

## Exploring Grief Expression of a Main Character in the *A Man Called Otto* Movie

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### ABSTRACT

Grief is recognized as a universal psychological phenomenon, with its manifestation influenced by individual differences and contextual variables such as personality traits, cultural background, and the relational proximity to the deceased (Worden, 2009; Stroebe et al., 2007). The present study investigated the expressions of grief as portrayed by Otto, the protagonist in the film *A Man Called Otto* (2022). Following the death of his spouse, Sonya, Otto displays a series of emotional and behavioral alterations, including social withdrawal and changes in affective expression. The film serves as a narrative medium through which complex psychological processes, such as bereavement and emotional regulation, are represented. This study employed the Modes of Expression framework proposed by Corless et al. (2009), which classifies grief-related responses into four categories: verbal, non-verbal, physical, and behavioral expressions. A qualitative descriptive method was utilized, with primary data extracted from the film's narrative and screenplay, and triangulated with secondary sources comprising peer-reviewed articles, psychological texts, and grief-related theoretical literature. Scenes relevant to the portrayal of grief were systematically identified and thematically analyzed in alignment with the established framework. Findings indicated that Otto's grief is conveyed through a combination of spoken language, silence, facial expressions, and purposeful actions, most notably, repeated visits to his late wife's grave. These behaviors underscore the multifaceted and often non-verbal nature of grief expression. Moreover, Otto's trajectory from emotional isolation to renewed interpersonal engagement reflects the dynamic and transformative characteristics of the mourning process (Neimeyer, 2001). This study contributed to the growing body of literature on cinematic representations of psychological states, offering insights into how grief may be externalized through narrative structures and character development in visual media.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Losing someone we love is a painful experience that many people go through at some point in life. Whether it is our partner, close friend, family member, or even pet, grief can bring strong effects to the people left behind for instance, deep sorrow or even depression (Kübler-Ross, 2009). In addition to affecting the psychological symptoms, the death of a loved one also can affect the physiological symptoms such as changes in blood pressure, trouble sleeping, and others related conditions of the family or the surroundings as their response to the grief happened (Shear 2015). As a natural and universal part of human life, grief involves navigating the emotional impact of losing someone or something, with each individual responding differently depending on the nature of the loss (Mongelluzzo, 2023).

The response that people feel should be differ each other because there are internal and external factors that influence them, for instance culture, the relationship among the deceased and the people left behind, gender, and other factors (Geneviro et al., 2004). While everyone experiences grief differently, it often becomes

a long and personal journey to find peace and meaning of life again. People who are grieving often find different ways to show their emotions and the methods they choose are usually shaped by their individual character. Some may visit gravesites, take part in memorials, tell stories about the person they lost, light candles in remembrance, or even create personal items like journals or books to process their sorrow and keep reminding the deceased (Mitima-Verloop et al., 2021).

The grief response is part of the psychology study and closely related to social phenomena. This can also be experienced by the character in literature, for instance movies (Sharma & Pathak 2022). Psychology and literature have strong connections with each other since they both deal with humans and their emotions, perception to the world, and feelings (Aras, 2015). One of the grief response examples is depicted in the Otto character as the main character in *A Man Called Otto* (2022) movie.

*A Man Called Otto* (2022) movie is an adaptation movie from the best seller novel entitled *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman that was adapted as a movie in 2022. The story follows Otto, an elderly man who becomes anti-social and lives alone after the death of his beloved wife, Sonya. He only interacts as needed with his surroundings and starts to isolate himself after he is left behind by Sonya. However, his new neighbor, Marisol and her family, slowly help him open up. Through his actions, for instance speaking about his wife to others, visiting Sonya's grave, or other actions, it can be seen how deeply he is grieving and facing the grief.

Otto's journey on facing grief depicts that his grief is not always expressed directly through words. Sometimes, Otto expresses his sorrow through behavior or symbolic actions. This is related to the theory by Corless et al. used in this study which is a development of existing grief theory. Corless et al. (2014) developed a framework called the Language of Grief in their article entitled *Languages of grief: A model for understanding the expressions of the bereaved*, which includes a component known as the Modes of Expression. This concept categorizes the different ways grief is expressed. There are four types of grief expressions under the Modes of Expression: verbal response, non-verbal response, physical response, and physical activity. Each mode reflects different ways people process and externalize their loss, either through speech, silence, bodily reactions, or purposeful actions. These modes of expression offer a lens to examine how grief is shown and communicated.

The grief issue has been analyzed by Zakky (2023) in his study entitled *Prolonged Grief Disorder of the Main Character in A Man Called Otto*. The study analyzes the five stages of grief that Otto has been through with the Kübler-Ross theory. The result of the study is Otto experienced all of the 5 stages of grief, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance during his grief after his beloved wife, Sonya, is passed away. Furthermore, there is also another study that not only explore five stages of grief popularized by Kübler-Ross, but also the author has explored about how the griever responses to the grief or as known as modes of expression. The study has been analyzed by Ardyandika (2023) entitled *The Stages of Grief and Response of Cameron Turner in Confronting Death depicted in Benjamin Cleary's Swan Song*. This study found that Cameron Turner has experienced all of the stages of grief by Kübler-Ross and also his response to his grief, including verbal response, non-verbal response, physical response, and physical activity when Otto was striving to his grief.

Referring to the previous studies on grief, this study aims to explore the grief expression in *A Man Called Otto* (2022) movie that was experienced by the main character, Otto, who has been left by his beloved wife with the framework from Corless et al., including verbal response, non-verbal response, physical response, and physical activity. This topic is significant because grief is a universal and deeply personal experience, but not all individuals understand how to express it. In addition, the movie *A Man Called Otto* (2022) movie was chosen as the subject of this study because it provides a relatable portrayal of bereavement and grief through the main character, Otto. His emotional responses closely align with the Corless's Modes of Expression theory. By focusing specifically on modes of expression, this study analyzes a more detailed understanding of how grief is communicated and expressed.

## 2. METHODS

This study applied a descriptive qualitative approach to examine how grief is expressed by the main character, Otto, in *A Man Called Otto* (2022) movie. A qualitative data focused on human perspectives and meaning, particularly in involving emotion and individual perspectives, that are not easily captured through numerical data (Hammarberg et al. 2016). This approach enables a deeper understanding of Otto's response as expressions of his grief. The data used in this study consist of primary and secondary data. The primary data were obtained from the *A Man Called Otto* (2022) movie and its script, while the secondary data came from academic articles, books, or other resources and were used to support the analysis.

Data were collected through repeated watching of *A Man Called Otto* (2022) movie while closely reading the script to identify the scene that reflects the research objectives and organize it as the data. Data that did not align with the focus of the study were excluded to maintain relevance and coherence. The selected data

were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis. Each expression was interpreted based on its connection to the modes of expression of grief by Corless et al. (2014), including verbal response, non-verbal response, physical response, and physical activity. The analysis aimed to understand how Otto's behaviors and reactions show his emotional struggles of his grief.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Grief is a deeply personal experience that expresses itself in various forms. Based on Corless et al.'s grief theory of modes of expression, this study identified four types of grief expressions shown by Otto as the main character in *A Man Called Otto* (2022) movie. There are verbal response, non-verbal response, physical response, and physical activity.

#### *Verbal Response*

The griever often express their feeling of grief through words, either speaking or writing form, to their surroundings which aim to convey their emotions related to grief (Corless et al. 2014). This verbal response is also known as storytelling. It is normal as a social human who needs each other. It is because storytelling has a positive impact for both the physical and psychological of a person (Brockington, 2021). Otto experiences this verbal response during his grief that is shown by the following quotation.

#### **Data 1:**

*OTTO: Sonya found it. We used to come here every Saturday at one.*

*MARISOL: Then what?*

*OTTO: Go home at two. I'd wax the car. Sonya would grade papers, cook. Spend the rest of the day reading.*

*MARISOL: What kinds of books?*

*OTTO (Shrugs): **Books. I tried reading some of them; it wasn't for me. (Beat.) Sonya's friends used to say we were night and day. Everything in my world was black and white until I met Sonya. She was the color.***

*MARISOL: I would have liked her.*

*(A Man Called Otto movie 01:09:17 - 01:10:05)*

Otto's verbal expressions of grief are seen when he speaks about Sonya with his neighbor, Marisol. Although he is typically a quiet person, Otto slowly starts to open up about his memories with Sonya, describing how Sonya brings color to his dark life and has a big impact on Otto's life. By recalling and sharing memories of Sonya, Otto not only expresses his feeling of grief, but also copes with her absence and preserves the presence in Otto's life.

Another instance of Otto's verbal expression happens during a confrontation with Marisol, where he becomes emotionally defensive. Otto explicitly expresses his unwillingness to let go of his memories of Sonya, despite the social pressure to move on. Through his spoken words, Otto not only conveys his grief but also resists the society's pressure to forget someone who is influential to his life. His verbal response becomes a way of asserting his right to mourn on his way. Furthermore, his anger toward those who ask him to move on shows that the frustration some griever feel when others seem insensitive to their pain. Here is the following quotation.

#### **Data 2:**

*MARISOL: Don't yell at me!*

*OTTO: ... **Why can't people mind their own business? Idiots, interrupting me at every turn. The more they babble on, the more they drown out the memory of her voice. I don't want to clear Sonya out of my life. She was everything. There was nothing before her; there's nothing after.***

*(A Man Called Otto movie 01:21:43- 01:22:06)*

#### *Non-verbal Response*

Grief is not always expressed by spoken or written. In some cases, it is quietly carried and expressed through silence or reflection. It is called as non-verbal response which involves internal thoughts and emotions that may not be communicated through words (Corless et al. 2014). In *A Man Called Otto* (2022) movie, Otto also shows this mode of expression. He is often quiet and reflective of the past memories with Sonya. Here is the following quotation of non-verbal response scene.

**Data 3:**

*Marisol, Jimmy and the Cat leave and Otto shuts the door firmly behind them. He stands for a moment in silence then turns, looking around his empty house, remembering...*

*EXT. LUCAS'S FARMHOUSE, DRIVEWAY 1976 (MEMORY) ...*

*Sonya picks up a chubby barn cat (ERNEST) and holds it out affectionately toward Young Otto, nearly pressing their faces together.*

*SONYA: This is Ernest, my guard dog. Say hello to Otto.*

*YOUNG OTTO: Hello (...)*

*(A Man Called Otto movie 00:54:25 - 00:54:45).*

In that scene, Otto stands alone in his house and gazes at familiar surroundings that once included Sonya. Without saying anything, he is visibly overcome by memory and emotion. This silence becomes a meaningful act in itself, a way of holding on to the past. His silence, body language, and gaze suggest an ongoing emotional connection and internal struggle that words cannot express. It is part of a non-verbal response as in the definition of Kurniadi and Mahaputra (2021) states that non-verbal refers to a communication that emphasizes meaning rather than words.

Furthermore, Otto does not experience the non-verbal response once. Similarly with the previous scene of non-verbal response, Otto sits on a bench recalling the first time he met Sonya at the train station. The flashback is presented without dialogue, emphasizing how memories can resurface through quiet reflection. His non-verbal expressions, which are motionless and lost in thought, show the emotional weight of loss and how deeply it lives within him. Here is the scene of Otto's non-verbal response.

**Data 4:**

*Otto (60s) sits on a train bench, watching people come and go. It's a foggy morning, dreamlike, hard to recognize faces. (Flashback)*

*A train pulls in. Otto catches sight of a woman who looks like Sonya boarding at the other end of the platform. He rises, hurries toward her, then tries to board. Too late. ...*

*(A Man Called Otto movie 00:42:33 - 00:42:45).*

Another moment further illustrates Otto's silent grief when he listens to a song that reminds him of Sonya. Here is the following quotation of that moment.

**Data 5:**

*Otto turns on the radio, searches stations, lands on a country ballad ("Til You're Home"). He listens to the song a moment while he finishes his cookie, then turns the radio off, leaning back in his seat as exhaust fills the car... (Flashback...)*

*EXT. TRAIN PLATFORM, 1973 - Otto (60s) sits on a train bench, watching people come and go. It's a foggy morning, dreamlike, hard to recognize faces. A train pulls in. Otto catches sight of a woman who looks like Sonya boarding at the other end of the platform. He rises, hurries toward her, then tries to board. Too late. (...)*

*(A Man Called Otto movie 00:41:40 - 00:42:30).*

In that scene, Otto does not speak, but he focuses on the song that is playing on and his gestures show a profound emotional response. The absence of spoken words does not decrease the intensity of his grief. It enhances the sense of intimacy and emotional depth. His non-verbal responses reflect how grief often lingers in memory and silence that also show how grief and mourning can be expressed without a single word.

**Physical Response**

Grief can be expressed not only through speech or silence, but also through involuntary physical responses. Corless et al. (2014) describe physical responses as signs and bodily expressions, such as crying, sighing, or other involuntary physical reactions to intense emotions. In *A Man Called Otto* (2022) movie, Otto experiences this kind of grief through spontaneous physical responses that occur in moments of vulnerability. This following quotation highlights how the body often shows grief and sorrow that is not expressed verbally.

**Data 6:**

*MARISOL: I would have liked her.*

*OTTO (Nods): Sonya was a force of nature. Convinced the school to start a program for kids who needed extra help. A lot of them had problems at home, social anxieties. By the time she was done, they were reciting Shakespeare. I ran into one of her kids this morning -*

***Otto pauses, struck by an unexpected wave of emotion. He pushes it quickly aside and rises, grabbing his coffee cup.***

*(A Man Called Otto movie 01:10:05 - 01:10:41)*

When he speaks about Sonya's life in the past, Otto suddenly becomes overwhelmed and pauses his sentences. Rather than finishing the story, Otto quickly shifts his posture and diverts his attention by standing and grabbing a cup of coffee. In this scene, Otto's body tries to reveal the emotional intensity he tries to suppress. The hesitation followed by the physical response, shows that grief is still in Otto's heart, waiting to emerge at unexpected moments.

This kind of response shows how grief can interrupt daily activities, surfacing in ways the individual may not fully control. The physical response, such as in this scene, depicts the complexity of grief. It is not only as an emotional experience, but also as a body language that communicates sorrow even in silence.

### ***Physical Activity***

Grieving is not always an internal process. It often takes the form of meaningful actions. Corless et al. (2014) define physical activities as intentional acts, either private or public, carried out to remember and honor the deceased, including visiting a grave, participating in ritual, and others. In addition to honor to the person who has passed away, such actions also serve to support the grieving individual in adapting to the loss and navigating the bereavement process (Mitima-Verloop et al., 2021).

In this movie, Otto occasionally visits his wife's grave as his response to the deep grief that he experiences. Here is the following quotation.

#### **Data 7:**

*Otto walks across an expanse of grass carrying a lawn chair, a thermos, and some potted flowers. He unfolds the lawn chair, puts the thermos beside it.*

*OTTO: I found the flowers you like. Pink.*

***Otto sets the flowers in front of the grave marker of SONYA ANDERSON. He clears away old flowers, leaves and twigs.***

*(A Man Called Otto movie 00:23:33 - 00:23:58).*

In that scene, Otto is seen carrying Sonya's favorite flowers and visiting her grave. He speaks to her headstone, clears away old leaves, and replaces them with the pink flowers. This act holds deep emotional meaning for Otto. It reflects Otto's desire to maintain his connection between him and his beloved wife, Sonya and symbolizes his ongoing bond with her even after death. Furthermore, his activity aligns with the concept that physical activity in grief is not only acts of remembrance, but also serves as ways to process emotions and cope with absence.

That is not only a scene of Otto visiting Sonya's grave, but also there is another scene of physical activity that Otto did.

#### **Data 8:**

***TILT DOWN to discover Otto setting his thermos and lawn chair down in front of Sonya's headstone. Marisol stands behind Otto, the baby in her arms. Tommy, Luna, Abbie and the Cat are there as well. Otto gestures to each in turn, 'introducing' them to Sonya. Marisol takes the baby's hand in hers and waves to Sonya. Luna and Abbie place fresh pink flowers on the headstone.***

*(A Man Called Otto movie 01:00:18 - 01:00:33).*

In that scene, Otto is not going alone to Sonya's grave, but he invites Marisol and her family to join him. Otto starts to introduce them to Sonya and allows them to participate in the moment. This shift from a private ritual to shared experience illustrates his gradual openness to his surroundings. It also shows how grief can also be expressed communally. These scenes reveal how deliberate, symbolic actions can provide comfort and meaning in the grieving process, allowing the bereaved to both honor the past and gently move forward.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that the grief experienced by Otto, the main character in *A Man Called Otto* (2022), is expressed through various forms categorized under the four Modes of Expression by Corless et al. (2014): verbal response, non-verbal response, physical response, and physical activity. These modes offer insight into how grieving individuals express their emotions in both direct and indirect ways.

Otto's verbal responses are seen in the way he shares memories of his late wife, Sonya, especially during conversations with his new neighbor, Marisol. Through storytelling, Otto not only expresses his sorrow but also keeps Sonya's presence alive in his daily life. Furthermore, Otto also highlights the unspoken grief as his non-verbal response. Scenes where Otto gazes silently at familiar places or listens to music tied to past memories show how emotional pain can manifest without words. Otto also experiences physical response which is expressed by grabbing a cup of coffee in the middle conversation with Marisol talking about Sonya. In addition, Otto visits his beloved wife's grave twice, either personal or public, as his physical activities to face his grief. These acts are not only ways of honoring the deceased but also serve as coping mechanisms that allow Otto to process his emotions.

By analyzing Otto's expressions through Corless et al.'s framework, the study highlighted that grieving is a unique and evolving process. Each form of expression, spoken or silent, plays a role in how one navigates loss and eventually finds new meaning in life.

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