
CONFLICTS

An introduction by John Leggett

It seems likely that the earliest storytellers—in the tent or around the campfire or on the Viking ship—told stories out of an impulse to tell stories. They made themselves popular by distracting their listeners from a dull or dangerous evening with heroic exploits and a skill at creating suspense: What happened next? And after that? And then what happened?

—Janet Burroway

Why do certain stories catch our attention instantly, draw us in, and make us care about what's going on? It is as if each of these stories has a motor that keeps us reading, or that makes us read faster and faster.

Conflict: The Energy of a Story

An interesting story creates an energy that attracts us. Where does this energy come from? It comes from conflict. **Conflict** is a struggle between opposing forces. A conflict results when a person disturbs the balance of things, because of desire or dread. In a conflict, a character may struggle with another person, with a whole army, with a hungry tiger, or with a troublesome aspect of his or her own personality. Conflict is found in true stories as well as fictional stories.

When a baby wants a rattle but cannot reach it, there is conflict. When a girl wishes that the boy with freckles—who never notices her—would ask her to the picnic, there is conflict. When a pinch hitter picks up a bat and starts toward the plate, or when a doctor frowns at the laboratory report, or when a political candidate learns that his opponent has taken the lead, a conflict has been started. A story begins.

Each of us knows about conflict. We encounter it and try to resolve it every day. From the moment we wake in the morning, we must deal with conflict. The conflict might involve guilt over the homework we didn't finish. It might involve anger at the traffic jams on the way to school. It might involve some big guy who bumps us in the hall. If we don't overcome the conflict, we feel frustrated and angry. If we do overcome it, we feel great.



Illustration by N. C. Wyeth for *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson (1911).



An illustration by Arthur Rackham for "The Valiant Tailor," from *The Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (1909). Constable & Company, Ltd., London.

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Two Kinds of Conflict: External and Internal

In daily life, as in literature, there are two basic types of conflict. **External conflict** is a struggle between a character and some outside force. It may take place when one person threatens another. An example might be a bully who waits for a smaller child on the way home. An external conflict may also take place between one person



and a group of people. For instance, an outlaw in a Western story may struggle with a sheriff and his deputies. An external conflict also may take place when a person is challenged or threatened by nature. This kind of conflict might involve a mountain climber struggling to reach the peak of a steep, ice-covered mountain. It could also involve a storm at sea that keeps a sailor from the safety of the harbor.

The second basic type of conflict takes place within our minds or hearts. **Internal conflict** is a struggle between opposing desires or emotions in a person. Suppose a desire to pass the test tempts Miranda to glance at Alice's paper. At the same time, Miranda doesn't want to lose the respect of her teacher and classmates, who disapprove of cheating. As she decides whether or not to look at Alice's answer, Miranda is enduring an internal conflict.

Suspense: Exciting Uncertainty

In literature, once a conflict begins we want to know what happens next. Once Miranda realizes she could see Alice's paper if she turned her head slightly, or once the batter faces the pitcher, or once the climber starts up that mountain, we begin to wonder what is going to happen. This anxious curiosity is called **suspense**. Suspense usually begins to build as soon as a conflict begins.

Sometimes suspense is increased by hints or clues about what will happen later. Such hints or clues are called **foreshadowing**. Say a character about to dive into the ocean hears someone remark that sharks were once sighted near shore. As you read, you suspect the sharks will appear again—and you feel that tingle of fear and excitement that keeps you turning the pages.