

EXTERNAL PLOT VS. INTERNAL PLOT

By Mike Klaassen

My definition of a story doesn't include the word *obstacle*, but the phrase *a character's attempts to achieve a goal* requires that each attempt be met with some obstacle, which may be one of two types: internal or external.

EXTERNAL PLOT

An *external plot* is one in which the obstacles are outside the focal character, taking the form of (1) another character, (2) nature, or (3) society. In Kristin Hannah's *The Four Winds*, the protagonist faces all three.

INTERNAL PLOT

An *internal plot* is one in which the obstacle exists within the character himself. Such plots show a character struggling to overcome one or more weaknesses. Those weaknesses may be of two types: (1) *personal weakness*,ⁱ which holds the character back from achieving his goals, and (2) *moral weakness*,ⁱⁱ which harms others. The focal character may have both personal weaknesses and moral weaknesses, and those weaknesses may be related.

For example, a character may have low regard for himself, which obstructs his goal of attaining a more satisfying life. That same weakness, carried to an extreme, could cause the character to exhibit indecisiveness, failing to save the lives of others. The internal plot could be expanded to include a moral weakness if, for example, failure to

overcome a personal weakness causes danger to others. In Rebecca Serle's *One Italian Summer*, the main character struggles to cope with her mother's death, leaving her husband in the process.

The structure of an internal plot may be identical to that of the external plot, with parallel beginnings, middles, and endings, allowing the two plots to be told in tandem. A particularly satisfying situation occurs when the external and internal plots reach the crisis and the climax phase together, with the character's solution to his weakness(es) allowing him to overcome the external obstacle in the climax. In Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us*, the protagonist struggles with internal and external plots of reconciling her love of two different men while dealing with the external and internal plots related to domestic abuse.

More often the character addresses his internal weakness (at least partially) in the middle of the plot. Perhaps he has been so focused on his goal that he hasn't been forced to confront his weakness; or maybe his weakness has been only an inconvenience or a quirk, but now circumstances make his weakness more significant. The character then uses newfound insight to overcome the final obstacle to his external goal. His actions demonstrate that he has taken his new insight to heart, proving to the reader that he has indeed changed. In Jodi Picoult's *Wish You Were Here*, the main character deals with personal questions about her career, the man she lives with, and how much care she should provide a mother who wasn't home for much of the protagonist's childhood.

The simplest of stories include only one plot. More complicated stories may feature both external and internal plots.

LEARN MORE

Mike Klaassen is the author of *Third-Person Possessed*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the book at Amazon.com.

This article was adapted from an excerpt of *Third-Person Possessed* by Mike Klaassen.

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ⁱ Truby, *The Anatomy of Story*, 40-43.

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