

Antagonist

Antagonist Definition

In literature, an antagonist is a [character](#), or a group of characters, which stands in opposition to the [protagonist](#), which is the main character. The term “antagonist” comes from the Greek word *antagonistēs*, which means “opponent,” “competitor,” or “rival.”

It is common to refer to an antagonist as a *villain* (the bad guy), against whom a *hero* (the good guy) fights in order to save himself or others. In some cases, an antagonist may exist within the protagonist that causes an inner [conflict](#) or a [moral](#) conflict inside his mind. This inner conflict is a major [theme](#) of many literary works, such as *Doctor Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe, *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare, and *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, by James Joyce. Generally, an antagonist appears as a foil to the main character, embodying qualities that are in [contrast](#) with the qualities of the main character.

Examples of Antagonist in Literature

Example #1: *Antigone* (By Sophocles)

A classical example of an antagonist is that of King Creon in Sophocles’ [tragedy](#) *Antigone*. Here, the function of the antagonist is to obstruct the main character’s progress, through evil plots and actions. Antigone, the protagonist, struggles against King Creon, the antagonist, in her effort to give her brother a respectable burial. Through his evil designs, Creon tries to hamper her in this attempt by announcing that her brother was a traitor, and decreeing that “he must be left to the elements.” This protagonist-antagonist conflict becomes the theme of this tragedy.

Example #2: *Othello* (By William Shakespeare)

Another example of an antagonist is the character of Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Iago stands as one of the most notorious villains of all time, having spent all of his time plotting against Othello, the protagonist, and his wife Desdemona. Through his evil schemes, Iago convinces Othello that his wife has been cheating on him, and even convinces him to kill his own wife despite her being faithful to him. The thing that separates Iago from other antagonists is that we do not really know why he wants to destroy Othello.

Example #3: *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (By Robert Louis Stevenson)

In his novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson explores the theme of [doppelganger](#) in which Hyde is not only an evil double of the honorable Dr. Jekyll, but his antagonist. Jekyll creates Hyde by a series of scientific experiments in order to prove his statement:

“Man is not truly one, but truly two.”

He means that a human soul is a mixture of evil and good. In other words, every man's antagonist exists within himself. Hyde is the manifestation of the evil that existed in the honorable Dr. Jekyll. Well-known as a respectable Victorian gentleman, Jekyll could never have fulfilled his evil desires. He separated his “evil-self” and gave him a separate identity, thus inventing his own antagonist who, as a result, brings his downfall.

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

Bob Ewell is a malicious antagonist in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. Being convinced that Mayella may have been guilty of committing a crime, Ewell is bent on making sure that someone else gets the punishment. Ewell keeps on following Atticus, Judge Taylor, and Helen Robinson – even after the case is finished – and goes to the extent that he almost kills the Finch kids. In defense of Boo over the killing of Bob Ewell, Heck Tate said:

“To my way of thinkin’, Mr Finch, taking the one man who’s done you and this town a great favour an’ draggin’ him with his shy ways into the limelight – to me, that’s a sin. It’s a sin and

I'm not about to have it on my head. If it was any other man, it'd be different. But not this man, Mr. Finch."

Function of Antagonist

Conflict is a basic element of any plot. The presence of an antagonist alongside a protagonist is vital for the typical formula of a plot. The antagonist opposes the protagonist in his endeavors, and thus the conflict ensues. The protagonist struggles against the antagonist, taking the plot to a [climax](#). Later, the conflict is resolved with the defeat of the antagonist; or, as in tragedies, with the downfall of the protagonist.