

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICTS BETWEEN KEY CHARACTERS IN GILLIAN FLYNN'S *GONE GIRL*

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Abstract

Gone Girl, a novel by Gillian Flynn, explores the intense psychological and emotional conflict between a married couple, Amy and Nick Dunne. Amy desires love and loyalty but is devastated by Nick's betrayal. Meanwhile, Nick, who is obsessed with emulating his father, fails to express love to Amy and instead engages in an affair, leading to suspicion when Amy suddenly disappears. Amy's uncontrollable ego drives her to fake her own death and frame Nick for murder as a form of social punishment. The story unfolds through public suspicion, legal investigation, and emotional turmoil. This study applies Cascio's theory of conflict to examine the types and dynamics of internal and external conflicts experienced by the main characters. The study also aims to identify the negative impacts resulting from these conflicts. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the research analyzes how internal conflict (man versus self) and external conflict (man versus man, society, and fate) shape the narrative. Amy's psychological need for validation and her manipulative actions lead her to deep guilt and emotional suffering. Nick, on the other hand, experiences social rejection, emotional stress, and job loss after being falsely accused. These conflicts result in significant behavioral changes and deteriorating mental, physical, and social well-being. The novel reveals how unresolved personal and relational conflicts can escalate into destructive outcomes.

Keywords: *External conflict; gone girl; internal conflict; negative impact; psychological struggle*

1. Introduction

Literature is a mirror of human life that records feelings, ideas, and experiences in artistic form. According to Abrams (1999), literature can be classified into prose fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction. Prose fiction such as short stories, novellas, and novels depicts events resembling real life, with the main characters playing a central role in shaping actions, feelings, and decisions. Social issues, the abuse of power, and personal deviations often influence these characters, leading to conflicts that reflect real human struggles.

According to Ginting (2021), conflict refers to the clash between opposing forces that may be internal or external, originating from the Latin *configere*, meaning

“to strike.” Conflict can arise from contradictory desires or ideas and is an inevitable part of human life.

The novel *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn (2014) was chosen for its psychological depth and intriguing plot, centering on Amy's disappearance and presumed death, which reflects real marital issues such as boredom, insecurity, jealousy, betrayal, and financial tension. Conflict can be internal or external, portraying emotional tension, and its outcome depends on the strategy used by Rahim (2002), as cited in Hussein & Al-Mamary, (2019). Hearn and Buffardi (2016) define impact as the measurable change in a person's life that may be social, economic, cultural, or psychological. This research examines the negative impacts of conflict on the protagonists in *Gone Girl*, including changes in their character, behavior, and mental, physical, and social well-being.

Amy is portrayed as a perfectionist, antisocial, and controlling woman who stages her own death to frame Nick for murder after discovering his affair. Detectives Boney and Gilpin investigate the case and uncover debts, increased life insurance, and a fabricated pregnancy. The conflict escalates when Amy reappears with a fake kidnapping story, causing emotional and social damage. Cascio (2005) categorizes conflict into internal (man vs. self) and external (man vs. man, society, nature, machine, or fate).

Gone Girl, a mystery, suspense, and crime novel, is widely praised as a psychological thriller exploring the complexities of human emotion and behavior. It examines the collapse of a marital dream and the effects of betrayal, remaining on The New York Times bestseller list for eight weeks and selling over twenty million copies by 2019. This study analyzes types of conflict using Cascio's (2005) theory, supported by Senider's (2018) approach, and investigates the negative impacts of these conflicts through a qualitative descriptive method. Data were collected from quotations and utterances in the novel that reflect internal and external conflicts.

2. Literature Review

This part contains theories guiding the analysis, applying the Psychology of Literature approach. A theory serves as a framework to simplify and describe data meaningfully (Schultz in Safitri, 2018).

2.1 Psychology of Literature

The Psychology of Literature approach examines the psychological elements reflected in fictional characters. Literary works present aspects of humanity, which are the primary objects of psychological analysis. Afifulloh (2019) defines the psychology of literature as an approach that seeks to understand the spiritual and emotional dimensions of human experience represented in literary works. The focus lies on the characters' inner conflicts and unconscious symptoms, which are analyzed using relevant psychological theories. Works suitable for psychological analysis are those that emphasize the depiction of psychological conditions and emotional struggles (Suhendi, as cited in Alfarisi, 2022).

Wellek and Warren (2000) propose four key aspects of psychological literary studies:

- (1) the author's psyche as expressed through the work,
- (2) the creative process behind the writing,
- (3) the application of psychological principles within the text, and
- (4) the psychological effects of literature on its readers.

Novel such as *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn (2014) exemplifies these dimensions, presenting complex human emotions and psychological conflicts within marital relationships.

2.2 Conflict

Conflict can be defined as a clash or lack of harmony between opposing forces (Oktavianus, Janggur, et al., 2022). Ginting (2021) describes it as a struggle between two opposing characters or interests, typically between a protagonist and an antagonist. Riyanti (2020) identifies conflict as a dynamic opposition of forces that shapes the progression of a narrative, while Siswanti (2020) calls it a dramatic struggle between balanced powers that sustains tension throughout the story.

2.2.1 Types of Conflict

According to Stanton (2000), conflicts can be classified into internal and external types. Internal conflict occurs within a character's mind, such as in moral dilemmas, psychological turmoil, or emotional struggles (Cascio, 2005; Thompson, 2018; Coser, as cited in Alfarisi, 2022). External conflict, on the other hand, arises between a character and outside forces, such as other individuals, society, or fate (Cascio, 2005; Stanton (2000; Panjaitan & Suhendi, 2020; Wijayanti & Laba, 2020).

External conflicts are generally divided into three main categories.

First, Man vs. Man, which is the most common type, involves the protagonist's confrontation with an antagonist (Cascio, 2005; Thompson, 2018). Second, Man vs. Society, which depicts the struggle between an individual's beliefs and social norms or laws. Third, Man vs. Fate, which illustrates a human's resistance to destiny or divine will, commonly found in classical myths and Shakespearean tragedies (Cascio, 2005; Thompson, 2018).

In literary analysis, it is also important to consider the negative effects of conflict. Amason (as cited in Hussein & Al-Mamary, 2019) identifies two categories of negative impact: internal and external. Internal conflicts often result in a decline in mental health, marked by anxiety, stress, and depression. External conflicts, meanwhile, may lead to significant transformations in character, behavior, and social relationships. These effects can be classified as:

- a. Change of Character, referring to alterations in personal traits or moral values;
- b. Change of Behavior, which influences motivation, social cooperation, and decision-making; and
- c. Change of Society, which denotes broader social transformations caused by opposing interests within a community.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the internal and external conflicts experienced by the protagonists in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. According to Bogdan and Taylor (1975), qualitative research produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from observable behavior rather than statistical figures. Similarly, Creswell (2014) emphasizes that qualitative inquiry focuses on exploring meanings, concepts, and interpretations within natural settings. Kothari (2004) and Nurgiyantoro (2017) further explain that this approach allows researchers to interpret human experiences, emotions, and social dynamics beyond quantifiable measurement.

The qualitative descriptive method was chosen because it enables a deep understanding of psychological and emotional conflicts in literary characters. In this study, the researcher acts as the primary research instrument (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2022), conducting direct interpretation and contextual analysis of textual data. The main objective is to describe and interpret the types of conflict and their impacts as reflected in the novel.

Cascio's (2005) theory of conflict serves as the main analytical framework, classifying conflict into internal (man vs. self) and external (man vs. man, society, nature, or fate). This classification helps the researcher to identify the sources, dynamics, and outcomes of conflict within the narrative. Meanwhile, Kevin Senider's (2018) approach complements Cascio's framework by offering a psychological lens to interpret emotional motivations and behavioral responses of the main characters when facing conflict situations. Together, these theories allow for a multidimensional reading of *Gone Girl*, linking psychological tendencies with narrative tension.

The data of this research consist of selected quotations and utterances that represent internal and external conflicts experienced by Amy and Nick Dunne. The data were collected through several steps:

1. Comprehensive reading of the novel to understand the plot, characters, and conflict development;
2. Note-taking and coding of textual evidence related to conflict indicators;
3. Identification and classification of conflict types based on Cascio's framework; and
4. Interpretation and analysis of the data to explain how each type of conflict produces negative psychological, behavioral, and social effects.

The data analysis process follows three main stages:

- a. Identification, in which relevant textual data are selected and categorized;
- b. Classification, where the data are grouped according to the conflict types (internal or external); and
- c. Interpretation, which involves analyzing how conflicts evolve and what negative impacts they generate on the characters' psyche and social environment.

The entire process aims to produce a coherent understanding of conflict portrayal in *Gone Girl*, demonstrating how unresolved psychological tensions manifest through characters' actions and relationships.

4. Discussion

This section presents the analysis of internal and external conflicts faced by the main characters in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, applying Cascio's (2005) theory of conflict as the primary framework, supported by Senider's (2018) psychological interpretation and Amason's (as cited in Hussein & Al-Mamary, 2019) perspective on the negative impact of conflict. It discusses two main issues: (1) the types of internal and external conflicts, and (2) their negative psychological, behavioral, and social impacts.

4.1 Internal Conflicts

4.1.1 Man vs self

The inability of Amy and Nick Dunne to express their true emotions and manage disappointment represents Cascio's internal conflict type, man versus self, where

psychological imbalance manifests as anxiety, frustration, and mistrust. According to Murnigham and Conlon (as cited in Hussein, 2019), unresolved emotional strain often produces resentment and tension that disrupt personal harmony.

Amy vs. Herself

“I’ve asked most often during our marriage. What are you thinking? How are you feeling? Who are you? What have we done to each other? What will we do?” (Flynn, 2014, p. 9).

Amy’s introspection reflects the psychological struggle between her desire for control and her incapacity to trust her partner, consistent with Senider’s view that emotional repression leads to distorted perception of reality. Her diary becomes both a coping mechanism and a fabrication tool, indicating her fragmented identity. Amy’s perfectionism and emotional isolation produce self-destructive behavior, illustrating Amason’s notion of internal conflict that deteriorates mental health.

Nick vs. Himself

“My wife loved games, mostly mind games ... the last present I remember my dad giving my mom was an iron, set on the kitchen counter, no wrapping paper.” (Flynn, 2014, p. 22).

Nick’s inner turmoil stems from the pressure to conform to Amy’s expectations and his inherited patriarchal model of love, which he subconsciously rejects yet imitates. Although he was unhappy, he was unable to change his circumstances, reflecting a conflict between personal authenticity and social conditioning. Senider’s psychological approach helps interpret Nick’s guilt and emotional paralysis as symptoms of unresolved self-identity conflict.

4.2 External Conflict

4.2.1 Man vs Man

“Baby, what we’re dealing with right now is I need to make sure we’re okay...” (Flynn, 2014, p. 144).

Nick’s extramarital relationship with Andie embodies external conflict in Cascio’s framework, man versus man, where opposing desires create moral and emotional tension. His affair represents the manifestation of internal dissatisfaction projected outward, confirming Senider’s claim that unexpressed psychological needs often emerge as behavioral deviation. Although he realizes his wrongdoing, Nick’s dependency on Andie’s affection illustrates his loss of self-control and ethical clarity.

4.2.2 Man vs. Society

“Everyone knows it’s always the husband... ‘Okay, great, Nick,’ Boney said. ‘First let’s get a swab of the inside of your cheek...’” (Flynn, 2014, p. 45).

Nick’s confrontation with societal judgment exemplifies Cascio’s “man versus society” conflict, where social perception replaces justice with prejudice. Media narratives and neighborhood gossip transform Nick into a public villain, aligning with Amason’s theory that external conflict generates social alienation and identity crisis.

This conflict reveals how individual reputation collapses under collective suspicion, leaving Nick psychologically isolated.

4.2.3 Man vs. Fate

“I followed him all the way to Missouri, because I still believed he'd love me again somehow... Faith!” (Flynn, 2014, p. 228).

Amy's delusional hope that love can be restored represents Cascio's “man versus fate” category, in which characters confront inevitable emotional failure. Senider's psychological reading interprets Amy's obsession as the denial of loss, an unconscious attempt to rewrite destiny. Her romantic fatalism signifies the collapse of rational control, transforming emotional longing into self-inflicted tragedy.

4.3 Negative Impacts of Internal Conflict

4.3.1 Change of Mental Health

Amy's obsessive behavior and fabricated death plot severely damage both her and Nick's mental stability.

“Flashbulbs exploded, and I dropped the smile, but not soon enough... it was too late to make any other impression.” (Flynn, 2014, p. 73).

Nick's anxiety, guilt, and physical exhaustion illustrate Amason's (2019) internal conflict impact, a deterioration of mental and physiological balance. Continuous social pressure and public scrutiny intensify his depression. This condition aligns with Senider's assertion that internalized guilt transforms into psychosomatic stress. Amy's manipulation simultaneously reflects her deteriorating mental coherence and need for psychological validation.

4.4 Negative Impacts of External Conflict

4.4.1 Change of Character

“I won't blame Nick. I don't blame Nick. I refuse ... refuse... to turn into some pert-mouthed, strident angry-girl...” (Flynn, 2014, p. 67).

Amy's narrative voice demonstrates a dissonance between intention and emotion, reflecting Cascio's notion that external conflict reshapes moral identity. Though she vows to remain calm, her actions betray anger and vengeance, embodying Senider's psychological paradox of self-denial. Her moral transformation from victim to manipulator represents the destructive culmination of unresolved emotional trauma.

4.4.2 Change of Behavior

“Nick loved me. A six-o kind of love... I change personalities.” (Flynn, 2014, p. 217).

Amy's behavioral inconsistency signifies the disintegration of self-awareness. Her shifting personas correspond to Senider's psychological model of adaptive falsification, in which individuals construct artificial identities to maintain emotional control. This behavioral metamorphosis fulfills Amason's category of external conflict

outcome altered social functioning and motivation, showing how deceit becomes a coping mechanism.

4.4.3 Change of Society

“I walked out with the Elliotts, my head ducked low as more flashbulbs popped...” (Flynn, 2014, p. 73).

The conflict’s social repercussions extend beyond the protagonists, influencing community perception and collective morality. Nick’s public shame and isolation reveal Amason’s (2019) idea that external conflict destabilizes social bonds and produces stigma. His alienation mirrors Cascio’s societal conflict model, where interpersonal tension evolves into social disintegration. Nick’s loss of status and connection signifies the erosion of moral trust in his environment.

5. Conclusion

The conflict experienced by Amy Dunne and Nick Dunne is a central issue in Gillian Flynn's novel because both Amy and Nick, as the main characters, prioritize their own feelings and thoughts, which they keep to themselves. As a couple, they are unwilling to be honest about their love, which has changed due to the physical and economic challenges that most couples face. This study classifies the internal conflict as Man vs. Self, where Amy struggles with her obsessive thoughts about affection that she expects from Nick, while Nick is obsessed with being a good man like his father without truly loving Amy and instead chooses to be unfaithful. Amy's obsession leads her to fabricate a disappearance story, planting evidence that frames Nick as the suspect, even though she knows the accusations are false. This act becomes her form of punishment toward Nick.

This study classifies external conflicts into Man vs. Man (Amy to Nick and Nick to Amy). These conflicts occur because of Amy’s hidden emotions and suspicions regarding Nick’s affair, as well as her anger toward the change in Nick’s attitude after he no longer finds her attractive. Amy's fabricated accusations place immense pressure on Nick. On the other hand, Nick’s dissatisfaction in his marriage, which he is unable to express, drives him to seek satisfaction with other women, which only worsens his public image.

Nick also feels guilty for not being a good husband to Amy, a woman who has always supported him during difficult times. That guilt ultimately shatters his obsession with becoming a good man like his father.

Furthermore, Man vs. Society conflict arises due to Amy's disappearance, with the planted evidence pointing to Nick. As a suspect in his wife’s murder, Nick faces harsh social judgment. Amy’s family becomes furious with him, while friends and neighbors view him negatively due to the media portrayal of his infidelity and alleged crime. He is interrogated by the police repeatedly, suffers humiliation within his community, and loses his job due to the negative public exposure, which also damages his workplace relationships.

Finally, in the Man vs. Fate conflict, Amy, as a woman and wife, genuinely loves Nick and considers him her ideal partner. She longs for a complete, reciprocated love and sees Nick as her hero. However, she cannot express those feelings openly, nor does she attempt to change her appearance or behavior to win back Nick’s attention. Instead, her obsession and anger lead her to fake her death and blame Nick for it. In

doing so, she risks losing the very person she loves. Likewise, Nick, who is obsessed with becoming a better man than his father who was admired in public but deeply flawed in private, tries to please Amy. However, he ends up suppressing his desires, grows bored with the relationship, and ultimately cheats on her with one of his students. As a result, he too becomes a victim of fate, failing to live up to his ideal and potentially losing the woman who always loved and supported him.

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