

# The Motif of Memory in Classical and Modern Literature

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**Abstract:** The motif of memory plays a significant role in literary studies, as it reflects how individuals and societies interpret the past. This paper's aim is to identify the transformation of the motif of memory in classical and modern literature, focusing on its narrative, psychological, and cultural directions. While classical literature often presents memory as stable and collective, modern literature depicts it as subjective, fragmented, and unreliable. Drawing on contemporary literary theory and recent scholarly works, this study demonstrates that the motif of memory is essential for understanding identity, narrative structure, and cultural change.

**Keywords:** Memory, literary motif, narrative, modernism, cultural identity.

**Introduction:** The motif of memory has long been an important feature in literature, allowing writers to explore how the past influences individual identity and collective experience. In literary texts, memory is not only a personal recollection but also a cultural and narrative construct. In classical literature, memory is often performed as stable and reliable, serving to preserve tradition and moral values. However, in modern literature, memory becomes fragmented, selective, and subjective.

Recent literary scholarship highlights that memory is closely connected to narrative and identity. According to Astrid Erll (2011), cultural memory shapes how societies understand themselves through shared stories and representations. Similarly, Paul Ricoeur (2004) argues that memory is essential for constructing narrative identity. This paper examines how the motif of memory evolves from classical to modern literature, highlighting its changing role in representing human experience.

## Theoretical Framework: Memory as a Literary Motif

A motif is a crucial element that contributes to the central meaning of a literary text, often reinforcing its thematic concerns and guiding the reader's

interpretation. Among various literary motifs, the motif of memory is particularly significant because it establishes a strong connection between time, identity, and narrative structure. Through memory, characters are able to interpret their past experiences and construct a sense of meaning, which ultimately shapes their understanding of themselves and the world around them. In many cases, memory functions not only as a personal recollection but also as a narrative device that influences the progression of the plot and the development of character identity.

Contemporary research suggests that memory should not be explained as a fixed or objective record of past events; rather, it is an active, dynamic, and constantly evolving process. As Ann Rigney (2012) explains, memory is continuously reshaped through storytelling, reinterpretation, and cultural practices. This indicates that literary representations of memory are not purely individual but are deeply influenced by social, historical, and cultural contexts. In other words, what characters remember—and how they remember it—is often shaped by external forces such as ideology, tradition, and collective narratives.

Furthermore, recent studies highlight that memory is

selective and frequently influenced by emotional and psychological factors. Individuals tend to remember certain events more vividly while forgetting or distorting others, which makes memory an unreliable yet meaningful source of knowledge. According to Aleida Assmann (2018), modern literature increasingly emphasizes the instability and fragmentation of memory, presenting it as a fluid process rather than a stable entity. This shift reflects a broader change in how identity is understood—not as something fixed, but as something continuously constructed through memory and experience. These theoretical perspectives are essential for understanding how the motif of memory operates across different literary periods. While earlier texts often portray memory as stable and authoritative, modern works tend to highlight its complexity, subjectivity, and limitations, thereby offering a more nuanced representation of human consciousness.

### **The Motif of Memory in Classical Literature**

In classical literature, the motif of memory is closely associated with stability, continuity, and collective identity. Memory often functions as a tool for preserving cultural values, traditions, and historical knowledge across generations. In this sense, it is not merely an individual experience but a shared resource that reinforces social cohesion. Literary works from this period tend to present memory as reliable, structured, and meaningful, reflecting a worldview in which truth and identity are relatively fixed.

For example, in epic narratives such as *The Odyssey*, memory plays a central role in maintaining both personal identity and a sense of belonging. The protagonist's recollection of home, family, and past experiences helps sustain his purpose throughout his journey. Characters rely on memory not only to preserve their sense of self but also to reconnect with their cultural roots. This reflects what Jan Assmann (2011) describes as cultural memory, which enables societies to maintain continuity and shared meaning over time.

In addition, classical literature often employs structured narratives and clear chronological order, reinforcing the idea that memory is organized and trustworthy. Events are typically presented in a linear sequence, which mirrors a stable perception of time and experience. As a result, the motif of memory

supports a coherent and unified view of human existence, where the past can be understood, preserved, and transmitted with relative clarity.

### **The Motif of Memory in Modern Literature**

In contrast, modern literature presents memory as complex, fragmented, and often unreliable. The motif of memory becomes a way to explore psychological depth and subjective experience. In *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, memory is shown as fluid and constantly shifting. Through stream-of-consciousness narration, the novel reveals how past and present merge in the character's mind. Memory is no longer a stable record but a personal interpretation shaped by emotions and perception.

Recent studies support this view, suggesting that memory is constructed through narrative and influenced by social context (Erll, 2011; Assmann, 2018). Similarly, Marianne Hirsch (2012) introduces the concept of "postmemory," which explains how individuals inherit memories from previous generations. Thus, modern literature transforms the motif of memory into a dynamic and uncertain element, reflecting the complexity of modern life.

### **Narrative Techniques and Symbolism**

The transformation of the motif of memory is also reflected in literary techniques. Classical literature typically uses linear narratives and clear symbolism, reinforcing stable meanings. In contrast, modern literature often employs fragmented structures, non-linear timelines, and ambiguous symbols.

These techniques reflect the nature of memory itself. According to Rigney (2012), narrative form plays a crucial role in shaping how memory is represented. Modern texts require readers to actively interpret and reconstruct meaning, mirroring the process of remembering. Additionally, symbolic elements such as objects, places, and sensory details are frequently used to trigger memory in literary works. This highlights the connection between memory, perception, and identity.

### **CONCLUSION**

The motif of memory remains one of the most significant elements in literature. While classical literature presents memory as stable and collective, modern literature portrays it as fragmented and subjective. This transformation reflects broader

changes in cultural and philosophical understandings of time, identity, and experience. From my perspective, the evolution of the motif of memory demonstrates how literature adapts to changing views of human consciousness. By exploring memory, literary texts provide deeper insight into both individual identity and collective history.

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