

MINING FOR MEANING

Subject Matter, Genre & Theme

(and their immutable web of connections)

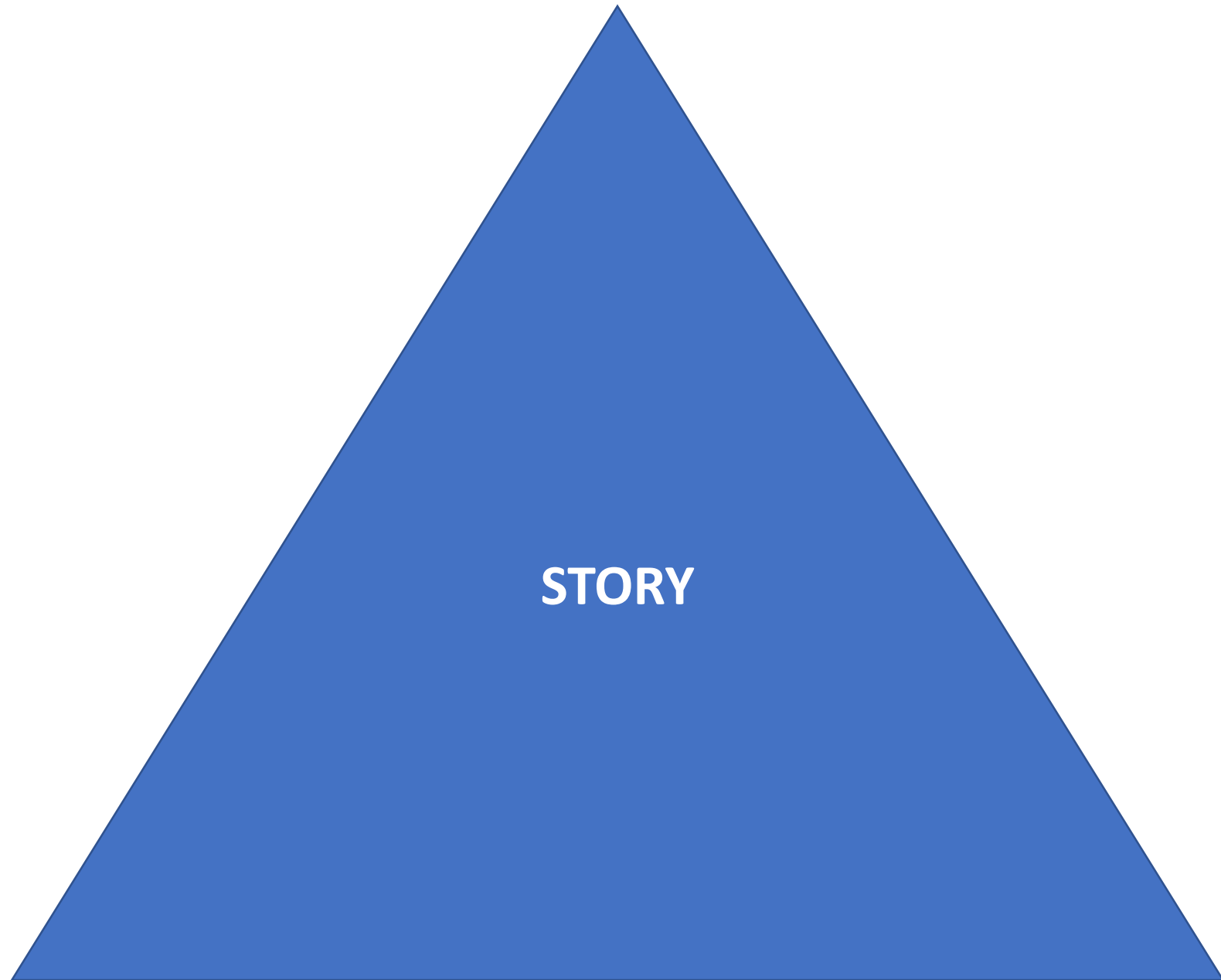
Or: a new map for the same old territory

by Nic Ransome

(Précis + Tips)

A note on terminology:

- “Theme” and “controlling idea”, although often used interchangeably, can be distinguished as follows:
- A “controlling idea” is an *a priori* unified meaning for a story that should ideally osmose into every single part of that story, both as you write it and as it unfolds for the audience.
- A “core theme” or “unified theme” that is perceived by the reader, analyst or viewer might well be very close, or even identical, to the writer’s original “controlling idea” but this isn’t a given.
- A “core theme” can subsume many sub-themes, which can sit across multiple Subject-Matter Strands and their related genres.



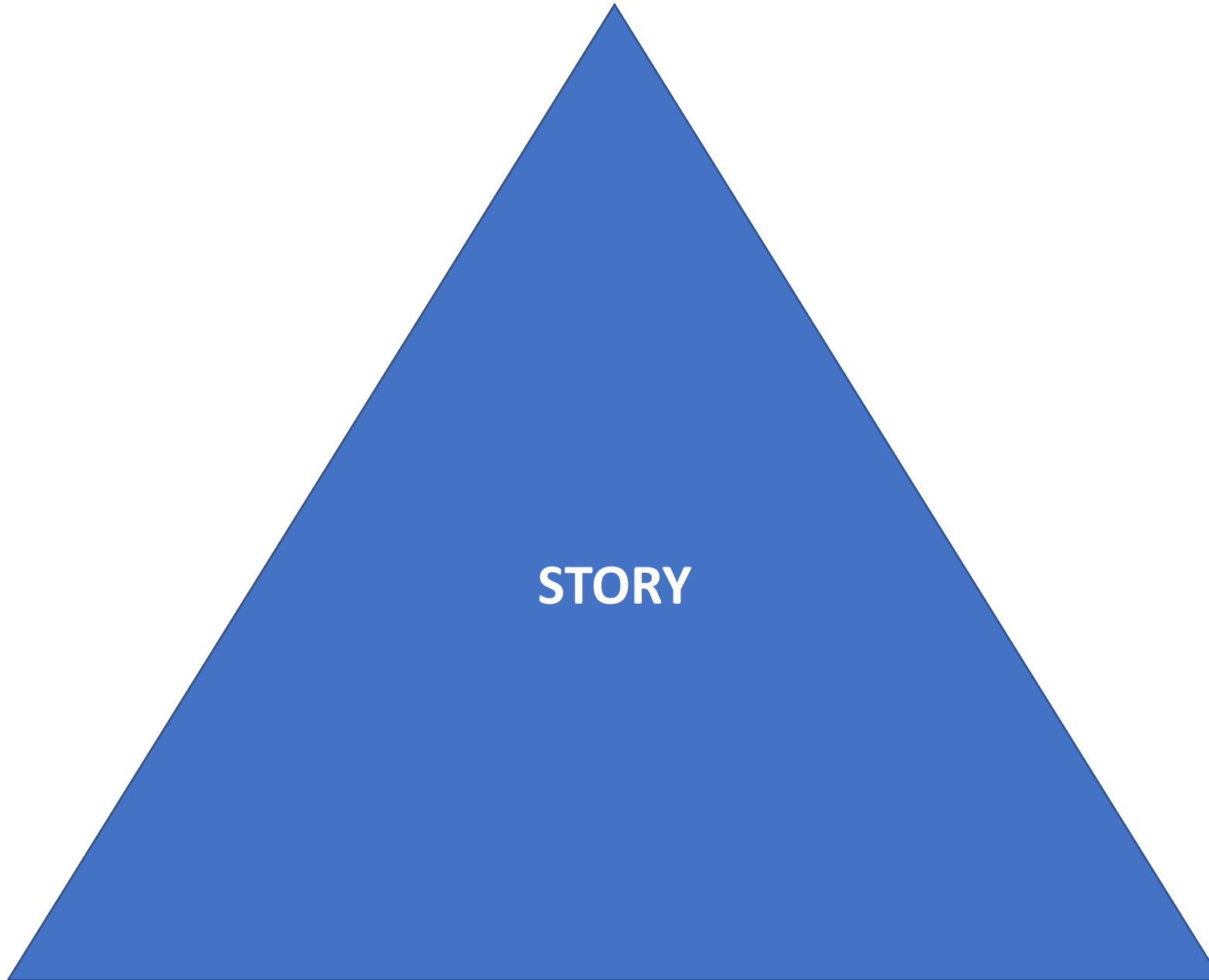
STORY

CHARACTER

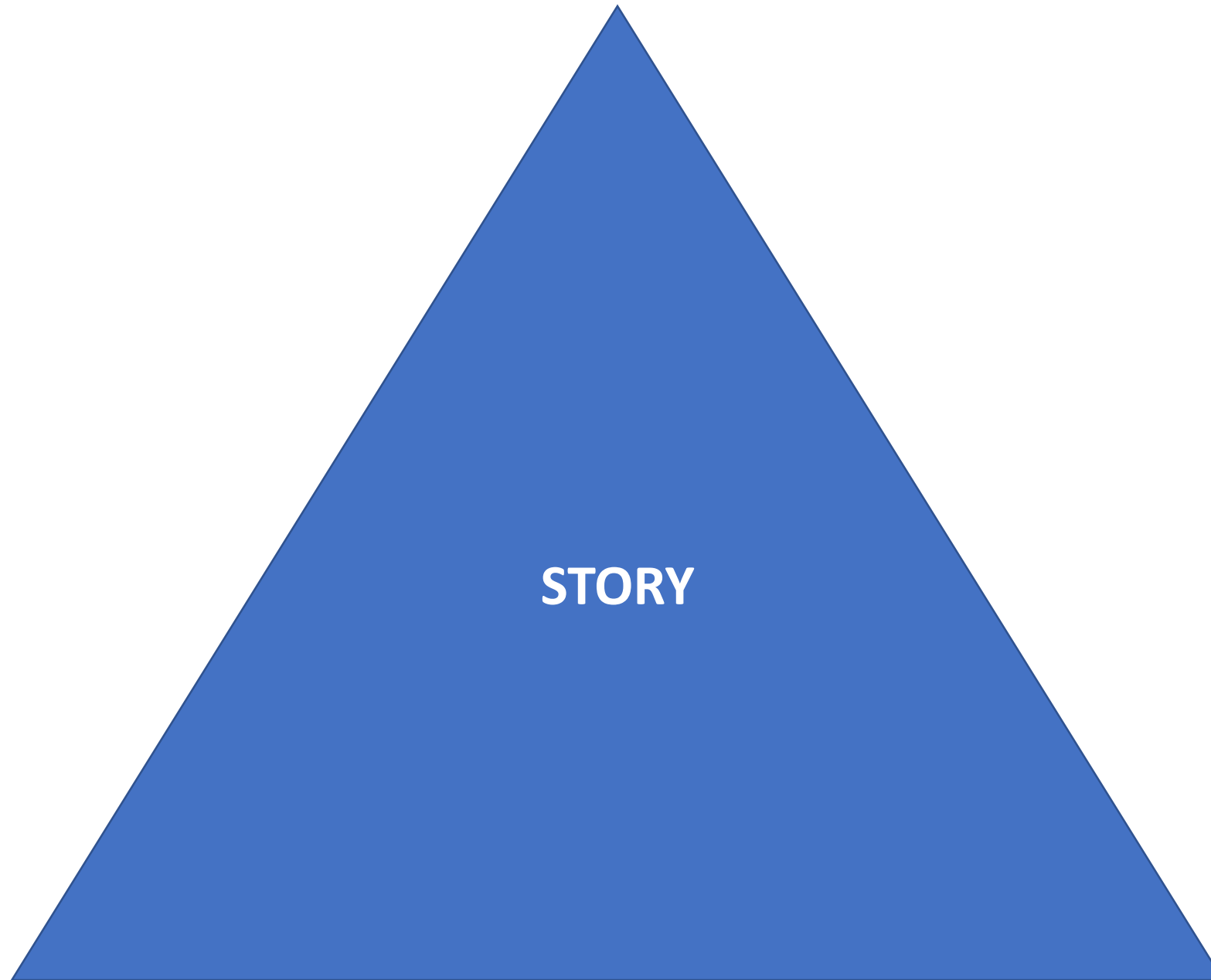
STORY

PLOT

SETTING



CHARACTER (WHO DOES IT HAPPEN TO?)



STORY

**PLOT
(WHAT
HAPPENS?)**

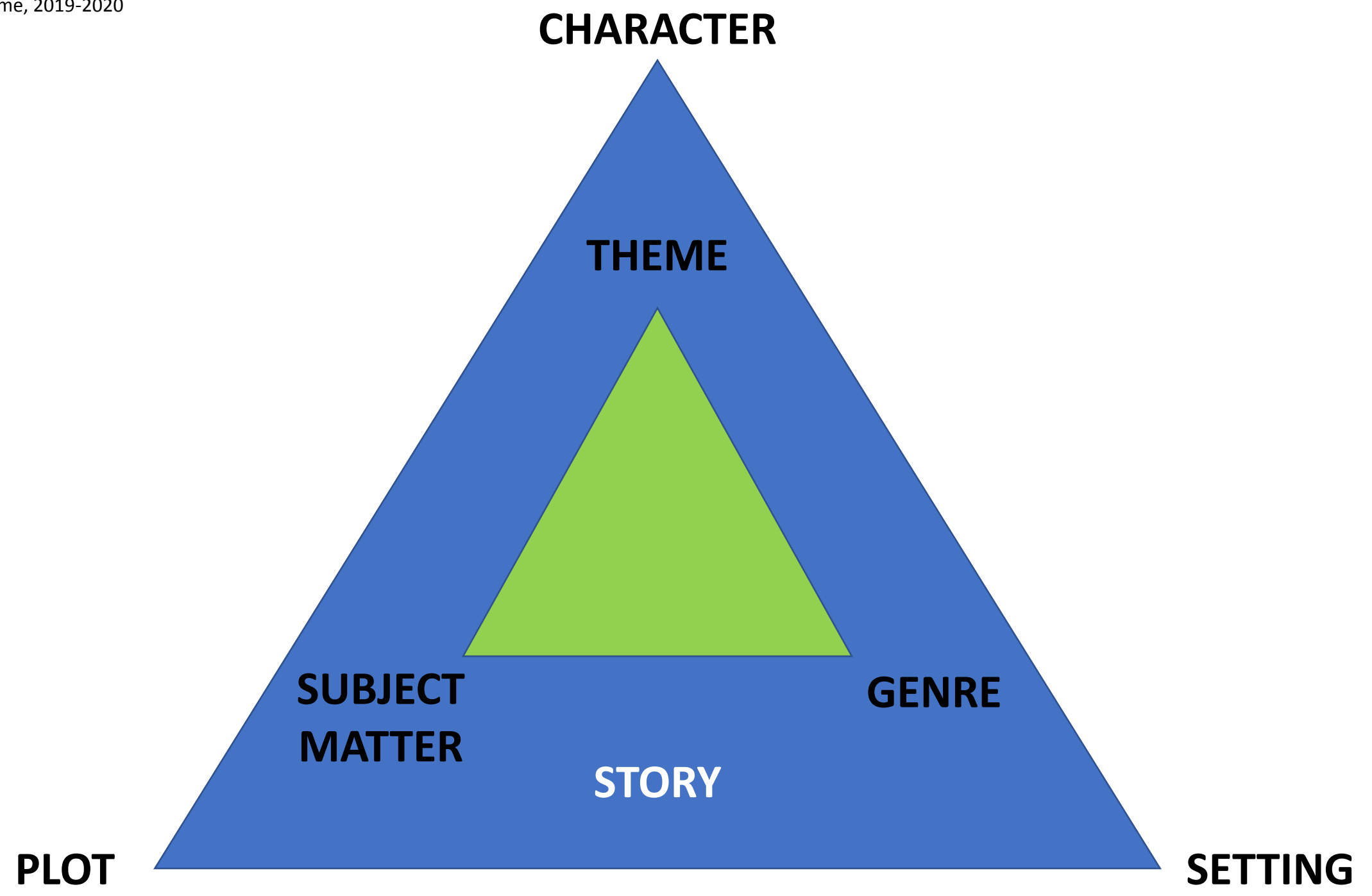
**SETTING
(WHERE?
WHEN?)**

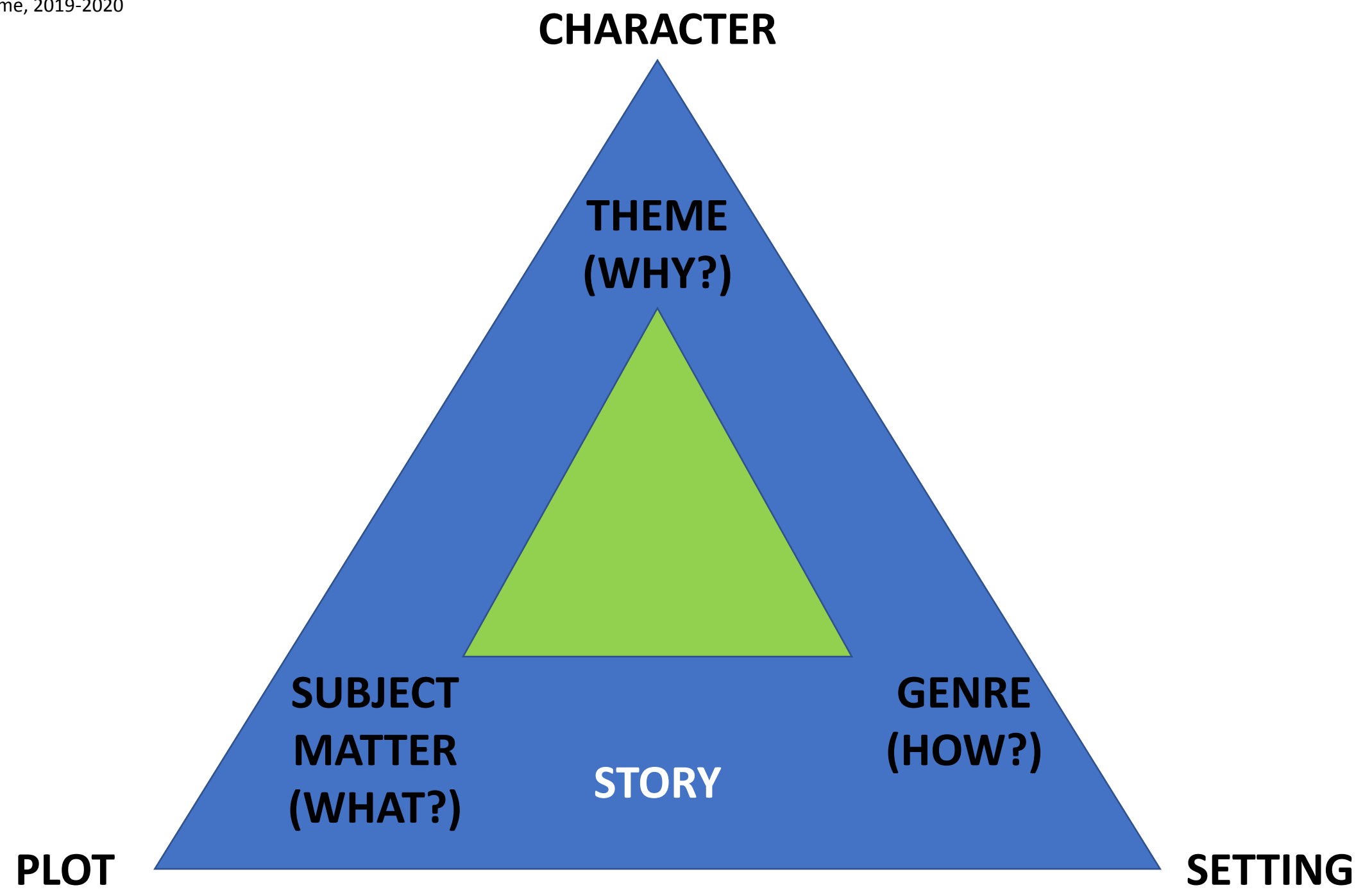


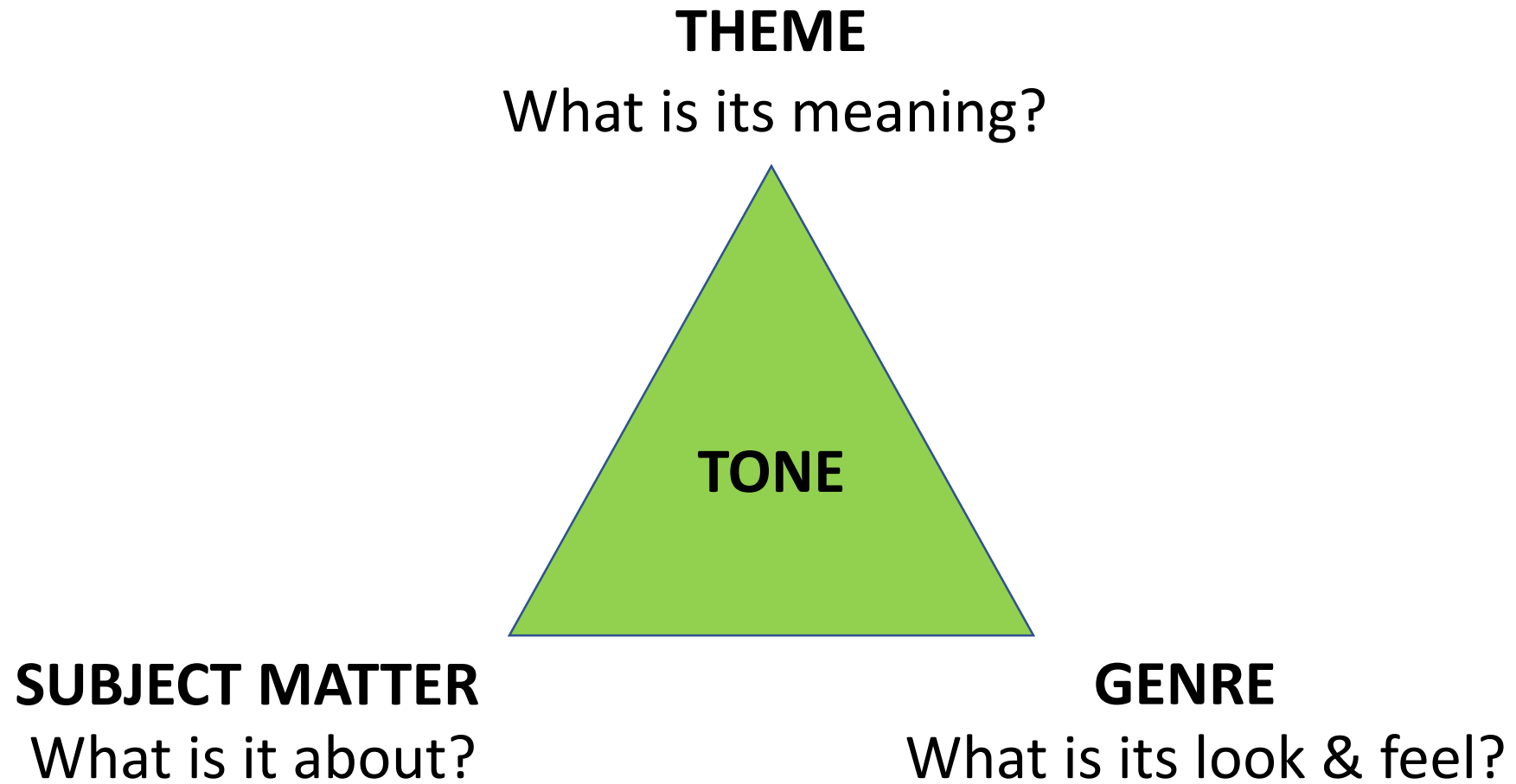
The map is not the territory.

— *Alfred Korzybski* —

AZ QUOTES







“Subject-Matter Strands” or “Domains”

- There are six in total: best perceived as sitting on a circular continuum, but for ease of use I’m placing five facing us and the sixth behind those five (see slides).
- Film genres (horror, drama, thriller etc.) map onto these Subject-Matter Strands (see slides).
- Sub/themes also map onto these Subject-Matter Domains (and onto the genres aligned with them).

PHILOSOPHICAL
ETHICAL

INTELLECTUAL
CEREBRAL
IDEOLOGICAL

MORAL
SOCIAL
FAMILIAL

VISCERAL

MYTHIC
DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY

PHILOSOPHICAL
ETHICAL

SCI-FI

INTELLECTUAL
CEREBRAL
IDEOLOGICAL

SATIRE

MYSTERY

MORAL
SOCIAL
FAMILIAL

COMEDY

DRAMA

THRILLER

SOAP

VISCERAL

HORROR

ACTION

ACTION
ADVENTURE

MYTHIC
DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY

ADVENTURE/
HERO'S
JOURNEY



PHILOSOPHICAL
ETHICAL

INTELLECTUAL
CEREBRAL
IDEOLOGICAL

MORAL
SOCIAL
FAMILIAL

VISCERAL

MYTHIC
DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY

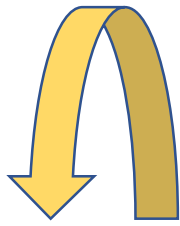
DARK

**BREAKING
BAD**

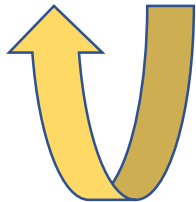
THE X-FILES

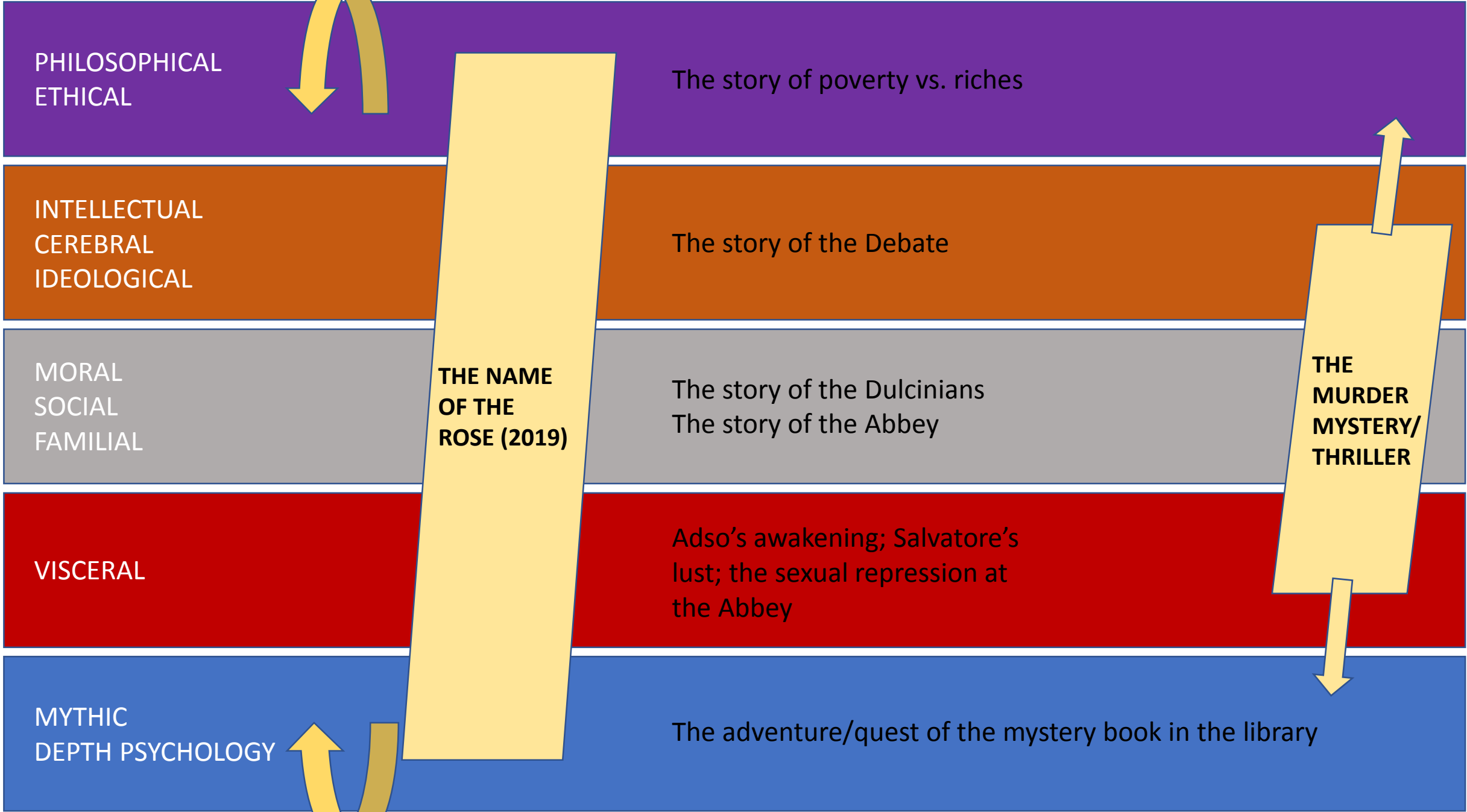
**TWIN PEAKS:
THE RETURN**

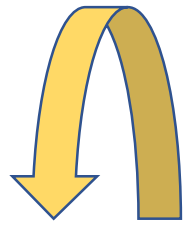
**GAME
OF
THRONES**



BELIEF
RELIGION
THEOLOGY



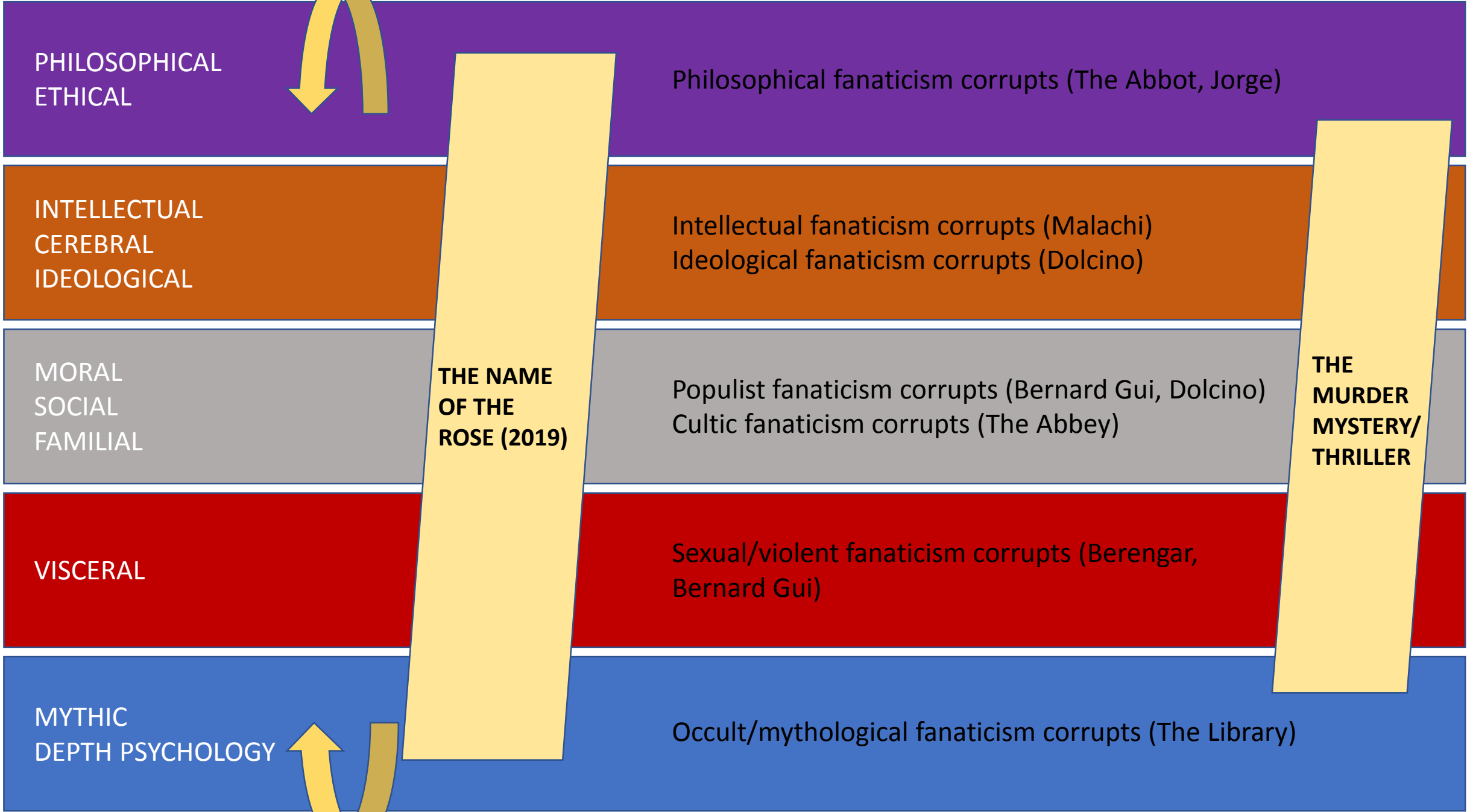




BELIEF
RELIGION
THEOLOGY

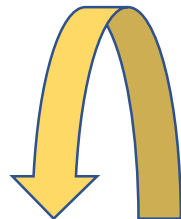
THE ENTIRE STORY





**THE NAME
OF THE
ROSE (2019)**

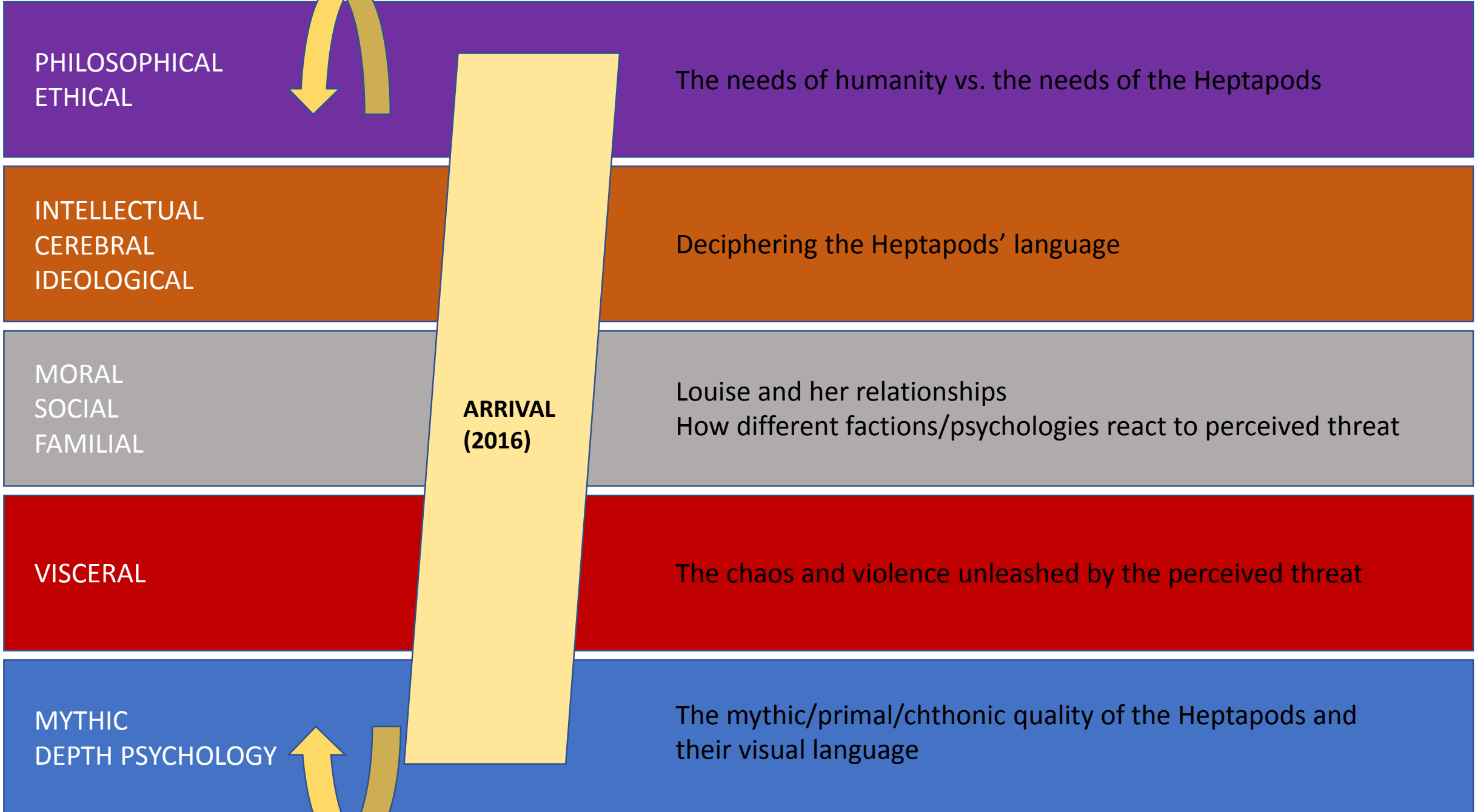
**THE
MURDER
MYSTERY/
THRILLER**

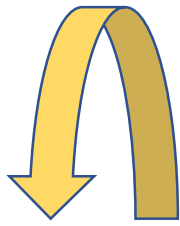


BELIEF
RELIGION
THEOLOGY

Religious fanaticism corrupts (everyone except our heroes—
William, Adso, Anna, Occitan Girl—from the Pope down)

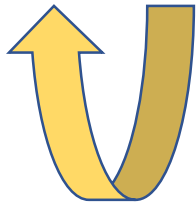


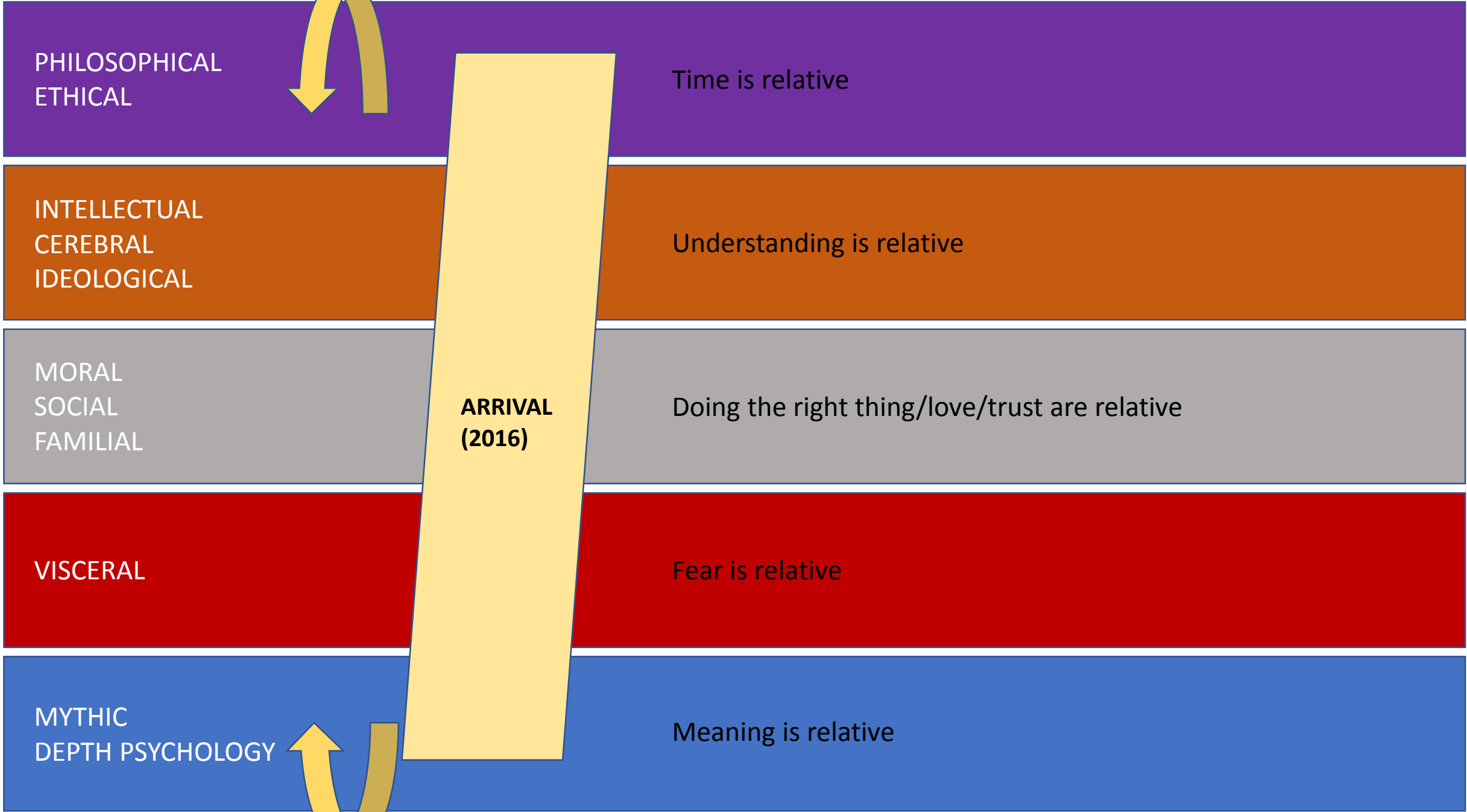


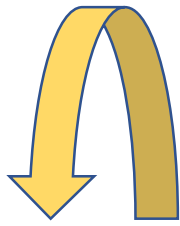


BELIEF
RELIGION
THEOLOGY

Some treat the Heptapods as gods, e.g. the suicide-cult

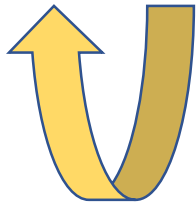






BELIEF
RELIGION
THEOLOGY

“The gods” are relative



Unified theme examples:

- *The Name Of The Rose*: All fanaticism corrupts
- *Arrival*: Everything is relative
- *Breaking Bad*: Moral corruption infects everything
- *Da Vinci's Demons*: There is always another truth hidden behind the one you've just discovered.
- *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*: Every aspect of life is beyond crazy – from love to the fabric of the universe – but friendship/family/loyalty/trust can enable your survival.
- *Watchmen*: Transcending who you are *is* becoming who you are, but in order to transcend who you are, you must first *know* who you are – both in your heart and in your DNA. Or, more simply: know thyself.

Key message:

The more Subject-Matter Domains you traverse – both literally and metaphorically – the more genre terrain you can cover, and the greater your potential not only for deep theme and thematic layering but also for story and character development.

Uses #1:

- You can use this map to interrogate a current project/script:
 - Do your chosen Subject-Matter Strands/Domains map onto your chosen genres?
 - Do your chosen genres map onto your chosen Subject-Matter Strands/Domains?
 - Are you fully utilising your chosen Subject-Matter Domains and genres?
 - Can you deepen theme/meaning by adding additional Subject-Matter Domains?
 - Can you create deeper engagement and enhance your story by stretching your genre terrain in either, or both, directions?

Uses #2:

- You can also use this map to develop a project so that it traverses enough Subject-Matter Domains and genre terrain to fuel a multi-season TV/streaming show, or a complex/elevated feature narrative:
 - Can you add new Subject-Matter Domains to your story?
 - Can you thereby add new genre terrain?
 - Can you build your story so that new Subject-Matter Domains organically open-up as the story unfolds?
 - Can you build your story so that new genre terrain organically opens-up as the story unfolds?
 - Can you deepen theme/meaning by stretching both Subject-Matter Domains and genre terrain in either, or both, directions?

Tips:

- Unity of theme is ideal (in which sub-themes relevant to each Strand/Domain are all ultimately subsumed into a core “unified theme”).
- Once you’ve chosen your core theme (or “controlling idea”), interrogate it with regard to every Subject-Matter-Strand and every appropriate genre.
- Or, once you’ve chosen your core topic, interrogate that topic through the lens of every genre and/or every Subject-Matter Domain (see examples on next four slides) .

Core topic example #1 interrogated through genre: “Love”

- Is a robot/machine capable of love? (Sci-Fi)
- Is love possible when humans are, basically, fuckwits? (Satire)
- Love makes you vulnerable (Thriller)
- Love is paradoxical (Drama)
- Love is chaotic because of sex (Comedy)
- Love kills (Horror)
- Love is continuous pain (Soap)
- Love is irrelevant/an impediment (Action)
- Love is essential (Adventure)

Core topic example #1 interrogated through Subject-Matter Domains:
“How does love relate to?”

- The mythic
- The visceral
- The social/familial/moral
- The cerebral
- The philosophical
- Religion

Core topic example #2 interrogated through genre:
“What does it mean to be human (in the face of)?”

- The Artificial (Sci-Fi)
- The Ridiculous (Satire)
- The Amoral/Immoral (Thriller)
- One’s own inadequacies and cravings (Drama)
- The Absurd (Comedy)
- The Monstrous (Horror)
- Nothing ever changing (Soap)
- Sustained risk/jeopardy (Action)
- The Unknown (Adventure)

Core topic example #2 interrogated through Subject-Matter Domains:
“What does it mean to be human (in the face of)?”

- The mythic
- The visceral
- The social/familial/moral
- The cerebral
- The philosophical
- Religion

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