

JANE EYRE'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY

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Charlotte Bronte's (1816-1855) novel *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847, a story about a young orphan girl who grows and comes of age in the Victorian England. *Jane Eyre* ranks as one of the greatest and most perennially popular works of English fiction. It is possibly one of the most read, appreciated and discussed pieces of literature of the western world. It is a story of the protagonist's growth and internal development on her search for a meaningful existence in society. The novel also contains elements of a romance novel and a Gothic novel, written in the form of an autobiography and narrated by protagonist Jane Eyre in a friendly, confessional tone. Jane begins her journey as a mistreated and insecure ten year old girl and during the novel develops into a self-confident and self-respectful woman in her early twenties. The narrative is about an orphan forced to battle a cruel guardian, a patriarchal society and rigid social order. Jane's miserable childhood under her relative's roof and continues with an account of her education and schooling years at the Lowood boarding school. However, the main focus of the novel is on her experiences as an 18 year old governess who falls in love with her wealthy employer, Mr. Rochester. The complex relationship to Mr. Rochester, the discovery of new relatives and knowledge of her past and the unexpected inheritance are of great importance on her journey. She meets different people, sees different places, and becomes aware of the norms and restrictions of Victorian society. On her journey to maturity, the theme of identity plays an important role. "To be Jane", she must face a variety of challenges, which derive both from the natural psychological maturation processes and from the contradictory demands and restrictions of the Victorian culture. The psychological and the social are both present and intertwined in Jane's life, growth and identity formation. Victorian women such as Jane were trapped in a society that did not accept angry, rebellious women who wished to escape the confines of the drawing room to a more self-fulfilling life with more space for action. In this paper I will examine how Jane stands up to the patriarchal society to face herself on her quest for identity and independence.

The novel is also considered a classic representative of the "governess novel", which became popular in the nineteenth century. Christ and Robsen (2006, 992) suggest that the governess novel, of which *Jane Eyre* is one of the most famous examples, became a popular genre because women's roles - and especially the unsettled position of the unmarried middle class woman - could be explored through it. Indeed, at the heart of *Jane Eyre*'s popularity could be its ability to explore many important questions and theme of its time. The Victorian novel typically entails a protagonist, male or female, on a journey for self-definition. The novel portrays the conflict or tension between the social environment and personal aspirations: thus, it

is most suitable forum to describe women's struggle for identity in the Victorian social context of female oppression. Essentially, Jane Eyre deals with the contradictory and oppressive notions of womanhood characteristic of the Victorian culture. The story of Jane Eyre "a woman caring for herself - earning her own living learning to resist passion and preserve her integrity in a world of patriarchal power".

The novel can be divided into five parts according to the five different places or buildings where Jane stays for various periods of time. Jane's childhood at Gateshead with her aunt and cousins, her education at the Lowood School, her time as a governess at Thornfield Hall, her time with the Rivers family at Marsh End and finally, her time at Ferndean Manor. 'The novel goes through these five distinct stages, and each stage is important in Jane's development.

Gateshead Hall and Lowood Institution

Jane as a child is lonely with a sense of becoming for kinship. While living at Gateshead Hall she is constantly reminded that she is not part of the Reed family. She is excluded from the activities of Mrs. Reed and her children even though Mrs. Reed had promised her husband Jane's uncle, on his deathbed to bring Jane up as one of her own children. She feels inferior to her cousins and cannot understand why all her efforts are denied and why she is not loved at Gateshead.

All John Reed's violent tyrannies, all his sister's proud indifference, all his mother's aversion, all the servant's partiality, turned up in my disturbed mind like a dark deposit in a turbid well, Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please? Why was it useless to try to win anyone's favour?

According to Mrs. Reed, Jane was to be excluded until she "was endeavouring in good earnest to acquire a more sociable childlike disposition a more attractive and sprightly manner - something lighter, franker, more more natural". Jane does not fit the ideal picture of a small girl at the time because she has a strong sense of justice and the questions too much, which are traits not suitable in a little Victorian girl who was supposed to be a pretty ornament. Jane is not a pretty little girl and well aware of it, she is as her name suggests "invisible as air, the heir to nothing secretly choking with ire". Even though Jane is like air, invisible on the outside she is like fire on the inside which will be the fuel for her quest for identity and independence. She does not succeed in winning Mrs. Reed's motherly love or care, and when Jane finally shows her anxiety and anger and revolts in a fight started by her cousin John, Mrs. Reed punishes her for her behaviour and shuts her to the scary "red room", which is a large chamber with heavy red coloured furnishings at Gateshead. The red-room is a place that witnessed the death of Jane's uncle, Mr. Reed, which is entered rarely and Jane finds it ghostly and intimidating. Even when Jane is scared to death in the red-room and pleads for getting out, Mrs. Reed is unyielding:

"Silence? This violence is all most repulsive:" and so doubt, she felt it. I was a precocious actress in her eyes; she sincerely looked on me as a compound of virulent passions, mean spirit, and dangerous duplicity.

Consequently, Jane lives a loveless childhood filled with insecurity. In the Red Room transforms overnight from a child to a more mature person. This imprisonment in the Red Room can be interpreted as a voyage into the unconscious. When Jane looks into the mirror she sees herself looking like "a real spirit" which makes her think of one of the characters, 'tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp', in Bessie's ghost stories. Jane realizes that she is considered

different and identified as the “the other” by the household at Gateshead Hall, similar to the lonely characters of the moon in Bessie’s stories. Jane also realized that it does not matter how hard she tries to do right and fulfill her duties, she will not be accepted by the Reed household. She is “termed naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaking from morning to noon and from noon to midnight. Jane is trapped and imprisoned and it symbolize the way the Victorian women were trapped in their homes and how their behaviour was restricted by the society. The apothecary Mr. Lloyd comes for a visit after Jane’s fainting in the Red-room, and Jane feels relieved and safe:

I feel an inexpressible relief, a soothing conviction of protection and security, when I knew that there was a stranger in the room, an individual not belonging to Gateshead, and not related to Mr. Reed... I felt so sheltered and befriended while he sat in the chair near my pillow; and as he closed the door after him, all the room darkened and my heart again sank in expressible sadness weighted it down.

The apothecary notices Jane’s distress in the Reed household and plants an idea of going to school in Jane’s mind. Jane starts to see education as a Gateway to liberty: “school would be a complete change: it implied a long journey, an entire separation from Gateshead, an entrance into a new life”. Jane leaves Gateshead for the Lowood in bad relations to her aunt, and with negative feelings toward her first home and primary caregiver, Mrs. Reed.

Mr. Brocklehurst is the second male character Jane stands up to. Mr. Brocklehurst who rules over the Lowood Institution; a charity school for girls, when Jane first meets Mr. Brocklehurst he appears as “a black pillar ... a sable clad shape standing erect on the rug: the grim face at the top was like a curved mark, placed above the shaft by way of capital. His phallic – like appearance Mr. Brocklehurst symbolizes the patriarchal rule. He uses his power to oppress the girls and teachers at the school to teach them to know their place in society and repress their individuality and identity. He uses religion as a tool to oppress when making threats stating that the naughty girls will burn in hellfire. When Jane, who is considered a naughty girl according to Mrs. Reed, is asked how to avoid ending up in hell she answers him: “I must keep in good health and not die”. It suggests that Jane has a strong sense of self and is not willing to completely change herself to fit into the way of the patriarchal society and also realizes that to avoid hell is to stay alive. Jane remains strong and lives where as other girls at Lowood Institution become sick and die. Jane’s longing for kinship causes her to try to find a substitute mother in first Bessie and then Miss Temple. She thinks Bessie is stern and does not show any affection for her and is not a mother figure Jane can seek some comfort with as a child at Gateshead Hall. Jane meets Miss Temple at Lowood, who becomes a substitute mother and an important role model to Jane. Jane forms a close friendship with a girl called Helen Burns and one of the teachers, Miss Temple. Helen and Miss Temple act as loving mother figures, nourishing and nurturing her, and thus, filling the emotional hole left by Mrs. Reed. She mirrors herself to them in her growth, and starts to form her own identity which is not based on exclusion anymore but inclusion to the school community. At Lowood she is able to overcome her sense of inferiority and learns to moderate her behaviour, not to be so extreme in her reactions. Helen’s death also forces her to confront and deal with the grief of losing a friend. Through personal experience, Jane’s attitudes change: She learns to value friendship and spiritual support over material comfort. Jane has new experiences; she matures and gains knowledge through education. Jane finds that she is gifted in academic skills and that her industrious disposition and manner pays off:

I had the mean of an excellent education placed within my reach; a fondness for some of studies, and a desire to excel in all, together with a great delight in pleasing my teachers especially such as I loved, urged me on: I availed myself fully of the advantages offered me. In time I rose to be the first girl of the first class; then I was invested with the office of teacher ... Her responsive attitude makes her able to active a sense of competence in life. Eventually she ends up creating the occupational identity of a teacher. Lowood provides Jane with three necessary things: education, love and the examples of different forms of behaviour of different identities. These are all “tools” for Jane in making her may in the world.

Thornfield Hall and Marsh End.

Jane Eyre covers approximately ten years of Jane Eyre’s life: the novel begins with the ten year old child Jane and end with the young Jane of about twenty year old. Thornfield Hall and Marsh End act as the two important sites for the young adult Jane. These places and the period of time that Jane spends in them can be considered the crucial ones in terms of Jane’s identity. The Thornfield Hall and Marsh End parts of the novel revolve around Jane’s identity and self-assertion. She meets different people and different circumstances, different social practice and different setting on her journey to maturity, that is, different “others” or the “others” from which to draw hr own identity. She faces the world of changes and challenges, and changes and challenges develops her identity accordingly. Identity is a process: the whole novel, Jane Eyre, can be read as Jane’s identity formation process the places of Thornfield Hall and March End witness the culmination of this process. Her employment at Thornfield before Mr. Rochester arrives she finds no intellectual stimulation and soon her feeling of restlessness becomes stronger:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their facilities, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bays. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. It displays Jane’s longing for equality and independence.

Mr. Rochester rides into Jane’s life as a fairy tale dark prince resembling a Byronic hero. He makes a quite dramatic entrance in the novel. ‘It was exactly one from of Bassie’s Gytrash – a lion – like creature with long hair and a huge head: it passed me however, quietly enough, not staying to look up, with strange pretercanini eyes, in my face, as I half expected it would: The horse followed, a tall steed, and on its back a rider’. Rochester appears the very assence of patriarchal energy. Rochester is however not a strong as a Byronic hero would be and shows immediate weakness by hurting himself when his horse takes a fall, thus needing the help of Jane. Further, he show more signs of weakness in regard to his hidden mad wife. Shortly after Jane learns who the Master of Thornfield is and gets to know him she becomes intrigued and affected by him, she feels as they have a mental connection. “I felt at times as if however my relation rather than my master ... I ceased to pine for kindered: my thin crescent – destiny seemed to enlarge; the blanks of existence were filled up; my bodily health improved; I gathered flesh and strength (Bronte, 128). Rochester adds interest to Jane’s life with the intellectual

stimulus of their evening conferences, which she was lacking before he entered the scene. Jane and Rochester can be considered quite equal intellectually, however, in the beginning many inequalities exist.

Jane's relationship with Rochester is complicated by a power imbalance. The relationship between Jane and Rochester is unequal on many points; he is twenty years older than her, much more experienced, he belongs to higher social group, he is rich and she is poor and he is her master. All these inequalities were a major barrier at the time. As a governess, she is situated in an ambiguous point in the social structure: she is servant, but "upper" servant, equipped with sound school education and professional sophistication (Eagleton 1988, 16). Jane's social status and prestige are lower than those of Mr. Rochester's, who is a wealthy heir of the upper gentry and has a grand estate and a prestigious family lineage. A union or intimate relationship at least socially acceptable one – between the two is a impossibility, of which Jane is conscientious to remind herself in her rumination, as well as she is eager to reproach herself for building up her hopes:

"You have nothing to do with the master of Thornfield, further then to receive that salary he gives you for teaching his protegu, and to be grateful for such respectful and kind treatment as, if you do your duty, you have a right to expected at his hands. Be sure that is the only tie he seriously acknowledge between you and him; so don't make him the object of your fine feelings, your raptures, agonies and so forth. He is not of your order: keep to your caste, and be too self-respecting to lavish the love of the whole heart, soul, and strength, where such a gift is not wanted and would be desprised". (Bronte 1992-142).

Despite the severe incongruence between Jane and Mr. Rochester's social position, Jane is unable to extinguish her affectionate feeling and sense of strong affinity between them. Jane is able to identify with Mr. Rochester mentally though not socially: "He is not to them [the Ingrams and Eshtons] what he is to me, "I thought: "he is not of their kind. I believe he is of mine; - I am sure he is – I feel akin to him – I understand the language of his countenance and movements: though rank and wealth and sever us widely, I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him ... I must, then, repeat continually that we are for ever sundered: - and yet, while I breathe and think, I must love him". (Bronte 1992, 153).

Jane arrives to this conclusion in her own reflections: "Felling without judgement is a washy draught indeed; but judgement untempered by feeling is too bitter and husky a morsel for human deglutition" (Bronte 1992, 208). The synthesis of and balance between sense and sensibility is needed, and in her development. Jane is able too achieve this balance in the end. However, some maturation and developmental challenges have to be gone through before arriving to this inner "triumph". Jane has to overcome the social constraints in asserting her identity. She acknowledges that her status and appearance does not make her the ideal and eligible young Victorian lady. Nevertheless, she demands for recognition and respect for who she is, as she is respect for her identity as such as she defines it. In a speech she gives to Mr. Rochester in the garden of Thornfield Hall, Jane, overwhelmed by her emotion and the fear of losing Mr. Rochester asserts herself courageously:

"Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automation? – a machine with feelings and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you

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think because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am soulless and heartless? You thing wrong! – I have as much soul as you, - and full as much heart! And if God and gifted me with same beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor ever of moral flesh; - it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal; - as me are/ ... I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you.” (Bronte 1992, 223).

Especially her inner accomplishment and qualities, and her equality and value as a human being, she insists above, need and deserve to be noticed and appreciated.

Rochester tests Jane by spreading a rumour that he will marry Blanche Ingram causing Jane to feel insecure in regard to her looks. Blanche is a beautiful woman and Jane is aware of how the society and men rate women according to how beautiful they are. The more or less hidden rule is that beautiful women have a higher value than unattractive women. Beauty in a woman is regarded as more important than intellect, because a woman was expected to be an ornament without much opinion. When Rochester intends to marry Jane even though he already has a wife and is not able to enter another legally binding marriage it is a way of trying to exploit her. During the wedding preparing Jane realizes the great social difference and how she is to be financially dependent on Rochers; he reminded her of a “sultan”, who “bestows on a slave his gold and germs” (Bronte 237). When the marriage is stopped Jane turns down a comfortable life as Rochesters mistress because even though she loves him wants to be with him she will be dependent and in a sense imprisoned as a slave. To Jane independence is very important and she will not sacrifice her integrity and dignity. Her refusal to be Mr. Rochester mistress is strong assertion of her own identity. She chooses her values and makes her own decision, independent of other. Mr. Rochester tries to make Jane stay with him by pointing out that Jane has no “relatives or acquaintances” that could be offended by Jane's choice of living with him. Jane is conscious of this and tempted by the possibility of staying:

This was true and while he spoke my very conscience and reason turned traitors against me, and charged me with crime in resisting him. They spoke almost as loud as feeling and that damoured wildly. “Oh, comply!” it said. “This of his misery; think of his danger look at his state when left alone; remember his head long nature; consider the recklessness following on despair – soothe him; save him; tell him you love him and will be his. Who in the world on the world cares for you? Or who will be injured by what you do? (Bronte 1992, 280).

Jane may not have relatives that care for her, but she has herself: “Still undomitable was the reply – “I care for myself. The more solitary the more friendless, the more unsustained I am the more I will respect myself” (Bronte 1992, 280). Mr Rochester's negative attitude to mistresses confirms Jane in her decision to not to become his mistress: Jane shown self-reliance and confidence in her own instincts. Mr Rochester is not happy with Jane's decision. He holds her passionately, almost violently, trying to make her stay with him and realizing that he cannot and does not even want to force her and understands that violence and force are not the answer : if they were to be together and live happily it has to be Jane's own free will and choice; otherwise would not even be the Jane with whom he liked and love. Mr. Rochester acknowledge Jane's identity as an independent creature with a will of her own. Thus, for the sake of her conscience, self respect and independency, she decides to have Mr Rochester and Thornfield

Hall. On her way through the moors, she accidentally loses her few possessions and has to live the life of a beggar for a while. Exhausted and heart broken and in the grip of poverty, she is still able to maintain her endurance: “Life, however, was yet in my possession, will all its requirements, and pains and responsibilities. The burden must be carried; the want provided for; the suffering endured; the responsibility fulfilled: I set out.” (Bronte 1992, 287). Finally, she arrives at Marsh End and ends up at the door of the three siblings of the Rivers family, who admit her under their roof and take care of her. Jane is not ready for intimacy with Mr. Rochester until she had found her true identity, her real self. Thus, leaving Mr. Rochester is necessary for Jane’s identity search. The time spent at Marsh End is vital for the development of her identity: she gains knowledge of her origin and discovers new relations, her cousins of whose existence she was not even aware. The new findings help her to define herself – she has roots, now, and a family that cares for her.

At Marsh End, Jane’s relationship to her relatives is notably different from her relations to the Reed family at Gateshead. At Gateshead, she was dependent on her relatives; at Marsh End, her relatives are at least partly dependent on Jane and her sudden inheritance. Luckily for her cousins, Jane is only happy to be able to share her wealth of twenty thousand pounds with them: ‘the independence, the affluence which was mine, might be theirs too ... It would please and benefit me to have five thousand pounds; it would torment and oppress me to have twenty thousand ...’ (Bronte 1992, 341-342). Jane’s attitude to wealth is very modest and practical. However, Marsh End is not just a place of wealth, peace and refuge for Jane. She is put in a position where powerful self-assertion and depending on her identity is needed: confronting her unyielding cousin Saint John Rivers and his religious principles forces her to ponder over her own world view and values, making her more self-reliant. John regards Jane as “a specimen of a diligent, orderly, energetic woman” (Bronte 1992, 332) and starts to teach her Hindustani and other subjects. When Jane starts to study by St. John’s command and under his guidance, she begins to feel oppressed and dependent. Kind and benevolent by nature, she wishes to please her cousin but is soon mentally exhausted under his pressure. She is forced to “disown” her identity and natural disposition. She does not sympathize with St. John’s strict and hard religious beliefs to general coldness: “The humanities and amenities of life had no attraction for him – its peaceful enjoyment no charm. Literally, he lived only to aspire ... I comprehended all at once that he would hardly make a good husband: that it would be a trying thing to be his wife” (Bronte 1992, 347). St. John offers Jane to become his wife and helper as a missionary in India however tempted Jane is to accept the proposal, she realizes that such a loveless union will shorten her life. St. John is the opposite of Rochester in many ways. He is cold and without passion, and he aims to suppress Jane’s personality and independence. ‘I could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by, because tiresome importunate instinct reminded me that vivacity (at least in me) was distasteful to him’ (Bronte 352). St. John’s possessive manner reflects the Victorian patriarchal order, in which wives were practically owned by their husbands. St. John and Jane also have very different ideas of love.

[St. John to Jane]: “Jane you would not repent marrying me – be certain of that, we must be married. I repeat it: there is no other way: and undoubtedly enough of love would follow upon marriage to render the union right even in your eyes”.

“I scorn your idea of love, “I could not help saying, as I rose up and stood before him, leaving my back against the rock. “I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St. John, and

I scorn you when you offer it” (Bronte 361-362). St. John’s notion of love consists of reason and practicalities, while Jane defends the notion of passionate romantic love.

Victorian women were brought up and conditioned to believe that men were powerful and women followers that suppressed their own identity. Jane’s eagerness to please, which is a product of the fact that she has never before felt true belonging, could be one of the reasons why she has such difficulties to fend herself from St. John’s increasing power over her. ‘I felt his influence in my marrow – his hold on my limbs” (Bronte 359). Jane agrees to follow him to India to become a missionary as his helper but not his wife because she feels that he does not love her. She rather feels as if he hates and to marry him would result in him sending her to a premature death (Bronte 365). His persistence is strong and she is getting “hard beset by him” but in a different way she has been by Rochester, and obviously to Jane to yield would have been an error of judgement (Bronte 370). St. John is using argument such as “God and nature intended you as a missionary’s wife” (Bronte 356). His arguments of duty and service called by God are difficult for Jane to object to because she is conditioned by her years at Lowood where religion was an important tool used to educate the girls to obey patriarchal leader. St. John’s proposal and the discussion following it is an important burning point in the novel: Jane sees clearly the impossibility of their union and reassured her own identity. St. John and his views of marriage and love offer a good setting in which Jane may reflect on her own views and sentiments. Jane refuses to enter into a union based only on reason. She stays true to her feelings but St. John, like Mr. Rochester is an important character in Jane’s identity formation. After the rest and struggle at Marsh End, Jane is ready to move on. She has not been able to forget Mr. Rochester, and decides to find out what has happened to him. Having achieved financial independency through her inheritance during her stay at Marsh End, she is not financially inferior to Mr. Rochester anymore: they stand on more equal ground. Now that she has had the time to build her identity and become more independent and self-confident, she returns to Mr. Rochester and is ready for intimacy and love.

Ferndean

Jane learns that Thornfield Hall has been destroyed by a fire set by Bertha. During the fire, Bertha has committed suicide and Mr. Rochester has injured himself; he is blind, crippled and retired to his old manor house at Ferndean acts as final site for Jane’s development. At Ferndean, she finishes and finds culmination for the tasks and question of the stage of young/early intimacy and isolation, and achieves the experience of love as one of the basic powers in life. Like Jane herself says to Mr. Rochester, told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress” (Bronte 385). Jane and Mr. Rochester get married and settle down at Ferndean manor house.

The impassionate Mr. Rochester is a contrast to the passionless St. John, and thus, fulfills Jane’s ideal of romantic love and her requirements for a partner. I do not want a stranger - unsympathising, alien, different for me; I want my kindred: those with whom I have full fellow feeling” (Bronte 343). Mr. Rochester, unlike St. John, acknowledges and appreciates Jane’s identity and personality: “I longed for thee, Janet! Oh I longed for thee both with soul and flesh!” (Bronte 396). Mr. Rochester wants Jane in person, mentally and physically – to him, Jane is not just a mere tool for some higher purpose, but a unique and valuable, individual, “[his] second self, and lest earthly companion” (Bronte 223), as he tells Jane. Most importantly, Jane feels free

and is able to be herself with Mr. Rochester: “with him I was at perfect ease, because and knew I suited him; all I said or did seemed either to console or revive him. The equality that exists between Jane and Mr. Rochester begins already at Thornfield but deepens at Ferndean. At Thornfield, Mr. Rochester says to Jane. “My bride is here ... because my equal is here, and my likeness” (Brontë 224). At Thornfield Jane and Mr. Rochester are equal mentally, “in spirit” at Ferndean, they are also socially equal Jane and Mr. Rochester are able to grow and affirm their identities in each other’s presence. Jane did not care for the superficial social life she observed at Thornfield where women were displayed as ornaments of the drawing room. In the end Jane found her place in life: “No woman was even nearer to her mate than I am ... To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company” (Brontë 399). She found the love and kinship she longed for without sacrificing her own identity and independence.

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