

Sample Content: Understanding Motif Lesson

Material Preceding Lesson Objectives:

Objectives:

- Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
(RL.11-12.1)

Key Ideas:

- Writers convey meaning in texts through the use of literary devices, and these literary devices provide clues to determine both what the text says explicitly and what is implied.
- The identification of devices such as theme, symbol, and motif can provide insights into the meaning of a text.

Vocabulary: literary devices, theme, symbol, motif

Lesson: Understanding Motif

Audience: Upper High School/College

Standards:

CCSS

- College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2 Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

Teacher Background Information:

While students at this level should have a nuanced understanding of the usage of theme as a literary device, in order to accurately describe the development of a theme in a work of literature, students should also have a solid grasp of the use of symbols and motif in a literary work. Whereas the theme of a text is the dominant or unifying idea in a work, the use of symbols and motif work to establish that theme. For example, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a green light (a singular symbol) is prominently featured as a representation of Gatsby's hopes for the future. Further, the color green is a recurring element throughout the novel (green cards, green car involved in crash, etc.) used to illustrate that the future Gatsby desired is slipping away. The repeated references to the color green have

become more than singular symbols. Together they become a motif that highlights the broader theme of the unattainability of the American dream.

Lesson Objectives: In this lesson, students will learn to identify the use of motif in literature and correctly distinguish between the use of symbols and motif as literary devices. Additionally, students will not only learn to identify and distinguish between the literary devices, but will also learn to identify the relationships and interactions between them and how they build upon one another to create a cohesive theme(s).

Prerequisite Skills:

- Identification of themes and symbols in literature

Materials:

- Projector with audio for videos and poetry reading
- Copies of [The Raven](#)

Introduction (15–20 minutes)

What is motif? Warm-up

- a. Display the word *motif* on the board and share that motif is a term used across a variety of mediums including music, literature, film, and visual art.
 - i. Explain that the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 includes one of the most famous motifs in classical music and that students will hear it firsthand. Make clear that as they listen and watch they should attempt to determine what motif means in relation to music.
 - ii. Display the video and audio of the first 50 seconds of [Beethoven's Symphony No. 5](#).
 - iii. Facilitate a class discussion focused on the effect achieved by the use of the motif in Beethoven's Symphony No. 5. Students should identify how the repeated use of the motif establishes a sense of unity throughout the composition. Further expand student understanding of motif by explaining that motif is used similarly in literature to reinforce theme.

Concept Overview

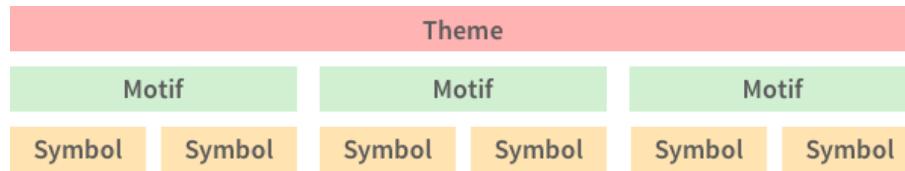
- a. Motif in literature is often a meaningful pattern of symbols, actions, or events that reinforce a theme.
 - iv. Display the table illustrating the differences between [motif and theme](#).

THEME VERSUS MOTIF

Theme is the fundamental concept or the underlying message that is conveyed through a piece of writing.	Motif is a recurring element, idea or concept that has a symbolic value in a text.
Theme is not explicitly given in a text.	Motif is often explicitly stated through the use of repetition.
Theme is abstract.	Motif is concrete.

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- b. Introduce the descriptors *symbol*, *motif*, and *theme* and their relationships by showing the following litcharts [image](#):



- i. Clarify that, similar to building blocks, repeated symbols contribute to a motif and that the motif then helps to illustrate the theme.
 - 1. Work with students to break down the motif in Beethoven's Symphony from the warm-up, illustrating how the different symbols (specific notes), played together in repeated patterns (motif), worked to establish a unifying feeling/reaction while listening. Have students volunteer one-word reactions that describe their feelings/reactions to the music.
 - ii. Explain that students are going to watch a video and, while watching, they should attempt to identify symbols, a motif, and the theme of the video.
- c. Show the video [Alike](#).

Common Misconception: Students may have difficulty distinguishing between symbols, motif, and theme depending on their knowledge of the concepts. It may be helpful to suggest they start by watching the video and simply making a list of the symbols they see: violin, books, stacks of papers, the colorless buildings, etc. When the video is over, it may be easier to illustrate the different concepts by working backward from the theme.

Potential example:

Theme: the importance of nurturing creativity

Motif: the repeated use of color (dark and light)

Symbolic locations: school/work vs. park

Symbolic characters: dad and son

(Note that the repeated use of the locations could potentially qualify them as motifs and the symbols would be the more simple objects: violin, textbooks, clock, etc. This illustrates the fluid nature of motif and repeated symbols as motif.)

Exploration (20–30 minutes)

The Raven Activity: This activity is adapted from Poe's [“The Raven” – Unity of Effect lesson from Prestwick House.](#)

- a. Provide students with copies of *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe (included in the handouts section of the lesson plan on page 5).
 - i. Explain to students that as they listen to a reading of *The Raven* they should note feelings/emotions and images that come to mind. Additionally, they should highlight/underline the repeated words and images that contribute to these reactions.
 - ii. Play the Radio Theatre Group's performance of *The Raven*.
- b. Ask students to analyze the poem to identify the symbols, motif, and overarching theme.
 - i. Have students work to identify the building blocks of symbols, motif, and theme. Have them use this identification to write a 300–500 word essay explaining how the themes of grief, negativity, and depression are developed throughout the course of *The Raven*. They should explain how these themes interact and build on one another and how the use of symbolism and motif contribute to the main themes.

Conclusion:

Provide students with a [rubric](#) illustrating the required components and point totals for their essay.

Possible Enrichment Activity: Facilitate a class discussion on the opposing views of [motif vs. symbol](#) as highlighted on the litcharts website. Have students adopt one view and write an explanation explaining why they adopted that stance.



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Additional Activity: Utilizing a text that you have assigned previously in class, have students create a project of their choice (visual representation, paper, presentation, etc.) that demonstrates the relationships between the use of symbols, motif, and overarching theme.