

Main Themes of Charles Dickens' Works And Different Critical Approaches To Them

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Keywords	Abstract
short stories critical approaches novelist social criticism critical interpretations	<p>This article explores the central themes that pervade the works of Charles Dickens and examines various critical approaches to understanding his literary contributions. It identifies key motifs such as social inequality, the impact of industrialization, the struggles of the poor, and the complexities of human nature. The article delves into Dickens' portrayal of moral development, justice, and redemption, alongside his critique of Victorian society. By analyzing these thematic and critical frameworks, the article offers a comprehensive view of Dickens as both a social commentator and a master storyteller, revealing the enduring relevance of his works in contemporary literary discourse.</p> <p>This article analyses the main themes of the works of Charles Dickens, focusing on recurring topics such as social injustice, the effects of industrialization, class struggles, and human complexity. It highlights Dickens' exploration of moral growth, redemption, and the harsh realities faced by the impoverished in Victorian society. Additionally, the article surveys various critical approaches—including historical, feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic perspectives—that offer diverse interpretations of Dickens' works. By engaging with these themes and critical lenses, the article underscores the continued relevance of Dickens' works and their significance in understanding both the past and contemporary social issues.</p>

Introduction

Charles Dickens, one of the most iconic figures of Victorian literature, remains a cornerstone of English literary tradition for his incisive social commentary and vivid portrayal of 19th-century England. His novels, such as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations*, not only reflect the era's stark class divisions, the challenges faced by the impoverished, and the injustices of industrialization but also delve into the moral complexities of human behavior. Through his masterful storytelling, Dickens captured the essence of a rapidly transforming society, offering both an unflinching critique and a deep sense of empathy for the marginalized (Ackroyd, 1990; Slater, 2009).

Over the years, Dickens's works have been subject to a variety of critical interpretations, each offering unique insights into their enduring significance. Early evaluations praised his blend of social realism and melodrama, while more contemporary analyses have employed theoretical frameworks such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminist criticism, and postcolonial studies. These diverse approaches have illuminated the multifaceted nature of Dickens's narratives, shedding light on their critique of capitalism,



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their exploration of identity and psychology, and their engagement with themes of empire and race (Mukherjee, 2013; Tambling, 1995).

This essay examines the central themes of Dickens's works, emphasizing their continued relevance and complexity. Dickens's engagement with poverty, social inequality, and the failures of institutions underscores his enduring empathy for the disenfranchised, particularly children and women. His novels, including *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*, critique the dehumanizing effects of capitalism while blending social realism with sentimentalism and humor (Collins, 1962; House, 1941).

Critics have approached Dickens's writings from multiple perspectives. Marxist scholars emphasize his portrayal of class struggles and capitalist exploitation, while psychoanalytic readings explore the psychological intricacies of his characters. Feminist analyses interrogate the roles of women and gender dynamics in his narratives, and postcolonial interpretations examine his depictions of empire and racial otherness. Together, these approaches highlight the richness of Dickens's oeuvre, offering new ways to understand the historical and cultural significance of his work (Ledger, 2000; Schwarzbach, 1979).

This discussion will explore how Dickens's engagement with central themes such as poverty, class, and morality reflects the social realities of his time while transcending their historical context. By analyzing his work through diverse critical frameworks, this essay aims to deepen our understanding of Dickens as a writer whose contributions continue to shape the landscape of literature and social thought.

Thematic Exploration in Dickens' Works

Charles Dickens (1812–1870), widely regarded as one of the greatest novelists of the Victorian era, is celebrated for his ability to weave vivid characters and intricate plots into narratives that illuminate the social complexities of 19th-century England. His works grapple with enduring themes that not only resonated with his contemporaries but continue to captivate modern readers. This section examines Dickens' recurring themes, highlighting their depth, complexity, and relevance.

Social Inequality and Class Struggles

A central theme in Dickens' oeuvre is his unflinching critique of social inequality and the rigid class structures of Victorian England. His novels expose the plight of the poor and marginalized, contrasting their struggles with the opulence and indifference of the wealthy elite. In *Oliver Twist* (1837–1839), Dickens presents a harrowing portrayal of orphans and the underprivileged, drawing attention to the cruelty of workhouses and the exploitation of the criminal underworld (Ackroyd, 1990). Similarly, *Great Expectations* (1861) explores the limitations imposed by class distinctions, as Pip's aspirations for upward mobility underscore the barriers created by entrenched social hierarchies (Ledger, 2000).

Through these narratives, Dickens critiques the lack of social mobility and the dehumanizing effects of poverty, urging readers to reflect on the moral fabric of a society that tolerates such disparities. His works challenge Victorian ideals of wealth and class, emphasizing the need for social reform (House, 1941).

Industrialization and Its Discontents

The rapid industrialization of Britain during Dickens' lifetime brought both economic advancement and profound social upheaval. Dickens critically examines the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism, particularly on the working class. In *Hard Times* (1854), set in the fictional industrial town of Coketown, Dickens critiques utilitarianism, which prioritizes profit and efficiency over human welfare. The novel



vividly depicts the grim lives of factory workers, illustrating the physical and emotional toll of industrial labor (Tambling, 1995).

Through his works, Dickens champions the rights of the common man and calls for compassion and humanity in an increasingly mechanized world. His critique of industrial society reflects a deep concern for the erosion of individuality and the alienation wrought by industrial progress (Schwarzbach, 1979).

Child Exploitation and Education

Few authors have explored the vulnerability and exploitation of children as poignantly as Dickens. Drawing on his own experiences as a child laborer, Dickens portrays young characters who endure neglect, abuse, and hardship with remarkable resilience. In *David Copperfield* (1849–1850), the titular character's experiences mirror Dickens' own childhood struggles, offering an unflinching depiction of child labor and familial neglect (Slater, 2009). Similarly, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–1839) exposes the brutal conditions of Yorkshire boarding schools, where children were subjected to mistreatment and deprivation.

Dickens also critiques the inadequacies of the Victorian education system, advocating for reform and emphasizing the importance of nurturing young minds with kindness and creativity. His narratives highlight the moral imperative of safeguarding childhood innocence and fostering an equitable education system (Kaplan, 1987).

Crime, Justice, and Redemption

Themes of crime and justice permeate much of Dickens' work, reflecting his preoccupation with the moral dilemmas of his era. He frequently explores the root causes of crime, attributing them to poverty, social injustice, and systemic failures. In *Bleak House* (1852–1853), Dickens critiques the inefficiency and corruption of the legal system, while in *Oliver Twist*, he portrays the brutal consequences of life in the criminal underworld (Collins, 1962).

Despite the grim realities he depicts, Dickens weaves in themes of redemption, illustrating how characters can reform and find salvation through kindness and love. The moral complexity of figures like Magwitch in *Great Expectations* challenges readers to consider how societal factors shape individual choices and morality (Miller, 1958).

Family and Domestic Life

Family relationships often serve as a microcosm of broader societal dynamics in Dickens' works. He examines the bonds of love and loyalty within families, as well as the conflicts and betrayals that can strain these ties. In *Little Dorrit* (1857), the titular character embodies resilience and selflessness in her devotion to her family, while *A Christmas Carol* (1843) highlights the transformative power of familial love and generosity (Walder, 1995).

Conversely, dysfunctional family dynamics in works like *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848) reveal the damaging effects of pride, neglect, and materialism. Dickens' exploration of domestic life underscores his belief in compassion, understanding, and moral responsibility as essential to personal and societal harmony (Bowen, 2000).

Urbanization and the City as a Character



London, often personified in Dickens' novels, serves as more than just a setting—it becomes a character in its own right. Dickens captures the vibrancy and chaos of urban life while exposing its darker underbelly. In *Bleak House*, the fog-shrouded streets symbolize moral and legal ambiguity, while in *Oliver Twist*, the slums and labyrinthine alleys serve as a backdrop for criminality and poverty (Schwarzbach, 1979).

Through his richly detailed urban landscapes, Dickens juxtaposes wealth and destitution, progress and decay, painting a vivid portrait of a city teetering between advancement and ruin. His portrayal of urbanization reflects the duality of modernity—its promise and its perils (Tambling, 1995).

Hypocrisy and Moral Critique

Dickens frequently critiques the hypocrisy and moral failings of Victorian society, particularly among the upper classes and institutions. His works expose the superficiality of social conventions and the corruption of legal and religious organizations. In *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–1844), Dickens satirizes selfishness and greed, while *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–1865) critiques the obsession with wealth and social status (Mukherjee, 2013).

Through biting humor and sharp social commentary, Dickens challenges readers to reflect on their own values and the ethical implications of their actions. His moral critiques remain as relevant today as they were in his own time, offering timeless insights into human nature and societal structures (Furieux, 2009).

Dickens' thematic breadth and depth continue to captivate audiences, offering both a mirror to Victorian society and a lens through which to interrogate contemporary issues. His ability to blend social critique with compelling narratives ensures his place as one of the most influential and enduring figures in English literature.

The Struggle for Identity and Personal Growth

Central to many of Charles Dickens' works is the theme of self-discovery and personal growth. His protagonists often embark on transformative journeys, grappling with questions of identity, morality, and their place in the world. These coming-of-age narratives frequently involve overcoming adversity, reflecting Dickens' belief in the human capacity for resilience and redemption.

In *David Copperfield* (1849–1850), Dickens portrays the titular character's journey from a troubled childhood to a fulfilled adulthood. The novel explores themes of perseverance, self-determination, and the development of moral character, resonating with readers as a universal quest for purpose and meaning (Ackroyd, 1990). Similarly, in *Great Expectations* (1861), Pip's evolution from a naïve boy to a self-aware adult highlights the tension between ambition and humility, as well as the importance of recognizing true values amidst societal pressures (Slater, 2009).

Themes in Dickens' Short Stories

Charles Dickens' short stories distill many of the themes found in his novels, offering concentrated explorations of societal issues, human emotions, and moral lessons. Through these stories, Dickens critiques social inequality, delves into moral development, and reflects on the complexities of human nature.

Social Inequality and the Suffering of the Poor



A recurring theme in Dickens' short stories is the stark division between the rich and the poor, exposing the social injustices of Victorian society. In *The Poor Relation's Story* and *A Child's Dream of a Star*, Dickens juxtaposes the struggles of the underprivileged with the indifference of the wealthy, illustrating the systemic neglect of the working class and impoverished (House, 1941). These stories, much like his novels, critique the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and highlight the emotional, physical, and social toll of poverty.

Dickens often portrays the poor as victims of societal failure, using their plight to evoke sympathy and demand reform. For example, in *The Ghost's Bargain* and *The Christmas Tree*, he reflects on the enduring impact of poverty on individuals and families, emphasizing the need for collective empathy and action (Ledger, 2000).

Moral Development and Redemption

A key theme in Dickens' short stories is the possibility of personal redemption. His characters often undergo profound moral transformations, demonstrating the power of self-reflection and kindness. *A Christmas Carol* is perhaps the most iconic example, with Ebenezer Scrooge's journey from avarice to generosity symbolizing the transformative potential of compassion (Collins, 1962).

This theme extends to other stories, such as *The Signal-Man* and *The Black Veil*, where Dickens employs supernatural elements to explore guilt, fear, and the consequences of past actions. These eerie and mysterious narratives create an atmosphere of unease, compelling readers to confront deeper truths about morality and human behavior (Tambling, 1995).

The Importance of Family and Relationships

Family dynamics are a central focus in Dickens' short stories, where he explores themes of love, loss, and reconciliation. In *The Christmas Tree* and *The Haunted Man*, Dickens underscores the importance of familial bonds and emotional connections, portraying family as a source of strength and resilience. Conversely, stories like *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners* critique dysfunctional family relationships, reflecting how societal pressures can strain personal connections (Schwarzbach, 1979).

Through these narratives, Dickens emphasizes the redemptive power of love and understanding within families, portraying reconciliation and forgiveness as pathways to healing and personal growth (Furneaux, 2009).

Satire, Humor, and Social Critique

Dickens often employs humor and satire in his short stories to expose the hypocrisy and moral failings of Victorian society. In *The Uncommercial Traveler* and *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*, he mocks the inefficiencies and corruption of social and legal systems, illustrating how power dynamics favor the privileged while neglecting the vulnerable (Mukherjee, 2013). His sharp wit and irony render his critiques both engaging and accessible, making his social commentary all the more impactful.

Compassion and Human Kindness

At the heart of Dickens' short stories is the theme of compassion as a transformative force. In tales such as *The Wreck of the Golden Mary* and *The Lamplighter*, Dickens portrays characters who demonstrate empathy and kindness, even amidst adversity. These stories advocate for the healing potential of compassion, suggesting that it can not only bridge divides but also bring about societal change (Johnson, 1952).



The Short Stories as Microcosms of Dickens' Vision

While Dickens' novels often explore these themes in broader and more elaborate narratives, his short stories provide a distilled reflection of his literary and social vision. With their blend of humor, pathos, and sharp social critique, these tales reveal Dickens' deep concern for the marginalized and his enduring belief in the potential for individual and collective redemption. His ability to balance entertainment with moral and social insight ensures the timeless relevance of his short fiction, much as it does his longer works.

Memory and Personal Identity in Dickens' Short Stories

Memory and its impact on personal identity are pivotal themes in several of Charles Dickens' short stories, where past experiences profoundly shape characters' perceptions and actions. In *The Signal-Man*, the protagonist is haunted by memories of a tragic past, which distort his sense of reality and color his interactions with the present. Dickens employs memory as a narrative device to explore how unresolved trauma influences one's worldview and decision-making. Through such portrayals, he reveals the cathartic power of confronting these memories, often leading to emotional release or significant revelation (Kaplan, 1987).

Themes of Generosity and Family Unity

Themes of generosity, goodwill, and familial connection recur throughout Dickens' short stories, particularly those set during the Christmas season. *A Christmas Carol* remains the most celebrated example, with Ebenezer Scrooge's transformation symbolizing the redemptive power of kindness and community (Collins, 1962). Similarly, in *The Christmas Tree* and *The Holly-Tree*, Dickens emphasizes the joy of giving and the importance of human connection, using the holiday setting as a backdrop for moral and emotional awakening.

These stories underscore Dickens' belief in the transformative potential of selfless acts and the enduring significance of compassion in fostering unity and reconciliation. By intertwining themes of generosity and family, Dickens offers a hopeful vision of human connection that continues to resonate with readers (Ackroyd, 1990).

The Rich Tapestry of Themes in Dickens' Short Stories

Dickens' short stories weave together a tapestry of themes that reflect his preoccupation with social justice, morality, and the intricacies of human nature. Whether depicting the struggles of the poor, exploring the possibility of redemption, or employing supernatural elements to probe psychological depths, these stories illuminate enduring lessons about empathy, justice, and the human condition.

The recurring motifs of memory, generosity, and redemption in Dickens' works showcase his profound understanding of human suffering and resilience. These themes, combined with his sharp social critique, contribute to the timeless relevance of his short fiction, cementing its place as a cornerstone of English literature (Ledger, 2000).

Critical Approaches to the Works of Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens, one of the most celebrated figures in English literature, has inspired a vast and varied range of critical interpretations since the 19th century. From the Victorian reviews that first celebrated his vivid storytelling to contemporary theoretical analyses, Dickens' works have been examined through multiple lenses that reflect the evolving cultural, social, and intellectual climates.



Biographical and Historical Approaches

Early biographical studies of Dickens, such as those by Ackroyd (1990) and Johnson (1952), emphasize how his personal experiences shaped the themes and characters in his novels. For instance, Dickens' childhood hardships as a factory worker informed his poignant depictions of child labor and poverty in works like *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist*. Historical approaches similarly situate Dickens within the context of Victorian England, examining his responses to industrialization, urbanization, and social reform (House, 1941; Schwarzbach, 1979).

Social Critique and Marxist Perspectives

Dickens' acute critique of social inequality has made his works a subject of significant interest for Marxist scholars. His portrayal of class struggle, the exploitation of labor, and the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism aligns with key Marxist concerns. In *Hard Times* and *Bleak House*, Dickens exposes the inequalities perpetuated by utilitarianism and institutional corruption, advocating for greater compassion and justice (Mukherjee, 2013; Walder, 1995).

Psychoanalytic Readings

Psychoanalytic approaches to Dickens' works explore the psychological dimensions of his characters, as well as the influence of Dickens' own psyche on his storytelling. Scholars have delved into themes of trauma, repression, and identity, particularly in works like *Great Expectations* and *The Signal-Man*, where guilt and memory play central roles (Tambling, 1995; Kaplan, 1987).

Feminist Interpretations

Feminist critics have examined Dickens' portrayal of women, often highlighting the tension between his progressive depictions of strong female characters and the restrictive gender norms of Victorian society. Novels such as *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend* present complex female figures navigating social and domestic constraints, while short stories like *The Holly-Tree* emphasize themes of familial duty and sacrifice. These readings underscore Dickens' ambivalent relationship with the gender dynamics of his time (Ledger, 2000; Furneaux, 2009).

Postmodern and Postcolonial Approaches

Postmodern critiques of Dickens' works often focus on his use of fragmented narratives, unreliable narrators, and symbolic settings, particularly in novels like *Bleak House*. Postcolonial scholars, on the other hand, interrogate Dickens' depictions of empire and race, analyzing how his works reflect and challenge Victorian attitudes toward colonialism and the "other." For instance, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* explores themes of cultural dislocation and imperial identity, making it a rich text for postcolonial analysis (Mukherjee, 2013).

Dickens' Enduring Relevance

Through these diverse critical lenses, Dickens' works continue to reveal their richness and complexity, offering insights into the human condition, societal structures, and moral dilemmas. His ability to address universal themes while engaging with the specificities of Victorian England ensures his enduring relevance in both literary and cultural studies. Dickens remains a writer whose works invite constant reinterpretation, reflecting the timeless nature of his art and the ever-evolving conversations surrounding it.



Biographical and Historical Contexts

A biographical approach to Dickens's works highlights the profound influence of his life experiences on his literary output. Dickens's own childhood, marked by poverty and his father's imprisonment for debt, deeply shaped his portrayals of social injustice and the plight of the marginalized. Characters such as Oliver Twist and David Copperfield mirror Dickens's own struggles with adversity and his aspirations for self-improvement (Ackroyd, 1990; Slater, 2009). These autobiographical elements provide a lens through which readers can better understand Dickens's empathy for the disenfranchised and his calls for reform.

Historically, Dickens's novels serve as richly detailed portraits of Victorian England. His works engage with the major societal changes of the 19th century, including the Industrial Revolution, urbanization, and the rigid class structures of the period. For instance, *Hard Times* critiques the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism, offering a literary response to the era's utilitarian ethos and its disregard for individual welfare (House, 1941; Schwarzbach, 1979). Through his historical and social critiques, Dickens's novels become both works of art and historical documents, providing valuable insight into the realities of 19th-century life.

Social Criticism and Reformist Perspectives

Dickens's works are celebrated for their sharp social criticism, particularly their depictions of poverty, child labor, and institutional corruption. Early critics, such as John Forster, praised Dickens for combining moral purpose with compelling storytelling, while modern scholars continue to explore how he used satire and melodrama to critique societal injustices (Collins, 1962; Walder, 1995).

In *Bleak House*, Dickens exposes the inefficiencies and moral failings of the Chancery Court, illustrating the broader corruption of legal and bureaucratic systems. Similarly, in *Oliver Twist*, he critiques the harsh realities of workhouses and the criminal underworld, drawing attention to the societal neglect of vulnerable populations. Although critics debate whether Dickens was a radical reformer or a sentimental conservative, his acute awareness of social inequities and his demand for empathy and reform are undeniable (Mukherjee, 2013).

Psychoanalytic Criticism

Psychoanalytic approaches to Dickens's works examine the psychological depth of his characters and the subconscious elements of his storytelling. Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* has been interpreted as embodying obsessive grief and unresolved trauma, while the fractured identity of John Harmon in *Our Mutual Friend* reflects a complex exploration of selfhood and reinvention (Tambling, 1995; Kaplan, 1987).

Peter Ackroyd and other biographers have also explored Dickens's personal relationships, particularly his troubled marriage and his idealization of young women, to shed light on his portrayals of female characters. The gothic and fantastical elements of his novels, such as the spectral visions in *A Christmas Carol* and *The Signal-Man*, are often viewed as manifestations of Dickens's subconscious fears and desires (Ackroyd, 1990).

Feminist Criticism

Feminist critiques of Dickens's works offer a nuanced view of his depiction of women. On one hand, Dickens created strong, memorable female characters like Nancy in *Oliver Twist* and Esther Summerson in



Bleak House. These figures exhibit resilience and complexity, challenging Victorian norms of femininity (Ledger, 2000).

On the other hand, critics have pointed to Dickens's tendency to idealize women as either angelic nurturers or tragic figures, reflecting the limited roles available to women in his time. Characters like Agnes Wickfield in *David Copperfield* reinforce the domestic ideal, while Rosa Dartle and Estella embody more destructive stereotypes of female ambition and coldness. Feminist scholars argue that Dickens's portrayal of women often fails to imagine them outside the constraints of 19th-century gender norms (Furieux, 2009).

Marxist Criticism

Marxist critics view Dickens's novels as incisive commentaries on class inequality and the exploitation inherent in capitalist systems. Karl Marx himself admired Dickens's ability to expose the "misery of the poor" and the contradictions of industrial society (Walder, 1995). *Hard Times* offers a particularly pointed critique of utilitarianism and the commodification of human relationships, highlighting the physical and emotional toll of labor exploitation.

However, some Marxist scholars, such as Terry Eagleton, contend that Dickens ultimately stops short of advocating systemic change. His resolutions often center on individual moral redemption rather than structural reform, reflecting a middle-class perspective on social issues (Mukherjee, 2013).

Postcolonial Criticism

Postcolonial analyses of Dickens's works explore how his narratives engage with British imperialism and its consequences. In *Great Expectations*, Magwitch's transportation to Australia symbolizes the penal colony system and its role in empire-building. Similarly, *Bleak House* reveals how colonial wealth permeates and shapes English society (Paroissien, 1999).

Critics also examine Dickens's portrayals of non-European characters, which often reflect the racial attitudes of his era. While his sympathy for the oppressed is evident in many of his works, postcolonial scholars challenge his Eurocentric worldview and occasional complicity in imperialist ideologies (Mukherjee, 2013).

Postmodern and Structuralist Approaches

Postmodern and structuralist critiques focus on Dickens's narrative techniques and the multiplicity of meanings in his works. In *Bleak House*, the use of dual narrators—Esther Summerson and an omniscient voice—illustrates the instability of perception and truth, encouraging readers to question narrative authority (Tambling, 1995).

The episodic structure of Dickens's serialized novels, such as *The Pickwick Papers*, has been analyzed for its reflection of modern fragmentation and temporality. Postmodern critics highlight how these narrative techniques anticipate later innovations in literature, blending humor, pathos, and social critique in ways that remain compelling and relevant (Walder, 1995).

Ecocriticism

Recent eco-critical studies have examined Dickens's portrayals of environmental degradation and the effects of industrialization on nature. Novels like *Hard Times* and *Dombey and Son* depict the destruction



of rural landscapes and the rise of polluted urban centers. Dickens's vivid descriptions of fog, smoke, and filth in London not only create atmospheric settings but also serve as early warnings about the environmental costs of unchecked industrialization (Schwarzbach, 1979).

Conclusion

Charles Dickens's works are remarkable for their ability to combine sharp social critique with compelling narratives that explore universal themes of justice, morality, and identity. His portrayal of Victorian society captures the complexities of class struggle, industrialization, and the plight of marginalized groups, offering insights that remain relevant today.

Critics have approached Dickens from diverse perspectives, including Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial readings, each enriching our understanding of his work. Whether examining his critique of capitalism in *Hard Times*, his psychological depth in *Great Expectations*, or his environmental concerns in *Dombey and Son*, these approaches underscore the enduring complexity and significance of Dickens's novels.

Through his masterful storytelling, Dickens not only entertained but also inspired reflection on the social and moral challenges of his time. His vision of a more compassionate and equitable world continues to resonate, making his works a cornerstone of literary and cultural studies.

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