

# Literary Modernism 1901-1965



SENTIMENTALISM

NATURALISM

# A Few Artistic Modes

REALISM

THE ROMANCE

THE ABSURD

THE GROTESQUE



# There are *many* ways to categorize the narrative arts, including:

- by *form*: essay, autobiography; poetry, drama, short story, novel, film; tapestry, sculpture, painting, film; picaresque, bildungsroman, künstlerroman, etc.
- by *setting*: history, mythology; urban, rural; fantasy, sci-fi
- by *tone*: tragedy, comedy, satire, thriller, horror, crime, erotica, adventure, religious allegory, etc.
- by *depth of vision*: sentimentalism, realism, naturalism, romanticism, the absurd, the grotesque . . .



# Dig, We Must

- “All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their own peril.”  
(O. Wilde, Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)
- “These questions are very profound [. . .] Only the trained diver can go down into those depths and explore them and come to the surface again.”  
(J. Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*)
- “The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality.”  
(F. O’Connor, “Novelist and Believer”)





# Popular Models of the Layered Life



**Sigmund Freud**  
*The Unconscious*



**Abraham Maslow**  
*Hierarchy of Needs*



**Another Model, One  
Useful for Explaining  
the Differences Among  
Narrative Modalities . . .**



The diagram features a central white circle with a black outline, containing the text "Dimensions of Experience" in a large, black, sans-serif font. Surrounding this central circle are four other circles, each with a different color and a black outline. The top-left circle is grey and contains the text "The" and "Phy". The top-right circle is green and contains the text "The" and "ogical". The bottom-left circle is teal and contains the text "Psycho". The bottom-right circle is purple and contains the text "tual".

**Dimensions  
of  
Experience**

The  
Phy

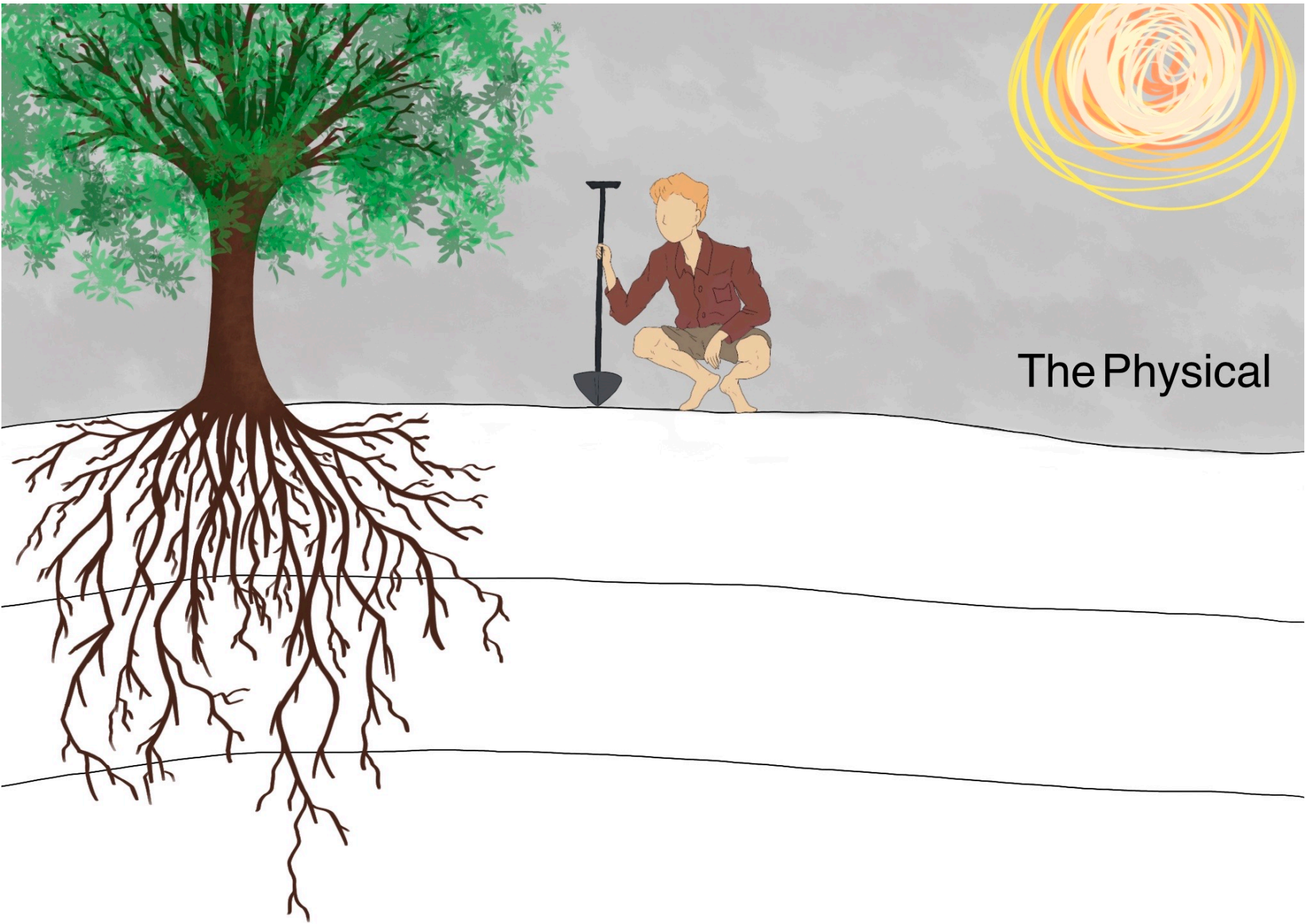
The  
ogical

Psycho

tual



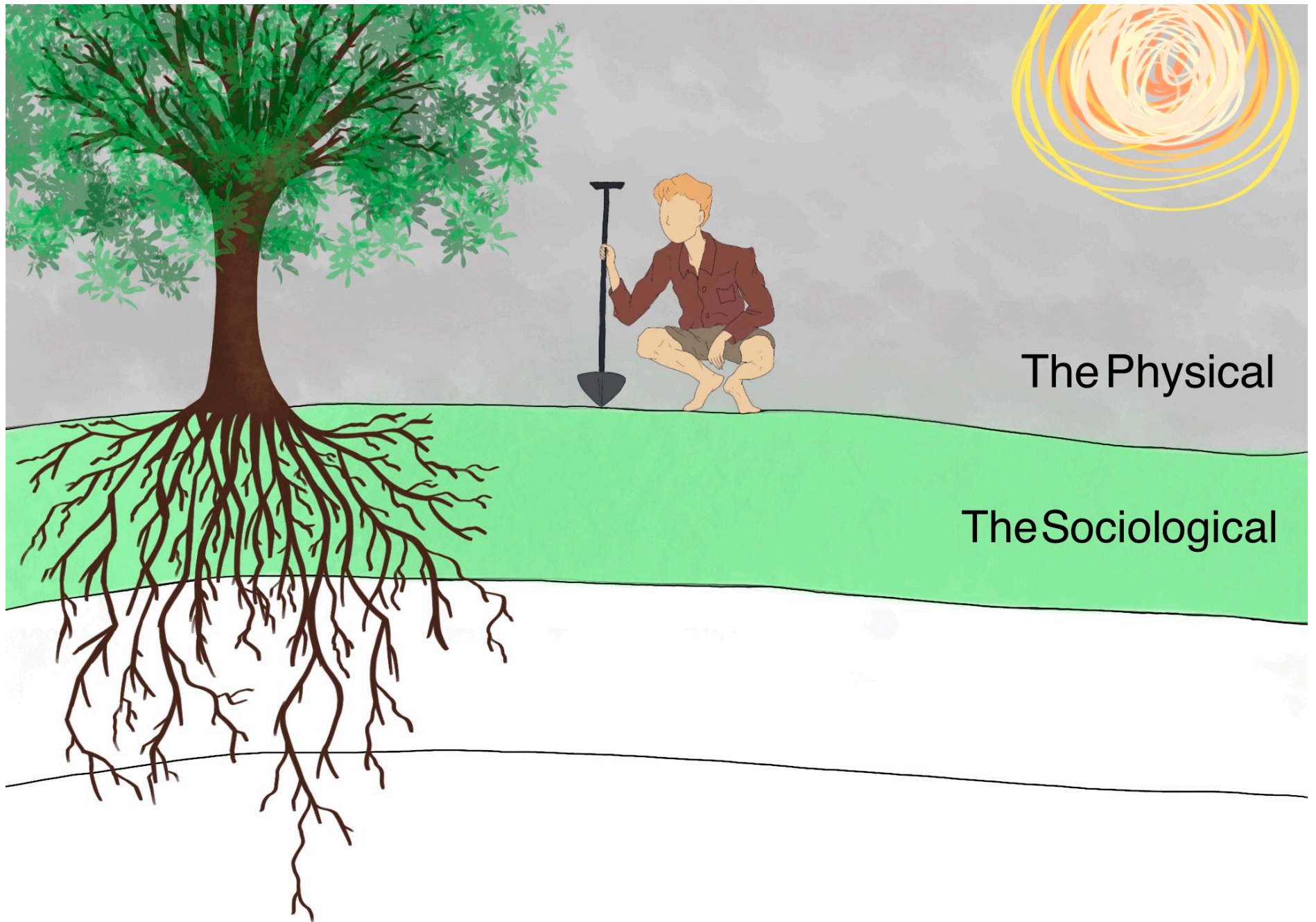
# THE CONCRETE: SENSUOUS, MEASURABLE STIMULI (VISUAL, AURAL, ETC.)



The Physical

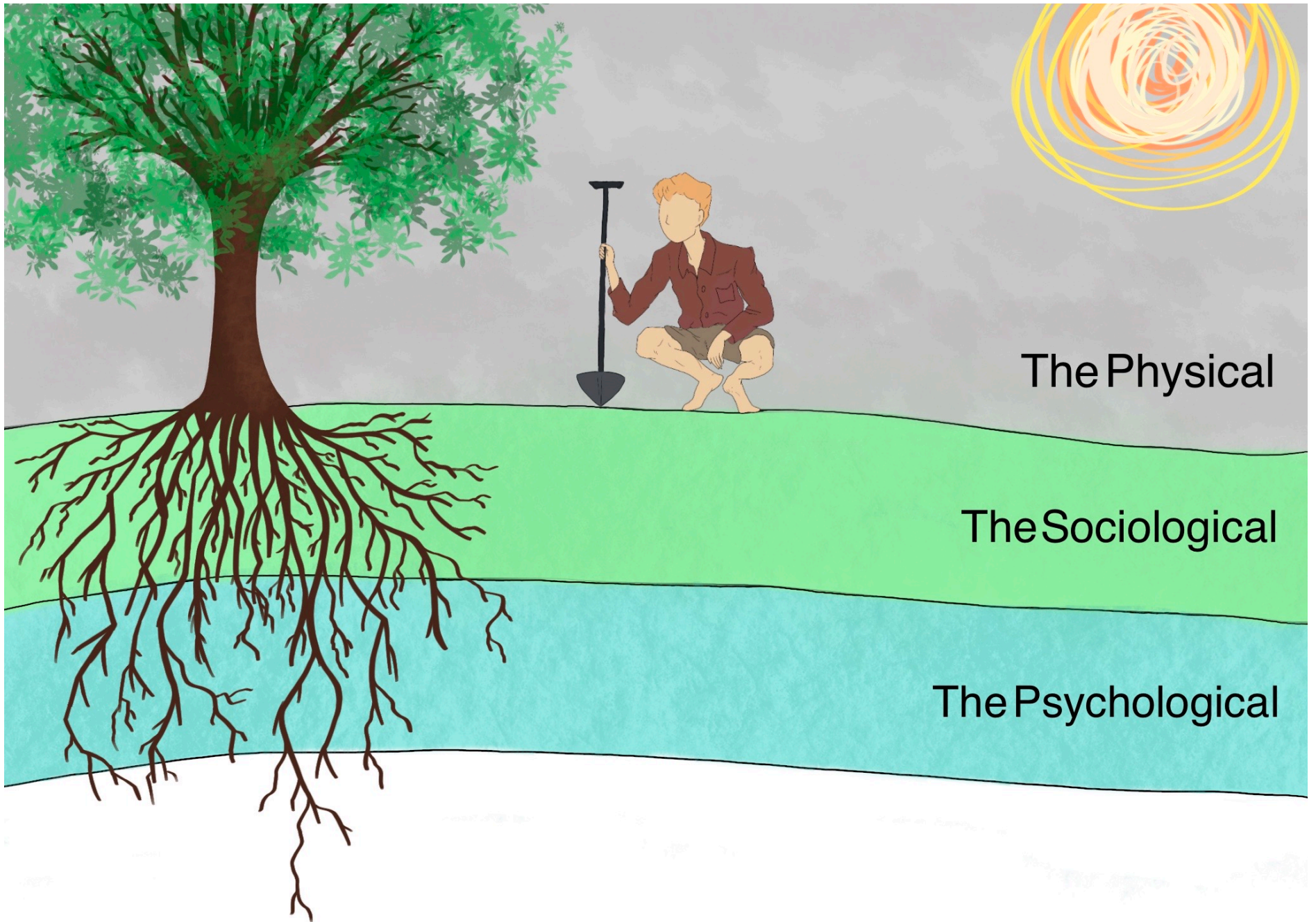


# THE SOCIOLOGICAL: INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS, GROUPS, SOCIAL JUSTICE



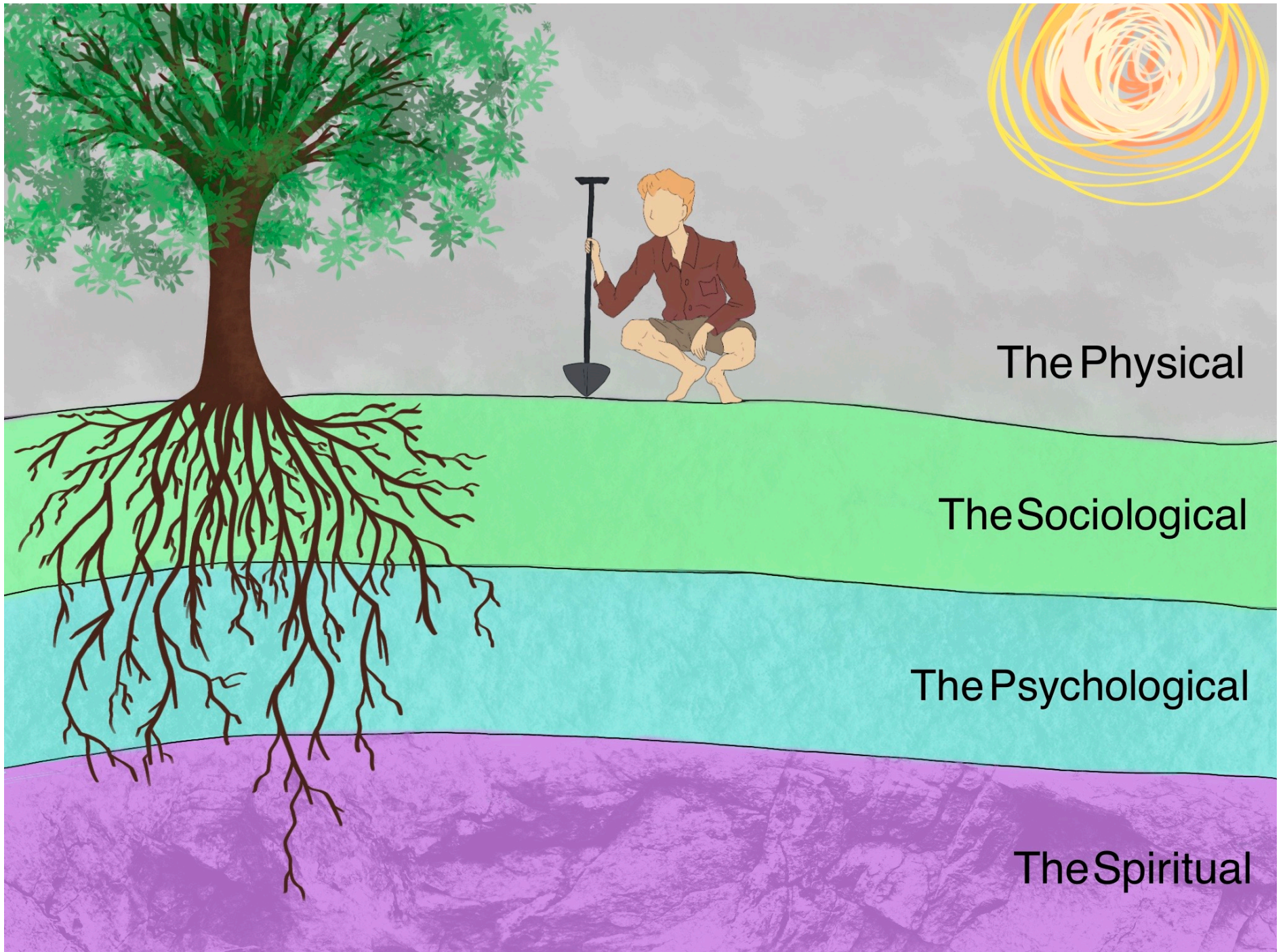


# THE PSYCHOLOGICAL: MEMORY, DESIRE, FEAR, SHAME, THE UNCONSCIOUS



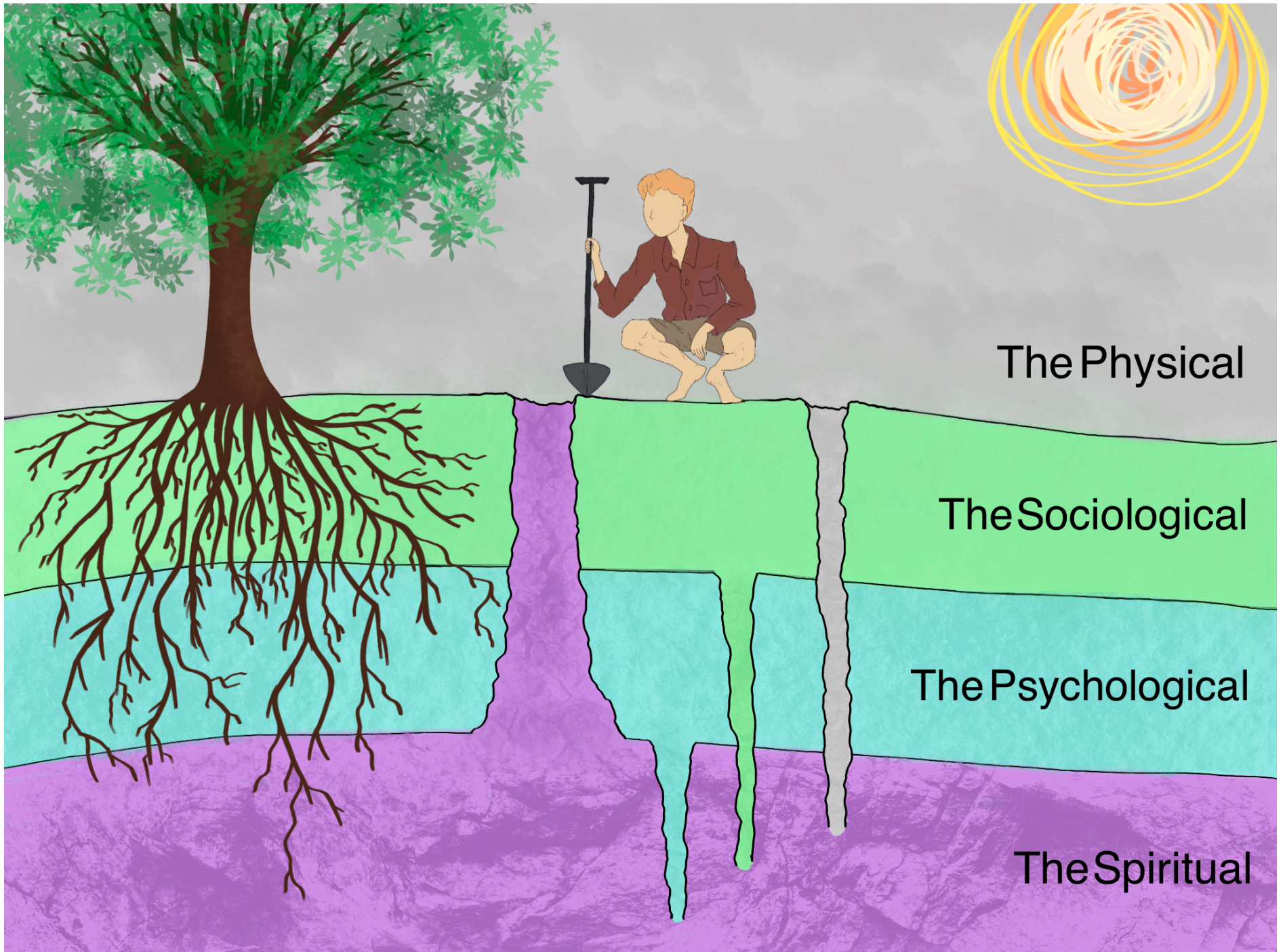


# THE SPIRITUAL: SOUL & SIN, GOD & GRACE, FROM GUILT TO JOY, "MYSTERY"





# SYNERGIES: EACH LAYER INFORMS THE OTHERS



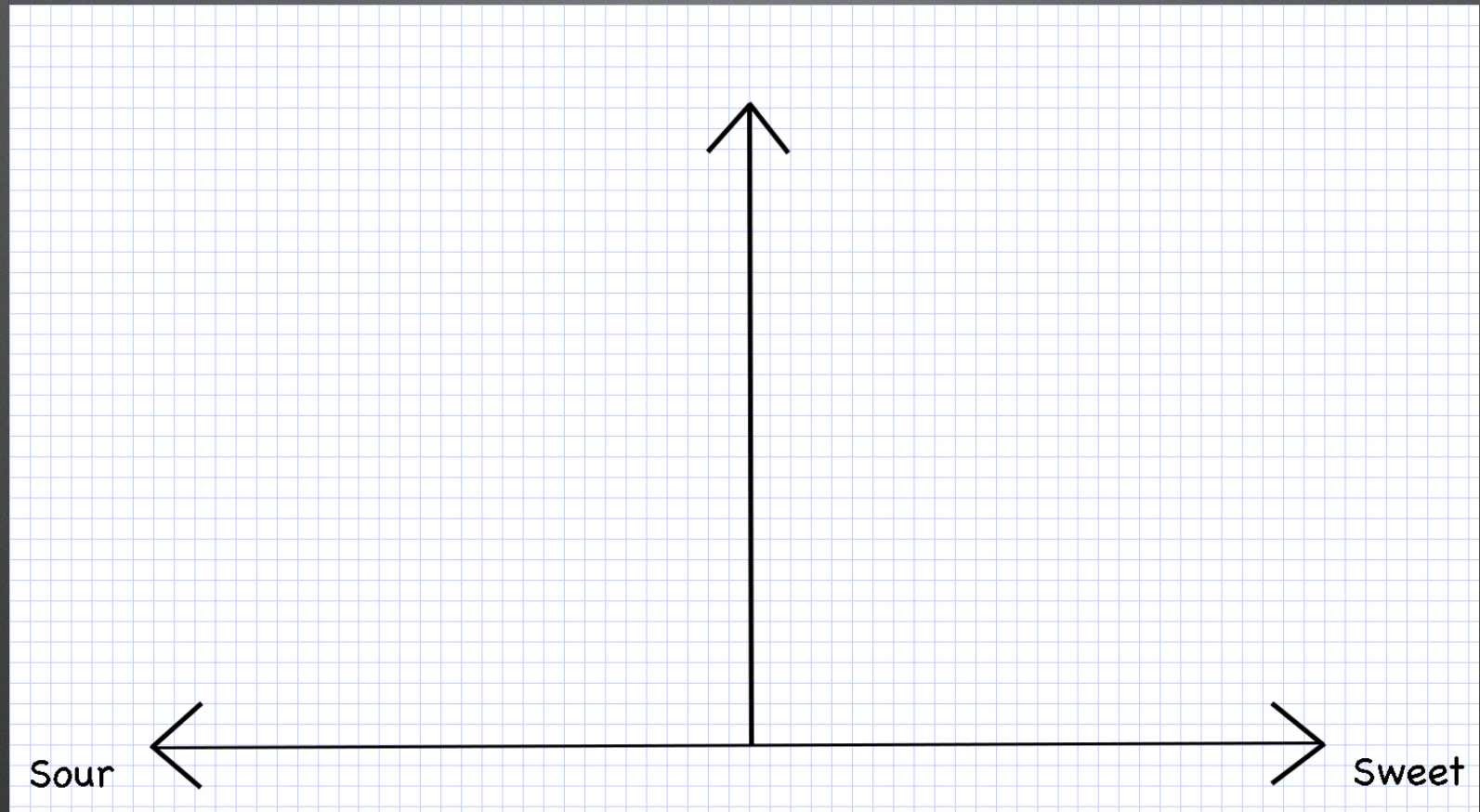


## LAYERS & MODERNISM

- ▶ The Material: redistribution of resources (personal property, national boundaries, etc.). Redistribution of production & services among victorious Allies (loss of power among Central Powers)
- ▶ Sociological: women gain suffrage (1920), Harlem Renaissance (1918-37)
- ▶ Psychological: fear, anxiety, depression, loss grief, expressions of love
- ▶ Spiritual: existentialism as response to traditional religious systems & mores, etc.

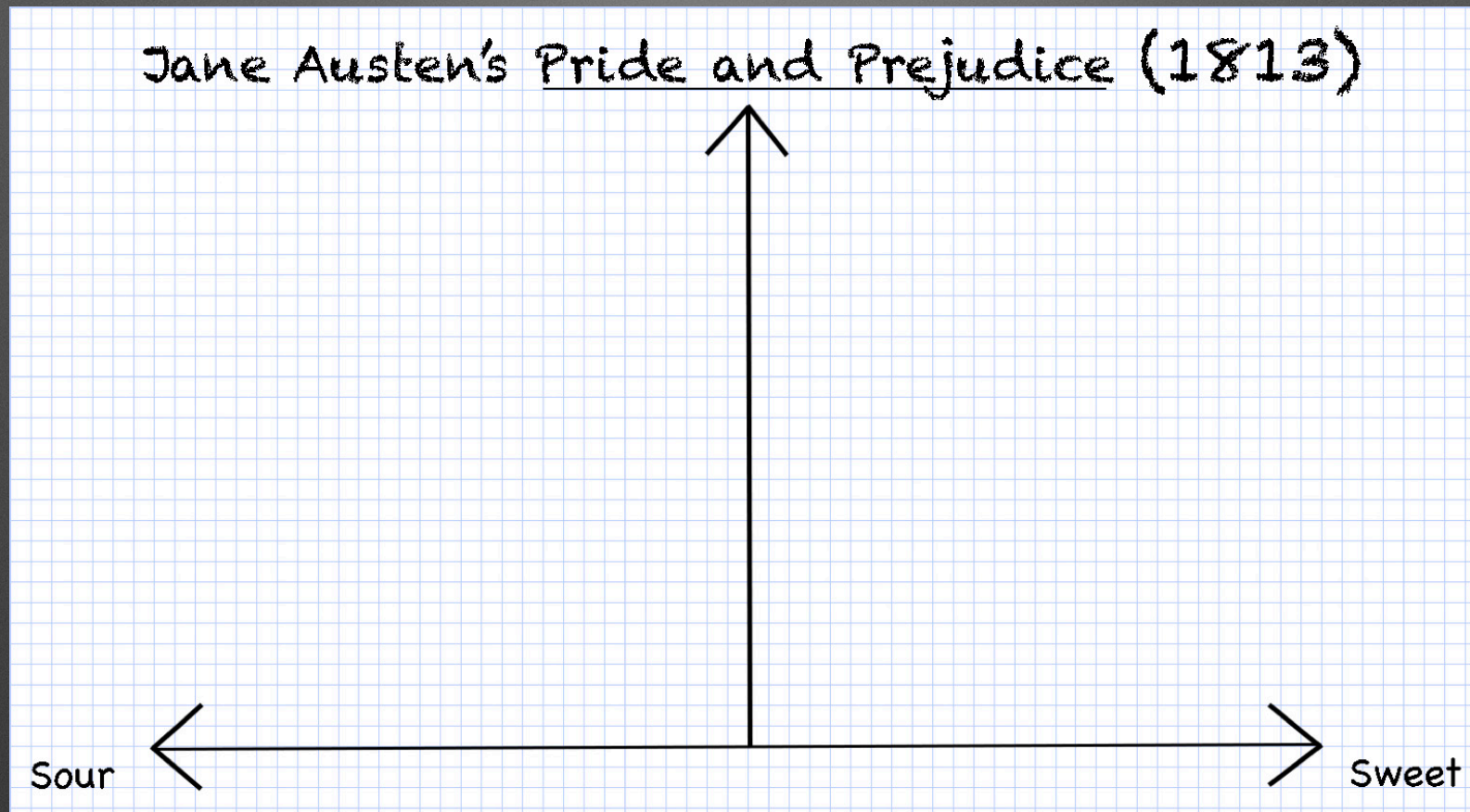


# x-axis: “flavor” (tonal range)



- ▶ “flavor” determined by relative extremities in which characters find themselves
- ▶ such circumstances will be a product of both character choices and environmental factors

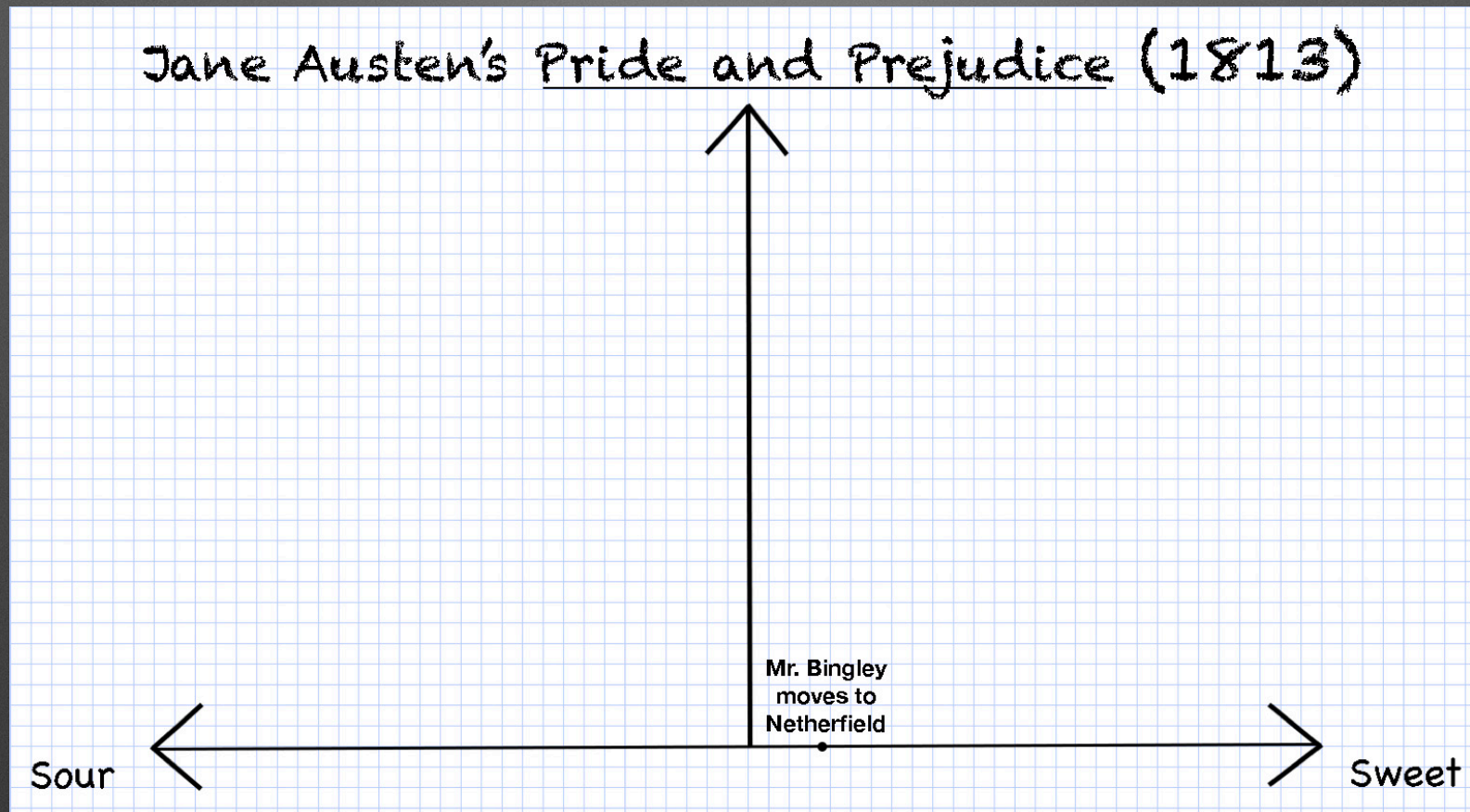
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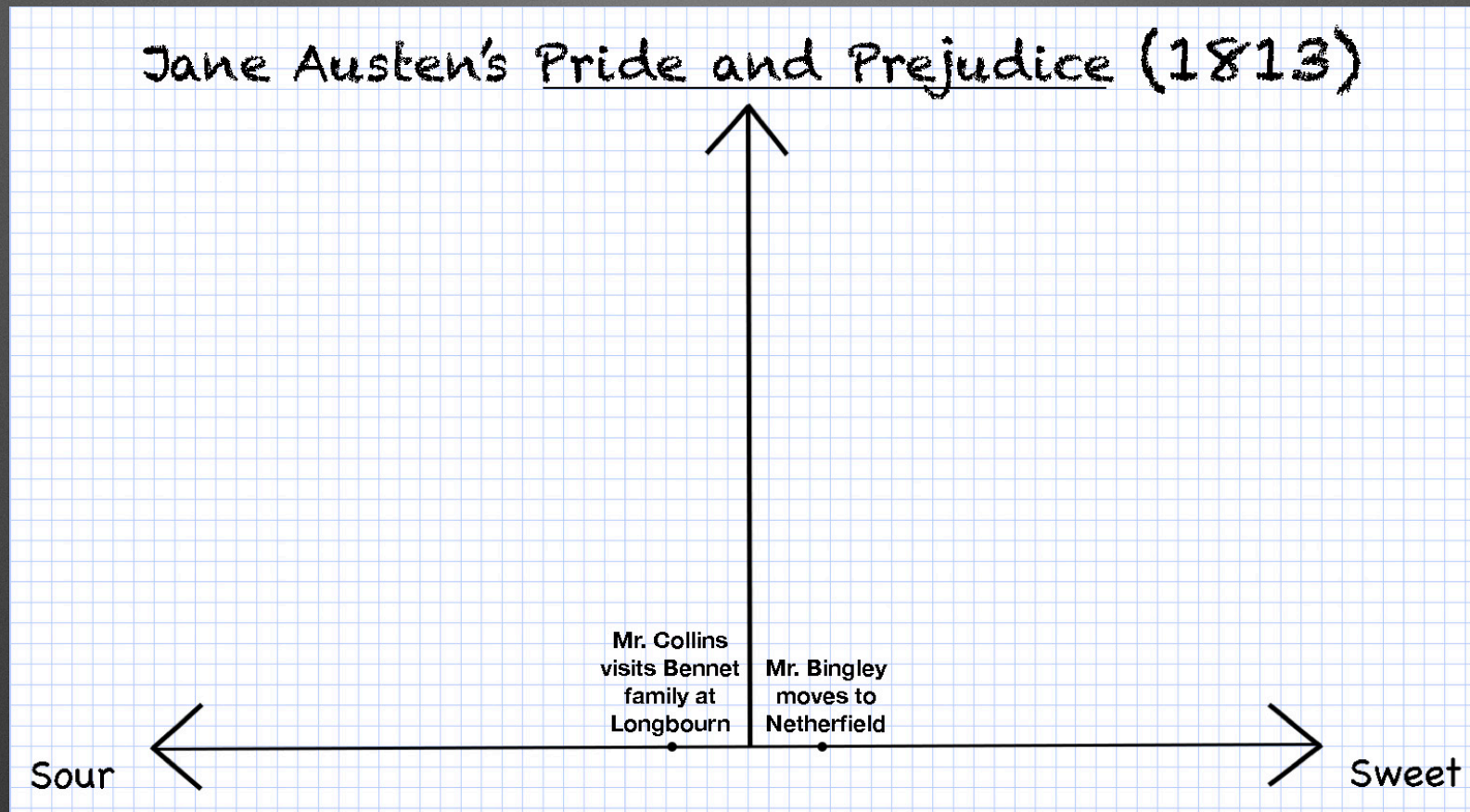
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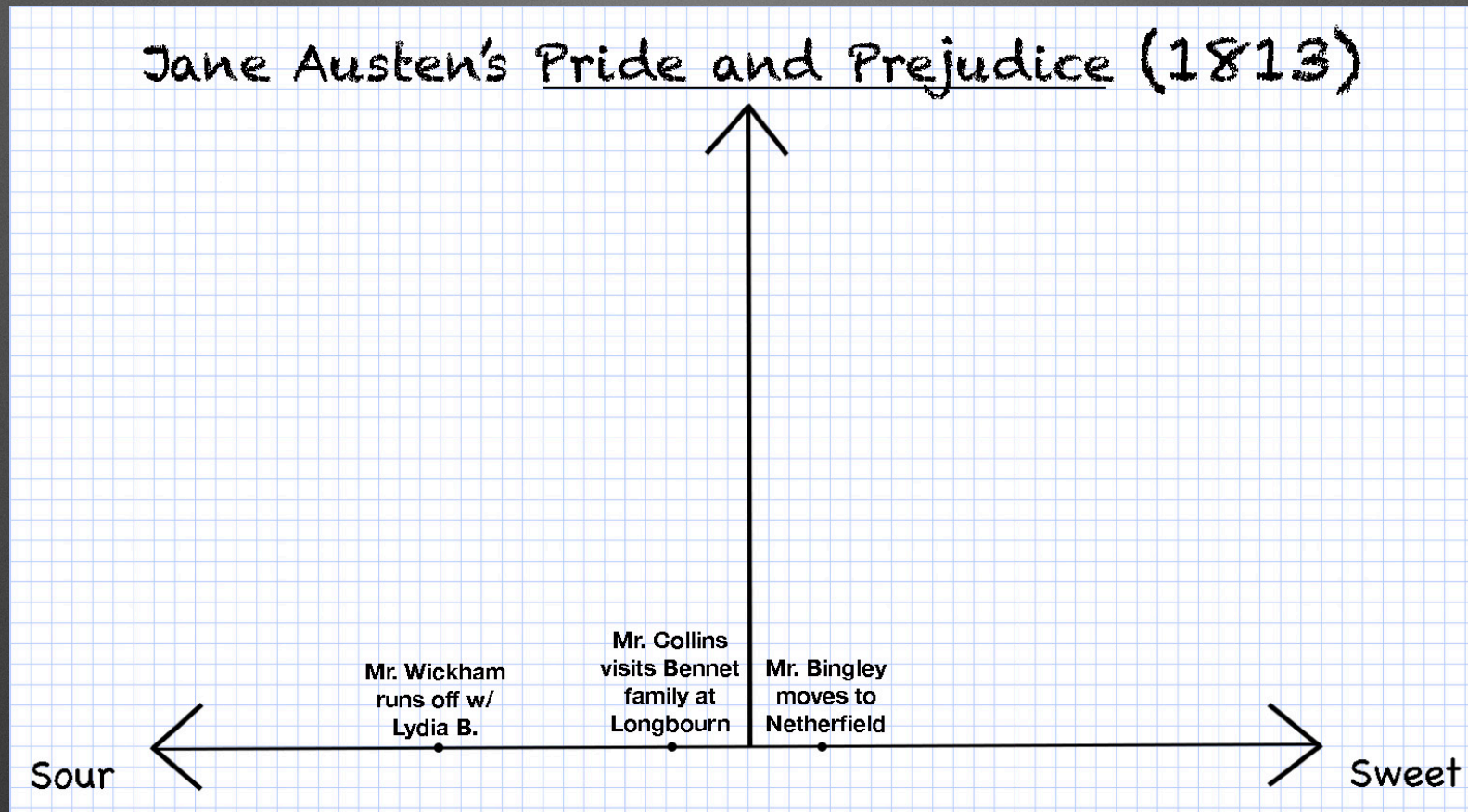
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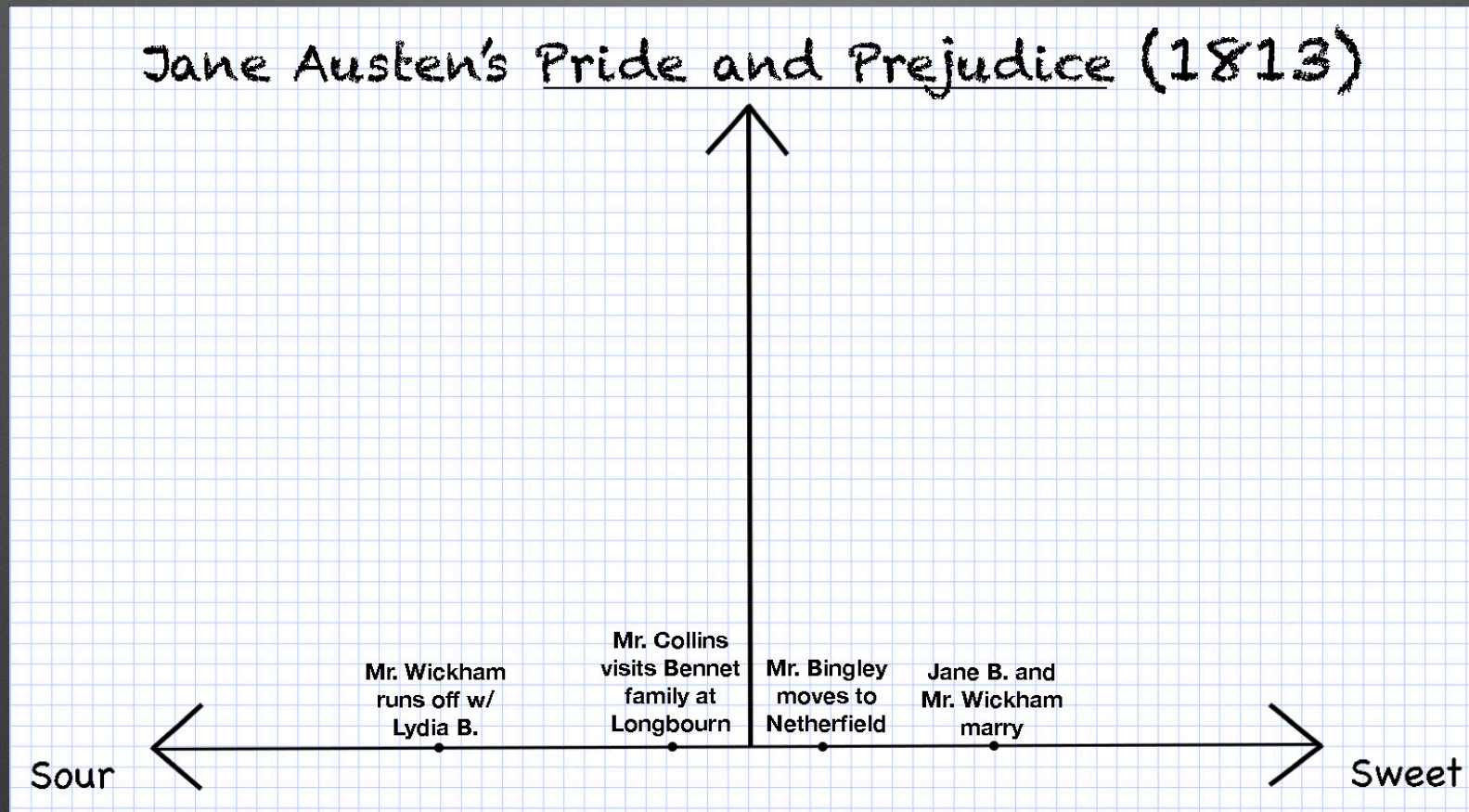
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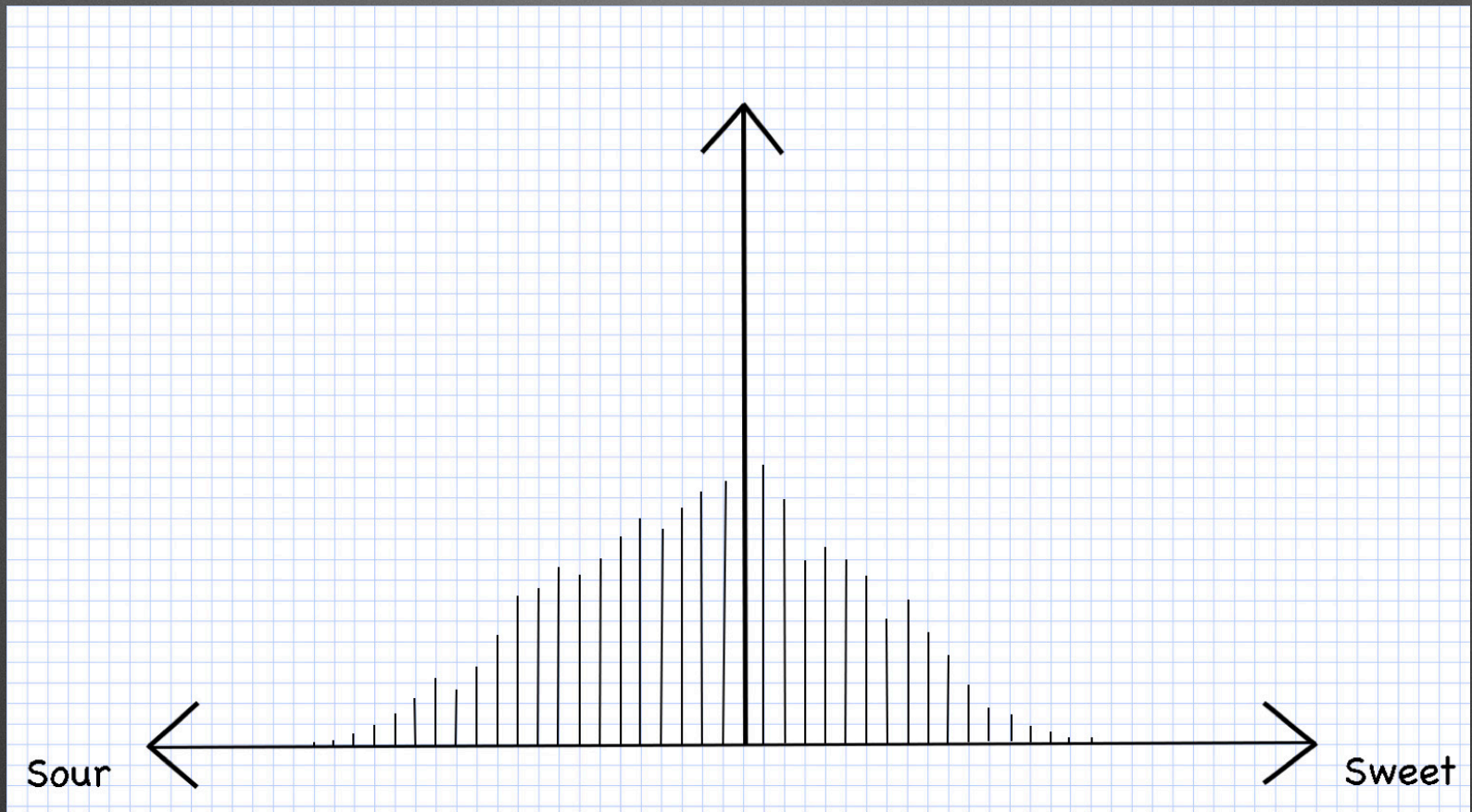
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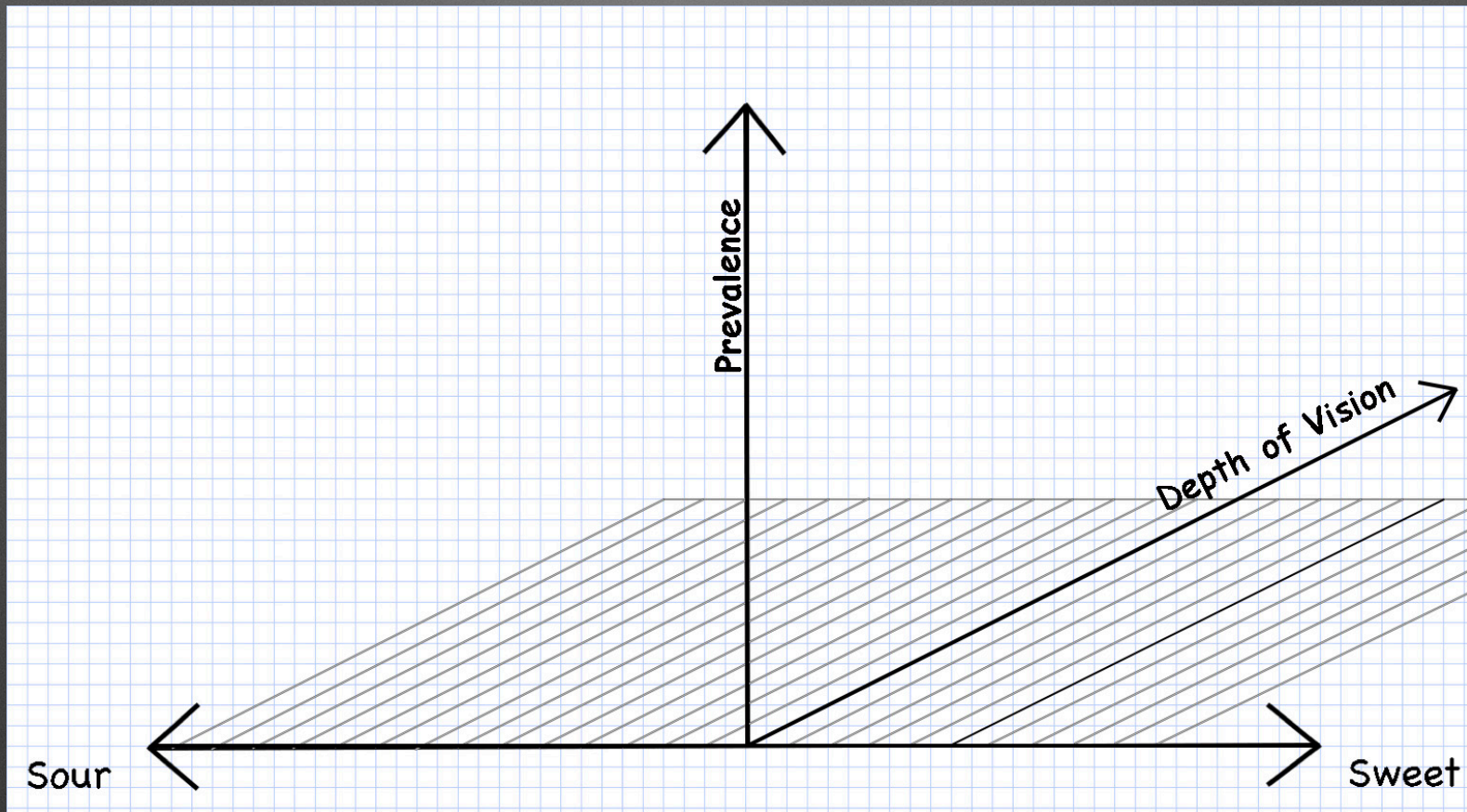
# y-axis: prevalence



- ▶ “prevalence” determined by the *amount* of textual material marked by a given degree of sweetness or sourness
- ▶ most tales will contain more familiar, low-key material than they will extremely sweet or sour material, thus approaching a bell curve



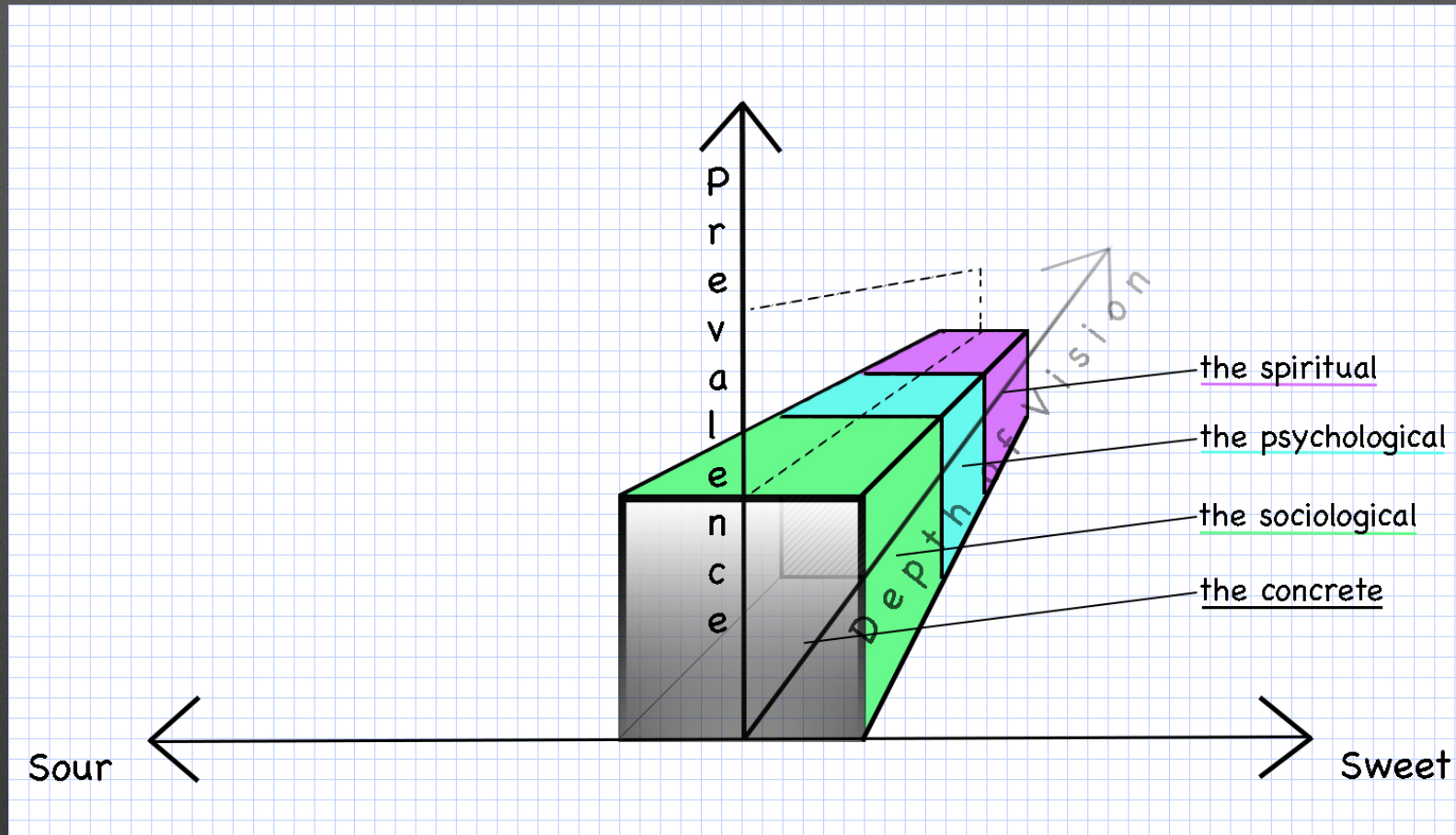
# z-axis: depth of vision



- ▶ "depth of vision" determined by an artist's relative interest in that which cannot be easily measured, relative to that which can
- ▶ depth begins at the quantifiable, concrete surface, and moves through interpersonal, psychological, and spiritual concerns



# z-axis: depth of vision



- ▶ the concrete: the physical/sensuous; quantifiable, empirically verifiable
- ▶ the **sociological**: relational dynamics among individuals and groups
- ▶ the **psychological**: memory, desire, anxiety, shame, the unconscious
- ▶ the **spiritual**: from guilt to joy; sin and the soul; God and grace; mystery



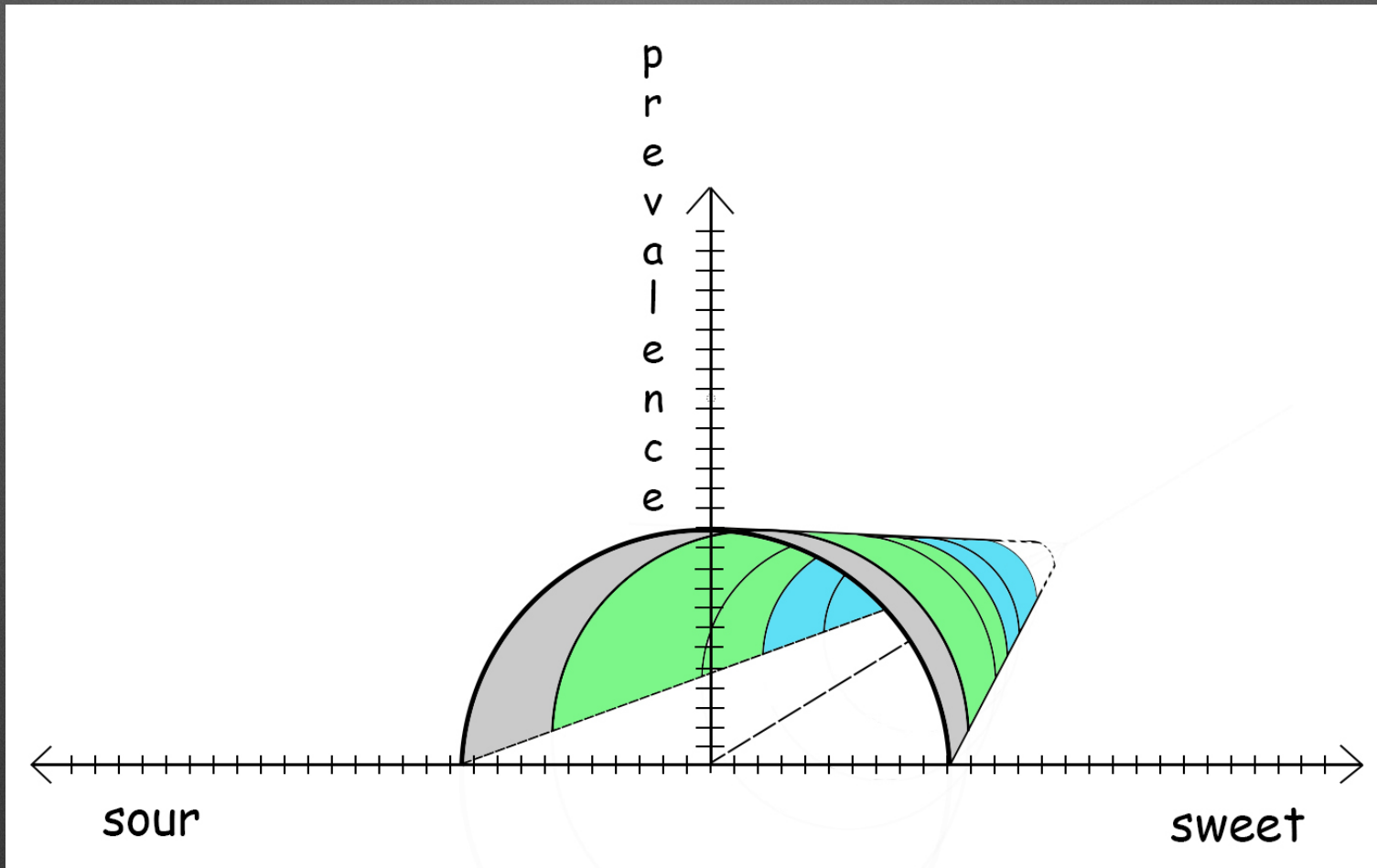
# REALISM

“let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things—men who see beauty in these commonplace things [. . .] There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can’t afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my every-day fellow-men, especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude, whose faces I know [. . .]”

George Eliot’s (Mary Ann Evan’s) *Adam Bede* (1859), chp. 17



# REALISM: an arch



- ▶ approach: *objective* & quantifiable; scientific empiricism
- ▶ focus: the familiar & *representative*; the "normal"
- ▶ action: avoids extremes of event & character; sympathetic narrator
- ▶ socioeconomic preoccupation: middle class



- ▶ What does "clod" mean, besides a lump of earth/clay, and why might Hardy use it in the first line?
- ▶ Is the slow, uneven movement of man and horse intended to render each less, or more, noble (l.1-4)?
- ▶ What might "smoke without flame" (l.5) signify, figuratively?
- ▶ Why might Hardy capitalize "Dynasties" (l.8)? It's not a proper noun here . . .
- ▶ Why "wight" (l.9), and why "whispering" (l.10)?
- ▶ Why generate a title derived from *The Bible* (Jeremiah 51:20)?
- ▶ To what end does Hardy focus on the socioeconomic class pictured here?
- ▶ Does this poem magnify or diminish the significance of war and large-scale violence?



## I

Only a man harrowing clods  
In a slow silent walk  
With an old horse that stumbles and nods  
Half asleep as they stalk.

## II

Only thin smoke without flame 5  
From the heaps of couch-grass;  
Yet this will go onward the same  
Though Dynasties pass.

## III

Yonder a maid and her wight 10  
Come whispering by:  
War's annals will cloud into night  
Ere their story die.



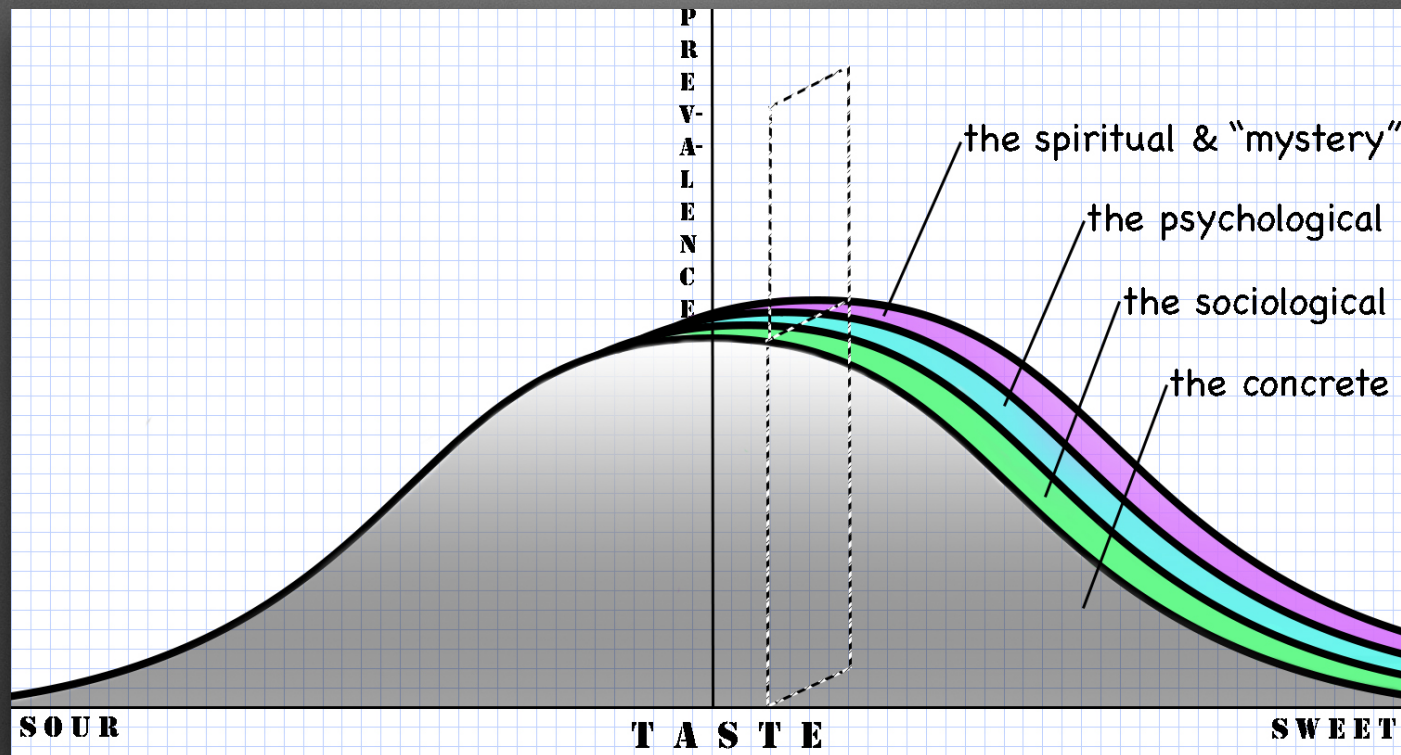
# ROMANTICISM

**“I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it. . . . the case is an extreme one, as I trusted none would fail to perceive; but I know that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain.”**

**from the Preface to the second edition of  
Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848)**



# ROMANTICISM: bell curve



- ▶ approach: allows for *extraordinary* incidents, & sometimes the fantastic
- ▶ focus: both "normal" and "abnormal" characters and events
- ▶ action: grounded in the familiar, but reaches towards extremes
- ▶ socioeconomic preoccupation: none



- ▶ What images does McKay use to convey the intensity of his narrator's suppressed emotions?
- ▶ Does the narrator find his sense of identity in expressing or in burying what he feels?
- ▶ Any idea as to why McKay appropriates and redeploys a racist description of the black man as "savage (l.6)?"
- ▶ What might the "white house" represent?
- ▶ Why configure the white house's shut door as transparent instead of opaque (l.8)?

Your door is shut against my tightened face,  
And I am sharp as steel with discontent;  
But I possess the courage and the grace  
To bear my anger proudly and unbent.  
The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,       5  
A chafing savage, down the decent street;  
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,  
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.  
Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,  
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,       10  
And find in it the superhuman power  
To hold me to the letter of your law!  
Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate  
Against the potent poison of your hate.



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# NATURALISM

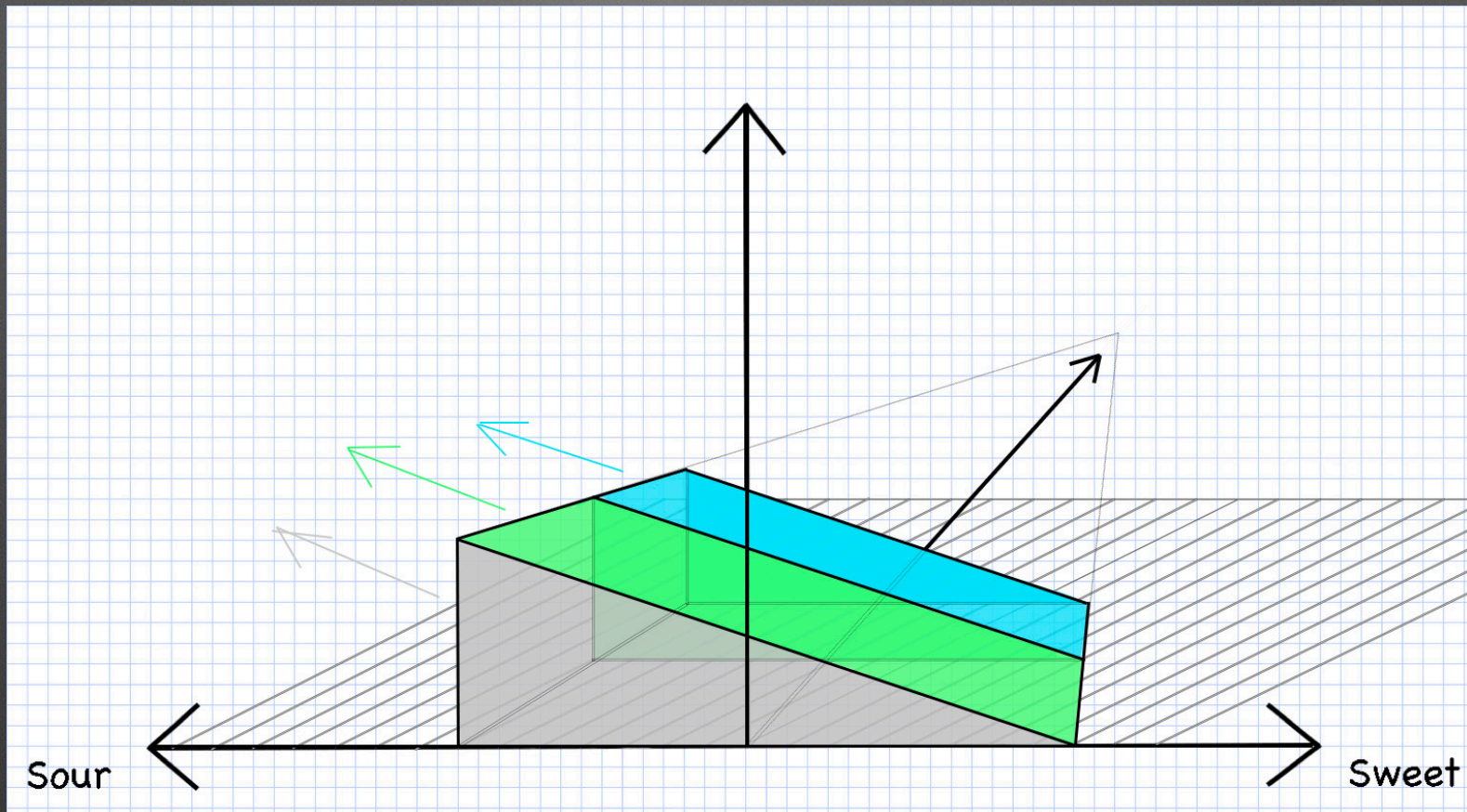
**“[Lily] was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (9).**

**“she felt herself more strangely confronted with her fate. The sensation made her brain reel, and she tried to shut out consciousness by pressing her hands against her eyes. But the terrible silence and emptiness seemed to symbolize her future—she felt as though the house, the street, the world were all empty, and she alone left sentient in a lifeless universe” (312).**

**Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905)**



# NATURALISM: triangle w/ trajectory



- ▶ approach: *dark*; shaped by Social Darwinian struggle for survival
- ▶ focus: pain and suffering which overwhelm glimpses of hope
- ▶ action: moves towards inevitable sorrow, angst, or tragedy
- ▶ socioeconomic preoccupation: the working classes & poor

- ▶ Does Auden configure death as central or peripheral to human awareness?
- ▶ Do you think enigmatic line six refers to imminent grandparents eagerly awaiting their first grandchild, or to the advent of Christ in Christianity? Why?
- ▶ What is the antecedent of the pronoun "They" (l.9)?
- ▶ Do you think Auden's reading of Breughel's painting apt given what you see within the frame?
- ▶ What has your own experience proven? Do you see a preponderance of people attuned to the suffering of others, or apathetic to it?





PIETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER'S LANDSCAPE WITH THE FALL OF ICARUS (C.1560)







In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns  
away

Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may 15  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, 20  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

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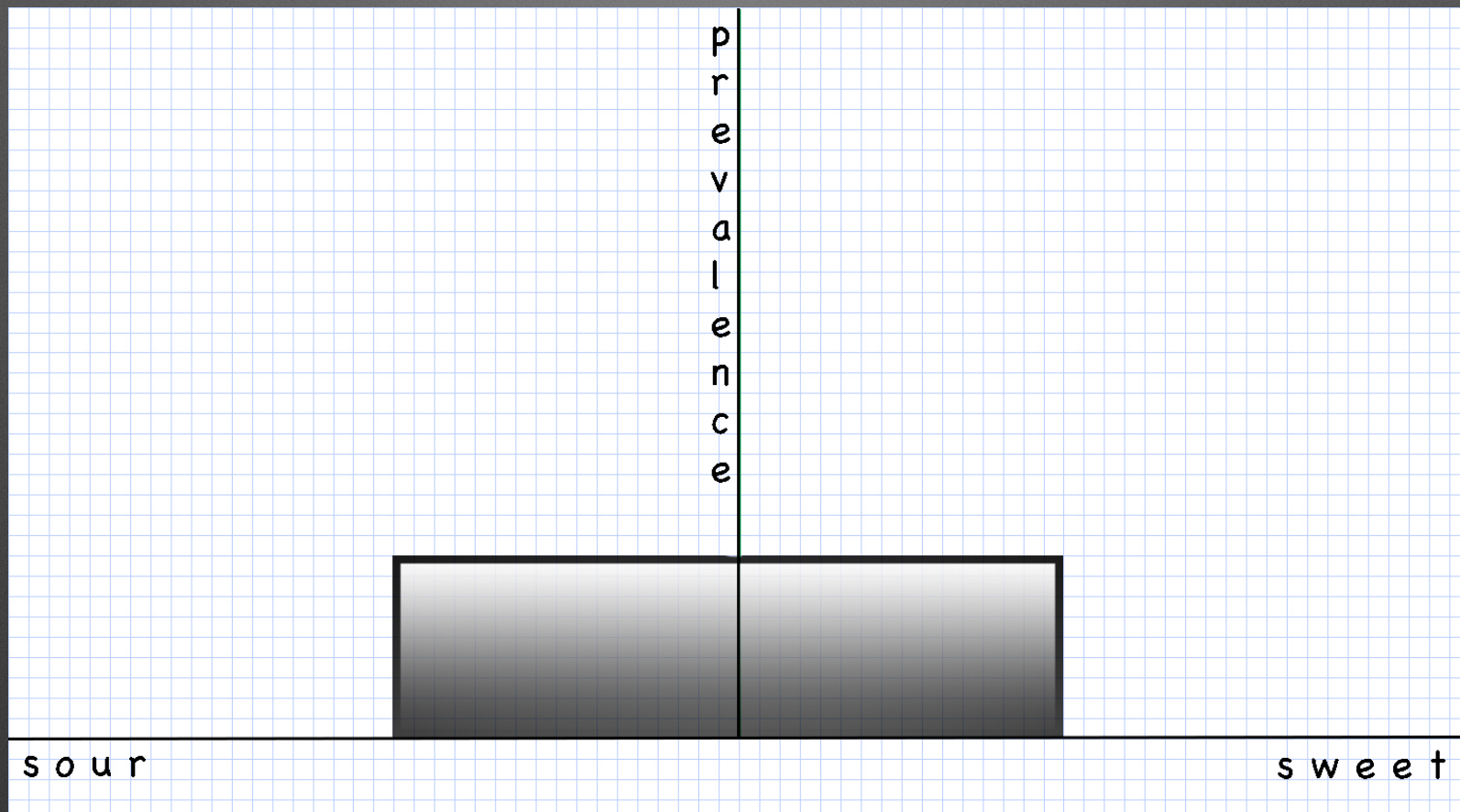


# SENTIMENTALISM

“When her term of mourning had expired, Madeline gave her hand and fortune to Nicholas; and, on the same day and at the same time, Kate became Mrs Frank Cheeryble. [. . .] The money which Nicholas acquired in right of his wife he invested in the firm of Cheeryble Brothers, in which Frank had become a partner. Before many years elapsed, the business began to be carried on in the names of ‘Cheeryble and Nickleby,’ so that Mrs. Nickleby’s prophetic anticipations were realised at last. The twin brothers retired. Who needs to be told that *they* were happy? They were surrounded by happiness of their own creation, and lived but to increase it.



# SENTIMENTALISM: rectangle



- ▶ approach: whatever the plot, culminates in happy ending
- ▶ focus: positive events balance negative ones
- ▶ action: redemption w/o struggle or change; tied up too neatly
- ▶ socioeconomic preoccupation: none



**THE MODERNISTS AVOID SENTIMENTALISM  
LIKE THE PLAGUE. IN FACT . . . THEY'D  
RATHER WRITE ABOUT A LITERAL PLAGUE.**

**SEE ALBERT CAMUS'S THE PLAGUE (1947).**

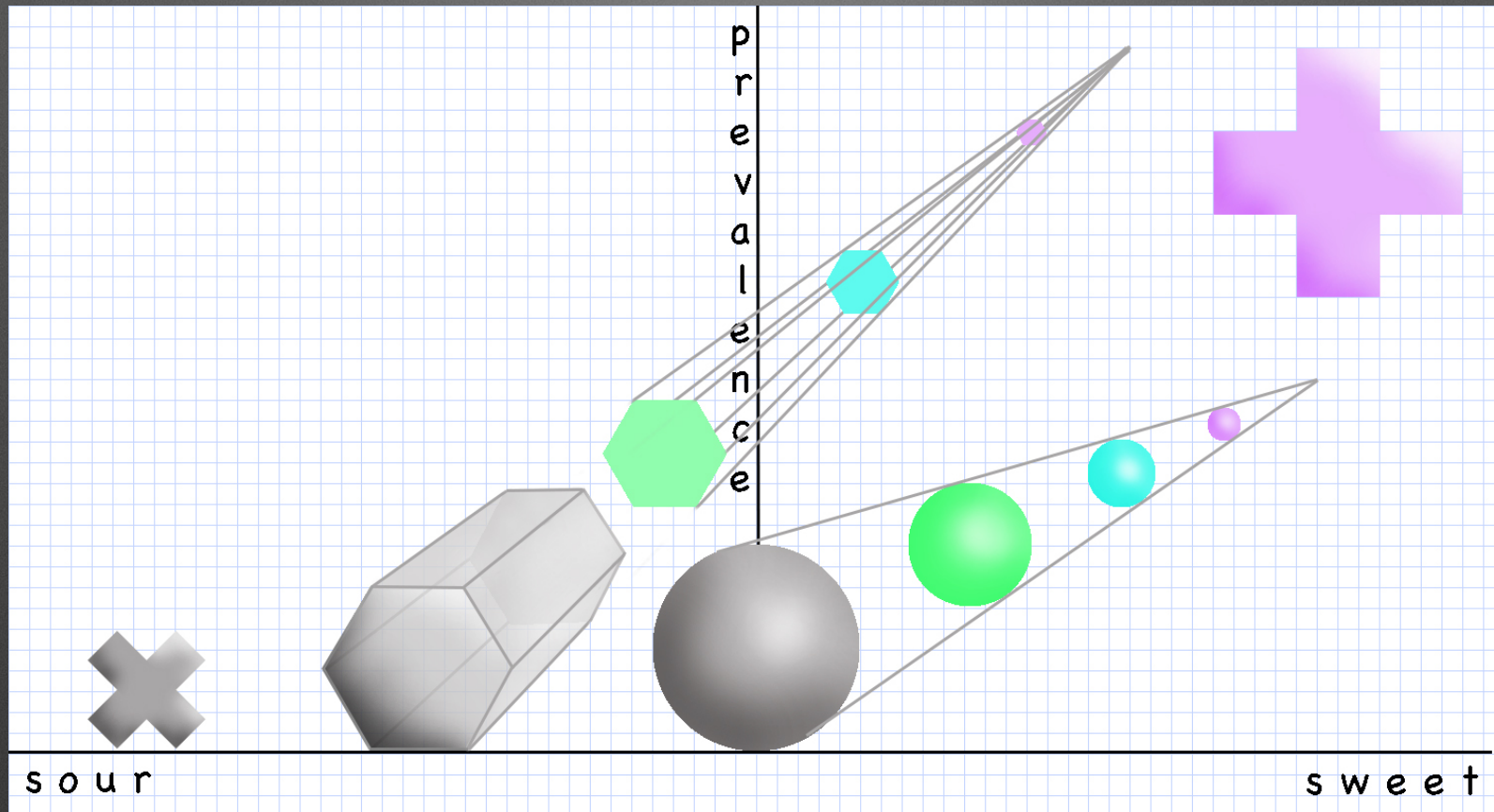
# REDEMPTIVELY GROTESQUE

“Henry James said that in his [realistic] fiction, he did things in the way that took the most doing. I think the writer of grotesque fiction does them in the way that takes the least, because in his work distances are so great. He’s looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees. [. . .] the look of this fiction is going to be wild [. . .] is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic, because of the discrepancies that it seeks to combine.”

Flannery O’Connor’s “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” (1960; 1965)



# GROTESQUE: echoes & reflections



- ▶ approach: finds divine grace at work in the natural, sensuous world
- ▶ focus: blends low-key w/ comic & violent; characters face own sin
- ▶ action: "skips & gaps" in action & character—imagination required
- ▶ socioeconomic preoccupation: none

- ▶ Is the new good envisioned by Johnson something terrestrial or otherworldly, present or future?
- ▶ Does this poem appear to concern a particular ethnic group, or humanity in general?
- ▶ Does this poem balance the possibilities that humans are a work of craftsmanship (l.16) and an experiment (l.17), or privilege one as more likely?



When we are junk in Nature's storehouse  
he takes us apart.

What is good he lays aside;  
he might use it some day.

What has decayed he buries in six feet of sod      5  
to nurture the weeds.

Those we leave behind  
moisten the sod with their tears;  
But their eyes are blind  
as to where he has placed the good.                      10

Some day the Old Repair Man  
Will take the good from its secret place  
And with his gentle, strong hands will mold  
A more enduring work—a work that will defy Nature—

And we will laugh at the old days, the troubled days, 15  
When we were but a crude piece of craftsmanship,  
When we were but an experiment in Nature's  
laboratory . . .

It is good we have the Old Repair Man.



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# THE ABSURD

“Nature has forgotten us.”

“Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that.”

“you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!”

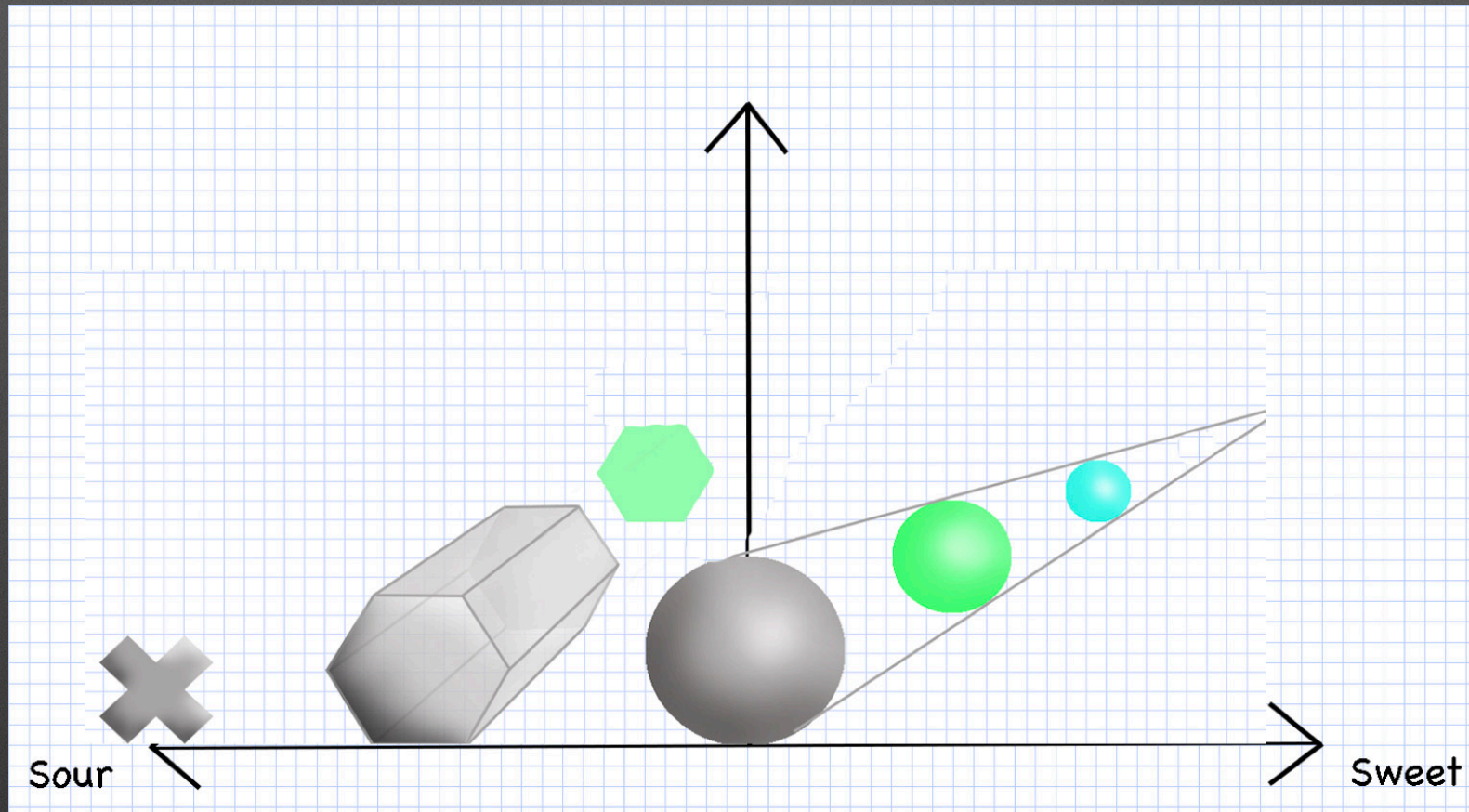
“The end is in the beginning and yet you go on”

“it’ll never end, I’ll never go.”

Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957)



# THE ABSURD: unconnected shapes



- ▶ approach: discursive; circular; parodic; shaped by existential crisis
- ▶ focus: pain and suffering w/ darkly comical spin
- ▶ action: moves in haphazard fashion, looping back upon itself
- ▶ socioeconomic preoccupation: none

Sometimes it seems as though some puppet-player,  
A clenched claw cupping a craggy chin  
Sits just beyond the border of our seeing,  
Twitching the strings with slow, sardonic grin.

- ▶ Does this sound like the plaint of an oppressed people group, or the cry of all humanity?
- ▶ Can a poem this succinct still pack a punch?