

Goals, Motivation and Conflict,  
Or the Object of Desire, the Thwarting Forces, and War

By Azalea Dabill

Growing your story is a matter of logic, and emotion. Finding your character's desire or goal and thwarting it causes conflict. The villain, your secondary characters, the setting, or your character's own weaknesses can all cause conflict by becoming obstacles to your character's objective. The trick is getting conflict to grow naturally.

Don't arbitrarily impose obstacles or villains on your character. This doesn't mean don't brainstorm for obstacles or villains. It means you need to take your thwarting forces and see how your character responds. If your character looks up, takes a step back and says, "Uh oh," you have something good going. If your villain or obstacle is as "strong or stronger than" your hero or heroine, and does not insult the logic of your story, characters, or setting, then you have an excellent war beginning.

Inside the framework of the "crucible," the longstanding conflict of your book that forces your characters together, the first conflict is eventually resolved, which sets the stage for another, which births another . . . It is good to have conflict on several levels at once. In both the outer world and the internal: in the physical, the emotional, and the spiritual realms. This adds depth to your story because reality is like this; something attacks us, we feel strongly about it, which drives us to action, which impacts our spiritual being.

A word about resolution, obstacles, and villains. Resolution to your character's conflicts or war should not come all at once. The longest conflict and the last to be resolved is usually between the main antagonist or villain and your hero or heroine. Lesser obstacles are solved along the way, as you weave them into your story. Weaving layers of conflict within the scope of the war makes it impossible for your middle to sag. Your story middle, that is.

Story making is an organic thing I compare to planting the seed of an oak. The acorn, your fertile mind-picture, falls to the ground of your heart, and it waits. It waits inside you, among the darkness of other hidden dreams, for the coaxing rain of "dreamspace," as Robert Olen Butler calls it. You must also give your mind-picture space to live: plenty of the warm, encouraging sunshine of free dreaming, and the oxygen of freedom to take what direction it wants, within the limits of what it is. Let your mind-picture lie in the dark, growing more pictures, the cells needed for strong growth, until they please to push above the earth together, unfolding the glowing green leaves of a tree.

Water your acorn with the sweat of waiting "until the time." Battle the weeds: waiting forever till the seed coat breaks and you must write, and your fears of what may come from the bare earth, and countermand your anger at the burden of writing, or your yearning after opportunities you feel denied you by this time of making.

The moment is vast. Use it well. Create. Rather, make space in your soul for what you are made to do. The acorn struggles; and so will we. Dig up the inhibitors of growth, wait. The acorn will grow.

Let the young oak spring out and up, get your ordered mind-pictures down on your page. Live in the dreamspace, and the roots there will support magnificent branches. Guard your tree, especially at first. Don't let indiscriminate axe-men near until you find they bear that axe over their shoulder, not for hacking, but for wise pruning. The one can kill, the other gives life.

It takes more than one person to grow an acorn into a breathing, fragrant, green and lofty oak. We all receive from the great Creator: we borrow from each other's work, and share our pruning blades. Ask the Creator's help: He will provide you perseverance, the wisdom of other minds, the skills you need. Not like a magician, except in rare miraculous cases, but as our Creator, working within us to will and to do of His good pleasure. He loves good things, good efforts, from acorn to tree. The growth of learning is in the doing.

*Sol Stein has great further information on all things writing in Stein on Writing. Robert Olen Butler has some excellent information on dreamspace in From Where You Dream, chapters 1-5 and 8. The other chapters have immoral material in the examples, etc.*

*In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.*