

Understanding the Journey from Motif to Theme

Defining Terms

Motif, subject, and theme are commonly used terms in our English classrooms; however, definitions can vary. We've begun by defining the terms that you will meet in this resource. Student definitions of these terms introduce Chapters Two through Four, and accompanying student resources are located in the **Student Handouts**.

Motif

A motif is a recurring object, idea, structure, or image found in the details of a work. Often, an author will use repetition or synonyms to elicit a particular motif. Several motifs may be used in a single work. When looked at as a whole, motifs help to reveal the subject of a work and lead to understanding the work's theme.

To find motifs in a work, look for repeated or significant objects, ideas, or images. Some examples found in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

- **Words:** "blood," "king," "crown," "dagger," and "tyrant"
- **Phrases:** "fair is foul, and foul is fair;" "Out, damned spot!"
- **Abstract ideas:** betrayal, ambition, grief, insanity, and power

Motifs can also be found by examining character. An author can establish a pattern of character actions and reactions to elicit a particular motif. To find motifs in a work, such as *Macbeth*, look for how the character is portrayed and how others perceive the character by examining:

- **Character actions:** Macbeth murders several people (murder is a motif).
- **Character traits/emotions/feelings:** Macbeth feels paranoid (paranoia is a motif).
- **Character motivation:** Macbeth is driven by his ambition to be king and to be ruler forever (ambition is a motif).

To assist your students with the complex process of characterization, we have compiled a "Character Trait List," located in the **Student Handouts**.

Subject

A subject unifies a work's motifs into a single word or phrase and is often considered a main topic or main idea of a work. Sometimes, motifs can literally double as a subject in a poem or prose passage. While literary pieces contain several subjects, it is important to note that each subject should be supported by several motifs. You can find a comprehensive list of common literary subjects in the **Student Handouts**.

For example, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the motifs combine to create possible subjects, such as violence, confusion, and guilt. Some motifs that double as the work's subject are: betrayal, ambition, grief, insanity, power, and paranoia.

Subject Phrase

A subject phrase is a phrase that describes the subject of an excerpt in order to further define the subject's role in the piece. Consider the subject of betrayal. How do we know if the excerpt expresses betrayal's power, the ramifications of betrayal, or justifiable betrayal? The subject phrase helps clarify this for us.

For example, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the list of subjects may include betrayal, ambition, grief, insanity, violence, power, and paranoia. Several subject phrases that help clarify these subjects may include: *betrayal's power*, *thwarted ambition*, *the shackles of grief*, *insanity's solitude*, *oppressive violence*, and *the journey to paranoia*.

Generally, there are three easy ways to narrow the subject of an excerpt into a subject phrase. One way to further narrow a subject is to combine two subjects from the "Subject List" handout (see the **Student Handouts**). For example, betrayal and power are two separate subjects in *Macbeth*; however, these two subjects can combine to generate a narrowed and specified subject phrase for the work: *betrayal's power*.

Another way to further narrow a subject is to describe the subject with an adjective from the "Adjective List" handout (see the **Student Handouts**). First, students consider how the subject is described in the poem or passage. Next, they choose an adjective that further defines how the subject is being used in the piece. To create a subject phrase, students place the adjective before the subject. For example, to further clarify and define the role of ambition in *Macbeth*, an appropriate subject phrase may be *thwarted ambition*.

Describing the subject with a noun phrase is yet another technique for formulating the subject phrase. Again, students can choose a descriptive noun phrase (see the **Student Handouts**) that further defines how the subject is portrayed in the excerpt. Then, they place the subject at the end of the noun phrase to create a subject phrase. In *Macbeth*, if a student has chosen the subject of grief, he may formulate the subject phrase, *the shackles of grief*, after reviewing his motifs.

You will find a resource entitled "How to Create a Subject Phrase" in the **Student Handouts** that provides specific directions for your students on generating subject phrases.

Theme

A theme is a declarative statement that asserts the role of a dominant subject in a work. A thematic statement contains two critical components: first, a theme must uphold the values and principles contained within a work's motifs and subjects and, second, a thematic statement must apply these textual insights to the outside world or humanity as a whole. Consequently, a theme makes an enlightened observation about a subject. Each literary work or excerpt contains multiple themes for the reader to unearth. You will find a resource in the **Student Handouts** entitled "How to Create a Thematic Statement" that provides specific directions on generating themes.

In thematic statements, the subject phrase can be linked to an action verb; this allows the student to reveal the role of the subject phrase in the piece as a whole. For example, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the subject phrase of *thwarted ambition* could encourage the following theme: *Thwarted ambition leads to one's personal downfall rather than gain*. Similarly, the subject phrase of *the shackles of grief* could lead to the following theme: *The shackles of grief impede one's ability to engage in rational thought*. To assist your students in this process, we have included an "Active Verb List" in the **Student Handouts**.

Some of your students might be comfortable deviating from a subject phrase/active verb format and, in turn, craft more sophisticated themes. For example, the subject phrase of *insanity's solitude* could lead to the following theme: *The suffering caused by insanity's solitude permanently damages the human psyche*. Using the subject phrase of *the journey to paranoia*, a student may generate the following theme: *Guilt, regret, and fear define one's journey and downward spiral into the wrenching claws of paranoia*. You will find the resource "How to Create a Thematic Statement" in the **Student Handouts** to guide your students in writing these advanced thematic statements.

Note how, in all thematic assertions, the character and the plot are not mentioned specifically but are instead used to represent a larger concept that reveals a deeper truth about human behavior or human nature.

Journey from Motif to Theme: Prose Sample

Each chapter of this book highlights and develops specific skills in detail for your students to become proficient readers in the thematic process. We have modeled the identification and application of motifs, subjects, subject phrases, and themes in the following prose excerpt from Somerset Maugham:

"Your mamma's gone away. You won't ever see her any more." Philip did not know what she meant.

"Why not?"

"Your mamma's in heaven." [...]

Philip opened a large cupboard filled with dresses and, stepping in, took as many of them as he could in his arms and buried his face in them. They smelt of the scent his mother used. Then he pulled open the drawers, filled with his mother's things, and looked at them: there were lavender bags among the linen, and their scent was fresh and pleasant. The strangeness of the room left it, and it seemed to him that his mother had just gone out for a walk. She would be in presently and would come upstairs to have nursery tea with him. And he seemed to feel her kiss on his lips.

It was not true that he would never see her again. It was not true simply because it was impossible. He climbed up on the bed and put his head on the pillow. He lay there quite still.

~W. Somerset Maugham, *Of Human Bondage*

The first step of the thematic process (covered extensively in Chapter Two and throughout the remaining chapters) allows your students to engage in the critical steps of examining, identifying, and classifying motifs in prose. Some examples of repeated or significant words, phrases, and images from the passage are: “mamma,” “gone away,” “heaven,” “buried his face,” “mother,” “her kiss on his lips,” and “not true.” Several abstract ideas from the passage are: “fresh and pleasant,” “strangeness,” truth, “never see her again,” death, “impossible,” and possibilities. Your students will also examine motifs via character actions, character traits/emotions/feelings, and character motivation. In the passage, the character questions why he won’t see his mother again, “buries” his face in his mother’s clothes, smells “his mother’s things,” feels his mother’s “kiss on his lips,” and lays “still” with his head on her “pillow.” The young character is grief-stricken, disillusioned, and innocent to death’s reality. The child is motivated by his desire for his mother’s presence.

The next step of this analytical process (covered in Chapter Two and throughout the remaining chapters) asks your students to use their inferential skills to determine the subject of an excerpt. Students will examine their motifs in the passage to ascertain main ideas or topics for the excerpt as a whole. The goal of a subject is to unify and merge the motifs into a word or idea that is emphasized throughout the literary piece. Some examples in the Maugham passage of subjects revealed via repeated and significant words or phrases are: death, loss, mother and son relationships, denial, truth, and innocence. Several subjects gathered from analyzing the character in the passage are: doubt, grief, disillusionment, denial, affection, and despair. Indeed, some motifs duly function as subjects, such as grief and disillusionment.

In Chapter Three, students will generate a subject phrase to further define and narrow the role of the subject in the passage. For example, in the Maugham excerpt, possible subject phrases may include: *inconsolable grief*, *unexpected death*, *the effect of death*, *a son’s love for his mother*, *the intimate bond of parent and child relationships*, *loss of innocence*, *the power of denial*, *the denial of truth*, and *the disillusionment of death’s reality*.

The journey of the thematic process culminates in Chapter Four as students craft their own themes for passages. Analyzing and synthesizing their motifs, subjects, and subject phrases, students will assert thematic statements that showcase their close, critical-reading skills. For example, by synthesizing motifs, subjects, and subject phrases from the Maugham excerpt, one can craft the following themes: *A parent’s unexpected death is an inexplicable event for a child*; *The effect of death kills childhood innocence*; *The intimate bond between a parent and a child transcends death*; *Lost innocence impacts a child’s development*; *The power of denial preserves a child’s youthful outlook*; *In denial of truth, a child never reconciles the loss of a parental figure*; and *The disillusionment of death’s reality safeguards the innocent from pain*.

Journey from Motif to Theme: Poetic Sample

Rough wind, that moanest loud
Grief too sad for song;
Wild wind, when sullen cloud
Knells all the night long;
Sad storm whose tears are vain,
Bare woods, whose branches strain,
Deep caves and dreary main,—
Wail, for the world’s wrong!

~“A Dirge” by Percy Bysshe Shelley

The first step of the thematic process (covered extensively in Chapter Two and throughout the remaining chapters) allows your students to engage in the critical steps of examining, identifying, and classifying motifs in poetry. Some examples of repeated or significant words, phrases, and images from Shelley's poem "A Dirge" are: "Rough wind," "moanest loud," "wild wind," "sullen cloud," "knells," "sad storm," "tears," "bare woods," "branches strain," "caves," "dreary main," "wail," "grief," "world's wrong," despair, and hopelessness. Your students will also examine motifs via speaker actions, speaker traits/emotions/feelings, and speaker motivation. In the poem, the speaker "wails, for the world is wrong," and he also sees his grief mirrored in the natural world that surrounds him. The speaker is sad, depressed, hopeless, and helpless. He clearly feels distraught and overwhelmed by loss. The speaker is motivated by his desire to tangibly express his grief and sadness.

The next step of this analytical process (covered in Chapter Two and throughout the remaining chapters) asks your students to use their inferential skills to determine the subject of an excerpt. Students will examine their motifs in the poem to ascertain main ideas or topics for the excerpt as a whole. The goal of a subject is to unify and merge the motifs into a word or idea that is emphasized throughout the literary piece. Some examples of subjects revealed via repeated and significant words or phrases in "A Dirge" are death and nature. Subjects gathered from analyzing the speaker in the poem are pain and loss. Additionally, some motifs duly function as subjects, such as grief and despair.

In Chapter Three, students will generate a subject phrase to further define and narrow the role of the subject in the poem. For example, in "A Dirge," possible subject phrases may include: *the impact of grief*; *the isolating nature of grief*; *unrelenting pain*; *crippling despair*; *tragic loss*; *imprisoning despair*; *the inequity of death*; *the ramifications of death*; and *the turbulence of nature*.

The journey of the thematic process culminates in Chapter Four as students craft their own themes for poems. Analyzing and synthesizing their motifs, subjects, and subject phrases, students will assert thematic statements that showcase their close, critical-reading skills. For example, by synthesizing motifs, subjects, and subject phrases from "A Dirge," one can craft the following themes: *The impact of grief alters the way that one perceives the world*; *The isolating nature of grief results in feelings of despair and hopelessness*; *Unrelenting pain terrorizes and shackles the human spirit*; *Crippling despair robs the world of color and joy*; *Tragic loss serves as a catalyst for inward combustion*; *The imprisoning despair of hopelessness transforms one's current reality*; *The inequity of death creates a spiritual crisis within an individual*; *Despair, dejection, and misery are among the multiple ramifications of death*; and *The turbulence of nature mirrors our deepest emotional pain*.