

Conflict Analysis in Denis Villeneuve's film *Prisoners*

Syamsul Bahri^{1*}, Putri Naira², Fitra Aulia Simatupang³, Farid Rizaldi⁴

^{1,2,3,4} Department of English Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

*syamsul.bahri0401@gmail.com¹, putrinaira2018@gmail.com², fitraaulia2006@gmail.com³,
faridrzldi@gmail.com⁴

Korespondensi penulis: syamsul.bahri0401@gmail.com

Abstract. The film *Prisoners* (2013), directed by Denis Villeneuve, presents a complex portrayal of emotional intensity, moral ambiguity, and psychological struggle in the aftermath of a child kidnapping. Conflict becomes the central element that shapes the characters, drives the storyline, and raises important questions about justice, resilience, and ethical boundaries. This study aims to explore the internal and external conflicts found in *Prisoners*, and how these tensions reflect challenges often encountered in real life. Using a descriptive qualitative method and based on William Kenney's theory of conflict, the research closely analyzes key scenes and character interactions to identify patterns of tension and confrontation. The results show that *Prisoners* features 15 conflict events: internal conflict (26.67%), man vs. man (33.33%), man vs. society (26.67%), and man vs. nature (13.33%), with man vs. man emerging as the most dominant, emphasizing the focus on intense personal struggles and confrontations between characters. The findings suggest that *Prisoners* (2013) uses conflict not just as a narrative device, but also as a way to invite the audience to reflect on moral choices, human limits, and the emotional cost of seeking justice in moments of crisis.

Keywords: Conflict, Internal Conflict, External Conflict, Film

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature (from Latin "litteratura", which means "writing formed with letters") is the body of written or oral works that use artistic language to express ideas, emotions, and stories. Originally linked to litterae, or "letters of the alphabet," the word changed from referring to grammar and written knowledge in the 14th century to its modern meaning of creative or imaginative works in the 18th century and beyond. Stephen said "Literature is a cultural artifact shaped by the "circulation of social energy," reflecting and influencing the historical and social contexts from which it emerges." Stephen Greenblatt. (2023). Literature is also produced by imagination of the author. "Literature is not just a document of facts, it is not just the collection of real events though it may happen in the real life. Literature can create its own world as a product of the unlimited imagination." The author's imagination also contributes to the creation of literature. Even if they are real-life occurrences, literature is more than just a collection of factual events. Literature's boundless imagination allows it to create its own world. "Literature can create its own world as a product of the unlimited imagination." There are three literature work which is, prose, poetry, and drama. Prose is unlike poetry, which often depends on metre, rhyme, and stylistic elements, prose is a kind of written or spoken language that follows natural speech patterns and grammatical structure jadi prose is a written or spoken language that employs natural speech patterns and grammatical structure. On the other hand, if prose is the

straightforward flow of language, poetry is literary work that expresses ideas, feelings, and experiences through the expressive and rhythmic language. Poetry often applies figurative language like metaphor, hyperbole, simile, etc.

Drama (from Greek "dran" (δράω), which means "deed" or "act") is a literary and performative art form telling stories via action, dialogue, and conflict that intended to be performed by actors on stage or screen. Unlike novels (prose) or poetry, drama is meant to be performed, mixing written scripts with live or recorded interpretation. According to Weiqi Wu et al (2024) "Drama is a form of storytelling inspired by human creativity, proceeding with a predefined storyline, carrying emotions and thoughts." A dynamic exploration of themes like love, betrayal, revenge, and other is made possible by this combination of visual and auditory elements. Drama thus inspires the audience to reflect on all aspects of life via the prism of performance in addition to captivating them. In a drama, there are several elements that must be present to create a quality and enjoyable story. These elements include well developed characters, an intriguing theme, well developed plot, the dialogue should also be authentic, a pleasing spectacle that captivates the audience's attention, and also an exciting conflict because drama typically is driven by the conflict between two opposing sides. As characters must deal with their desires and face their obstacles, this struggle drives the story forward and enables character growth.

Conflict is a battle or disagreement between two or more people who view their goals, interests, values, or needs as incompatible. Different ideas, misunderstandings, resource rivalry, or conflicting goals could all trigger it. According to William Kenney "Conflict is the struggle between opposing forces that drives the plot and shapes characters". Conflict as its classification is divided into two types, such as internal conflict and external conflict. The movie prisoners directed by Denise Veneulle depicts many life conflicts that can be important lessons for readers and the public so that they are able to take values that can be implemented in everyday life. This study focuses on the 2013 film Prisoners. Following the narrative of two families whose daughters go missing, Denis Villeneuve's Prisoners opens up about the painful topics of desperation and moral ambiguity. The movie poses provocative questions about justice, parental instincts, and the extremes one might go to safeguard their loved ones. The story deftly combines psychological tension with suspense, so forcing the audience to question their own ideas about right and wrong. The movie encourages viewers to consider the complexity of human nature and the sometimes hazy line between heroism and villainy as the characters struggle with their decisions. One of the conflicts theories relevant to Prisoners is represented by the following dialogue.

Keller : **"Where's my daughter? Tell me where my daughter is."**
Alex : "I didn't take her."
Keller : "I know you took her. Tell me where she is!"
Alex : "I... I can't..."
Keller : "You were there. You were parked right outside my house. I saw you!"
Alex : [Whimpering] **"I'm not Alex."**

The context of this dialogue is that Keller's daughter disappeared without a trace, and Alex is the only suspect because of his suspicious actions and being close to the crime scene. Keller takes matters into his own hands by kidnapping and torturing Alex in a deserted building after the police release him because there is not enough evidence. In this scene, exposes Keller's quick moral decline; his dehumanization of Alex "You're not a person" his demands for explanations **"Where's my daughter? Tell me where my daughter is"** and Alex's childish whimpers and ambiguous responses **"I'm not Alex"** meanwhile, cast doubt on his actual involvement in the kidnapping. This moment connects to Willlliam Kenney's conflict theory, which emphasizes their struggle, both psychologically and physically, highlights a conflict between moral convictions and individuals, a clear conflict between two people with opposing values or objectives. Keller, a desperate father motivated by sorrow and retribution, confronts Alex in this situation; he thinks Alex is to blame for his daughter's vanishing.

The previous studies, the author also looks at five studies. The first is Artawan, N. D., Dewi, A. S. S., & Savitri, P. W. (2020) *The External Conflict Faced by The Main Character in Five Feet Apart Movie*, which examines the protagonist's emotional and psychological conflicts. Another study Silvina, S., Aldiansyah, M. G., & Bahri, S. (2021) *Conflict analysis in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman*. This study examines the difficulties of desire and the sacrifices paid for societal progress. Suffragette's ideas of courage and equality can be understood via the characters' sufferings. Another study by Utama, I. W. A., Suastini, N. W., & Permana, I. P. A. (2023) *Conflict Analysis Faced by Main Character in the Movie Fast & Furious: Hobbs & Shaw*. Hobbs and Shaw's conflict in *Fast & Furious* advances more than the plot. Conflicts force them to mature and learn about friendship and loyalty. Another study by Gorang, E. A. S., Moelier, D. D., & Rijal, T. S. (2024) *Conflict In James Marsh's Movie: Theory Of Everything Movie Script, Like Five Feet Apart*, the conflicts in *The Theory of Everything* help in our understanding of complex relationships. Both films demonstrate how the characters' relationships with others are impacted by their personal struggles. Finally, study by Anggraini, M., Pradana, A., & Rahman Putra, A. (2025) *An Analysis Of The Conflict Faced By The Main*

Characters In Laskar Pelangi Film. The study looking at how internal and external conflicts are portrayed emphasizes how difficult their paths are. Examining these challenges helps the study highlight how resiliency and determination of the characters form major themes running across the movie.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Plot development in both literature and film depends heavily on conflict. It is not only a plot device but also the main way that a story progresses, characters change, and themes emerge. William Kenney described conflict as "the struggle between opposing forces" that affects character development and narrative structure in his 1966 book *How to Analyze Fiction*. According to Kenney, conflict is necessary for a story to have development, emotional resonance, and thematic relevance. According to Kenney, there are two primary categories of conflict: internal and external. Each type offers unique tension and plot development components.

1. Internal conflict, represents the internal emotional or psychological struggle of a character. It is a very personal struggle that often involves morality, guilt, identity, or fear. These conflicts show the depth of a character's inner life and play a significant role in character growth throughout the narrative. For example in film *Hunger Games*:

Katniss : "What am I even doing? One moment I'm surviving, the next I'm pretending. This isn't a game anymore. Rue is gone. Peeta is hurt. They're watching everything... But if I stop now, if I give up... then they win. No. I won't be their piece."

As Katniss works through her feelings, moral conundrums, and psychological effects of competing in the Games, she battles inside. She battles guilt, the pressure to uphold her humanity under orders to fight for survival, and the uncertainty of passing for someone she is not. Her choices and path during the Games are shaped by this inner struggle.

2. External conflict, on the other hand, arises from the character's interaction with external forces. There are three types of external conflict, following as:

a) Man vs Man

As a straight conflict between the protagonist and an antagonistic power personified in another character. This conflict is a complicated struggle with psychological, ideological, even existential elements, not only physical confrontation. Kenney underlines that this kind of

conflict reflects actual human relational dynamics and drives the story forward. There are three forms to man against man conflict: psychological, verbal, and physical. For example in film *Hunger Games*:

Cato: “Go on. Shoot. Then we both go down and you’d win. Go on.”

Katniss: “I’m not going to do that.”

Cato: “Dead anyway. I always wanted to drink. Until now. How’s that? Is that what you want? Huh!”

Katniss: “No. I don’t want any of this.”

Katniss confronts a direct struggle against Cato in this conflict since he epitomizes the merciless survival instinct. Their clash is between their values: Katniss chooses survival without compromising her moral compass while Cato is ready to kill to win. Their different strategies to the Games generate conflict.

b) Man vs Society

Considered as a conflict between an individual and the social system, collective norms, or institutions judged as repressive, unfair, or limiting of freedom. Rather than a personal enemy, this conflict is "abstract force" manifested in customs, laws, totalitarian governments, or social pressures forcing the person to either submit or rebel. Such conflict shows different traits influencing the character, including: power disparity, pertinent social concerns, and a test of personal values. For example in film *Hunger Games*:

Katniss: “They have to have a victor.”

Peeta: “No. They don’t.”

Katniss: “Trust me.”

Peeta: “On three?”

This conflict is represented by Katniss and Peeta’s defiance against the Capitol's oppressive rules. The Capitol dictates that only one victor can emerge from the Hunger Games, but Katniss and Peeta challenge this system by threatening to commit suicide together, which forces the Capitol to change its rules and allow both to win. Their act of rebellion is a direct opposition to the Capitol’s control over their lives.

c) Man vs Nature

As a struggle between a character and the uncontrollably strong forces of nature. This conflict investigates human vulnerability against often erratic natural forces, wild, hostile elements. Kenney stresses that such conflict exposes deep psychological tensions and philosophical concerns regarding mankind's place in the universe in addition to testing a character's physical endurance. For example:

Katniss: "The fire's not random. They're driving me into a trap."

Rue: "The arena responds to what we do. It's alive, in a way."

Katniss: "Then I'll use the trees for cover. Stay low. Stay quiet."

Rue: "And always watch the sky. They're always watching from above."

Katniss has to deal with the dangers presented by the arena under Capitol control. Natural and manmade dangers abound in the surroundings: mutant animals, perilous plants, and erratic temperature. Katniss has to deal with these dangers using her survival skills, so highlighting her fight against the Capitol's controlled natural environment.

In Denis Villeneuve's 2013 film *Prisoners*, conflict is the primary plot device and is profoundly embedded in the moral and psychological landscapes of the characters. The film explores the aftermath of a kidnapping while delving into human responses to tragedy, justice, and desperation. Keller Dover personifies the primary internal conflict in the film. As a parent whose daughter is gone, he experiences a profound psychological struggle marked by anxiety, helplessness, and a moral crisis. His internal struggle over whether to uphold the law or pursue justice on his own is evident. This is consistent with Kenney's concept of internal struggle, wherein the character's internal conflict reflects deeper questions regarding personal identity and moral boundaries. External tension is also demonstrated by Dover's interaction with Detective Loki, a metaphor for judicial authority and procedural justice. Their different approaches to the study of emotional immediacy and methodical detachment serve as an example of man-versus-man conflict. Dover's decision to engage in morally questionable behavior (such as kidnapping and torturing a suspect) places him against social norms and legal frameworks, adding another dimension of man versus society. Through these complex conflicts, *Prisoners* not only builds suspense but also asks viewers to think about moral ambiguity, justice, and human resiliency.

According to Kenney, conflict is necessary for character development and theme expression in addition to plot advancement. According to him, conflict serves as the furnace in which characters are tried, honed, and finally comprehended. The moral ambiguity of justice, the vulnerability of the human psyche under duress, and the moral boundaries people are prepared to cross out of love or retaliation are all examined through the lens of conflict in *Prisoners*. Every conflict, whether internal or external, deepens the film's examination of existential and moral issues and gives the characters more nuance as the plot develops. The conflicts serve as more than just challenges to overcome; they influence the story's overall philosophical framework. The audience is prompted to consider their own reactions to loss, law, and crisis by studying these conflicts.

3. METHOD

The primary method used in this study to examine the internal and external conflicts in Denis Villeneuve's 2013 film *Prisoners* is the descriptive qualitative method. This method was selected because it can thoroughly examine the internal and external conflict dynamics that emerge in the movie. To guarantee a thorough comprehension of the plot and the characters engaged in the conflict, the data collection process started with multiple viewings of the film. In order to record subtleties in dialogue and monologue pertinent to the conflict theme, the researchers also read the screenplay. Additionally, thorough notes were taken on significant scenes that demonstrated the emergence of conflict, including internal and external conflicts involving interactions between characters and the outside world. The analysis and categorization of the conflicts in the movie *Prisoners* are based on William Kenney theory.

4. RESULT & DISCUSSION

One of the essential components that frequently shows up in movies and books is conflict. Particularly in cinematic storytelling, conflict serves as a motivating factor that influences character growth, tension, and storyline advancement. Character disagreements, conflicts, or oppositions whether internal to a character or external to their control are frequently linked to conflict. According to philosophy, conflict is an inevitable and necessary byproduct of human desire, fear, and limitation. With several tensions arising between the characters, conflict is a major theme. We can analyze these conflicts using various dramatic conflict categories, including internal and external conflict.

No	Types of conflict	Number	Percentage
1.	Internal Conflict	4	26.67%
2.	External Conflict		
	1) Man vs Man	5	33.33%
	2) Man vs Society	4	26.67%
	3) Man vs Nature	2	13.33%
Total		15	100%

1. Man vs Self (Internal Conflict)



Duration: 00:22:21

Grace : "So did we pass the poly thing, the lie detector we took this morning. Did we pass?"

Loki : "Yes. We appreciate your cooperation"

Grace : "It's embarrassing, all this fuse. Everyone's gonna think we're crazy when those two come out of hiding, wherever they are"

Loki : "Do you have some reason to believe they ran away?"

Grace : "**No. They're happy. They must have run away. I think they must have run away, right? Your police captain told me that you've solved every case that you've ever been assigned. Is that right? Sorry.....I'm so sorry. Do you have children, detective?**"

In this scene, Grace Dover speaks with Detective Loki after undergoing a polygraph test. She tries to persuade herself that her kids might have escaped, but her statements seem to be more motivated by denial than sincere conviction. Her internal conflict between hope and the harsh reality she finds difficult to accept is reflected in her statement, "**No. They're happy. They must have run away. I think they must have run away, right? Your police captain told me that you've solved every case that you've ever been assigned. Is that right? Sorry.....I'm so sorry. Do you have children, detective?**" that shows emotional fragility and a strong desire for approval and understanding. This instance demonstrates Grace's psychological struggle, which is evident in her tone and facial expressions despite being subtle. Grace's struggle falls under the category of internal conflict, in which a

character fights against their own feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and pressure. William Kenney (1966: 19) asserts that internal conflict is the foundation of a character's psychological complexity and that conflict is a basic component of fiction. In this situation, Grace seems calm on the outside but is consumed on the inside by feelings of worry, hopelessness, and the emotional burden of being a mother whose child has disappeared.

2. Man vs Man



Duration: 01:22:34

Loki : “Mr. Dover, you need to take care of yourself and your wife. That’s the best thing you can do it right now. That little girl is gonna need you when she comes home.”

Keller : “Kids gone for more than a week have half as good a chance of being found and after a month, almost none are not alive, all right? So forgive me for doing everything I can”

Loki : “ You know what? It hasn’t been a fucking week! Hasn’t been a week”

Keller : “**You’re right. Its day fucking six! Day six! And everyday she’s wondering why I’m not there to fucking rescue her! Do you understand that?**”

The confrontation between Keller and Loki in this scene is a prime example of the classic external conflict known as "man vs. man." In his 1966 book *How to Analyze Fiction*, William Kenney highlights that one of the main factors influencing narrative is character conflict. Opposing beliefs, objectives, or behaviors between people give rise to this kind of conflict, in which one character frequently acts as a barrier to the other. According to theory, man versus man is an example of interpersonal conflict, where conflict is stoked by divergent feelings, goals, or ideologies. Loki represents reason and procedural logic in this situation, following the law and exercising composure. Keller, on the other hand, demands quick action regardless of the process which is contained in his statement, “**You’re right. Its day fucking six! Day six! And everyday she’s wondering why I’m not there to fucking rescue her! Do**

you understand that?" he is overcome with emotional urgency and desperation. Their confrontation serves as an example of how conflict can arise between rational control and emotional intensity in response to a crisis. Such tension, as Kenney points out, not only moves the plot along but also enhances character growth and exposes hidden themes.

3. Man vs Society



Duration: 00:35:51

Keller : “When I grabbed him in the parking lot, he said right to my face that they didn’t cry until I left them. He said right to my fucking face.”

Loki : “Are you sure that’s what he said?”

Keller : “Jesus Christ! You think I’m making this up? Why would I make this up?”

Loki : “I’m not saying that. I’m just asking you a couple questions. I will talk to him”

Keller : **”No, don’t talk to him! Arrest him!”**

In addition to the interpersonal conflict, the scene depicts the external struggle of "man vs. society." This type of conflict arises when an individual's actions or beliefs conflict with institutional structures, laws, or societal norms, according to William Kenney (1966). It frequently draws attention to ethical quandaries and criticisms of institutional injustice or bureaucracy. In this instance, Keller demands prompt justice based on his instincts and moral convictions, motivated by grief and a strong conviction in the suspect's guilt. Loki must respect due process, objectivity, and procedure as a representative of the legal system. Keller's impassioned demand for instant justice and the legal system's requirement for prudence and proof create conflict. His frantic request, **”No, don’t talk to him! Arrest him!”** represents the annoyance a person feels when confronted with the limitations of a slow, inflexible institution. This captures the essence of the conflict between man and society, which, as Kenney explains,

frequently functions as a narrative vehicle for analyzing authority, ethical boundaries, and social norms.

4. Man vs Nature



Duration: 02:18:19

(Groaning)

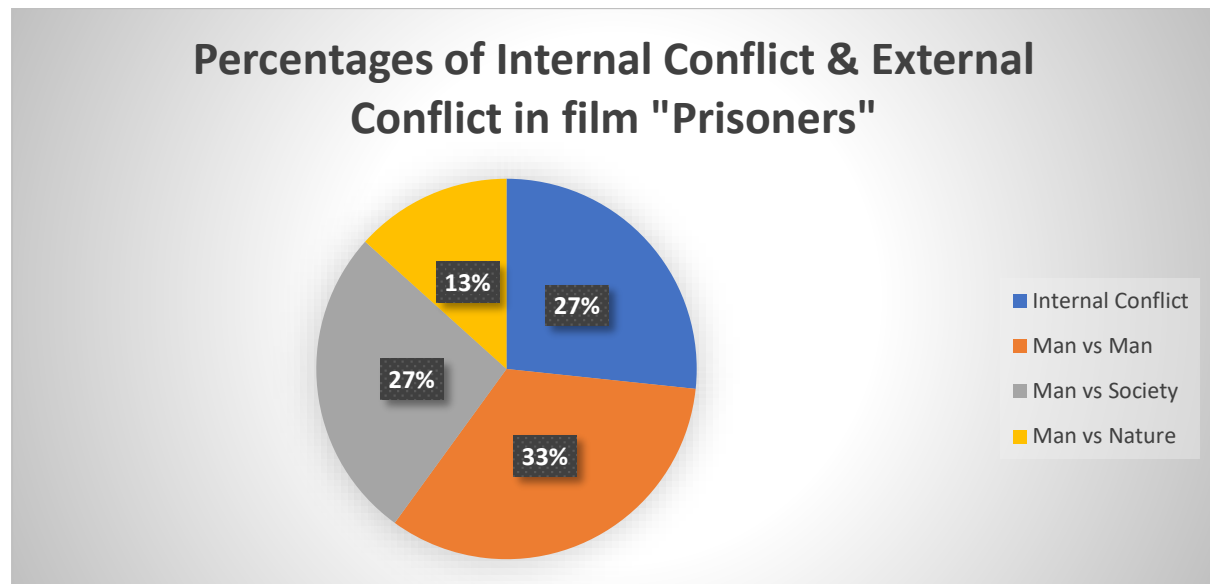
Loki : “Anna....Oh shit.”

(Tires screeching and car horn honking)

Loki : “**Stay with me, Anna! It’s all right....come on. Go move, move, move! Don’t die. Don’t die!**”

In an emergency, Detective Loki hurries to take Anna to the hospital in this scene. At night, he navigates treacherous roads with poor visibility as he drives through dense snowfall. The fact that Loki is severely hurt and has blood in one eye, which makes it difficult for him to see, makes matters worse. He speeds through the snowy streets in an attempt to save Anna's life in spite of these challenges. As he drives, Loki desperately shouts, “**Stay with me, Anna! It’s all right....come on. Go move, move, move! Don’t die. Don’t die!**” his voice filled with panic and urgency, reflecting the life or death stakes of the moment. The harsh weather, hazardous terrain, and Loki's physical limitations as a result of his injuries, in addition to the urgency of Anna's condition, are the main sources of conflict in this scene. His struggle against nature is not explicitly expressed verbally, but it is evident from the story and images that he is fighting to overcome the environment that is endangering his and Anna's lives. Theoretically, this is a powerful illustration of man versus nature, an external conflict in which the character faces significant challenges from natural forces. Conflict is a basic component of fiction, according to William Kenney (1966:19), and one of the main types of external conflict is man versus

nature, in which nature itself turns into an antagonistic force. In this light, the scene is notable for its cinematic depiction of the conflict between humans and nature, which is conveyed through action, mood, and visual tension rather than through speech.



5. CONCLUSION

This article has discussed how conflict is portrayed in Denis Villeneuve's *Prisoners* (2013), focusing on how it drives the storyline, develops characters, and communicates moral complexity. Using William Kenney's theory of conflict, the research identified four types of conflict, internal conflict (man vs self) and three external conflicts (man vs. man, man vs. society, and man vs. nature). The analysis showed that conflict in *Prisoners* is not just used to create tension, but also to reveal emotional turmoil, ethical dilemmas, and the psychological struggles that characters go through during moments of crisis. Conflict becomes a tool to explore themes such as justice, desperation, and the boundaries of human morality. From the research, man vs. man conflict was found to be the most frequently used (33.33%). This shows that intense interpersonal confrontation plays a major role in shaping the narrative, especially through emotional and psychological clashes between characters. Internal conflict appeared in 26.67% of scenes, showing the characters' emotional battles that reflect deep psychological pressure and moral uncertainty. Man vs. society also accounted for 26.67%, where characters clash with legal systems they feel are failing them and pushes them to act outside the law. Lastly, man vs. nature appeared the least at 13.33%, but still added significant suspense and emotional stakes in key scenes. In conclusion, conflict in *Prisoners* is more than just a plot

device, it is a powerful narrative element that brings depth to the characters and invites viewers to reflect on the complex moral questions raised by the story.

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