

Motif

Motif Definition

Motif is an object or idea that repeats itself throughout a literary work.

Motif and Theme

In a literary work, a motif can be seen as an image, sound, action, or other figure that has a symbolic significance, and contributes toward the development of a [theme](#). Motif and theme are linked in a literary work, but there is a difference between them. In a literary piece, a motif is a recurrent image, idea, or [symbol](#) that develops or explains a theme, while a theme is a central idea or message.

Motif and Symbol

Sometimes, examples of motif are mistakenly identified as examples of symbols. Symbols are images, ideas, sounds, or words that represent something else, and help to understand an idea or a thing. Motifs, on the other hand, are images, ideas, sounds, or words that help to explain the central idea of a literary work – the theme. Moreover, a symbol may appear once or twice in a literary work, whereas a motif is a recurring element.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*

Let us try to understand the difference between theme, motif, and symbol by analyzing a literary work. In Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, the main plot revolves around two basic themes: the ever-present possibility of resurrection, and the necessity of sacrifice to bring about a revolution.

One of the motif examples in the novel that develops these themes is the presence of Doubles: (1) the action takes place in two cities; (2) we find two opposed doubles in the form of the female characters Lucie and Madame

Defarge. We also see recurrent images of darkness in the [narrative](#), which add to the gloomy [atmosphere](#).

Another motif is that of imprisonment, as each and every [character](#) struggles against some kind of imprisonment. Finally, there are plenty of symbols in the narrative as well. The broken wine cask is a symbol of people's hunger; Madame Defarge knitting is a symbol of revenge, and Marquis is a character that stands for social disorder.

Examples of Motif in Literature

Example #1: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we find a recurring motif of incest, accompanied by incestuous desires of some characters. Laertes speaks to his sister Ophelia in a way that is sexually explicit. Hamlet's obsession with Gertrude's sexual life with Claudius has an underlying tone of incestuous desire.

There is also a motif of hatred for women that Hamlet experiences in his relationship with Gertrude and Ophelia. Hamlet expresses his disgust for women in Scene 2 of Act I, as he says:

“Frailty, thy name is woman”

Example #2: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (By Mark Twain)

In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, we see several motifs that support the central idea of the narrative. The motif of childhood gives the novel a lighter tone, and makes it enjoyable to read despite its grave central ideas of slavery and racism. Both Huck and Tom are young and flexible enough to undergo a [moral](#) education, and thus are more open-minded than adults. Another obvious motif in the narrative is superstition. Jim appears silly to believe in all sorts of signs and omens, but interestingly predicts the coming event.

Example #3: *Heart of Darkness* (By Joseph Conrad)

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has a motif of observation and eavesdropping. Marlow, the [protagonist](#), gets information about the world by either observing his surroundings or listening to the conversations of others. Similarly, there is another evident motif of [comparison](#) between the exterior and the interior. Initially, Marlow is a person who keenly observes things and people from the surface, but as he continues his journey into the heart of darkness, he gains an insight into his deeper nature, as well as that of others.

Example #4: *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (By Harper Lee)

The central idea of the co-existence of good and evil in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* is supported by several motifs. Lee strengthens the atmosphere by a motif of Gothic details, in recurrent images of gloomy and haunted settings, supernatural events, and a full moon. Another motif in the narrative is the small town life of Maycomb, which depicts goodness and pleasantness in life.

Function of Motif

Along with presenting a prevailing theme, writers include several motifs in their literary works as reinforcements. Motifs contribute in developing the major theme of a literary work, and help readers to comprehend the underlying messages that writers intend to communicate to them.