

# Developing the Basic Conflict for Your Novel

From *Structuring Your Novel*, Meredith and Fitzgerald, ch. 2 (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993)

Traditional novels have a protagonist who represents a group, class, profession, or some other segment of society who is in conflict with his own environment or the environment of others. Traditional novels also have a protagonist with a chief motivating force and a tangible objective.

## Environment

Environment is composed of three elements:

1. One or more physical settings
2. A general significance that grows out of the social, moral, and cultural intercourse in each setting
3. An atmosphere that is the emotional mood of each setting

Your protagonist *reacts* to his environment one of three ways:

1. He is satisfied with the status quo of his environment.
2. He is satisfied with the status quo of his environment part of the time, and dissatisfied part of the time.
3. He is dissatisfied with the status quo of his environment.

You must upset the status quo by introducing something into your story that will make the character *dissatisfied* with his environment (#3).

To set the stage for the basic conflict in your novel, put the protagonist in conflict with his own environment, or the environment of others. Here are 10 principles that will help you do just that.

1. A change in the environment that affects the protagonist can cause him conflict.
2. Uprooting your protagonist from one environment and putting him in a strange one can cause him conflict.
3. Putting your protagonist in an environment in conflict with another environment puts your protagonist in conflict with the environment of others.
4. Put your protagonist in an environment that he wants to change.
5. Give your protagonist an environment to conquer.
6. Put your protagonist in an environment from which he wants to escape.
7. Put your protagonist in an environment where he is not wanted.
8. Put your protagonist in an environment for which he is unsuited by character.
9. Change the status quo of your protagonist within his environment.
10. Change the status quo of the protagonist's environment.

## Chief Motivating Force and Tangible Objective

To develop the basic conflict in your novel, give your protagonist a **chief motivating force** (need, drive) with a **tangible objective** (physical goal). Your protagonist's *response* to the environmental conflict must result in his determination to *do* something about it—his chief motivating force. This motivated action will propel him toward achieving the tangible objective.

For example, in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the protagonist Emma is put in conflict with her environment of the dull, provincial, small French village where she lives with her stuffy husband, Charles. Her response to the environmental conflict results in a determination to escape from it (principle #6), her chief motivating force, with the tangible objective of finding romance, glamour, and the indulgence of her sensibilities. Note how the protagonist's drive relates causally to her physical goal: Protagonist employs A to achieve B.

## The Importance of Motivation

The basic conflict cannot be developed or sustained unless you exaggerate the protagonist's reaction to the environmental conflict. In other words, you must sufficiently motivate your character so that he will not abandon his chief motivating force. He must be driven to pursue his tangible objective. With proper motivation, your character will be relentless.