

Use motifs to "pull" the reader and pace the plot

By Alicia Rasley (c. 2020)

MOTIFS: A PATTERN OF RECURRENCE

A motif is a recurrent pattern, image, concept, even keyword, which has some plot, character, and/or symbolic resonance. Motifs help to unify the story, to connect character and plot, and to give the reader that pleasurable feeling of "familiar difference". (I think of this as the pleasure of coming across something you recognize, and yet it's a little different this time, so there's not only that pleasure of recognition -- I know that song!--but the pleasure of the new--but I've never heard Ray Charles sing it before! Popular fiction, with its recurrent themes and plot structures, plays around a lot with this reader-response technique.)

Now of course we all remember 10th grade English class and having to explain why snow is a symbol of death in Joyce's story *The Dead*, etc. That's fine. But we're popular fiction writers. We have to be more subtle than literary fiction writers. :) We are more connected to the "earth" of our stories, to the actual practical realities of everyday life. So our symbols, our motifs, have to fit in, not stick out. They become part of that weave of coherence in our story tapestry, that the reader notices and records subconsciously.

So when I read over a draft, I'm on the lookout for motifs that evolved more or less naturally, and consider how I can refine them or amplify them with one more occurrence, say. The motifs should not only connect somehow with the theme, but should also be integrated in the plot-- in popular fiction, nearly everything in the story should connect to the plot (and/or the character journey). Motifs shouldn't stand out blaring "motif!" but should be so well-integrated the reader picks it up without having it shoved at her. They should be part of the plot, connected to the characters.

Consider that in real life we notice patterns. In fact, we make patterns-- it's part of human nature to see connections and recurrences. We take objects and make them symbolic of emotional experiences-- like think how hard it often is to sell our parents' home after they die, even if we don't want to live there. The house is more than a building to us.

These symbols or patterns tell us something about the emotional experience, or clue us in that an emotional experience is going on. Why, after all, does our friend Tamara shop for purses whenever she feels anxious? (I just bought a couple handbags -- artsy ones, made out of men's ties-- so purses are on my mind. :) We don't need to know everything about her to notice that pattern. She's thinking about quitting her lucrative but boring job, so she calls us and asks us to go purse shopping with us.

Hmm... so purse-shopping is a motif— that is, it's a pattern that recurs in her life. So we know— purse-shopping... Tamara is worried about something.

Well, the same thing works in fiction. By the second time a character goes purse-shopping, the reader is paying attention, noticing the context around that purse-shopping decision, comparing it with the LAST purse-shopping episode. And the third purse-shopping episode, well, the reader – consciously or not– has figured it out. "First time, she was about to break up with her boyfriend. Second time she was thinking of quitting her job. Third time, well, she's considering moving out of town. Hmm. Each time she goes purse-shopping, she's facing a major decision!"



MOTIFS UNIFY

The motif serves to unify different times/events in the story, helps us connect them and figure out why they're connected. The motif is not the theme, but it helps provide the connections between plot and character, and different "times" of the plot, and different events in the plots, which help develop the theme.

For example, think of Hamlet. He and Laertes (his foil) could practically start a support group for "sons of murdered fathers". Oh, yeah, add in Ophelia, Laertes's sister, and let's call it CHILDREN of murdered fathers. Of course Laertes might not want to be in a group with the guy who actually murdered dear old Dad! So "dad-murder" and "king-murder" and just plain old murder become a motif that links the experiences of everyone murdered or murdering... So we can look at Hamlet's equivocal response when he hears his father has been murdered and compare it with the other children of murdered fathers, and that will tell us something about Hamlet.

Laertes becomes obsessed with revenge.

Ophelia goes mad and kills herself.

Hamlet almost goes mad, but doesn't quite get that far. Why?

The motif linking them makes us ponder this. Because he's a man? Because she has to deal with the additional pain that her boyfriend did the killing?

And compare his response with Laertes's immediate insistence on revenge.

Hamlet considers, while Laertes decides.

(Fortinbras—the prince who shows up in the very last scene and takes over Denmark once the whole royal family is killed-- is another child of a killed father, btw, whose

response to his father's death in battle is to "finish his work" and win more battles and conquer more lands.)

So that motif of dad-murder – three young people facing that– gives us the opportunity to consider that Hamlet's way of doing things is not the only response available, so we think, "Why did he go that way?"

MOTIFS CONNECT AND CHANGE

A motif doesn't have to be fancy. It's generally going to be connected to some concern or issue of the characters. For instance, in my last book, I used cars as a motif. The heroine had a 15-year-old son undergoing driver's ed, and he was obsessed with cars. So he notices cars all the time, and she has started doing that too, just because he's always pointing them out.

And (as actually happens) the cars kind of represent who the characters are. Meggie drives what she calls the typical soccer mom van, only it's five years old and scrungy because her divorce didn't leave her enough money to replace it.

Her eventual beau, an MD, drives a Jag, and this shows he's a bit different (and classier :) than other MDs because they all drive Mercedes and BMWs. (Okay, so I gave him MY dream car. <G>)

A secondary character, a wealthy software entrepreneur who takes a sort of ridiculous fancy to Meggie, tries to sort of woo her (and her son) with rides in his Lamborghini (which ends up getting destroyed in the end by the bad guy).

There's a militia-man farmer with a shotgun and a shiny new pickup, and the heroine bribes her son to write thank-you notes by promising that she'd help him buy a car when he turns 16. (What can I say? She's a pushover!)

And a major plot point (though hidden-- it's a Clue :) happens when a character trades in an expensive car for a less expensive one.

None of this, I hope, sticks out, because it fits in with the teenaged boy's car obsession. And it's all tied in to the actual story-- the heroine gets a ride home one stormy night in the hero's Jag, the rich software guy is driving drunk in the Lamborghini when he's almost killed, etc. So it's a subtle weave, but one that kind of represents the class differences in this town and the materialism of some of the residents.

Another motif is water. The town is set on a river, and the history of its prosperity has to do with that access to water. The heroine lives on

the river and is always concerned with the possibility of flooding (I live on a river, so...), and the mystery plot kind of turns on an aspect of this whole flood thing.

There are two major storms in the book (and of course, there's that symbolic thing of the pressure of the plot exploding in a storm), and during each there's an attempted murder.



I'm sure there are others snuck in there-- software is one, a kind of weird one, but this is a software-rich town. At any rate, the motifs help to unify the story, to connect character and plot, and to give the reader that pleasurable feeling of "familiar difference".

It also helps to explore the difference between characters. Okay, it might not mean much to you, but I knew in my soul that Mike was going to be The One for Meggie, even though Will was much richer and in some ways nicer, because, well, Mike drove that understated, elegant, dangerous Jaguar, and Will went for the ostentatious Lamborghini. :0

(You know, I was in England last year and rented a Ford Fiesta, and the rental car agency manager apparently took pity on me or something and upgraded me to a Jaguar! For the same price! I thought I was so lucky, until I had to deal with the reality of driving a **\$100K car** on the **WRONG SIDE OF THE ROAD** for two weeks. I practically had a stroke, the stress was so great. Theme: Be careful what you wish for... it might come true.)

MOTIFS IN ACTION AND COMBINATION

So what do you do with motifs? Well, I think the one suggestion that helped me was that once you figure it out, see how much otherwise extraneous detail you can make more coherent using one of the motifs. In any book, there'll be a thousand of little choices you make, things that don't really matter very much and are just put in there to create a life and a world. See if you can connect some of these "throwaway" choices to the motifs you've identified.

One motif ended up being software (the town is sort of a "Silicon Cornfield"-- a software haven in the Midwest). So I thought about connecting that to a couple other aspects of the story.

For example, I was going to have the heroine be a CPA, and I did keep that, but now instead of just having an accounting firm, she has a small-business consulting service where she works with setting up

business systems for those crazy young software/Web entrepreneurs. That makes it more plausible that she'd end up hanging around with Will, the software zillionaire, and connects with the software motif.

I was going to have Will the software zillionaire be a victim of attempted murder, but it was just going to be that someone shot at him. It got much more vital and vivid when I put him in that fancy car and shoved him over the cliff into the flooded river. :)

You can also use a motif as a way to individualize the story or setting. When my heroine was heading for the police station to report a crime, I envisioned her walking up the steps to the precinct house from Hill Street Blues. You know, grungy, 19th century building, cracked linoleum, etc. But then I forced my mind away from that seductive cliché and realized that this was pretty much a new town, where the population has doubled because of... software companies. The police wouldn't be in an old building. They'd be in a new, gleaming building, filled with high-tech equipment donated by the software guys who kind of see the police department as just another video game.

I even have Meg comment on the difference between her expectations of what a police dept should look like, and this Philip-Johnson designed tribute to high-tech law enforcement. This isn't the cliché-ed police station-- it's "real" because it's unique to this story, and I found my way to that unique station through the software motif.

You can also use the terminology associated with this motif to enliven your narrative. If there's a water motif, the heroine might be "drowning in debt". Keep this subtle-- a little goes a long way.

What are some common motifs? Well, there are so many it's hard to name them, and as you can see from the above, you might have several in one book.

The motif serves to unify different times/events in the story, helps us connect them and figure out why they're connected. The motif is not the theme, but it helps provide the connections between plot and character, and different "times" of the plot, and different events in the plots, which help develop the theme. Also, every scene that uses that motif is linked in the reader's mind to every other scene, so the progress or change in the motif can represent some change in the story or character. (Grief can be expressed 3-4 different ways throughout the story.)

(Theme is "whole story" and there is usually just one main theme developed by the whole story. A motif will show up inside different scenes, and there might be several motifs in a story.)

MOTIF EXAMPLES

Some motifs (there are as many as there are stories—what are yours? You might have more than one in a story):

Fathers (Hamlet-- Dead Fathers)

Prophecies (Macbeth – sorry, lately on a Shakespeare kick)

Persuasive speeches (Julius Caesar)

Blindness (Oedipus Rex)

Color

Water

Birthdays or celebrations

Music or musical instruments

Religion and religious symbology

Justice, laws, lawbreaking

Doubling roles

Sports

Offices (and contrast between them – plush corporate office vs. cheap sole practitioner office)

Babies/reproduction/sterility/fertility – a motif can have a positive expression and a negative one

Lies

Jewelry

Clothing (ripped clothing, dirty laundry)

Technology—iPhone, gizmos, gadgets that don't work

Expectations (low, high, disappointed)

Mirrors, reflections

The trick here is not just to repeat these motifs in different scenes, but to show different aspects of them and reveal something of the story or character by how they differ. For example, "counting change" (as in coins) could be a motif, and reflect the heroine's lack of trust. Say the first time, she meticulously counts her change, and the second time, when she sees the bad guy and has to grab her change, she counts it in the cab, and the third time, maybe she drops it into her purse without counting. What does this say about how she's changed?

I had a motif of "crying" in one book (son was mourning the death of his father), and at first they were all the same progression-- Son cried, Mom comforted him. But then I started changing each to fit where it was in the book. First, son cried, mom comforted. Second, son cries, refuses Mom comfort. Third, son starts to cry, then represses it and runs off.



Fourth, son refuses to cry, Mom confronts him, and he finally tells her the secret he's been keeping about Dad, and cries freely. Notice that the reader can subconsciously register each scene, connect them mentally, and see the change in emotion through the story.

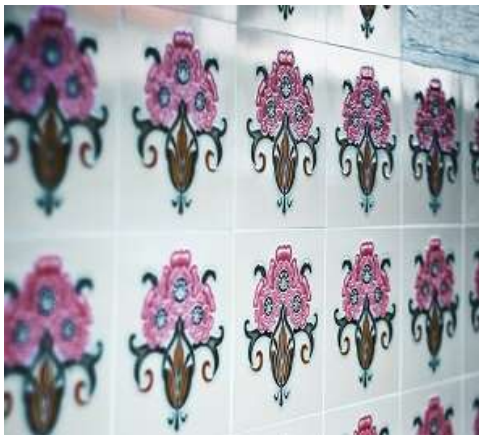
Also, you should in revision look for ways to use these motifs in the story events. For example, if one of your motifs is "cars" (which might amplify some theme about modern life), and you're going to have someone attempt to murder Jill—don't cop out with a gunshot. Have someone tamper with her brakes so she drives off a mountainside.

What's a motif in your book? If you have two occurrences of something, consider upping that to 3 or 4.

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What's a motif in your book? If you have two occurrences of something, consider upping that to 3 or 4. And remember, the purpose of the motif is to show both connection AND change—that is, the motif shouldn't look the same in each scene. How the motif changes will amplify the creation of the ultimate theme.

Alicia



**MOTIF: A RECURRENT PATTERN ...
WITH MEANING**