

## Centering the Student Psyche: Facilitating Psychotherapeutic Readings of Literary Texts

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### Abstract

Using the insights of psychoanalytical theory, literature instructors can facilitate therapeutically beneficial readings, especially of works that students choose because of a strong affective response. The essay proposes moving beyond reader-response assignments, in which students reflect anecdotally on their reactions to a literary work, to assignments in which students effectively analyze their own psyches, in dialogue with the literary work. The pedagogy of centering the student psyche grew out of the author's twenty-five-year-long affective response to a particular novel and his experience with Jungian analytical and archetypal psychology, which gave him a framework within which to analyze that affective response.

*Keywords:* psychoanalytical approach to literature, reader-response, therapeutic reading

As Bernard Paris (1997) suggests, “There has been a great deal of resistance among critics not only to regarding literary characters as imagined human beings, but also to using modern psychoanalytic theories to analyze them” (p. 7). Paris champions psychological approaches to literature and employs the psychoanalytical theories of Karen Horney to analyze the motivation and “psychology of literary characters” (p. 6). He goes so far as to suggest that “[t]here is a triangular relationship between literature, theory, and the individual

interpreter,” and that “[o]ur literary and theoretical interests reflect our own character” (p. 15). His work is fascinating in that it is interested in the psychology of literary characters, but what if literature instructors used Paris’s insights and those of other theorists, as well as psychologists, to put the psyche of their students on the syllabus? Doing so would seem to be highly transgressive. Many students, however, are eager to make significant, perhaps even life-changing, connections to literary works. Given the opportunity and a psychologically informed frame to work within, they can develop a reading that informs their psyches in therapeutic ways. Transgression can lead to new insights, and a pedagogy that augments standard literary hermeneutics and occasionally centers the students’ psyches can help students explore their own psyches in dialogue with the literary texts they read.

Centering the student psyche is a radical step, even for reader response theories, some of which are closely allied with psychoanalytical thought. Norman Holland (1990) helped establish a psychoanalytic approach to literary analysis that sees the Freudian, wish-fulfilling ego as being drawn to texts that are “the secret expression of what we desire to hear, much as we protest we do not” (Wright qtd. in Murfin, 1993, p. 224). Any work to analyze what fantasy wish-fulfillment a reader projects, however, is bracketed off, left to the specialist:

It is essential to have some clinical experience of psychoanalysis and to supplement that experience with a sense of the historical practice of psychoanalysis (Holland, p. 3).

Without clinical experience, “we turn psychoanalysis into language games or airy speculation,” Holland suggests (p. 3). Yet work has been done in both psychological theory and literary theory that Holland labels “third-phase psychoanalysis” (p. 40), that, when taken together, does give a literature instructor ways to privilege a student reader’s psyche. As my experience doing just that suggests, occasionally teaching students to move from privileging the literary text to privileging their own psychological responses can open new experiences, ranging from posing provocative questions about why literature is important to them personally to powerful therapeutic insights into their psyches. There is work in literary theory and Freudian psychoanalysis, as well as in Jungian analytical psychology, to suggest how an instructor can facilitate such therapeutic reading that itself organically taps into one’s conscious and unconscious mind: Simply calling attention to and privileging a therapeutic reading—for those students who are interested—can offer therapeutic insights.

Valuing students' response to literature, of course, is not new. Reader response theory has centered the reader's experience since Louise Rosenblatt first theorized in *Literature as Exploration* (1938) that what was paramount was a reader's "personal sense of literature," "an unself-conscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction" that, albeit, had to be grounded in the factual detail of a work (qtd. in Lynn, 2005, p. 62-63). In other reader-response practice, readers negotiate and respond to narrative strategies embedded in the text (reader-reception criticism). In *Surprised By Sin* (1967), Stanley Fish theorized that *Paradise Lost* is "riddled with traps, or 'good temptations,' to test even the most devout and contrite" Christian reader of Milton's epic (Author 1990). For instance, a reader falls imaginatively if one approves of Adam willingly sinning so as to be with his wife: The reader imaginatively reproduces Adam's sins of uxoriousness and disobedience and, Fish suggests, is chastened. Wolfgang Iser's (1978) approach took a step back away from the text and the reader in his reader-response theory, arguing for a reading process of "virtual work" (p. 21) in which the meaning generated resides in a virtual space between the reader and the text. The reader/critic's role is to "clarif[y] the *potential* of a text" (p. 18). While the reader works to avoid "the fatal trap of trying to impose one meaning," the text anchors a reader's response (p. 18). A psycho-therapeutic reading of a text, conversely, moves away from strategies embedded in a text, virtual work, and a more or less free-floating personal response toward the psyches of student readers.

For a new course on psychological approaches to literature that I developed, I resolved to offer a proactive option to facilitate a psycho-therapeutic response to literature, drawing from both my extensive research in analytical psychology, especially, as well as my personal experience with a particular novel. Literature instructors certainly have had deeply personal relationships with particular works, yet we generally proscribe student personal relations with literature, leaving it to students to somehow, at some later time, nurture personal responses. Several years ago, I struggled as an undergraduate and young assistant professor with my own powerful affective response to a particular character in a Kurt Vonnegut Jr. novel—Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1968). Some years after earning my Ph.D., I decided to use what I knew of Jungian analytical psychology (a major part of my dissertation research) to analyze not the novel, but my pronounced and specific psychological response, which had stretched over twenty-five years. At one point in the novel, Billy, a chaplain's assistant in World War II, "dazed wanderer" (p. 32) is behind enemy lines with three other soldiers who try to help. But "He wished everybody would leave him alone. 'You guys go on without me,' he said again and again" (p. 34). It took a long time before it became obvious to

me, through the psychological theories of C.G. Jung and Karen Horney, that there was a reason that my psyche kept returning to the character—and, almost as mysteriously, why the novel kept returning to my syllabus. My affective response to Billy Pilgrim’s defense of being “resigned or detached” (Paris, 1997, p. 27) did not change over the years; it just kept returning, something like Freud’s return of the repressed. The experience of first, noticing the affective response and, second, exploring it analytically, was powerfully transformative.<sup>1</sup> I resolved to give students an opportunity to entertain doing the same.

Certainly, students have equally powerful affective responses, as is evidenced by novels that are re-read and films that are seen repeatedly. So, why not allow students to write about books to which they had powerful affective responses? *Fight Club*, *The Great Gatsby*, or *Ella Enchanted* were a few that came up in my class. For one student, *The Bell Jar* had mysteriously “whispered” to her one summer four years ago when she saw it in the library stacks. She had wondered ever since about the “tidal wave of response [from] my subconscious.” (I will discuss this student’s therapeutic exploration and analysis later in the essay.) Her experience, and that of others in this class, it turned out, did indeed echo my own. For my students and myself, in a manner of speaking, we had not chosen to analyze the literary work: it had, as it were, chosen each of us. I am not suggesting that instructors assume the role of a psychoanalytical clinician and attempt therapy in our classes. Rather, I am suggesting that we sometimes allow opportunities for students to analyze their own psyches in course assignments that privilege personal investigation of what Marshall Alcorn and Mark Bracher (1985) have called a “narcissistic alliance” with a character or text (p. 348).

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College students in literature and humanities classes come looking for answers to questions about life and identity, as Mark Bracher (2006) asserts, and instructors, unconsciously or consciously, act the role of one who “is presumed to know the answer” (p. 128). Understandably, when instructors act as one who knows, they tend naturalize and privilege their desires—their understanding how to approach and interpret texts—not their students’. Certainly, the project of the literature classroom, largely, is to broaden students’ knowledge and thinking about literature, about theory, about critical reception of texts. However, students’ analyses of their personal responses to texts are also valuable and afford them opportunities to deepen their understanding of not just literature, but themselves. Facilitating such a practice in course assignments offers benefits of psychoanalysis akin to those derived from sessions with a therapist, according to Mark Bracher and Marshall

Alcorn (1985), both professors of English with expertise in psychoanalysis. In a fascinating essay, “Literature, Psychoanalysis, and the Re-Formation of the Self” (1985), they theorize about two forces operating sympathetically within transference, a phenomenon in which an analysand projects emotions onto an analyst—or, by extension of their model, a student onto an instructor, or a reader onto a text. Readers enter into a dialogic relationship in which a story or author persona can be “interposed between the reader and the perceived threat to the reader’s self” (a “primary trust”), as well as enter into a “narcissistic alliance” (“secondary trust”) with a story or author persona which “is itself seen to be confronting the same aspects of existence (death, frustration, etc.) that threaten the reader’s own sense of self” (p. 349). When a story is interposed between the reader and the threatening aspect of life, a reader develops a “projective fantasy” (p. 347) in which one transfers—or projects—an infantile wish, a fantasy of fulfillment of a desire prohibited in childhood.

In the course of classroom instruction and discussion (or later), Alcorn and Bracher suggest, the student will come to realize that he or she has projected / transferred onto the text his or her own emotional wish fantasies, a corrective dynamic that functions like that of a psychotherapist in the consulting room. That is, it becomes clear to the student that the “reality” he or she projected originated in his or her own here-to-fore unconscious projection. In the case of secondary trust, the reader forms a narcissistic alliance with a story’s character or author persona. This alliance establishes a buffer between the reader and the external threat, which then leads to the character or persona being introjected, “becoming a living presence in the reader’s consciousness” (p. 349). In this way, for instance, my narcissistic alliance with Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim buffered me from the realization of my own defense of detachment, allowing Billy Pilgrim, as it were, to carry that burden for me, until I was ready or knowledgeable enough to notice and explore my projection.

A reader’s primary- and/or secondary-trust experience acts upon one’s ego ideal (an aspirant effect) as well as one’s superego (an effect of restraint), effectively “promot[ing] a re-formation of the self” (Alcorn & Bracher, 1985, p. 350), structurally changing the way one’s psyche negotiates external experience. In therapeutic psychoanalysis work, the therapeutic session alters the self structure—helps the analysand—by identifying and opening up space for infantile wishes (ego-ideal, aspirant), then confronting and challenging them, activating, then discharging vestigial Oedipal fantasies (superego reality, restraint). The reading of literature echoes the process: Many stories afford “material for ego-ideal introjects,” while also providing cautionary and tragic tales that help “foste[r] the

recognition of ideals that overstep the finite human condition” (p. 350). Bracher and Alcorn sum up the process this way:

Such recognition of the frustration and suffering attendant on life’s precarious position promotes a realistic superego that serves to check the often infinite desires of the ego ideal (p. 350).

The psychoanalytical project, whether in the therapeutic session or in one’s own reading, “pressures the self to develop more realistic and sophisticated ideals as it negotiates obstacles in the path to fulfillment” (Alcorn & Bracher, 1985, p. 350). Their theory of self-reformation suggests that complex psychoanalytic work goes on as a student reads. Alcorn and Bracher’s work is very insightful, but leans heavily toward Freudian psychoanalysis, while I lean much more toward Jung, whose work another leading psychologist, James Hillman, has taken up and extended.

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In *The Force of Character*, Hillman (1999) suggests that psychotherapists can become the unwitting victims of professional practices and ideologies that condition them to see, largely, what they are looking for: “Our restricted notion of character restricts what we are able to see in people” (p. 34). “[I]nstead of looking, we test; instead of [using] imaginative insight, we read write-ups” (p. 35). As educators, perhaps our concern in our understanding of students is sometimes more narcissistic than it is imaginative. In disseminating knowledge about literary texts and their critical reception, we perhaps necessarily look in student work for analysis that often reflects what we might come up with ourselves, though we emphasize the need for original work in assignments such as a character analysis. Perhaps we could approach such a familiar assignment in a new way. When we read student analyses about literary characters, we often expect to see a discussion of what motivates a character. Why not pause, however, and consider what we do in the classroom with a little “imaginative insight”? What motivates students to come to our literature classrooms in the first place? If we give our students the benefit of the doubt and resist the urge to think, for instance, that only a liberal arts core requirement or a lack of interest in other majors has put them in our classes, we can consider that something serious and important has brought them to us: What is it that they are looking for at this time in their lives that has brought them into our classes?

In “Transference, Desire, and the Ethics of Pedagogy,” Mark Bracher (2006) suggests that students come to class expecting literature instructors to impart knowledge about life’s “epistemological truths” (p. 129). Bracher theorizes the psychology of the students’ projections upon instructors, who are presumed to either “know the answer” (p. 128) or to know authors who do, asserting that “teachers cannot shed the mantle of authority” in the classroom because of student projections, transference. “Transference is present in all pedagogical situations, but it is often particularly powerful in literature classes” (p. 128), a thesis that Bracher (2006) later re-asserted, but changing “literature classes” to “humanities classes” (p. 82). Students “come with implicit (and sometimes explicit) questions such as: What should I do with my life? What’s the point of it all? Why am I here? How can I give meaning to my life?” (Bracher, 2006, p. 128). This, of course, is not news to instructors in the humanities, who regularly have some few students who clearly are in transference. Bracher insists, however, that all students are in transference—even quiet or unresponsive students are there “for knowledge of much the same type as analysands bring to analysis” (p. 128). Students come to literature classes to develop self-knowledge from “one who knows,” and this is fine, even desirable, as long as the instructor acts ethically and resists the “seductive force of authority” (p. 128), the authority of being the one in the know or being the one whose “desire determines the student’s desire” (Bracher, 2006, p. 83).

A strategy that I have adopted to minimize student projections onto me as one who knows is to be the one who knows that they are the ones who know. In this pedagogy, I have found Alcorn and Bracher’s concept of a “narcissistic alliance” to be a powerful way to help students understand their affective responses to literature, although my approach, at its base, is informed more by Jung’s and Hillman’s analytical psychology. Put simply, during a reading experience the unconscious will call attention to characters and situations that point to both positive and negative aspects of one’s psyche that are being overlooked by the ego. Writing about an individual’s symptomatic response to a particular situation in life, Edward Whitmont (1969) suggests that there is a “meaningfulness of the unknown message which [is] inherent in his strange compulsion” (p. 20). Similarly, one caught up in—even enjoying—a narcissistic alliance with a story or film is receiving a message. One’s compelling attraction to a character may also point to unknown strengths—“a positive force ... needed by the dreamer,” as Marie-Louise von Franz (1964) suggests (p. 178). As individuals develop early in life, characteristics that are deemed inappropriate [both negative and positive] are repressed into what Jung called the shadow: “[W]hatever form it takes the function of the shadow is to represent the opposite side of the ego and to embody just those

qualities that one dislikes most in other people” (von Franz, p 182). That is, one projects one’s unconscious contents out to the world, like a film projecting onto a screen, and can therapeutically “read” one’s unconscious contents by “reading” one’s affective responses to others, as well as to characters in literature. The benefit is that “an inner guiding factor” (von Franz, p. 163) can signal powerful recognitions of a change one could make in one’s life.

The Jungian approach—one of a few that I model for students—privileges and centers the reader as the expert and recognizes that there is an “internal sense of therapy” that “goes on in the soul’s imagination and not only in the clinic” (Hillman, 1975a, p. xii). “Our human characters can locate themselves against the characters of myth,” Hillman writes (1999, p. 11). Elsewhere, he suggests that the stories of mythology are the “impersonal dominants” that “provid[e] for many varieties of consciousness, styles of existence, and ways of soul-making” (1975b, p. 143). Literature, no less than myth, provides for varieties of consciousness with which readers may identify. For Hillman, soul is a concrete way of developing one’s psyche, and it’s not “all gossamer” or “a refuge of mystery and mist” that is “ungraspable and vulnerable as a butterfly’s wing” (1999, p. 11). Rather, soul is an active force, “an active intelligence” informing and building character. A term like soul may seem too psychologized and “misty,” but we can note that the etymology of character denotes an inscribing that results in “a distinctive mark, imprint on soul.” Students, many students, come to our classrooms already standing on the threshold of a more soulful experience of literature and literary study. Perhaps, we as instructors have only to open the door.

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I do not propose that literature and/or humanities classes become narcissistic and ignore rigorous literary analysis. Rather, I suggest that instructors give an optional assignment or two that values what students may discover about their own character and psyche, and then, as much as possible, step aside. In “Classroom Discomfort,” David Bleich (1980) poses the rhetorical question, “How many administrators and instructors continue to assume that learning in classrooms occurs in one and only one direction—that faculty members have much to teach students but students have nothing whatever to teach faculty members?” (p. 31). I would add that we allow that students also have a lot to teach themselves. In my psychological approaches to literature class, twenty of the thirty-five students opted to write the personal essay, which I described on the syllabus as a “Critical *or* Reflective Essay: A critically informed and personally reflective essay that frames your engagement with a literary text in psychoanalytical theory.” In the



early part of the semester, we studied Chopin's *The Awakening* along with Freud, Jung, James Hillman, Carol Gilligan, D.W. Winnicott and Bernard Paris's work on Karen Horney. In the latter part, we focused Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* and the archetype of the quest as understood by Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Clarissa Pinkola Estés. All students had to choose a literary text to analyze for twenty-five percent of the course grade in a 1,500- to 2,000-word essay.

In explaining the Critical or Reflective Essay assignment at the beginning of the semester, I tantalize students by asking: what literary work has chosen you? What work do you especially like or—equally important—really dislike? What work do you “identify with?” I mention the example of my own long-term narcissistic alliance with Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* as an example. To explain a narcissistic alliance further, I ask how many times they have seen the film *Titanic* or *Fight Club*. Answer: Into double digits. I then ask why they see the film again and again, and, at that point, they begin to see that there is a mystery to investigate. I give them until the midterm to make a commitment about which literary work they will analyze, using the first half of the semester to model psychological approaches to literary works, emphasizing Freud, Jung and ego psychology to include D.W. Winnicott, Horney, Gilligan. They also choose at the midterm whether to write a paper that will be a traditional literary critique of the work or a personal, psychologically informed essay.

After the midterm, students who choose the reflective essay option develop their own analyses of the texts that have chosen them, as it were, and in workshopping this analytical work in class, my role shifts to that of a critical listener, a facilitator—not that of one who knows. When psychological approaches are privileged in the classroom, “[A]ny member of a class may ... authorize knowledge” (Bleich, 1980, p. 352). Norman Holland (1990) credits Bleich with “pioneer[ing] the study of actual feelings and free associations of readers as early as 1967” and notes that, following in that early pedagogy, “most American reader-response critics... draw heavily on psychology, often psychoanalytic psychology, since it addresses individuality” (p. 58).

The student who selected Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* for her reflective paper—I will call her Jenny—writes that she had an “agonizingly strong response to the character Esther Greenwood. She grows up with her identity secured to her academic ability, just as I have.” Jenny drew eclectically from psychoanalytical theory, Jungian analytical psychology, and Horneyan psychoanalysis, which focus on the adult's defense mechanisms more than classical Freudian psychoanalysis, which tends to locate adult neuroses and traumas in infantile origins. She described

her affective response to the novel as a “sacred attachment to the text” and as a “narcissistic alliance,” after writing that the novel’s depiction of “depression, struggle, and stagnant confusion, while not necessarily pleasant to reflect upon, represent episodes of emotional anguish that every human has experienced from time to time.” In the novel, protagonist Esther Greenwood fails to be accepted into a prestigious summer academic program, triggering her troubles.

In particular, Jenny’s paper uses Horneyan theory to formally analyze Plath’s protagonist, but in dialogue with her own psyche:

In Esther’s case, the discomfort of the situation morphed from simple indecision to a virulent, unchecked depression. Esther methodically developed the Horneyan psychological defense of detachment, protecting herself with indifference and distance from others....

This same defense mechanism, the student writes, operates in her own psyche. In the Horneyan theory that Jenny applies, but does not state in so many words, both she and Esther can be seen to struggle with maintaining in adulthood the “idealized image” of themselves that they developed in childhood. The idealized image is part of a defense mechanism that works to “compensate for feelings of self-hate and inadequacy” (Paris, p. 29) in what Horney calls an individual’s “predominant solution” (Paris, p. 18, 28). The detachment that Jenny identifies in Esther is one of four Horneyan strategies of defense against “basic anxiety” (Paris, p. 18) in childhood development: self-effacement, compliance, narcissism and perfectionism, and resignation or detachment.

Jenny writes that Esther Greenwood’s defensive strategy of detachment “subsequently halted any possible progress” in her development as Esther’s academic career neared its end. Esther had great difficulties coping with the “countless choices [she needed] to make in [an] effort to reconcile herself to a new and uncertain future” brought on by her failure to be accepted into the summer internship. Anxiety and self-loathing come to haunt Esther as she fails to live up to her idealized image, an anxiety that Jenny reports experiencing:

I believe there are not enough words in the world to capture the agonizingly strong response I have had to the character Esther Greenwood.

Jenny explains that Esther stagnates when her “single plan to adhere to” (i.e., her idealized-image performance as an elite student) fails her. “Esther Greenwood is the model of what I could become, if I do not swallow my fears about the future

and remain active.” That is, now that Jenny can “maintain the presence of mind to recognize my similarities to Esther, and the prescient truths her story affords to my own life,” Jenny writes, she must act to “swallow my fears” about moving beyond her idealized image as the detached intellectual. Analyzing *The Bell Jar* from psychological perspectives, Jenny writes in her essays last sentence, has “taught me a great and ponderous deal about myself.” In Jenny’s case, while she believed that *The Bell Jar* whispered to her, Jung would suggest it was actually her unconscious psyche responding to the novel, pointing to a potent corrective and therapeutic map.

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Stories are containers for what a reader projects onto them—for what in the story resonates sympathetically with the reader—and “By identifying with the [story’s] protagonist, we are imbued with the hope that problems do indeed have solutions,” Verena Kast (1995) suggests, writing about folktales as therapy (p. x). In stories, “we find the resources that will help us through our trials” (p. xi), as Jenny found a resource in Esther Greenwood as a cautionary tale about fearing the next big transition in her life. The hope is that she insights in Esther Greenwood what Alcorn and Bracher (1985) might call an “intra-psyche cognitive map” (p. 344)—she can see into the future, as it were, what may happen, were she to give into the fears she expresses in her paper. The many other essays in the class that analyzed a personal response to a text were, in different measures, confessional or exploratory, focusing on characters whom they found to be compelling, investigating parts of their response that, previously, were less than fully conscious. All students who wrote the reflective essay reported, in one way another, that their psychological readings had at least piqued their interest, if not opened up an entirely new relationship with literature and their own psyche. Another student wrote about her narcissistic alliance with a protagonist from young adult literature who learns to fight to protect her psyche “from outside forces that are trying to control and change her.” The student concludes that “I must let myself listen to her story so that I am able to learn what my inner self [the Jungian unconscious psyche] wants me to do in the future.”

Instructors interested in integrating the kind of therapeutic readings this paper has discussed will want to have a degree of comfort with at least one psychological theory. *Paris’s Imagined Human Beings* provides an excellent overview of Horney’s theories, with an extensive example of applied theory in his reading of Chopin’s *The Awakening*. Anthony Storr’s primer, *Freud: A Very Short Introduction*, is very useful, as is *Man & His Symbols*, a Jungian primer written by

Jung and his followers for lay readers. The chapter written by Marie-Louise von Franz, “The Process of Individuation,” is a particularly good place to first encounter Jung’s psychology. For instructors who are intrigued by facilitating therapeutic reading as I have described it, but fear it is too transgressive for a literature classroom, I recommend the introduction to Hillman’s *Revisioning Psychology* (1975a) where he makes an influential statement about therapy and soul:

Therapy, or analysis, is not only something that analysts do to patients; it is a process that goes on intermittently in our individual soul-searching, our attempts at understanding our complexities, the critical attacks, prescriptions, and encouragements that we give ourselves. We are all in therapy all the time insofar as we are involved with soul-making...Analysis goes on in the soul’s imagination and not only in the clinic (p. xii).

Many students do come to the classroom searching for “epistemological truths,” as Bracher suggests, and the pedagogical choices that an instructor makes in a literature class can provide opportunities for a student to augment rigorous textual study of literature with a more therapeutic—even soulful—analysis of the one “character” with whom they will be “reading” for the rest of their lives—their own psyches.

### Endnotes

1. The author has published a book on his therapeutic reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. See (2007) *A new path at midlife; Transformative relationship & story for men*. Harriman, Tenn: Men’s Studies Press.

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