

Conflict

Conflict Definition

In literature, conflict is a literary element that involves a struggle between two opposing forces, usually a [protagonist](#) and an [antagonist](#).

Internal and External Conflicts

Careful examination of some conflict examples will help us realize that conflicts may be internal or external. An internal or psychological conflict arises as soon as a [character](#) experiences two opposite emotions or desires – usually virtue and vice, or good and evil – inside him. This disagreement causes the character to suffer mental agony. Internal conflict develops a unique tension in a storyline, marked by a lack of action.

[External conflict](#), on the other hand, is marked by a characteristic involvement of an action wherein a character finds himself in struggle with those outside forces that hamper his progress. The most common type of external conflict is where a protagonist fights back against the antagonist's tactics that impede his or her advancement.

Examples of Conflict in Literature

Example #1: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)

Hamlet's internal conflict is the main conflict in William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*." This internal conflict decides his tragic downfall. He reveals his state of mind in the following lines from Act 3, Scene 1 of the play:

“To be, or not to be – that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep..."

The conflict here is that Hamlet wants to kill his father's murderer, Claudius, but he also looks for proof to justify his action. This ultimately ruins his life, and the lives of his loved ones. Due to his internal conflict, Hamlet spoils his relationship with his mother, and sends Ophelia (Hamlet's love interest) into such a state of despair that she commits suicide.

Hamlet's internal conflict, which is regarded as indecisiveness, almost got everyone killed at the end of the play. The [resolution](#) to the conflict came when he killed Claudius by assuming fake madness so that he would not be asked for any justification. In the same play, we find Hamlet engaged in an external conflict with his uncle Claudius.

Example #2: *Doctor Faustus* (By Christopher Marlowe)

Another example of an internal conflict is found in the character of Doctor Faustus in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Faustus has an ambitious nature. In spite of being a respected scholar, he sold his soul to Lucifer by signing a contract with his blood, in order to achieve ultimate power and limitless pleasure in this world. He learns the art of black magic, and defies Christianity.

After the aforementioned action, we see Faustus suffering from an internal conflict where he thinks honestly about repenting, acting upon the advice of "the good angel," but "the bad angel" or the evil inside him distracts him by saying it is all too late. In conclusion, the conflict is resolved when devils take his soul away to Hell, and he suffers eternal damnation because of his over-ambition.

Example #3: *The Lord of the Flies* (By William Golding)

The most straightforward type of external conflict is when a character in a story struggles against another character physically. In William Golding's novel *The Lord of the Flies*, for example, Ralph (the leader of the "good

“tribe” of hunters. Jack and his tribe give in to their savage instinct, and make attempts to hunt or kill the civilized batch of boys led by Ralph.

Example #4: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (By Harper Lee)

Another kind of external conflict sets a character against the evil that dominates a society. In this type of conflict, a character may confront a dominant group with opposing priorities. For instance, in Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, an honest lawyer, Atticus Finch, goes up against the racist society in which he lives. Atticus has the courage to defend a black man, Tom Robinson, who has been falsely accused of a rape. Though Atticus has the support of a few like-minded people, most of the townspeople express their disapproval of his defense of a black man.

Function of Conflict

Both internal and external conflicts are essential elements of a storyline. It is essential for a writer to introduce and develop conflict, whether internal, external, or both, in his storyline in order to achieve the story’s goal. Resolution of the conflict entertains the readers.

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