

THE BREAKDOWN OF PATRIARCHAL LAWS IN STEIN'S THREE LIVES

STEIN'İN THREE LIVES ADLI ESERİNDE ATAERKİL KURALLARIN YIKIMI

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ÖZ

Three Lives is a three-part novel of the narratives of three working-class women-- "The Good Anna" "Melanctha " and "The Gentle Lena." "In writing Three Lives, Gertrude wanted to find her own voice and to explore her own state of mind. She paid little or no attention to narrative flow, pace, development, or consistency" (Souhami, 1992: 9). Stein-- unlike some of her contemporaries influenced by old conventions of literature in the early twentieth century-- becomes a modernist pioneer who has an aim of reconstructing the world in her works. In other words, Stein manages to break away from the nineteenth century order and structure in fiction. Through experimenting the technique of fragmentation, Stein gives the reader the message that patriarchal laws were disrupted and we are not sure what may arise in this fragmented world around us.

This paper aims at exploring how Stein demonstrates the breakdown of the patriarchal laws in Three Lives. It will focus on Stein's modernist views towards language and her feminist approach through her portrayal of three female characters. These women have an effort to survive in the patriarchal society that traps them in gender roles. While one of them challenges the social order, the others yield the same order and cannot control their own lives.

Key words: Modernism, Patriarchal Laws, *Three Lives*, Gertrude Stein

ABSTRACT

"The Good Anna" "Melanctha " ve "The Gentle Lena" adlı üç bölümden oluşan *Three Lives* işçi sınıfından üç kadının - öyküsüdür. "*Three Lives* romanını yazarken Gertrude kendi sesini bulmak ve kendi zihinsel durumunu ortaya koymak istedi. Öykülerin akışı, hızı, gelişimi veya tutarlılığına çok az veya hiç dikkat etmedi" (Souhami, 1992: 9). Yirminci yüzyılın başlarında edebiyatın eski geleneklerinden etkilenen bazı çağdaşlarının aksine Stein eserlerinde dünyayı yeniden inşa etmeyi amaçlayan modernist bir öncüdür. Bir başka deyişle, o roman yazımında ondokuzuncu yüzyıl düzeni ve yapısından ayrılmayı başarır. Parçalanma tekniğini deneysel kullanarak, Stein okura ataerki kuralların yıkıldığını ve etrafımızdaki bu parçalanmış dünyada nelerin ortaya çıkabileceğinden emin olamadığımızın mesajını vermektedir.

Bu makale Stein'in *Three Lives* adlı romanındaki ataerki kurallarının nasıl yıkıldığını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma Stein'in üç kadın karakterin temsiliyle modernist dil bakış açısı ve feminist yaklaşımını vurgulamaktadır. Bu kadınlar, onları cinsiyet rolleri içinde tutsak eden ataerki toplumda hayatta kalmak için çaba gösterirler. Onlardan biri toplumsal düzene meydan okurken, diğerleri aynı düzene teslim olup yaşamlarını kontrol edemezler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Modernizm, Ataerki Kurallar, *Three Lives*, Gertrude Stein

1. INTRODUCTION

In the eighteenth century of America, man turned from theism, which failed to present the truth in its universal form, towards Deism in which God appeared to have designed the universe according to scientific laws and had withdrawn from direct intervention in human affairs. Man of the Age of Reason (Enlightenment) sought order everywhere in the world of nature and found it not in religion, but in science. Besides, reason was emphasized as 'the reasonable science of virtue.' Thus, this age brought with it the liberal and humanitarian way of thinking as a patriarchal law in society: governments that violated natural rights oppressing the weak

had to be overthrown. Therefore, the universe became a mechanism operating by rational and humanitarian formula understood and appreciated by people. In other words, the universe consisted of a compact stable society which had confidence in the universality of reason, uniformity of behaviour; so sober reason left its place to a different universe in which there were indulgence in passion and sensibility, emphasis upon the diversity of truth. However, in the nineteenth century, there was a revolutionary society and anti-social disregard for the conventions of the Age of Reason. This was the age of Individualism in which literature was based on imagination rather than reason. Furthermore, there was a desire for an escape from society to nature, which has become a convention in American literature.

Later, the arrival of the twentieth century led to disillusionment since the order of culture fell due to the World War I. The stress on science and the application of scientific methods to Bible became the result of modernism in religion. In modernism, dogmas were not thought to be exact and authoritative formulations of truth revealed by God any more. Modernism is also the name of the major artistic movement responding to a sense of social breakdown which has a result of elimination of traditional literary rules and the destruction of patriarchal laws of society.

The modernist novelist, involving in the unusual sides of human character, tried, at first, to show that revelation was a concrete personal experience of the truth about human beings rather than an objective communication of universal truth from God. In a modernist sense, truth did not exist objectively, but it was the product of a personal interaction with reality. (The subject matter of modernist writing often became, by extension, the poem or literary work itself.) Secondly, the modernists showed the concrete sensory image or detail as the direct conveyor of experience. They also relied on the reference (allusion) to literary, historical, philosophical, or religious details of the past as a way of reminding readers of the old convention of coherence. Thirdly, contrary to Victorian or realistic fiction, which achieved its effects by accumulation and saturation, modernist fiction preferred suggestion since it is constructed out of fragments.

A modernist American writer, Gertrude Stein, was a lover of art and literature and was seen as an expert on literary innovation and talent. She began to entertain people at her Paris home. While she was searching for a different experimental approach, Stein met Picasso and Cezanne whose cubist paradigms of painting she adapted in her narrative techniques. These revolutionary techniques were experimental as well as rebellious against patriarchal linguistic structures. Stein also introduced the term "the Lost Generation" which referred to a group of American writers. Most of these writers immigrated to Europe and worked there after the end of World War I. Stein was bewildered and uncertain of herself; yet she has challenged to find and express a reality. She made poetry "...getting inside of nouns or objects, finding their reality and calling them by their appropriate and peculiar names" (Hobhouse, 1975: 175).

Stein wrote her famous "A rose is a rose is a rose is a ..." which made her poetry seem unclear even though it is her way of discovering truth. (from her poem *Sacred Emily*, 1913) She further wrote: "Every time I said what they were I said it so that they were this thing. Each time I said not that they were different nor that I was, but as it was not the same moment" (Stein, 1935: 185). Thus when questioned about her sentence "A rose is a rose is a rose," she could reply, "Now listen! I'm no fool; but I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years" (Wilder, 1947: 6).

Through experimenting the technique of fragmentation, Stein has an aim of reconstructing the world in her works. She gives the reader the message that patriarchal laws have been disrupted and we are not sure what may arise in this fragmented world around us. Assuming that beliefs, values, and social conventions constitute social interaction and relations between people, Stein refuses to accept the notion that the author will determine the meaning of his/her text. However, it must be the reader who will have the active role in comprehending the text. As a writer who experienced both of the World Wars, Stein tends to lack the faith that literature could reflect any truth, even a disintegrating one. This is one of the reasons why she attempts not to accept a sense of society as something very stable, or in other words patriarchal, whose repetitions and predictability enables us to submit to the established rules and codes of behaviour.

One striking example to Stein's views as a modernist writer who tends to be personal and pragmatic rather than universal and abstract is her novel *Three Lives* (1909). This is her first published work of fiction that tells the stories of three women ("The Good Anna", "The Gentle Lena" and "Melanctha") from the same fictitious town of Bridgeport. Stein subverts the significance of the nineteenth century order and structure in fiction and patriarchal laws in society. This article aims at demonstrating how the patriarchal laws are broken down through Stein's modernist perspective towards language and her feminist approach. Furthermore, Stein's

portrayal of female characters in *Three Lives* needs a comparative analysis: while one character challenges the patriarchal order, the others yield the same order.

2. STEIN'S PERSPECTIVE TOWARDS LANGUAGE

The way Stein experiments with language reveals the breakdown of the patriarchal rules in her fiction. Stein simplifies the language and uses repetitions in *Three Lives*. The repetition of words and action reveal that Stein discovers the element of truth and that of constancy about human nature. Stein's perspective towards language is also a way of expression of her modernist view of truth. While writing, she has a freedom to use the words as she likes. The way words move and are reflected in her works represent the characteristic of American way of life that move in every and any direction.

Salas asserts that Stein employs a style in which she carries out a literary revolution (2002:168). Her use of repetitions has two functions which are related to her revolutionary aim. "First her attempt to break with the dominant/patriarchal literary tradition in narrative style by abstracting language to the maximum; second, her desire to build up a distinctive identity through this experimental technique" (2002:168). Salas further asserts that when a writer reacts against certain established patterns, he/she has two choices—either criticizing those patterns by adhering to and ridiculing them, or radically challenging them by a totally different alternative. Stein has a desire to subvert patriarchal laws with these alternatives in her unconventional style based on repetition.

The repetition of words, dialogues and natural conversation reveal the fact that Stein sees herself revolutionary in terms of her writing. Not only her language, but also her use of punctuation gives the message that Stein tries hard to break the literary conventions of her time. She thinks commas make life too easy for the reader and the writer because commas do not have any aesthetic and dependent function. So, she uses periods and very rarely commas. The story of a black woman—Melanchta— moves forward not by events, but by thought processes conveyed by inner and spoken monologues. "Melanchta Herbert always loved too hard and much too often. She was always full with mystery and subtle movements and denials and vague distrusts and complicated disillusiones" (1992: 77). Melanchta's speech with a negro dialect reveals her personality. "Stein prefers to approximate... speech rhythms as evidence of their (her characters) inner natures" (Hoffman, 1976: 36).

Words are repeated, insisted on, discontinued, restarted, which define the character of Melanchta. Thus, the element of time sequence becomes uncertain in Stein's work, which represents her modernist way of seeing the world. To give an example, while portraying Jeff's attraction towards Melanchta: "... Jeff never, even now, really knew what it was that moved him. He was ever sure, he really knew what Melanchta was..." (1992: 110). From this angle, Stein reacts towards the patriarchal idea of the existence of a beginning, a middle and an end in time.

Furthermore, Stein has an insight of the concept of "continuous present" that prolongs the present moment of thought for the purpose of finding out the reality of a character. Stein explains in "Composition as Explanation," *Three Lives* is the first experimental work in which she uses the continuous present. Stein uses the word "now" to imply the idea of the continuous present in Melanchta's relationship with Jeff: "Always now he never felt really at ease with her, even when they were good friends together. Always now he felt, with her, he could not be really honest to her" (1992:185). In the story, the continuous present is used to reveal the truth based on how she is confined in such a relationship.

Certain keywords appear continuously throughout *Three Lives*. For instance, the key phrases repeated throughout the stories "Melanchta", "The Good Anna" and "The Gentle Lena" make the protagonists not only lively and vivid but also constraint. In "The Good Anna," Stein introduces Anna as a "small spare, German woman... her face was worn, her cheeks were thin" (1992: 5). Later, she describes Anna again, almost as if we had not been given a description before. "Anna was a medium sized, thin, hard working worrying woman" (1992: 22). Again, on the next page she was mentioned as "she was always thin and worn." In the story of Anna, the reader is repeatedly informed of Anna's "goodness." The adjective "good" is used to describe Anna more than forty times in the story. However, upon reading the story, the reader gradually realizes that she far from good. There are other characters in the story whose "goodness" is questionable, such as Mrs. Lehntman, who is described as "good and honest" although she exploits Anna financially and spiritually, yet never repaying her.

In short, having circular plot structures, the novel contains time-space disruptions and repetitions which disturb the conventional linearity. The plot in the stories is simple and straightforward. The narrator does not reflect

the psychology of any character through direct dialogue; instead the psychological aspects of the narrative lead the reader into the minds of the characters. Furthermore, using a kind of distorted syntax, Stein reflects her modernist perspective in language. She rejects the patriarchal roles of author as “the tyrant” of language; instead she reflects her feminist attitude towards literature. Therefore, by using experimental kind of style, Stein is independent in her attitude towards patriarchal language. She wants to “... dislocate the previous forms and conventions of the literary tradition in which she found herself” (Hoffman, 1976: 59).

3. STEINS FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Stein’s repetition is not employed in only words, phrases, and sentences, but also in themes, actions, patterns of behavior and life situations in *Three Lives*. These repetitions create vivid portrayal of three women caught in their own repetitious patterns of life from which they cannot escape. While the narrator ironically reveals the self-sacrificing virtues of the women, the stories show “a picture of a world that prompts self-punishing behavior in women” and “does not always value women enough to teach them self-protection” (Ruddick, 1990: 48). This is a way of Stein’s assertion of feminine individuation. In other words, by experimenting with language (through the function of repetition), Stein portrays female subjectivity and consciousness. *Three Lives* displays the separate subjectivity of female characters and their impressions of life. So, Stein tries to control her narrative through her writing style to focus on the idea that each female character has her own personality in a patriarchal world.

Stein’s unconventional style makes the shift to feminist themes possible such as the theme of sexuality and the repression of female desires. In the story of Melanchta, Stein explores her own preoccupations with rejection, sexual desire, conscience, ill-fated relationships and abandonment. In this respect, Stein, in a way, attempts to destroy the common accepted moral values of her society with a female character who expresses her own feelings in spite of social constraints. Stein depicts Melanchta, as a working class black woman possessing a wild courage, sexy, and impatient. She has a suspicious father who limits her freedom; so Melanchta tries to find happiness with other people. She teaches the man she loves –Jefferson-- how to love, but his feelings are changeable and uncertain since Melanchta has an old-fashioned understanding of morality. Facing Melanchta's challenge, Jefferson (Jeff) does not think it right to truly love anyone. He answers, “why sure no, yes I do Miss Melanchta, I certainly do believe strong in loving” (1992: 119). What Melanchta means by love, a “real, strong hot love which makes you do anything for somebody that loves you” (1992: 119).

Jeff listens to the stories of her past from her various friends. For example, Jane Harden, (a female friend who is emotionally very close to her) tells Jeff of Melanchta's “good mind” and that she “always... wanted to know everything, always....” (1992: 142). Having uncertainty about Melanchta's ‘true’ nature, Jeff becomes overwhelmed, feeling suddenly “very sick” (1992, p.142). Melanchta later seems very ugly to him and he states:

I certainly do very badly want to be *right*, Melanchta, the only way I know is *right* Melanchta *really*, and I don't know any way, Melanchta, to find out *really* whether my way, the way I always used to be thinking, or the new way, you make so like a *real* religion to me sometimes, Melanchta, which way certainly is the *real right* way for me to be always thinking ...(1992:157).

Through repetitions in language, Stein shows not only her character’s viewpoints, but also makes us understand that her female characters are limited in patriarchal society. For instance, Jeff’s tormented mind reveals the fact that there will be resentment and struggle in order to love a promiscuous woman like Melanchta. “What could he (Jeff) know who had such slow feelings in him? What could he know who always had to find his way with just thinking. What could he know who had to be taught such a long time to learn about what was really loving?” (1992: 151).

In Melanchta’s story, Stein assumes that there is no clear distinction between right and wrong. She deliberately draws the picture of Melanchta as a striking example of a woman asserting sexual freedom. “During the year before she met Jefferson Campbell, Melanchta had tried many kinds of men but they had none of them interested Melanchta very deeply. She met them, she was much with them, she left them, she would think perhaps this next time it would be more exciting...” (92).

Stein also identifies with the black culture which regards sexuality as a quite natural act. She breaks down the patriarchal gendered behavior by demonstrating Melanchta as a woman outside the boundaries of social morality. For example, with an overt sexuality, Melanchta wants to be attached to Jeff even though she fails. Melanchta later leaves him to find happiness in other men since his love does not fulfill her.

Melanchta has another relationship: she finds something in Jem Richards that satisfies her physically. However, this is a failure since she badly needs to have him as her lover which causes him to have a distance. She tells him that she would always love to be together. "Jem sure I know you love me like I live you always, and its all I ever could be wanting Jem to me, just your wanting me always to be with you. I get married Jem to you soon ever as you can want me, if you once Jem say it to me" (1992: 192-3). After Jem leaves her, Melanchta gets "awful blue" and thinks of killing herself.

Stein further challenges the conventional morality of her society in Melanchta's emotional attachment towards Jane. This is another example of distortion of patriarchal codes because in lesbian relationships her heroines are able to be freed from the dynamic of male control. The readers perceive a world of women in which women were emotionally involved in a relationship with women rather than a husband or a lover. "Melanchta sat at Jane's feet for many hours in these days and felt Jane's wisdom. She learned to love Jane and to have this feeling very deeply" (1992: 89). Jane is older and hardened who teaches her about life -- rougher lessons. Melanchta also has an ambiguous relationship with unappreciative Rose Johnson who neglects her baby and causes her death.

Moreover, Stein's feminist perspective exposes the social constraints upon women and represents the male-dominated society with a portrayal of a black female who can be easily allowed to channel her energy to sexual liaisons. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein describes "Melanchta" as "the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature"(Alexander, 2008: 50).

In the story "The Good Anna", Stein this time tries to challenge the cultural assumptions of her society. She mocks the way Anna understands these cultural beliefs about female sexuality. "Anna had always a firm old world sense of what was the right way for a girl to do" (1992: 15). Sexual affair without marriage is seen as immoral by Anna. Anna denies her own sexual desires and sees repression of them as a virtue. Although Anna does not fit in the gender roles in her society, she feels threatened by "the feminine, the subtle opposition so early always in a young girl's nature" (1992: 25). The goodness in Anna is because of the fact that there is no sexuality in her life. Being a spinster, Anna is not able to perform the possibilities of a heterosexual relationship. She fails in her relationship with Dr. Shonjen since her family is formed by dogs, cats and her friend Sally. Stein compares Anna's attachment to women with that to dogs in order to reveal that Anna makes a connection between sexual desires and immoral animal-like impulses. "Back would slink all the wicked-minded dogs at the sound of her hand upon the knob, and they would sit desolate in their corners like a lot of disappointed children whose stolen sugar has been taken from them" (1992: 5).

In the second part of the story, Anna's romantic relationship with women are exposed through irony: "The widow Mrs. Lehntman was the only romance in Anna's life" (1992: 24). In her relationship with Mrs. Lehntman, Anna suppresses her own lesbian desires; thus she loses her power to say no because she gives Mrs. Lehntman money and becomes a victim to her manipulations. Another thing Anna does to suppress her desires is that she avoids taking women boarders. She manages and dominates the entire household of Miss Mathilda, who leaves the country later. So, Anna decides to remove women out of her life by dedicating herself to running a boarding house for men.

The third woman in the story "Gentle Lena" is a German immigrant brought to the USA by her domineering aunt Mrs. Hayden. Lena works as a servant until she has an arranged marriage with Herman Kreder. They have four children but both Lena and their fourth child die at labor. Stein portrays Lena as being submissive to patriarchal laws. Since she has no right to voice her own desires, she believes she is supposed to cope with such a life of an immigrant who is obedient and subservient to the needs of others around her. Lena is described as "lifeless" as she is not "an important daughter in the family... she was always sort of dreamy and not there" (1992: 212). In her strict social community, Lena cannot live up her social expectations. She is not only gentle herself but also gentle to others by caring and comforting them. "Gentle", "generous", "well-to-do", "well-taught", "well-meaning" are the roles and expectations for her position. So Lena represents a kind of subjectivity that is considered as mentally weak, which can render oppression and exclusion from social circle.

Lena is aware of her frustrated life. When she is forced to marry Herman, she becomes cold and loses her life energy. In spite of her passive nature and the way that she seems to obey social conventions, she could only act by realizing that she no longer fits in her social role. She becomes a social misfit who faces a sort of depression. Her depression stems from this social circle in which her wishes and desires are constantly overlooked. "But mostly Lena just lived along and was careless in her clothes, and dull, and lifeless" (1992: 244). Lena does what she has to do the way she always has been taught. She does not pay attention to her physical appearance and lives as if she has no feelings left. In other words, something dies in her. This is a

kind of reaction that shows her ignorance of the oppressive burden in her society. "Lena is unique in her "patient, old-world ignorance... Lena's rarity resides in her inbred lack of understanding and self-knowledge... Lena's lack of knowledge gives her shallowness a strange depth: she does not know herself, and she does not know that she does not know" (Wilson, 2006: 94-5).

As to comparison of the women in *Three Lives*, like gentle Lena, good Anna does not feel satisfied in her life. She is similarly frustrated by her so-called happiness. Anna becomes a spinster into a male dominated society which makes her act ironically to get rid of her lack of satisfaction. Anna and Lena are portrayed as having lack of sexuality. They are submissive women who are made to suppress their inner feelings. Stein uses the device of the 'tag' for Anna with 'good' and for Lena with 'gentle'; but she does not use it for Melanchta. Instead, Stein compares Melanchta with her friend Rose. She relates that Rose is selfish, careless, stupid, negligent, coward black woman whereas Melanchta is intelligent, attractive, patient, submissive half-white, pale yellow woman. Melanchta is more complicated compared to Anna and Lena, who have simple personalities. She has sexual freedom that leads her to struggle against patriarchy. Even though the three protagonists are portrayed as uneducated, submissive and serving the needs of others, Melanchta differs from the others since she does not seem to accept moral codes of her society.

In the stories of Anna and Lena, white female-sacrifice is revealed since these women die while fulfilling their roles of being good and gentle. Devoting herself to her employer for many years, Anna dies alone in a hospital while Lena dies in childbirth in a similar situation of self-denial for the sake of others. Stein also emphasizes female sacrifice and devotion as social constructions that victimize women. On the other side, Melanchta has a sexual nature and an autonomy of physical desire through which she uses her body language. However, Melanchta has problems with language, unable to express herself in a conventional way. She cannot "remember right" and finds it hard to talk about what she wants and desires.

In Melanchta, Stein allows her heroine to go beyond the restrictive patriarchal structures which creates a female autonomy based on her lifelong search for identity and love. Ruddick describes Melanchta's feelings towards her parents as autonomy of woman's pleasure. (1990: 127) Melanchta hates her mother's submissive role which is reflected in her disrespect towards her color "a pale yellow woman." On the other hand, Melanchta admires the power in herself that comes from her father. She is the only one among the others whose greatest gift is intellectual. She uses her intelligence in disputes with her uneducated parents, sometimes in "a tongue that could be very nasty" (1992: 91). Unfortunately, Melanchta, in spite of having female power, has a sort of victimization that ends in exhaustion, in depression and death. All three women have an effort to survive in patriarchal society. All end in depression and death. All have perceived themselves worthless for a while and yet endured many hardships in their lives. Thus, a feminist reading of *Three Lives* could argue that each of the heroines show the way society traps women in gender roles so that they cannot control their own lives.

4. CONCLUSION

Stein, in a way, manages to recreate language in order to experiment with different ideas of her time. This language that insists of repeating itself has constructed sexuality, identity, consciousness and modern lives. Instead of male-centered definitions and traditional grammar rules, Stein has a free narrative that does not limit representations of women. Through experimenting with language, Stein shows how social and cultural aspects that are based on patriarchal laws can be harmful for female lives. Stein also attacks cultural assumptions that have prejudices against female sexuality through linguistic repetition and continuous present. As sexuality was not openly dealt within the nineteenth century fiction, modernist fiction attacks the limitations of the subject matter by rediscovering this issue in the lower classes. Stein points out that white culture is so polluted that it degraded many values. Observing the American culture from outside, Stein achieves to convey a reality of sexual confusion in Melanchta's case. In Anna and Lena, Stein shows the repression of female desires in a patriarchal society. Melanchta tries to subvert the patriarchal order whereas Anna and Lena submit the white male-dominated society. This contrast created by Stein reveals not only her feminist perspective but also modernist subjective attitude towards the way truth is presented. In other words, Stein's feminism is manifested in her portrayal of characters and her portrayal of their truth.

Furthermore, *Three Lives* represents Stein's consistent use of repetition as a stylistic device. In repetitions of cultural attitudes towards sexuality, we, as readers, reconcile the writer's critical point about what her female characters represent as regards the patriarchal prejudice towards female sexuality. Stein's use of repetitions not only intensify the meaning but also has an attempt to represent women's selves, lives and relationships to each other and men. Thus, Stein's language and style suggest rather than asserting that humankind does not

need a high and elaborated language so as to reflect her perception of truth. She maintains that in spite of the limitations in their society, humankind could express their truth. "...she pioneers the effort of later women writers to give the daughters of more contemporary fiction the chance to do their own naming" (Kalfopoulou, 1994: 95). As a result, Stein, in her own way, has managed to transform the old patriarchal laws that govern people of a society in a rational, sober, and reasonable manner. In order to realize this, she has made a shocking impact while portraying human experiences and social problems through her usage of language, style and theme.

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