

Our Souls at Night Study Guide

Our Souls at Night by Kent Haruf

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Plot Summary

Kent Haruf's novel, *Our Souls at Night*, tells the tale of the unlikely love found when Addie Moore proposes that her neighbor, Louis Waters, sleeps in the same bed as her because the nights are lonely. In small town Holt County. Their arrangement immediately comes under fire from the other elderly folks. Despite their words, the two continue because they believe they have finally found some light after the death of their spouses.

Each night, Louis and Addie recount parts of their past to each other and become closer for it. Louis tells Addie how his wife, Diane, lost the will to live as she wasted away from terminal cancer. Addie tells Louis about her eventually cold relationship with her husband, Carl, who died in church one Sunday morning. After relating the parts of their lives that are common knowledge, they begin to delve into the deeper, more painful memories that they have.

For instance, Louis tells Addie about his affair with a fellow school teacher named Tamara and how he left Diane and his young daughter to live with Tamara and her daughter. After ruining Tamara's marriage, he returned to his family. Addie then recounts the story of her daughter, Connie, who, while playing with her brother in the yard, ran out into the street. A car hit her, and Connie died in the hospital a few hours later. These events affect the way that each character behaves with the other and how each thinks about their own self. Louis's affair causes him to be brutally hard on himself, while Connie's death ruined Gene, Addie's son, and Carl's relationship. It put Addie in the middle of their resentment.

One day, Gene drops his son off at Addie's house asking that she look after the boy because Gene's wife left him. That summer, Jamie, Addie's grandson, stays with her in the house. He cries every night until Addie takes him into her bed to comfort him. Louis, who meets the boy, decides to get him a dog who they later call Bonnie. With Bonnie, Jamie feels more comfortable and begins to settle in for the summer. To help Jamie enjoy his summer and also to be with each other, Addie and Louis take him to a softball game, the Rocky Mountains to go camping, and restaurants.

Eventually, Jamie meets Louis and Addie's elderly neighbor Ruth who quickly takes to the boy. Later in the week, after dinner with Louis, Addie, and Jamie at Ruth's house, Ruth goes to the bank and collapses. She dies before she hits the floor. Deciding not to tell Jamie about Ruth's death, the couple continues with their summer. A weekend visit from Jamie's father, Gene, destroys Addie and Louis's peace. Gene denounces their relationship as something disgusting and tells them to stop immediately. Louis leaves in a fury and Addie tells Gene he should be ashamed of himself. That weekend, Gene takes Jamie home with him because Jamie's mother agreed to come back to the house.

When Addie tries to call Jamie, Gene refuses to let her speak to him because she continues her relationship with Louis. Addie and Louis have one more, sad night then they stop seeing each other. That fall, Addie breaks her hip and goes to live in a



retirement home near Gene and Jamie. Destroyed, Louis solemnly continues his routines around the house and in town until Addie calls him one day from her cell phone. Addie initiates the calls between them and they begin to talk regularly again. In this bittersweet manner, the novel ends.



Chapters 1 - 8

Summary

Our Souls at Night by Kent Haruf is a tale of the relationship between two aging neighbors who lived in the rural Midwestern United States. One day, Addie Moore, a widow, asked Louis Waters, a widower, to sleep in her bed with her, but only for companionship, not for anything physical. With this proposal, Haruf sets the stage for his novel to explore the ideas of new love in old bodies, the small town mindset, and the role of the elderly in society.

Chapter 1 begins with Addie's proposal on a cool, May evening on the comfortable and rural Cedar Street. Addie knocked on Louis's door, and he invited her inside his home. He mentioned that Diane, his deceased wife, always kept the house tidy. After a moment of small talk in which Louis noticed Addie's good looks, she asked him to sleep in her bed because she was lonely and she believed Louis was lonely as well. Louis told her that he would consider her offer. Then, he watched the graceful, 70 year old woman walk back to her house.

The next day, in Chapter 2, Louis got his hair cut and spruced up. Then, he walked over to Addie's house, just one door away. The couple had a drink at the kitchen table and Louis told Addie that he admired her willingness to risk what other people might think of them. Addie showed Louis the house and remarked that she had lived in the house for 44 years.

In Chapter 3, Addie went to the bathroom to change while Louis looked at family pictures in Addie's bedroom. He saw a picture of Carl, Addie's deceased husband, and pictures of Addie's son Gene and daughter when the girl was young. Louis then used the bathroom to brush his teeth and changed into his pajamas. Once in bed, the two remarked about how novel and nervous they both felt. Then, Addie turned the light out. Unable to sleep, Louis left early in the morning after telling Addie that he would see her soon. Louis awakened the next day feeling sick. At the hospital, he learned that he had a urinary tract infection. He called Addie to tell her he was sick. He stayed in the hospital for a few days. Addie visited him at the hospital to check on him and to say that she thought he was lying when he told her that he didn't feel well.

Louis returned home in Chapter 5. It took another full week to fully recover. Once he felt well, he spent the night at Addie's house where he decided to leave his pajamas and toothbrush. Addie told Louis that she picked him because she thought he was a good man and Louis told her that he thought that she was a good woman.

In Chapter 6, Louis worked in his yard the next day. Later, he went to have coffee with a group of men who got together every other week. One of the men cracked a joke about how much energy Louis had despite his nightly excursions. Louis snapped at the man



who stormed out of the café. Louis paid for both his coffee and the man's. Then, worked in his garden almost violently. That night he returned to Addie's house.

Addie let Louis into the house in Chapter 7. He told her about Dorlan Becker, the man from the coffee shop. Addie took the news in stride. Then, she asked if Louis wanted more beer.

Addie tells Louis the outline of her life in Chapter 8. She was born in Lincoln, Nebraska. She had gotten pregnant in college, then married Carl at 20 years old. Louis got jealous hearing about Carl, but he apologized to Addie for his feelings. Addie continued and told Louis that she and Carl had Connie, their firstborn. Then, 6 years later, they had Gene, their only son.

Analysis

The first section of this novel establishes the author's tone, mood, and major themes. Here, Haruf introduces his two main characters, Addie and Louis, and begins to flesh out their complexities. Section 1's overall tone is light and bantering. The dialogue between Addie and Louis, while sometimes it touches on sensitive topics, manages to fly through witty responses and keep the pace moving.

In all books, the first sentence is critical to the book's interpretation. In *Our Souls at Night*, the first sentence begins with the words, "And then". From these seemingly insignificant first two words, Haruf indicates much to the reader. Firstly, he indicates that he will not observe traditional academic writing rules. Starting a sentence with "and" gives the reader a sense of not only Haruf's colloquial writing style, but also his stance on normality and continuation. The novel does not deal with the fantasy or the impossible. Instead, it delves into the simple, yet profound moments in everyday life.

Fairy tales begin with the words "once upon a time", but Haruf starts his novel in a way that tells the reader that nothing mystical will occur in his story. "And then" gives the reader the feel that nothing particularly surprising will happen in the story. These 2 words demonstrate Haruf's style, they also hint at the contents of the book. The plot is simply a continuation of something. The ambiguity of this opening allows the author to commence in *medias res*, in the middle of things.

Besides the novel's opening, Haruf enforces the idea of flowing, pleasant novel in his lack of dialogue quotations. Yet again, he ignores the conventions of academic writing by leaving the transitions between narration and dialogue unclear. He does not mark the difference between his own omniscient narration and his characters' dialogue at all. In fact, at points, he does not even give line breaks between narration and dialogue.

Haruf's omission of quotations is significant because it informs the reader of his intentions for his manuscript. Namely, in an effort to make the novel appear as if it is seamless and fluid, he rejects traditional writing conventions and strives to appear natural. The intention to hide his book's artifice, or artificiality, is an example of *sprezzatura*. *Sprezzatura*, a literary convention in which the author attempts to make his



or her art appear effortless, allows Haruf to achieve the natural feel that his novel exudes. He omits quotation marks and begins his novel as if much action has already passed in an effort to portray small town life as what he perceives it to be. For the author, Holt, Colorado is a microcosm of all the events that occur in the larger world. Instead of portraying the town as idyllic, he gives detailed and expansive backstories to each of his characters.

Another consideration to note in Section 1 is the story's structure. While all of the action in this section occurs continuously, without temporal breaks, the author sets up the story in a way that allows both his main characters and the reader to familiarize themselves with each other. In other words, by having Abbie and Louis explore each other's lives from the beginning, Haruf creates an opportunity for the reader to get to know the story's main characters as naturally as possible.

In order to discover more about Louis and Abbie, the reader not only sees what the two say to each other, but also receives the insightful narration that goes along with this dialogue. For instance, in Chapter 1, Louis notices Abbie's hips and the rest of her body. He appreciates the way she looks, but does not express his observations aloud. Consequently, the reader notices Louis's almost immediate carnal reaction to Abbie and his desire for their relationship to move past that of platonic friendship. The first description the reader gets of Abbie is through the eyes of a man who is physically interested in her. With this fact in mind, one understands that, by perceiving the first section through Louis's eyes, the narration is not necessarily unbiased. Louis's personal feelings affect the narration just as his characteristics inform his dialogue.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author break conventional writing rules and do what effect?

Discussion Question 2

How does Louis's own feelings affect the story's narration?

Discussion Question 3

As Louis and Addie get to know each other, so too does the reader get to know them. What does Addie reveal about herself to Louis in this first section?

Vocabulary

prevaricator, proposal, companionably, honking, disgraceful, willingness, overlooking, trivial, routine, paving, infection, ragged, presumptuous, intrusive, particularly, reputation, violently, defused, vaguely, circumstances



Chapters 9 - 18

Summary

Chapter 9 begins when Addie dropped her elderly neighbor, Ruth, off at her house after a trip to the grocery store. While at the store, the clerk made a snide, but veiled comment about Addie and Louis. Ruth responded saying that the clerk had a spot on her blouse. Ruth told Addie that she knew about her and Louis's nightly visits because he walked across Ruth's lawn to get to his house every morning. Addie said he was a good man. Ruth agreed, but she mentioned that he was unfaithful to his wife.

Addie questioned Louis about the woman with whom he had an affair in Chapter 10. He told her that the woman, Tamara, was married and worked at the high school as an English teacher like Louis himself. After filing his taxes in mid-April, Louis went to Tamara's house and their affair began. He moved in with Tamara and her daughter Pamela, ignoring his wife (Diane) and his daughter (Holly). After realizing his mistake, Louis moved back into his house. Once, Tamara called him, but he told her he couldn't see her. Addie remarked that she thought Louis was still in love with Tamara, but he disagreed.

In Chapter 11, Addie told Louis about how her daughter Connie, at 11 years old, died after being hit by a car while playing in the street. After the funeral, Addie's husband Carl asked if she wanted to move, but Addie said the spot was almost sacred after Connie's death. Louis informed Addie his daughter Holly was coming down for Memorial Day weekend in Chapter 12 and she arrived in Chapter 13. Holly challenged Louis about his relationship with Addie, but Louis defended his actions telling her that his life was his own. The next day, Holly's friend, Julie Newcomb, called to tell her about Louis and Addie, but Holly told her off.

In Chapter 14, Louis told Addie about Diane's women's group in which she spoke about Louis's infidelity with Tamara. Diane never worked, but Addie worked as a clerk at the city offices. Chapter 15 saw Louis and Addie eating at the town's busiest café together, despite the expectations of the townspeople. One woman stopped by their table and admired their courage.

In Chapter 16, Jamie, Addie's 6 year old grandson, went to stay with his grandmother because his mother left his father Gene, Addie's son. Gene dropped his son off at the house of his mother, Addie. Addie and Jamie went to visit Louis after Jamie's father left. That night, Jamie woke up crying and went to sleep in his grandmother's bed.

Chapter 17 started with Louis showing Jamie and Addie a den of mice in his shed. Jamie worked in Louis's yard with him for the day. Then, that night he called his mother who did not respond. He called his father who told him that he needed to stay at his grandmother's house for a while more. Jamie woke up crying and went to sleep in Addie's bed.



In Chapter 18, Jamie returned to Louis's house to see the mice again. That night Louis was sleeping in Addie's bed. When Jamie woke up crying, Louis planted him in the center of the bed, between himself and Addie.

Analysis

In Section 2, the author develops his two main characters and the story's plot. *Our Souls at Night's* genre becomes evident. The story of Addie and Louis's relationship is something of a small town, pseudo-romance in which the main characters defy the social conventions of small town America and those of the romance novel. The couple, both of whom have lost their spouses, finds a specific kind of love that defies classification. Their relationship grows in this chapter as the two tackle the expectations of the other townspeople and come to define their interactions as something of a love affair.

Throughout this section, Addie is the author's focus. Haruf develops her personality through her interactions with other characters, like Ruth and Jamie, and through the stories that she tells Louis. In Chapter 9, Addie drives Ruth to the grocery store. At the store Ruth asks Addie, "Aren't you going to get anything?" Addie responds, "No...I shopped the other day." This simple exchange reveals something about Addie as a person that other situations in the novel do not. She is able to act selflessly and take care of another person despite the lack of an obligation to do so. She helps Ruth, her elderly neighbor, solely to ease the old woman's chores. As in all interactions and plot points in this book, little interactions like this one add up into an overall indication of one's character. The characters do not act heroically; they do not fight one and other; and, they do not make courageous declarations of love.

During their trip to the grocery store, the cashier makes a snide remark about finding a man close to home. Rather than allowing Addie to respond for herself, Ruth informs the girl that there is a spot on her blouse and that she should not come to work in a dirty outfit. The girl, not understanding the symbolic significance of Ruth's words, is flustered and remarks that she cannot find any spot.

The scene makes Ruth a more likable character. It also indicates that the novel may appear to be concerned only with the mundane and the physical, but it operates on a metaphysical level, too. This overtly symbolic instance gestures toward the literary tradition in which *Our Souls at Night* operates. Ruth's remark to the cashier, Louis's concern over Addie's reputation, and the overall plot of the novel are allusions to another novel set in small town America that involves the idea of a woman's dignity, *The Scarlet Letter*. Kent Haruf's obsession with the idea of American rural life and his concern with the idea of societal expectations point toward Nathaniel Hawthorne's themes in *The Scarlet Letter*. Chapter 9 contains one example when Ruth offers the idea of shame being a physical mark borne by those who act immorally, like Addie who sleeps with Louis.



Another development in Section 2 is the dichotomy between innocence and maturity. Haruf uses violence, sexual references, and strong language in this section, but he also introduces Jamie, the novel's first and major child. In Chapter 10, Louis tells Addie about his family-crushing affair with Tamara. In Chapter 11, Addie tells him about how her first born child died at 11 years old. In Chapter 12, Louis's daughter visits and, in Chapter 16, Addie's son and grandson visit. The contrast between the violence and desperation of Chapters 11 and 12 and the introduction of children and the continuation of life in the following chapters extenuate the book's broad scope. Despite the fact that the story takes place in a microcosm, Haruf employs this parochial setting to comment upon the multifaceted aspects of the world at large.

Discussion Question 1

How does the introduction of Jamie, Addie's grandson, change the novel's scope?

Discussion Question 2

What does Haruf's inclusion of the tale of Addie's daughter do to the story's tone?

Discussion Question 3

As their pasts come to light, how do Addie and Louis change in both each other's eyes and in the eyes of the reader?

Vocabulary

preserves, sophisticated, mistreated, mediocre, unscrewed, wailing, gash, swollen, arranged, sacred, omission, propping, printmaking, capable, admire, embarrassed, liberation, ironic, entwined



Chapters 19 - 27

Summary

In Chapter 19, Louis drove Addie, Jamie, and Ruth to a hamburger joint then to a softball game. Afterward, Louis told Addie that Jamie had never played catch. The next day, Louis bought Jamie a glove and played with him in the yard. That night, Louis decided to buy Jamie a dog and the next day they bought him a collie mix with a plastic tube on its right front foot. Jamie named the dog Bonny after a girl in his class that he liked. Jamie slept in his room that night with Bonny in his bed. He did not come into Addie's room crying that night.

Chapter 21 saw Louis revealing his former aspiration to be a poet to Addie. His poems were, as he put it, "awful little things" that strained his already bruised relationship with Diane, his wife, because she was jealous of his passion for poetry. Addie shared that she was a teacher as well. In Chapter 22, Louis and Jamie checked on the growing mice in his shed and Louis said that mice can chew through anything. Ruth hosted a dinner for her three neighbors in Chapter 23 in which she told Jamie to make sure he grew up to be a good man. One morning, the three take Bonny out to the country in Chapter 24. They enjoyed an unclouded, hot summer day in the country.

A shift, in which the narration focused on Ruth, occurred in Chapter 25. In late July, Ruth went to the bank on Main Street with another old lady. Ruth dropped dead on the floor. They took her body directly to the funeral home instead of the hospital and had her body cremated. A handful of the elderly fold, Louis, Addie, and Jamie attended the funeral. A distant niece of Ruth's came, gave her aunt's urn to Addie, and sold Ruth's house.

In Chapter 26, Addie talked about how after the death of Connie, her daughter, Carl was never the same. He did not care for Gene the way he loved Connie. Carl's feelings for Gene affected the boy. After Connie's death, Addie and her husband Carl grew distant, stopped having sex, and seldom spoke to each other.

In Chapter 27, they packed Louis's pickup truck and went camping in the Rocky Mountains. They set up camp among massive trees, waded into the chilly stream around their camp, and ate a dinner of hot dogs and canned beans. After dinner, they roasted marshmallows. Before sleeping, Louis took Jamie to the latrine. Then, they turned in for the night. Louis and Addie slept together while holding hands. The next day they returned home after dark.

Analysis

As a character, Jamie grows. His presence changes the scope of the novel in Section 3. Besides changing Addie's and Louis's nightly routine, he affects the way that the couple behave with each other and around others, like their neighbor Ruth. In a way, Jamie is



the child of Addie and Louis. He is legitimately related to Abby. More than that, the two become his guardians. The idea that Abby and Louis, an elderly couple, could care for a child at their age is an empowering idea that fits into Haruf's message. The question the author poses is if an old widow and an aged widower can find love, then why can they not raise a child?

Throughout Section 3, the author Americanizes the novel. In Chapter 20, Louis brings the gang to a softball game where they drink root beer floats. In Chapter 27, Louis, Addie, and Jamie drive out along U.S. Highway 50 to the Rocky Mountains where they embrace the romantic idea of the hardy, American explorer. They eat hot dogs and canned beans. The inclusion of these rustic, American foods, landscapes, and sports firmly places *Our Souls at Night* in the context of American literature. As Haruf tries to find a place for his novel in the American literary context, he positions his characters in a way that highlights the aspects of average, small town, American life. While the author's purpose for this attempt is debatable, the story demonstrates and captures both the profound and the mundane facets of small town America. In his dealing with the idea of being an American in the Midwest, Haruf dances between idolizing the American landscape and its pastimes and criticizing the narrow minded, parochial ideals that go along with the small town existence.

Section 3 also features heavy foreshadowing. When Louis and Addie lie next to each other in Chapter 22, Louis tells Addie that he likes what they have a lot. She replies that she loves it. Directly after these words, the chapter ends. The empty space that follows their praising of their relationship emphasizes their words.

In Chapter 24, Haruf enforces the fragile nature of their love with the scene in which Addie accuses Louis of being "skeptical about how long this [their relationship] will last". He replies, a tad ominously, that "everything changes". Because their relationship is precious to them, the author begins to threaten the peace that he has cultivated up to this point. These scenes are instances of foreshadowing impending trouble in Addie's and Louis's relationship.

The author introduces another important idea in this section when he reveals that Louis "wanted to be a poet." When Louis tells this to Addie, he becomes more than a character in the book. After this revelation, he changes into a figure for the author himself and for the idea of art. Almost every time an author includes a character who is an artist, that character becomes a meta-fiction tool used to highlight the idea of creating art. In Louis's case, his failed aspirations to become a poet represent the fears that the author himself may have experienced. Furthermore, when Louis says that his poems were "awful, little things," he emphasizes the notion that art can fail and that the author's personal perception affects the work. Louis's musings point back to the idea of writing itself, a process in which Haruf engages.



Discussion Question 1

What stance does Haruf take on small town life in America? Consider both his treatment of the town gossips and the way he idolizes sport.

Discussion Question 2

How does Louis bond with Jamie in this section? What effect does this bonding have on the boy's temperament?

Discussion Question 3

What purpose does the idyllic and essentially American camping trip serve for both the characters and for the novel's structure?

Vocabulary

hollered, adjust, extravagantly, doddering, irrigated, humane, yap, squatted, whining, tangling, dominion, unnecessarily, quarterlies, bookkeeping, communal, sniffle, adjustment, withdrawing, shuffling, orthodoxy



Chapters 28 - 36

Summary

Chapter 28 begins with the arrival of Addie's son Gene who came to the house and immediately started interrogating Louis about his relationship with Addie. Jamie had a bad dream that night, and Addie took him into her bed. Gene could not comfort his son. In Chapter 29, Louis told Addie about Diane's final year of life and her decline. Diane lost the will to live and succumbed to her cancer. Just as Diane got tired of life, Addie feared that Louis would do the same with her.

In Chapter 30, the annual Holt County Fair occurred while Addie, Louis, and Jamie watched. As the soaked parade moved past, Louis laughed at a young man holding an umbrella who was dressed as Jesus. Louis remarked that he could walk on water, but he couldn't keep it off his head. That afternoon, the rain stopped and they went to the fairgrounds to watch a horse race. Instead of drinking slushy, icy drinks, they ate them. Then, they rode the Ferris wheel. The late August day ended with the trio eating dinner on the front porch of Addie's house.

Louis mowed his lawn and Addie's in Chapter 31. He discovered that the den of mice in his shed was gone. When Louis went over to Addie's house that night, Jamie got a call from his mother who said that she was coming back home and that Jamie would return to live with his parents again. Addie, Louis, and Jamie went to eat at the Wagon Wheel restaurant a few nights later in Chapter 32. Stanley, a friend of Louis's and a wheat farmer in the area, came over to their table to chat. He remarked that he heard Louis and Addie were seeing each other. Then, he asked Addie if she knew anyone who would be willing to curl up with an old wheat farmer. Stanley said that the harvest was good. The three drove up a nearby hill after dinner and looked out over the fields.

In Chapter 33, Addie described her husband who died in church to Louis. She talked about how Carl slumped then crumpled to the floor during Mass. The ambulance took Carl directly to the funeral home instead of the hospital. Gene took his father's death poorly because he had been so angry with his father for never loving him the way he loved Gene's sister. Addie saw that Carl's treatment of Gene affected Gene's treatment of Carl.

In Chapter 34, the couple discussed a play, based on a book, at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts. Since the plot related to country life, Louis said that he did not want to be in any book. In Chapter 35, Gene was driving to Holt to take his son back home. They had brought Bonnie, the dog. Jamie said goodbye to his grandmother, but he was unable to find Louis. That afternoon, Addie kissed Louis for the first time where others could see them. Then, she told him that she felt better for having him there. The pair tried to have sex with each other for the first time in Chapter 36. After getting over the self-consciousness they had about their aging bodies, Louis told Addie that he had "the old man's complaint." So, they agreed to try again another night.



Analysis

Section 4 extends and complicates the novel's previously simple plot while deepening the relationship between Addie and Louis. The two analyze what it is that they share with each other each night and agree that they would very much prefer stay together.

In Chapter 28, Gene visits Jamie at Addie's house. He tells his mother and Louis that he disapproves of their relationship. Throughout a heated exchange among Louis, Addie, and Gene, the reader sees how Gene understands the role of a mother and the celibate widow. While this confrontation furthers the plot, it also contains an interesting grammatical point that shapes the novel and the reader's perception of the story. The author never writes whether a character shouted, whispered, or sighed when they spoke. Instead, the author writes the dialogue, not even marked with quotations, in a pseudo-deadpan manner. The conversations read as if they are lines in a play. The reader must decide how each character would say their lines. Consequently, the reader has more room for interpretation than in most novels.

In these chapters, both Addie and Louis talk about the way in which their partners passed. First, Louis tells Addie that Diane wasted away because she lost her will to live. Then, Addie describes the way Carl died in church. In speaking about death, the two touch on the idea of the soul and of what occurs after death. Addie believes that Connie, her daughter, remains with her in some form and is attached to the house. In Chapter 29, Louis speaks of "some kind of emanation" he felt when he describes how Diane died. For a novel that, until this point, was only concerned with a narrow, immediate idea of the world, the introduction of almost supernatural elements marks a shift.

A shift in tone occurs in Chapter 30. The rain falling on Holt County parade is an example of comparing a human attribute to an object in nature. Just after Gene's denunciation of their relationship and Louis's story of Diane's death, the couple's relationship is unsteady.

This change in tone reflects itself in the rain that pours down upon the parade. In keeping with this instance of pathetic fallacy, Chapter 31 explores when Jamie and Louis find out that the den of mice is no longer in Louis's shed. When the pair first visit the mice, the mother runs away from her litter. Jamie asks Louis why she fled. Louis responds that she was afraid. Jamie's situation is very similar because his mother left him and his father to stay in California. Chapter 31 ends with Jamie's mother calling him and telling him that she is coming home. By including the idea of nature bearing human emotions and reflecting upon characters' situations, Haruf engages with the concept of Romanticism and elevates the status of his novel from that of a simple, plot-based story.

In Chapter 34, the couple discuss a play, based on a book, at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts. Since the plot related to country life, Louis says that he does not want to be in any book. In other words, Addie and Louis's discussion about a play in Denver can also be read as the author discussing the book itself. This conversation is an instance of meta-fiction because Haruf self-consciously alludes to the artificial nature of the novel.



Discussion Question 1

How does Gene's visit Jamie in Chapter 28 affect Louis and Addie's relationship, if at all?

Discussion Question 2

Both Addie and Louis tell each other about how their spouses died. Do these revelations change how they behave with each other?

Discussion Question 3

How does Haruf play with the conventions of his novel in this section and to what end?

Vocabulary

consoled, radiation, sedatives, frail, emanation, pattering, notables, vacant, infamous, winced, sermon, embalmed, cremated, trance, resentment, improbable, humiliation, fortunate, plopping, brood



Chapters 37 - 43

Summary

In Chapter 37, Louis and Addie walked over to the grade school playground. Louis pushed Addie on the swing. Later, they stayed overnight in Denver at a beautiful hotel to watch a play. Chapter 38 began on Labor Day when Louis and Addie decided to drive out to Chief Creek and picnic. After lunch, Louis stripped and went swimming, Addie quickly followed suit. After a lovely afternoon, they return to their homes. Almost the second Louis entered his house, Addie called him on the phone and told him to hurry over because Gene, Addie's son, was waiting. Gene ordered them to stop seeing each other. A heated argument ensued that left both Gene and Addie in tears and Louis angry.

After the climactic fight in Chapter 38, Addie and Louis continued to see each other despite Gene's wishes, but it was different. In Chapter 39, their relationship had lost the lighthearted pleasure it previously had. One day, Addie tried to talk to Jamie, but Gene would not let her. She called Jamie on her cell phone when he was alone, but the 6 year old boy just cried and told her that his parents would take Bonnie and his phone away if he talked to her. Addie told Louis about Gene's ultimatum. They only had one last night together because she needed her grandson. Louis left at four in the morning, and Addie cried.

In Chapter 40, Louis made a habit of walking through the neighborhood and passing by Addie's house on brisk fall walks. One night, he saw Addie's face, but she ignored him. When he got home, she called to tell him he could not walk past her house anymore. He never passed her familiar house at night after that call.

Addie slipped and broke her hip in Chapter 41. A few days later, Dorlan Becker, one of the men who met biweekly at the coffeehouse, told Louis about Addie's incident. Louis drove to the hospital in Denver where Addie had been admitted and found Gene and Jamie in Addie's room. After Addie begged him, Gene allowed Louis inside. Addie told him nothing had changed, that she needed her family, and that she was moving into the Grand Junction assisted living facility despite Louis's desire to care for her himself and become her family. Louis kissed her on the mouth.

Addie called Louis in Chapter 42 from her cell phone. After a pause, Louis responded and they spoke about their loneliness without each other. In Chapter 43, Addie called Louis on a winter's day after he shoveled snow. She told him that Jamie's parents had been fighting again. Addie told him that the play they had been discussing would be in Denver soon. Neither of them would go without the other, so they agreed that strangers would sit in their seats. Louis lamented that he could never initiate the calls because Addie would not be able to hide the call from Gene. After Louis asked her what she wanted to talk about tonight, Addie looked out the window and asked, "Dear, is it cold there tonight?". With that question, the novel ends.



Analysis

Section 5, while the shortest of the story's sections, contains what would traditionally be the novel's rising action, climax, and resolution. Since the novel focuses on character development and the intricacies of relationships, referring to certain events from this section as climactic or resolving is insufficient. If there must be a climax in the story, it is Gene's second visit to Holt County in which he demands that Addie and Louis stop seeing each other. After his words, their relationship cannot recover and begins to crumble. As for the book's resolution, when Addie starts to call Louis regularly from her cell phone, they regain a portion of what they had lost. With this bittersweet resolution, the story ends.

From the beginning of this section, the author sets up the couple's fall. In Chapter 37, the two enjoy a childlike moment of joy when they go to the grammar school's playground and Addie rides the metal swing while Louis pushes her. This episode is an instance of regression or recapturing for the pair. Although they are laden with the expectations of their microcosmic society and the accumulated aches of their aging bodies, they are able to forget their worries and their responsibilities and enjoy an instance of pure, infantile joy. After this chapter, they go to Denver and have a wonderful night away from Holt in which they stay at a fancy hotel and view a play. After a night at the hotel, Addie says, "tomorrow I want our own bed again". Despite the fact that the bed is in her house and Louis lives a couple doors down from her, Addie refers to the bed communally, saying "our" instead of "mine". This word choice highlights the dependence of their relationship and unites them even further. While these sequential chapters certainly build the beauty of Addie's and Louis's relationship, it also contains a uniquely undermining tone which forebodes the end of their relationship. After these perfect moments, their relationship cannot get any better. In thinking this way, the reader begins to understand that their honeymoon phase must end.

In Chapter 38, after Gene's visit, Louis and Addie enjoy a nearly idyllic picnic by the river on the farm of Bill Martin, a farmer whose children Louis taught. As with much of the novel, the elder characters concern themselves with the idea of children. Louis tells Addie that all of Bill's children have "left home now." Then, he goes on to say, "I imagine he's sorry about that. Kids don't want to stay here." With these words, Louis remarks upon the discrepancies between childhood and adulthood. This chapter with its picturesque beginning considers how important children are to have around and does the same at its end. When the two get home, Addie calls Jamie, but Gene answers and tells her that she cannot speak with her grandson until she leaves Louis. Addie makes the heartbreaking decision to forsake Louis in order to have a sliver of family.

Addie tells Louis they must end what they have at the change of season. The overarching pathetic fallacy of seasonal change makes itself even more evident as the novel enters its third season in this chapter. Late spring saw the birth of their relationship, summer its height, and fall its end. This pathetic fallacy structures the novel and informs the way the reader understands the story's progress. The idea of fall and decay plays into the course of Addie and Louis's relationship and also into the idea of



aging itself. In the penultimate chapter, Addie tells Louis that she has to move into the home while she's "still able to make the adjustment". She says, "I can't wait until I'm too old. I won't be able to change then or I might not even have the option." Despite the beauty of what the pair have, they must confront the realities of their bodies and evaluate what exactly they hold dear. At first, Addie leaves Louis for Jamie, her grandson. However, in the final chapters, she calls Louis. Consequently, in considering what she loves, she eventually includes Louis as the only other connection she has in the later part of her life.

Discussion Question 1

How does the change of season reflect the novel's overall changes?

Discussion Question 2

Is Gene's demand that his mother, Addie, stop seeing Louis justified? Is this sentiment natural for a son to feel about his mother's relationships?

Discussion Question 3

When the novel ends, Addie is able to see her grandson and continue to keep in contact with Louis, but a compromise has been made. What does this compromise say about the process and realities of aging?

Vocabulary

fluttering, queued, leisurely, contented, pulsing, ashamed, obscure, silverware, shuttled, appreciate, admitted, adjustment, rented, available, obscure, silverware, shuttled, auditorium, intermission, looming, generous, horizon, twisting



Characters

Louis Waters

Louis is one of the story's two main characters. In his mid-70's, he is the second oldest character in the book, after Ruth. After Addie, his neighbor from two doors door, invites him to sleep in her bed each night, he begins a relationship with her. Of the two, Louis is more reserved at first and Addie's daring personality is both refreshing and shocking for him. Just after Addie proposes the sleeping arrangement, Louis notes her physical attractiveness.

Before his retirement, Louis was a high school English teacher in Holt County, where he resides throughout the novel. After years of teaching, he knows many of the townsfolk and their children. While speaking to Addie, he shares that his true fascination with English literature is poetry rather than prose. He then admits that he was only a good teacher, never a great one, because he would rather have been a poet.

In his typically self-critical way, Louis disparages his poetry and also his character. When telling Addie about his wife, Diane, he relates that their relationship was only enjoyable before their first child. After Holly, their daughter, the two began to drift apart because Diane resented the fact that Louis had a life outside of the house and he grew weary of his home life. The two stopped speaking to each other. Then, Louis began an affair with Tamara, another English teacher at the high school.

He left Holly and Diane to live with Tamara for a time, then came to his senses and returned home. Grudgingly, Diane accepted him back into her life; but, too much damage had been done for them to really recover. Louis berates himself for the way he treated Tamara. Their affair ruined Tamara's marriage while Louis was able to return to Diane and be a part of Holly's life. In relating the mistakes of his life, Louis becomes closer to Addie and begins to recover from the "old sins" as he calls them. Louis remains in Holt County while Addie moves to a retirement home to be closer to her grandson Jamie.

Addie Moore

Addie is one of the novel's main characters. She is a grey haired, pretty woman in her early 70's. The reader first meets her during the opening scene when she goes to Louis Waters's house and asks him to sleep in her bed with her without any sexual activities. She is lonely after losing her husband Carl years before and wishes to pass the nights in the company of another person. With this daring gesture, Addie creates the novel's theme of the power of companionship.

Despite the way that rumors fly in Holt County and the expectations of her family and friends to be a celibate widow, Addie risks the derision and scorn of everyone she knows in order to be happy in her later years. With their relationship, she becomes



happy and the nights become far less lonely. She unburdens all her losses and pent up frustrations each night with Louis. She tells him about how her daughter, Connie, died at 11 years old and how the event crushed her son Gene as well as her husband Carl. In the aftermath of Connie's death, Carl was unable to show Gene the love that he did Connie. The burden to make up for Gene's lack came to rest upon her alone because her husband could not love Gene.

Even though her immediate family is fractured, when Jamie, her grandson, comes to stay with her for a summer, she rekindles the familial bond that she struggled to have with Gene and Carl. Over the summer, she becomes like a mother to Jamie and Louis becomes something of a father again. Jamie heals their wounds just as they heal the wounds of each other in Addie's room each night. Eventually, Gene comes to pick his son up and take him home. Before he leaves, he demands that Addie and Louis stop seeing each other. He does not allow Addie to speak to Jamie until she leaves Louis.

One day after their breakup, Addie slips on a Main Street sidewalk and breaks her hip. She goes to a hospital in Denver where Louis visits her only to find Gene barring the door. Gene allows them five minutes alone. After leaving the hospital, Addie goes to stay in a retirement home in the same town as Jamie and Gene. While she gets to see Jamie often, she longs for Louis's company. Again, she dares the disapproval and potential familial disaster when she calls him from her cell phone. The two resume speaking regularly, but they cannot see each other.

Jamie

Jamie is Addie's grandson who comes to live with Addie during the summer of her relationship with Louis. At 6 years old, he is, at first, a lonely and distraught boy when he comes to Holt County. Through Addie's gentle care and Louis' company, he begins to settle into the small town. After getting Bonnie, a rescue dog from the pound, and taking almost weekly trips with Louis and Addie, he feels at home in Holt. Gene, his father, eventually picks him up to take him back home because his mother, who had run away to California, came home. Caught between the now familiar comfort of Holt and his parents, Jamie gets tugged around from one place to the next.

As a character, Jamie is flat and largely unformed mainly because he is only 6 years old. Haruf rarely gives him dialogue and his presence is usually secondary to that of Louis and Addie. In this way, he becomes something of a symbol for youth rather than a specific example of it. He simply displays the effects of poor parenting and the beautiful simplicity of youth. By and large, he is a contrast to Addie, Louis, and the other characters, all of whom are older than Jamie.

Carl and Diane

Carl was Addie's husband, and Diane was Louis's wife. While the two are never alive during the story's plot, the effects that each had on their spouse are significant. Carl died one day in church after a sudden heart attack. Diane wasted away from terminal



cancer and lost the will to live. Carl and Addie became cold and robotic with each other as time passed because of the loss of Connie, their firstborn. Similarly, Diane and Louis went through nearly incessant rough patches until Diane began to shrivel up and die.

The two of them represent different aspects of both dying and marriage. Carl is the single-minded breadwinner whose past tragedy with his daughter turns him into something of a hero. On the other hand, Diane is the subservient, good wife whose husband cheated on her. But, she allowed him to return to the house. Perhaps hating herself for her weakness, she openly welcomes the cancer that eventually kills her because it offers a sort of tragic escape.

Gene and Connie

Gene and Connie are Addie and Carl's son and daughter. Connie died young, and Addie only vaguely remembers her. Gene was born when Connie was 6 years old. At 11, Connie and the then 5 year old Gene were playing in the backyard with a sprinkler. Addie went into the kitchen to check on their dinner. Then, she heard the screech of tires. She ran outside to find Connie dead in the street after being hit by a car. Connie's death is the watershed moment that affects every member of Addie's family. Addie struggles to forgive herself for her lack of supervision. Carl withdraws, and Gene wilts from lack of fatherly love.

Ruth Joyce

Ruth's house is between the houses of Addie and Louis. At 82 years old, Ruth is older than the two of them by about a decade. She is the oldest character in the novel. Addie takes Ruth shopping every week. Eventually, Ruth invites Addie, Louis, and Jamie over for dinner one night. At this dinner, Ruth disparages Louis's past infidelity, then demands that Jamie grow up to be a good man. After Ruth's own father cheated on her mother, she has a poor opinion of men. However, she has hope that Jamie will be different from her father and Louis.

Tamara

Louis has an affair with Tamara, a married woman, while he is married to Diane. Tamara is an English teacher at the town's high school just like Louis. Unlike Louis, after the affair, Tamara's marriage is ruined. Louis goes back to his family with only minor repercussions. Years later, Tamara calls Louis's house. Diane answers and tells Louis that someone is on the phone. Louis speaks to Tamara. He tells her that he has a family and cannot see her. Tamara and Louis never have contact with each other again.



Dorlan Becker

Dorlan is one of the men with whom Louis has coffee each week. Although Louis does not like the man, he bears with Dorlan until one day Dorlan makes a snide comment about Louis and Addie. Louis tells him to mind his own business. Then, Dorlan leaves and Louis pays for Dorlan's coffee. Ironically, Dorlan is also the gossip who tells Louis that Addie is in the hospital after she breaks her hip in the street one day. With this information, Louis is able to track Addie down and see her. Overall, Dorlan is neither a positive or negative influence. He is a representation of the small town gossip who wags their tongue.

Stanley Thompkins

As in the case of Dorland Becker, Stanley is the archetypal Midwestern wheat farmer. He has strong hands, a weathered face, and a hearty manner. When he sees Louis and meets Addie and Jamie one night at a restaurant just outside of Holt County, his friendly demeanor immediately endears Addie and Jamie to him. Unlike the majority of the townspeople, Stanley supports their relationship and even asks Addie if she knows anyone willing to curl up with an old wheat farmer.

Holly

Louis and Diane's daughter Holly bears some of the scars of her father's infidelity. When she was a child and Louis walked out on Diane and her, she lost her father for a time. When he finally came back, she had to bear with a divided household in which her parents were no longer in love with each other. When she comes to visit Louis for a weekend, she tells him, gently, that he should think about what he's doing with Addie and what Diane would think of it. After Louis firmly says that it's his business and she makes him happy, Holly accepts their relationship. In this way, she is a foil character to Gene who cannot accept Addie and Louis's relationship and goes so far as to destroy it by risking the relationship between his son and the boy's grandmother.



Symbols and Symbolism

Bonnie

Jamie's rescued dog, Bonnie, is the most animated symbol of the novel. Besides being Jamie's comfort, she becomes something of a friend to him. As his companion, she is important to the novel through her relationship to Jamie and because she was Louis's idea. He decided to buy Jamie a dog in order to give him a friend away from home. In this way, Bonnie represents both Louis's drive to make Jamie feel at home and Jamie's ability to give a home to another being. Since he himself is in a troubling transitory period, his ability to provide and care for Bonnie gives him a sense of comfort and control.

Baseball Mit

After watching a softball game with Louis, Addie, and Ruth, Jamie gets a baseball mitt from Louis. Again, Louis tries to comfort Jamie, but he does so with the a symbol of the American dream. The American dream of buying a house with a yard and a white picket fence and filling the house with a family in which the boys play baseball is prevalent in *Our Souls at Night*. By trying to give Jamie a home, Addie and Louis almost adopt the boy. As surrogate parents, the responsibility to instruct Jamie lands on their heads. In acknowledging this burden, Louis teaches Jamie to play catch, something so inherently American that Louis is shocked to learn that Gene has never played catch with Jamie.

Toothbrush and Pajamas

Toward the beginning of Louis and Addie's relationship, Addie makes the suggestion for Louis to leave his toothbrush and pajamas at her house. He replies that doing so would save him the trouble of using many paper bags. While the conversation is about overnight supplies, Addie is asking him to set up roots at her place and to make their arrangement more permanent. By accepting, Louis is agreeing to the unspoken meaning and significance of Addie's words. The toothbrush and pajamas become symbols of the couple's willingness to affirm the importance of their relationship.

Bathing Suit

When Connie gets hit by a car in the street, she dies in her bathing suit. As Addie remembers, her limbs were twisted at odd angles and her head was gashed. In the gorey recounting of her daughter's death, Addie specifically mentions that the most shocking part of seeing Connie's body was the bathing suit she was wearing. A bathing suit on a child is a symbol of one of the most enjoyable parts of being young. Going to the beach, swimming in the pool, or playing with the sprinkler are all moments in which children would wear a bathing suit. The shock that Addie feels is that no longer will



Connie be able to participate in those childhood pastimes and no longer would Addie be able to transitively enjoy those moments through her firstborn child.

Addie's Pictures

Louis feels as if he is invading another family's house when he first spends the night at Addie's because he sees pictures of Carl, Gene, and a young Connie. Not only is he doing something that he finds strange, novel, and daring, but he must do so in front of photographs of Addie's family. He particularly dislikes seeing Carl, Addie's dead husband, because he feels like he is competing with a dead man for the same woman's bed. Despite Addie's words to ease him, Louis leaves early in the night because the thought of onlookers, especially onlookers belonging to Addie's family, unsettles him. The pictures become lifelike and judgmental in Louis's mind. Thus, they transcend the boundaries of the physical to become symbols.

Stain on the Apron

Ruth tells a snarky store clerk at the grocery store that there is a spot on her shirt and that the girl should not come to work in such a state. Dumbfounded, the clerk tells Ruth that she cannot find any stain, but Ruth persists saying that it is there. Despite the fact that there is no physical spot, Ruth believes that there is in fact something that stains the girl's appearance. After the clerk makes a snide comment about Addie and Louis, Ruth speaks to something not physical, but symbolic. The girl's comportment is dirty. Her apron may be spotless, but Ruth sees past her outward appearance and speaks to that which cannot be seen.

Campsite Latrine

When Jamie, Louis, and Addie go camping in the Rocky Mountains, they must adjust to campsite life. One of the adjustments that they must undertake is that of using the campground's latrine. For the 6 year old Jamie, this is a terrifying prospect. Accordingly, Louis must accompany him to relieve himself because Addie cannot. This incident becomes an example of Jamie's need for a father figure. Because Gene works the summer away while his son stays with Addie, Jamie lacks another male presence in his life. Consequently, Louis must work to fill this need. The campsite's latrine becomes a symbol of Jamie's need.

Jesus's Umbrella

In the Holt County annual parade, a man dressed as Jesus carries an umbrella because it is raining. Louis laughs at the ridiculousness of the situation while the other spectators do not bat an eye. Once they hear Louis's laugh, they frown at him because he has broken a sense of propriety that they feel must go along with such things. This incident

is an example of Louis' and Addie's willingness to break with the traditionally held values of both the celibate widow or widower and the sanctity of religion.

The Swing

In Addie and Louis's last moments of happiness together in Chapter 37, the two go to the grammar school's playground. Louis pushes Addie on the swing. Addie and Louis, who are in their early 70's and mid 70's respectively, are far from children. Addie is a grandmother, and Louis has a grown daughter. But, when they use the swing, they embrace the childish joy that only the young can find. The swing is the mechanism that allows them to forget their age and worries and simply enjoy themselves. Thus, the swing becomes a symbol of the carefree nature of youth.

Cellphone

Addie's cellphone is her last remaining connection to Louis. With it, she can call him from the retirement home without Gene finding out and keeping her away from Jamie. Although the two cannot reclaim the past intimacy of their relationship, they are able to recapture a piece of what they had lost. Addie tells Louis that he cannot call her because someone might be in the room and she would not be able to explain away the call. Since circumstances demand that she must hide the calls she makes to Louis, Addie's cellphone is the only instrument that keeps them in contact with each other.



Settings

Birch Street, Holt County, Colorado, USA

Almost all of the novel's action takes place on Birch Street in Holt County. Between Addie's house and Louis' house lies Ruth's house. With these three characters living on the same street, the only time that the story ventures away from Birch Street is during the few trips that Louis and Addie take. Holt County is a small town with few residents, who all know the business of one another. As such, news of the relationship between Addie and Louis spreads like wildfire. While the two despise the idle gossip of their neighbors, they also enjoy knowing almost every resident of their town. It is here that Louis and Addie had their families, and it is here that they find each other and form somewhat of a new family.

Campground in the Rocky Mountains

While the couple have Jamie with them during the summer, they take a trip out to the Rocky Mountains. While Jamie learns how to set up camp and perform chores around the site from Louis, Addie prepares food for them. The campground is an example of the natural environment of endless woods that eludes the trio as they live in Holt County. The Rocky Mountains are an escape that allow them to embrace their American wilderness roots and relax for a weekend.

Denver, Colorado

Louis and Addie go to Denver twice during the course of the novel. The first time, they go for a romantic weekend at a posh hotel after they see a play. The second time, Louis visits Addie in the hospital after she broke her hip. On the second visit, Gene and Jamie are already in Denver by the time Louis arrives and Gene tries to turn Louis away. Addie pleads with Gene to let him in because they both need each other, at least for that moment. In this light, Denver is the place of the couple's greatest joy and sorrow.

Retirement Home

Addie eventually moves to a retirement home near Gene and Jamie's house. After her broken hip, she is unable to care for herself. Even though Louis offers to help her get back on her feet, Addie decides that she needs to have a relationship with her grandson. While Jamie does visit Addie in the home, she is just as lonely as she was before she proposed that Louis and she sleep in the same bed back in Holt County. After suffering through some time at the home without Louis's company, she secretly calls him from her cellphone so that Gene will not find out. Although the retirement home allows Addie to see her grandson, it keeps her from Louis.



Chief Creek, edge of Holt County

On one of the most idyllic days of their relationship, Louis takes Addie to a creek on a farmer's property at the edge of town. After a picnic under the summer sun, Louis strips down naked and swims in the creek. Addie quickly joins him. This day, in Chapter 38, is the last that the couple spend together. Once they return home, Addie calls Jamie only to find that Gene is barring him from speaking with Addie until Addie stops seeing Louis. In this way, their time at Chief Creek is their unwitting farewell and celebration of innocence. They picnic, play, and splash in the water like children just before they must say goodbye.



Themes and Motifs

Age and Time

The novel's major driving force is the process of time. Addie, Louis, Ruth, Gene, and even Jamie must confront the varying difficulties and adjustments necessary to age well. Addie must consider, especially after she breaks her hip, the realities of her situation and the idea that her body cannot support her the way it once did. In coming to this realization, she decides to break off her relationship with Louis and live in a retirement home. By living in a home, she provides for her immediate physical demands, but she begins to feel that she needs Louis in her life. Consequently, her emotional life suffers because of the choices she made in order to accommodate her aging body.

Addie's physical problems are a result of age, just as some of Louis' issues are the result of his advancing age. During the couple's first attempt to be physically intimate, Louis says that he has the old man's complaint. This episode highlights their ability to have a successful relationship outside of physical contact and in spite of their physical conditions. In this way, both Louis and Addie confront their changing physical circumstances and begin to adjust even if they cannot overcome their aging bodies.

In thinking about aging and the effect of time, Gene and his son Jamie illustrate diverse ways of dealing with the differences that life brings at certain stages of life. In other words, Gene continues to display the scars he received when he was a child. After his sister's death, his father Carl ignored him. Because of the lack of affection he received, Gene gives similarly little affection to his son Jamie whom he leaves at Addie's house. In Gene's experience, aging is the process of emulating your parents and following in their footsteps.

On the other end of the spectrum, being young is not easy either. Jamie, although only 6 years old, must struggle with the difficulties of being a child. His lack of experience makes his lonely situation with his grandmother a terrifying concept. He loses the presence of both his mother and his father when he comes to live with Addie. Immediately, he must begin not only to grow and mature, but do so without his parents. In these ways, the author highlights both the difficulties of aging and the ways in which one may comfortably adjust to the changes involved in time's passage.

Companionship

The novel's central focus is the relationship between Louis and Addie. The way the relationship grows and moves through its phases informs both the structure and the tone of the novel. Consequently, companionship is an idea into which the author delves. The story's opening premise is that of the lonely widow asking for the nocturnal company of an equally lonely widower.



In order to combat this loneliness, the two begin to spend time together. Louis sleeps in Addie's bed each night because, for both of them, the nights are unbearably lonely. In this way, their relationship grows out of a desire for the company of another human. While this idea is initially beautiful, the complexities of adapting to another person become apparent as the novel develops.

In playing with the complexities of companionship, Haruf places obstacles in Louis and Addie's path that complicate their relationship and force them to overcome their personal qualms. In becoming a companion, one must learn to acknowledge and accept the differences of another person. In an ultimate statement of the effect Addie has upon him, Louis tells her that he is a better man for having known her.

By thinking about the effect that she has upon him, Louis delves into the idea that another person can change him and, in this case, for the better. Addie quickly agrees with this notion and tells him that he has a good effect on her as well. Through analyzing the complexities of Louis and Addie's relationship, one understands the importance of the theme of companionship and the author's own positive stance on how friendships can change a person.

Smalltown Life

Another major focus is the novel's small town setting that almost becomes a character in the story. Louis and Addie actively struggle against the idle and oftentimes malicious gossip that surrounds them. They blame their difficulties on Holt's small size and the ease with which gossip spreads. In a town of few people, everyone knows other people's business.

Subsequently, the small town ideals and the style of living that goes along with these ideals become more than a simple locale. It becomes an important theme that constantly influences characters actions and informs their opinions of the larger world. For instance, Louis and Addie actively try to escape Holt's parochial atmosphere in order to feel as if what they have is a private and beautiful thing.

In their frequent excursions outside the city, they enjoy their love without the constraints and labels that the other town members would force upon them. They spend a night at the theater in Denver. They take Jamie to the Rocky Mountains, and they travel to the edge of Holt County to swim in the river. Through these excursions, Louis and Addie are consciously attempting to free themselves from their small town constraints.

While the need to escape from the confines of Holt County in itself is worth mentioning, the couple's inability to completely leave Holt is far more complex and engaging. Despite how much the two complain about their small town and its chinwags, never once do they voluntarily spend more than a day away from Holt. Even when they are in Denver in a beautiful hotel, Addy says that she loves the city, but she wants to be back in her own bed in Holt the next night.



When she eventually leaves Holt to stay at a retirement home near her son's house, she does so unwillingly. Her attachment to the simple, traditional area of Holt County is too strong for her to simply give up on it. The effect a small town like Holt has on its residents is central to *Our Souls at Night*.

Death

The idea of death resonates throughout the novel even when it is not directly confronted. Both Louis and Addie, who are in their 70's, think about their own death and must confront the realities of their situation. Despite the inherently gloomy idea of dying, the couple comes to understand that their death is a natural step in their lives.

In keeping with their almost intellectual and removed idea of death, they order and prioritize their lives with the knowledge that, in the face of their own mortality, only what is truly important matters. In other words, acknowledging their human condition allows them to focus on the importance of having each other in their lives and having family.

When Addie talks to Louis of her reasons for abandoning their relationship, she tells him that she must leave him because of Gene's ultimatum and because she realizes that Jamie, her grandson, is the one who will outlive her. She believes that when she reaches the time in which she must seek care, Jamie will be the one to provide it. Louis counters this idea by saying that he could help her. However, given his age, she is unsure of whether or not he will outlive her. In thinking logically in this manner, Addie is able to prioritize her life as unattached as she can manage.

While, for much of the novel, both Addie and Louis are able to ponder their situations in an almost clinical way, Ruth's death and the death of their spouses loom in their thoughts. Ruth, their neighbor, is the only character who dies in the novel. The elderly woman drops dead at the bank one day. Consequently, the couple begin to speak about the death of their spouses, Diane and Carl. As widow and widower, Addie and Louis are almost intimate with death and seek companionship with each other partly as a way of coping with their loss and partly to find another who understands the loneliness they both feel.

Because death is a factor of the human condition, it is a fairly common theme. However, Haruf goes beyond the traditional level of interest in mortality when he layers it into his novel. From the loss of the couple's spouses to the death of Addie's child and that of Ruth, death hangs upon the story. Although Haruf does not give the reader a perfect solution for dealing with death, the overall position that the novel supports is that death is an opportunity for one to ignore the daily routine and traditions and think about what truly matters. For the couple, companionship and family are what comfort them when they consider their mortality.



American Landscape

While there are many novels set in America, not everyone directly interacts with the idea of the American landscape. Louis and Addie's drama plays out, for the most part, in Holt County. The small town features the idea of town gossips and claustrophobia, but it also exposes the beauty of the familiarity that comes along with a tight knit community. During the chapters in which the characters venture outside of Holt, Haruf introduces and engages in the theme of the American landscape.

An example of the introduction of the American landscape occurs, when, in Chapter 27, Louis, Addie, and Jamie drive out along U.S. Highway 50 to the Rocky Mountains for a camping trip. During this trip, Louis teaches Jamie how to pitch a tent, roast marshmallows, and fish. During this excursion, Louis trains Jamie in the ways of the great American outdoors. As the two go about their manly business of taming the wild, Addie assumes the role of the traditional mother who cooks their meals and tidies up the camp area.

This passing of knowledge from a father figure to a son is a symbolic exchange of ideals and customs. Consequently, Louis's informal tutoring of Jamie is a kind of Americanizing process in which the older man teaches Jamie to interact with the landscape of his country. Another way to view the Rocky Mountain trip is to see it as a return to the simplicity and rugged beauty of the American colonial past. This retroactive urge of Haruf's plays out in the conversations that the older characters have about the younger generation's fascination and obsession with technology.

In the discussions about the importance of Jamie's phone for instance, Haruf's characters find themselves wishing for a simple and idyllic past that they seem to find in the Rocky Mountains and by the creek at the edge of Holt County. When Addie and Louis picnic on the edge of a Holt County farmer's property by a pristine creek, they engage yet again with the American landscape and enjoy its rustic beauty. In these instances, the theme of the country, specifically its land, becomes an important part of the novel that functions as a means of both situating the plot and of furthering the characters as they interact with their surroundings.

Styles

Point of View

The author portrays his novel through a strict, third-person, omniscient point of view that wavers only when the narrator's focus changes from Louis to Addie. For the most part, Haruf keeps the focus on Louis, the novel's overall protagonist. In keeping with Louis, the author narrows the story's scope. This narrowed scope provides the novel with a more intimate and engaging atmosphere, but it also limits the parameters of the plot.

In speaking of the intimate scope that Haruf seeks to develop, the story's first line gives the reader a firm sense of the novel's focus. "And then there was the day when Addie Moore made a call on Louis Waters". With these words, the author indicates to the reader that the novel will follow Addie and Louis. To keep with the almost contractual nature of this first sentence, Haruf then tells about their Holt County love affair through their eyes alone.

Perhaps because of the author's own gender, *Our Souls at Night* keeps a close perspective on Louis far more than on Addie. If Haruf kept the point of view focused on a single character, one would not be able to say that his own sentiments affect the novel's focus, but the fact that the perspective wavers between both Addie and Louis in unequal amounts gives the reader the sense of priority and preference. The author is more comfortable using Louis as his lens. Subsequently, Addie receives only a few of the forty-three chapters in the book.

Although this third-person, omniscient point of view allows for an emotional attachment to form between the reader and the main characters, it also limits the scope of the novel. In other words, because Haruf so closely focuses on the couple, he cannot speak to any other character's inner self. This inability to give the reader Jamie's thoughts for example, cripples Haruf's ability speak to anything besides Louis and Addie. While *Our Souls at Night's* intense third-person point of view limits the author's ability to develop his characters, it also creates a deeply personal relationship among the reader, Addie, and Louis.

Language and Meaning

In order to capture the rustic simplicity of Holt County and the couple's relationship, the author's diction is straightforward and easily understood. Kent Haruf strives to portray life realistically. In his effort to achieve verisimilitude, he pours his attention into crafting honest dialogue and unadorned narration. Rather than flouting his literary prowess with unwieldy diction and flashy descriptive sections, he keeps his language simple.

In looking at Haruf's word choices, one must consider the effect that his choices have on the story. Following this effort, the author's simplistic diction allows the story a quick, light, and easy feel. Rather than pausing to reread certain words or phrases, the read



can breeze through the novel's dialogue and narration. Despite the story's simple plot and overall simple language, the reader may be inclined to underestimate the power of Haruf's prose.

While the language is simple, its meaning is profound. No word is out of place in this novel because there is never a moment in which a character speaks with the weight of an eclectic author. The characters, most of whom are not very educated, speak with the words that a small town, rural American might use rather than the words of a well-read author. The effect of this language allows Haruf to capture the simplicity of his character's surroundings.

The danger in breezing through the easy language of *Our Souls at Night* is that one can miss the deeply honest weight of the story. One can easily underestimate the importance of Addie and Louis's exchanges because they speak without the elaborate flourishes typical of dramatic prose. Haruf concocts a unique combination of both accessible language and profound meaning to form a story that speaks to the truths and the beauty of the average person's life.

Structure

Our Souls at Night follows a simple structure of 43 chapters that progress chronologically. In keeping with the simple diction, the author also uses an easily understandable structure. From the first chapter, Louis and Addie meet. In this first arc, the couple get to know each other by sleeping in the same bed each night.

As they become more comfortable with each other, their relationship cements. This first arc and the following sequences are thematically linked by the specific stage of the couple's relationship. In this manner, the first arc focuses on their burgeoning relationship and takes place over Chapters 1 to 15. This arc follows their honeymoon phase in which they encounter each other, learn of one and other, and finally begin to fall in love.

After the first arc, Jamie arrives. Although, in himself, Jamie is not a wildly interesting or engaging character, he changes the novel's focus and the couple's relationship. Instead of having one and other in a special kind of vacuum, Louis and Addie must become a parental team in order to raise Jamie in the absence of his father, Gene. Jamie becomes the child for Louis and Addie to nurture as if they are, in fact, a newly married couple with their first child. This arc occurs over Chapters 16 to 35. This second arc, by far the longest in the story, contains the meat of the plot and the joy that the two experience with each other.

Following Jamie's absence after Chapter 35, the couple enjoy each other in a more intimate manner as if their only child has gone off to college and they are finally free to reacquaint. Soon after this rediscovery, Gene returns to give the ultimatum that if Addie does not stop seeing Louis, he will not allow his son to speak to her. Their relationship ends. Then, Addie reaches out to Louis and they regain a little of the connection that



they once had. This third arc continues from Chapter 36 until the end of the novel in Chapter 43. In viewing the story's structure as three distinct arcs of the natural parental cycle, the first arc includes the couple's meeting and honeymoon. The second is their raising of Jamie, their symbolic child. Finally, the third is their difficulties and the way they overcome the obstacles put in place for them. This structure allows the reader to focus more on the characters and their development rather than struggling to make sense of diverse times in each section.



Quotes

And then there was the day when Addie Moore made a call on Louis Waters.

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: In these opening words, the author tells the reader exactly what makes his story significant. With "and then," the opening has the feel of something that has started and only continues. The first two words indicate that the novel's action will encompass only what happens during the setting's scope. With the idea of continuation in mind, *Our Souls at Night* represents only an instant of action in the larger scheme of the events in Holt County. Since all of Kent Haruf's books take place in Holt County, this idea gains further standing.

I can have faith in you. I see that already. But I'm not sure I can be equal to you.

-- Louis (chapter 2 paragraph 11)

Importance: Louis tells Addie these words because he does not believe that he can be as daring or as strong as Addie herself is. Addie initiates their arrangement, thus daring the rest of the town to think what they would of the two. While Louis agrees to the affair, he sees Addie as someone brave enough to ignore the snide words of others for the sake of her won happiness. Not only does their relationship give Addie and Louis solace, it also provokes Louis to grow to match Addie's brave character.

How strange this is. How new it is to be here. How uncertain I feel, and sort of nervous.

-- Louis (chapter 3 paragraph 17)

Importance: Again, Louis displays his insecurities to Addie. Of the two, Louis continually portrays himself as the weaker of them. In this light, the classically strong and imperturbable male figure is no more. Instead, Louis sees himself as inherently less than Addie who he believes is strong enough to take on an entire town without flinching. This quote reveals the novelty of their situation.

Well, you can leave your pajamas and toothbrush here from now on, she said. It'll save wear and tear on paper sacks, he said.

-- Addie and Louis (chapter 5 paragraph 39)

Importance: This quote is a firm example of sub-textual significance. While Addie and Louis overtly speak about mundane, material objects and of efficiency, their words are far deeper than they seem. Beneath this dialogue, Addie is telling Louis that he can leave his overnight items at her house, which is an invitation for him to sleep in her bed every night. The two of them cleverly avoid sharing their feelings directly. Instead, they speak of immaterial items to skirt around the edges of a potentially awkward conversation.

No. But if you want more wine I'll sit here with you while you drink it. I'll just watch you.

-- Louis (chapter 7 paragraph 52)



Importance: After a rough day in which a friend of Louis's attacks him for his underhanded relationship with Addie, the couple reposes in Addie's kitchen. Despite his foul mood, Louis is content to simply appreciate Addie and watch her drink a glass of wine. His words display his ability to enjoy even the unexceptional aspects of her company. He is simply content to be with her. These final words in Chapter 7 underscore the power of their relationship.

I'd appreciate it if you would just call me a goddamn son of a bitch, Louis said. A man too foolish for words.

-- Louis (chapter 8 paragraph 24)

Importance: Again, Louis deprecates himself. He does not believe that he is fit for Addie's love because of the adulterous past that he has had. While these lines, in their entirety, are not particularly exceptional, they reveal Haruf's willingness to use swear words in order to achieve his goal of perfect verisimilitude. He strives to have dialogue that people would use in order to capture the world around him in a more realistic manner. Since people swear in the world outside of literature, the author has his characters swear like Louis does here.

I shouldn't eat this chocolate but what difference does it make now, I'm going to eat whatever I want to.

-- Ruth (chapter 9 paragraph 8)

Importance: Ruth, Addie and Louis's elderly neighbor, declares that she is perfectly fine enjoying life and ignoring her doctor's words. Ruth's death is the only one in the novel that occurs during the plot. While Louis and Addie discuss the deaths of their spouses and Addie tells Louis about her daughter's accident, Ruth is the only character who dies during the course of the story. While these words may be construed as an instance of foreshadowing, they are also important because they promote the idea that life is meant to be lived rather than spent in fretful brooding.

Diane and I weren't doing so well either...because of me, mostly. But both of us too. We couldn't talk.

-- Louis (chapter 10 paragraph 5)

Importance: While Louis is hard on himself, he may not be wrong. He had an affair with Tamara, another teacher at his school, while he was married and his daughter was still at home. He left his wife and daughter for a time to be with Tamara and her child, breaking up her marriage in the meantime. When he remarks that he and Diane did not talk, he highlights the importance of communication in a successful relationship. These words also draw a contrast between his relationship to Diane and his relationship with Addie. Addie and he, during the first arc of the novel, only talk.

Don't tell me about them. I don't want to know.

-- Addie (chapter 10 paragraph 34)



Importance: Addie does not wish to know about Louis's final nights with Tamara. She may be jealous of Tamara, but Addie's insistence not to hear the details of those nights also acts as a censor for not only Addie, but also the reader. Despite Haruf's drive to create verisimilitude in his novel, he cannot bring himself to give the reader explicit sexual details.

Connie was flung out in the street in her swimming suit, bleeding from her ears and mouth and the gash on her forehead, her legs wrenched up under her, her arms spread out at weird angles.

-- Addie (chapter 11 paragraph 21)

Importance: This horrid description of Connie's death is the most brutal moment in the entire novel. Throughout, Haruf delves into his characters' tragedies, but he does so with the backdrop of Louis and Addie's burgeoning relationship. In this moment, Addie's violent history gets the best of her. Despite the love that the two begin to find in each other, this moment of absolute horror casts a dour mark on the story that cannot be found elsewhere. This tragic event shaped Addie's and Gene's lives and continues to influence the way they behave both with each other and with others.

I wanted to be a poet.

-- Louis (chapter 21 paragraph 1)

Importance: This simple words bring Haruf's supposedly simple tale to a metafictional level. When Louis admits his secret passion for poetry to Addie, he becomes an artist figure. As such, he can stand in for the idea of creating art and fiction as if he were the author himself. By including a fellow artist in his story, Haruf points the reader's attention to the artifice of his own story. Haruf creates the story of Louis and Addie just as Louis created poetry. Consequently, one begins to stand in for the other. Certain actions that Louis makes can reflect upon the author himself and the process of writing.

Men are good for some things. I'll say that much...Men, she used to say. She never forgave my father.

-- Ruth (chapter 23 paragraph 31)

Importance: In this quote, Ruth says her final words in the story. In the following chapter, she dies on the floor of her local bank. Subsequently, these words gain a weight that affects their impact upon the reader. Ruth speaks of the definitive roles of gender in her experience. Soon after grudgingly thanking Louis for his help, Ruth then retells her mother's opinion of men. In speaking so definitively and broadly about all men, she narrows the potential of an entire gender, just as speaking about women does the same. Ruth, the aging matron, is so obviously set in her ways that she cannot see past certain differences between individual men.

Dear, is it cold there tonight?

-- Addie (chapter 43 paragraph 19)

Importance: These are the final words of the novel. Addie asks this simple, mundane



question in a way that refocuses the story on what is important. Just after all the drama and heartache that the two endure, Addie recaptures some of the everyday joy that they had. Her question about the weather, something upon which strangers may comment in passing, is an instance of trite banality, but it repositions the relationship in the way it was before Gene's ultimatum.