

# Binary opposition of life of pi essay sample

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Abstract: Ever since its publication in 2002, Life of Pi has gained great popularity and high critical acclaim from critical circle. It arose the study of Li of Pi from various angels. But most kinds of analysis about the novel are focus on existing doubts about the story, and the religious symbols in the novels. The binary opposition narrative in the novel discussed rarely. The novel is full of the binary oppositions narrative, these made the story distinctive. By expounding the existence of the binary oppositions in the novel, to reveal the meaning of the novel conveys. Key words: Binary opposition; Pi; Tiger; Evil; Ego

Yann Martel (1963-present) is a Canadian author best known for the Man Booker Prize-winning novel Life of Pi. Life of Pi talked about a young boy, Pi, whose family runs zoo in India, providing him with interesting in the animal psychology. Because of the problems of economics and politics, his father decided to move to Canada with his family and their animals. Unfortunately, the ship met storm and capsized. He survived but stranded on a lifeboat With Richard Parker, a 450-pound Bengal tiger. After 227days, he reached the coast of Mexican and rescued by natives and the tiger disappeared in the jungle. As the only survivor of ship two officials from the Japanese Ministry of Transport research the reason of the ship sank.

Pi told them two different versions about his experience. But one on can explain the reason of ship sank. At last, the research men had to accept one of the stories to wind up the case. Life of Pi contains abundant of implications. The most typical one is the binary opposition. In critical theory, a binary opposition is a pair of related terms or concepts that are opposite in meaning. Binary opposition is the system that in language and thought, two

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theoretical opposites are strictly defined and set off against one another. The opposition can be exchange in most of time by the situation. Binary opposition is an important concept of structuralism. In structuralism, a binary opposition is seen as a fundamental organizer of human philosophy, culture, and language. By using binary opposition to analyze the phenomenon of Life of Pi can dig out intension of the novel.

## I. Binary Opposition of Theme

### A. Fantasy and Reality

Life of Pi divided into three parts, Part One is Toronto and Pondicherry describes his childhood in India, Part Two is The Pacific Ocean represents an experience in the ocean with Bengal tiger; Part Three is Benito Juarez Infirmary, Tomatlan, Mexico. The high tide of the novel is Part Three. If Life of Pi only has two parts that removed the last part, the whole novel would be an adventure story merely, cannot cause such kinds of literary circles pay close attention to the book. The third part is essence of book. It implied Life of Pi is the combination of fantasy and reality. Pi has two stories, in the first story he straggled to live with Richard Parker—a Bengal tiger on the lifeboat. Second story is about a helpless 16 years old boy for saving his life and revenge to kill the cook who killed his mother. He told two stories for Japanese Ministry of Transport who research the reason of sank of the ship. Of course, he drew one of them up. The first story is full of the fantastic color, meanwhile, the story made people doubt its reality.

It contains the four animals and Pi, the story have zebra, hyena, orangutan and tiger, they killed each other left the Bengal tiger and Pi, tiger is a <https://assignbuster.com/binary-opposition-of-life-of-pi-essay-sample/>

predator but during the 227 days tiger did not kill Pi, even they were lack of food and dying. It is strange that tiger ate the hyena but did not eat Pi. Actually, Richard Parker had a lot of chances to assault Pi. But he kept Pi in the end. This goes against the nature of predator, tiger gets along with human being with its great hunger and gives up the food before its eyes is impossible. Even more, as a tiger Richard Parker accepted the training from Pi, Pi was only 16 years old, he has no experience about training, and how can he control a 450-pound Bengal tiger? Indeed, the tiger behaviors are also quite extraordinary. The tiger in the story acted more like a man, from Pi's description; Richard Parker is a name of the hunter who caught him, because the mistake of transportation's work, the tiger's name exchanged with the name of hunter. Thus, Richard Parker got a man's name.

In the story, Richard Parker used 'him' instead of 'it', proved the tiger's personification. Further more, he expressed excessive endures for Pi. He ate the animals and a blind man except Pi. These also can make people re-examine the role of Bengal tiger as well. In the third part, as the only survivor of ship of Pi, he told his all experience on the ocean with Bengal tiger but Japanese Ministry of Transport didn't believe the story. Then he told another story, the four animals became four people. He described sailor's broken leg, the ferocious of cook, the kind-hearted mother, and the instinct of Pi. The plot in the second story is correspond to the first story very well. From his state of second story, the research also found the connection with the two story, " So the Taiwanese sailor is the zebra, his mother is the orangutan, the cook is...the hyena? Which mean he is the tiger!"[Chapter-99] These evidences all proved that the personalized tiger is fantasy. Just as

investigator's conclusion, the Bengal tiger is Pi. Fantasy tiger stands for Pi is a sort of personality shift.

He wants to reduce the guilty of killing people to eat. The nature of predator is eating flesh. He made use up the nature of tiger to liberate himself. He killed the cook and cut him to eat is the instinct of human being when got in perilous situation, but the real and clear-mind Pi cannot do such cruel thing. He still cannot face the reality that he had been eaten people; the fantasy tiger is the scapegoat of evil. There is another crucial clue in story can prove the fantasy of the first story. When Pi was blind and ready to his last breath, he felt another people's voice, because he was out of consciousness, he considered that the voice is from Richard Parker, hence, he began to talk with the voice. They talked a lot about delicious food, and then Pi realized that the voice is from another blind victim who was floating in other lifeboat alone. The uncommon met for Pi is a good way to left away lonely. He decided to let him board his boat, but this blind victim wanted to kill Pi to eat. Richard Parker saved him; the tiger killed the blind man. It is so hard to meet a man in the Pacific Ocean. Moreover, the same blind name whom on the lifeboat without food.

Their communication was special, ' " I'm curious, tell me—have you ever killed a man?" " Two." "...A man and a woman" "...why did you kill them?" " Need." [C-90] When Richard Parker killed the blind man, Pi felt very depressed ' Something in me died then that has never come back again.' [C-90] The content implied that the blind man in other lifeboat is another side of Pi. In other words, the blind man in other lifeboat is the fantasy shadow of Pi, the shadow of Pi's ego. Richard Parker killed the fantasy shadow of Pi, means <https://assignbuster.com/binary-opposition-of-life-of-pi-essay-sample/>

that lose of ego of Pi; this plot amount to the last reality in Pi's mind is disappeared. Thus, these evidences proved that fantasy of the first story, all the characters and animals in the story are fantasy.

The tiger is the scapegoat of Pi, the blind man is the ego of Pi, the animals is correspond to four people according to features of animals on the basis of Pi's memory, which he observed in the zoo. On the contrary, the second story is a real experience that Pi had a rough time of 227 days in the Pacific Ocean. The second story is so cruel it is the reason he didn't want to face it. Although recollecting the unbearable memory in the Pacific Ocean was hard to him. But he had to face the reality to tell the truth sooner or later. The binary opposition of fantasy and reality as a theme made Life of Pi succeed.

#### B. Lose and Gains

Lose and gain is abstract noun, of which always makes people re-examine of life. Furthermore, it gives more self-space to readers who enjoy the novel with great sprit of study. Lose and gain important to everyone in the growing way. Life of Pi is a story about fantasy and reality, it on lose and gain as well. Following discussion of essay would around the protagonist—Pi and lose and gain of his life on the lifeboat during 227 days. Pi during his special journey lost naïve, family. Another side, Pi gains sublimation or rebirth and another happy family. Pi lost his family in a sudden accident. His childhood was full of the happiness; he had a happy family who run a zoo. His father is a sagacious and deliberate man. ' Just beyond the ticket booth father had painted on the wall in bright red letters the question: DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO? An arrow pointed to a small

curtain. There were so many eager, curious hands that pulled at the curtain that we had to replace it regularly.

Behind it was a mirror.’[C-8] Pi’s father gave lesson to his sons by revealing the key point of the phenomenon. This kinds of education influenced Pi a lot. His mother is a mild, and kindhearted woman. She can give her life to evil to exchange her son, actually, in second story, she really did. For protecting his son she lost her life in the evils hands. His brother Ravi smart and naughty, he likes adventure. ‘ “ Adventure beckons!” said Ravi. That’s what made it tolerable, our sense of adventure.’ [C-99] The interest of Ravi effect on the Pi sooner, after a big noise of explosion on the ship in the mid-night, he decided to exploration. ‘ I don’t know why I got up that night. It was more the sort of thing Ravi would do... he would have said, “ adventure beckons,” and would have gone off to prowl around the ship. [C-38] The members of Pi’s family helped Pi built his view of life, gives him a kind heart to feel the world, also keep him a curious mind. These characteristics made him a brave and wisdom man who saved his life to the end.

Although he lost his family but he gain more after the accident. He lost naïve of which belong to child during distress on the lifeboat as well. He is only 16 when he left the hometown. Father’s decision that moving to Canada is good news for him. Likes all the boys that had many beautiful dreams about the strange place, he cannot wait leaving for a second. ‘ On our last day in Pondicherry I said goodbye to Mamaji, to Mr. Kumar, to all my friends and even to many strangers.’[C-35] ‘ As the ship was worked out of the dock and piloted out to sea, I wildly waved goodbye to India, the sun was shining, the breeze was steady, and seagulls shrieked in the air above us. I was terribly

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excited.’[C-35] This is a long journey for young Pi, but all things were really amazing. The journey attracted him at the beginning until the ship Tsimtsum’s sank. Heretofore, he was a naïve boy, protected and looking after from family around him all the time. But God offers him an opportunity, which can make him grow up quickly.

The sink of ship made him lost his family, meanwhile naive nature of him. According to his real story in the lifeboat, he saw the cruelest event. For being alive, he had to kill people to eat to save his own life. He got through the cruelest thing, and he did it either. At this point, the naïve nature of Pi already had been disappeared. The life without sorrow and anxiety protected by parents sank with the ship in the deep of ocean. He is no longer a boy, after through thick and thin he becomes a strong man who can against the worst situation alone. On the other side, the miserable experience gives him another riches of everlasting. He gained sublimation from his mind. Building the view of life influenced by his family, but the sublimate of his view of life was due to his trouble life on the lifeboat. The kill is an inhuman lesson; Pi’s view of life is changed after he suffered from it.

There were three kills on the lifeboat, two was happened to cook who killed sailor and Pi’s mother, and one was to Pi’s killing of the cook. The kill of sailor and Pi’s mother, let him realized the most cruel and helpless of human’s life. The revenge of cook, made him understand the instinct of human being. Therefore, he got rebirth after survived. That is the reason why he communicated with Japanese Ministry of Transport peaceful after the accident. That is the reason he made an animals story up to narrate his painful ingenious. Recalling the mirror under a curtain, to tell people the <https://assignbuster.com/binary-opposition-of-life-of-pi-essay-sample/>



most dangerous animal is human being. Not because he can't bear to face the cruel, but in the minds of him the animal have no differences with man who are in blind alley. He also gains family again. He rebuilt a new happy family after he suffered the loss of his parents and brother. He is married; his wife is also an Indian, lovely and moral. They love each other very much. ' This house is more than a box full of icons. I start noticing small signs of conjugal existence...'[C-30]

He also has two children, a civilized and vitality boy and a shy and lovely girl. ' I've just set foot on the cement steps of the front porch when a teenager bursts out the front door. He's wearing a baseball uniform and carrying baseball equipment, and he's in a hurry. When he sees me he stops dead in his tracks startled. He turns around and hollers into the house, " Dad! The writer's here." To me, he says, " Hi." And rushes off.'[C-36] ' Leaning against the sofa in the living room, looking up at me bashfully, is a little brown girl, pretty in pink, very much at home...she comes up to her father and peeks at me from behind his leg.'[C-36] ' He is an excellent cook. His overheated house is always smelling of something delicious...'[C-6] Pi lost his family, but after the rebirth he gains another happy family. Binary opposition about loses and gains can really make people re-examine the life deeply. Pi lost everything he had been got in childhood, but he gained others, the gain as much as the lost, in many times, lose and gain as a binary opposition not opposed to each other strictly, it can shift can exchange.

## II. Binary Opposition of Characters

## A. Good and Evil

Obviously, good and evil is the most marked binary opposition in Life of Pi. Good and evil pass through the whole plot in the novel and support the novel. There are many roles in the novel, some of them play the part of good and some of them represent the evil. How to judge the standard of good and evil in the normal situations are the open keys, but in binary opposition the meaning of good and evil is profound. In religion, ethics, and philosophy, the dichotomy “good and evil” refers to the location on a linear spectrum of objects, desires, or behaviors, the good direction being morally positive, and the evil direction morally negative. Good is a broad concept but it typically deals with an association with life, charity, continuity, happiness, love, prosperity and justice. Evil is typically associated with conscious and deliberate wrongdoing, discrimination designed to harm others, humiliation of people designed to diminish their psychological needs and dignity, destructiveness, and acts of unnecessary and indiscriminate violence.

Good has a vast definable range, In Life of Pi good is belong to the people who have the own positions, show enough understanding and sympathy for others, especially for the weak. Pi’s family is from Indian, there are four people in his family, and all of them are vegetarian diet. Pi’s mother is a kind□mild□and justice woman. ‘ If mother, normally so unruffled, so calm, was worried, even upset, it meant we were in serious trouble.’[C-8] As a justice mother she always keep her principles she keep away all the evils. In the second story, four people got on the lifeboat, Pi, his mother, sailor and cook. Cook killed the sailor to cut and eat him to save himself. “ The next time the cook was closed by, mother slapped him in the face, a full hard

strips that punctuated the air with a sharp crack. It was something shocking coming from my mother. And it was heroic. It was an act of outrage and pity and grief and bravery.

It was done in memory of that poor sailor. It was to salvage his dignity.’[C-99] She also tries best to protect her son from danger. Cook has bad temper and reprimands Pi all the time, she made a duel with cook, then she lost her life under the cook’s hands. In the story, the role of Pi’s mother does not appeared many times, but she gives people deep impression. She is in the name of Good. Evil has other name of immorality. Definitions of evil vary, as does the analysis of its root motives and causes, causing pain or suffering for selfish or malicious intentions. In Life of Pi, the cook is avatar of evil. He is disgusting, selfish and cruel, he eats flies also eats rat. He dominated Pi and his mother. First, he killed the sailor and ate him. He sat on the leg of sailor in the lifeboat. He said, ““ Don’t be an idiot. We will use it as bait. That was the whole point.”” The sailor passed away, but the cook does not want to stop, ‘ the cook butchered him, he cut up everything, let strips of flesh lying to dry in the sun.’[C-99] Then, he killed Pi’s mother who wanted to protect her son. His image opposed to Pi’s mother, he represents evil. Pi is protagonist in the story. He presented dual personality in the novel.

His real name is Piscine Molitor Patel. For do not cause ambiguity, he called himself Pi. He is clever boy, when he was child his family run a zoo in India, He likes animals and spending time to observe their habits. When the ship left Manila and entered the Pacific four days latter, Pi heard the sound of explosion in the night. He dressed and climbed down to decide to exploration. His mind fills with the curious, and he likes to carry out. ‘ I

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advanced onto the deck. I gripped the railing and faced the elements. This was adventure.' ' I felt very brave.'[C-38] The ship sank. According to Pi's first story, (although the first story proved fake but it still has value to analysis), good expressed in Pi stark naked. There are four animals with Pi, broken-leg zebra, spotted hyena, female orangutan and Bengal tiger on the lifeboat with him. On the lifeboat, he witnessed the killing between zebra, hyena, orangutan and Bengal tiger.

Hyena ate the zebra and killed the orangutan, Bengal tiger seizure hyena and ate it greedily, Bengal tiger was the last victor stay with Pi. The following days is the hardest time for Pi, he hatched six plans to get rid of tiger so that lifeboat might be his. But all of them are impossible for him, then he got the seventh plan: ' Keep Him (tiger) Alive.' [C-57] Pi is clever and emotional. He tries to save the tiger, feed him, train him. At last both of them survived, he thanks to the Bengal tiger. ' A part of me was glad about Richard Parker. A part of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all, because if he died I would be left alone with despair, a foe even more formidable than a tiger...'[C-57] when the lifeboat reached the beach of Mexico, tiger jumped out of the boat and disappeared in the jungle directly made Pi sad. ' I wept like a child. It was not because I was overcome at having survived my ordeal...I was weeping because Richard Parker had left me so unceremoniously.'[C-94] Obviously, in first story he is a good boy.

On the contrary, in the second story of which real, Pi caught on the lifeboat, he also witnessed the killing between sailor, cook and Pi's mother, then he killed cook and did what he did for sailor. ' I stabbed him in the stomach. He grimaced but remained standing. I pulled the knife out and stabbed him  
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again. Blood was pouring out. Still he didn't fall over...I stabbed him in the throat, next to the Adam's apple...he died. A knife has a horrible dynamic power; once in motion, it's hard to stop...'[C-99] In the second story, he is evil. Pi presented dual personality in the two stories. Freud came to see personality as having three aspects, which work together to produce all of our complex behaviors: the Id, the Ego and the Superego. All 3 components need to be well balanced in order to have good amount of psychological energy available and to have reasonable mental health. The Id is the primitive mind. It contains all the basic needs and feelings. The Ego relates to the real world and operates via the "reality principle".

The Superego is the last part of the mind to develop. It might be called the moral part of the mind. Id under the ego in normal life, while in extraordinary times, human's id would be came out to face fear. In the first story, Pi got in trouble, the id help him to face trouble, the id is tiger, which belong to evil hides in Pi's personality deeply. In other words, in normal life, Pi is good but in dangerous situations, id would be defeated ego. Id try to gain basic needs just like the tiger's behavior of eating people or just like what Pi did in the second story. From the binary opposition to analyze Pi, can recognize that good and evil both exists in life Pi. From binary opposition analysis of the main characters from good and evil.

The truth is that boundary line between good and evil sometimes clear, like Pi's mother and cook, sometimes it is ambiguity, like Pi and tiger (another side of Pi), existed in the same people. But when people back the safety, the id can change to ego again. In end of the first story, mentioned the disappearance of tiger shows dissolve of evil, Pi back to his basis personality

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—good. It shows that human being has good and evil both in mind, and safety and satisfied delivers human being from evil. The book account for good and evil of human nature in particular way. It worthwhile to pounder and reflect upon. The author's meditation on human nature is specific, profound as well as comprehensive.

## B. Weak and Powerful

Weak and powerful as one pair of binary opposition played in Life of Pi everywhere, from the strength to class. This kind of opposition makes the big span of the novel. The opposition includes, predator's power, herbivore's weakness, people's ferocious, and mild, the class of the crew compare to the officers in the ship and the class of Japanese Ministry of Transport. All of the comparison displayed vivid and meaningful. The first story, hyena and Bengal tiger is the most mighty in the lifeboat, as the predator all of the herbivores are the cheerful food. The first story described that the lifeboat has two predators, two herbivores. Of course, predators were staying the position to the top. Except terrified shaking herbivores had nothing to do. When the storm stopped after ship sank, the lifeboat would begin slaughtering, hyena hesitated but still to kill the two herbivores. No matter from size or strength the 450-pound Bengal tiger is much powerful than the hyena. It's no doubt that tiger killed it at last. In animal's story, the strength resolves the fate of animal.

The binary opposition is between predators with herbivore. The situation is different in man's story. It would be more complicated. Pi and other three people in the lifeboat, in second story. Cook is strong and rude, broken leg

sailor is weak, Pi's mother is kind and weak as well, 16 years old Pi too young to protect himself. At this point the decision must belong to the powerful cook. He dominated Pi and his mother, to complete his objective. ' He whispered that the blackness would spread and that he would survive only if his leg were amputated...I can still hear his evil whisper. He would do the job to save the sailor's life, he said, but we would have to hold him.' [C-99] He cut the broken leg of sailor and using it as bait. He ate most of the supplies on the lifeboat but no guilty. After sailor's death, he cut the meat of sailor to eat. His greedy is endless, he killed Pi's mother. He achieved his goal by murderous means.

He is strong and cruel man. To compare with other three people in the lifeboat, he is belong to powerful, on the other side, the poor victims are weakness. Power and weakness also played well in class, the class of staff in the ship is a good example, according to Pi's description, the crew in the ship is in the lower class, and they are Taiwanese. ' The crew were a sullen, unfriendly a lot, hard at work when the officers were around but doing nothing when they weren't. They didn't speak a word of English and they were of no help to us. Some of them stank of alcohol by mid-afternoon.' [C-99] from the description to the crew, reveal that lower class worker, always depressing by the officers, every day's work is boring and heavy. And because of the language obstruct, the last self-indulgent for crew is alcohol. They are weak group not because of the class. For the upper class officers they feel superior. And the lower class is never come into their eyes. Including the crew and the family of Pi. ' They had little to do with us. They never came close to the animals.'

' They spoke English, but they were no better than the crew. They made us feel unwelcome in the common room and hardly said a word to us during meals. They went on in Japanese, as if we weren't there. We were just a lowly Indian family with a bothersome cargo...'[C-99] Pi's family is Indian, although they can communicate with English and they are had well-off family in India, but they cannot get any respect from the upper class officer either. Because as the developing country citizen they hard to make any comparison to the Japanese officers. The feeling of superior seeped into the bones of officers who enjoying it time by time. The power in the ship is the officers; weak include the crew and Pi's family. Weak and powerful for human being more exists in social estate system. After the sinking of the ship Tsimtsum, Pi is the only survivor who had been a passenger. Thus, two Japanese Ministry of Transport came to research the reason of sinking. One is called Tomohiro Okamoto; other one is his assistant Atsuro Chiba.

In the communication with Pi, the relationship of superior and subordinate is very clear. Superior holds right and order in hand firmly. As the subordinate, should always respect the decision of superior. Before the beginning of conversation with Pi, Tomohiro Okamoto had a short dialogue with Atsuro Chiba, " Now, Atsuro-kun, you're new at this, so pay attention and see to learn." " Yes, Okamoto-san." " Is the tape recorder on?" " Yes, it is." [C-99] Subordinate obey to superior directly. Superior always ignore subordinate's ideal. ' Pi: "...You should have seen Richard Parker...Teeth like this! Claws like scimitars!" Mr. Chiba: " What are scimitars?" Mr. Okamoto: " Chiba-san, instead of asking stupid questions, why don't you make yourself useful...?" [C-99] Subordinate own ideal cannot support by superior all the time. ' Mr.



Chiba: “ Maybe they were banana bones! Ha! Ha!” “ Atsuro, shut up!” “ I’m very sorry, Okamotosan...”

“ You are bringing our service into disrepute!” [C-99] At the same time as subordinate Mr. Atsuro should repeat the words of Mr. Tomohiro to respect and obey. ‘ Mr. Okamoto: “ We will remember it for a long, long time.” Mr. Chiba: “ We will.”[C-99] Mr. Okamoto: “ We wish you all the best, Mr. Patel.” Mr. Chiba: “ Yes, all the best.”[C-99] The conversation between Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba is proved that the binary opposition of weak and power in the social estate system widely. Weak and powerful in animal’s world is strength, in human being’s world, include capacity, class and status and so on. In Life of Pi, most of the elements contained, therefore, components of the binary opposition of weak and powerful. Without this binary opposition, the book would be meaningless.

## Conclusion

“ I have a story that will make you believe in God.” This word is from an elderly man called Francis Adirubasamy. Because of this word, Life of Pi came into the world. The author described two unforgettable stories in the book. It is no doubt that the book contains too many elements to interpret every element in a round. But structuralism is good at finding the basic rule behind the texts. Binary opposition as a sort of analytical method in structuralism is using by literary criticism usually. This essay using binary opposition tries to analyze the theme and the characters in Life of Pi. The themes are two pair of binary opposition fantasy and reality, lose and gain.

This two pair of binary opposition revealed meaning of Pi's life, it also revealed everyone's meaning of life either.

This is the key point of author, he named the book *The Life of Pi* instead of *Life of Pi* from the ideal of arouse the same feeling of others. By analyzing the characters, discovered two pair of good and evil, weak and powerful of which becomes binary opposition. These oppositions exists wherever the palace of life. The clear mind is important to distinguish them, because most of people mixed them together, such as good and evil. The phenomenon implied that binary opposition can permeate each other even can exchange. It is an attractive book with thought-provoking story. The story isn't finish, just as the story would never told you where is the beginning.

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