



**STRUCTURAL METAPHOR IN THE NOVEL *A MAN CALLED OVE* BY
FREDRIK BACKMAN**

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ABSTRACT

This article entitled Structural Metaphor in The Novel *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman, aims to identify and analyze structural metaphors and their underlying meanings. The data were collected from dialogues and narrative passages, specifically phrases, clauses, and sentences within the novel. Employing a documentation method and note-taking technique, the study was conducted using a descriptive qualitative approach. The analysis was presented in informal through descriptive discussion in paragraph form. The theories applied in this study were the theory of metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (2003) to analyze the type of metaphor, especially structural metaphor. This study focused on finding structural metaphors out of three types of metaphors, and also focused on analyzing the meaning of the metaphor. The result of the study shows that there are representations of structural metaphor in the novel, and all the meanings implied by each of the metaphors are found, highlighting their central role in expressing grief and emotional transformation. These metaphors illuminate the protagonist's internal struggles and reveal universal aspects of the human experience, such as loss, grief, resilience, and the search for connection.

Keywords: A Man Called Ove; meaning; metaphor; novel; structural metaphor.

INTRODUCTION

According to Lakoff (2003, p. 4), metaphor is a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish. Metaphors compare two unrelated things by emphasizing a shared trait or connection, offering a more direct and consequential comparison than similes, which use “like” or “as.” This rhetorical tool deepens meaning, enhances understanding, and creates vivid imagery by explaining abstract ideas through familiar terms.

Metaphor is one part of figurative language that gives meaning beyond the literal words, which is the focus of this study. Figurative language is used when speakers and authors intend something different from what their words literally mean (Milosz, 1996, p. 8). As

stated by Lakoff and Johnson (2003), there are three types of metaphor: structural metaphor, orientational metaphor, and ontological metaphor.

A novel is an extended fictional narrative, typically written in prose, that enables the author to convey a message through figurative language, thereby adding depth and artistic value to the storytelling (Whitmarsh, 2018; Swarniti, 2022). One of the most frequently used forms of figurative language in novels is metaphor, which enhances the reader's experience by making language more vivid and expressive. An effective metaphor enriches the narrative, capturing the reader's interest and making the story more enjoyable and memorable. However, understanding

metaphors can be challenging, as readers must interpret their figurative meanings in context and not simply reject literal interpretations (Schraw, 1995; Shinjo and Myers, 1987).

Studying metaphors in novels is interesting because they extend beyond literal meaning, requiring a more profound analysis to avoid misinterpretation. Understanding this metaphor will enhance the reader's understanding of the message conveyed in a novel. Previous studies explored metaphors in literature. Amiruddin (2020) analyzed metaphors in the novel *The Time Machine*, while Tantiasari (2021) examined metaphors in the character's speech in the novel *A Child Called It*. Ramadhika (2022) examined metaphorical phrases in Adele's song lyrics. In addition, Meranggi et al. (2022) examined similes and metaphors in the novel "The Sky Is Falling." These studies offer valuable insights into analyzing metaphors across various genres, underscoring the need for further exploration in novels.

Backman's (2014) novel, *A Man Called Ove*, was first published in Swedish on August 27, 2012, under the title *En man som heter Ove*, and later translated into English by Henning Koch, with the English edition released on July 15, 2014. The novel has resonated with readers worldwide through its heartfelt exploration of loneliness, loss, and the profound power of human connection. With sincere storytelling and a perfect blend of humor and emotion, this book has touched many readers, garnered praise, and inspired numerous adaptations, including a Swedish film in 2015 and an American remake, *A Man Called Otto*, in 2022, starring Tom Hanks.

Backman (2014) employs rich metaphorical imagery throughout the novel to enhance these themes and illustrate Ove's emotional struggles, his connection to the past, and his gradual embrace of new relationships. Given the significance of metaphors in shaping the novel's themes and emotional depth, this study aimed to analyze the metaphorical expressions, especially structural metaphors, in *A Man Called Ove* in a comprehensive manner. By examining how these structural metaphors function within the narrative, this study uncovered the layers of structural metaphors and the meanings they create and their

influence on the reader's interpretation of the novel.

METHOD

The method used in this study is a descriptive qualitative method, focusing on understanding phenomena through collecting and analyzing non-numerical data. This approach emphasized in-depth exploration of behaviors, experiences, attitudes, and social contexts rather than measuring statistical patterns. The analysis process began with an intense reading of the novel. Second, repeat the reading three times to thoroughly observe the data. Third, the collected data were classified based on the theory of metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson (2003) to classify the structural metaphor and their meaning. The third step was to verify the data by checking and rechecking to ensure accuracy and consistency.

This study used data from the novel *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman (2014). First published in Swedish under the title *En man som heter Ove* on August 27, 2012, the novel was later translated into English by Henning Koch and published by Atria Books on July 15, 2014, with 286 pages. *A Man Called Ove* has gained wide popularity, leading to several adaptations, including a Swedish film in 2015 and an American adaptation, *A Man Called Otto*, in 2022. This study focused on the type of structural metaphors and their meanings that appear in the novel, examining how metaphors are employed through dialogue and narration in the form of phrases, clauses, and sentences within the novel.

The data collection process for this study employed the documentation method, combined with note-taking techniques, to extract relevant information from Backman's (2014) novel, *A Man Called Ove*. data presentation used informal methods, which involved analyzing and presenting findings through words, explanations, and descriptions rather than formal methods such as symbols, diagrams, or tables. This study employed an informal method, which presents the analysis through non-verbal descriptions and explanations.

DISCUSSION

This section explains the eight data analyses in this study. Each datum utilizes a form of structural metaphors and its meaning in the novel.

Datum 1

“She believed in destiny. **That all the roads you walk in life, in one way or another, lead to what has been predetermined for you.**” (p. 64)

The example above is taken from Chapter 8, titled “*A Man Who Was Ove and A Pair of His Father’s Old Footprints.*” This chapter explores the formative period of Ove's life after his father's death. Ove reflects on the profound differences between his worldview and that of his wife, Sonja. In comparison, she views destiny as an abstract concept, something magical or philosophical, while Ove's idea of destiny is simple, concrete, and deeply personal.

The datum above is an example of a structural metaphor (life is a journey), where the concept of life (target domain) is understood in terms of elements of a journey, such as roads, walking, and destinations (source domain). The metaphor “That all the roads you walk in life, in one way or another, lead to what has been predetermined for you” implies that life's paths (roads) represent the various choices, experiences, and directions a person takes throughout life. This metaphor conceptualizes life as a journey along roads, and destiny as the fixed endpoint or destination that all paths converge upon. Sonya sees destiny as a well-planned journey, where every step you take and every decision you make leads you to exactly where you were always meant to go.

Datum 2

“It was more an argument where the little disagreements had ended up so entangled that every new word was treacherously booby-trapped, and in the end, it wasn't possible to open one's mouth at all without setting off at least four unexploded mines from earlier conflicts. **It was the sort of argument that had just run, and run, and run.** Until one day it just ran out.”

The example above is taken from Chapter 9, titled “*A Man Called Ove Bleeds A Radiator.*” The narration highlights the emotional formation over the years of unresolved conflict between Ove and his neighbor, Rune. Their strained relationship, which began with minor differences such as the choice of heating system or car brand (Saab vs Volvo), has evolved into a deep-rooted grudge.

The datum above is an example of a structural metaphor (argument is a journey), where the concept of arguments (target domain) is understood in terms of a journey or physical movement that can run, run, and run (source domain). The sentence “It was the sort of argument that had just run, and run, and run.” The metaphor structures our understanding of the argument as an ongoing process, with its momentum and direction, much like a person or object that “runs” or moves forward. This metaphor captures the exhausting and protracted nature of unresolved conflict. This allows us to talk about arguments as things that “start,” “run,” “go on,” or “come to an end,” borrowing language from the domain of physical activity to describe the flow and development of abstract experiences. In the context of this novel, this reflects the long-standing emotional distance between Ove and Rune. What begins as a minor disagreement gradually turns into a deep and lasting grudge. This metaphor maps the progression of their conflict onto the idea of a journey that one cannot easily stop or avoid.

Datum 3

“Many years later it occurred to Sonja to ask him about all that. When Ove at last told her, she shook her head both long and hard. “So while I was sleeping you sneaked out and helped people in need . . . and mended their fences? People can say whatever they like about you, Ove. But **you're the strangest superhero I ever heard about.**”

The example above is taken from Chapter 21, titled “*A Man Who Was Ove and Countries Where They Play Foreign Music in Restaurants.*” This passage is a flashback. Sonja finally asks about Ove's disappearance in the middle of the night. After learning that Ove had secretly been helping neighbors in need

and repairing their fences.

The datum above is an example of a structural metaphor (people are heroes), where the concept of people (target domain) in this context is Ove's identity, which is understood in terms of heroes (source domain). This culturally familiar figure represents selflessness, strength, and quiet heroism. Calling Ove, the "strangest superhero," while he does not fit the conventional image of a superhero (no cape, no superpowers), his actions, helping neighbors, standing up for the vulnerable, and compassion highlight the contrast between his rough exterior and the kindness hidden in his actions. Calling him "the strangest superhero" Sonja recognizes the contrast between Ove's appearance and the selfless integrity of his actions. He does not seek recognition or praise, which makes his actions all the more meaningful.

Datum 4

"Every human being needs to know what she's fighting for. That was what they said. And she fought for what was good. For the children she never had. And Ove fought for her. Because that was the only thing in this world he really knew."

The example above is datum number 19, taken from Chapter 23, titled "*A Man Who Was Ove and A Bus That Never Got There.*" The chapter recalls the deep bond between Ove and Sonja, particularly emphasizing how central she was to his identity and purpose. The chapter shows how Sonja's unwavering kindness, strength, and optimism shaped Ove's worldview. Even though she never had children, she poured her love into teaching and helping others, embodying a quiet resilience.

The datum above is an example of a structural metaphor (life is a battle/war), where the concept of life (target domain) is understood in terms of battle/war (source domain). The sentence "Every human being needs to know what she's fighting for" shows that living a meaningful life requires purpose, struggle, and commitment, just as a battle requires a goal. Like a battle, where every move is driven by a clear goal, whether freedom, justice, or protection, a person's life gains direction and significance when guided by a purpose. Without this sense of purpose, the

journey becomes aimless. This metaphor emphasizes how life is filled with challenges that require inner strength, and knowing what one is "fighting for" motivates to persevere. In this story, Sonja fights for love, for her dreams, and for her loved ones. After Sonja's passing, Ove continues the fight by preserving her legacy quietly and determinedly. This metaphor powerfully illustrates how both characters live with conviction, binding their lives together through acts of resistance, love, and loyalty, even in the face of loss and difficulty.

Datum 5

"Did you lose your license?"

"No. I never had one."

Ove's brain seems to need a good few moments to process this information, which, to him, is utterly beyond belief."

The example above is taken from Chapter 24, titled "*A Man Called Ove and A Brat Who Draws in Color.*" This scene is about Parvaneh revealing that she has no driver's license, which completely baffles Ove. His brain "needs time to process" the idea, which is inconceivable to him, especially coming from someone with a responsible job like a real estate agent.

The datum above is an example of a structural metaphor (mind is a machine), where the concept of mind (target domain) is understood in terms of a machine (source domain). The sentence "Ove's brain seems to need a good few moments to process this information" conveys that the brain operates like a machine that receives input, processes data, and produces output. This metaphor brings us closer to understanding how Ove sees the world, not with flexibility or spontaneity, but with structure and logic. His mind works like a well-oiled machine: everything must have a clear purpose, place, and function. So, when someone like Parvaneh casually mentions that she does not have a driver's license, it takes her by surprise and throws her entire way of thinking into chaos. Her brain needs time to "reboot" because this kind of thing makes no sense in her world. This metaphor shows how much Ove relies on routine and order to make sense of life, and how shocking it is for him when people do not

follow the rules he lives by.

Datum 6

“The man in the white shirt walks away, up towards the garages and the main road, with the sort of steps that make it clear that **this will not be the end of this story**. The woman with the papers hurries off after him”

The example above is taken from Chapter 31, titled “*A Man Called Ove Backs Up A Trailer. Again.*” This scene captures a critical moment of confrontation between Ove and the local authorities, particularly the man in the white shirt, a recurring figure who represents the cold face of the council. His growing frustration and anger suggest that Ove's silent rebellion, refusal to comply, and defense of his neighbors have riled others. The way he storms in, with a stiff, decisive step, makes it clear that this conflict is not over.

The datum above is an example of a structural metaphor (life is a journey/story), where the concept of life (target domain) in this context is the ongoing conflict understood in terms of journey or story (source domain). The phrase “with the sort of steps that make it clear that this will not be the end of this story” implies that the situation between Ove and the man in the white shirt unfolds like a plot line in a larger story. It conveys the impression that what has just happened is just one chapter of an ongoing struggle, with more developments to come. The metaphor signifies that this is not a one-time occurrence; the angry man deliberately leaving implies that Ove's actions will have consequences, and further confrontation is inevitable. The “steps” metaphorically promise further disturbance or conflict, even though no words are spoken to confirm it. This builds tension and reflects the ongoing conflict between Ove and the external forces that challenge his autonomy.

Datum 7

“Not that he needs music to take his own life, and not that he likes the idea of the radio clicking its way through units of electricity when he's gone. But if the cat wakes up from the bang, it may end up thinking that it's just a part of one of those modern pop songs the radio plays all the time these days. And then go back to sleep. **That is Ove's train of thought**”

The example above is taken from Chapter 32, titled “*A Man Called Ove Isn't Running A Damned Hotel.*” This scene depicts a very emotional moment where Ove, contemplating suicide, puts down his rifle and chooses to turn on the radio, not for himself, but to soften the impact of the shot on the cat, should it wake up to the noise. He reasoned that the cat would probably mistake the noise for a pop song and go back to sleep.

The datum above is an example of a structural metaphor (thinking is a journey), where the concept of thinking (target domain) is understood in terms of journey, specifically as a train moving along a track (source domain). The phrase “That is Ove's train of thought” maps the process of thinking onto the movement and sequence of a train that is logically connected and moving in a particular direction. The expression paints Ove's thoughts as a sequence of connected, logically progressing ideas like train cars following one another on a rail. This image of thought as movement highlights how his mind travels step by step, methodically working through even the most minor details, like a cat's well-being.

Datum 8

“They've considered countless plans over the last few days—including planting marijuana in the white-shirted man's shed, as Rune might have suggested—but after a few nights Ove seems to give up. He nods grimly, demands to use the telephone, and shuffles off into the next room to make a call. He didn't like doing it. **But when there's a war on, there's a war.**”

The example above is taken from Chapter 35, titled “*A Man Called Ove and Social Incompetence.*” The scene tells of Ove reluctantly joining his neighbors to help Anita and Rune, who are being threatened by the authorities, specifically, the man in the white shirt from the council, trying to move Rune to a care facility against their wishes.

The datum above is an example of a structural metaphor (conflict is a war), where the concept of conflict (target domain) is understood in terms of war (source domain). The phrase “But, when there's a war on, there's

a war” does not refer to an actual war but instead frames the council’s attempt to forcibly move Rune into a care facility against his and Anita’s wishes as a kind of battle. This reflects Ove’s sense of responsibility and justice. He may not want to get involved, but once he recognizes an injustice, like what happened to Rune, he cannot ignore it. This situation becomes a moral crusade for Ove, and he is willing to fight, even if it means stepping out of his comfort zone. Despite his apparent coldness, this significant turning point shows how deeply he cares.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that structural metaphors play an important role in conveying meaning and emotional depth in Fredrik Backman’s *A Man Called Ove*. Based on Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003) theory, eight data containing structural metaphors were identified and analyzed. The findings show that metaphors such as life is a journey, life is a battle/war, mind is a machine, thinking is a journey, people are heroes, and conflict is war are used to represent abstract experiences through concrete concepts. These structural metaphors help reveal Ove’s rigid mindset, emotional struggles, moral values, and personal transformation throughout the story. They also strengthen the novel’s themes of love, loss, responsibility, and human connection. Overall, the use of structural metaphors enhances the reader’s understanding of the narrative and characters, proving that metaphors function not only as stylistic devices but also as essential elements in shaping meaning. Thus, the research objective of identifying and explaining structural metaphors and their meanings in the novel has been achieved.

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