

One Page Concept Review: Conflict

What is it?

In a literary text, conflict is a problem to be overcome. It can be internal (a psychological struggle and/or a clash between contradictory inclinations or desires) or it can be external (against society, nature, or another character).

Conflict is not always resolved successfully, and there is almost always more than one conflict in a work of fiction. Often these conflicts overlap, and there is also often more than one way to evaluate a conflict.

Why should I care?

If there is no conflict, there is no story (at least in a traditional sense). Even texts like narrative poems will usually have an implied conflict.

The way conflicts are resolved (or not resolved) is the single biggest clue to uncovering the author's attitude toward the big ideas in a work of fiction.

How do I do it?

- **Look for turning points.** For each important character there is usually at least one point where his or her reaction to a conflict alters his or her fate. These are usually the most important parts in a text to analyze. When you do this, focus on the choices that the character makes in response to the conflicts. What does this reveal about that character's personality or nature?
- **In major works, think about conflict in terms of character arcs.** A character arc is nothing more than measuring the distance in personality from where a character begins to where a character ends up. Often this is in terms of personal growth or maturity. However, this is not to imply that all major characters have to be dynamic, since sometimes conflicts are resolved by sticking steadfastly to one's convictions (to give one obvious example). However, even in this case of a static major character, he or she will typically be tempted to waver from his or her core beliefs or core nature at various points in the text, allowing the reader to evaluate his or her progress as a sort of journey to an end point. Thinking about conflict in this way (as a journey) gives you a short hand for understanding what points in that journey are significant as well as an obvious point of comparison or contrast (beginning to end).
- **Use conflicts to uncover themes.** If a character's conflict is resolved in a positive manner, for instance, the author *could be* signaling approval of what that character represents (their ideas, actions, or point of view). To give another example, if a sympathetic character's conflict is resolved in a negative manner, the author *could be* signaling disapproval of whatever it is that is complicating the sympathetic character's life. Obviously this sort of analysis is completely context dependent (you still have to make inferences on a case-by-case basis), but the point is that if one takes the time to think about what the resolution of a conflict implies, one can usually get pretty close to the author's attitude toward the idea that the conflict is engaging (a theme).

How do students screw this up?

Focusing on Only the Primary Conflict

- **Secondary characters have conflicts too.** While people generally speak of conflict in terms of the protagonist, it's often worth considering alternative points of view. Particularly on the AP exam, you might be asked to analyze a novel in terms of another character other than the protagonist. If you find yourself engaging someone other than the main character (or if the plot features an ensemble of protagonists or otherwise lacks a unifying point of view), simply treat the character that you are analyzing like you would the protagonist in a more conventional text.
- **The “primary” conflict is sometimes just a plot device to set up other, more important things into motion.** When I write *primary* here, in this context I mean “most obvious” or “the conflict that initiates action” (and not in the sense of “most important”). A “shaggy dog story” is a long, rambling story or joke that is only amusing because it is absurdly inconsequential or pointless. This type of narrative, in other words, only exists to provide a platform for embellishments and digressions. Something of the sort can happen in literature too, especially in more character driven pieces. The primary conflict can, for instance, just be an excuse to group characters together who would otherwise have no reason to interact.

Forgetting to Think about the Resolution to Conflicts

- **Focusing only on the set-up can make you miss the big picture.** While establishing the conflict is obviously important, a conflict is primarily important in terms of its resolution (or failure to resolve). This is true in terms of uncovering themes, and it is true in terms of measuring a character according to their development over time.
- In Q3 essays, **you don't want to give the impression that you did not finish the book.** Not that you would ever do this of course, but some lazy students never quite make it to the end of a work, yet somehow operate under the delusion that they are qualified to write about the novel or play in essay form. Even if this is not the case (and you have entirely legitimate reasons to focus on the beginning of a novel or play), you still need to (at minimum) relate early conflicts to their ultimate resolution in your conclusion (to demonstrate that you grasp the big picture).
- **Unresolved conflicts are important too.** If a problem is not solved, it could suggest any number of things: that the problem is intractable; that the character is flawed; that fate determines people's lives, etc. Failing to consider these possibilities is to potentially miss what the author is trying to communicate about a big idea in the text.

Not Relating External Conflicts to Internal Conflicts

- **Internal conflict is usually more central to developing themes in a literary text.** Plot obviously matters, but (broadly speaking) it matters primarily in terms of its effects on character, and personality is mostly revealed through internal conflict. What a character thinks, how a character reacts, and the degree to which a character alters his or her point of view over time: these are typically the ways an author develops theme, and they are largely a function of a character's psychology. The external conflict often exists merely to reveal these things.
- **Societal conflicts are primarily important in terms of how they affect character's psychology.** Works with major societal conflicts are usually (though not always) critical of aspects of the society that the author is describing. Given this, one can usually assess the author's attitude fairly easily. To give a common example, if sympathetic characters are made miserable by a societal conflict, the author almost certainly disapproves of that aspect of society that is leading to the psychological distress.