

Motif



DEFINITION

What is a motif? Here's a quick and simple definition:

A motif is an element or idea that recurs throughout a work of literature. Motifs, which are often collections of related symbols, help develop the central [themes](#) of a book or play. For example, one of the central themes in [Romeo and Juliet](#) is that love is a paradox containing many contradictions. As part of developing this theme, Shakespeare describes the experience of love by pairing contradictory, opposite symbols next to each other throughout the play, such as *night and day*, *moon and sun*, *crows and swans*. All of these paired symbols fall into a broader pattern of "dark vs. light," and that *broader pattern* is called a *motif*. The motif (in this case "darkness and light") reinforces the theme: that love is paradox.

Some additional key details about motifs:

- Because motifs are so effective in communicating and emphasizing the main themes of a work, they're common in political speeches as well as in literature.
- There are actually *two* working definitions of motif: one that defines motif as a special kind of symbol, and one that draws a greater distinction between the two terms. We'll explore both definitions below.
- You may have heard the word "motif" used to describe repeating patterns *outside* the realm of literature. In music, for example, a motif is a short series of notes that repeats throughout a song or track. In art, a motif is a design or pattern that repeats in different parts of an artwork, or in different works by the same artist. While these additional meanings of motif are useful to know, motifs in literature function differently and have a slightly more specific meaning.

Motif Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce motif: moh-**teef**

Motifs in Depth

In order to understand motifs in more depth, it's helpful to have a strong grasp of a few other literary terms related to motif. We cover each of these in depth on their own respective pages, but below is a quick overview to help make understanding motif easier.

- A [theme](#) is an abstract and universal idea, lesson, or message explored throughout a work of literature. It's what the writer is trying to say about life and human experience in general, beyond

the scope of what happens in a particular story. Motifs, while they often *reinforce* themes, are different in the sense that they are both more *concrete* and more *specific to the work* in which they appear than themes.

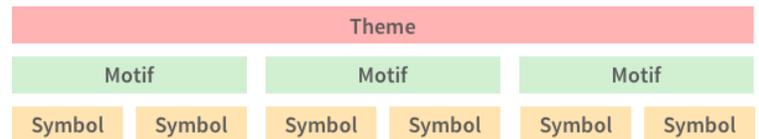
- A **symbol** is anything that represents another thing. We encounter symbols constantly in our every day life: a red light is a symbol for stop, a dove is a symbol for peace, a heart is a symbol for love.
 - A literary symbol is often a tangible thing—an object, person, place, or action—that represents something intangible, like a complex concept or emotion. For instance, in Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, the "two roads [diverging] in a yellow wood" are symbols for two different life paths. In Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven*, the raven that taps on the narrator's door as he mourns his lost love symbolizes the finality of her death.

Identifying Motifs

The main themes of a work are rarely expressed directly by a writer (for instance, Shakespeare doesn't tell his audience directly "this play is about the contradictory nature of love"). Rather, writers reveal the main themes of their work *indirectly*, through different elements of the narrative such as [plot](#) developments and [imagery](#). When readers recognize a pattern in the work they're reading—specifically, a pattern that connects some or all of the different images or plot developments that help express a particular theme in the work—that overall pattern is the motif. Here's a more concrete example:

- If a story centers around someone's sudden and unexplained death, one of the main [themes](#) might be that [death is ever-present](#). This theme might, in turn, be supported by a [motif of harmless things becoming fatal](#): for instance, perhaps the main character develops an irrational fear of [choking while drinking water](#), or [contracting disease from a mosquito bite](#).

This relationship between themes, motifs, and symbols (or images) can be visualized with different symbols making up a motif, and different motifs supporting an overarching theme, like so:



Motif vs. Theme

It can be difficult, at times, to clearly distinguish themes from the motifs that express them. Here are some of the key differences between themes and motifs:

- The motif is much more concrete than the abstract theme: it consists of specific images and symbols that the reader can visualize.
- Motifs also tend to be specific to the work in which they appear, whereas themes appear again and again in different works by writers from different eras.
 - For instance, there are thousands of works that explore the theme of love being contradictory. But while you may encounter other books that examine the contradictory nature of love as the theme, you're unlikely to find multiples books that use the same motif or motifs and the same repetitive pattern of symbols to do so.

To return to the [Romeo and Juliet](#) example, Shakespeare's **theme** (that "love is contradictory") is an abstract idea that finds expression in different ways throughout the story, and it's general enough that most people will be able to relate it to their own life and experiences. By contrast, the **motif of darkness and light** is *not* a purely abstract concept, and it's also not necessarily as broadly applicable to the lives of readers as a theme generally is.

Motif vs. Symbol

There are two competing ways of thinking about the relationship between symbols and motifs:

- Some people think that a motif is just a symbol that repeats throughout a text. For instance, if Edgar Allen Poe's poem "[The Raven](#)" were a longer work in which the raven disappears and reappears several times, these people would argue that the raven (which symbolizes death) would then be a motif.
- However, others think that there's a bigger difference between motifs and symbols, and believe that symbols are just one *building block* of motifs, which are bigger, more overarching patterns that directly reinforce themes. These people would say that even if the raven were to disappear and reappear throughout "The Raven," it's still just a symbol.
 - These people might argue that the symbol of **the raven**—which taps on the narrator's door and perches above the entry way to his house, and generally acts as a messenger from some other world—is part of a larger motif in poem of **thresholds and borders** which helps explore the themes of **losing touch with reality** and **death**.

In this entry, we've chosen to cover this second definition of motif—the one that separates motifs from symbols in the hierarchy of literary devices. However, many reputable sources refer to motif as a kind of symbol. What you should know is that there are competing definitions of motif, and whether a motif is a type of symbol depends on the definition you're using.



EXAMPLES

While motifs often do consist of literary symbols like the ones we describe above—the raven that stands for death, or the path that represents a way of life—the elements that make up motifs are not always *things*. In the examples below, you'll see cases in which the symbolic elements of a motif are sometimes things, sometimes actions, and sometimes events and places.

Motif in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*

One theme of Roberto Bolaño's novel *2666* is that **art always escapes critics' efforts to understand it**. Bolaño explores this theme through the motif of the **futile search**. Throughout the novel, different characters search for things unsuccessfully:

- The first, overarching search is the **search for a reclusive writer**, Benno von Arcimboldi, who has neither published new writing nor appeared in public for decades. Three academics who have all made careers out of studying Arcimboldi lead the search, yet never find him.
- The second search is a **criminal investigation** into the rape and murder of hundreds of young women in the city of Santa Teresa, Mexico. This search is led by the city's best police detectives, who believe a serial killer is responsible. Even though he has a distinctive signature and doesn't even try to hide the bodies of his victims, the killer is never found.
- The third search is a **romantic quest** undertaken by a madwoman, for a poet she slept with as a young woman. When she finds him in an insane asylum, not only does he not recognize her, but he's only interested in men.

Each of the novel's three searches proves to be fruitless, creating a broader pattern (the motif) of **futile searching**, which in turn supports the book's broader thematic statement that **art, despite the best efforts of critics, has a way of resisting resolution or apprehension**.

Motif in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

One theme in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is that **the American dream is empty and unattainable**. The book centers around the character Jay Gatsby, who claws his way into high society to win the affection of the wealthy but frivolous Daisy Buchanan, and ultimately dies because of Daisy's selfish, reckless behavior. Fitzgerald uses the motif of the color **green** to explore the empty promise of the American Dream by repeatedly associating the color with ideas of success, ambition, and wealth:

- Gatsby buys a mansion on the Long Island Sound, across the water from Daisy's estate, and each night stares longingly at the **green light** that shines from the end of Daisy's dock. The green light is a symbol that appears multiple times in the novel—during the early stages of Gatsby's longing for Daisy, during his pursuit of her, and after he dies after she abandons him. The green light

symbolizes Gatsby's longing for Daisy and his dream that he can recreate his past love with her, but it also plays into the broader motif of the color green.

- In Chapter 6, Daisy tells Nick that she'll be handing out **green cards** at Gatsby's party, and informs him that he can present her with one of these green cards if he wants to kiss her. So the cards themselves symbolize the very thing Gatsby desires (i.e., Daisy's affection).
- In Chapter 7, the car crash that leads to Gatsby's ruin, definitively destroying his dream of ever being with Daisy, involves a **green car**.
- In Chapter 9, Gatsby's friend Nick Caraway stares at the coastline and wonders how the first settlers to America must have felt staring out at the "**green breast of the new world**."

In every instance in which the color green appears in the book, it is closely associated with a goal that is forever receding into the distance (whether it's the idea of a "New World," true love, success, or happiness). "Greenness" itself therefore becomes a motif which reinforces the broader theme of the unattainability of the American dream.

Motif in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is about an Igbo warrior named Okonkwo, whose commitment to his culture's traditions brings him honor, but also eventually leads to his downfall. In the novel, Achebe develops the theme that **blindly following tradition can have catastrophic consequences** through the specific motif of **sacrifice**.

- Throughout the novel, Okonkwo and other members of the community routinely perform **symbolic rituals of sacrifice** in the name of tradition, offering up animals, currency, and other valuables.
- Throughout the novel, women who give birth to twins **abandon their own babies** in the forest. This tradition, which the clan enforces out of a belief that twins are evil, alienates many members of the clan who later convert to Christianity.
- In Chapter 7, Okonkwo **kills his adopted son**, whom he loves deeply, in accordance with his clan's laws, permanently scarring his other son, Nwoye, who later joins the white Christian missionaries and colonialists.

Finally, Okonkwo loses the will to live and commits suicide, devastated by having witnessed the white colonialists' destruction of

his own community's ancient traditions (including acts of sacrifice such as those described above). Okonkwo's inability to live without these traditions—all of which together make up the motif of **sacrifice**—supports the book's broader thematic statement: that **without the ability to adapt and change, the desire to preserve tradition can become fatal**.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers incorporate motifs in their work for a number of reasons:

- They help writers organize symbols, plot developments, and imagery into broader patterns that emphasize the main themes of the work.
- They give a work a sense of structure and continuity by creating patterns that recur throughout the work.
- They can help writers weave together different and seemingly unrelated parts of a narrative.
- They enable writers to subtly restate or remind the reader of certain ideas throughout a text using vivid and often memorable imagery.



OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Page on Motif:** A concise [explanation](#) of motif.
- **The Dictionary Definition of Motif:** A basic [definition](#) of the term, with a bit on the etymology: the word *motif* comes from the French word for "dominant idea or theme."
- **Theme vs. Motif:** A helpful [article](#) that breaks down the difference between these two terms.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Scopa, Sally. "Motif." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

Chicago Manual

Scopa, Sally. "Motif." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/motif>.