mercedes that ends with Ove deliberately denying the car’s driver a parking spot in a shopping mall parking lot. Ove goes into the mall, where he gets into an argument with a florist about a coupon offer. Eventually, Ove



is forced into purchasing two plants according to the rules of the coupon, refusing to pay a surcharge on an alternative arrangement. He leaves, finds his wife, and prepares to put the new plants into the ground spite of the impending cold weather. The chapter ends with him caressing a large boulder “from side to side, as if touching her cheek.” Narration then reveals that it’s been six months since his wife died.

Analysis

There are several points to note about this introductory section. These include the sketching in of subtle hints about the revelation that comes at the end of Chapter 4, and the appearances of several elements that foreshadow the important roles they play in the narrative later on (i.e. the specific make of Ove’s car, the cat, the characters of the Lanky One and the Pregnant One). Then there is the introduction of several plot elements (i.e. the hook in the ceiling, the trailer) which, because of the amount of attention given to them, suggest they will be important later even though they don’t seem particularly important at this stage. Again, clear examples of foreshadowing.

Another important element is the indication of time frame – specifically, the shift in apparent timelines between the first and second chapter. This is noteworthy because much later in the narrative (more than thirty chapters down the road), events take place that echo those in the first chapter, and give an explanation as to why those seemingly unlikely events took place at all. Meanwhile, the time shift apparent at the beginning of the second chapter suggests that there will be two timelines to keep track of in this story: the present and the relatively recent past. The next section introduces a third, as flashbacks take the narrative even further into the past and into Ove’s history, explaining how he became the vividly cranky character he is portrayed as in these early chapters.

That character, the clear portrait of ornery opinionated-ness that is drawn here, is this section’s second-most noteworthy element. It marks a very clear beginning to a journey of transformation that both defines and is defined by the character over the course of the narrative, a journey that to some readers might not be too surprising, given the sudden sense of loneliness that shows up at the end of Chapter Four. Both the revelation that Ove’s wife is dead and his vulnerability in the face of his grief and loss create the very clear sense, as discussed in “Characters”, that all of Ove’s anger and frustration, while grounded in other aspects of his personality, are in many ways a defense mechanism to protect his ultimate sensitivity.

The most noteworthy element in this section is the revelation at the end of Chapter 4. Aside from being an example of very effective writing (i.e. changing the reader’s understanding of what’s going on with a character and a story by adding a key detail at a key point in the narrative), it also introduces the book’s central theme, by suggesting that Ove is trying to find a way to live in the aftermath of a beloved’s death. His struggle with both his inability and eventual ability to do just that forms both the thematic and narrative foundations of the story.



Discussion Question 1

What are some of the details throughout the first three chapters of this section that suggest / foreshadow the revelation at the end of Chapter 4 (i.e. that Ove's wife is dead)?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think narration refers to the people who live next door as The Pregnant One and The Lanky One instead of by their names? How might this stylistic choice relate to the character of Ove?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the novel's thematic interest in the power of compassion manifest in this section?

Vocabulary

skeptical, dubious, articulate (v.), impaired, pedagogical, sufficient, insinuate, exceeding, reciprocate, percolator, disreputable, nonchalant, potential, scrutinize, lollop, prohibit, wonky, imbecile, initiative, anarchy, unanimous, ineffectual, vehement, veranda, imperious, portfolio, pulmonary, emphysema, inebriated, functionality, gesticulate, lanky, moronic, selective, obesity, apologetic, calcium, deficiency, harangue, indescribable, harmonious, ponderous, saunter, provocation, disarming, reciprocate, cretin, perplexity, nitroglycerine, superfluous, burgeon, lunacy, entail, obituary, repentant



Chapters 5 - 7

Summary

“A Man Called Ove” Past tense. Narration describes how people found the relationship between Ove and his wife to be odd, because they were so different. Narration then goes further into the past and describes Ove’s brief relationship with his mother (who died when Ove was six) and his longer relationship with his father. A quiet, hard-working, physically slight but extremely strong man, Ove’s father took good care of his son; had a knack for engines and repair work, being employed at a railway repair yard; and taught Ove about integrity, honesty, and the importance of doing the right thing. After his father suddenly died, Ove worked at the same railway yard for five years. “Then one morning,” narration says, “he boarded a train and saw her for the first time. That was the first time he laughed since his father’s death. And life was never again the same.”

“A Man Called Ove and a Bicycle that Should Have Been Left where Bicycles are Left” Present tense. Narration describes Ove’s careful and organized preparations to die, suggesting that he is preparing to commit suicide. While sitting in his beloved Saab one last time, he sees an overweight young neighbor whom his wife had helped after his mother died; gets into a confrontation with a couple of thin young men about a bicycle parked in the wrong place; and gets into a confrontation with the young wife (“The Blonde Weed”) of the neighbor across the street. He tells her to stop throwing stones at the mangy cat from Chapter 1 even though, she says, it attacked her precious little dog. The Blonde Weed angrily goes away, and Ove goes back into his house, telling the cat, bleeding after being hit by some of the stones, to go away. Eventually the cat does, and Ove goes in the house, preparing to die.

“A Man Called Ove Drills a Hole for a Hook” Present tense. Narration describes the detailed preparations Ove makes for his suicide. His drilling of a hole for the hook is interrupted by the arrival of neighbors: first the Pregnant One and the Lanky One (who introduce themselves as Parvaneh and Patrick), and later Anita (the wife of Rune, the man whom Ove believes got him ousted as president of the Residents’ Association). Parvaneh and Patrick have come by to thank Ove for his help with their car. Meanwhile, Anita has come by to ask Ove for help with her radiators, referencing the fact that Rune has become ill with Alzheimer’s Disease. When Patrick asks about some marks on Ove’s floor and Anita’s answer references Sonja, Ove’s wife, Ove erupts in anger, and the neighbors leave. Ove then goes into his house, sits in a long silence as he contemplates a picture of him and Sonja during a holiday in Spain ... and then fetches a rope, ties it into a noose, throws it over the newly installed hook, gets a chair, steps onto it, and puts his head in the noose, feeling it “closing around his throat like the jaws of a large wild animal.”



Analysis

This section contains the first full example of how the narrative transitions back and forth between past and present, using shifts between past and present tense verbs to define those transitions. The past is the third layer of time in which events in the narrative play out: the first is essentially a framing device (i.e. the immediate present as defined in the first chapter and in Chapter 38 and beyond); the second is what might be described as the recent past (much of the main body of the narrative up to Chapter 38); the third is various times in the more distant past. This period covers everything from the time referred to in the first chapter in this section (i.e. Ove's childhood) up to the events surrounding Sonja's death six months prior to events in the first timeline.

It's important to note the writing techniques at work here: how the writing simultaneously gives new information about character and situation (i.e. the revelation about Ove's first encounter with a woman the reader can reasonably assume is Sonja) and raises questions in the reader's mind (i.e. how did Ove's life change after that first meeting) that draws the reader further into the story, a technique that might be defined as a kind of foreshadowing. Other foreshadowings in this section include the confrontation with the young men over the bicycle; the confrontation with the Blonde Weed; the reference to the young overweight neighbor; and the references to Alzheimer's Disease, all of which foreshadow important plot elements. Perhaps the most significant pieces of foreshadowing, though, are the reference to Spain and to the marks on the floor. Both are connected to the same painful incident / set of circumstances in Ove's past that ultimately defined much of his life, the nature of which is revealed later in the book.

Meanwhile, another important element in this section is the description of how Ove's life, attitudes, and values were shaped by his father. Here the narrative introduces several thematically important elements: living in the aftermath of death, the value of integrity (a lesson that proves a defining element in Ove's character and choices for his entire life); and the importance of not giving up, an aspect of both plot and theme that is lightly touched on here but which plays a more significant role later. Meanwhile, plot and theme entwine in the narration / exploration of Ove's efforts at killing himself: while answering the question posed in the first section about the ceiling hook (i.e. why it was emphasized so much in those early chapters). Events here foreshadow Ove's further attempts at killing himself while at the same time suggesting that at this stage in his grieving process, Ove is finding it difficult to keep living: in other (thematically defined) words, he is finding it impossible to live in the aftermath of death.

Discussion Question 1

What is your experience of a first meeting that led to major life changes? How did that first meeting feel?



Discussion Question 2

In what ways does the novel's thematic interest in the power of compassion manifest in this section?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the novel's thematic interest in the power of compassion manifest in this section?

Vocabulary

refurbish, discordant, exert, ceremonious, pigmentation, excessive, defiance, malicious, fathom (v.), pubescent, stripling, pedantic, rebellious, emaciated, exertion, enunciate, gesticulate, negligible, quandary, reluctant, scathing, cylindrical, reprimand, composure



Chapters 8 - 11

Summary

“A Man who was Ove and a Pair of His Father’s Old Footprints” Past tense. Narration describes how Sonja believed in destiny while the more pragmatic Ove didn’t; and how Ove’s regular, quiet, respected work and routine at the railway repair plant were disrupted by Tom, a malicious colleague of his father’s, who said that Ove had stolen some money. Ove, acting out of the integrity taught to him by his father, refused to say that he (Ove) knew that Tom had taken the money: he and his father were not men who tell tales. At first Ove’s refusal to defend himself led him to being fired, but on his last day, he was called into the director’s office and told that the director (who knew Ove’s father) knows that Tom was guilty and that he respects Ove for not speaking up against a colleague. The usually silent Ove surprises both himself and the director by saying that “men are what they are because of what they do. Not what they say.” This leads the director to offer Ove a job as night porter on one of the trains, narration revealing that one morning after finishing a shift, he met Sonja.

“A Man Called Ove Bleeds a Radiator” Past tense narration describes the history of the fractious relationship between Ove and Rune, describing how they and their wives moved into the neighborhood at around the same time; how once they were allies on the Residents’ Association but, over a period of thirty years or so, became increasingly estranged; and how their arguments finally ended with Rune’s falling ill. Narration then returns to the present (and present tense narration) as it describes how the rope from which Ove made his noose tore apart, leaving Ove sprawled all over the floor. He tidies up, puts away his tools, and then goes over to help Anita with her radiators, where he sees Rune in his wheelchair staring vacantly out into space.

“A Man who was Ove and a House that Ove Built” Past tense. Narration describes how the 18-year-old Ove refused to move out of the house that his father had left him in spite of the insistence of white-shirted local authorities that he sell; how he took a second job on a construction site to learn how to renovate / build houses; and how he, with the help of some of his workmates, renovated the house. Narration also describes how he became friends with his elderly neighbors; how he was sold house insurance by a “jovial” salesman; and how, one night, he helped the elderly neighbors survive a house fire, knowing that his own home was in danger but choosing to do what his father would do. Both houses burn down, and Ove was shocked and angry when he’s told (by a pair of visitors in white shirts) that there was, in fact, no insurance on his house: the salesman was a fraud.

“A Man Called Ove and a Lanky One who can’t Open a Window Without Falling Off a Ladder” Present tense. Narration describes how, on a morning after a heavy snowfall, Ove does his inspection and then goes out to his garage to fetch a shovel. His way is blocked by the cat, which Ove eventually chases away. After he cleans his sidewalk, he has an angrily shouted encounter with a Man in a White Shirt driving through the no-car



zone, following the car to Anita's where she tells him the car was from the local council and that they are planning to take Rune away from her. Ove leaves without commenting, passing the Blonde Weed and her yapping dog on his way, noting how strangely the Weed is smiling and realizing that he is looking to make sure the cat is okay. Without finding the cat, Ove goes out into his garage, intending to die by poisoning himself with carbon monoxide from his car. He completes his arrangements and is just settling into his car to die when he is roused by a pounding on his garage door: Parvaneh has come to get him to drive her to the hospital so she can be with Patrick, who has fallen off a ladder. At first Ove refuses, but then realizes he has no choice. As Parvaneh goes to get her children, Ove gets the car out of his garage.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section has to do with the comments about destiny at the beginning of Chapter 8. Not only is there a clear sense of tie-in with the events described at the end of that chapter but there is also a hindsight-based sense that destiny might, or might not, play a role in several the connection between events / characters referred to in both past and present narration.

Another key point is Ove's comment to the director that "men are what they are because of what they do. Not what they say." This is not only a key component of Ove's character in general: it's also an important clue to how the narrator reveals the deeper truths about Ove and what drives him. Throughout the narrative, Ove's actions tend to belie his words: he acts with more compassion than he speaks, revealing the kind of man he truly is (i.e. deeply compassionate and sensitive) by what he does rather than by his generally opinionated, sharp, judgmental words. This, in turn, is an example of how the novel develops its theme related to the value of integrity – as defined, that is, by compassion, an essential element of Ove's character that he would never acknowledge but which is again evident in his efforts to rescue the elderly couple from the house fire.

Other important points in this section include the interplay between past and present (exploration of / commentary on the former illuminating the latter); Ove's second attempt at killing himself (a manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in the question of how to live in the aftermath of death); the references to men in white shirts (who, here and throughout the novel, represent the kind of cold, non-compassionate attitudes against which Ove continually struggles); and several instances of foreshadowing. These include Ove's encounter with Tom, the first appearance of the Man in the White Shirt who visits Anita and Rune, and the narrative's second reference to how Ove met Sonja, all of which foreshadow later important events in the story.

Finally, "bleeding" a radiator refers to the practice of opening a valve in the radiator to release trapped air. That release in turn makes room for hot water from a boiler (usually in the basement) to come up into the radiator, heating it up and therefore heating the room / house.



Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the metaphoric meaning of Chapter 8's title, "A Man who was Ove and a Pair of His Father's Old Footprints"?

Discussion Question 2

How do the events described at the end of Chapter 8 (Ove meeting Sonja) relate to the comments about destiny at the beginning of the section?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the theme of "not giving up" manifest in this section?

Vocabulary

conscientious, contemptuous, amicable, cursory, formality, kinetic, treacherous, mediocrity, profuse, spanner, decrepit, remnant, extinguished, vicinity, parameters, compensate, omission, surreptitious, jovial, consternation, veritable, catastrophe, credentials, reiterate, audacity, devoid, gesticulation, inane, frenetic, clarify, inexplicable



Chapters 12 - 14

Summary

“A Man who was Ove and One Day He Had Enough” After a few paragraphs of past-tense reflection that refers to how Sonja said she knew there was a secret “dancing” in Ove, narration comments on how most people believed Ove was simply a “grumpy old sod”, but that they didn’t really know the story of how he became what he was.

Narration then shifts into the past, describing how Ove first knew real hate (of the white-shirted men who came to tell him he had no choice but to sell his land to the council for development); how he found a new place to live, quit his construction job, and continued working on the trains; how he again encountered Tom, enduring more taunting about his father; and how, when he discovered Tom had stolen his father’s watch, got it back by accusing Tom in front of witnesses, hitting him, and retrieving the watch. Narration then described how Ove tried to join the military, but was turned down because of a heart defect; how he fell into a deep depression that was only slightly eased by a hobby of dismantling and repairing cars; and how his new, quiet life was disrupted when he met Sonja.

“A Man Called Ove and a Clown Called Beppo” Present tense. Ove and Parvaneh hurry into the hospital, Parvaneh leaving her children (seven and three years old) with a deeply reluctant Ove while she goes to check on Patrick. Ove’s unsuccessful attempt at reading the three year old a story is interrupted by the arrival of Beppo the Clown – or rather, the three year old’s desperation to see Beppo the Clown. A short time later, Parvaneh returns to find her children and Ove guarded by security: apparently Ove hit Beppo after a failed magic trick. Ove protests his innocence. Later, back at Ove’s garage, Parvaneh notices the paraphernalia Ove had been using to suffocate himself but says nothing as she asks him for some help around the house. Ove gruffly agrees, narration commenting that the next day is just as good a day for suicide.

“A Man Who Was Ove and a Woman On A Train” Past tense. Narration describes Ove’s spontaneous decision to sit next to a beautiful girl on a train (Sonja), who talked so happily about books that “Ove realized that he wanted to hear her talking about the things she loved for the rest of his life.” Narration then describes the complicated, determined way in which he went about seeing her; and how she, in her own determined way, insisted that he take her for dinner. While they’re out, narration reveals, Ove explained why he went through the lengths he did to be with Sonja (“I just wanted to know what it felt like to be someone you look at”), and revealed that he wanted to design and build houses. Narration describes how Sonja encouraged him and helped him find a two-year training program that he completed in a few months. Narration then describes how he quickly got a job; how he stayed there “for more than a third of a century”; how they lived the kind of life together that they wanted; and how that life ended with Sonja’s death.



Analysis

The most noteworthy element in this section is the juxtaposition between Ove's joy at being with Sonja with his latest attempt at killing himself. Both are entwined aspects of the novel's thematic exploration of how to live in the aftermath of death: the portrait of Ove's joy (as well as the manifestation of a secondary theme – the importance of not giving up) offers insight into what he feels he can no longer live without. A similarly significant juxtaposition is the one provided by the placement of Ove's second encounter with Tom in relationship to the story of his relationship with Sonja: the former a vivid example of how Ove's external / outward character became hard and judgmental, the latter an equally vivid example of the Ove's internal / inward vulnerability and sensitivity that outer shell came into being to protect.

Other important elements in this section include the gently vivid portrait of Ove and Sonja's falling in love (the language in this section is among the most delicately evocative and/or poetic in the book); the sense that Parvaneh has at least some understanding of what's going on for Ove (i.e. his attempts at suicide); and, on a technical level, the use of British idioms in the translation of the story from the original Swedish ("sod", for example, is British for "shit"). Meanwhile, important pieces of foreshadowing in this section include the reference to Ove's heart (which foreshadows later circumstances in which Ove's heart gives him trouble); the reference to Ove's initial relationship with Parvaneh's children (which foreshadows later, more positive developments in that relationship); and the visit to the hospital (which foreshadows other, forthcoming hospital visits).

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the metaphoric relationship between Ove's heart problems and his feelings for Sonja? In what way does the latter symbolically (relate to? parallel? contrast?) the former?

Discussion Question 2

How does the Ove / Sonja love story reflect the novel's thematic interest in not giving up?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss your experiences, if any, of wanting to be someone that another person looked at, or of wanting to hear another person talk about things they love. In other words, describe what falling in love feels like to you. How does the story reflect the novel's thematic interest in not giving up?



Vocabulary

haphazard, clarify, desolate, combative, taciturn, obligatory, congenital, despondent, consternation, peruse, lucrative, amphetamine, exasperation, agape, dour, auburn, effervescent, retrospective, compatible, ponderous, intervene, succinct, partition, ingratiating, dubious



Chapters 15 - 19

Summary

“A Man Called Ove and a Delayed Train” Present tense. At a nearby train station, Ove waits on the platform, narration indicating his intentions to kill himself by throwing himself in front of a train. Suddenly a waiting passenger has a seizure and falls onto the train tracks. Ove helps him out, remaining on the tracks as the train draws closer. He catches a glimpse of the terrified young driver and pulls himself out of the way: he feels like the driver should not be forced into the trauma of having killed a man, even accidentally. Afterwards Ove heads home, noting that visitors from the council have again been to visit Rune and Anita, and also noting that by his front door, there is a cat-shaped hole in the snowdrift, with “a cat at the bottom of it.”

“A Man Who Was Ove and a Truck in the Forest” This chapter, written in past tense narration, is told from Sonja’s point of view. It describes her reasons for being with Ove when her friends all said she could do better (no-one, Sonja said, had ever done so much to just be with her); how her love of words and language (she taught learning-disabled children) was supported by the often wordless Ove (who, narration reveals, constructed beautiful bookcases for all her books); and how Sonja’s mother died when she was born, leaving her with her gruff, hermit-like father and a large, cranky cat named Ernest. Narration also describes how the awkward dinner when Ove and her father met only became pleasant when Ove offered to look at Sonja’s father’s rough-running truck, and how afterwards, her father paid Ove the ultimate compliment by resolving to teach him to fish.

“A Man Called Ove and a Cat Annoyance in a Snowdrift” Present tense. Ove looks down at the cat in the snowdrift as Parvaneh hurries up, insisting that he do something. When he doesn’t, she grabs the cat out of the snow and takes it into Ove’s house, Ove following after he realizes that that’s what Sonja would have wanted him to do. Parvaneh shouts at him to go upstairs and get a blanket. While he’s up there, Ove’s overweight young neighbor (Chapter 6) arrives, telling Parvaneh that his name is Jimmy, that he heard shouting, and came by to see if everything was okay. The cat begins to come around, and Jimmy takes it in his arms to keep warm. Meanwhile, Parvaneh goes into the kitchen to find something for the cat to eat, but stops when she sees how it’s configured: with shorter cabinets and lower appliances; faint marks of rubber all over the floor; and all of Sonja’s decorations and keepsakes still in place. She apologizes to Ove, saying she “didn’t know”, with narration revealing that Ove rebuilt the kitchen after “the accident”. Eventually, as Ove insists that someone else will have to take care of the cat, Parvaneh and Jimmy both reveal allergies: Parvaneh’s in her children, Jimmy’s in himself. He’s in the middle of such an allergic reaction that Parvaneh says he has to get to a hospital.

“A Man Who Was Ove and a Cat Called Ernest” Past tense. Narration describes Ove’s difficult relationship with Ernest the cat; how, two years after he first met Ove, Sonja’s



father died, and how intensely Sonja grieved; how Ove did what he could to give her room for that grief; and how, shortly afterwards, Ernest was killed by a car. Afterwards, Sonja told Ove that he had to love her twice as much which he promised to do, even though he didn't think it was possible to love her more. Driving home in the aftermath of burying Ernest, Sonja told Ove that it's time for them to have a house of their own: their child will grow up better in one. Ove took the news in silently, and then commented that it's time to get a bigger car.

“A Man Called Ove and a Cat That Was Broken When He Came” Present tense. The day after the trip to the hospital with Jimmy and Parvaneh, Ove reluctantly begins the process of nursing the cat (now referred to as the Cat Annoyance). The cat seems perfectly comfortable with Ove, accompanying him on his errands, which include picking up some flowers and taking them to lay on Sonja's grave. As he's speaking to Sonja, telling her how much he misses her, he feels the cat “gently resting its head in the palm of his hand.”

Analysis

Noteworthy elements in this section include vivid examples of the novel's thematic interest in the power of compassion (manifesting most overtly in Ove's actions at the train station and in relationship to the Cat Annoyance, and more subtly in the revelation of what he did for Sonja's books), and its parallel thematic interest in how one lives in the aftermath of death. There is the sense in this section, perhaps more so than anywhere else in the book, that Ove's capacity for compassion is, in fact, something that's taking him away from his determination to die and more closely towards a renewed capacity for life. One last theme-related point: the reappearance of Jimmy in this section foreshadows later revelations in the narrative of a particularly significant act of compassion on Ove's part.

Meanwhile, the incident at the train station, while important in itself, is also a key piece of foreshadowing, in that events and relationships that come into Ove's life as a direct result of this incident play key roles later in the narrative. Other foreshadowings include the reference to the sort of children taught by Sonja (which foreshadows the appearance of one of those children a few chapters down the road) and additional references to the configuration / layout of the kitchen and to “the accident”. Both foreshadow revelations later in the narrative of just what that accident was and how traumatizing it became for Ove and Sonja, as does the reference to Ove and Sonja's baby.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways, large or small, does the theme of “not giving up” manifest in this section?



Discussion Question 2

At this point in the narrative, what do the references to the kitchen, Ove's reaction to Parvaneh's reaction to the kitchen, and the references to an accident suggest about what happened to Ove and Lena?

Discussion Question 3

Which of the book's themes manifests most vividly in the image of the cat and Ove at the end of the chapter?

Vocabulary

erectile, chastened, cordon, convulsive, enmesh, stultify, plinth, elongate, apocalyptic, malevolent, grimace, inclusive, smithereens, dissuade, immeasurable, vociferous, composure, disdainful, entreat, pirouette, assiduous, enervate, benevolent, truculent, paltry, frenetic



Chapters 20 - 23

Summary

“A Man Called Ove and an Intruder” Present tense. Back at the house, Ove sits in his car in the garage remembering his friendship with Rune: how they moved into the neighborhood at the same time, both with pregnant wives, neither knowing how to deal with the pregnancies or how to have conversations at all. Ove’s recollections are interrupted first by the arrival of a female journalist (who wants to talk to him about how he saved the life of the man at the train station) and then by the arrival of the people from the council (wearing white shirts) who have come to talk to Anita about taking Rune into care. Ove is disconcerted to find out that both the people in the white shirts and the journalist know his name, and that neither he nor Anita can do anything about what’s happening to Rune. He takes refuge in the house, reflecting on “the powerlessness” of trying to fight “men in white shirts”, and on how they hadn’t been at the house “since he and Sonja came home from Spain. After the accident.”

“A Man Who Was Ove and Countries Where They Play Foreign Music in Restaurants” Past tense. Narration describes how Ove and Sonja took a trip to Spain while Sonja was pregnant; how Sonja quickly fell into the rhythms of the culture (including midday siestas), and how Ove went for walks while she was napping. On one such walk, he helped the owner of the restaurant where they frequently eat fix his car, unwittingly enabling him to get his mother to a hospital. Narration describes how Sonja couldn’t understand why she and Ove never again had to pay for a meal; how Ove repeatedly helped other people during Sonja’s naps; and how several years later, Sonja learned the details of what he’d been doing and described him as “the strangest superhero” she’d ever heard of. Narration also describes how, on the bus on their way home, Ove felt the child in Sonja’s womb move, and had to excuse himself to go to the toilet, wiping his eyes. “It was the happiest week of Ove’s life,” narration comments. “It was destined to be followed by the very unhappiest.”

“A Man Called Ove and Someone in a Garage” Present Tense. Narration describes Ove’s attempts to evade the journalist (Lena) who is still after her story about the incident at the train station; how Parvaneh discovers Ove (and the cat) outside Ove’s garage; how Parvaneh learns that Ove has (accidentally?) locked Lena in the garage; and how Parvaneh both gets the journalist out and gets Ove to take her to the hospital so both Patrick and Jimmy can come home. The chapter ends with Ove in the car with the cat, telling the watchful, unblinking animal that he knows Parvaneh lied to him: the children aren’t allergic to cats at all, she just wanted the responsibility for the Cat Annoyance to be Ove’s.

“A Man Who Was Ove and a Coach that Never Got There” Past tense. On the bus that would take them home from Spain, and in the moments after Ove went to the toilet in tears, the bus was in an accident that resulted in Sonja being hospitalized and losing the baby. Ove sat by her bedside for a week, insisting on telling her both about the baby



and about her paralysis, and narration describes the intensity of their grief. Eventually, however, Sonja decided to get physiotherapy and move on, going back home to the wheelchair-friendly renovations completed by Ove. Narration then sums up the following years: how Sonja completed her teacher training and got a job teaching disadvantaged children; how Ove's anger and desire for revenge for what happened controlled him until Sonja gently told him it was time to stop; how teaching the children brought Sonja great joy; how Ove celebrated that joy, even though he didn't understand why Sonja did what she did; and how he built a ramp for her to get into the school even though the men in white shirts (who had continually and repeatedly blocked his efforts at justice/revenge) refused to let one be built.

Analysis

The most significant element in this section, and perhaps in the novel to date, is the revelation of what happened to Sonja and Ove – specifically, their being in an accident that both paralyzed Sonja and killed her baby she and Ove were expecting. The revelation answers a few key questions, particularly how and why the kitchen in Ove and Sonja's house became what it did, and what the marks on the kitchen floor were (i.e. marks caused by the tires on her wheelchair). Aside from offering important historical information, the revelations around the accident and its aftermath also explore aspects of the novel's themes – the theme of living in the aftermath of death, for example, is explored here in this section's portrayal of how Ove and Lena move ahead with their lives in the aftermath of the death of their baby. There are also clear references to the power of compassion (i.e. Ove's determination to make a good life for Lena) and the value of integrity (i.e. Ove's determination, albeit unsuccessful, to get justice for what happened to his family).

Other important elements in this section include the several appearances of the men in white shirts (each appearance echoing the meaning and implications of the other, and of the appearance of the white-shirted men throughout the narrative; the reappearance of Lena the journalist (whose persistence in trying to talk to Ove foreshadows incidents later in the narrative when they actually do have a conversation); and another reference to the disadvantaged children taught by Sonia, another foreshadowing of the moment (in the following section) when one of those children makes an unexpected appearance in Ove's life.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways (other than in terms of his actions towards Anita and Sonja) does the theme of compassion manifest in this section?

Discussion Question 2

What does Sonja mean when she calls Ove a "superhero"? What theme does her use of that term relate to?



Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the theme of not giving up manifest in this section?

Vocabulary

dismal, brusque, capacity, formulate, monotone, inarticulate, raving, senile, evasive, barbaric, gesticulate, empathize



Chapters 24 - 27

Summary

“A Man Called Ove and a Brat who Paints in Color” Present tense. Ove drives home from the hospital with the injured Patrick (now in a plaster cast), Parvaneh, their children, Jimmy, and the Cat Annoyance. The youngest child draws and colors a picture which Parvaneh gives to Ove when they get home. The picture is mostly black, but the figure intended to be Ove is in color: Parvaneh tells Ove that the girl (Nasanin) thinks that Ove is “the funniest thing she knows.” That’s why, Parvaneh says, Nasanin always draws him in color. Parvaneh also asks for Ove’s help in learning to drive. Later, Ove sits in the car with the cat and once again contemplates killing himself by inhaling the fumes from his exhaust. He looks down at the cat ... and changes his mind. The next morning, after another snowfall, he shovels the snow from his own sidewalk, and then crosses the street and shovels the snow from the sidewalks of his neighbors.

“A Man Called Ove and a Piece of Corrugated Iron” Present tense. In the main-floor bathroom, Ove contemplates killing himself with some of Sonja’s left-over painkillers. His thoughts are interrupted by increasingly frantic yells of the Cat Annoyance coming from outside. He hurries outside and finds the Cat bleeding from another wound caused by the Blonde Weed’s dog. Plotting revenge, Ove goes search of materials (including a piece of corrugated iron) and visits Rune, becoming shocked to discover how much he has physically and mentally deteriorated. He is also surprised, and happily so, to discover that Rune still remembers him, at least a little. Ove then gets the supplies he needs and leaves, but not before offering Anita help around the house as she struggles to keep Rune at home. Back at his house, Ove sets an elaborate trap for Blonde Weed’s dog that involves electrifying the corrugated iron and shocking the dog, but then realizes that it’s not the right thing to do.

“A Man Called Ove and a Society where No-one Can Repair a Bicycle Any More” Present tense. When the mail arrives, Ove is shocked to discover that the mail carrier is one of the young men he chased off in Section 2, Chapter 6. The young man asks if this is where Sonja used to live, revealing that he was one of the young people she taught and that she was the only teacher who ever made him feel as though he was worth teaching. This leads to a moment of connection between the young man and Ove, which results in Ove offering to help the young man repair his bicycle (Section 2, Chapter 6) which the young man says he wants to do because he loves the girl it belongs to. The young man also reveals that he’s working two jobs (including one in a café) in order to buy a car, a brand of which Ove doesn’t approve. After the surprised and excited young man leaves, Ove goes next door and tells Parvaneh to get ready for her driving lesson: they start in two hours.

“A Man Called Ove and a Driving Lesson” Brief past tense narration describes how Sonja and Ove both always explained the rivalry between Ove and Rune as beginning in a dispute over brands of cars (Ove only ever drove Saabs: Rune started out with



Volvos, but the straw that broke Ove's back came when he bought a BMW). Then: present tense narration describes the first driving lesson Ove gives Parvaneh, which starts badly and gets worse when she stalls the car at an intersection, bursts into tears, and triggers the horn-honking ire of the people behind her. Ove confronts the drivers of the car directly behind, grabbing the tattooed young man by the throat and saying that if he honks the horn again, it will be the last thing he does. He then calmly gets back into the car, offers encouraging words to Parvaneh (concluding by saying she is "not a complete twit" which, narration comments, she would always remember as "the loveliest compliment" he ever gave her), and continues the driving lesson.

Analysis

There are several interesting and important elements in this section. The first has to do with narrative style / structure: specifically, the way the narrative suggest connections between seemingly very independent events by placing them one right after the other and giving the two events in question similar qualities.

Other important elements include developments in the relationship between Ove and Paravaneh's children (which foreshadow circumstances in which that relationship becomes even closer later in the narrative); the revelations around the character of the mailman (who plays an increasingly important role in the narrative from this point on); and the reference that the mailman also works in a café (which is the setting for both important confrontations and significant thematic developments in the following section).

The last chapter in this section answers several questions raised by the narrative about the relationship between Rune and Ove, but again applies a narrative technique used earlier in the narrative: using information to trigger more questions in the reader's mind. In this case, those questions have to do with why Ove reacted so strongly to Rune's purchase of a BMW, questions that are answered later in the narrative when it reveals more information about Rune's family history. Also in the final chapter, there is the narrative of the driving lesson that Ove gives Parvaneh, which contains one of the most surprising moments in the story: not the confrontation between Ove and the honking driver (which is ultimately UN-surprising because all along, Ove seems to have had no problem whatsoever confronting people who anger him) but what he says to Parvaneh. While on one level this is a clear example of the novel's thematic interest in the power of compassion (i.e. Ove's compassion for the struggling and frustrated Parvaneh), it's also one of the clearest, most vivid, and most powerful examples of how Ove is transforming. There is the strong sense here that the Ove early in the narrative, not to mention the Ove who was grieving his wife so deeply, would not have been willing, able, or comfortable saying such things to someone who, when they first met, he only thought of as being The Pregnant One. Now he sees her as much more of a human being than he did, displaying compassion, empathy, and – incidentally – manifesting another of the narrative's themes.



Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the connection between Ove looking down at the cat and his decision to not kill himself?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the connection between Ove's discovery about the mailman and his decision to help Parvaneh learn to drive?

Discussion Question 3

Aside from exhibiting compassion, which of the novel's other themes is manifest in Ove's speech to Parvaneh in the car?

Vocabulary

vehicular, profanity, clarification, tentative, torturous, inconsolable, succinct, innumerable, inundate, upholstery, vagrant, commotion, pinnacle, extricate, traipse, egoistic, disreputable, proportionate



Chapters 28 - 31

Summary

“A Man Who Was Ove and a Man Who Was Rune” Past tense. Narration sums up the decades of growing tension between Ove and Rune, and how Sonja and Anita both longed to be good friends and tried several times to make the men see reason, but eventually gave up. Narration also describes how Rune and Anita had a son shortly after Ove and Sonja returned home after the accident in Spain; how that son turned out to be silent and resentful, leaving home as soon as he legally could; and how Rune’s purchase of the BMW was tied to their son’s absence and their inability to have another child (despite years of trying) – a small sporty car, like a BMW, was perfect for them. “And that was the moment,” narration comments, “when Ove realized that a part of Rune had given up forever. And for that maybe neither Ove nor Rune forgave him.”

“A Man Called Ove and a Bender” Present tense. Later that afternoon, after the driving lesson, Ove and Parvaneh go to the café where the young mailman (Adrian) works. A dispute over Adrian’s inability to make plain coffee leads to the quiet curiosity of another young man who is identified by Adrian as being his boss and by Ove as being “bent” (i.e. gay). Together Ove and Adrian repair the bicycle, which Ove had attached to the back of his car. After they’re done, they go back into the café, only to find a blunt, aggressive man trying to fix a ceiling heater. Ove takes over the repair work and finishes it quickly. The man (Amel) thanks him and offers him a whisky, but Ove refuses. Later, as Ove and Parvaneh are leaving, Adrian asks Ove to keep the sexuality of his boss (Mirsad) a secret: Amel is his father, and would react badly. Ove, calling Mirsad a “bender”, tells Adrian that he (Adrian) has too many problems of his own and should stop worrying so much about other people.

“A Man Called Ove and a Society without Him” Present tense. As Ove visits Sonya’s grave, narration shifts into past tense as it describes their weekly routines, one of which (Ove’s insistence that he carry her upstairs to their bedroom where they always slept) Sonja recognized as “...his way of showing her that he had no intention of giving up.” Narration also describes their differing reactions to Sonja’s cancer diagnosis (hers of continuing to work and his of getting angry, particularly at white-shirted officials of every sort); and how Sonja, after she eventually had no choice but to quit work, had students visit her almost until the day she died. Back in present tense, Ove tells Sonja that in spite of knowing she’d be unhappy, he still plans to “do it” (i.e. kill himself). Back in the car, Parvaneh tentatively offers to help him clear out the house. Ove erupts in anger, and the trip home is silent.

“A Man Called Ove Reverses with a Trailer. Again.” Present tense. This chapter begins with the image of a standoff between Ove and a Man in a White Shirt who has come to tell Anita that it’s time for Rune to move into a care facility. Slipping into past tense, the narrative flashes back to events leading up to the confrontation: Ove again preparing to kill himself (this time with a gun); Ove again being interrupted (this time by Parvaneh,



who wants him to talk to Lena); Ove again seeing the Man drive up to Rune and Anita's house; Ove confronting him; and Ove reacting badly as the cool, unemotional man tells him there's nothing he can do about what's going to happen to Rune. Ove goes to Patrick and demands to know where he got the trailer that Ove moved for him (Section 1, Chapter 3). Later, when the Man in the White Shirt comes out of Rune and Anita's, he finds his car blocked from leaving by the car and trailer. Slipping back into present tense, the confrontation between Ove and the Man is replayed, with the Man in the White Shirt stalking off angrily. Suddenly exhausted, Ove goes home, where he feels overwhelmed by helplessness and loss and futility. He feels enormous pressure in his chest, and suddenly starts to cry.

Analysis

The first point to note in this section comes in its first chapter, which explains in ironic detail what happened between Ove and Rune, and specifically the truth around Rune's choice of car. There are several ironies here: the fact that Rune and Anita had a child, when Ove and Sonja's child was killed; that Rune and Anita's child was not happy in his home; and that Ove believed Rune had "given up" when, in fact, Rune and Anita had kept trying to both have another child and win their first child back. This last, in turn, is a key manifestation of a darker aspect of the novel's thematic interest in not giving up.

The second point to note in this section becomes apparent in the chapter where Ove visits the café – specifically, how the action of this section introduces a new theme that plays an increasingly significant role in the narrative from this point on. This is the novel's thematic interest in exploring the humanity of being different, manifesting here in Ove's casual acceptance of Mirsad's sexual orientation (Ove's politically incorrect use of the term "bent" notwithstanding). It may well be somewhat surprising to the reader that Ove, who seems pretty conservative and traditional, would have such a matter-of-fact reaction to finding out that Mirsad is gay: upon deeper consideration, however, it becomes possible to see that the seeds of Ove's tolerance might just have been planted in his relationship to Sonja who, in her own way, was just as "different" as Mirsad. Other important points to note in this chapter include the narrative finally providing Adrian's name (which follows a pattern established earlier in the story of narration initially referring to characters as Ove sees them and only later revealing their names); the brief appearance of Amel (which foreshadows a later, and even more narratively significant, appearance); and the irony of Ove telling Adrian to not worry so much about other people.

In subsequent chapters in this section, there are several important manifestations of the novel's thematic interest in not giving up: Sonja's specific reference to Ove's not giving up; Sonja's continuing to work in the face of a cancer diagnosis; Ove's apparent determination to not give up on his attempts to kill himself; the reappearances of Men in White Shirts (which, in a darker way, also manifest the theme of not giving up); and, perhaps most notably in terms of future events in the plot, Ove's apparent determination to not give up on his intention to help Anita.



The final point to note about this section is the final image (i.e. of Ove crying and experiencing pain in his chest), which is significant for two reasons. It's the first time in the narrative that Ove actually releases what seems to be his grief over Sonja's death: it's also a significant piece of foreshadowing that prepares the reader for the eventual revelation of what, exactly, is going on with Ove's chest / heart.

Discussion Question 1

Given what you know of Ove's character, how important was it to him that Rune and Anita had a child when his (Ove's) and Sonja's was dead, and Sonja couldn't have any more? What effect do you think this fact had, or might have had, on the deterioration of the relationship between Ove and Rune?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Ove telling Adrian to worry less about other people so ironic?

Discussion Question 3

Do you agree with Ove (and perhaps Rune) that, with his purchase of a BMW, Rune indicated that he was "giving up"? Or do you see it as Rune simply accepting reality? Explain your answer.

Vocabulary

marginal, demarcation, inaudible, clarify, ingratiating, animosity, oblong, malicious, contraption, incandescent, restitution, diametrically, accessory, obstinate, uppity, vagrant, conspirator, monosyllabic, dexterous, effusive



Chapters 32 - 34

Summary

“A Man Called Ove Isn’t Running a Damned Hotel” Present tense. That night, after making sure the cat is asleep, Ove again gets out the rifle and prepares to kill himself. He’s just settling in to shoot himself when he hears a noise outside and angrily flings open the door. He surprises Adrian (who runs screaming off) and Mirsad (who reacts more calmly), who explains that he has come out as gay to his father; that his father threw him out of the house; and that Adrian thought, because Ove has so much room, that Mirsad could stay there. At first Ove refuses, saying he’s not running a hotel. But then he catches sight of a photo of the pregnant Sonya taken when they were in Spain, and changes his mind.

“A Man Called Ove and an Inspection Tour That Is Not the Usual” The next morning, Ove finds Mirsad in the kitchen having breakfast, and without saying much, gets ready to go on his inspection. Mirsad asks to come along, and Ove agrees. As they’re leaving, they encounter Jimmy, out for a walk in an attempt to start losing some weight. He also asks to come along, and Ove again agrees. “And this is why a cat, an overweight allergy sufferer, a bent person, and a man called Ove make the inspection round that morning.” Jimmy reveals that the authorities are soon coming to take Rune away. Ove tells him the bureaucracy can be stalled, but Jimmy tells him that Anita’s been fighting the bureaucracy for years, adding that she didn’t tell Sonja what was happening because she (Anita) felt that Ove and Sonja had enough to worry about. Ove asks Jimmy if he’s sure, and when Jimmy says he is, Ove goes to Rune’s and Anita’s and takes all the paper records of Anita’s argument with the authorities.

“A Man Called Ove and a Boy in the House Next Door” Brief present tense narration shows Ove at Sonja’s grave, preparing to tell her something she won’t like to hear. The narrative then shifts into past tense narration as it summarizes the history of the several owners of the house between Ove’s and Rune’s houses, that history ending with a single mother and her chubby little boy, living with an abusive man who Rune and Ove chased away. Narration then reveals how Rune and Anita, Sonja and Ove, pooled their money to buy the house for the woman and her son, who turned out to be Jimmy. Past tense narration continues, and describes how Ove’s initial attempts to help Anita (by confronting the latest Man in the White Shirt) ended badly: how Jimmy brought over a new ally - Anders, the boyfriend of Blonde Weed (who has moved out) and who runs a business that Jimmy thinks might be of use in the current situation; how, when the Man in the White Shirt arrived, he found both his car and the trailer gone (towed away by someone from Anders’ towing service); and how afterwards, Anita received official documents telling her when and where Rune was to be transferred into care. Present tense narration returns as, back at Sonja’s grave, Ove reveals that he’s not going to be able to join her as quickly as he’d planned: “there’s a bloody war on.”

Analysis

At this point in the narrative, Ove's repeatedly failed attempts to kill himself tend to become more comic than serious: earlier on, the initial attempts come across as powerfully and effectively evocative of his pain and grief, not to mention evocative of the novel's thematic interest in the struggle to live in the face of death. But as Ove's attempts not only become more and more extreme but consistently fail, they start to become ridiculous, and therefore somewhat humorous. On another level, however, the failed attempts do continue to dramatize the tension between living and dying – or rather, the struggle to live in the face of death, since each time an attempt fails, the call for Ove to live rather than die becomes even stronger. At the same time, it also becomes clear that that call to live is inextricably tied in with a call to compassion: it manifested with the man on the train platform; it manifested with the cat in the car; and here, it manifests with Adrian and Mirsad. A related point: Ove's eventual (if grudging) acceptance of Mirsad is a manifestation of another theme – see "Discussion Question 1". Meanwhile, and also in the first chapter of this section, the narrative again employs the technique of juxtaposing two events / images and implying a connection between the two: in this case, Adrian's request and the picture of Sonja. See "Discussion Question 2".

Also in this section: further explorations of the novel's thematic interest in being different (i.e. the reference to the unusual crowd that accompanies Ove on his inspection); the upping of the narrative stakes in the Rune / Anita situation (in preparation for the climax of this particular subplot in the following section); the revelation of the relationship history that exists between Ove, Jimmy, Rune, and Anita; the return of both the Man in the White Shirt and of the characters / devices deployed to thwart him; and the use of a significant narrative technique ... bookending. This is a technique in which a situation / image appears both at the beginning and at the end of a particular piece of writing, whether it be a chapter, a section of a book, or a book as a whole, with the section in between offering information as to how the first manifestation of the situation (in this case, Ove's conversation with Sonja) came into being, and leading to a potential conclusion to the situation (in this case, Ove's conversation with Sonja leading to the revelation of a "war"). This last is particularly important, in that Ove's determination to die seems to have been significantly derailed, again as a result of his discovering the power of compassion.

Discussion Question 1

A number of the narrative's themes manifest in the appearance of Mirsad and Ove's acceptance of him into his home. What are they, and how do they relate to this particular incident?



Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the implied connection between Adrian's request to Ove, Ove's seeing the picture of Anita (specifically the picture of her in Spain), and Ove's decision to let Mirsad stay?

Discussion Question 3

Which of the novel's themes is manifest in the story of Ove's next door neighbors?

Vocabulary

replenish, mayhem, taciturn, assail, exhort, reliant, decisive, venture, tumult, obstinate, mainsail



Chapters 34 - 37

Summary

“A Man Called Ove and Social Incompetence” Present tense. Narration describes how Ove and his other neighbors come up with a plan for helping Anita and Rune; how Parvaneh is surprised to see something in Ove’s living room – something he’s taken down from his attic, something he’s repainted, and something that he says can be painted pink if Parvaneh’s baby is a girl. Narration eventually reveals it’s a baby cot: meanwhile, Ove is deeply embarrassed when Parvaneh bursts into tears. A short time later, the Man in the White Shirt, accompanied by three nurses, arrives to take Rune into custody. He is confronted first by Anita and then by Parvaneh, Patrick, Adrian, Mirsad, Jimmy, and finally Ove, all of whom declare that they will take care of Rune. The Man is also confronted by journalist Lena, who (along with Patrick) reveals that various investigations have discovered information about the Man that he might want to keep secret. The Man eventually leaves, defeated. Conversation reveals that Ove has promised Lena that he will read a letter she brought him, and that Ove wants to talk with Rune, narration describing how Anita, after Ove left, was convinced she heard Rune laugh.

“A Man Called Ove and a Whisky” Past tense narration sums up Sonja’s opinions on loving another person: that it’s like buying a new house and at first being obsessed with its newness and perfections, but then falling more deeply in love with it as a result of knowing its many imperfections. Narration also describes how Ove knew, when she said those things, she was talking about him. Past tense narration also describes how comfortable Ove became with Patrick and Parvaneh’s family, reading stories to their youngest child and discovering that their older child likes drawing and designing houses. Present tense narration then describes Ove going into the café where Adrian and Mirsad work; how miserable Amel looks; and how Ove sits down and tells Amel he’s ready for that whisky. Narration comments that “it is difficult to admit that one is wrong. Particularly when one has been wrong for a long time.”

“A Man Called Ove and a Lot of Bastards Sticking Their Noses In” Present tense. Ove pays another visit to Sonja, again apologizing for not coming sooner. Slipping into past tense, narration describes how Ove opened the letter given to him by Lena and found that it contained a thank you note from the man he saved at the train station, accompanied by a picture of the man and his family. Back in the present tense, Ove is joined at Sonja’s gravesite by Parvaneh and Patrick and their children; Mirsad, Adrian, and Jimmy. They all pay their respects to Sonja and eventually leave. When they get back home, they find that Mirsad’s father is waiting for him. Ove joins Patrick and Parvaneh at their house for dinner, leaving Mirsad and his father at his house talking in a way that, Ove realizes, Sonja would have approved of. After dinner, the oldest girl invites Ove to a birthday party, and tells him that she only wants one present, but that her mother says it’s probably too expensive: an I-pad. “And something,” narration says, “is shining in her eyes. Something that Ove recognizes.”



Analysis

In a novel that has its share of unexpectedly moving moments and bits of writing that have the potential to make a reader gasp with their heart-stopping, gentle evocation of love and compassion, there are few like the moment that opens this section: specifically, the gift that Ove gives to Parvaneh, the history of which is never spelled out but which is clearly, and touchingly, implied. What's interesting here is again an intriguing juxtaposition: the placement of this moment next to the moment where Ove and several new, unexpected allies join forces to protect Anita and Rune from the latest assault of the Man in the White Shirt, said placement offering clear manifestations of several of the novel's themes: the power of compassion (i.e. in the gifts Ove offers to both Parvaneh and Anita); the value of not giving up (i.e. in making sure that the cot is used by at least one child / in making a concerted effort to face down the Man in the White Shirt once and for all); and, perhaps most importantly, the value of living in the face of death. Ove is arguably more alive in this section than he has been since Sonja died; the child to whom he is giving the cot is hopefully having the life that the dead child for whom it was intended did not; and Anita and Rune continue to live as they want in the face of what they believed would be the death of their relationship (i.e. Rune being taken into care).

Other important elements in this section include the information about the interests of Parvaneh's oldest child (a foreshadowing of events in the following section as well as an echo of a certain character's interest earlier in the narrative); the conversation between Ove and Mirsad's father (another manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in the value of being different, and again a foreshadowing of forthcoming events); yet another reference to Ove making a choice because he believes it's something Sonja would have wanted; and the reference to the I-pad, which is arguably a lightbulb moment for the reader, in that s/he might possibly realize the connection with the novel's first chapter, which never DID explain why Ove wanted to buy a computer.

Discussion Question 1

Do you agree or disagree with Sonja's recounted comments on relationships and love? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What circumstances are being referenced in the comment that "it is difficult to admit that one is wrong. Particularly when one has been wrong for a long time." To whom might this comment be referring?



Discussion Question 3

There are a lot of different references to families in this section – families of choice (i.e. those that gather around and support Rune and Anita) and also birth families. How do the appearances of these families evoke / manifest the play's various themes?

Vocabulary

irrespective, veritable, audacious, invective, composure, expletive, rhetorical, consumption, palaver



Chapters 38 - Epilogue

Summary

“A Man Called Ove and the End of a Story” Present tense. This chapter begins with an echo of events in the very first chapter: Ove confronting a young, and increasingly nervous, sales associate as he tries to buy an I-pad. The scene continues with Jimmy’s intervention, calming both the salesclerk and Ove and ensuring the purchase gets made. That night, Ove and Jimmy take the gift to the birthday party at Parvaneh and Patrick’s, where the girl who is now an eight year old accepts it gratefully and calls Ove “Granddad”. Ove, shocked and moved, is very still for a long time. Parvaneh asks if he’s all right, and he says he is. He prepares to leave, and Parvaneh requests a second driving lesson. Ove goes, doing a nighttime inspection along the way and reflecting on how much Sonja would have loved the sound of laughter coming from the house. He comes across a trio of burglars breaking into another house down the road: he confronts them, but has sudden and severe pains in his chest (which he thinks means he’s been stabbed) and collapses into the snow, hearing Parvaneh crying out to him as he slips into unconsciousness.

“A Man Called Ove” After a brief meditation on humanity’s relationship with death, and on Ove’s reaction to Sonja’s death (“...it wasn’t as if Ove also died when Sonja left him. He just stopped living”), present tense narration describes how intensely and angrily Parvaneh struggled to see Ove when he was first admitted to the hospital; how, when she finally did see him, they had tender moments of both affection and irritation (when Ove asked Parvaneh whether an ambulance came into the residential area against all the rules) and finally of complete hilarity from Parvaneh, when the doctor said that Ove needed to take it easy because his heart was too big. Four days later, Ove returns home to find drawings from Parvaneh’s children on his kitchen table (drawings that are addressed to “Granddad”), and then gets boxes from the attic, into which he packs all of Sonja’s things. At the end of the evening, the tired silence is interrupted by Parvaneh shouting. They all go back to the hospital, and Parvaneh has a baby boy.

“A Man Called Ove and an Epilogue” Narration quickly skims over four years in the lives of the characters: the maturing of Patrick and Parvaneh’s children; the cohabitation of Anders and Lena; the marriage of Mirsad and Jimmy, attended by Amel; Mirsad’s and Jimmy’s adoption of a little girl, whose visits to Anita and Rune always provoke smiles in Rune; and Ove’s ongoing (albeit grumpy) handyman support to the members of the expanding community. Then, in present tense, narration describes how, one winter morning, Parvaneh wakes up fearfully. She discovers that Ove’s sidewalk has not been shoveled; runs over to the house and discovers that he has died in the night; whispers to his body “Give my love to Sonja and thank her for the loan”; and then takes the envelope with her name on it downstairs to read. She discovers that Ove and Sonja were very wealthy: more specifically, that Sonja’s father left them more money than they never knew what to do with. There are also instructions for a simple funeral, which Parvaneh plans but which, narration reveals, was attended by three hundred people.



Narration also reveals that Parvaneh set up a charity with the money, “Sonja’s Fund”, intended to help orphaned children. Parvaneh grieves deeply, but can’t help laughing when Patrick comments that Ove would have hated the funeral. That evening, Parvaneh shows Ove and Sonja’s house to a young couple: the wife is pregnant, the husband is quiet and seems unhappy, going around kicking the baseboards and wanting to check out the garage. Parvaneh asks him what kind of car he drives. He almost smiles and speaks with a kind of quiet pride when he says “Saab”.

Analysis

The first chapter in this section contains yet another significant juxtaposition: the joy of life (i.e. the birthday party, and Ove being called “Granddad”) contrasted with the danger of imminent death (i.e. Ove’s confrontation with the burglars). As such, this juxtaposition can be seen as one of the most stark manifestations of the novel’s thematic interest in the struggle to live in the face of death, as can the events of the following chapter. There is, of course, a couple of significant ironies in these events: the fact that in the midst of feeling so alive, Ove comes so close to death; and that after making so many attempts to cause his own death, Ove is almost killed as the result of an encounter with someone else. Meanwhile, what is arguably the most concise and the clearest evocation of this particular theme comes in the second chapter of this section, with the narrative’s reference to Ove’s situation in the wake of Sonja’s death.

There are several other significant elements in the first two chapters of this section: the echoes of Ove’s attempts at computer shopping in the first chapter (another, albeit larger, example of bookending); the intensity of Parvaneh’s determination to see him when he’s recovering in hospital; the revelation of what, exactly, happened to him (the problem with his heart, repeatedly foreshadowed throughout the narrative); Ove’s final decision to pack up what remains of Sonja’s life; and the juxtaposition of this moment with the birth of Parvaneh’s baby. One last point: the specific cause of Ove’s health issues could, for many readers, become laugh-out-loud funny/ironic, in that while his literal heart may be physically too big, his emotional heart (i.e. his capacity for caring, compassion, and empathy) has been growing steadily throughout the narrative.

The third chapter in this section, in the midst of its summing up of the last four years of Ove’s life, contains a glimpse of not only the novel’s main theme (in that Ove is living, in the aftermath of Sonja’s death, in a way he never did before) but also one of its secondary themes. The family life of Jimmy, Mirsad, and their daughter is, arguably, a subtle, matter-of-fact evocation of the humanity / value of being different: here it’s interesting to note that it’s THEIR daughter, and not Parvaneh’s baby boy, that brings such a smile to Rune’s face.

Finally, there is the description of Parvaneh finding Ove’s body – not, it’s important to note, a description of Ove’s death. What IS included in this description raises some questions: specifically, the details of the note. The fact that there IS a note suggests that Ove knew his death was approaching: the description of his body being calm and peaceful, however, suggests that death was quiet and natural ... or was it? Meanwhile,



the revelation of Ove's wealth comes as a significant surprise, and one that the novel doesn't really seem to need in order to successfully conclude its story: there is the sense here that this revelation is ALMOST one happy ending too many. On the other hand, it does provide an opportunity for one last manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in compassion: specifically, the compassion inherent in the establishment of the charity.

The novel concludes with what seems to be the inevitable passing of Ove and Sonja's home to what seems like the inevitable couple, right down to the reference to the young man "kicking" at things to make sure they're solid, a detail that rings very familiar to the earlier description of the attitude of another character.

Discussion Question 1

Why, do you think, Ove is finally able to pack up Sonja's things? What aspects of his recent experiences trigger his decision, and why?

Discussion Question 2

What, do you think, is the metaphoric connection / relationship between Ove's decision to pack up Sonja's things and the birth of Parvaneh's baby?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the novel's final images – specifically, of the details in narration that describe / define the young house buyer and his wife?

Vocabulary

archetypal, multifarious, redundant, succinct, conspiratorial, lobotomy, intransigent, regurgitate, expansive, premonition, ungovernable, enormity, agitation, strenuous, anodyne, euphoric, competent, joist



Characters

Ove

Fifty-nine year old Ove (his last name is never given) is the novel's central character and protagonist. He is portrayed as hard-working, quiet, strong-willed, outspoken, and opinionated: other adjectives that would apply include curmudgeonly, crusty, cranky, cantankerous, and rigid. There is the strong sense throughout the narrative, however, that all these aspects of his character and identity are primarily external, the outward appearance that he presents: as the events of the story reveal, both those in the past and those in the present, he has a powerful, driving sense of integrity and compassion, of sensitivity and open-mindedness. He is not particularly intelligent, not particularly well educated, and certainly not very articulate: as the novel suggests, he is a man whose character is revealed by what he does, rather than what he says, and what he does reveals that he cares very deeply about people, perhaps in spite of himself and definitely in spite of being deeply wounded, angered, and embittered by various circumstances in his life. In short, all those hard-edged outward aspects of his character and personality can ultimately be seen as a kind of armor that protects the caring, compassionate, loving heart and soul beneath.

As a protagonist often does, Ove goes through a significant journey of transformation over the course of the narrative. While many aspects of his personality don't change (for example, he remains grumpy and opinionated until his dying day), there is a strong sense not only that his emotional armor becomes less impenetrable, but that he finds a way to enjoy life without his beloved Sonja. This is not to suggest that he forgets about her, or stops missing her, but rather that he finds a way to accept different sorts of joy, affection, and connection – or, perhaps more accurately, a way to accept the same sort of unconditional affection that he always believed he could only get from her from different people, people that he never believed could ever accept both his armor and the compassionate truth that the armor was protecting.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Ove's journey of transformation is his movement from being suicidal to choosing to engage with life, if not embrace it. His various attempts at ending his life are simultaneously heartbreaking and blackly comic, but ultimately come to an end when he finally realizes that there is a way to live with his wife's death. That realization comes about as the result of his emerging, deepening connection with / affection for other people – in other words, as a manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in the relationship between life and death.

Sonja

Sonja is Ove's beloved wife. Six months dead when the novel begins (Ove frequently visits her grave and talks to her), details of her character and her relationship with Ove are revealed in flashback (i.e. the narrative line moving from the present into the past).



At first glance, and as the novel suggests, she and Ove are very different people: Sonja is educated where Ove is not; Sonja is outgoing where Ove is more private; Sonja is more patient and understanding where Ove tends to be impatient and judgmental. At the core of their relationship, however, is a profound and deeply significant common characteristic: they are both deeply compassionate people, sensitive to others and willing to act on that compassion.

That compassion in Sonja manifests early in their relationship as compassionate insight into / understanding of Ove's character and story: it manifests late in their relationship, after the accident that leaves Sonja paralyzed and kills her unborn child, as compassionate caring not just for Ove in his own grief but also for the disadvantaged students that Sonja loves to teach. Sonja's compassion is carried on metaphorically into the charitable foundation established in her memory by Parvaneh: a charity designed to help orphaned children.

Ove's Father

Ove's father is portrayed by the narrative as being the primary influence on his life and character, perhaps even an even stronger influence than Sonja. It is from his father that Ove learned integrity, compassion, and the value of hard work. The former two were / are expressed overtly, either in Ove's past or in his present, but are nevertheless defining aspects of Ove's identity.

Tom

Tom was a colleague and rival of Ove's father's, who extended his feelings of aggression and resentment towards Ove. His various attempts to belittle, demean, and ultimately destroy Ove are countered by his (Ove's) relentless, steady integrity.

Rune

Rune is the closest thing that Ove ever came to having a best friend, but it was a friendship that was also an intense rivalry. Rune and his wife Anita (see below) moved into the terrace (i.e. housing development) at the same time as Ove and Sonja, and while efforts were made by both couples (particularly the women) to be friends, rivalries between Rune and Ove made those efforts fruitless. Eventually, Rune's increasing vulnerability resulting from his having Alzheimer's Disease creates an opportunity for reconciliation between the two men.

Anita

Anita is Rune's wife. Frail and elderly, sad and lonely as a result of her husband's illness, she is nevertheless determined to not give up and to keep him at home with her for as long as he can. She is helped in this by Ove, and eventually by other residents of



the housing development, as well as by some of the other people befriended by Ove over the course of the story.

Parvaneh

Parvaneh (initially referred to as "The Pregnant One") is Ove's the thirty-ish Iranian neighbor. Married to a Caucasian man, Patrick, and the once-again pregnant mother of two young girls, Parvaneh is direct, wise, sensitive, and no-nonsense. She has a compassionate insight into Ove and his situation, and knows how to strike a balance between confronting / challenging the more difficult aspects of his character and recognizing / nurturing the more sensitive ones. At the end of the novel, Ove in effect makes her his executor, leaving her in charge of taking care of him and what he leaves behind after he dies.

Patrick

Patrick (at first referred to as "The Lanky One") is the Caucasian, accident-prone husband of Parvaneh. He is well-meaning but not particularly good at relationships, being (as he reveals) more adept at IT (information technology) services. Somewhat unworldly and clumsy at life, Patrick is good-hearted and supportive when he needs to be.

Parvaneh and Patrick's Children

Parvaneh and Patrick have two daughters: the three year old is named Nasanin, but the older is never referred to by name. The younger one is playful and energetic; the older one is thoughtful and withdrawn. By the end of the narrative, they have both embraced Ove as a grandfather figure: their affection for him / joy in his company are key triggers for his transformation into a warmer, more open person.

"The Blonde Weed"

This selfish, malicious woman is never referred to by name. She lives across the street from Ove, has a precious little dog called Prince, and goes to extreme lengths to defend him from what she perceives as an attack, whether it actually is one or not. Ove has several confrontations with her which ultimately end when she moves out of the neighborhood.

Anders

Anders is the boyfriend of "The Blonde Weed", and is portrayed throughout much / most of the narrative as being pretty quiet and not a very colorful character. He and the



business he runs play an important role in the final confrontation between Ove and the Man in the White Shirt who is trying to move Rune out of his home with Anita.

Lena

Lena is a journalist determined to interview Ove in the aftermath of the incident in which he saved a man's life. His eventual agreement to an interview is tied to her assistance in helping him get rid of the Man in the White Shirt, assistance that Lena, for her own reasons (i.e. the pursuit of justice) is happy to provide. Lena ends the story living with Anders, the two of them having discovered a mutual connection as they're helping Ove in his defense of Rune and Anita.

Jimmy

Jimmy is another resident of the housing development where Ove lives. In his early twenties, the overweight Jimmy is technologically minded (he helps Ove buy a computer for the oldest daughter of Parvaneh and Patrick) and eventually is revealed to be gay, late in the narrative getting married to Mirsad. At one point in the novel, flashback narration reveals that Jimmy and his mother were rescued from the influences of a violent boyfriend by the actions of Rune and Ove.

Adrian

Adrian is a young man whose presence in the neighborhood Ove originally resents: he (Adrian) tries to park a bike where there are no bikes allowed. Eventually, Adrian is revealed to be Ove's mailman, the two men bonding over their shared connection with / affection for Sonja.

Mirsad

Mirsad is Adrian's young boss at a small cafe. Ove immediately pegs him as gay (or "bent" as Ove calls it), an aspect of Mirsad's identity that gets him into trouble with his conservative father (although their cultural origin is never specifically identified, there is the sense that they come from an Arab country). Thanks to Ove's intervention, Mirsad is eventually reconciled with his father, who eventually attends Mirsad's wedding to Jimmy.

Amel

Amel is Mirsad's conservative father. Originally rejecting of his son because of his (Mirsad's) sexual orientation, Ove convinces him to reconsider, to the point where Amel actually attends Mirsad's same-sex wedding.



The Man in the White Shirt

While people in white shirts appear frequently throughout the narrative, one particular Man in a White Shirt stands out as being more narratively significant than the others. This is the Man from the local council who is spearheading the plan to get Rune out of the home he shares with Anita and into a care facility. The Man is cool, unemotional, and relentless - until, that is, he is confronted, faced down, and defeated by Ove and his friends / allies.



Symbols and Symbolism

Ove's Saab

Throughout the narrative, Ove is portrayed as driving only one kind of vehicle: a Saab, a Swedish auto manufacturer. The Saab, and more specifically Ove's habit of buying only that brand of car (not to mention his astonishment that anyone else would even think of buying ANOTHER brand) represent his reliance on habit, tradition, and loyalty.

Ove's House

Ove's home, built in a terraced neighborhood (i.e. suburban housing development), is precious to him as the place where he made his life with Sonja, and changed that life when his circumstances changed. He is as protective of it as he is of both other aspects of his routine / security and his memories of / love for Sonja.

The Residents' Association

The association of residents that live in Ove's terrace (i.e. suburban sub-division) was, narration suggests, both an important focus of activity for Ove and a trigger for his ongoing rivalry with Rune. His being ousted from the organization was a traumatizing event for Ove, but his departure from the association didn't lessen his determination to both abide by its rules and to make sure that others did so as well.

Ove's First House

The house that Ove inherited after his father died represents his independence and determination to make life on his own terms. Both its placement on the map of the city (i.e. straddling two districts) and its destruction by fire trigger confrontations with men in white shirts (see below) that reveal, in turn, the importance and reliance that Ove attaches to external manifestations (i.e. houses) of his identity and purpose.

Ove's Father's Watch

Aside from Ove's first home, his father's watch is the only thing that Ove inherits after his father dies. To him, the watch is the last real connection he maintains with his father, making his (Ove's) coldly furious reaction when the watch is stolen strong, passionate, and irresistible.



Sonja's Gravestone

Throughout the narrative, Ove visits Sonja's grave, which has as its headstone a large rock that narration frequently describes as a "boulder". Ove tends to address the gravestone as if it was actually his wife, or rather the last representation of her on earth.

Cats

Two cats make important appearances in the narrative. The first appears at the beginning: a wounded stray that eventually makes its home in Ove's house (it's difficult to say who adopts whom). The second appears in flashback: Ernest is the cat belonging to Sonja and her father. Both become symbols of / triggers for Ove's capacity for unexpected, compassion-defined love and affection, the former doing so because the latter did so first.

People in White Shirts

Throughout the narrative, people in white shirts become, for both Ove and the reader, representations of harsh, unsympathetic authority against which Ove must struggle in order for life to be just. They appear on several occasions, and always in situations of great trauma: the destruction of Ove's first house by fire, the accident that injures Sonja and kills her and Ove's baby; and, perhaps most notably, in confrontations with Anita in which a particular Man in a White Shirt makes arrangements for Rune to be taken into care.

Parvaneh's Children's Drawings

Later in the narrative, as Parvaneh's two children have gotten closer to Ove, they draw pictures for / of him. Both sorts of pictures are labelled "Granddad", an indication of the affection with which they view and interact with him. They are key symbols of how relationships with others trigger, and are triggered by, Ove's transformations in himself.

Mementoes of Sonja

There are several references throughout the novel to objects associated with Sonja that remain in the house she shared with Ove before she died: her coats, photographs, and knickknacks among them. There are also several references to Ove's interactions with those objects: how they trigger thoughts of her that he often doesn't want to engage with. Late in the narrative, Parvaneh helps Ove put most of these mementos away, their disappearance representing Ove's readiness to move on with his life in the same way as their presence represented his inability to do so.



Settings

Sweden

This is the country / culture in which the novel is set. Swedish is the novel's original language, the translation (which is primarily British in its vocabulary) still retains aspects of its original Swedish context: the currency with which the characters operate, for example is the "crown", rather than the British pound or the North American dollar. Being a northern country and having a northern (i.e. colder) climate weather, and particularly snow, plays a significant role in defining the circumstances of the narrative.

Ove's "Terrace"

Throughout the narrative, the word "terrace" is used to describe the small community / sub-division / suburb in which his home is located. The "terrace" is the setting for many of the novel's confrontations, in both past and present: there is the strong sense that, at least in Ove's mind, the "terrace" is a community within a community, the sense of connection, relationship, and respect between its residents being particularly important to him.

The Present / The Past

The novel has two settings in time: the present (the setting in time for the main story-line - that is, Ove's struggle to kill himself and the development of the relationships that keep him from doing so), and the past (the setting in time that defines / portrays Ove's history, particularly his relationships with his father, his wife, and his best friend). Flipping back and forth between the two settings is one of the novel's key stylistic elements.

The Hospital

Several key scenes take place at the hospital near the terrace where Ove and his neighbors live. These include confrontations between Ove and various officious people with whom he disagrees; the visit that Ove helps Parvaneh and her family make to Patrick; and perhaps most significantly, the moments / days following Ove's climactic encounter with the burglars trying to break into his house.

Spain

This European country is the setting for only a short portion of the novel (i.e. one chapter), but is nevertheless significant, in that the circumstances of Ove and Sonja's visit to / departure from Spain, as well as the things that happen there, are defining elements in their relationship and in the narrative of that relationship.



Themes and Motifs

Living in the Aftermath of Death

This is the book's central theme, and is woven tightly into the movement of its plot as defined by the actions of its central character and protagonist, fifty-nine year old Ove.

For much of the narrative, Ove feels that he is unable to continue living following the death of his beloved wife Sonja, and throughout the book makes repeated efforts to kill himself so he can join her in whatever life comes after this one. Here it's interesting to note that Ove's actions in response to his desire to die are entirely different to his actions in the aftermath of an earlier, similarly significant death: that of his father .

Over the course of the novel, even while Ove continues his efforts to end his life, he has experiences that indicate to the reader, if not to Ove, that he actually has at least one very good reason to continue living: he is needed and wanted by people around him. Sometimes those needs and wants are overtly and directly expressed (i.e. Parvaneh and Peter, Mirsad); sometimes he feels them on his own (i.e. his determination to help Anita and Rune); sometimes he feels he has no choice (i.e. his experiences with the Cat Annoyance). The fact that he grumbles about being wanted, and the fact that his generosity is grounded as much in impatience as it is in compassion, is in some ways important (in that it makes him a complex character) but in more ways unimportant: ultimately, the novel's purpose in putting Ove into this situation and make him react in the way he does is to communicate the thematic point that while grief can continue and true love never dies, it is possible to find new ways to live in the aftermath of a beloved's death.

The Power of Compassion

As noted above, Ove discovers, and grows into, a new life in the aftermath of his wife's death through an awakening and deepening of compassion. Given how he's portrayed in the novel, it's doubtful that he would ever refer to what he does for his neighbors and friends, for strangers and cats, as "compassionate": his self-awareness doesn't go that deep. But the reader can see it, perhaps because Ove's wife Sonja sees it and comments on it so clearly; perhaps because Ove is portrayed as responding to the needs of others, albeit gruffly, when they are most vulnerable; and perhaps because the characters whom he helps (from Anita through Parvaneh and Mirsad all the way down to the Cat Annoyance) live improved, richer lives as the result of his actions.

What's particularly interesting to note in relation to this particular theme is how it ties into the first: specifically, how directly acts of compassion conflict with, and eventually overcome, Ove's desire to die. The most vivid example of this frequently occurring motif is the incident at the train station: waiting to throw himself in front of a train, Ove puts aside his desire for death not once but twice (i.e. to help the man who accidentally fell



onto the tracks; and to keep the young train driver from experiencing the trauma of killing someone). Quite literally, in both these cases, Ove lives because he chooses to act out of a desire to care for someone else.

Because this particular example of compassion's power is so strong and vivid, it endows other acts of compassion in the story with similar qualities. When, for example, Ove talks to Mirsad's father, it doesn't literally save his (Ove's) life: there is, however, a clear echo of the train incident in his efforts to save Mirsad and his father from the trauma of losing each other. Ove's life may not be saved because of compassion: it is, however, made richer, fuller, and given more meaning.

The Humanity in Being “Different”

There is the sense throughout the narrative that one of the things that fuels and defines Ove's compassionate side, his reason for taking care of others (including animals like the Cat Annoyance), is his ability to identify with being and feeling different. Again, this is not something that uneducated, inarticulate Ove would ever be able to identify about himself (although Sonja, Parvaneh, or Mirsad might be able to say it about him). But the novel clearly and carefully portrays him as having an experience of not being like everyone else – in his experience of integrity, in his attitude towards work, in his ways of expressing his love for his wife and for other people. On a deep, probably unconscious level, Ove knows what it feels like to be different – and he knows, as a result of his experience with Sonja, how it feels to be loved both for his differences and in spite of them. Therefore, and again on a deep, unconscious level, Ove acts out of compassion for people in similar circumstances.

Perhaps the most vivid examples of this is Ove's reaction to Mirsad, and his intervention in the difficulties between Mirsad and his father. The first point to note here is that Ove, a man of “a certain age” and perspective that might lead him towards being less than understanding of Mirsad's orientation and ways of expressing it, has absolutely no reaction at all to the news that Mirsad is gay (aside, that is, from using the politically incorrect term “bent): he accepts Mirsad as he is, in the same way that Sonja accepted him. Then: Ove intervenes with Mirsad's conservative father, to the point that the latter attends Mirsad's wedding to Jimmy, an event dropped into the narrative with a matter-of-fact nonchalantness that is, in many ways, evocative of Ove's perspective on the whole thing. He accepts the mixed-ethnicity relationship of Paravaneh and Patrick; he does everything he can to make Sonja's life bearable after the accident that leaves her paralyzed; he even accepts the uniqueness of the wandering Cat Annoyance. Ove sees the humanity in everyone at the core of what makes them different because he himself was gifted with that kind of compassionate seeing from Sonja, an aspect of both their characters that ties into the next of the book's themes: the value of integrity.



The Value of Integrity

Throughout the narrative, Ove does what he believes, with all of his being, is “the right thing”. Now there is always the sense that for Ove, there are variations in what “right” actually means: the way things have always been done, the way he THINKS things should be done, and the morally correct ways his father taught him to behave. The latter is arguably the most meaningful manifestation of this theme in the novel, and the most interwoven with the book’s other themes. Ove’s absorption of his father’s morality and integrity defines how he responds when attacked (i.e. by Tom), defied (i.e. by various people wearing white shirts), or disbelieved (i.e. by people who accept the obvious, easy versions of events). On other occasions, the work ethic, discipline, and need for skill he learned from his father are entwined and/or put into action in relationship to Ove’s sense of compassion: like his father, Ove has skills and puts them in service of people who need them, whether Ove is irritated by those people’s lack of skills or not.

All that said, the other two aspects of Ove’s sense of what is right (his sense of tradition / habit and his beliefs about how things should be) are still important, and worth taking into account. For Ove, integrity involves honoring one’s commitments; being honest and truthful, no matter what the cost; and following the rules ... except when it becomes more important not to, particularly when rules imposed by people in white shirts prevent other people from living with integrity. For Ove, breaking the rules tends to be the true expression of true, human, compassion-defined integrity: the right thing, for him, is ultimately defined by respect – of oneself, of vulnerability, and of courage. This last, in turn, leads to the last of the novel’s primary themes: the importance of not giving up.

Not Giving Up

This theme / motif manifests on a few key occasions and in a few key ways throughout the narrative. At one point, it is referenced quite specifically and quite overtly: in Sonja’s comment on how Ove’s determination to keep sleeping with her in the bed and the room they had always shared was his way of “not giving up” (Section 8, Chapter 30). Here again, as was the case with Ove’s compassion-defined actions in saving the man at the train station, one specific reference colors and illuminates other incidents in the novel, giving them similar thematic resonance. Ove’s determination to continue living in the house left to him by his father and his determination to help Anita keep her beloved Rune at home are more conscious choices made by Ove that define / manifest this theme.

Another reference to this theme shows up in Quote 12, in which Ove considers whether his desire to die is, in fact, a desire to give up. The quote suggests that for Ove, there’s a clear difference between giving up and not wanting to live without the woman he loves, and who has loved him. The reader, on the other hand, can see something else at work: Ove’s subconscious desire to keep living, to very definitely not give up, that keeps him making compassionate choices; that keeps him finding things to do; that



keeps him making positive connections with other people that, in turn, keep him from giving up his life. In other words, he tells himself he's not giving up, but his sub-conscious mind / soul knows that that's EXACTLY what he's doing, and connects him with feelings, intuitions, intentions, and actions that keep him from doing so ... that, in an aspect of the story that takes the reader back to consideration of the first them, enables Ove to choose life, albeit one that he didn't plan, rather than death.

Styles

Point of View

For the most part, the story is told from almost entirely from the third person limited point of view – that is, from a perspective that focuses on Ove, the events in his life, his motivations for the choices that he makes, his reactions to events around him, and his memories. There are occasional references to other characters, particularly to Sonja and her perspectives, but for the most part the story is Ove's. The most notable, and substantial, point at which the narrative shifts away from Ove is Section 5, Chapter 5 (“A Man Who Was Ove and a Truck in the Forest”), which tells the story of how the relationship between Ove and Sonja's father began and developed. This is the only place in the narrative where the point of view is that of another character (i.e. Sonja) for more than a few lines at a time.

In terms of thematic point of view, the novel takes the clear position that love and compassion are not only positive and redeeming values, but that they can exist in, and / or change, even the most difficult, bitter, and wounded of human beings. This thematic point of view manifests both in the actual events of the story (i.e. how Ove changes both by acting out of compassion and by having others, particularly Sonja, act compassionately towards him), and in the way those events are both described and interpreted for / communicated to the reader. For further consideration of this aspect of the story, see “Themes – The Transcendent Power of Love and Compassion”.

Finally, there is the point of view of the narrative voice – specifically, how the language of narration communicates an attitude towards the central characters and the story. Here the writing (or, more specifically, the translation of the original writing), walks a carefully balanced line between being humorous (which suggests to the reader that some of Ove's “eccentricities” are potentially amusing), being poetic (see “Language and Meaning” below), and being intriguing (i.e. in creating mysteries about characters, situations, and motivations that draw the reader into the story, making them wonder what's going to happen next). This, in turn, relates to both the other primary stylistic elements under consideration here: language and meaning, and structure.

Language and Meaning

There are several points to note about how language is used in the story. The first is that the text examined in this analysis is an English translation, the original work being in Swedish. A more specific point to note is that the translation in question is very British in tone: use of mild curse words (i.e. “bloody” and “twit”) and usage of words like “terrace” to describe a sub-division of a city give the writing a sometimes incongruous flavor, given that so much of the original's cultural context (i.e. its Swedish origins) remains in place – a particular example is its use of “crowns” as the word defining its currency.



That said, the second noteworthy point about language relates to the use of verb tense in narration. Present tense is used in narration of events in the novel's primary, present day timeline – specifically, Ove's attempts at committing suicide and the development of relationships / circumstances that lead him away from the desire to do so. On the other hand, past tense is used in narration of events in Ove's history – his childhood, youth, relationship to Sonja, the details of the accident that changed their lives, and Sonja's death. A related point is that shifts between verb tense and time occur primarily on a chapter by chapter basis (i.e. chapters set in the present with present tense narration and so on), but there are also several chapters in which present tense narration segues, or transitions, into past tense and then back again. This happens when narration / contemplation of Ove's present day experiences trigger recollections / evocations of historical incidents and circumstances, understanding of which deepens the reader's understanding of the meaning / implications of the present day events.

Finally, there is occasionally a sense of gentle, evocative poetry about the language, word usage that, without being heavily metaphoric or self-consciously symbolic, nevertheless has a poetic simplicity and depth to it that, when deployed, is deeply moving. The most vivid example is the point where narration describes, very briefly, Ove's reasons for wanting to be with Sonja: "I just wanted to know what it felt like to be someone you look at", a hauntingly simple yet deeply affecting sentence written in a simple, honest, yet profound style that ripples gently throughout the book as a whole.

Structure

In terms of structure, the primary point to note about the book is its frequent, if sometimes irregular, movement between past and present. The main timeline, the main PLOT-line, is anchored in present day narration and, as noted above, is written in the present tense. That timeline, if looked at in isolation, can be seen as being fairly linear in structure, moving from Event A to Event B, cause to effect, action to reaction, incident to incident, in a generally linear way. Chapters focusing on that plotline, that structural element, are interspersed with chapters that take the reader into the past lives of the character – into Ove's past with Sonja in particular, but into stories / chapters that look into the histories of other characters as well. Again, there is no set pattern to this alternation between past and present: there is a long section in the middle of the book where the movement between past and present is basically chapter by chapter, but there are also sections in which there are several present day chapters in a row (rarely, if ever, is there a cluster of chapters that focus on the past).

Within that overall structure, there are other discernible, noticeable patterns. On a chapter by chapter level, there is the repeated structural motif (i.e. pattern) of beginning a chapter in the present day narrative line ... the narrative shifting or slipping into past tense narration to explore / recount an incident in the past that relates to and/or illuminates an incident in the present ... and then shifting back into the present, with the reader having a deeper, more illuminated sense of what is making the character do what s/he is doing in the present.



One last noteworthy structural element has to do with another layer of past / present jumping. Specifically, this relates to how the first chapter (i.e. Ove's encounter with the computer salesman) is set in what might be described as the immediate present, a present to which the narrative returns more than three dozen chapters later (Section 11, Chapter 38) in which Ove makes another attempt to purchase a computer, this one being successfully completed. The present day chapters in between (the ones written in present tense that describe developments in Ove's relationships with his neighbors) take place in what might be described as the recent past, while the chapters that are written in the past tense might be described as being written in the further past, which might be defined as the time leading up to Sonja's death, six months before the events of the present day timeline.



Quotes

Every morning for the almost four decades they had lived in this house, Ove had put on the coffee percolator ... one measure for each cup, and one extra for the jug - no more, no less. People didn't know how to do that any more, brew some proper coffee. In the same way as nowadays nobody could write with a pen. Because now it was all computers and espresso machines. And where was the world going if people couldn't even write or brew a bit of coffee?

-- Narration (chapter 2)

Importance: By using a specific example, this quote in general defines how Ove feels about progress, and the world in which he lives.

...nowadays people are all thirty-one and wear too-tight trousers and no longer drink normal coffee. And don't want to take responsibility. A shed-load of men with elaborate beards, changing jobs and changing wives and changing their car makes. Just like that. Whenever they feel like it.

-- Narration (chapter 2)

Importance: Another example of how Ove sees the world around him - this time, the world of work.

He can't understand people who long to retire. How can anyone spend their whole life longing for the day when they become superfluous? Wandering about, a burden on society, what sort of man would ever wish for that? Staying at home, waiting to die. Or even worse: waiting for them to come and fetch you and put you in a home. Being dependent on other people to get to the toilet.

-- Narration (chapter 4)

Importance: Here narration sums up Ove's reflections on what he feels like in the midst of his enforced "retirement".

He was a man of black and white. And she was color. All the color he had.

-- Narration (chapter 5)

Importance: This brief line sums up, in clear and vivid detail, the contrasting / complimentary qualities that were the primary elements of Ove's relationship with his wife.

They say the brain functions quicker while it's falling. As if the sudden explosion of kinetic energy forces the mental faculties to accelerate until the perception of the exterior world goes into slow motion. So Ove had time to think of many different things. Mainly radiators.

-- Narration (chapter 9)

Importance: In this quote, narration introduces the circumstances by which Ove reflects



and/or remembers important incidents in his life in the moments of his attempted suicide.

You only need one ray of light to chase all the shadows away ... you don't fool me, darling," she said with a playful little smile and crept into his big arms. "You're dancing on the inside, Ove, when no-one's watching. And I'll always love you for that. Whether you like it or not.

-- Sonya (chapter 12)

Importance: Here Ove's wife comments on why she loves him and what she sees in him, comments that Ove doesn't really understand.

A time like that comes for all men, when they choose what sort of men they want to be. And if you don't know the story, you don't know the men.

-- Narration (chapter 12)

Importance: Here narration offers a clear statement about Ove's character: his motivation, his decisions how to live his life, and his story.

And less than forty years later there was no forest around the house any more. Just other houses. And one day she was lying there in a hospital and holding his hand and telling him not to worry. Everything was going to be all right. Easy for her to say, thought Ove, his breast pulsating with anger and sorrow ... [she] leaned her arm against his arm ...and then closed her eyes and died ... if anyone had asked, he would have told them that he never lived before he met her. And not after, either.

-- Narration (Chapter 14)

Importance: This quote sums up Ove's experiences in the last few moments of his wife's life, and how he felt about their life together.

He hasn't given any real thought to how one is supposed to present oneself when arriving upstairs. Initially he thought one should be all spruced up and formal. Most likely there'll be some kind of uniform up there, to avoid confusion. He supposes there will be all sorts of people - foreigners, for instance, each one wearing stranger kit than the next. Presumably it will be possible to organize your clothes once you get there; surely there will even be some sort of wardrobe department?

-- Narration (chapter 15)

Importance: In this quote, and in the latest of a series of musings on what Heaven will be like, Ove wonders what clothes he should wear / will be wearing when he is reunited, in Heaven, with Sonya.

When Ove protested she just smiled and took his big hands in hers and kissed them, explaining that when a person gives to another person it's not just the receiver who's blessed. It's the giver."

-- Narration (chapter 21)



Importance: This quote sums up one of the differences in perspective between Ove and Sonja, and manifests one of the novel's key themes: the power of compassion.

And she wept. An ancient, inconsolable despair that screamed and tore and shredded them both as countless hours passed. Time and sorrow and fury flowed together in stark, long-drawn darkness. Ove knew there and then that he would never forgive himself for having got up from his seat at that exact moment, for not being there to protect them. And knew that this pain was forever.

-- Narration (chapter 23)

Importance: Narration describes Ove and Sonja's grief at losing their baby in the aftermath of the accident, and Ove's realization that that grief, entwined with guilt, would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Ove closes his eyes and thinks of Sonja. It's not that he's the sort of man who gives up and dies; he doesn't want her to think that. But it's actually WRONG, all this. She married him. And now he doesn't quite know how to carry on without the tip of her nose in the pit between his throat and his shoulder. That's all.

-- Narration (chapter 25)

Importance: In this quote, narration sums up both the depth and the detail associated with Ove's grief and loss.

...they both stand there, the fifty-nine-year-old and the teenager, a few metres apart, kicking at the snow. As if they were kicking a memory back and forth, a memory of a woman who insisted on seeing more potential in certain men than they saw in themselves. Neither of them know what to do with their shared experience.

-- Narration (chapter 26)

Importance: This quote sums up the reactions in both Ove and the young mailman to the discovery that they have more in common than they ever could possibly have imagined.

The sales assistant looks at Jimmy with a sort of twitching around his eyes that Ove seems adept at generating in people with whom he comes into contact. This is so frequent that one could possibly name a syndrome after him.

-- Narration (chapter 38)

Importance: Narration irreverently sums up the effect that Ove has on people, and will probably continue to have even though he seems to have opened his heart and soul in unexpected ways.

Death is a strange thing. People live their whole lives as if it does not exist, and yet it's often one of the great motivations for living ... we fear it, yet most of us fear more often than anything that it may take someone other than ourselves. For the greatest fear of death is always that it will pass us by. And leave us there alone.

-- Narration (chapter 39)

Importance: In this quote, narration sums up one of the book's main themes: the relationship between life and death.