



Depression and human connection in Fredrik Backman's *A Man Called Ove* (2012)

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the portrayal of the protagonist in *A Man Called Ove*, a contemporary novel by Swedish author Fredrik Backman, focusing on how human connection plays a role in helping someone recover from depression. The story follows Ove, an elderly man who withdraws from others and attempts to take his own life after the loss of his beloved wife, believing that his life no longer has meaning. However, his plans are constantly interrupted by the arrival of his new neighbors, Parvaneh and her family. As their relationship slowly grows, Ove begins to open up and finds a new sense of purpose. This research uses a psychological approach, drawing on Abraham H. Maslow's theory of human motivation, especially the third level in his Hierarchy of Needs: love and belongingness. Maslow explains that the need for connection and acceptance is essential for emotional well-being and personal growth. The data were collected through close reading of the novel, focusing on dialogues, descriptions, and events that reveal the protagonist's psychological state and interpersonal relationships. These textual elements were then analyzed using Maslow's concept of love and belongingness to interpret the character's emotional development. Through this lens, the study explores how Ove's journey from being depressed to becoming someone who appreciates his life reflects the importance of fulfilling social needs. In conclusion, this research shows that Backman successfully portrays how genuine relationships can help a person heal through the characterization of the protagonist he has created.

Keywords: depression; human connection; protagonist; mental health

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INTRODUCTION

Depression is a global issue that continues to raise concern due to its strong association with suicide. A meta-analysis published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders* found that among individuals diagnosed with major depressive disorder (MDD), the lifetime prevalence of suicide attempts is 31%, with an annual prevalence of 8%. Individuals with depression often exhibit social withdrawal, irritability, and persistent negative thinking—symptoms linked to shame, low self-worth, and emotional dysregulation (WebMD, 2025; Bezzy Depression, n.d.; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Another prevalent trait is bitterness and persistent negative thinking, particularly

rumination, which has been strongly linked to worsened depressive symptoms and impaired emotional regulation (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). One effective way to reduce the impact of depression is through fostering human connection. When individuals are socially connected and maintain stable, supportive relationships, they are more likely to make healthy choices and enjoy better mental and physical health outcomes (SeniorNavigator, n.d.). The healing power of human connection is also a central theme in Fredrik Backman's novel *A Man Called Ove*, which serves as the focus of this study.

Fredrik Backman is a renowned Swedish author best known for his debut novel, *A Man Called Ove* (2012), which remained on the New York Times Bestseller list for 42 weeks (LitCharts, n.d.). Backman's works, including *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry* (2013) and *Beartown* (2016), often explore themes of human fragility and connection. *A Man Called Ove* was also adapted into a film titled *A Man Called Otto* (2022), starring Tom Hanks.

A Man Called Ove tells the story of an old man named Ove who, after losing his beloved wife, struggles with depression and decides to end his life. However, his repeated suicide attempts are interrupted by the arrival of a lively new family next door. Through his growing connection with them, Ove slowly begins to rediscover his purpose in life and rebuilds his desire to live.

As the synopsis suggests, the portrayal of the protagonist is the most significant element for analysis in this novel. "Portrayal" is defined as "the act of showing or describing somebody or something in a picture, play, book, etc.; a particular way in which this is done" (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2025), and a "protagonist" is "the central character or leading figure in poetry, narrative, novel or any other story" (Literary Devices, n.d.). The protagonist in *A Man Called Ove* undergoes a significant transformation throughout the story, making him a dynamic character—"a character who undergoes significant internal change throughout a story" (MasterClass, n.d.).

This research focuses on the portrayal of the protagonist, Ove, as the lens through which personal growth is represented, by examining how his characteristics evolve—particularly from being depressed to becoming a person who appreciates his life. The analysis aims to show how the development of human connection plays a critical role in overcoming depression and restoring one's sense of worth.

The analysis itself is conducted using Maslow's Theory of Hierarchy of Human Needs. According to Maslow (1954), human needs are arranged in a hierarchy, and love and belongingness are placed on the third level. These needs are essential for emotional well-being and personal growth. This theory will be used to show how Ove's depression begins to heal as his need for social connection is gradually fulfilled. Since the portrayal of the protagonist aspect of the novel can be explored more deeply through

this theory, it provides a fitting framework for this study.

Since the novel was published in 2012, *A Man Called Ove* has become a popular subject of academic discussion due to Backman's success as a contemporary author. Therefore, it is necessary to examine previous studies on this novel to identify potential research gaps.

Nabilah (2023), for example, focuses on the development of the protagonist's character. She describes him as a round character: someone with complex and sometimes contradictory traits. Her research shows how the protagonist changes from being grumpy, stubborn, and antisocial to someone who becomes more caring and open to others. However, she does not explain what causes this transformation or what influences his personal growth. Another study by Prameswati (2023) explores the theme of social empathy in the novel. She argues that empathy has a powerful impact on personal growth. Still, she does not mention specifically how the personal growth changes the characteristics of the protagonist. Hormati et al. (2024) analyze the trauma experienced by the protagonist using Freud's psychological theory. They conclude that his depression is largely caused by the loss of loved ones, but they do not explore how the character begins to heal or what supports his recovery after trauma.

While the novel has been examined from different perspectives, such as the protagonist's characteristics, his psychological struggles, and the social values reflected in the story, there is still a gap in the previous research that needs more attention: how human connection plays a central role in helping someone recover from depression, as shown through the protagonist's journey. This study thus aims to explore the portrayal of the protagonist in *A Man Called Ove*, with a specific focus on how his character grows throughout the story, despite experiencing deep personal loss. It will highlight how human connection helps the protagonist recover emotionally and find renewed meaning in life.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to both literary and psychological studies. From a local perspective, this study can raise awareness among Indonesian readers about the importance of emotional support and social connection in coping with depression, which remains a stigmatized issue in many

communities. Globally, it adds to the growing discussion on how contemporary literature reflects real-world psychological struggles, showing that stories like *A Man Called Ove* can encourage empathy and mental health understanding across cultures.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method, which refers to “a research approach that involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences” (Bhandari, 2023). The non-numerical data used in this study is the Swedish novel *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman.

The analysis is conducted using a psychological approach, specifically focusing on Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory. In *Motivation and Personality*, Maslow (1954) presents a five-level hierarchy of human motivation: physiological, safety, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. He argues that individuals are motivated to fulfill basic needs before moving toward higher psychological growth and self-fulfillment.

This study focuses specifically on the third level: love and belongingness, because it represents the most relevant aspect of Ove's psychological struggle. While the other levels of Maslow's hierarchy (such as physiological or safety needs) are present, they are not the primary source of Ove's emotional conflict. His depression and recovery revolve around the loss and re-establishment of meaningful relationships, making this level the most appropriate for in-depth analysis. According to Maslow (1954, p. 89), “The person will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, for a place in his group, and will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal”. He further states that “the thwarting of these needs is the most commonly found core in cases of maladjustment and more severe psychopathology” (Maslow, 1954, p. 90). This implies that social disconnection may contribute to emotional distress, while fulfilling these needs can significantly improve psychological well-being.

Guided by Maslow's theory, this study went through several steps. First, the novel was read multiple times to identify relevant data. This included notable quotes and character behaviors that reflected the

psychological traits of the protagonist, Ove. Next, the selected data was analyzed through the lens of Maslow's theory to examine how the character's psychological needs—particularly love and belonging—were met or unmet, and how these experiences shaped his mental state and development. Finally, some conclusions were drawn regarding Ove's psychological transformation throughout the story.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The portrayal of the protagonist in *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman will be discussed in detail below. The focus will be on how Ove is portrayed using Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs, particularly to illustrate the importance of human connection in recovering from depression.

The first dominant characteristic of Ove is that he is unsociable. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, “unsociable” is defined as “not liking to meet people or to spend time with them” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). This characteristic is evident, for example, when Ove visits his past wife, Sonja's, gravestone while reflecting on how lonely he feels after her death and how much he misses her presence. After Sonja's death, Ove feels that he has become very silent, to the point where he cannot even recall the last time he spoke to someone before Parvaneh, a new neighbor who lives across his house, approaches him. Ove also mentions how he prefers to keep his thoughts to himself rather than talking to other people because he is afraid that making memories with other people would make him forget about the memories of Sonja. His unsociable characteristic is seen from the excerpt below.

He doesn't know what happened to him after her funeral. The days and weeks floated together in such a way, and in such utter silence, that he could hardly describe what exactly he was doing. Before Parvaneh and Patrick backed into his mailbox, he could barely remember saying a word to another human being since Sonja died.

And Ove didn't know exactly when he became so quiet. He'd always been taciturn, but this was something quite different. Maybe he had started talking more inside his own head. Maybe he was going insane (he did wonder sometimes). It was as if he didn't want other people

to talk to him; he was afraid that their chattering voices would drown out the memory of her voice. (Backman, 2014, p. 22)

This excerpt shows that Ove is unsociable. Ove mentions how he has stopped talking to other people since Sonja died, which indicates that he does not like meeting or spending time with others. Moreover, Ove says that he prefers to keep his thoughts to himself rather than talking to people. This also shows how he does not like meeting or spending time with people, suggesting that Ove is unsociable.

Ove's unsociable characteristic can be further understood through Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs, particularly the third level: love and belongingness. According to Maslow, humans have a fundamental need to form emotional connections and be part of social groups—whether with family, friends, or the community. This need includes receiving affection, acceptance, and respect from others. Sonja was the only person who fulfilled these needs for Ove. After her death, he lost the sense of belonging that grounded him, and it made him feel to have no other purpose in life. As a result, Ove withdraws from the world even more than before, and he becomes unsociable.

Ove's reluctance to speak or bond with others is a defensive coping mechanism. It is not that he inherently dislikes people, but rather, the emotional dependency he had on Sonja has left a void he is too afraid to fill. He fears that creating new relationships would replace the memories he has of her. His concern that "other people's voices might drown out the memory of her voice" highlights how big the impact of Sonja was in his life in fulfilling his social needs. Therefore, when Sonja left him, he became unsociable.

The second dominant characteristic of Ove is prickly. Prickly is defined as "unfriendly and easily offended or annoyed" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). This characteristic is evident when Ove first meets his new neighbors, Parvaneh and her husband, Patrick. When Ove notices that Patrick is parking their trailer in the residential area, with the trailer touching Ove's flowerbed, he immediately becomes angry. He rants at them and takes control of the situation by parking the trailer himself in the correct spot. Ove's prickly characteristic can be seen in the excerpt below.

"My fault, my fault! Sorry about that, didn't see the mailbox in the rearview mirror, you know. It's difficult, this trailer thing, just can't figure out which way to turn the wheel ..."

Ove thumps his fist on the roof of the car so hard that the Lanky One jumps and bangs his head on the doorframe. "Out of the car!"

"What?"

"Get out of the car, I said!"

The Lanky One gives Ove a slightly startled glance, but he doesn't quite seem to have the nerve to reply. Instead he gets out of his car and stands beside it like a schoolboy in the dunce's corner. Ove points down the footpath between the row houses, towards the bicycle shed and the parking area.

"Go and stand where you're not in the way." The Lanky One nods, slightly puzzled. (Backman, 2014, p. 18)

This excerpt shows Ove's prickly characteristic as he is unfriendly and easily gets annoyed or irritated at Patrick and Parvaneh, even during his first encounter with them. His action of yelling at Patrick and taking over his car without hesitation clearly shows how he is easily annoyed with people and unfriendly toward them, suggesting that he is prickly.

Ove's prickly characteristic is formed because of the depression he is struggling with. According to Maslow, when the need for love and belongingness is unmet, individuals may experience loneliness, anxiety, and even depression (Maslow, 1954). In Ove's case, after the death of his wife, his social needs are severely unfulfilled. He no longer feels emotionally connected to others, which contributes to his depression. Psychologically, depression is not always expressed through sadness; it often manifests through irritability and anger. According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), symptoms of depression can include "irritability or frustration, even over small matters." This is supported by psychologist Dr. Susan Noonan, who states that "anger and irritability are often overlooked symptoms of depression, especially in men" (Noonan, 2013). These findings help explain why Ove is prickly: his unfriendly and easily annoyed behavior is not just an aspect of his personality but signs of deeper emotional distress. His aggression toward others, especially in seemingly minor situations, like

the way he acts when facing his new neighbors in parking their trailer, reflects how unresolved grief and unmet social needs manifest as irritation and hostility, further reinforcing his prickly demeanor.

The third dominant characteristic of Ove is bitter. Bitter is defined as “angry and unhappy because they cannot forget bad things that happened in the past” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). This characteristic is evident when Ove visits Sonja’s grave with Parvaneh, who waits in the car. During his visit, Ove reflects on how much he misses Sonja. When Ove gets back to the car, Parvaneh offers to help Ove clean up Sonja’s belongings in his house. This suggestion makes Ove immediately very angry at Parvaneh. Until they get back home, Ove remains silent and does not want to talk to Parvaneh at all. This whole event can be seen in the following excerpt.

He opens the passenger door. Parvaneh looks at him, her big brown eyes filled with empathy.
“I’ve been thinking about something,” she says carefully, as she puts the Saab into gear and pulls off.
“Don’t.”
But she can’t be stopped.
“I was just thinking that maybe I could help you clean out the house. Maybe put Sonja’s things in boxes and—”
She hardly has time to speak Sonja’s name before Ove’s face darkens, anger stiffening it into a mask.
“Not another word,” he roars, with a booming sound inside the car.
“But I was only thi—”
“Not another bloody WORD. Have you got it?!”
Parvaneh nods and goes silent. Shaking with anger, Ove stares out the window all the way home. (Backman, 2014, p. 225)

This excerpt reveals Ove’s bitter characteristic. As he reflects on the deep loss he feels due to Sonja’s death, he suddenly becomes very angry when Parvaneh suggests clearing out Sonja’s belongings. This reaction illustrates how he is still holding onto unresolved emotions related to his past experiences. Specifically, he has endured so many losses, including the death of his beloved wife, Sonja, and his struggles with loneliness and a sense of having no purpose in life. These events have left Ove unable to

move on, making him angry and unhappy, which suggests that he is bitter.

Ove’s bitterness stems from the deep sadness and loss of purpose he feels after Sonja’s absence, who, throughout his married life, has fulfilled the sense of belongingness and love in Ove. His inability to face anything related to Sonja, even hearing her name, shows that he has not fully processed his grief. This leads to depression, as he resists recovering from the pain he carries. He rejects help from others, including kind offers like Parvaneh’s, because his unmet emotional needs have built walls around him. His bitterness acts as a defense mechanism to protect him from more pain, even though it isolates him. Until his needs are met again through new relationships or renewed self-worth, Ove remains stuck in bitterness.

However, Ove gradually changes as he starts to form meaningful relationships with the people around him. These relationships play a crucial role in helping him see that life is still worth living, as it slowly fulfills his psychological needs as a human being. The first event that triggers this change happens when Ove attempts to end his life by sitting in a car filled with exhaust fumes. Parvaneh interrupts him by persistently banging on his garage door, asking him to drive her and her children to the hospital because her husband, Patrick, has fallen off a ladder.

Although Ove is initially reluctant and annoyed, he eventually agrees to help. His decision to postpone his suicide and assist Parvaneh is influenced by a sense of responsibility and an emotional connection to Sonja’s memory, as he imagines that Sonja would be disappointed if he refused to help. This moment marks the beginning of Ove’s transformation.

There’s more frenetic banging at the garage door. Ove stares sourly at it. More banging. Ove thinks to himself that it’s enough now. “That will do!”

...

“I need a lift to the hospital,” she says tilting her head back.

“Patrick fell off the ladder.”

...

“There are no have-tos around here. I’m not some bloody mobility service!” he manages to say at last.

But she just squeezes her index finger and thumb even harder around the bridge of her nose. And nods, as if she

has not in any way listened to what he just said.

...

Ove stays where he is, as if waiting for someone to catch up with her and tell her that actually Ove had not finished talking. But no one does.

But of course he can't avoid thinking about what his wife would have told him to do under the circumstances, if she'd been here.

At long last he walks up to the car and pokes off the tube from the exhaust pipe with his shoe. Gets into the Saab. Checks his mirrors. Puts it into first and pulls out into the parking area. (Backman, 2014, pp. 92-94)

By stepping in to help Parvaneh, Ove unintentionally allows himself to become involved in someone else's life. Although at first, he refused to help Parvaneh, in the end, he still drives her to the hospital, showing that he is not entirely indifferent to the people around him. The excerpt highlights that Ove pauses after Parvaneh leaves to bring her children, as if expecting someone to acknowledge his refusal—but no one does. Instead of insisting on his detachment, he silently gives in, kicks the exhaust tube away, and starts the car (Backman, 2014, p. 94). His hesitation and eventual compliance suggest that he still feels a sense of responsibility towards others, especially when he remembers what Sonja would have wanted him to do. This moment serves as the first step toward his transformation, as he gradually becomes more involved with his neighbors.

The next event that helps Ove change is when Parvaneh insists that Ove take care of the stray cat in their neighborhood because the cat is sick and freezing. Ove, who initially hates the cat, reluctantly agrees to look after it. This moment shows how his connection with Parvaneh influences his actions. Although Ove does not care about the cat itself, he values his relationship with Parvaneh and respects her request. His willingness to care for the cat reflects how much he values having someone like Parvaneh in his life.

"Is it dead?" Parvaneh asks in terror as she rushes forward as quickly as her pregnant belly will allow and stands there staring down into the hole.

"I'm not a vet," Ove replies—not in an unfriendly way. Just as a point of information. (Backman, 2014, p. 134)

...

"He can stay here until he's completely defrosted, then you have to take him," says Ove, shrugging towards the cat.

...

"I'm afraid I can't," she says after that. "The girls are ... allergic," she adds.

...

"Don't think it's such a cool idea me taking care of the puss, sorry, man," says Jimmy

"I'm a bit allergic as well ..."

...

When he peers in her direction and she looks ready to throw the cat at him, he looks down again and groans disconsolately. All I want is to die, he thinks and presses his toes into one of the floorboards. It flexes slightly. Ove looks up at Jimmy. Looks at the cat. Surveys the wet floor. Shakes his head at Parvaneh. (Backman, 2014, p. 140)

By taking care of the cat, Ove shows how his relationship with Parvaneh influences his actions. At first, he does not care about the cat, but he ends up taking responsibility for it. Later, it is revealed that Ove actually knows Parvaneh lied about her daughter's allergy to make him keep the cat.

Ove looks out the window again. He knows very well that the three-year-old isn't allergic at all. He knows very well that Parvaneh just lied to him so she wouldn't have to take care of the Cat Annoyance.

He's not some bloody senile old man. (Backman, 2014, p. 164)

Even though he knows the truth, Ove still keeps the cat. This shows that he is changing; he wants to take care of the cat because Parvaneh is valuable enough for Ove that he wants to do something he usually hates. Ove's action of doing something he does not like for someone else shows that he is slowly changing.

Throughout these events, Ove gradually changes because his connections with people around him help him realize that he has reasons to continue living. This is evident as Ove begins doing things he would never do before. He slowly becomes willing to help Parvaneh, takes care of a cat he once hated

because Parvaneh tells him to, demonstrating that human connections play a crucial role in helping Ove recover from depression, helping him realize that life is still worth living. After Ove realizes that his life is still worth living, he starts changing. He becomes sociable, affable, and accepting. These are the characteristics of someone who appreciates life.

Ove's first dominant characteristic after changing is sociable. Sociable is defined as "enjoying spending time with other people" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). This characteristic can be seen, for example, when he comes to Parvaneh's eight-year-old child's birthday party. Ove gives the child an iPad as a birthday gift. The child is excited with the gift, and Ove says that he understands the excitement as he feels exactly the same when he gets a new car.

She points to the living room, which is full of people. In the middle of the room is a birthday cake with eight lit candles, towards which the well-built young man immediately navigates. The girl, who is now an eight-year-old, stays in the hall, touching the iPad box with amazement. As if she hardly dares believe that she's actually got it in her hands. Ove leans towards her.

"That's how I always felt every time I bought a new car," he says in a low voice. (Backman, 2014, p. 263)

This excerpt highlights Ove's sociable characteristic as he comes to the birthday party that is filled with other people. Ove used to be a person who hated spending time with others; however, this action of coming to the party and giving a birthday gift to the child shows that now, Ove enjoys spending time with others, suggesting that he is sociable.

After Sonja's death, Ove's sense of connection and belonging was deeply fractured, leaving a void that made him depressed. However, Parvaneh, along with neighbors like Jimmy and Mirsad, gradually fills this gap by including Ove in their social circles and everyday lives. Ove, who slowly accepts their company in his daily routines, begins to rebuild his sense of belonging. His social circle has helped him feel needed and valued. This emotional connection counters the loneliness that once consumed him.

In Maslow's terms, these social bonds satisfy his belongingness needs, which are

essential before he can focus on higher-level needs like self-esteem and self-actualization. As a result, Ove becomes more open and sociable—he no longer resists being around others but instead enjoys their company, marking a significant change from his earlier characteristic, which was built up by his depression.

Ove's second dominant characteristic after changing is affable. Affable is defined as "easy to approach and converse with; courteous and kind in relation to others" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). Ove being affable can be seen when he is teaching Parvaneh how to drive a car. During the lesson, Parvaneh panics and nearly hits another car. She also struggles to find the right pedal and almost gets into an argument with two SUV drivers because she is blocking the traffic. Despite this heated situation, Ove remains calm and guides her without getting annoyed throughout the ordeal. Little by little, Parvaneh calms down and manages to drive more confidently.

"Now, you listen to me," says Ove calmly while he carefully closes the door.

"You've given birth to two children and quite soon you'll be squeezing out a third. You've come here from a land far away and most likely you fled war and persecution and all sorts of other nonsense. You've learned a new language and got yourself an education and you're holding together a family of obvious incompetents. And I'll be damned if I've seen you afraid of a single bloody thing in this world before now." Ove rivets his eyes on her.

Parvaneh is still agape. Ove points imperiously at the pedals under her feet. "I'm not asking for brain surgery. I'm asking you to drive a car. It's got an accelerator, a brake, and a clutch. Some of the greatest twits in world history have sorted out how it works. And you will as well." And then he utters seven words, which Parvaneh will always remember as the loveliest compliment he'll ever give her.

"Because you are not a complete twit." Parvaneh pushes a ringlet of hair out of her face, sticky with tears.

Clumsily, she once again grabs hold of the steering wheel with both hands. Ove nods, puts on his safety belt, and makes himself comfortable.

"Now, push the clutch down and do what I say." And that afternoon, Parvaneh learns to drive. (Backman, 2014, p. 198)

This excerpt highlights Ove's affable characteristic. Ove, who used to be prickly, now handles Parvaneh's panic without getting annoyed or angry. He guides her step by step until she can learn to drive. His action toward Parvaneh shows that he is now easy to converse with, courteous, and kind in his interactions with others, which suggests that he is affable.

Ove's affable characteristic emerges as his need for belongingness begins to be fulfilled. According to Maslow's theory, satisfying this need provides a person with emotional security and confidence, which can foster positive traits such as openness, kindness, and a greater willingness to connect with others. In Ove's case, after Parvaneh and the community fill the emotional void left by his isolation, he begins to feel valued and accepted. This sense of belonging encourages him to engage in more positive social behavior, revealing his affable nature.

Ove's third dominant characteristic after changing is accepting. Accepting is defined as "able or willing to accept something or someone: inclined to regard something or someone with acceptance rather than with hostility or fear" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Ove's accepting characteristic is evident when he lets Parvaneh and her children help him clean Sonja's things from his house, despite his usual aversion to anyone who touches items that have a connection to Sonja. Ove's accepting characteristic can be seen through this excerpt.

So, that evening, Parvaneh and the girls help him clean up his house. They wrap each and every one of Sonja's things in newspaper and carefully pack all her clothes into boxes. One memory at a time. And at half past nine when everything is done and the girls have fallen asleep on Ove's sofa with newsprint on their fingertips and chocolate ice cream around the corners of their mouths, then Parvaneh's hand suddenly grips Ove's upper arm like a voracious metal claw. And when Ove growls, "OUCH!" she growls back, "SHUSH!" And then they have to go back to the hospital. It's a boy. (Backman, 2014, pp. 280-281)

This excerpt clearly depicts Ove's accepting characteristic, as he is no longer angry when Parvaneh tries to help him clean Sonja's belongings. Ove was previously a bitter person who would become angry when someone mentioned anything about Sonja. He never allowed anyone to touch her things or even look at them, as it was too painful for him. However, by permitting others to clean Sonja's items without getting angry, Ove shows that he has accepted her departure and is ready to continue living with his current circumstances. This suggests that Ove is indeed accepting.

Ove's accepting his loss is deeply connected to the fulfillment of his social needs, as outlined in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Ove's transformation begins when Parvaneh, her children, and other neighbors enter his life and start meeting these needs. Their persistent presence gradually pulls Ove out of his depression. His acceptance of their help, especially in moments tied closely to his grief, like cleaning Sonja's belongings, demonstrates that he is no longer stuck in depression. Instead, Ove begins to fulfill his psychological needs, which creates emotional stability and enables personal growth. This emotional grounding allows him to accept Sonja's death not with bitterness or resistance, but with openness and peace.

At the end of the story, Ove decides to continue living until he dies naturally from heart failure. After his death, Parvaneh finds a letter from Ove, in which he leaves a message saying that he has allocated some of his money to Parvaneh and her family, Anita, as well as Jimmy and Mirsad, who have been his friends after Sonja's death. He wants them to use the money for their needs. Overall, Ove's transformation from an unsociable, prickly, and bitter man to a sociable, affable, and accepting man illustrates that emotional healing often begins through genuine human connection. This narrative trajectory clearly reflects Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, especially the idea that love and belonging are essential human needs for healthy psychological development (Martino et al., 2015). When Ove isolates himself, the lack of these needs increases his emotional pain and depressive state (Brendtro, 2019). On the other hand, the novel shows that isolation only worsens emotional suffering, while meaningful relationships help people gain a sense of belonging that supports them in overcoming depression. This proves that fulfilling the need for love and belonging

plays an important role in reducing emotional distress and building resilience. Backman's portrayal reminds us that even in the depths of grief, connection with others can restore one's purpose and hope for life.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion in the previous section, it can be concluded that Ove's initial characteristics—unsociable, prickly, and bitter—represent the behavior of a person experiencing depression. His depression stems from the death of his wife, Sonja, who previously fulfilled his need for love and belongingness, a core element of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The deep loneliness and emotional void caused by her absence lead to a decline in Ove's psychological well-being.

However, as Ove begins forming connections with his neighbors, particularly Parvaneh and her family, his social needs gradually become fulfilled. This marks the beginning of his emotional recovery. According to Maslow, once an individual's psychological needs—such as love and belongingness—are met, they can progress toward higher levels such as self-esteem and self-actualization. This theory is reflected in Ove's character development, as he transforms into a sociable, affable, and accepting individual. His recovery illustrates how fulfilling social needs can help a person heal from depression.

This analysis demonstrates that human connection plays a crucial role in supporting mental health, especially in helping individuals recover from emotional pain. In the end, it can be concluded that Fredrik Backman has successfully portrayed a protagonist whose journey reflects the universal need for belongingness. Through Ove's transformation, the novel raises the readers' awareness of the importance of emotional connection in helping individuals overcome depression.

Future researchers could expand this topic by examining how other contemporary novels represent mental health recovery using different psychological frameworks, such as cognitive-behavioral theory or Erikson's psychosocial development stages. Comparative studies could also explore how cultural contexts influence the portrayal of depression and human connection in literature.

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