

The fictional world of *Brave* (Pixar, 2012) in 3 stages and 3 diagrams

Stage 1

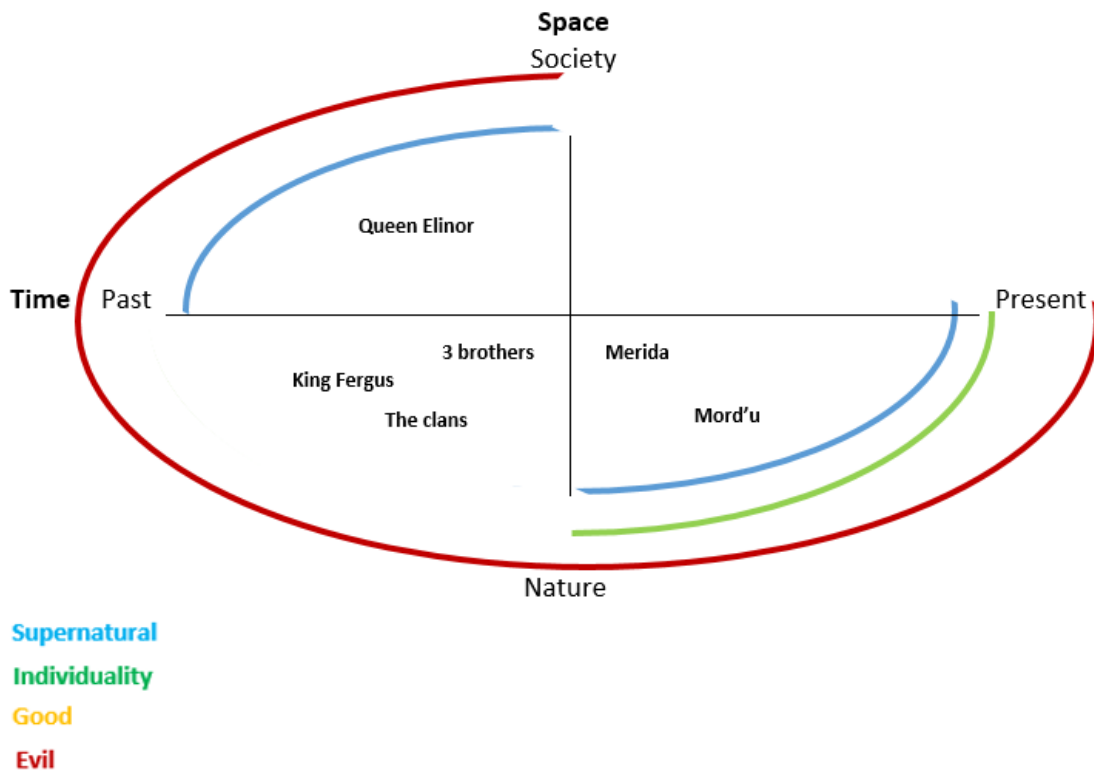


Figure 1

The story starts with a past which provides many clues about the main characters of the Scottish kingdom of Dun Broch, the heroine princess Merida, her mother, Queen Elinor, her father, King Fergus, and the dangerous bear Mor'du. Merida is as of yet a little child, loved by her father and mother. She is hiding from her mother, who plays she's going to gobble Merida up, which she will do throughout the movie in more than one way, by loving, oppressing and literally eating Merida. We also see a tension between wife and husband: Queen Elinor disapproves of her husband's table manners – he has left a bow on the table – as she does to his giving Merida a boy's gift for her birthday, a bow. Unlike her mother, Merida loves the bow, practices and enters the forest for a stray arrow. In the forest, she finds a will-o'-the-wisp, which her father does not believe in, but also hears something approaching, which turns out to be the mighty bear Mor'du. Her father fights against Mor'du and loses a leg as a result of that fight.

The story jumps forward to the present and repeats the pattern, but without the loving relationship between mother and daughter. Merida is now sixteen years old, and required by her mother, to follow social rules and tradition, wherefore Merida complains that “[her] whole life is planned out around social duties, responsibilities and expectations”. This situation becomes untenable when Queen Elinor expects her daughter to marry a man she is not in love with for the sake of the kingdom. This looming marriage oppresses Merida's free spirit and makes her hate her social condition and her mother.

Merida's relationship with her mother hides the classic tension between social oppression and the desire for freedom and individuality. Queen Elinor appears as the main social force in the movie. Not only does she defend social values, duties and tradition; she also takes the central decisions regarding court matters without asking King Fergus, her husband. Merida, on the other hand, is a clear representative of emotivist individualism. Her wild appearance – symbolized above all by her flaming red, long hair – and the tomboyish activities she excels at – riding and archery – suggest an untamed personality. Far away from the traditionally defenseless characters who used to inspire older generations, Merida is constructed to fit new values and break expectations as to what a princess is. Her indomitable spirit connects individualism and nature. The natural association is reinforced by the wild surroundings which Merida frequents to be alone, where she climbs dangerous rocks on her own – “The Crone's Tooth” – rides her horse and practices archery. The ladylike dress her mother forces her to wear for the suitors constrains her so much that she breaks it when she flexes her muscles to beat the suitors at an archery contest, thus visually reinforcing the oppression of society over wild nature. Natural surroundings in turn link her to the supernatural, for the forest typically features mist, darkness, will-o'-the-wisps, all accompanied by eerie, otherworldly music. A Stonehenge-like ring of stones, and, later on, a witch complete the supernatural mise-en-scene. With regard to the diagram in figure 1, the queen is therefore placed in traditionalism, whilst Merida is located in emotivism, struggling against her mother's wish to pull Merida into her traditionalist sphere.

As for King Fergus, he is a well-meaning brute, and thus a primitivist, wherefore he belongs to the bottom-left corner of the diagram. He loves his wife and daughter, but apart from that he devotes his life to eating and drinking rather than state business. He is inarticulate when it comes to expressing ideas – he lets his wife speak for him. Instead, he is bent on killing Mor'du – his bear-skin cape and his ability to sniff out bears suggests that he is closer to Mor'du than he would like to acknowledge – and he loves a good fight: in this he is seconded by the clans he has invited to find a suitable husband for Merida. Rather than engage in fruitful discussion as to the suitability of the matches or the merits of the suitors – the clan chiefs' sons, one a brutish oaf, the other a spoilt dandy, the third a dreamer, each inadequate for kingship – chiefs, sons and retainers soon engage in a pub brawl and fight each other in the most brutal manner. They are therefore also placed in the primitivist field.

King Fergus completes his semantic significance by establishing a series of bonds with Merida and against Queen Elinor. The very first scene where the whole family appears together – the dinner table, a classic since *The Incredibles* – shows Merida placing her bow on the table like her father before, being rebuked by Queen Elinor like her father before, and being defended by a father whose table manners have not improved since the beginning – here he lets the dogs lick him at dinner. This affinity between father and daughter is proof of the common natural semantic ground they share. Individualism, on the other hand, is not as fully present in the father as in the daughter, but since individualism is often the result of rebelling against society, King Fergus does not need to rebel much, being royal and male. Male privilege is also given expression through King Fergus' sons, three wee scallywags who always get away with everything, whereas Merida is allowed much less freedom. Her three brothers are therefore also placed in primitivism.

In one respect, however, there is a clearly marked difference between father and daughter: while she believes in the supernatural, as the movie has shown at the beginning, he does not. For him, will-o'-the-wisps don't exist and Mor'du is just a bear. This will have tragic consequences as the movie moves on, but just now it makes for an interesting triangle: Merida and her mother share their belief in the supernatural but oppose each other over nature and society, Merida and her father share a natural ground but oppose each other over the supernatural, and finally Queen Elinor and King Fergus share no semantic value.

Stage 2

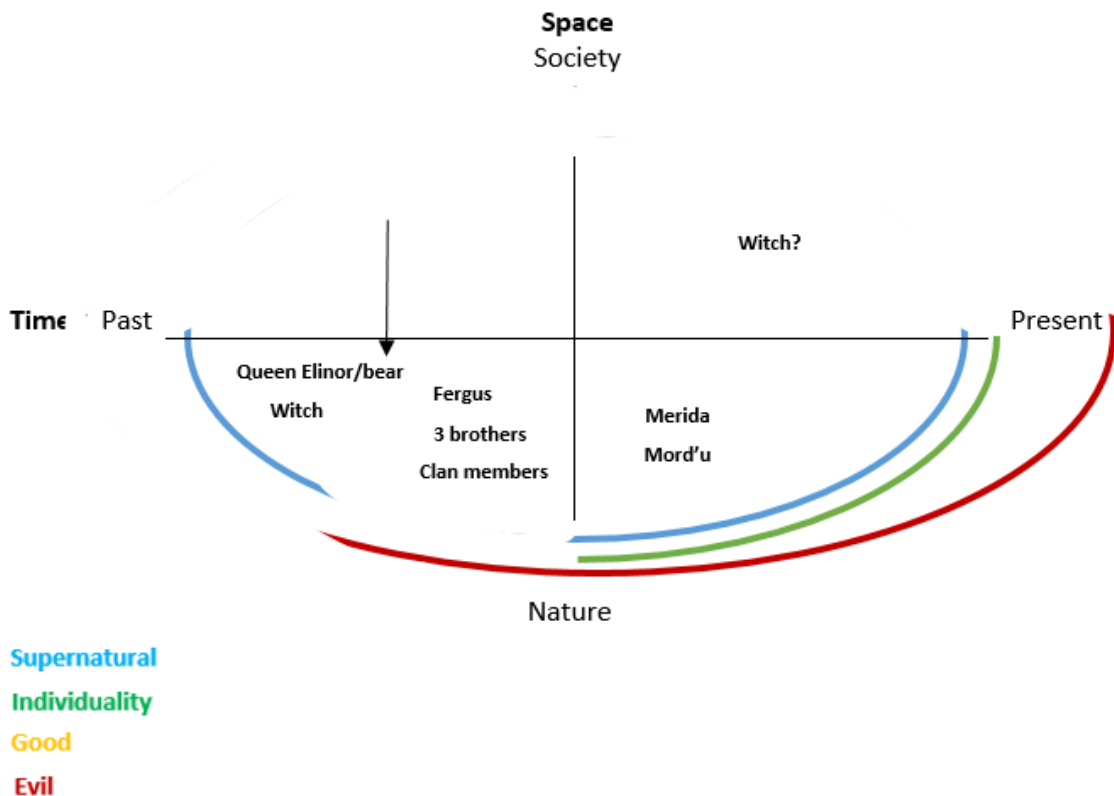


Figure 2

After an archery contest which cannot establish who will be Merida's husband since Merida herself wins it, the tension between mother and daughter comes to a head in a double way: Queen Elinor throws Merida's bow, a sign of her freedom and identity, into the fire. Just before, Merida has ripped open a family tapestry her mother has been working on precisely where she and her mother appear. Dismayed, Merida flees into the forest, where she meets a witch who she hopes may cast a spell on her mother to undo her impending marriage. As an agent of change, the witch is an important character, but proves a compound of semantic packages. Deep down she is a typical witch, dabbles in magic and lives alone in the forest, isolated from human society. What predominates in this picture is primitivism allied with the supernatural. Superficially, however, the witch presents herself as a woodcarver, her hut being full of all kind of objects made of wood and depicting bears. She also looks like a modern businesswoman: she will only do magic if somebody buys her woodcarvings. In addition, she complains about "unsatisfied customers" and "purchases", and operates a kind of telephone switchboard. This

seemingly places her in the institutionalist field. Her link with primitivism seems to define her, while the institutionalist contrast apparently exists for comic purposes.

Merida goes back to the castle with a cake the witch has baked for her mother. When Queen Elinor eats the cake she turns into a bear and has to leave the castle accompanied by Merida, as King Fergus would instantly kill any bear he set eyes on. Having turned into a wild animal, Queen Elinor moves from traditionalism to primitivism. Much of the middle section of the movie is devoted to showing the changes that magic wreaks on Queen Elinor. At first, the queen still behaves like a lady, ashamed of being naked, setting the table in the woods, trying to keep table manners – she still rebukes Merida for leaving her bow on the table – or letting Merida catch fish for her. Slowly, however, the shift towards nature takes a more complete hold on her, and she starts to fish on her own and eat ravenously. This initial change from queen to bear proves liberating, for by placing the queen in the alethic field she comes to understand her daughter's position and learns to appreciate it. However, the physical metamorphosis is slowly accompanied by a more fundamental change, and at one point Queen Elinor even threatens Merida, which means that she is turning into a bear from the inside, much in keeping with the spell, which says that on the morning of the third day, Queen Elinor will remain a bear forever...

...if Merida does not “look inside [and] mend the bond torn by pride”, as the witch has told the princess. This last advice by the witch shows that getting rid of the spell depends on an inner conversion – “look inside” – and the affective bond – “mend the bond”. In this sense, while the witch is initially placed in the primitivist / institutionalist camp, we can see her and generally speaking the supernatural as a fictional means to psychological conversion from pride to affection. In fact, the witch may suggest as much when she claims that “wood cannot be imbued with magical properties” and when she asks Merida if she really knows what she is doing, a sign that her supernatural affinity is balanced by realism and deeper knowledge.

Merida and her mother's visit to an ancient ruin in the forest further clarify the interplay between the supernatural and the psychological. Here Merida learns that the bear Mor'du really was a king's eldest sibling and the eldest of four, like Merida, and like Merida “he followed his own path”, in his case by “want[ing] to rule the land for himself”. It was this desire that turned him into a bear. Inside the ruin, Merida also finds a carved stone depicting the four princes of old, “split, like the tapestry”. Then Mor'du appears and tries to kill Merida – she barely manages to escape with her mother – showing that the change from human to animal is complete in him. Mor'du thus provides a foil for Merida: against the positive background of females striving for liberation, Mor'du casts the dark shadow of unfettered individualism or pride and shows the dangers of emotivism when not purified by the affective bond.

“To mend the bond” Merida and her mother return to the castle to physically stitch together the damaged tapestry, but see King Fergus and the rival clans fighting each other in the great hall over who's going to marry Merida. As weapons are hurtled across the hall, the angry threat of one of the clan chiefs – “No more talk! No more traditions! We'll settle this now!” – makes it clear how important Queen Elinor's social skills have always been, casting a new light on her traditionalist position. To stop the clans murdering each other, Merida steps in and appropriates her mother's discourse, repeating Queen Elinor's words earlier in the movie – “Legends are lessons. They ring with truths” – stressing Merida's selfishness, but also the personal bonds that

keep the clans together. In doing so, Merida creates institutional parallels with the bonds which should work at a more personal level between mother and daughter. In turn, Queen Elinor makes Merida say words fitting the daughter rather than the mother: “we should break tradition [...] be free to write our own story, follow our hearts and find love in our own time”. Upon this the clan chiefs’ sons rebel against their fathers and demand that they too be allowed to decide who to marry. Merida’s speech shows how mother and daughter have moved towards each other not just emotionally, but also discursively. In addition, by folding the personal into the institutional, male primitivism can evolve into a position closer to freedom, emotivism and the affective bond.

Stage 3

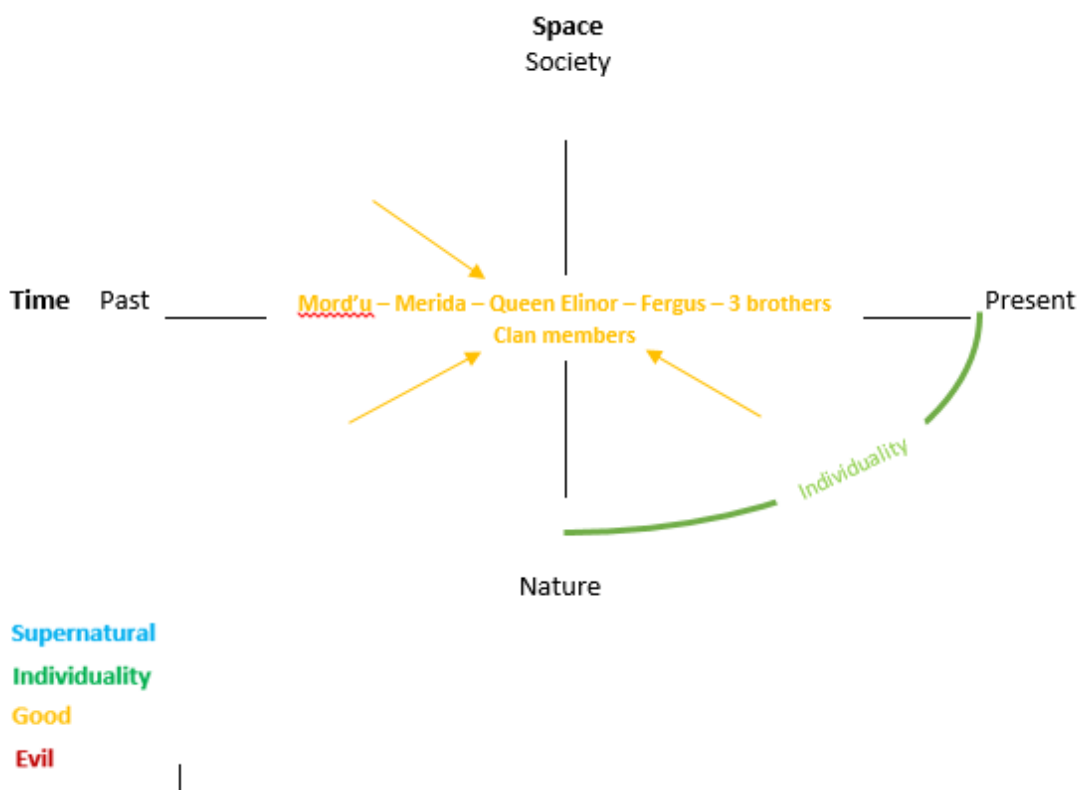


Figure 3

When a happy ending looks probable, King Fergus accidentally discovers Merida with the ‘bear’, and is convinced that the bear has killed his wife and will also devour Merida. What follows are complicated escape- and hunt-scenes as Merida is imprisoned by her father in the castle – her father’s being the physical version of her mother’s psychological imprisonment. Merida breaks free with the help of her three little brothers, who have also turned bears – they had tried the witches’ cake – to save her mother and bring her the tapestry, which she has now repaired. The resolution of the plot takes place in the middle of the forest, in the ancient ring of stones, with Queen Elinor surrounded by the clans, willing to tear her to pieces. When Merida arrives, Mor’du also does and tries to kill her, but Queen Elinor protects her daughter and a terrible fight ensues. Mor’du proves stronger than Queen Elinor, but she manages to let a loosened stone crash down

on him, thus killing him and releasing him from his curse. Semantically, the final fight proves the superiority of emotivism informed by the affective bond to the simple emotivist formula of individualism – I do as I like – and nature – following my animal instinct.

The remaining semantic shifts take place as King Fergus and the other clans accept the existence of the supernatural, but also when the bears return to human form. Seemingly the evidence of magic vindicates the supernatural, as does the fact that the final showdown takes place inside the ring of stones, and ends with the fall of one of the stones. However, the supernatural is simultaneously psychologized, for in the end it is only the “look inside” which can “mend the bond torn by pride”; in this sense, the supernatural merely acts as the external façade of internal change towards the affective bond, with the witch presiding as master family therapist. This is the reason why in spite of the magical breaking of the spell the supernatural has disappeared from the diagram in figure 3.

The bears’ return to human form is the victory of the affective bond. While at the beginning Merida would always blame her mother or the witch for her problems, she has now come to realize how she too is to blame, and how her mother has always been there for her; for her own part, Queen Elinor has learned to accept her daughters’ freedom. We see them at the end of the movie both working together on a new tapestry and riding together in the woods. The clans also return home in the best of spirits, and so all the characters move from their former positions towards the affective bond, as the diagram shows well. The understanding of the affective bond as a mediating space between nature and culture, primitivism and traditionalism, and its power to soften emotivist individualism, could be symbolized by the necklace which passes from mother to daughter, and from daughter to witch at the beginning of the movie. It shows three interlaced bears, the animal standing for nature, the number and interlaced pattern for the social bond.