Themes/Motifs in Greek Mythology

Theme: a universal idea explored in a literary work; a statement about life
Motif: a recurring structure, object, or literary device in literature

Gods and Goddesses
- The gods/goddesses of Greek mythology embody human emotions.
- The gods/goddesses of Greek mythology manifest human flaws and failings.
  - Feasting/Drinking
  - Philandering/Adultery
  - Obsessive Jealousy, Stubbornness, Pride, Anger
- The gods/goddesses manipulate and use mortals for their own purposes.
- The gods/goddesses of Greek mythology often deceived and/or abducted mortals.
- The schemes and plots of the gods and goddesses often entangled mortals.
- The gods/goddesses of Greek mythology had frequent affairs (with each other as well as with mortals).

Reward for Goodness & Retribution for Evil
- The gods/goddesses judge our moral actions and dispense justice accordingly.
- The gods punish pride, arrogance, and/or disobedience in mortals.
- Those who defy or challenge the gods are made to suffer.
  - Horrible and/or eternal punishments
  - Transformed into monsters
  - Transformed into natural phenomena
- The morality of Greek mythology is not the same as Judeo-Christian morality. (Some things they considered honorable, we consider terrible.)
- Many myths are “morality tales” that illustrate the value system of the culture.

The Hero’s Quest
- Heroes are often “more than human.”
  - Offspring of a god and a human
  - Superhuman strength or ability; crafty and intelligent
- Heroes rise from lowly beginnings or unhappy circumstances.
  - Foster parents or single mother/Abandoned by father
  - Poverty
- Heroes complete seemingly impossible tasks.
  - Kill monsters
  - Outsmart enemies
  - Overcome “impossible obstacles” against all odds
- Heroes reclaim their rightful place in life.
  - Find/Overthrow father or evil ruler
  - Take back rightful throne
  - Defeat enemies who sought to destroy them
- Heroes get help from gods/goddesses
Fate
- No human or god can escape fate.
  - Oracles, seers, prophecies
  - Trying to change fate only guarantees a prophecy comes to pass.

Beauty
- Beautiful is better.
  - Judgment of Paris, Aphrodite, Helen of Troy
- The quest for beauty is the cause of much suffering.

Love
- Love is often unrequited.
- Love often leads to tragedy.
- Lovers are often abandoned by those they love.
- Love between gods and mortals seldom works out.
- Selfish love ends in suffering.

War
- War is an inescapable part of existence.
- The greatest warriors are proud and/or arrogant.
- It is an honor to die in battle.
- Gods/Goddesses involve themselves (and choose sides) in mortal conflicts.
- Bloodshed begets bloodshed.
- The gods avenge those who do not give proper burial rites to those who died in battle.

Cannibalism
- Cannibalism (frequently present in Greek mythology) is severely punished.