**Honors World Literature**

**Literary Motifs**

Why does the author keep bringing up the color red, and why is it always raining? In this lesson, we will learn about the literary device of the motif which is a recurring symbol that conveys a symbolic meaning.

**Definition of Motif**

A motif is a [narrative](http://www.literarydevices.com/narrative/) element with symbolic meaning that repeats throughout a work of literature. Motifs may come in the form of reoccurring [imagery](http://www.literarydevices.com/imagery/), language, structure, or contrasts. In drama, motifs may also take the form of repeated music, visual components, or physical movements. The development of motifs in a work of literature often contributes to mood and/or [theme](http://www.literarydevices.com/theme/).

The word “motif” comes from the French for “a dominant idea” or “theme.”

A motif is a recurring symbol which takes on a figurative meaning. We see them in books, films, and poems. In fact, almost every text commonly uses the literary device of the motif. A motif can be almost anything: an idea, an object, a concept, a character archetype, the weather, a color, or even a statement. Motifs are used to establish a theme or a certain mood; they have a symbolic meaning.

**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.

**Significance of Motif in Literature**

Authors use motifs for many reasons in their literature, including to tie together moments that might otherwise not seem related. Motifs are also often important for establishing themes and moods in works of literature. Repetition helps either subtly or explicitly drive home certain points to the reader which the author considers vital to comprehending the work. Analyzing the motifs in a work of literature lead to a better understanding of the deeper [symbolism](http://www.literarydevices.com/symbolism/) and meaning of that work.

**Motif and Theme**

In a literary work, a motif can be seen as an image, sound, action or other figures that have a symbolic significance and contributes toward the development of [theme](http://literarydevices.net/theme/). Motif and [theme](http://literarydevices.net/community/tag/theme/) are linked in a literary work but there is a [difference](http://literarydevices.net/community/tag/difference/) between them. In a literary piece, a motif is a recurrent image, idea or a [symbol](http://literarydevices.net/community/tag/symbol/) that develops or explains a theme while a theme is a [central idea](http://literarydevices.net/community/tag/central-idea/) or message.

The key difference, however, is that a theme is abstract while a motif is concrete. The theme of a work is an idea or central topic, and can often be summed up in one abstract concept, such as “love conquers all” or “good overcomes evil.” The theme is also generally not explicitly stated in the text. The definition of motif, however, is such that it is more obvious to the reader, such as the [repetition](http://www.literarydevices.com/repetition/) of certain words or images.

To see the difference, let us consider William Shakespeare’s tragedy Macbeth. One of the themes of the play is ambition often corrupts men. We see Macbeth strive for power and kill people in his quest. One of the motifs, on the other hand, is water and the washing of hands. Lady Macbeth famously tries to wash the blood from her hands, crying, “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” The inability of water to cleanse the sins of Macbeth and his wife show how irredeemable they are and to what extent they have lost their morals in pursuit of their ambitions.

**Motif and Symbol**

Sometimes, [examples](http://literarydevices.net/community/tag/examples/) of motif are mistakenly identified as examples of [symbols](http://literarydevices.net/community/tag/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 i.e. theme. Moreover, a symbol may appear once or twice in a literary work, whereas a motif is a recurring element.

**How can I find a Motif?**

It's typically pretty clear when a writer is using a motif. They're not usually associated with hidden meanings because the writer wants you to recognize them. They play a role in defining the makeup of a narrative. Think about the fairy tale and its almost endless list of motifs: happily ever after, the handsome prince, the damsel in distress, the fairy godmother, the wicked witch, the evil stepmother, talking animals, magic fairies, and ogres.

Consider the popular fairy tale 'Snow White' and how it uses a mirror as a prominent motif throughout the story. Snow White's wicked stepmother, the queen, is constantly checking herself out in the mirror, even asking it, 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?' The trouble begins when Snow White turns seven and the mirror informs the queen that she is no longer the prettiest because Snow White has taken over that title. The queen's face goes green to indicate her jealousy and envy.

Mirrors are all about letting a person know how others see you. They, in essence, represent the honest truth, plain and clear. When the queen's mirror informs her that she is just second best, she finally gets a real glimpse of herself and it enrages her to no end.