

Excelsior Online
Reading Exercise 1
Grades 5-6

Reading Concept: Themes and Motifs

Prerequisite: Character development in stories, plot structures, themes, conflicts

What you will need: A recently read chapter book, preferably a classic

Themes

To analyze themes in the plot, you have to think about the underlying message or lesson that the characters (including the villain or antagonist) face and learn through the book. The theme reveals the characters' growth, choices, and interactions between each other and often drives/creates the situations they find themselves in. Themes are also supported by conflicts; the struggles and challenges characters face help support the theme so that the reader understands the message more clearly.

To explore and analyze the theme(s) of a book/story, the following questions should be asked while reading:

- What are the themes?
- How do the themes evolve over the course of the story?
- How do are the themes realized through the conflicts evident in the story?
- How are the characters impacted by the themes?
- How do the characters affect the development of the theme?

There can be many themes in a book/story. In *Charlotte's Web*, the themes of friendship, loyalty, and perseverance are understood through the relationships between the farm animals and their group effort to save Wilbur's life. In the *Harry Potter* series, the themes of friendship, humility, dangers of power, dangers of rebellion, good vs. evil, perseverance, problem-solving, power, and betrayal appear.

Motifs

Motifs can use a collection of symbols and, like a theme, run like a river current through the book. While symbols may appear now and again through a book, the motif will be the driving force of the plot and/or character's development. Hence, motifs are like themes, they recur and carry the central idea or theme to understanding the character's development.

Some common motifs in literature are the following:

- **Journey to Awareness:** Literal journeys can involve something as large as a global journey or as small as a journey to the supermarket. Metaphorical journeys involve a character experiencing life and growing/changing as a result of it. The journey to awareness involves coming to the realization of something,

which could be a learning experience, growth, maturity, the truth, freedom, independence, a better way to live, better choices and decisions, understanding of values.

- **Duality:** Duality involves the inner struggle in one individual (conflict: man vs. self). It can also involve the choice between two conflicting sides to a personality (like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde). The most common inner struggle is between good and evil.
- **Quest:** The quest goes hand-in-hand with the journey: to search for something. That search involves something literal, metaphorical, or spiritual. With the quest, though, the goal is attainable and drives the character to make the decisions that he or she does. Typically, the hero or protagonist will face obstacles or challenges during the quest that make the entire journey seem greater, more difficult, and more heroic in the process.
- **Rebirth/Salvation/Redemption:** Focuses on new beginnings or a resurrection. The resurrection may be in the form of a literal birth (offspring) OR a creation of something new (an idea, a nation), or symbolic by becoming a new person. In the process, the person, idea, or generation of people/nation may be saved or redeemed through forgiveness, purification, or renewal.
- **Death and Afterlife:** The death and/or afterlife motif involves the essentials of existence, or the lack of existence, which are questioned and explored: What happens when we die? Is there an afterlife? Who or what created mankind? Death can also be metaphorical, representing a part of one's life and entering the unknown.
- **Innocence to Experience (or Fall from Innocence):** This is also a type of journey. It involves an increase in knowledge by circumstances that may not be from a positive experience. Innocence, often a child-like innocence, fades away and is replaced by experience of the world, which can involve wisdom, maturity, sadness, loneliness, or sacrifice. It is the loss of innocence as well as the attainment of knowledge. Sometimes this is shown as a 'coming of age' story.
- **Challenge to Authority:** This involves questioning authority. The authority can be a ruler, a society or a belief system. This can be shown in direct actions or a refusal to compromise or conform to the ways, expectations, or rules of that authority.

Critical Thinking: The types of critical thinking questions you should ask and answer when examining motifs are the following:

1. Which motifs are evident in the book?
2. How do these motifs tie in with the theme(s) of the book?
3. How do these motifs further develop through the conflicts in the book?
4. Which characters go through which motifs?

- a. How do these characters react or handle the specific motifs?
- b. How do the conflicts within the characters reveal the motifs?
- c. Why are the motifs important to the plot?
5. What symbols support or enhance the motifs? How so?
6. In what ways do the characters interact, use, or are impacted by the symbols?
7. How do the motifs impact the character development?

Exercise 1

Identify 3 themes evident in the book. How do these themes develop? What is the central lesson of each theme? Be sure to add 2 pieces of evidence from the book with chapter and page for each response. Each response should be a minimum of 1-2 sentences long. Develop the chart below:

	How does it develop?	What is the central lesson of the theme	Which characters are a part of the theme?	How does the theme help develop the character?
Theme 1:				
Theme 2:				
Theme 3:				

How do we see these themes in our own lives? In the world around us?

	Has the theme or central lesson been experienced in your own life? How?	Have you observed the theme or central lesson impact another person in your life? How?	Give an example of when you have seen this theme appear in our society, state, or country? (pick one)	Give an example of when you have seen this theme appear in our world?
Theme 1:				
Theme 2:				
Theme 3:				

Identify 2 motifs evident in the book. How do these motifs develop? What is the central lesson of each motif? Does it tie with any theme you've identified above? Be sure to add 2 pieces of evidence from the book with chapter and page for each response. Each response should be a minimum of 1-2 sentences long. Develop the chart below:

	How does it develop?	What is the central lesson of the motif?	Which characters are a part of the motif?	How does the motif help develop the character? What characteristics/skills develop as a result of the motif?	Which theme does the motif interconnect with? How?
Motif 1:					
Motif 2:					

How do we experience these motifs in our own lives or observe in others' lives?

	Has the motif been experienced in your own life? How?	Have you observed the motif impact another person in your life? How?	Give an example of when you have seen this motif appear in a different real-life story?	Give an example of when you have seen this motif appear in a different fictional story/movie?
Motif 1:				
Motif 2:				

Which conflicts develop in each theme and motif you have identified? Give a brief explanation for each with 2 pieces of evidence from the book for each. Restate the theme/motif as well.

	Conflict 1	Conflict 2	Conflict 3
Theme 1:			
Theme 2:			
Theme 3:			
Motif 1:			
Motif 2:			

Often times, conflicts are a result of underlying issues that have been brewing in the plot. In the same way, such issues are evident in our world today. So when examining conflicts, think about the actual issue that the conflict is revealing, exposing, or resulting from. Identify the issue and think about how it affects not only the character's world but your world as well. Issues could be something like political corruption, poverty, environmental problems, societal problems, etc. **Which underlying issue(s) are exposed as a result of the themes and motifs you have identified? Give 2 pieces of evidence from the book for each response with a brief explanation.**

	Issue 1	Issue 2	Issue 3
Theme 1: Conflict:			
Theme 2: Conflict:			
Theme 3: Conflict:			
Motif 1: Conflict:			
Motif 2: Conflict:			

At Excelsior Online, we strongly believe in weaving our learning instead of learning in silos. In other words, it's fine to learn about 'motifs' but how does one extend that learning? Through further analysis, application to the real world and our own personal lives. The latter is what helps the student begin the journey towards self-reflection that is needed for the college application essay.

We wholly believe in interconnecting our core foundations so that students understand how one dimension or foundation, such as writing, supports another dimension, such as reading—and vice versa. Thus, the exercises they complete here can be used in preparation for evidence-based writing.

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