

# Reality versus Fantasy in William Dean Howells' *Editha* and Luigi Pirandello's *War*

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## Abstract

In the twentieth century, we are all too familiar with the horror of war and its dehumanizing effects. Both *Editha* (1905), one of William Dean Howells' most successful and best-known short stories, and *War* (1919), a short story written by Luigi Pirandello—one of the most influential Italian playwrights of the twentieth century— inveigh against imperialism and revolve around radical ideas of country, patriotism, and war. Both *War* and *Editha* demonstrate that people may avoid the reality of tragedies that result from war in order to help themselves cope with the emotional impact. As "Human kind cannot bear very much reality" (T.S. Eliot), they try to rationalize the bitterness, facing denial and self-deception. What makes these two short stories appear in this article, based on its author's viewpoint, is the use of an ideological language fueled by media and nation narratives to glorify wars. Both short stories take advantage of some character who embodies all the nonsense about the heroic romanticism of war and whose false sense of values drives the rest either to premature death in a questionable war or to a fantastic rather than realistic situation. Both Howells and Pirandello were well aware of the influence of propaganda, advertisement and nation narratives in shaping such an ideological language ending in glorification of wars at the mercy of imperialism.

**Key words:** Fantasy, Ideology, Media, Reality.

## Introduction

In William Dean Howells' short story, *Editha*, the main character is an unusual woman, Editha Balcom, who has her own perfect ideals and pushes them on her lover, George Gearson, to ask him to fight in the Spanish-American War. In this short story Howells not only brought his anti-war message about the dangers of war but also satirized the United States' governments that have foolish ideas about the reasons to go to war. This short story, written at the beginning of 20th century, is audacious for its time; the plot revolves around radical ideas of patriotism, and country. Almost documentary in its realism, Dean Howells' story is as powerful as any of his better-known novels. Inspired by American attitudes toward the Spanish-American war, *Editha* is essential listening for anyone with an interest in history, both global and literary. For Howells, realism was a democratic movement in the arts, a focus on the normal and commonplace, distinct from romanticism or "romanticistic" fiction with its emphasis on the more ideal, bizarre, sentimental, or aristocratic. Howells summarized his notion of moral complicity in his novel *The Minister's Charge* (1886). No one "sinned or suffered to himself alone," a character remarks. "If a community was corrupt, if an age was immoral, it was not because of the vicious, but the virtuous who fancied themselves indifferent spectators." Faithful to such principles in his life as well as in his art, Howells flirted with socialism and inveighed against imperialism, as in his story *Editha* (1905), a satire of a young woman who challenges her weak-willed lover to win glorious honors in battle. The results of this decision are very unexpected and very thought-provoking (Scharnhorst). No other American writer has dominated the literary scene the way William Dean Howells did in his prime. As a steadily productive novelist, playwright, critic, essayist, and editor, Howells was always in the public eye, and his influence during the 1880s and 1890s on a growing, serious middle-class readership was incalculable. He made that emerging middle class aware of itself: in his writings an entire generation discovered, through his faithful description of familiar places, his dramatizations of ordinary lives, and his shrewd analyses of shared moral issues, its tastes, its social behavior, its values, and its problems (Baym et al, 1989, P.263). In *Editha* (1905), Howells characteristically explores the double moral failure of a society and of an individual who has been corrupted by its worst values at least (Baym et al, 1989, P.264). In the mid-1880s Howells had aggressively argued the case for realism and against the "romanticistic," promoting Henry James in particular at the expense of such English novelists as Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray (Ibid, P.265). Howells attacked sentimentality of thought and feeling and the falsification of moral nature and ethical options wherever he found them in fiction. He believed that realism "was nothing more or less than the truthful treatment of material," especially the motives and actions of ordinary men and women. He insisted, sooner and more vigorously than any other American critic, that the novel be objective or dramatic in point of view; solidly based in convincingly motivated characters

speaking the language of actual men and women; free of contrived events or melodramatic effects true to the particulars of a recent time and specific places; and ethically and aesthetically a seamless piece (Ibid). *War*, written by Luigi Pirandello, is a short story focusing on the tragic repercussions that World War I had on thousands of families. This short story is set on a train and involves four different families who discover the cruel reality of losing a loved one by listening to a traveling companion's own grief about the war and the effect it has on him. It is suggested that Pirandello uses his literary works to reflect the bitterness of self-deception therefore making it arguable that the characters in *War* find reality in death through their companion's testimony. Because of past denial, each character discovers that they are unstable beings when forced to recognize death. Analyzing the thoughts and opinions of the passengers can support this idea. Each traveler is enlightened after an accompanying passenger shares his personal testimony, shattering all previous views regarding the loss of a son for the benefit of the country. *War* brings to light the internal struggles provoked by the loss of a child to one's country. Pirandello, too, uses a well-established literary device to tell his story. He contrives a restricted setting for his characters and lets them share their thoughts with one another. Such constraint—Pirandello even honors the three classical unities of time, place, and action—more dramatically reveals a world in which all progress and hope of progress have ceased. This atmosphere is dull, oppressive, and intrusive. Pirandello is trying to represent human experience as realistically and banally as possible and could hardly be considered a symbolist; nevertheless, the imagery is there. His characters sit in an old-fashioned train in a small railway station in a small Italian province and wait to be taken to an even more remote and backward part of their country. They wait for something to happen with the dread that it might. They wait with the same spirit of resignation in which they struggle to accept and minimize the ultimate loss of their sons. Pirandello lets the characters speak for themselves. He offers the barest of description, saving himself the trouble by relying on the reader's own knowledge of his locale. In thus downplaying the surroundings, Pirandello is able to intensify the characters' relationships to one another. This intensification is necessary because his characters are so essentially colorless, with features made deliberately unpleasant. "Interested in the inner man, Pirandello explored the personalities of characters usually by placing them in fantastic rather than realistic situations" (Nowruzi and Birjandi, 2014, P.75).

## Discussion

### 1. Reality versus Fantasy in *Editha*

In the twentieth century, we are all too familiar with the horror of war. We see its effects in the psychological trauma of returning veterans. This is in stark contrast to the traditional view that war is a glorious enterprise which would make boys into men and confer honor upon both them and their loved ones. Completely overlooked was the fact that it could just as easily make boys into corpses and confer horrific memories on those who survived. However, some voices of pacifism have made themselves heard throughout past eras, and one of these belonged to William Dean Howells. In his story *Editha*, war is shown to be dehumanizing and traumatic—the complete opposite of glorious (Bernardo). The main subject of *Editha*, one of William Dean Howells's most successful and best-known short stories, is war. Howells was very much opposed to war and especially the Spanish-American War, which he considered imperialistic. He shows his dislike in his portrayal of Editha Balcom, a thoughtless, selfish young woman, idealistic but ignorant of the consequences of war. *Editha*, which questions what constitutes a justifiable war, is a tale whose brevity belies its weight. The story impales Editha, who embodies all the nonsense about the heroic romanticism of war and whose false sense of values drives her unfortunate fiancé to a premature death in a questionable war. This impressionable young woman, Editha, bases her sentimental views about war on the yellow journalism that she reads in the current newspapers. She insists that her fiancé, George Gearson, a conscientious objector, fight in the Spanish-American War. "He had said he would go and think it over, and she was not waiting. She was pushing, threatening, compelling..." (Howells, 1905, P.286). She is ecstatic that war is being declared and cannot understand his dislike for war and his unwillingness to fight in a war. "All through their courtship, which was contemporaneous with the growth of the war feeling, she had been puzzled by his want of seriousness about it. He seemed to despise it even more than he abhorred it" (Ibid, P.282). She believes that a man who wants to win her must do something to deserve her: "...to take the part that her whole soul willed him to take, for the completion of her ideal of him. He was very nearly perfect as he was, and he must be allowed to perfect himself" (Ibid, P.283). Now is his chance, because the Spanish-American War has been declared. Editha joyfully repeats jingoistic newspaper phrases to George, "But the man I marry must love his country first of all" (Ibid, P.285), but he remains ironic, thoughtful, and rational. "I'm going to the war, the big war, the glorious war, the holy war ordained by the pocket Providence that blesses butchery... 'Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war'...there was one country, and the thing was to fight to a finish as quick as possible (Ibid, P.286). *The Pocket providence* was a small leaflet with some ads and information to propagandize war. Through the alliteration of /p/ and /b/, the author ridicules the idea of war. He makes a parody of war. When George leaves Editha's presence after war has been declared, Editha's mother says that she hopes that George will not enlist, but Editha hopes that he will. Editha puts her engagement ring and various mementos into a package with a letter to George telling him to keep them until he enlists. She decides to keep the package for a while in case George does the right thing. George returns to the Balcom household that evening with the news that he has led the pro-war speakers at the town meeting and will be the captain of the local volunteers. Editha gives George her letter as he leaves; to show him how serious she is about the war. She tells him that war is in

the order of Providence: There are no two sides about war; there is nothing now but their country. Next afternoon, "looking pale and rather sick...even to his languid irony," George comes again, saying, "I guess I'd better tell you, Editha, that I consecrated myself to your god of battles last night by pouring too many libations to him down my own throat. But I'm all right now. One has to carry off the excitement, somehow" (Howells, 1905, P.287). Commanding him, Editha asks George not to touch it again. "You don't belong to yourself now; you don't even belong to *me*. You belong to your country, and you have a sacred charge to keep yourself strong and well for your country's sake. I have been thinking, thinking all night and all day long" (Ibid, P.288). George's rationality remains by the time he says farewell to Editha,

"I don't want you to feel foolishly bound to my memory ... If anything happens, I want you to help my mother out. She won't like my doing this thing. She brought me up to think war a fool thing as well as a bad thing. My father was in the Civil War; all through it; lost his arm in it." She thrilled with the sense of the arm round her; what if that should be lost? He laughed as if divining her: "Oh, it doesn't run in the family, as far as I know!" (Howells, 1905, P.288) Egotism and ignorance like Editha's lead to the suffering of many people. Her fixation of belief about the correctness, indeed, the necessity of war impels her pacifist fiancé to act against his beliefs and convictions about the supremacy of world peace and engage in what he fears and detests most, battling and possibly even killing other human beings. George had said it was not this war alone, although this war seemed peculiarly wanton and needless. Every war was so stupid that it made him feel sick, "It isn't this war alone; though this seems peculiarly wanton and needless; but it's every war—so stupid; it makes me sick." However, she said, very throatily again, "God meant it to be war" (Howells, 1905, P.284). His total love for Editha, however, leads him to act against his principles, "I never thought I should like to kill a man; but now I shouldn't care; and the smokeless powder lets you see the man drop that you kill. It's all for the country! What a thing it is to have a country that *can't* be wrong, but if it is, is right, anyway!" (Ibid, P.287). When he goes to the town meeting the day war is declared, he intends to sprinkle cold water on the enthusiasm of the young men who are of the age to be soldiers. In the confusion and drinking of toasts, people call his name, the men adore him, and, after everyone has volunteered, they elect him their captain.

Both of the central men in the story, George and Editha's father, agree that the Spanish-American War will not amount to much in terms of the length of the war and the loss of lives in battle. Mr. Balcom does not find any seriousness in this war, "I guess it won't be much of a war, and I guess Gearson don't think so either. ...I wouldn't lose any sleep over it. I'm going back to bed, myself" (Howells, 1905, P.287). They are both mistaken, however, in assuming the war will be a "walkover" because George himself dies in one of the first skirmishes. "...there came news of the first skirmish, and in the list of the killed, which was telegraphed as a trifling loss on our side, was Gearson's name" (Ibid, P.289). Those who took the war lightly were proven wrong.

Editha believed that her boyfriend would not be a real man unless he went to fight for his country. The fact that George did not seem to take anything very seriously infuriated Editha and she virtually bullied him into enlisting in the army when war was declared. He is among the first wave of soldiers killed, and Editha quite properly wears black out of respect (but with a great deal of pride, also), and goes to visit George's mother in his request,

"Yes," the mother said, "he told me he had asked you to come if he got killed. You didn't expect that, I suppose, when you sent him" (Howells, 1905, P.290).

Mrs. Gearson lashes out at Editha, telling her,

I suppose you would have been glad to die, such a brave person as you! I don't believe he was glad to die. He was always a timid boy, that way; he was afraid of a good many things; but if he was afraid he did what he made up his mind to. I suppose he made up his mind to go, but I knew what it cost him by what it cost me when I heard of it. I had been through one war before. When you sent him you didn't expect he would get killed (Howells, 1905, P.291).

Editha did not expect it. When girls and women give their men up to their country, they think the men will come "marching back, somehow, just as gay as they went, or if it's an empty sleeve, or even an empty pantaloons, it's all the more glory" (Howells, 1905, P.291). No one ever expects the glorious soldiers to come back the glorious dead. But Mrs. Gearson is not through:

"You just expected him to kill someone else, some of those foreigners, ... You thought it would be all right for my George, your George, to kill the sons of those miserable mothers and the husbands of those girls that you would never see the faces of. I thank my God he didn't live to do it! I thank my God they killed him first, and that he ain't livin' with their blood on his hands!" She dropped her eyes, which she had raised with her voice,

and glared at Editha. "What you got that black on for?" She lifted herself by her powerful arms so high that her helpless body seemed to hang limp its full length. "Take it off; take it off, before I tear it from your back!" (Howells, 1905, P.291)

It is not surprising that Editha does not get it; she ends the story by going to have her portrait painted in her lovely mourning outfit, and commenting that George's mother must be insane. "I think ...she wasn't quite in her right mind; and so did papa" (Howells, 1905, P.291). She personally has never seen the brutality, the complete horror of war; she has never experienced the terror of fearing for her life at every moment, of watching people blown up only inches away. She can still think it is romantic because she has not been there.

Hearing the comments of the artist lady on the mission of the war, "But when you consider the good this war has done—how much it has done for the country!", and her overt idea on Mrs. Gearson's view, "But how dreadful of her! How perfectly—excuse me—how *vulgar!*" (Howells, 1905, P. 291), a light broke on Editha in the darkness after weeks and months. The mystery that had confused her was solved by the word "vulgar"; and from that moment she rose from groveling in shame and self-pity, and began to live again in the ideal, the war is glorious (Ibid, P.292).

## 2. Reality versus Fantasy in *War*

*War*, written by Luigi Pirandello, is a short story that portrays the tragic impact of war on family. The story involves different families who discover the reality of losing a loved one; by listening to the different travelers' grief about the war. *War* is one of many works against wars, especially World War I. The story takes place on a train in Italy during World War I (1914–1918). Italy entered the war in 1915. Using indirect description by telling the whole story in the third-person perspective and defining clearly the emotions of characters, Pirandello easily helped readers to understand the cruelty and fierceness of the war. At the very beginning of the story, the background itself brings us the sad and gloomy atmosphere of the "night express" which "stopped at the small station of Fabriano and continued their journey by the small-fashioned local joining the main line with Sulmona" (Pirandello, 1919, P.68). Even when the dawn came, it only made the view more clearly for us to see how tragic the passengers became. By using such words like "mourning, weakened body, moaning, thin and weakly, death-white, shy, uneasy, missing front teeth, hide her face" (Ibid), the author directly defined how disastrous their situations are even though the readers have not known them yet. By accident, all of the passengers "in this stuffy and smoky second-class carriage" (Ibid) were the parents of soldiers who sent to the front in war. Their sons were died or wounded, which made the parents suffer the sadness, loneliness, bitterness and wretchedness inside each of them. Pirandello opens the story by introducing a husband and wife, both in deep mourning for their son that is to be sent to the front line. After the couple boarded the train, the husband felt that it was his duty to explain to his traveling companions that the poor old woman was to be pitied because the war was taking away her only son. This upset the couple because their son was assured that he would not be sent to the front line for at least six months and now all of a sudden he was commanded to report to the line in three days. The couple argues with the other passengers that their situation is as dire as it can get because this is their only son and there is no one left to console them if their son were to die. Until the woman met the man who gave his testimony, she mourned as though her life were ending along with her son's departure. Although her son was sent to the front line, "her grief had been greater in seeing that nobody—as she thought—could share her feelings (Pirandello, 1919, P.72), and all those explanations would not have aroused even "a shadow of sympathy from those people who—most likely—were in the same plight as herself" (Pirandello, 1919, P.69). In the second paragraph of the story, Pirandello crash-lands the reader into a scene of disorder and despair. The way the author introduces the characters and the scene—from a seemingly peaceful first paragraph, to a second paragraph full of disorder and despair—is precisely the view of the parents when their son goes off to war. Before the son goes off to war, life is calm and peaceful, but after he is called to the front, the parents' lives get shot to hell. At the onset, the characters of the story argue for the notion that it is but right and proper that their children are off fighting a war. First, the parents reflect that their sons are fighting for a higher calling — for their country. "Our children do not belong to us; they belong to the Country" (Pirandello, 1919, P.70). Moreover their sons are happy to be sacrificing themselves in the name of the nation. "And our sons go, when they are twenty, and they don't want tears, because if they die, they die inflamed and happy" (Ibid, P.71). Most of the short story is composed of this bravado, of parents telling themselves that it is correct that their sons are off killing and being killed. The chief believer in this line of reasoning is a father, "a fat, red-faced man with bloodshot eyes of the palest gray" (Pirandello, 1919, P.70), who has just lost his son. Yet he maintains that his son died happy and thus, he does not even wear mourning.

If Country is a natural necessity like bread of which each of us must eat in order not to die of hunger, somebody must go to defend it. And our sons go, when they are twenty, and they don't want tears, because if they die, they die inflamed and happy (I am speaking, of course, of decent boys). Now, if one dies young and happy, without having the ugly sides of life, the boredom of it, the pettiness, the bitterness of disillusion...what

more can we ask for him? Everyone should stop crying; everyone should laugh, as I do...or at least thank God—as I do—because my son, before dying, sent me a message saying that he was dying satisfied at having ended his life in the best way he could have wished. That is why, as you see, I do not even wear mourning (Pirandello, 1919, P.71).

This is a world of crumbling values, made all the more vapid because of the intense desire to rationalize attitudes and live in a mist of illusions. The characters are overwhelmed by events that they cannot control and understand, but they pretend otherwise. A bulky woman, who has just arrived, is somewhat of an outsider; she apparently has not had time, or is not yet willing, to submerge her natural emotions under a mask of acceptable public sentimentality. However a simple question by the woman, the newest passenger on the train, makes this man confront the fact that his son is indeed dead. "Trying to listen with great attention to the details which the fat man was giving to his companions about the way his son had fallen as a hero for his King and his Country, happy and without regrets," (Pirandello, 1919, P. 72) the bulky woman poses the question, "Then... is your son really dead?" (Ibid, P.73) Faced with this epiphany, the passenger breaks down. He tried to answer, but words failed him.

He looked and looked at her, almost as if only then—at that silly, incongruous question—he had suddenly realized at last that his son was really dead—gone forever—forever. His face contracted, became horribly distorted, then he snatched in haste a handkerchief from his pocket and, to the amazement of everyone, broke into harrowing, heart-breaking, uncontrollable sobs (Pirandello, 1919, P.73).

Once the initial shock of loss passes, the parents bear masks of stoic bravado in order to hide from their true emotions. But towards the end of the story, the bundle like woman, who is still in the initial shock of loss, turns to the fat man and asks, "Then...is your son really dead?" At this moment the fat man is stripped of his mask, and is faced with reality. As his walls come tumbling down, he finally realizes that no matter what his son might have done, he was now gone forever. Here, Pirandello does a fantastic job of portraying a parents' reaction to their son going off to war. The fat man's response is denial and he rationalizes his son's death. It seems as if he is proud of his son's death, trying to console himself with something inconsolable. Listening to all this, the bulky woman is barely convinced that he can rationalize the death of his child. It is evident that the fat man has not realized the impact of his loss, when the bulky woman poses the question, "Is your son really dead?" (Pirandello, 1919, P.73) only then, he instantly bursts out in tears. In light of this father's sudden realization that his son is truly gone, his earlier statements take on a ring of passionate desperation. Clearly the father has been trying to convince himself that everything is as it should be that his son died for a noble cause. Lastly, this father has poured tremendous energy in constructing the facade that he hides his grief behind. Yet ultimately the father's assertions ring hollow. His tears of mourning at the end reflect how the consolations we hide behind (his death was for a higher purpose, he died fighting for what he believed in) evaporate in the face of inconsolable fact. *War* deals with social realism, covering the topics of values, war and parenting. Pirandello's story is so powerful; it thematically breaks through many of the common associations with war. It strips away nationalism or love of country as a part of the justification of war. It takes away the notion of war being a part of a youthful adventure that young people must endure. It strikes at the heart that lies at all war. There is only death. The fact that the bundled up woman weeps for what she knows is going to be inevitable and that the fat man cannot escape the true horror of the war in that his son is "really dead" both help to emphasize the theme of the story. The end result of war is death and pain for those left behind. Pirandello's focus on the social masks that people wear has been a major influence on modern fiction, as well as on modern drama. Pirandello was fascinated by the contrast between appearance and reality in human behavior. He viewed life as a series of illusions, each concealing a surprising core: comedy in tragedy, sanity in madness, grief in happiness. He saw people as suffering from the necessity of leading insincere public lives, and he watched with compassion as they clung to their delusions. He created literature that he hoped would force people to examine their convictions, acknowledge their inner selves, and lead more authentic lives. Readers are introduced to the seven characters in this short story during a train ride to bid their loved ones farewell, to fight on the front. The setting is stuffy, smoky, and cramped, as the passengers have been on this journey for three long months. This second-class carriage sets the tone for the heartache and sacrifice that envelops each passenger. Pirandello describes these characters in great detail to illustrate to the reader their intensity and discontent. Although these passengers' stories differ, they each share a common thread of emotion that sparks a debate causing unrealized personal tragedy to bubble from below the surface. An immense amount of detail is privileged to the woman overcome with emotion and grief under her bulky exterior. She does not speak until the very end of the story, nor show her face. Her opposing character, the watery gray-eyed monster of a man, also receives much detail from Pirandello, "his eyes were watery and motionless, and soon after he ended with a shrill laugh which might well have been a sob" (Pirandello, 1919, P.72). These characters are balanced by the woman's tiny, small and bright-eyed husband who shares his distressing story with the other five passengers. The characters in the story are feeling deep sadness and grief over their sons and loved one's death or departure. They were all experiencing the same emotion, but they still argued about who was having it the worst. The discussion turns into a competition, where each man argues that his own suffering is worse than the others'. They all convinced themselves

that no one knew what they were going through and no one could understand how they felt. Each of them found some sort of comfort in believing that what they felt was so horrid, nothing else may have possibly been worse. The fat man's statement was reasonable, but in his statement, he only considered the feeling of his son's satisfaction in sacrificing himself for the country.

They all face denial– the denial to accept what is actually going on and having little control over it. They cannot control the war and they cannot accept that their sons might die or have died. It is in human nature to deny the truth, to deny what hurts us, or what breaks us. We sometimes create a bubble around us that keeps the bitter truth out and lets us live peacefully, until the bubble pops. The relationship between the characters brings each one back to reality and leaves them face to face with the truth they had been avoiding. In *War* Pirandello writes about peoples' reaction to war through the eyes of the main characters who talk about their children at war, and the right to grieve about them. But because of past denial, the characters discover that when confronted with death, they are stripped of their masks and confronted with reality. Pirandello's short story *War* is a fine example of epiphany as well as how this sudden realization can cast meaning on the entirety of a narrative.

### Conclusion

The main subject of both *Editha* (1905) by William Dean Howells and *War* (1919) by Luigi Pirandello is war. Both writers were very much opposed to war which they considered imperialistic. Both short stories reveal some moves from reality to fantasy and vice versa. Both *War* and *Editha* demonstrate that people may avoid the reality of tragedies that result from war in order to help themselves cope with the emotional impact. On the one hand, "Human kind cannot bear very much reality," (T.S. Elliot) on the other hand, one must face the harsh truths in life to truly understand and feel the tragic impact of war and death, no matter how devastating the situation may be. If one does not face the realities of life, it can cause ones values or moral beliefs to become askew. Readers are given two different viewpoints on this fact by the different characters of each story. In *War*, the character referred to as the fat man discusses the loss of a son at war and social responsibility versus personal sacrifice. In *Editha*; similarly, the title character, Editha, believes that her boyfriend is not a real man unless he goes to fight for his country. Her values and morals are completely askew as the realities of the tragedy are never faced and even after she faced the bitter realities at the end of the story, she prefers to return to her idealism. Both short stories take advantage of some character who embodies all the nonsense about the heroic romanticism of war and whose false sense of values drives the rest either to premature death in a questionable war or to a fantastic rather than realistic situation. Both Howells and Pirandello were well aware of the influence of propaganda, advertisement and nation narratives in shaping such an ideological language ending in glorification of wars at the mercy of imperialism.

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