The Queer Subtext of Good vs. Evil in The Picture of Dorian Gray and Good Omens

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BA Thesis

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1. Introduction

According to Nguyen, when reading the relationships between the male characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as homosexual, the novel becomes a cautionary tale warning of outing oneself in a heteronormative society. To develop this idea, this paper aims to show the conflict between good and evil, both in the novel and within Dorian Gray himself and how that conflict was punished.

In *Good Omens*, the characters of Crowley and Aziraphale struggle with the conflicts of good versus evil, in their case surrounded by the conflict between Heaven and Hell and struggling with their own morality. This paper will show their conflicts and present how the narrative treated them differently as society changed.

By comparing these novels, my goal is to show how society's perception of queerness, good and evil changed to the point that character's desires, queerness and beliefs no longer have to be punished to be discussed. While the societies contemporary to the works had their individual issues, how those issues are dealt with and perceived changed, which is going to be shown through this paper.

While writing this paper, alongside the works which focused on interpretations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Good Omens*, certain theoretical texts were used to describe queer theory and the conflict of morality in the characters, such as Warner's introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Lamos's *The Ethics of Queer Theory* and others.

2. Queer Theory

Sexuality in social theory has a recognized influence on social power dynamics and history as a whole, which is why the introduction of queer theory to it was significant. Queer theory, as Warner claims, allowed lesbian and gay intellectuals to challenge the heteronormativity of modern societies and pay closer attention to sexual movements that came before them, one of which can be seen in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the introduction of *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Warner points out how ignoring homosexuality, or only including it as an afterthought, often accompanied by more or less apparent homophobia, ignores the significance of queer theorists and queer texts through history. The only way to challenge the heteronormativity is by "actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world" (Warner 8), which is the goal of this paper.

Queer theorists challenge the heteronormative views of society, culture and what is considered normative. For queer theory it is important to examine how the law as an institution influenced and constricted queer behaviours, and how changing the law changed the perception of queerness (Calafell and Nakayama 3). This development can be seen in the differences between *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Good Omens*. While the former work punished its characters by straying from the norm, the latter allowed its characters to break the norms of their surroundings, specifically, the norms of Heaven and Hell. Calafell and Nakayama emphasise the importance of representation of sexuality in media, as that representation can influence how queer people are perceived. They also point out the importance of queer interpretations of certain works to challenge the more common readings.

According to Friedman, art was important for queer people such as Wilde and his contemporaries, as in it they could develop their sense of self and resist the hostile social world. Their writings show that engaging with art can be essential for understanding one's sexual

identity and that queer desire can inspire entirely new ways of seeing oneself and the world through art (Friedman 3).

Between the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Good Omens*, perception shifted, so more canonically and openly queer characters started to be included in media. It is important to recognize that the queer readings of those texts and their more or less intentional queer subtext does not exist in a vacuum. Queer theorists who discussed those works were influenced by their predominantly heteronormative cultures. Furthermore, queer people and queer theorists, are not a homogenous group, so there won't be a singular "correct" interpretation of any work. The aim while creating a queer interpretation of a text is to show a new and different perspective (Raymond 100).

3. Morality

In *The Ethics of Queer Theory*, Lamos argues for the understanding of the ethical dimensions of queer identities and how both individuals and the queer community struggle against oppression. While trying to break down the binary view of sexuality in the Western society is essentially amoral, it is still important to challenge the traditional views of sexuality. For queer theorists, the study of same-sex desire can create positive and meaningful queer identities. Another important idea for Lamos is to include homosexuality in "human nature," so it is perceived as something natural and an essential part of life. On the other hand, while Lamos describes the ethical subject of queer theory, they are not defined solely by their sexual orientation, but by the intersecting parts of their personality and experiences. Queer ethics are not a singular idea but "the ethics of queer theory is a fluctuating process of negotiation, an endless labour that entails debate as much as agreement" (Lamos 144). The characters which will later be described in this paper show how the idea of queerness changed through time.

The characters from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Good Omens* struggle with their sense of morality and if they are doing what is "right." Taylor discusses how queer morality is, as "moral properties are queer in this sense has nothing to do with whether or not they fit in with a naturalistic view of the world but rather to do with the fact that such properties would be intrinsically action-guiding" (Taylor 13), and by integrating queer perspectives in the discussion of morality adds nuance to the discussion of morality and ethics.

According to Fritz, the characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* mostly follow Christian morality and its idea of sin, which can be seen in Basil's reaction to how Dorian's portrait changed. Basil, following the Chrisitan idea of sin, sees the changes on the portrait as proof of Dorian's sins (Fritz 296). Although Wilde later claimed he regretted the moral of the novel being that one will be punished for their excesses, another part of the moral is "that the pursuer

of self-development in a sense deserves punishment because he or she depends upon the exploitation of others as a necessary part of this luxury" (Fritz 303). The role of morality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* will be further elaborated on in this paper.

4. Queer Subtext in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

The Picture of Dorian Gray was written in the Victorian period, when homosexuality in literature started to become "both hidden and wholly legible" (Kaye 51). This allows for a reading of the queer subtext which will be analysed through the relationships between Dorian and Basil and between Dorian and Henry.

In her paper, Nguyen mentions coded language which is based on a "form of peculiar diction and allusions to Greek mythology, history and culture" (Nguyen 9). For example, Henry compares the painting of Dorian to Adonis and Narcissus, two characters from Greek myths who were known for their beauty Dorian is also referred to as an "ivory Hermes" and "silver Faun" (Wilde 27) (Faun being the Roman iteration of the Greek satyr). According to Thomas Heacox, mentioning Greek mythology and culture is often used to insinuate homosexuality, as it was not so accepted in Victorian society (Heacox 58).

The specific examples and characters used can also be interpreted as indications of homosexual attraction. The Hellenic descriptors Henry uses allude to a forbidden desire, these specific words, such as aforementioned "ivory Hermes," are used to describe an attraction through the Hellenic worldview. Although modern terms cannot be directly applied to the people and relationships in Ancient Greece, there is proof of relations, usually between a younger and an older man, in Ancient Greek art and literature. These relationships were seen as neutral, as long as the men still performed their civic duties, meaning they got married to women and had children (Dover 12). This is why Henry claims that "the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of medievalism and return to the Hellenic ideal…" (Wilde 20). He claims that such a change would return joy to humanity, and separate society from the period when the Catholic Church started to actively punish homosexual acts (Brystryn and Greenberg 533-535). Henry continues by claiming "the bravest

man among us is afraid of himself" (Wilde 20), implying nothing can change as long as men are afraid to express their desires. By reading into the queer subtext of Henry's words, he is saying that homosexual men could not present their sexuality and attraction openly, as they would be condemned by society, as Wilde was during his trial for gross indecency in April of 1895 (Schulz 39). As Henry said in the aforementioned quote, they are afraid of a part of themselves and what would happen to their reputation if their attraction was made public. In this interpretation, Henry is also describing himself. Henry, who he is portrayed as an open and somewhat extravagant character who speaks his mind, shows his attraction by evoking Greek mythology, although he is not brave enough to act on it. Another reading of this quote places Henry in the position of a spokesperson for Wilde. Through Henry, Wilde is trying to be a proponent of living an honest life and not hiding one's homosexuality. He is trying to advise members of society who could read further into the meaning of his words that they should not hide their attractions. Henry is also a proponent of self-discovery and he encourages Dorian to experience new things.

Music is a part of the coded language in the relationship between Dorian and Alan Campbell. Campbell was described as an excellent musician and "it was music that had first brought him and Dorian Gray together—music and that indefinable attraction that Dorian seemed to be able to exercise whenever he wished" (Wilde 150). By connecting music and their "indefinable attraction," Wilde implies a homosexual relationship. Once their relationship ended, Campbell stopped playing and enjoying music. Here, music is coded language for Campbell's homosexual desire, when he rejects his desires, he stops enjoying music. According to Clausson's interpretation of Henry's quote about the soul and the senses, this is how Campbell destroyed his "individual personality" (Clausson 348).

Music as a coded language is also present in Henry's character. He is described as speaking with "musical words said with musical utterance" (Wilde 55). By interpreting music

as coded language, this implies he shows his attraction to men, similarly to how he used Greek mythology to show his attraction. Henry also compares his influence over Dorian with playing the violin. An important moment between Henry and Dorian happens while Dorian is playing him a nocturne. Henry here professes how beautiful and charming he found Dorian from the first time they met. He says "You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets" (Wilde 197), which can be interpreted as Henry praising Dorian for not hiding his homosexual attractions and acting on them. He also asks Dorian to stay the night, claiming he never played as well as he did that night. In the subtext there can be found a physical attraction Henry feels in the moment.

According to Nguyen, the specific words "personality" and "influence" imply same-sex attraction Basil experiences for Dorian, for example, when Basil describes his first meeting with Dorian by saying "I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. I did not want any external influence in my life" (Wilde 10). This idea comes from the trials of Oscar Wilde in which he mentioned the word "personality" when asked about homosexual relationships in the novel by Edward Carson. Carson was the counsel for the 8th Marquess of Queensberry, who was accused of libel by Wilde. Although Wilde was the persecutor in this trial, the trial focused more on whether or not he was a sodomite, as the Marquess claimed, and not on the accusations of libel.

CARSON: Do you mean to say that that passage describes the natural feeling of one man towards another?

WILDE: It would be the influence produced by a beautiful personality.

CARSON: A beautiful person?

WILDE: I said, "a beautiful personality." You can describe it as you like. Dorian Gray's was a remarkable personality. (Schulz 42)

The word "personality" evades outright mentions of homosexuality, but signals the homosexual desire towards a specific person. In the case of the novel, it is the attraction Basil feels towards Dorian that he cannot act on (Nguyen 9).

The relationship between Dorian, Henry and Basil can be observed through René Girard's mimetic theory. His theory is based on the assumption that humans do not know what they themselves desire, so they imitate the desires of others. As the desire for the desired object, in this case Dorian, is acquired by other desiring subjects, envy and conflict can arise. The desire which spreads from one person to another can be seen in Henry's desire to meet Dorian, after Basil professes his admiration of him. Basil, on the other hand, wants to keep Dorian for himself. He is infatuated with Dorian as can be seen through his comments to Henry before he introduces them. For example, the description of their first meeting could resemble an attraction one might feel for a stranger "I turned halfway round, and saw Dorian Gray for the first time. When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself" (Wilde 10). Girard describes the desire people experience for each other, which is then imitated by those around them as "…a description of the fundamental—if not extreme—openness of humans to others. The mimetic theory describes man as a social being that is dependent on relations to others" (Palaver 36). Although they were introduced later, Basil's immediate attraction was apparent. He didn't want to share Dorian's name with Henry, because he likes to keep the names of the people he loves secret, claiming "It seems to be the one thing that can make modern life mysterious or marvellous…" (Wilde 7). This can be interpreted through

Girard's claim that in some pieces of literature "there is no love without jealousy and no friendship without envy" (Palaver 59). Another interpretation of those words might be that in Victorian England homosexuality had to be hidden, so Basil kept his romantic interests a secret. Because Basil showed his fascination with Dorian, it prompted Henry's interest. That is when Basil and Henry begin competing for Dorian's attention, which Nguyen equates with Girard's triangle (Nguyen 12). Henry's desire for Dorian can be seen when they discuss who will get the portrait of Dorian, he wants the portrait because he wants to possess Dorian. Later, Basil refers to the portrait as "the real Dorian" (Wilde 28), the Dorian that Basil perceived as innocent, before he got corrupted by Henry, which he can in a way possess, as its creator. This aligns with Girard's mimetic theory as "…human beings strive to possess the exact objects that others already possess or desire" (Palaver 46).

As Basil and Henry wished to possess Dorian, so did Dorian himself. He wanted to possess his youth and beauty longer than it should be humanly possible, which he achieved by unwittingly placing the corruption of his soul into the portrait. He does this because "Dorian wishes to possess the gaze of others and visually dominate them" (Nguyen 13) Despite being the object in the traditional interpretation of Girard's triangle, he, as the object, also possesses others. The relationship between the three men in this interpretation only makes sense if there is sexual or romantic desire between them.

5. Conflict Between Good and Evil in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Often Basil and Henry are put on the opposite sides of the spectrum, as the right and wrong, consciousness and temptation, which boil down to the morally positive and morally negative influences in Dorian's life (Liebman 296). This conflict can also be seen within Dorian, who he was before the creation of the portrait and meeting Henry, and who he became afterwards. Despite how common these interpretations were, Houston A. Baker claimed Wilde's goal was not to pit these sides against each other, but to show that they must coexist. The conflict between Basil and Henry goes beyond being only a conflict between good and evil (Baker 352-354). Basil believes there is a moral order, that God punishes wrongdoing and that lives should be led by sympathy and compassion. Henry, on the other hand, doesn't believe in a moral order and believes the self is in a constant war with itself and things beyond its control. His goal in life is pleasure, both sensual and intellectual and he is shown to be one of the more scientific characters in the novel. While he wants to view everything from a scientific point of view, he is pessimistic about the topics that interest him, such as people and nature. Although he claims there is beauty in tragedy, such as Sybil's death, it is also the proof of the power of nature. Sybil's death is beautiful only as long as it is made beautiful through the aesthetic imagination. Henry is also knowledgeable about psychology and is interested in unique personalities, which is what he found attractive about Dorian. He is of the opinion that human beings are irrational. When Dorian decides to change his life after finding out Sybil died, Henry does not believe he will be able to. Similarly, as was mentioned before, Henry doesn't believe a person should be loyal to one person their whole life, because people are controlled more by their emotions than their will. Through his life Henry separates himself, not unlike a scientist, so he could observe people without being more deeply involved in their lives and therefore becoming attached. "Spectatorism allows him to analyze nonjudgmentally but also to turn reality into art by

transforming everyday human events into aesthetically distanced drama. And cynicism permits him to act on the stage of the real world, displaying the fruits of his scientific research, but also to protect himself from succumbing to the emotional temptations of that world, thereby avoiding the suffering that shadows passion" (Liebman 299). He separates himself from other characters, he still tries to manipulate Dorian to satisfy his curiosity. Despite not being young anymore, he can vicariously experience a new life through Dorian. Henry still claims "All influence is immoral – immoral from the scientific point of view… Because to influence a person is to give him at one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him, his sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him." (Wilde 19) In his own opinion, he is doing something immoral, influencing Dorian, but his scientific explorations are more important to him.

Henry spent years observing and influencing Dorian, but never realised what his influence brought about. He is absolutely convinced Dorian is not capable of committing a crime, as can be seen in his response when Dorian admits to murdering Basil "I would say, my dear fellow, that you're posing for a character that doesn't suit you. All crime is vulgar, just as all vulgarity is crime. It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder. I am sorry if I hurt your vanity by saying so, but I assure you it is true" (Wilde 193). Despite being the one constant in Dorian's life who almost encouraged illegal or ill-advised behaviour, he doesn't see what Dorian has become and how he helped Dorian along the way.

Basil is a less complicated character than Henry and appears less often in the novel, but his role contrasting Henry's behaviour is important. Basil, who thinks there is a moral order, believes he will be punished for influencing Dorian into becoming vain. Unlike Henry, he believes in the existence of sin and how it is visible on a person's face. Basil's view of art strays from aestheticism as he wants to inspire people, and is not making "art for art's sake." Before

seeing Sybil perform, Basil believes Dorian that she is what Dorian needs and believes she is a great actress. After her poor performance, he tries to advise Dorian to be gentle with his words "Don't talk like that about anyone you love, Dorian. Love is a more wonderful thing than art" (Wilde 78). He tries to lead a compassionate and a sympathetic life to achieve a peace of mind. He is a moralist and does his best to not fall into Henry's ways of thinking and to protect Dorian from his influence.

When he fails to preserve the purity Dorian had when they met, he tries to at least make him aware of the damage he is causing to the people around him and how it reflects on him "Every gentleman is interested in his good name. You don't want people to talk of you as something vile and degraded. Of course you have your position, and your wealth and all that kind of thing. But position and both are not everything" (Wilde 136). He continues to say how sin is visible on a person's face and because Dorian's face has not changed, it must mean he has not sinned. At this point, unbeknownst to Basil, the portrait has drastically changed.

Basil and Henry do not change drastically through the novel, their goal is to show Dorian the opposing sides of life, define his moral options "And unlike Dorian, therefore, they are not confronted by either the challenge of moral choice or the opportunity for moral growth" (Liebman 311). Had Dorian chosen either man and either way of life, he would have given up on a part of himself, which Wilde criticized. Wilde wanted to unite instinct and consciousness and through Dorian he showed the difficulties of achieving a balance between them. He is "Wilde's Everyman-that is, as the character who, embodying all the elements of humanity (instinct and conscience, scepticism and faith, appreciation of both life and art), represents humanity's last, best hope" (Liebman 312). With *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde strayed from the typical Victorian novel in which good is rewarded and evil punished, which is most obviously shown in Basil's character, who believes the world works like that and is murdered for it. Dorian, as the main character, does not get married or becomes a fully realised person,

but destroys himself. The novel deals with the conflict between good and evil that is deepened by what each aspect entails. It was not written as a moral lesson on how to live a good life, but as a lesson on complexities of life, personality and existing as a morally grey person.

6. Queer Subtext of Good and Evil in *Good Omens*

The queer subtext of good and evil in *Good Omens* is most apparent in the characters of the angel Aziraphale and the demon Crowley, although the subtext wasn't intentional. On a basic level they parallel the characters of Basil and Henry, and both go through an internal conflict, similar to Dorian, deciding whether they should lean towards Heaven or Hell. Through the novel the two sides are preparing for the Apocalypse and war against each other. Aziraphale and Crowley on the other hand, as they have been on Earth since its creation, want things to stay as they are. They have gotten attached to humanity and "gone native" (Gaiman and Pratchett 7). It is interesting to note Aziraphale's description in the novel:

> Many people, meeting Aziraphale for the first time, formed three impressions: that he was English, that he was intelligent, and that he was gayer than a tree full of monkeys on nitrous oxide. Two of these were wrong; Heaven is not in England, whatever certain poets may have thought, and angels are sexless unless they really want to make an effort. But he was intelligent. And it was an angelic intelligence which, while not being particularly higher than human intelligence, is much broader and has the advantage of having thousands of years of practice. (Gaiman and Pratchett 89)

Aziraphale is similar to Basil. While Basil believes in a moral order where everyone gets what they deserve, be it good or bad, Azraphale believes in the "ineffable plan." He, much like other angels, does not really understand what that plan is, but since it comes from Heaven and God, he believes it is right. He is also compassionate like Basil, for example, when he gave Adam and Eve his flaming sword and justified it by saying "They looked so cold, poor things, and she's expecting *already,* and what with the vicious animals out there and the storm coming up

I thought, well, where's the harm, so I just said, look, if you come back there's going to be an almighty row, but you might be needing this sword, so here it is, don't bother to thank me, just do everyone a big favor and don't let the sun go down on you here" (Gaiman and Pratchett 2). He tries to help, despite doing something he is not sure heaven would approve of. His belonging to Heaven is tested many times through the novel, occasionally choosing Heaven and occasionally Crowley. After realising Heaven doesn't want to prevent the Apocalypse that had begun, he joins Crowley in the efforts to stop it.

On the first pages it can be seen how both Aziraphale and Crowley struggle with knowing whether or not they did the good or evil thing, and whether or not they are capable of doing good or evil. Crowley, who is more open to change, comments "I keep wondering whether the apple thing wasn't the right thing to do, as well. A demon can get into real trouble, doing the right thing… Funny if we both got it wrong, eh? Funny if I did the good thing and you did the bad one, eh?" (Gaiman and Pratchett 3). He was also tasked with finding human parents for the Antichrist, who would bring about the Apocalypse. Although he is on the side of Hell, he doesn't want to help them and struggles with his inner conflict. He also prompts Aziraphale to question Heaven, as people who di dnot have the same opportunities in life shouldn't be judge the same. Although he still believed in the ineffable plan and Heaven, Aziraphale and Crowley came to an agreement to help each other. As they were tasked with steering humanity in opposite directions, they decided it would be easier if they both performed temptations and "divine ecstasies."

Aziraphale and Crowley try to influence the Antichrist from his birth, similarly to how Basil and Henry tried to influence Dorian. Due to a mix up in the hospital where the Antichrist was brought as a baby, they misplace him, so they spend 11 years influencing a regular boy. Their goal was to raise the Antichrist in the most neutral way possible, so he wouldn't help either side win in the Apocalypse. While they were influencing the regular boy, the real

Antichrist was living with his human parents in the village of Tadfield. Because the angels and demons did not know where he was, he grew up only with the human influence, which turned out to be the most neutral option.

The Antichrist, named Adam, had some grandiose and somewhat childish (age-appropriate for an eleven-year-old) ideas about what he could do with the powers he discovered after turning eleven. He wanted to make his friend group, called the Them, rulers of the world, grant their every wish and fill every day with games, but

They were sharing a thought that none of them would be able to articulate very satisfactorily even in normal times. Broadly, it was that there had once been real cowboys and gangsters, and that was great. And there would always be pretend cowboys and gangsters, and that was also great. But real pretend cowboys and gangsters, that were alive and not alive could be put back in their box when you were tired of them-this did not seem great at all. The whole point about gangsters and cowboys and aliens and pirates was that you could stop being them and go home (Gaiman and Pratchett 126).

They made Adam realise having everything he wished for was not going to be better than the lives they were living. He loved his humanity so much that Heaven and Hell couldn't turn him to either side. For example, while passing through Tadfield, Aziraphale felt how loved the village was, although at the time he didn't realise he was feeling Adam's emotions. Unlike Dorian, Adam became content with his life. He stopped desiring other's attention and admiration and instead of destroying the world, or himself, he protected it from Heaven and Hell. Adam also realised that there will always be conflict, within him, in the world, between angels and demons, and he accepted it, unlike Dorian who was destroyed by the conflict within him.

7. Conclusion

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a novel filled with queer subtext, which can be found in different forms, such as coded language and allusions to Greek mythology. Queer subtext is most apparent in the relationships between Dorian, Basil and Henry. This paper explored how they were influenced by desire through Girard's mimetic theory, how different characters expressed their desires and how their lives were influenced and changed by those desires.

The conflict of good and evil is also prominent in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and this paper explores which influences create that conflict and how Dorian is ultimately punished as he couldn't resolve the conflict within himself. He was influenced by both Basil and Henry, who expected different behaviours from him and that conflict is what lead to his death.

Finally, this paper shows how the novel *Good Omens* is similar to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as both deal with the conflict of good and evil. They are juxtaposed because the characters in *Good Omens* aren't punished for the conflicts within them, but are allowed by the narrative to resolve them. It is also significant to notice the parallels between specific characters, namely Basil and Aziraphale as the apparent positive moral influences, and Henry and Crowley as the negative moral influences.

8. Abstract

This thesis is about the queer subtext in the *Picture of Dorian Gray*¸ the conflict of good and evil in the characters of the novel and how the narrative punishes them because of that conflict. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is compared to the novel *Good Omens* to show how the treatment of the conflict of good and evil changed through time.

9. Sažetak

Ovaj završni rad govori o queer podtekstu u romanu *Slika Doriana Graya*, sukobu dobra i zla u likovima romana i načinom na koji ih sadržaj romana kažnjava zbog tog sukoba. *Slika Doriana Graya* uspoređuje se s romanom *Dobri predznaci* kako bi se prikazalo da se tretman sukoba dobra i zla promijenio kroz vrijeme.

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