External Conflict

Definition of External Conflict

External [conflict](#) is a struggle that takes place between the main [character](#) and some outside force. Therefore, it is outside the body of the [protagonist](#). Usually, it occurs when the protagonist struggles against the [antagonist](#), a character that opposes the protagonist in the main body of the story. Other types of external conflict could also arise due to some other factors such as the forces of nature, and society in which the protagonist lives.

Types of External Conflict

There are different types of external conflict found in stories. The most common are:

Character vs. Character

This type of conflict occurs when a character struggles against other characters in the story, for instance in the *Harry Potter* series. Harry engages in a battle against Lord Voldemort.

Character vs. Society

This external conflict occurs when the main character stands up to support his beliefs and struggles against the social forces, for instance Sophocles' "Antigone."

Character vs. Nature

In this type of external conflict, the protagonist struggles against the forces of nature, or an external environment. For instance, in the short story *To*

Build a Fire, Jack London tells a story of an anonymous narrator and his dog, traveling through the wilderness of Yukon Trail.

Examples of External Conflict in Literature

Example #1: *Romeo and Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

One classic example of character vs. society external conflict occurs in Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet.* The two major characters fall in love, despite their belonging to the feuding families, which do not want them to be together. They constantly struggle and strive to get together throughout the play, as they are under the pressure of society, which wants them to hate each other. Thus, it is a struggle between individuals and society that eventually causes their tragic deaths.

Example #2: *The Old Man and The Sea* (by Earnest Hemingway)

A major external conflict is between the old man, Santiago, and the fish, a marlin. There is fighting back and forth, and a tug of war between them, that lasts for several days, with neither giving up. Santiago's struggle is also against nature – to catch a giant fish, and the sharks – which attack his precious marlin.

The old man tries to catch the marlin, though it fights back pretty hard. The old man struggles against the views of his villagers too, as they think he has run out of his luck and wasted eighty four days without catching a fish. Nevertheless, he is still determined to not give up. We can clearly see his dilemma of catching the marlin, and his conflict with the fish, when he says, "Fish, I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends."

Example #3: *Heart of Darkness* (by Joseph Conrad)

Marlowe takes an adventure to the Congo Bay in Africa, and feels surrounded by imperialistic forces there. Conflicts of both character vs. nature, and character vs. society, exist here. In fact, Marlowe comes to a place where people are mentally crazy, and kill each other just to follow

Marlowe also sees a civilized man, Kurtz, who due to his prolonged stay over there, starts behaving like the local savages. Though Marlowe could not stand a lie, and does not forgive others for this fault when he meets Kurtz's fiancée, he tells her a lie about her fiancé's last words. Being a protagonist, Marlowe faces numerous external conflicts.

Example #4: *Macbeth* (by William Shakespeare)

Macbeth faces character vs. society conflict. Initially, he struggles with his internal conflict, which allows his ambition to turn him into a violent person, pushing him to kill the king to dethrone him. However, during all these circumstances, he encounters several external conflicts. Following the murder of the king, the people stand up against him, and he has to engage himself in fight with them. These external conflicts occur between Macbeth and other characters.

Function of External Conflict

Stories told in novels, plays, short stories, and other similar formats, revolve around the conflict. External conflict gives a sense of excitement and immediacy to the story, making it worth reading. It defines uniqueness of a character and reveals his intentions, giving the [audience](#) an understanding of his [motivation](#) behind the [dialogue](#) and action. In addition, it tells the reason of a character's motivation in life that otherwise may appear foolish on the surface. It also makes possible for the readers to build up sympathy and profound connection with the character to eventually learn something and transform their lives through this learning.