



Conflict

What is Conflict?

Simply put, conflict is a struggle between two opposing forces. Examining conflict can help when doing a character analysis. To understand conflict in literature, become familiar with the key character terms, as well as the types of conflict a character encounters.

Key Character Terms:

- **Protagonist.** The protagonist is the main character in a literary work. He or she is usually seen as good, upright, respectable, and always attempting to take the proper course of action. However, the protagonist is not always good. For example, in *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff, a brooding and vengeful man, is the protagonist. Thus, the protagonist is a central character, regardless of whether he or she is good or bad.

Note: Some literary works may involve an animal protagonist, such as Buck in *Call of the Wild*, or the animal characters in folk tales or fables.

- **Anti-Hero.** When the protagonist is flawed or dominated by negative traits or questionable behavior, he or she is called an "anti-hero." The term "anti-hero" does not, however, mean that the central character stands in opposition to an actual hero in the story or novel. Rather, it means that the central character stands in opposition to the traditional idea of a hero.

- **Antagonist.** The antagonist in a literary work stands in opposition to the protagonist. In most novels, the protagonists and antagonists will be clearly distinct and remain consistent. In general, the antagonist will be viewed as bad, wicked, or malicious. Even if dominated by negative traits, however, the antagonist can be just as significant and complex a character as the protagonist.

Four Major Types of Conflict:

By observing the manner in which a character resolves or doesn't resolve a conflict, one can gain insight into the character's qualities, values, and personality.

1. **Character's struggle against nature.** When a character must overcome some natural obstacle or condition, a conflict with nature occurs. For example, the men in *The Open Boat* must strive to reach land or perish at sea. Floods, snowstorms, insects, and animals may all constitute a conflict with nature. There are, however,

less obvious manifestations of nature that can also constitute a conflict, such as plague or famine.

- 2. Character's struggle against an antagonist.** A struggle between two people is a common element in many works of literature. For example, in *Hamlet*, Hamlet is involved in a conflict with his uncle, King Claudius, who seeks to have Hamlet killed. However, a conflict between two people is not always openly hostile. For example, in *Crime and Punishment*, the young murderer Raskolnikov and the police investigator Porfiry engage in a psychological conflict, a battle of wits.
- 3. Character's struggle against society.** A struggle against society occurs when a character is at odds with a particular social force or condition produced by society, such as poverty, political revolution, a social convention, or set of values. For example, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the protagonist stands in conflict with a hypocritical education system, while in *Bleak House* it is a corrupt legal system that functions as the major antagonist.
- 4. Struggle between competing elements within the character (internal conflict).** Within a character, aspects of his or her personality may struggle for dominance. These aspects may be emotional, intellectual, or moral. For example, an "emotional" conflict would occur if the protagonist chose an unworthy lover over someone who is devoted. An "intellectual" conflict could entail accepting or rejecting one's religion. A "moral" conflict might pose a choice between honoring family or country. Such conflicts typically leave the character indecisive and agitated. When such conflicts are resolved, the resolution may be successful or unsuccessful.

Remember:

Conflict is a struggle between two opposing forces. To understand conflict in literature, become familiar with the key character terms "protagonist," "antagonist," and "anti-hero." Also, keep in mind the four major types of conflict.