

morphology: 195.

motif and theme: A **motif** is a conspicuous element, such as a type of event, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature. The "loathly lady" who turns out to be a beautiful princess is a common motif in *folklore*, and the man fatally bewitched by a fairy lady is a motif adopted from folklore in Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (1820). Common in lyric poems is the **ubi sunt motif**, the "where-are" formula for lamenting the vanished past ("Where are the snows of yesteryear?"), and also the *carpe diem* motif, whose nature is sufficiently indicated by Robert Herrick's title "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." An **aubade**—from the Old French "alba," meaning dawn—is an early-morning song whose usual motif is an urgent request to a beloved to wake up. A familiar example is Shakespeare's "Hark, hark, the lark at heaven's gate sings." An older term for recurrent poetic concepts or formulas is the **topos** (Greek for "a commonplace"); Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (trans. 1953), treats many of the ancient literary topoi. The term "motif," or else the German **leitmotif** (a guiding motif), is also applied to the frequent repetition, within a single work, of a significant verbal or musical phrase, or set description, or complex of images, as in the operas of Richard Wagner or in novels by Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner. See *imagery*; and for a *deconstructive* treatment of recurrent elements or motifs in prose fiction, see J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition* (1982).

Theme is sometimes used interchangeably with "motif," but the term is more usefully applied to a general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to involve and make persuasive to the reader. John Milton states as the explicit theme of *Paradise Lost* to "assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men"; see *didactic literature and fiction and truth*. Some critics have claimed that all nontrivial works of literature, including lyric poems, involve an implicit theme which is embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery; see, for example, Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947). And *archetypal critics* trace such recurrent themes as that of the scapegoat, or the journey underground, through myths and social rituals, as well as literature. For a discussion of the overlapping applications of the critical terms "subject," "theme," and "thesis" see Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (1958, pp. 401–11).

motivation: 46.

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