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The Search for Identity in J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace

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Abstract

J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace (1999) explores the complexities of individual identity in the changing sociopolitical landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. Through the character of David Lurie, a fifty-two-year-old university professor whose professional, social, and personal identities undergo a gradual process of disintegration, Coetzee examines the instability of selfhood and the individual's struggle to negotiate changing structures of power, gender, race, and cultural belonging. The novel presents identity not as a fixed or unified entity but as a continually evolving construction shaped by desire, social recognition, historical circumstances, and interpersonal relationships. David Lurie's dismissal from the university following his sexual relationship with his student, Melanie Isaacs, initiates a crisis that challenges his established understanding of masculinity, authority, and personal freedom. His subsequent relocation to his daughter Lucy's farm exposes him to an unfamiliar social reality in which the privileges associated with his former identity are increasingly unstable. This paper examines the protagonist's search for identity through the theoretical perspectives of psychoanalysis, particularly Jacques Lacan's conceptualisation of subjectivity, and postcolonial theories of identity. It argues that Lurie's identity crisis emerges from the conflict between his imaginary conception of himself and the changing symbolic structures that previously sustained his authority. Furthermore, the paper investigates how his encounters with Lucy, Petrus, Melanie, and the animals at the veterinary clinic challenge his anthropocentric and patriarchal understanding of existence. His gradual involvement in animal care suggests the possibility of an alternative subjectivity founded upon vulnerability, responsibility, and ethical recognition rather than domination and possession. Ultimately, Disgrace presents identity as an unstable and relational process in which the collapse of established social positions creates the possibility, though not the certainty, of personal transformation.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee, Disgrace, identity, selfhood, subjectivity, Lacanian psychoanalysis, desire.

Introduction

The question of identity has occupied a central position in literary and philosophical discourse, particularly in the context of modern and postmodern literature. The traditional understanding of identity as a stable, coherent, and unified sense of self has increasingly been challenged by theories that regard subjectivity as fragmented, relational, and historically constructed. The individual does not necessarily possess a permanent and autonomous identity; rather, the self emerges through language, social relationships, cultural affiliations, historical experiences, and psychological conflicts. Literature frequently represents this process through characters who experience a crisis of identity when the structures that previously provided them with a sense of stability begin to collapse.

J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace (1999) provides a significant literary exploration of this problem. Set in post-apartheid South Africa, the novel examines the psychological and social consequences of changing political circumstances through the experiences of David Lurie, a middle-aged professor of English literature at a university in Cape Town. At the beginning of the narrative, Lurie appears to possess a relatively secure identity. His professional position, intellectual achievements, sexual experiences, and social privileges provide him with a sense of authority and personal independence. However, his involvement with Melanie Isaacs, one of his students, brings him into conflict with the university's disciplinary system. His refusal to express remorse in the manner expected by the university eventually results in his resignation.

This incident marks the beginning of a profound identity crisis. Removed from his professional environment, Lurie loses the institutional position through which he has understood and presented himself. His relocation to his daughter Lucy's farm further exposes the limitations of his established worldview. In the rural environment of the Eastern Cape, he encounters changing racial relationships, altered structures of authority, and forms of social existence that challenge his assumptions about personal freedom and cultural belonging.

The title Disgrace itself suggests the centrality of identity and social recognition in the novel. Disgrace is not simply an individual experience of humiliation; it also involves the collapse of an identity previously sustained by social authority, professional status, and patriarchal privilege. Lurie's experience raises important questions: What remains of an individual when the social structures that validate his identity disappear? Can the self reconstruct itself after the loss of authority and recognition? Is identity an autonomous psychological possession, or is it fundamentally dependent upon the recognition of others?

These questions become particularly significant when considered through Jacques Lacan's theory of subjectivity. Lacan challenges the traditional conception of the self as a unified and transparent entity. His psychoanalytic framework suggests that the subject is constituted through processes of identification, language, desire, and the symbolic structures of society. From this perspective, Lurie's identity can be examined as an unstable construction that depends upon his identification with particular images of masculinity, intellectual authority, and social superiority.

This paper argues that David Lurie's search for identity is fundamentally a struggle between an idealised conception of the self and the historical and social realities that challenge its existence. His crisis is intensified by the transformation of post-apartheid South Africa, which destabilises the racial and patriarchal structures through which his former identity derived authority. However, the novel also suggests the possibility of an alternative subjectivity through his gradual engagement with suffering, vulnerability, and ethical responsibility.

Theoretical Framework: Identity, Subjectivity, and the Fragmented Self

The concept of identity has undergone considerable transformation in modern philosophical and critical thought. Earlier humanist traditions frequently regarded the individual as a unified and rational subject possessing an essential identity. However, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories have questioned this assumption by emphasising the instability and relational nature of subjectivity. Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory is particularly relevant to an examination of Coetzee's representation of identity. Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud challenges the notion that the human subject possesses complete knowledge of itself. According to Lacan, the subject is divided and constituted through language, desire,

and identification. The self is therefore never entirely identical with its own image or conscious understanding.

Lacan's concept of the Mirror Stage provides an important starting point for understanding this process. In "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function," Lacan explains how the child identifies with an apparently unified image of itself. This identification produces an idealised sense of unity that conceals the subject's underlying fragmentation. The ego is consequently formed through misrecognition: the individual identifies with an image that appears complete but does not correspond to the fragmented experience of the subject. This concept offers a useful framework for examining David Lurie's understanding of himself. His identity as a university professor, intellectual, and sexually experienced man can be interpreted as an idealised image through which he establishes a sense of coherence and authority. When these social and psychological identifications are challenged, the instability of his self-conception becomes increasingly visible. Lacan's distinction between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real further contributes to this interpretation. The Imaginary concerns identification, images, and the construction of the ego. The Symbolic refers to the order of language, law, social institutions, and cultural conventions through which the subject acquires a socially recognisable position. The Real refers to what resists complete symbolic representation.

In Disgrace, Lurie's professional and masculine identity is sustained by the symbolic structures of the university and the broader social order. His dismissal disrupts his position within these structures, while his experiences in the rural environment expose him to realities that his established conceptual framework cannot adequately accommodate. Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity also provides a relevant perspective. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall argues that identity should not be understood exclusively as a fixed historical essence. Instead, identity is continually produced through historical and cultural processes. This approach is particularly useful in understanding the transformation of white identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Similarly, Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks examines the psychological consequences of colonial relationships and the formation of racial subjectivity. Although Fanon's analysis is concerned primarily with the experience of the colonised subject, his work provides an important theoretical background for examining the racial hierarchies and psychological tensions represented in Coetzee's novel. By bringing these perspectives together, this paper approaches identity as a fragmented and historically situated process shaped by unconscious desire, social recognition, racial relations, and ethical encounters.

David Lurie: The Construction of a Masculine Identity

At the beginning of Disgrace, David Lurie appears to possess a clearly established sense of personal identity. He is a university professor specialising in Romantic poetry, particularly the works of Wordsworth and Byron. Although his professional circumstances have changed, he continues to regard himself as an intellectually distinguished individual whose understanding of literature and human desire separates him from ordinary social conventions. His identity is also significantly influenced by his understanding of masculinity and sexuality. Lurie regards sexual desire as an essential dimension of his existence and attempts to organise his relationships with women according to his personal needs. His involvement with Soraya, a sex worker, initially allows him to maintain a sense of control over his sexual life. He considers this arrangement convenient because it offers sexual satisfaction without requiring emotional commitment. However, his relationship with Melanie Isaacs reveals the problematic nature of his understanding of desire and personal autonomy. Lurie interprets his attraction to Melanie

through the language of romantic passion and individual freedom. He attempts to aestheticise the relationship by relating his desire to the Romantic literary tradition with which he identifies.

His intellectual self-image therefore becomes closely connected to his sexual identity. He perceives himself as an individual whose desires should not necessarily be governed by conventional moral expectations. Nevertheless, the university's disciplinary proceedings expose the limitations of this understanding. Melanie's complaint challenges Lurie's interpretation of the relationship and brings questions of consent, authority, and institutional responsibility into the foreground. The conflict is not merely between an individual and an institution. It also concerns the relationship between personal desire and the rights of another individual. Lurie's refusal to acknowledge the full implications of the power imbalance between himself and his student demonstrates the limitations of his self-understanding.

His identity is therefore exposed as dependent upon an idealised conception of masculinity in which personal desire is prioritised over the subjectivity of others. From a Lacanian perspective, Lurie's self-image can be understood as an Imaginary construction. He identifies with the figure of the autonomous, intellectually superior, sexually experienced man. However, this idealised image conceals the contradictions within his actual relationships. The collapse of his professional identity begins when the universityy refuses to accept his personal interpretation of the incident as sufficient justification for his actions.

The Crisis of Institutional Identity and the Experience of Shame

The university disciplinary proceedings represent a crucial turning point in Lurie's search for identity. His position as a professor has provided him with professional recognition and social authority. Through his institutional affiliation, he has occupied a recognisable position within the academic community. The disciplinary hearing challenges this position. Lurie is required to respond to allegations of sexual misconduct and to acknowledge the institutional and ethical dimensions of his relationship with Melanie. His refusal to perform the expected expression of remorse is significant. He recognises that the university demands a public demonstration of repentance, but he resists what he considers an externally imposed confession. This resistance reveals his inability to reconcile his personal understanding of freedom with the demands of social responsibility. He wishes to retain control over the meaning of his actions, even when those actions have affected another person.

His eventual resignation signifies the collapse of his professional identity. He is no longer able to occupy the position through which he previously understood himself. The experience of shame becomes central to this transformation. Shame is closely connected to the relationship between the self and the gaze of others. The individual becomes conscious of the distance between the identity he wishes to maintain and the image reflected through social judgement. Lurie's humiliation can therefore be understood as a crisis of recognition. The university and its disciplinary structures no longer validate the identity he has constructed for himself.

The concept of the Lacanian Other is useful here. The symbolic Other represents the broader order of language, law, institutions, and social recognition through which the subject acquires meaning. Lurie's conflict with the university reveals his dependence upon this symbolic order, even though he attempts to present himself as independent of institutional morality. His refusal to accept the university's terms does not make him autonomous. Rather, it exposes the extent to which his identity has been shaped by the institution he now rejects. Thus, the loss of his professional position becomes an existential crisis. Lurie

must confront the possibility that the identity he has regarded as permanent was actually sustained by external recognition.

Desire and the Divided Subject: A Lacanian Reading of Lurie's Relationships

Desire occupies a central position in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan distinguishes desire from biological need and immediate demand. Desire is shaped by language and by the subject's relationship with the Other. It is fundamentally marked by lack and can never be completely satisfied. This understanding of desire offers a productive way of examining Lurie's relationships with women. His relationship with Soraya initially appears to provide a controlled arrangement through which sexual desire can be satisfied. However, when Soraya withdraws from the relationship, Lurie experiences a disruption of the routine that has sustained his sense of control.

His subsequent pursuit of Melanie reveals that desire cannot be reduced to a simple process of obtaining sexual satisfaction. Melanie becomes an object upon which Lurie projects his romantic and sexual fantasies. His attraction is shaped not merely by Melanie's individual identity but also by his own imaginative construction of her. He repeatedly interprets her through literary and aesthetic associations, thereby transforming her into an object within his personal narrative. This process reveals the divided nature of the subject. Lurie believes that he understands his desire, yet his actions demonstrate that desire is governed by unconscious motivations and fantasies that exceed his conscious explanations.

His relationship with Melanie also raises the question of the Other's subjectivity. Lurie initially fails to recognise the extent to which his position as a professor influences the relationship. His desire is organised around his own experience rather than a genuine recognition of Melanie as an independent subject. Consequently, his search for personal fulfilment becomes inseparable from his inability to acknowledge the autonomy of another individual. The novel gradually exposes the limitations of this position. Lurie's subsequent experiences force him to reconsider the relationship between desire, responsibility, and the recognition of others.

Lucy's Farm: Displacement and the Destabilisation of Identity

After leaving the university, Lurie travels to his daughter Lucy's farm in the Eastern Cape. This movement from the urban academic environment to the rural landscape represents a significant change in his social and psychological circumstances. The farm becomes a space in which Lurie's established identity loses much of its authority. He is no longer a university professor surrounded by institutional structures and intellectual recognition. Instead, he becomes an outsider who must negotiate an unfamiliar social environment.

His relationship with Lucy is central to this transformation. Although he is her father, he does not possess the authority over her life that he assumes should accompany their relationship. Lucy has established an independent existence through her agricultural activities and personal choices. Her lesbian identity and decision to live on the farm challenge Lurie's conventional understanding of gender, family, and social respectability. His inability to understand Lucy's decisions reveals the limitations of his own identity. He expects her to respond to circumstances according to his assumptions about security, freedom, and personal dignity. However, Lucy's understanding of existence differs significantly from his.

The difference becomes particularly evident after the violent attack on the farm. Three men enter the property, assault Lurie, sexually violate Lucy, and set fire to the building. The incident produces a

profound crisis for both characters. Lurie wants Lucy to report the crime and leave the farm. He understands the attack primarily through the framework of individual rights and justice. Lucy, however, responds through a more complicated understanding of historical vulnerability, racial relations, land, and survival. Her refusal to respond according to her father's expectations challenges his assumption that individual autonomy must necessarily involve resistance through established legal and institutional structures.

The farm thus becomes a space of identity negotiation. Lurie's displacement forces him to confront the limitations of the social and cultural framework that previously sustained his sense of self. From a postcolonial perspective, his experience reflects the instability of white identity in the new South Africa. The political transformation of the country has altered the structures of authority and social recognition that previously shaped his existence. However, the novel does not present this transformation as a simple reversal of racial power. Rather, it depicts a complex situation in which historical injustice, individual vulnerability, gendered violence, and competing claims to belonging intersect.

Race, Power, and the Crisis of White Identity in Post-apartheid South Africa

One of the most significant dimensions of Disgrace is its exploration of racial identity in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel is set in a society undergoing political transformation following the end of apartheid, and this historical context profoundly influences the identities of its characters. David Lurie belongs to a white social group whose historical position has been associated with racial privilege and institutional authority. His understanding of the world is therefore shaped, at least partly, by structures that have historically enabled white individuals to occupy positions of power.

The transformation of these structures challenges his sense of social and cultural belonging. His relationship with Petrus is particularly important in this regard. Initially introduced as a worker who assists Lucy with the farm, Petrus gradually acquires greater social and economic influence. He becomes increasingly important to the management and future of the property. Lurie struggles to understand this transformation. His perception of Petrus is influenced by his own assumptions about social hierarchy and authority. However, Petrus cannot be reduced to a figure within Lurie's personal interpretation of the changing political order. He possesses his own ambitions, relationships, and understanding of the new social environment.

The contrast between the two characters exposes the instability of established racial hierarchies. Lucy also occupies an important position within this conflict. Her decision to remain on the farm and negotiate a relationship of dependence with Petrus challenges Lurie's conception of independence and personal dignity. Her position is particularly complicated because she is simultaneously a woman, a lesbian, a rape survivor, and a white landowner in a changing political environment.

Lurie's response to the situation demonstrates his difficulty in understanding identities that do not conform to his own assumptions. Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity helps illuminate this conflict. If identity is continually produced through historical and cultural processes, then the transformation of South African society necessarily changes the conditions through which racial identities are understood. Lurie's crisis therefore extends beyond individual humiliation. It reflects a larger historical displacement in which the established meanings of whiteness, authority, and belonging are being questioned. Nevertheless, the novel's representation of race and violence remains controversial. Lucy's assault and the subsequent racial tensions have generated significant critical debate. Lucy Valerie Graham, in her influential essay "Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace," examines the complex

relationship between sexual violence, racial representation, and the historical discourse of colonial violence. A critical reading of the novel must therefore avoid reducing its representation of post-apartheid society to a simple narrative of white victimhood. The text invites consideration of the historical inequalities and unequal structures of power that complicate the characters' experiences.

Lucy and the Alternative Construction of Identity

Lucy represents an important contrast to David Lurie. Whereas Lurie attempts to preserve his established identity, Lucy demonstrates a willingness to negotiate her existence within changing circumstances. Her decision to remain on the farm after the assault is particularly significant. Lurie interprets her decision as an unacceptable surrender of personal dignity. He cannot understand why she would consider remaining in a situation that threatens her security and independence. Lucy, however, approaches the situation through a different understanding of historical and social reality. Her decision to enter into a relationship of dependence with Petrus is deeply unsettling because it challenges the liberal conception of the autonomous individual. She recognises that her position in the changing social environment may require compromises that her father considers unacceptable. Her pregnancy further complicates the question of identity. Following the assault, Lucy becomes pregnant, and she decides to continue the pregnancy despite her father's objections.

Her decision suggests that identity cannot always be understood through the categories of individual autonomy and personal choice alone. Her future becomes connected to historical circumstances, bodily experience, and an uncertain relationship with the surrounding community. Lucy therefore represents a form of subjectivity that differs from Lurie's. While he seeks to maintain control over his identity, she attempts to negotiate a future within circumstances that cannot be entirely controlled. Her position should not be idealised, particularly because her decision follows an act of sexual violence. Nevertheless, her response reveals the complexity of identity formation in a society marked by historical inequalities and changing power relations. The contrast between father and daughter suggests that the self is not simply an autonomous possession. It is continuously negotiated through relationships, vulnerability, and historical circumstances.

Animals, Vulnerability, and the Possibility of Ethical Transformation

The most significant development in Lurie's search for identity occurs through his involvement with animals at the animal clinic run by Bev Shaw. Initially, Lurie regards the work as an insignificant activity compared with his former intellectual and professional life. His position as a university professor has encouraged him to understand himself through intellectual achievement and cultural distinction. However, his experiences at the clinic gradually transform his relationship with suffering. He becomes increasingly involved in caring for injured and abandoned animals. His work includes assisting Bev Shaw in treating animals and participating in the process of euthanasia when their suffering cannot be alleviated.

This experience challenges his earlier understanding of human superiority and personal authority. The animals do not recognise his professional achievements or intellectual reputation. They exist outside the structures of social recognition through which he has previously understood himself. Their vulnerability forces him to encounter suffering without the possibility of transforming it into an abstract intellectual problem. This development is particularly important from an ethical perspective. Lurie gradually becomes more sensitive to the experiences of beings whose suffering cannot be adequately represented

through language. His relationship with the animals therefore introduces a possibility of transformation through compassion and responsibility.

The significance of this transformation becomes especially apparent in his relationship with the crippled dog that he eventually allows to be euthanised. Despite developing an emotional attachment to the animal, he refuses to prolong its suffering merely to satisfy his own desire to preserve it. His decision reveals a changing understanding of love and responsibility. The animal becomes important because it challenges the anthropocentric assumptions that have previously shaped his identity. Lurie begins to understand that ethical responsibility does not necessarily depend upon reciprocity, social recognition, or personal advantage. In The Lives of Animals, Coetzee also explores the ethical significance of human relationships with nonhuman beings. Although the narrative contexts differ, the concern with vulnerability and the limits of human rationality is relevant to understanding Lurie's transformation in Disgrace. His involvement with animals does not completely resolve his identity crisis. Nevertheless, it suggests the possibility of an alternative selfhood founded upon care rather than domination.

Language, Silence, and the Limits of Self-Representation

Language occupies an important position in Coetzee's exploration of identity. Lurie's professional existence is fundamentally connected with language, particularly through his teaching and literary scholarship. As a professor of literature, he has developed an intellectual identity based upon his ability to interpret texts and communicate ideas. Yet his personal relationships reveal the limitations of this linguistic authority. His inability to communicate effectively with Melanie, Lucy, and other characters demonstrates the distance between intellectual knowledge and ethical understanding. During the disciplinary proceedings, he is expected to provide an account of his actions and express remorse. However, his language becomes a means of protecting his self-image rather than acknowledging the experience of another person.

Similarly, after the assault on Lucy, he struggles to understand her silence and her refusal to describe the event in the terms he expects. These situations suggest that language does not necessarily provide complete access to the self or to the experiences of others. From a Lacanian perspective, the subject is constituted within the Symbolic order of language, but this does not mean that language can produce a complete or unified identity. The subject remains divided, and desire is never entirely expressed through conscious speech. Lurie's experiences reveal the limitations of his attempts to control the meaning of events through language. His gradual movement away from intellectual explanation towards practical acts of care suggests a different relationship with existence. He increasingly encounters situations in which ethical responsibility requires more than verbal interpretation. Thus, Coetzee presents silence not simply as an absence of communication but as a challenge to the assumption that the individual can fully understand or represent the experiences of others.

The Search for a New Self: From Authority to Vulnerability

The final stages of the novel present a transformed David Lurie. He has lost his professional position, experienced humiliation, witnessed violence, and become increasingly involved in the care of abandoned animals. These experiences have destabilised the identity through which he previously understood himself. At the beginning of the novel, Lurie regards himself as an individual entitled to pursue his desires without substantial interference from external authority. His professional and intellectual achievements reinforce this sense of independence.

By the conclusion, however, he becomes increasingly aware of his vulnerability and dependence. His relationship with Bev Shaw is important in this transformation. Although he initially approaches her with reservations, he gradually develops respect for her practical commitment to suffering animals. He begins to recognise forms of responsibility that cannot be explained through intellectual superiority or personal desire. His work at the clinic also changes his understanding of dignity. The animals he helps are frequently abandoned, injured, or unwanted. Their existence challenges the assumption that value depends upon social recognition or usefulness. In caring for them, Lurie experiences a form of ethical involvement that differs significantly from his earlier relationships.

The final image of Lurie carrying the crippled dog towards its death is especially meaningful. His decision to surrender the animal suggests an acceptance of vulnerability and loss. However, it would be inaccurate to interpret this development as a complete moral transformation. He remains a complicated and imperfect individual whose past actions cannot simply be erased. The significance of the ending lies precisely in its ambiguity. Lurie does not recover his former identity, nor does he achieve a completely unified new self. Instead, he arrives at a condition in which his identity is less dependent upon authority, recognition, and possession. His transformation suggests that the search for identity may not necessarily culminate in the discovery of a permanent and coherent self. It may instead involve the gradual recognition of one's limitations and responsibilities.

Conclusion

J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace presents identity as a fragmented and continuously changing process shaped by psychological desire, social recognition, gender relations, racial history, and ethical responsibility. Through the experiences of David Lurie, the novel examines the instability of a self that has been constructed through professional authority, patriarchal assumptions, and a particular understanding of individual freedom. Lurie's involvement with Melanie Isaacs exposes the limitations of his sexual and masculine identity. His dismissal from the university further destabilises his professional self, while his experiences on Lucy's farm challenge his assumptions about racial authority, family relationships, and personal independence.

The changing political environment of post-apartheid South Africa intensifies his identity crisis by undermining the historical structures through which his social position has acquired meaning. His relationship with Petrus and his inability to understand Lucy's decisions demonstrate the limitations of his established worldview. A Lacanian reading of the novel reveals that Lurie's identity is sustained by idealised images of masculinity and intellectual authority. These images provide him with a temporary sense of unity but conceal the divided and unstable nature of his subjectivity. When the symbolic structures supporting his identity are disrupted, the contradictions within his self-understanding become increasingly visible.

Nevertheless, the novel does not present identity crisis exclusively as a process of destruction. Lurie's involvement with animals introduces the possibility of an alternative relationship with the world. Through acts of care and compassion, he gradually encounters forms of existence that challenge his earlier dependence upon domination and social recognition. Ultimately, Disgrace suggests that the search for identity does not necessarily lead to the recovery of an original or permanent self. Rather, identity emerges through continuous negotiation with the Other, historical circumstances, desire, vulnerability, and ethical responsibility. Lurie's journey demonstrates that the collapse of an established identity may create the possibility of a different mode of existence, although such transformation

remains incomplete and uncertain. Coetzee's novel therefore offers a complex understanding of selfhood in which the individual is neither entirely autonomous nor permanently determined by social structures. The self remains divided, vulnerable, and subject to continual reconstruction. In this sense, Lurie's experience of disgrace becomes the beginning of a difficult encounter with the limitations of his former identity and the possibility of an alternative understanding of himself.

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