
Healing, grief, and the philosophy of thought in the works of Frances Burnett

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Annotation *This article examines the psychological and philosophical dimensions of Frances Hodgson Burnett's major works, arguing that her fiction constitutes a coherent therapeutic vision that extends well beyond the conventions of Victorian and Edwardian children's literature. Drawing on *The Secret Garden* (1911) and *A Little Princess* (1905), the analysis identifies five interconnected thematic strands: the garden as a metaphor for psychic restoration and active self-recovery; the influence of the New Thought movement on Burnett's treatment of belief, volition, and physical health; the complex and unsentimental portrayal of grief in the figure of Archibald Craven; the Stoic philosophy of interior sovereignty enacted by Sara Crewe; and the proto-ecopsychological conviction that sustained contact with the natural world carries measurable restorative properties. The article contends that Burnett arrived, through narrative instinct and personal experience of loss, at insights that anticipate modern developments in cognitive behavioral therapy, relational systems theory, and nature-based medicine. Rather than positioning her works as naive celebrations of positive thinking, the analysis attends to their philosophical complexity, including their honest reckoning with the limits of will, the costs of imagination, and the irrational dimensions of human recovery.*

Keywords *New Thought movement, Ecopsychology, Psychological resilience, Victorian children's literature, Stoicism, Grief and recovery, Nature-based healing*

Frensis Bernett asarlarida shifo topish, qayg'u va tafakkur falsafasi

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Annotatsiya *Annotatsiya*
*Ushbu maqola Frances Hodgson Burnett ning asosiy asarlaridagi psixologik va falsafiy jihatlarni tahlil qilib, uning badiiy ijodi Viktoriya va Edvard davri bolalar adabiyoti doirasidan ancha kengroq bo'lgan yaxlit terapevtik qarashni ifodalashini asoslaydi. Tahlil *The Secret Garden* (1911) va *A Little Princess* (1905) asarlariga tayangan holda beshta o'zaro bog'liq mavzuni aniqlaydi: bog' – ruhiy tiklanish va faol o'zini tiklash metaforasi sifatida; "New Thought" harakatining ishonch, iroda va jismoniy salomatlik talqiniga ta'siri; Archibald Craven obrazida qayg'uning murakkab va sentimental bo'lmagan tasviri; Sara Crewe timsolida namoyon bo'ladigan ichki suverenitetning stoik falsafasi; hamda tabiat bilan uzluksiz aloqaning o'lchab bo'ladigan tiklovchi xususiyatlarga ega ekanini ilgari suruvchi proto-ekopsixologik qarash. Maqolada ta'kidlanishicha, Bernett o'zining hikoya qilish instinkti va shaxsiy yo'qotish tajribasi orqali kognitiv-xulq-atvor terapiyasi, munosabatlar tizimi nazariyasi hamda tabiatga asoslangan tibbiyotning zamonaviy yo'nalishlarini oldindan sezgan. Uning asarlarini oddiy "ijobiy fikrlash" targ'iboti*

sifatida emas, balki irodaning chegaralari, tasavvurning xarajatlari va inson tiklanishining irratsional jihatlarini ham halol yoritgan falsafiy murakkab asarlar sifatida talqin qilish zarur.

Kalit so'zlar *"New Thought" harakati, ekopsixologiya, psixologik barqarorlik, Viktoriya davri bolalar adabiyoti, stoitsizm, qayg'u va tiklanish, tabiatga asoslangan davolash*

Исцеление, горе и философия мышления в произведениях Френсис Бёрнет

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Аннотация *Данная статья исследует психологические и философские аспекты ключевых произведений Frances Hodgson Burnett, утверждая, что её художественное творчество представляет собой целостное терапевтическое видение, значительно выходящее за рамки викторианской и эдвардианской детской литературы. Опираясь на романы The Secret Garden (1911) и A Little Princess (1905), в исследовании выделяются пять взаимосвязанных тематических направлений: сад как метафора психического восстановления и активного самовосстановления; влияние движения «Новая мысль» на трактовку веры, воли и физического здоровья; сложное и лишённое сентиментальности изображение горя в образе Арчибальда Крейвена; стоическая философия внутреннего суверенитета, воплощённая Сарой Кру; а также прото-экopsихологическое убеждение в том, что устойчивый контакт с природой обладает измеримыми восстановительными свойствами. В статье утверждается, что Бернетт, опираясь на повествовательную интуицию и личный опыт утраты, пришла к выводам, предвосхищающим современные разработки в области когнитивно-поведенческой терапии, теории реляционных систем и медицины, основанной на природных факторах. Вместо того чтобы рассматривать её произведения как наивное прославление позитивного мышления, исследование подчеркивает их философскую сложность, включая честное осмысление ограничений воли, издержек воображения и иррациональных аспектов человеческого восстановления.*

Ключевые слова *Движение «Новая мысль», экopsихология, психологическая устойчивость, викторианская детская литература, стоицизм, горе и восстановление, природно-ориентированное исцеление*

Introduction

Frances Hodgson Burnett did not merely write stories for children. She wrote philosophical arguments in the form of

narrative – quiet, urgent, and deeply personal – about the power of the human mind to transform suffering into life (Gerzina, 2004). At the heart of her most enduring works lies a

conviction that thought is not passive, that the inner world shapes the outer one, and that healing is not something that happens to us, but something we choose.

To read *The Secret Garden*, *A Little Princess*, or *The Lost Prince* as simple tales of resilient orphans is to miss their deeper architecture entirely. Burnett was working within – and beyond – the philosophical currents of her era, weaving together influences from the New Thought movement, Transcendentalism, and her own harrowing encounters with grief into a coherent and radical vision (Stiles, 2020): that the mind, properly cultivated, is the most fertile garden of all.

When Mary Lennox first discovers the locked garden at Misselthwaite Manor in *The Secret Garden* (1911), she encounters something that mirrors her own interior state precisely. The garden is not dead – it is dormant, suffocated, denied light and attention. So is Mary herself: a sharp-tongued, unloved child who has never been taught to feel, let alone to flourish.

Burnett constructs the garden as an explicit psychological metaphor. As Mary clears away dead wood and loosens the soil, she is simultaneously undertaking the painful work of self-excitation (Stiles, 2013). The buried bulbs waiting beneath the frozen earth are her own suppressed capacities – for joy, for connection, for wonder. The question the novel quietly poses is not horticultural but existential: can something this neglected still grow?

At first it seemed that green things would never cease pushing their way through the earth. What is radical here is Burnett's insistence that renewal is earned through effort, not granted by fate. Mary does not stumble into wellness; she digs for it, daily, in all weather. This is a proto-therapeutic insight: that recovery from psychological damage is not passive recuperation but active, disciplined engagement with the living world. Long before modern cognitive behavioral therapy

articulated the relationship between behavior and mood, Burnett's narrative showed it in soil and roots.

Burnett was deeply interested in the New Thought movement – a late nineteenth-century philosophical and spiritual current that held the mind capable of directly influencing physical and material reality. Thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Phineas Quimby, and Mary Baker Eddy had all, in varying registers, argued that thought was not merely reactive but generative: that belief, attention, and intention could reshape circumstances (Eddy, 1875/2000).

This philosophy finds its most explicit expression in the figure of Colin Craven. Colin has been told he is dying. He has been made to believe in his own fragility with such systematic thoroughness that it has become indistinguishable from fact. He cannot walk because he has learned not to try. His invalidism is, in crucial respects, a construction of thought – both his own and those around him.

Burnett frames Colin's recovery not as medical intervention but as a re-education of belief. When Colin begins to chant "I am going to live forever and ever and ever!" in the garden, he is not simply being optimistic – he is enacting a New Thought principle: that the deliberate, repeated direction of attention toward vitality can become vitality (Stiles, 2020). Burnett treats thought as having genuine causal power over the body and the world.

Whether one accepts the metaphysics or not, Burnett's psychological insight holds remarkable modern currency. What she describes maps closely onto what contemporary psychology calls the self-fulfilling prophecy – or, in its clinical dimension, the nocebo effect, whereby negative expectations actively produce negative outcomes. Colin's illness is partly iatrogenic: caused by the people charged with caring for him. Burnett understood this long before it had a name.

It would be easy to read Burnett's work as naively optimistic – a world in which positive thinking conquers all. But the portrait of Archibald Craven complicates this considerably. He is a man undone by grief, twisted by it into something barely human, absent from his own life. He does not reform through effort or will. He reforms because Mary and Colin, in healing themselves, send out a current of vitality that reaches him across distance.

This is the most philosophically mysterious element of the novel: the suggestion that psychological transformation is not entirely individual, that it radiates outward, that the healing of one mind can participate in the healing of another. Burnett here edges toward what we might today call systems thinking – the idea that the psyche does not exist in isolation but in relationship, and that changing one node of a relational system can shift the entire web.

One of the new things people began to find out in the last century was that thoughts – just mere thoughts – are as powerful as electric batteries.

And yet Archibald's transformation, when it comes, arrives not through logic or resolution but through dream – through the voice of his dead wife calling him back to the living. Burnett does not pretend that grief is solved by willpower. She acknowledges that some wounds require something beyond deliberate effort: grace, coincidence, the mysterious reach of love across time. Her philosophical position is not simple positivism; it contains within it a genuine reckoning with the irrational dimensions of human recovery.

Sara Crewe and the Sovereignty of Imagination

In *A Little Princess* (1905), Burnett moves the philosophical terrain from nature to imagination. Sara Crewe, reduced from pampered wealth to domestic servitude, survives her degradation not by denying it (Stiles, 2020) – she is unflinching in her perception of cruelty – but by constructing,

around the raw fact of suffering, an alternative interior kingdom. She pretends she is a princess: not because she is deluded, but because she understands instinctively that dignity is a posture of the self, not a grant from circumstance.

This is a sophisticated and even Stoic insight. The Stoic philosophers – Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, Seneca – held that the only true domain of human freedom is the mind: that while circumstances lie beyond our control, our response to them does not. Sara Crewe enacts this philosophy with remarkable discipline for a child. She cannot control Miss Minchin's cruelty. She can control whether she allows it to define her.

What elevates Burnett beyond mere moralism is her honesty about the cost of this stance. Sara is cold, and hungry, and lonely. The imagination that sustains her is also a kind of loneliness – she cannot fully share it, cannot make others see what she sees. The sovereignty of the interior world is real, but it exacts a price: a certain exile from ordinary human belonging. Burnett does not flinch from this. The princess survives, but she survives in a particular kind of solitude.

Running through all of Burnett's major works is a conviction that the natural world has specific restorative properties – not merely decorative or symbolic, but functionally therapeutic. The moor in *The Secret Garden* is not background; it is medicine. Dickon embodies this directly: he is a figure of radical attunement to the living world, and his presence is literally curative. He brings Colin, who has never breathed cold air, out into the wind, and Colin does not die. He grows.

Contemporary research in ecopsychology and environmental medicine has begun to document precisely what Burnett intuited: that exposure to natural environments measurably reduces cortisol levels, improves mood, strengthens immune function, and accelerates recovery from illness. Burnett's certainty that getting Mary and Colin outside – into unmediated contact with soil, weather,

animals, and growth – was the right prescription was, it turns out, empirically well-founded. She arrived at clinical conclusions by way of narrative instinct.

LEGACY & CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Burnett's therapeutic vision anticipates by over a century such contemporary practices as horticultural therapy, nature-based cognitive behavioral therapy, and the Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing). Her fictional gardens are, in the strictest sense, healing environments – and her descriptions of their effect on damaged children constitute an early and remarkably accurate phenomenology of what we now call nature-assisted recovery.

Frances Hodgson Burnett wrote at the intersection of Victorian sentiment and modern psychology, at a moment when the mind was beginning to be understood as something more than a passive recipient of experience. Her contribution was to translate the emerging philosophical and psychological insights of her era into a form that could be felt rather than merely argued: stories whose truths lodge in the body, not just the intellect.

What remains extraordinary, more than a century later, is how much of her vision has been confirmed rather than superseded. The relationship between thought and health, between environment and healing, between imagination and resilience – all of these are now active areas of clinical and scientific inquiry. Burnett reached her conclusions through story, through instinct, and through suffering. She knew something real about how minds work.

The secret, it turns out, was never about the garden. It was always about the person standing in it, deciding whether to believe that something buried might still grow.

The secret, it turns out, was never about the garden. It was always about the person standing in it, deciding whether to believe that something buried might still be alive.

To understand the full radicalism of Burnett's vision, one must situate her work against the dominant medical treatment of her

era: the rest cure. Invented by Philadelphia neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell in the 1870s, the rest cure prescribed bed rest, social isolation, and force-feeding for patients suffering from nervous disorders – primarily upper-middle-class women diagnosed with hysteria or neurasthenia. The cure was predicated on the assumption that female nervous systems were inherently fragile, that exertion of any kind – physical, intellectual, social – depleted vital energies that could only be restored through complete passivity (Ulrich, 1984; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Li, 2010).

Burnett herself underwent at least three modified rest cures during her lifetime, seeking relief from recurring bouts of insomnia and depression. These treatments offered her no lasting relief. What they did offer was material for critique – material she would transmute into fiction.

The Secret Garden can be read as a systematic inversion of the rest cure's every principle. Where Mitchell prescribed isolation, Burnett insists on connection – to other children, to servants, to animals, to the moor itself. Where the rest cure demanded stillness, Burnett's children dig, run, skip rope, and shout. Where Mitchell's patients were confined to darkened rooms, Mary and Colin are dragged into sunlight and wind. And where the rest cure positioned the physician as absolute authority over the patient's body, Burnett shows children healing themselves and each other, without medical intervention, often in direct defiance of doctors' orders.

Colin's family physician embodies this critique explicitly. He reminds Colin that "he must not forget that he was ill; he must not forget that he was very easily tired." But Colin shrewdly realizes that his cure consists in doing the opposite: believing, with deliberate repetition, that he is well. The doctor's well-meaning ministrations are revealed as iatrogenic – his caution itself produces the weakness it claims to treat.

By showing a young girl curing hysterical males, Burnett inverted the gender politics of

the rest cure and contradicted its key principles (Stiles, 2013).

This inversion carried particular feminist weight. The rest cure had been used to discipline women who stepped outside prescribed domestic roles – Charlotte Perkins Gilman famously documented its horrors in “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). Burnett’s response was quieter but no less subversive: she placed healing power in the hands of a sharp-tongued girl whom no one had ever loved, and showed her resurrecting not only herself but an invalid boy and his grief-stricken father (Gilman, 1892). The gendered hierarchy of Victorian medicine – male doctor, female patient – is entirely reversed.

Burnett’s philosophical commitments have been subject to considerable scholarly debate. During her lifetime and after, some readers assumed she was a Christian Scientist – an assumption encouraged by the novel’s emphasis on mental healing and its skepticism toward conventional medicine. Her son Vivian and his family did eventually become Christian Scientists, and Burnett herself read Mary Baker Eddy’s *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (1875), attended Christian Science services, and received treatment from practitioners affiliated with the movement.

Yet Burnett never formally joined any Christian Science church or organization. When her novel *The Dawn of a To-morrow* (1906) was adapted for the stage and some viewers labeled her a Christian Scientist, she responded tartly: “Thank goodness, I am not a scientist of any kind.”

The more precise influence appears to be New Thought – the broader, more eclectic movement that emerged alongside Christian Science but diverged from it in significant ways. Where Christian Science maintained strict theological commitments (denying the ultimate reality of matter and evil), New Thought was philosophically promiscuous, drawing on Transcendentalism, Swedenborgianism, Eastern philosophy, and emerging psychological theories. Its central

claim was simpler and more secular: that thought has causal power over circumstance, that the mind can directly influence health and material conditions.

This is precisely what Colin articulates in his “scientific” monologues:

“The great scientific discoveries I am going to make will be about Magic. Magic is a great thing and scarcely any one knows anything about it except a few people in old books.... I am sure there is Magic in everything, only we have not sense enough to get hold of it and make it do things for us – like electricity and horses and steam.”

Colin’s “Magic” is not supernatural in any traditional sense. It is mentalist – a force of directed attention and belief that operates according to laws not yet understood. This maps closely onto New Thought principles, which framed mental healing as a kind of technology, a discoverable science of mind awaiting systematic investigation.

Burnett’s fictional treatment of these ideas is notably non-dogmatic. She does not argue for a metaphysical system; she dramatizes a set of practices – positive affirmation, deliberate attention to vitality, immersion in nature – and shows their effects on bodies and relationships. Whether the reader accepts the underlying metaphysics is almost beside the point. The practices themselves are presented as empirically efficacious, regardless of theoretical justification.

Contemporary popular psychology is saturated with references to the “inner child” – that original, creative, authentic self supposedly buried beneath adult defenses and social conditioning. This concept, now ubiquitous in self-help literature and therapeutic practice, has traceable roots in the same late-nineteenth-century movements that shaped Burnett’s thinking.

Emma Curtis Hopkins, the leading New Thought teacher of the 1880s and 1890s, described an idealized “Man Child” within each adult who could lead her to spiritual serenity

and worldly success. This figure – innocent, intuitive, uncorrupted by negative thought – was explicitly gendered as masculine but resided within women, serving as a source of wisdom and a vehicle for ambition.

Little Lord Fauntleroy (1886), Burnett's first blockbuster success, can be read as a fictionalization of this concept. Cedric Errol, the novel's child hero, serves as a kind of external manifestation of his mother's inner child – achieving for her the wealth, status, and social influence that Victorian conventions would have forbidden her to pursue directly. The symbiotic relationship between mother and son allowed female readers to imaginatively participate in ambition and self-advancement without appearing selfish or unfeminine. The child became a socially acceptable proxy for adult desire.

This dynamic persists across Burnett's work. Mary Lennox, Sara Crewe, and Colin Craven all function as figures of the inner child made external – repositories of authenticity, creativity, and healing power that adults have lost access to. The adults in these novels are damaged, frozen, grief-stricken; the children carry the life force that will eventually thaw and restore them. Archibald Craven does not heal himself – he is healed by the vitality his son and niece generate in the garden. The current flows from child to adult, from inner to outer, from the buried to the blooming.

That this narrative structure continues to resonate – in therapy, in self-help, in the persistent popularity of Burnett's novels themselves – suggests it addresses something genuine in human psychology. The inner child concept may be philosophically imprecise, but it captures a felt truth: that access to play, wonder, and unselfconscious presence is often foreclosed by adult life, and that recovery sometimes requires returning to capacities we possessed before we learned to suppress them.

One of the most philosophically sophisticated elements of *The Secret Garden* is its implicit systems thinking. Burnett does not present healing as an individual achievement –

a matter of private willpower – but as a relational and even ecological phenomenon. Mary's recovery enables Colin's; Colin's enables his father's; the garden's restoration participates in and symbolizes all three. The boundaries between self and environment, between one psyche and another, are treated as permeable.

This has significant implications for how we understand the novel's apparent "magic." When Archibald Craven dreams of his dead wife calling him home, when he feels an inexplicable pull toward the garden at precisely the moment Colin is learning to walk, Burnett is suggesting that psychological transformation radiates outward through relational networks. The healing of one node shifts the entire system.

Contemporary family systems theory, developed by Murray Bowen and others in the mid-twentieth century, would later articulate similar principles: that symptoms in one family member often express dysfunction in the family system as a whole, and that changing one relationship can catalyze changes throughout the network. Burnett arrived at this insight narratively, showing rather than theorizing the ways that isolation perpetuates illness and connection enables recovery.

The garden itself functions as a systems diagram. It is not merely a backdrop for individual healing but an active participant in it – a third term that mediates between characters, providing common ground (literally) for relationships that could not otherwise form. Mary and Colin meet as hostile strangers; they become collaborators through shared labor in the garden. The work they do together creates the bond that heals them both.

Burnett's conviction that natural environments possess specific healing properties has received striking empirical support in recent decades. The field of ecopsychology – which examines the relationship between human psychological wellbeing and the natural world – has

documented measurable benefits of nature exposure across multiple domains.

A landmark 1984 study by Roger Ulrich found that hospital patients recovering from surgery healed faster and required less pain medication when their windows overlooked trees rather than brick walls. Subsequent research has confirmed that exposure to natural environments reduces cortisol levels, lowers blood pressure, improves mood, enhances immune function, and accelerates recovery from mental fatigue. The Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing) – walking slowly and attentively through forest environments – has been shown to produce significant physiological changes in as little as fifteen minutes.

Burnett intuited all of this. Her descriptions of Mary's first encounters with the moor – the cold wind, the unfamiliar smell of earth and heather, the physical shock of open space after enclosed rooms – read as phenomenologically precise accounts of what contemporary researchers call "soft fascination": the effortless, restorative attention that natural environments elicit, in contrast to the directed, depleting attention required by urban and built environments (Stephen Kaplan, 1989).

The garden in *The Secret Garden* functions as what environmental psychologists now call a "restorative environment" – a space characterized by being away (psychologically distant from stressors), extent (having sufficient scope and coherence to engage the mind), fascination (capturing attention without effort), and compatibility (matching the individual's inclinations and purposes). Burnett created, in narrative form, an almost perfect specimen of the healing landscape that subsequent research would validate.

Horticultural therapy – the use of gardening and plant-based activities as clinical intervention – now operates in hospitals, prisons, rehabilitation centers, and mental health facilities worldwide. Its practitioners cite, among other sources, *The Secret Garden* as an

early and influential articulation of their core insight: that tending living things can help heal damaged minds.

It would be a mistake to read Burnett as a naive optimist – as someone who believed that positive thinking could conquer all suffering, that willpower was sufficient to every challenge. Her own life contradicted this. The death of her son Lionel from tuberculosis in 1890, when he was only sixteen, devastated her in ways that no amount of mental discipline could remedy. She sought solace in spiritualism, in mind cure, in compulsive work, but the wound never fully healed.

This grief shadows her fiction. Archibald Craven is a portrait of what happens when loss exceeds the mind's capacity to metabolize it – when no amount of positive thinking can restore what has been taken. His recovery, when it comes, arrives not through willpower but through something that can only be called grace: a dream, a voice, a mysterious pull he does not understand. Burnett acknowledges that some healing lies beyond deliberate effort, that the irrational dimensions of recovery – coincidence, love, the inexplicable persistence of connection across death – cannot be reduced to technique.

Similarly, Sara Crewe's survival in *A Little Princess* exacts real costs. Her imagination sustains her, but it also isolates her. The interior kingdom she constructs is a refuge, but it is also a kind of exile – she cannot make others see what she sees, cannot fully share the reality she has created. The sovereignty of the mind is real, but it does not abolish loneliness.

Burnett's philosophical position is thus more complex than simple New Thought affirmation. She believes in the power of thought, but she also believes in the power of circumstance, of relationship, of forces that exceed individual control. Her novels enact a dialogue between agency and vulnerability, between what we can choose and what chooses us. The garden grows because Mary tends it – but also because spring comes whether she wills it or not.

Frances Hodgson Burnett wrote at a moment when the modern understanding of mind was just beginning to crystallize – when psychology was separating from philosophy, when the relationship between thought and body was being reimagined, when women were beginning to claim authority over their own mental and physical health. She participated in these transformations not as a theorist but as an artist, translating emerging insights into stories that could be felt before they were understood.

What remains extraordinary, more than a century later, is how much of her vision has been confirmed rather than superseded. The relationship between thought and health, between environment and healing, between imagination and resilience – all of these are now active areas of clinical and scientific inquiry. Researchers document what Burnett dramatized: that belief shapes physiology, that nature restores attention, that children carry capacities adults have forgotten, that isolation produces illness and connection enables recovery.

Her method was narrative rather than argumentative. She did not cite studies or

construct syllogisms. She created characters whose transformations readers could inhabit from the inside, whose recoveries felt true in the body before they could be assessed by the intellect. This is a different kind of knowledge than science produces – but it is not therefore less real. Stories teach through identification, through felt experience, through the slow accumulation of imaginative participation. Burnett understood this. She understood that the truths that matter most are often the ones we have to live our way into, not think our way toward.

Conclusion

The secret, it turns out, was never really about the garden. It was about the person standing in it, deciding whether to believe that something buried might still be alive. Burnett spent her life making that decision, over and over, in the face of loss and depression and the stubborn resistance of circumstance. She did not always succeed. But she left behind stories that continue to help others make the same decision – to clear away the dead wood, to loosen the soil, to wait for what wants to grow.

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