

**THE PRINCIPLES OF HIERARCHICAL CLASSIFICATION OF
LITERARY MOTIVES**

**ADABIY MOTIVLARNI IERARXIK TASNIFLASH
TAMOYILLARI**

**ПРИНЦИПЫ ИЕРАРХИЧЕСКОЙ КЛАССИФИКАЦИИ
ЛИТЕРАТУРНЫХ МОТИВОВ**

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Abstract: This article explores the theoretical foundations and practical applications of a hierarchical classification system for literary motives. While literary motives such as “exile”, “death”, or “transformation” recur across genres and cultures, existing classification models – mythological, structuralist, or thematic – tend to lack coherence and flexibility. Drawing on structural-semiotic theory, typological analysis, and comparative literary methods, the article assumes a

multilevel framework that organizes motifs by level of abstraction, narrative function, symbolic content, and cultural context.

Keywords: literary motives; hierarchical classification; structuralism; narratology; symbolic function; typology; cultural context; motif taxonomy.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada adabiy motivlarning ierarxik tasnifi tizimining nazariy asoslari va amaliy qo‘llanilishini o‘rganilgan. “Surgun”, “o‘lim” yoki “o‘zgarish” kabi adabiy motivlar janr va madaniyatlarda takrorlansa ham, mavjud tasniflash modellari – mifologik, strukturalistik yoki tematik – izchillik va moslashuvchanlikdan mahrum. Strukturaviy-semiotik nazariya, tipologik tahlil va qiyosiy adabiy usullarga tayangan holda, maqolada motivlar abstraksiya darajasi, bayon qilish funksiyasi, simvolik mazmuni va madaniy kontekst bo‘yicha tartibga soluvchi ko‘p darajali asosni nazarda tutiladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: adabiy motivlar; ierarxik tasnif; strukturalizm; narratologiya; simvolik funktsiya; tipologiya; madaniy kontekst; motivlar taksonomiyasi.

Аннотация: В этой статье рассматриваются теоретические основы и практические приложения иерархической системы классификации литературных мотивов. В то время как литературные мотивы, такие как «изгнание», «смерть» или «преобразование», повторяются в разных жанрах и культурах, существующие модели классификации – мифологические, структуралистские или тематические – как правило, лишены связности и гибкости. Опираясь на структурно-семиотические теории, типологический анализ и сравнительные литературные методы, статья предполагает многоуровневую структуру, которая организует мотивы по уровню абстракции, повествовательной функции, символическому содержанию и культурному контексту.

Ключевые слова: литературные мотивы; иерархическая классификация; структурализм; нарратология; символическая функция; типология; культурный контекст; таксономия мотивов.

Classification of literary motives is a simple task in literary research, highlighting the operation of recurring narrative elements across genres, periods, and cultures. Motives like “exile”, “revenge”, or “metamorphosis” are not only thematic constituents but also bearers of symbolic meaning that are involved in the making and interpretation of texts. Although very important, there is still no single method of classifying them in a systematic manner.

Traditional methods of categorizing motives typically either describe or are culturally specific. Structuralist, mythological, archetypal, and thematic frameworks all prove insightful, but none of them ever confronts the richness and diversity of motives across different literary traditions. Therefore, scholars find it challenging to compare texts or interdisciplinarily study based on the common framework.

The model of hierarchy that organizes motives in relation to levels of abstraction and function allows for a freer, larger paradigm. One such system would be able to chart the high-level archetypes and low-level narrative or culture-specific instances. It then becomes feasible to track the progression via which the very same root motive develops through various genres, languages, and time periods.

The goal of this article is to design and substantiate a theory of principles for ordering motives hierarchically within literature. They are aimed at noting both the narrative role and symbolical function of motives, and serve as a basis for further analysis in comparative literature, digital humanities, and literary didactics. The theory presented here considers clarity, extensibility, and transposability across cultures as its top priorities.

To achieve this aim, the investigation incorporates a combination of methodologies: comparative analysis to spot recurring motives, structural-semiotic techniques in order to grasp their internal logic, typological classification to sort them into meaningful categories, and taxonomy-based modeling to build the hierarchy. This combined methodology provides a firm theoretical and practical basis to a more systematic investigation of literary motives.

Definition of Literary Motive. The theory of the literary motive has historically held a privileged place in classical poetics and modern literary theory.

In its most broad sense, one can define a literary motive as a repeating thematic or symbolic element that shapes the structure and meaning of a literary text. Andre Jolles, in his work on simple narrative forms, was interested in the repetitive and constructive role of motives in the development of folk narrative and oral tradition. Juri Lotman regarded the motive as a unit of semantic structure of the text and was interested in its role within the semiotic system of literature. Roland Barthes, though more interested in the multiplicity of textual meaning, identified recurring symbolic elements – motifs – as signifiers in the mythologizing practices of modern literature and media.

What all these approaches have in common is the insight that motives are not mere repetitive material but useful narrative elements that are contextualized, transformed, and interpreted by readers in order to gain meaning. Motives are the link between texts, epochs, and literary cultures, offering a solid yet dynamic foundation for accounting for the ways in which texts transmit values, archetypes, and ideologies.

Existing Classifications. Several systems have been developed in an attempt to classify literary motives, typically indicating the theoretical and cultural issues of their time. The first is the mythological or archetypal system, founded on the work of scholars such as James G. Frazer and later Carl Jung. These systems classify motives according to deep, shared patterns of human thought – such as the hero's journey, the trickster, or the dying-and-reborn god—asserting that these patterns are universal, cross-cultural.

The structuralist school, most notably represented by Vladimir Propp and Algirdas Greimas, refocused attention on the function of motives within narrative form. Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* organized narrative units into 31 functions, based upon Russian folktales but with wider implications for narrative construction theories. Greimas' work on the actantial model argued structural positions (e.g. subject, object, helper) that recur in stories.

Simultaneously, thematic and symbolic categories – i.e., Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism or Jungian literary theory – classify motives by symbolic

meaning or recurring theme: nature and civilization, quest for identity, apocalypse and rebirth, etc. These categories will emphasize symbolic echo over narrative intent.

Limitations of Non-Hierarchical Classifications. Despite their contribution, the classical motivation systems are under drastic constraints. Most are non-hierarchical, with motives being listed as flat catalogues or inflexible categories in which gradations or cross-category movement is unachievable. Motives are therefore disconnected and are robbed of their capacity to shift or evolve between texts.

Such analytical fragmentation creates problems in using the same model for all genres, cultures, or periods. A motive that appears tragic fall in classical drama may reappear as existential crisis in modernist fiction – but both forms possess symbolic and structural DNA that cannot be adequately connected by older models.

Secondly, there is no uniformity in the recognition and explanation of motives. A “death motive” for one researcher may be a “transformation” or “initiation” tale for another. The terminological ambiguity makes comparative examination more difficult and undermines the overall goal of making motive study an integral part of systematic literary study or computational analysis.

Hierarchical classification is an organization system in which objects are classified into levels on the basis of shared characteristics, with broad categories in higher levels and specific instances in lower levels. The model finds universal use in biology (e.g. species-genus-family), informatics (e.g. file systems and ontologies), and corpus linguistics (e.g. part-of-speech hierarchies).

Applied to literary motivation, hierarchical classification would allow scholars to place recurring motifs into a multi-level system. Thus, the general category “Transformation” would branch out into “Physical transformation”, “Spiritual transformation”, and “Social transformation”, each further branching potentially into more specific instances in particular works or traditions.

Hierarchical classification is well suited to literary motive analysis for several reasons. First, it mirrors the processes of thinking through which readers

recognize patterns between texts – from general identification and progressing towards contextualized comprehension. Second, it is a process of step-by-step abstraction, allowing for effortless tracing of how abstract concepts work themselves out in actual literary instances. This is of particular importance to comparative and diachronic literary analysis.

Third, hierarchical models are narrative-intuitive. Narrative, by nature, moves from general to specific, from archetypal to individual. Such a structure as is thereby emulated is not only analytically effective but pedagogically clear. Finally, this type of structure is computer-friendly, with the potential to construct literary corpora, databases, and machine-readable ontologies that can be computationally processed.

Principles of Hierarchical Classification

Principle of Generalization. The highest point of the hierarchy are universal or archetypal motives, appearing across cultures and ages of literature. They are general narrative or symbolic themes such as “Journey”, “Death”, “Rebirth”, or “Conflict”. They are the theoretical framework skeleton, providing a solid foundation for comparison.

Principle of Thematic Grouping. The second order groups motive according to theme, with attention to shared subject matter or issue of narrative. Within the “Journey” archetype, for example, thematic groupings like “Heroic Quest”, “Pilgrimage”, or “Exile and Return” might be recognized. This order spans content across genres and modes while distinguishing variation in theme.

Principle of Symbolic Function. Some of these motives acquire power not from functioning in the plot but from symbolic value. This facilitates classification on semiotic or mythopoetic function – as “Water” as rebirth symbol, “Snake” as for deceit, or “Tree” as for life and continuation. Such symbols will tend to break thematic or narrative categorization and require a multi-level, adaptable organization.

Principle of Narrative Function. This principle classifies motives based on their narrative function in plot advancement, much like Proppian and Greimasian systems. Examples would include helper motives (e.g., magical objects), trickster motives (e.g., betrayal by a close friend), or quest motives (e.g., identity or justice quests). This level emphasizes narrative machinery over symbolic or thematic content.

Principle of Cultural Contextualization. Motives are not “invented” but rather occur within the context of specific historical, regional, or genre-specific conventions. For instance, the “Sacrifice” motive applied in ancient Greek tragedy is differentiated in tone, intention, and symbolism from when called upon in modern dystopian fiction. Classification must allow for culturally distinctive instantiations of universal notions.

Principle of Variability and Recurrence. Finally, classification must also offer provision for recurrence with variation – i.e., the same motive recurring in other forms in a variety of different works. By this principle, classification can reflect the dynamic, adaptive nature of literature, with the understanding that motives are developing narrative devices that are not to be treated as static units.

The classification of literary motives is essential for structured literary analysis, especially in comparative and interdisciplinary studies. Traditional approaches – mythological, structuralist, or thematic – have offered valuable insights but often lack coherence, flexibility, and cross-cultural applicability. A hierarchical classification model addresses these limitations by organizing motives according to levels of abstraction, thematic content, symbolic function, narrative role, and cultural context.

The proposed principles – generalization, thematic grouping, symbolic function, narrative function, cultural contextualization, and variability – form a dynamic and adaptable framework. This system not only enhances textual interpretation but also supports pedagogical use, digital humanities projects, and future research in motive analysis. By bridging theory and practical application,

hierarchical classification offers a more integrative and systematic approach to understanding the rich and complex world of literary motives.

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