

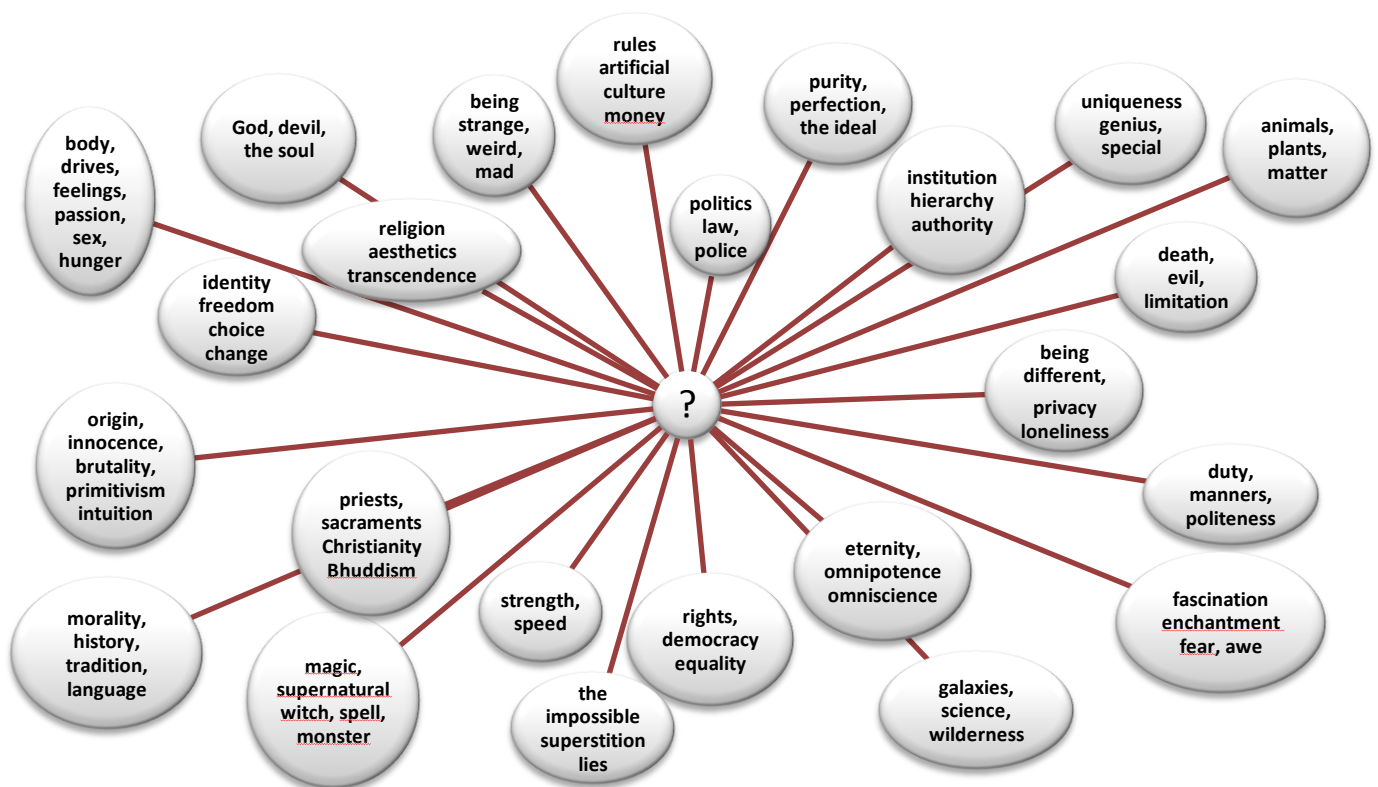
1.4 Mediation



There is a problem with the world we have described up to now, and which is illustrated in the diagram to your left: at present, there is nothing

in between the endless variety of novels, poems, movies, pictures, etc. that makes up culture (bottom of the pyramid), and the very limited number of dimensions (four) we use to analyse this culture. A big gap thus yawns in the middle of the pyramid.

Since cultural objects usually refer to the four dimensions through other words, it may therefore be interesting to have a series of terms which often appear in cultural objects and refer us to the different dimensions. Here is a list of such terms; they appear in clusters, but the clusters have not been allocated to any of the dimensions. Try to see whether you can find the dimensions they usually belong to (you can do so by assigning different colours to the dimensions):



Want to know more?

The indirection of cultural objects

Cultural objects don't readily say 'nature', 'society', 'metaphysics' or 'individuality'. They work in more indirect ways. Let me provide a couple of examples:

1. A text may present to us a character who is a **priest**, priesthood naturally refers us to **religion**, and religion in turn to **metaphysics**.

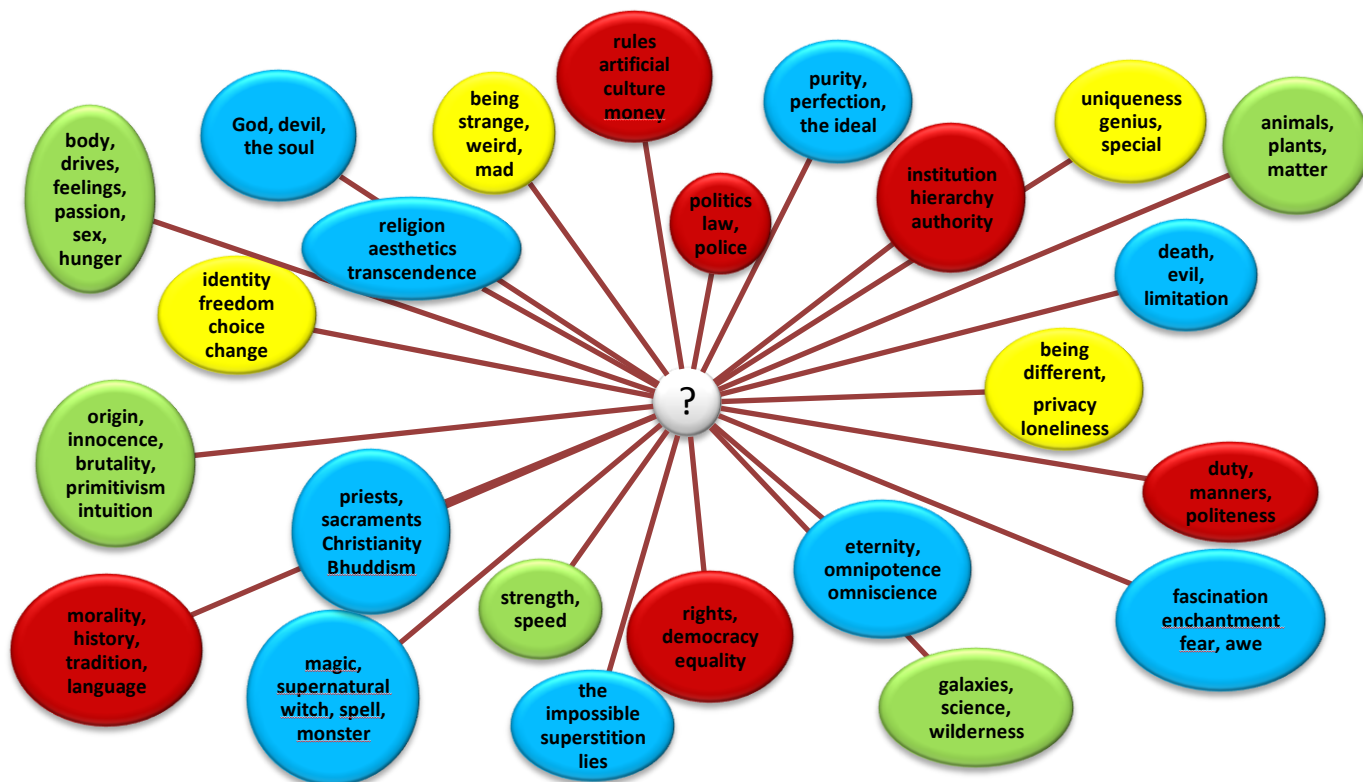


2. Another text may present a character whose **sexual desires** are emphasised; sexual desire leads us to infer a **drive** or **instinct**, that instinct in turn leads to interpret the character as **nature**.



3. The **sexual drive** may become so **overriding** as to condition the character's thoughts and feelings. This could turn him into a threat for society, which would see him as a **monster**, powerful because single-minded and ruthless. If no reasons are given for that obsession, sexuality acquires **metaphysical** overtones such as **mystery** and **omnipotence**.





Here is the allocation I propose (society **red**, nature **green**, individuality **yellow**, metaphysics **blue**). See if you agree. My students do so to 90-95%, and we discuss the cases where there are disagreements (e.g. as I have told them that feelings belong to nature, they criticize me for including “fascination, enchantment, fear and awe” in metaphysics).

But much more important than those 5-10% of disagreements is the 90-95% of agreement, since it means that in western culture we tend to think the same way as regards key terms. This means that we can meaningfully discuss what texts actually mean, and interpretation is not down to the individual.

Now, however, we face a problem. Before we only had 4 terms for analysis, now we seem to have too many. How can we expect our students to remember them all? The answer to this one awaits us in unit 2. For now we will just use the list of keywords as a kind of checklist when we analyze texts.

Want to know more?

Quote + interpretation + explanation: an essential interpretive skill

My students are good at intuitively allocating clusters of terms to their dimensions, but find it difficult to provide reasons for their choices. Sometimes the answer is straightforward, as when I ask them why plants or animals belong to nature. This becomes more difficult when I ask them why

1. Institutions, duty or politeness are **social**
2. Omnipotence, purity and art are **metaphysical**
3. Loneliness 'is' **individual**.

It's worth doing this experiment because, in the end, one of the **basic mistakes** students make when they interpret a text is that even when they **quote** and **interpret** correctly (e.g. Porthos's farting in 1.3 is natural), they do not **explain** how the quote leads to the interpretation: in the case of Porthos...

