

Conflict

If plot is the story's framework or skeleton, conflict is the story's muscle and tissue. The conflict or the struggle within the story gives the story its movement, its direction. Conflict is the guiding factor within a story. There is no story without conflict. Conflict is not only the fist-fighting rumble lasting for a few moments between two hot-heads, but more realistically conflict is the life-long struggle we have with our weaknesses, with other people, with our environment, and with our values.

Typically, literary conflicts fit into one of four main categories:

- Character against Self
- Character against Character
- Character against Society
- Character against Nature

Character against Self represents the struggles a character experiences with his or her own conscience, situation, or weakness. For example, we can see how these patterns of conflict apply directly to life and to our scripture study when we read about Nephi and his brothers returning to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates from Laban (1 Nephi 3). Nephi does not have a struggle within himself to return because he has already won the internal conflict when he decides, "I will go and do what the Lord hath commanded." But undoubtedly, Laman and Lemuel question whether they should or should not go (character against self).

However, we do see Nephi's internal struggle when the Spirit commands Nephi to slay Laban. In 1 Nephi 4:6-18, Nephi reveals: "Never at any time have I shed the blood of man. And I shrunk and would that I might not slay him." Nephi continues to reason, "Yea, and I also knew that he had sought to take away mine own life; yea and he would not hearken until the commandments of the Lord; and he also had taken away our property." Nephi continues to reason through the Spirit's guidance the necessity of having the brass plates to preserve the word of God for his people. At this point, Nephi concludes his conflict with himself and follows the command to slay Laban.

Character against Character represents the struggles between two or more characters. Of course, we see the near constant conflict Nephi experiences with his brothers Laman and Lemuel. When Laman wasn't able initially to obtain the brass plates from Laban, Nephi's brothers wanted to return to their father empty-handed. Yet Nephi confronts them by declaring that they would not return until they had accomplished all that they had been commanded to do. We also have accounts of Laman and Lemuel striking Nephi with a rod or of them angrily binding their younger brother on the ship until they are all nearly drowned.

Character against Society represents the struggles a character has with his or her social environment, with social traditions and institutions. We see this conflict first in the Book of Mormon when we learn that the people of Jerusalem are angry with Lehi and his preaching and intend to kill him; therefore, in a dream, the Lord commands Lehi and his family to flee to the

wilderness. We sense there is some conflict for this family as they must leave behind all their wealth and comfort. In fact, some of Lehi's children and Ishmael's children lament at times while in the wilderness all they have left behind. And when Nephi and his brothers return to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates, they must contend again with society as they confront Laban who represents the religious leaders of Jerusalem.

Character against Nature represents the struggles a character has with the natural environment. Certainly Lehi's family faces unthinkable circumstances as they wander in the Middle East wilderness for eight long years as Nephi directly states: "And we did travel and wade through much affliction in the wilderness; and our women did bear children in the wilderness" (1 Nephi 17:1). We know they also experienced hunger, fatigue, and disappointment. Then once they reach the seashore, they must cross the sea for "many days" (1 Nephi 8:23). And finally, they must conquer the new wilderness once they arrive at the "promised land" by tilling the earth, planting seeds, and harvesting crops while building homes and temples.

In addition to these four main literary conflicts, we may add two other types of conflicts:

- Character against the Supernatural
- Character against Technology

Character against the Supernatural represents the struggles a character has with an eternal being or force. In the case of Nephi, an angel intervenes to save him as Laman and Lemuel beat him, or Nephi shocks his brothers after they tried to kill him as he was beginning to build the ship: "And it came to pass that the Lord said unto me [Nephi]: Stretch forth thine hand again unto they brethren, and they shall not wither before thee, but I will shock them, saith the Lord, and this will I do, that they may know that I am the Lord their God" (1 Nephi 17:53).

As LDS readers, we don't view God as an adversary; however, our struggles result when we position ourselves in situations that remove us from His presence and influence. The struggle, then, is with our own choices that lead us either closer to or farther from Father.

Character against Technology represents the struggles a character has with machines or new technology (not unlike the struggles you may experience with the technology associated with an Internet course). Conflicts with technology don't necessarily mean advanced technology like nuclear weapons or computer systems. Technology in literature can be something common such as Nephi experienced with the broken bow as he was hunting or the construction of a ship of "curious workmanship" (1 Nephi 17:1). These objects have caused Nephi concern, yet these concerns have lead Nephi to rely on the Lord's help to arrive at solutions.

The above six literary conflicts often do coexist with each other. However, by limiting our attention to one or two conflicts per story, we are able to gain insights into both why and how characters struggle, insights into what an author may feel is important enough to develop, and insights into our own involvement with similar conflicts.