

Faulkner's Facets of Time and their Impact on his Characters in *The Sound and the Fury*

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Introduction

In the course of the southern American literary development after the defeat of the secession war, the use of manipulative time as a driving theme began to prevail. In most novels of this region, time holds a significant amount of importance and in a way drives the plot. It is clear that it is behind each event that takes place and holds any story together. A novel like *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner portrays time as a prolific contributing factor. Through his narration and perception, Faulkner shows in this novel the characters' attempt to manipulate time and its effect on both them and the plot as a whole. Faulkner's perception of time appears in his novels, precisely in *The Sound and the Fury* as a pressure that affects in a complex way the psychology, the morality and the actions of his characters. His intense preoccupation with time as a central theme of his novel and time as a means of narration is a way for him to explore the effects of time on the characters, while endeavoring to find a technique for rendering it.

This technique consists in using the stream-of-consciousness style to convey in a manner roughly equivalent to the way our minds actually work the characters' unadorned thoughts. The stream of consciousness is a narrative device Faulkner uses to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind of his characters. The consciousness of these one, then, appears to itself as chopped up in bits; it is nothing joined; it flows.¹ By this narrative mode, William Faulkner seeks to portray his characters' points of view by giving the written equivalent of the characters' thought processes, either in a loose interior monologue, or in connection to their actions linked to the time. Actions tug between the past and present. Thanks to this stream-of-consciousness, *The Sound and the Fury* bears the mark of Faulkner's characteristic use of different times, such as objective time and subjective time.

¹ Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1978, p.98.

Objective time exists and continues weaving its patterns regardless of the presence or absence of any one person; subjective time that depends for its very existence on the individual's awareness of it.² But how are these facets of time unfurled in Faulkner's novels and to what extent do they affect his characters' lives? In order to answer these questions, we shall first examine how does time allow the characters to change; then see the way it leads the events in the novels of Faulkner and finally show how can time be a doom for the characters.

I-Time as a Factor of the Characters' Change

Time is a reality that most people simply accept as an entity into itself. People do not often stop and question time, or truly analyze it except when perhaps forced to in one way or another.³ Authors and poets often insist that the reader takes a look at time in a way different than is normal. In William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* time is a very obvious element as it involves the stories and enhances the thematic elements. Often the theme of time is connected with the view of how often and how much of the past intrudes upon the present. Time appears as an outsider's look to Faulkner's characters who are undergoing change and obvious decay. It seems that in many ways the time frame is set up to illustrate the depth and disturbance of the characters, as well as the foundation of the family.

In his novel, the characters of William Faulkner deal with the past in a very living manner. They may discuss the past, but they are presented in relatively present terms. This technique utterly brings confusion, a disorder in the novel that seems necessary to show the metamorphosis of the characters and for the plot to make sense as a whole. But this metamorphosis appears through constant appearing small facts and details that only Faulkner's constant use of stream-of-consciousness narration permits to understand. And this stream-of-consciousness is crucial in helping each character develop a certain identity. We learn about the characters' changes by the facts and the reactions of certain characters to these facts. For example, the baffling

² Henry Bergson, *Time and Free Will: Essays on The Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. Pogson, New York, Macmillan, 2008, p.101.

³ Henry Bergson, *Op.Cit*, p.101.

and un-descriptive narration of Benjy and the soliloquy, complex narration of Quentin are the only ways to know the characters and understand how they work and think. Indeed, it is when the characters start a kind of soliloquy that their thoughts reveal their psychological disorder.

The Sound and the fury is centered on the internal chaos of the characters, their intellectual, moral, and spiritual confusion. Faulkner's use of time in this novel perfectly facilitates a full understanding of the disorder in the characters' lives through it. He simplifies their thoughts change processes to make it easier to understand.

Faulkner's interest in time is psychological. As such, time can be grasped intuitively and manifest itself in change. Thus, Faulkner uses it to provide a focus for the reactions and attitudes of his characters. Endlessly, it moves through the recurrent cycles of impacting the characters' behavior and let itself influenced by the continual change and destruction of these same characters. There is no end to the process itself. In addition, this psychological time being characterized by its immediacy, continuously leads the characters to change.

Unfortunately, this change distorts the characters' sense of time itself and negatively impacts their identity. This change also darkens their understanding of life. The characters have the impression that their measurement of time is logical, whereas their comprehension of it depends not only on reason but on memory and hope. Memory defines their past, while hope anticipates their future.⁴ A future of the characters that is unfortunately uncertain and a hope, therefore, inextricably fused with fear and where unexpected stroke of fate or circumstance destroy the familiar order to which the characters cling precariously but persistently.

Contrarily to this uncertain and incalculable future, the past seems infinitely reassuring for the characters because of its completeness. Forgetting that each moment of the present places the past in a new perspective, Faulkner's characters believe that whatever they hold in their memories is finished and unchangeable and that it can be invoked and re-examined at different points in time without suffering any alteration. This, unfortunately, is possible only if they remain static, a condition which they

⁴ Joseph Blotner, *William Faulkner: A Biography*. Jackson: Mississippi UP, 2005. Print, p.132.

cannot achieve without isolating themselves from the time. For example young Bayar Sartoris, Harris Wilbourne, Gail Hightower, and Rosa Coldfield, each in his own way lives in and through his memory. Gail Hightower and Rosa Coldfield are, in addition, extreme representatives of a society which, as *Requiem for a Nun* observes, has turned its face “irreconcilably backward toward the old lost battle, the old aborted cause, the old four ruined years whose very physical scars ten and twenty and twenty-five changes of season had annealed back into the earth.” (p.239)

However, if memory confines the characters to the past, imagination can free them or, conversely, confirm their bondage or change.⁵ It alone can recreate the events of the past and transform them into reality. As *Requiem for a Nun* points out, “so limitless in capacity is man’s imagination to disperse and but away the rubble-dross of fact and probability, leaving only truth and dream.” (p.261)

Since imagination alone is free of time, it can transcend and abrogate all categories of time and space and thereby bring some changes in the characters’ life. Such is the case with Hightower and Quentin Compson, for example, who place imagination with which it endows experience in their past life.

Regarding the example of the two characters cited above, we can see that there are degrees of concern on the part of the characters’ change. For example, the characters in *The Sound and the Fury* are each in their own ways wedded to the past that permanently modifies their deeds, which is Sartre's main criticism of the novel. It is in this perspective that he argues that Faulkner's characters are deeply involved in their past that they lack a future.⁶ A view that meets the one of Faulkner for whom time is chronological and an external force composed of a collection of discrete instances that determines the characters in their behavior.⁷ A Jim Bond or Ike Snopes, for instance, is reduced simply to a physical existence by idiocy, life in time without being conscious of it. Others, particularly women of limited intellectual capacities such as Jenny in *Mosquitoes*, Lena Grove, and Eula Varner in *The Hamlet* can be completely absorbed into the rhythms of psychological time. Even Benjy Compson is

⁵ Henry Bergson, *Time and Free Will: Essays on The Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. Pogson, New York: Macmillan, 2008, p.101.

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, “On The Sound and the Fury: Time in the Work of William Faulkner.” *Literary and Philosophical Essays*. Ed. Annette Michelson. London: Rider, 1995, p.125.

⁷ Matthews John, *William Faulkner: Seeing Through the South*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p.56.

aware of change and loss, though unable to develop any concept of time or to understand that he also is changing. Benjy, an autistic man, recalls all of his past memories through sensations. Since Benjy's character has a disability, he does not have the ability of deep analysis. It is apparent to see that Benjy's character is unbiased in most cases and truthful when he recalls a past memory simply because he does not have the ability to alter it. The only favoritism he acknowledges is towards his sister Caddy because she is the one person who loves and cares for him.⁸

The only or ultimate relationship between the characters and time is characterized by a conflict and a struggle that are the means by which the characters' lives acquire a signification. Then, in addition to struggle with time, Faulkner's characters are always fighting against each others or inner themselves with intangible force that affects their lives. These endless conflicts make the characters' sense of time defective. We can notice it in the way their thoughts move from present to past time without the ability to grasp the real meaning of metamorphosis that happens in them. Paradoxically, the characters' minds sometimes refuse to accept this change. It is the case with Quentin whose efforts to cope with the present are so impeded by his memories that he cannot accept the changes in his life that time inevitably brings. His sense of loss over the innocence of his childhood love of Caddy is unbearable. Rather than dealing with life's changes over time, he puts an end to his life.

In fact, the change that seems to occur in the lives of Faulkner's characters is a mere delusion. The characters' ideas of change are framed in memory by being reinvoked, not once, but many times. They associate growing up to maturity, so as they are constantly varying psychologically and the events that occur in their lives are affected.

II-Event, the Thread Driver of the Time

Events seem to recede in a regular temporal sequence like the hands of a clock. The clock is sometimes the central symbol in Faulkner's novels, especially in *The Sound and the Fury*, where it determines the events of the life of the characters. It is the example of Mr. Compson who says in this novel that: "time is dead as long as it is

⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Op. Cit*, p.125.

being clicked out by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life.”(p.104). For him time is the essence of man and it also determines the events of his life.

Regarding this assertion of Mr. Compson, if a person relies exclusively on the clock, he becomes, in the extreme case, a mechanical man, like Mr. Hooper in *Mosquitoes*, murmuring, “Well, well. I must run along. I run my day to schedule.” (p.37). Or else he becomes a Quentin Compson who, even on the threshold of death, attempts to construe his experience of natural time in terms of his obsession with mechanical time. The folly of such attitudes is realized by the Reporter in *Pylon* who despairs over the succession of days and lives rigidly controlled by the hands of a clock. So that he relates the events which happen in his life exactly how he experiences them.

As for Faulkner the real time is the time of experience, the time of the events; it is not a chronology but a continuous attempt to assess real values. And although both means of reconstructing the past, they seem such an attempt where the involuntary memory seems to be a more effective vehicle. It is only through such a memory that the past becomes not a memory but a present reality.⁹ It seems that Faulkner is almost making the point that for his characters, the future was predetermined, the present never really existing at all, and that it is only the memories of the past and the expectations for the future that truly exist and give meaning to the life of his characters. This greatly helps to explain their moral decay and their loss of hope.¹⁰

We notice that in *The Sound and the Fury* past and future are both implicit in the present; therefore the events, the causes, and the effects exist simultaneously in the mind of his characters. Knowing that both causes and events derive from a past that is always present explains why certain of Faulkner’s characters appear to be reliving something which has already happened or to be watching from a distance the rehearsal of a play whose ending they already know. Joe Christmas, in *The Sound and the Fury* for instance, accepts as accomplished the murder which has not yet been committed or

⁹ Peter Lurie, *Vision’s Immanence: Faulkner, Film and the Popular Imagination*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p.65.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Op. Cit.*, p.65.

even consciously planned. Even before he enters the house, he finds himself saying, «I had to do it already in the past tense; I had to do it. » (p.245)

Nevertheless, in this seeming determinism the characters are not relieved of responsibility. As according to Sigmund Freud, the mind can change things to suit itself especially with a mental condition¹¹, Faulkner's characters experience their lives through love; their minds do not take the time to analyze this feeling and then redirect it to benefit them. Indeed their sensory perceptions far outweigh their mental perception of all what happens around them as we could see with Quentin. Quentin's narrative in *The Sound and the Fury* is a stream of continuous thought interrupted by the dialogue he has on his last day among the living, but his memories are fragmented and twisted in with his thoughts. We can see it when he says: "Nonsense you look like a girl you are lots younger than Candace color in your cheeks like a girl a face reproachful an odor of camphor..." (p.95). Here, Quentin is in the past, but his recollection of the dialogue is interrupted by his personal thoughts that day and his own reflection on what occurred.

Faulkner constructs the characters' memories according to their present condition; in other words he alters them to fit their mental. Benjy, for instance, closely associates everything with past events, negating this way the reality and diverting his own perception of the drive of time. This is symbolic of Quentin's ability to manipulate his sense of time via the events that happen in his life.¹²

This manner of plotting with time shows the characters' ability to stop and start it again; often interjecting their thoughts, whether relevant or not. Quentin stops the plot regularly for moments when inquiring to himself regarding surrounding events. He talks to himself and really stepping out of the progression of time and more or less just analyzing the situation. Without that consciousness, Quentin has no control on how the plot proceeds. His only power is in his ability to perceive time as he chooses and in turn this causes him to continually reference the past for he has the ability to control his recollection of events but feels an inability to direct his own future and the

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *La Psychanalyse*, Textes Choisis, Presse Universitaire, France, PUF 1978, p.97.

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Op. Cit*, p.125.

coming events. This is the only way all the characters of Faulkner feel they can control time, through their perception of it. But they know within themselves that life can't constantly be lived in the past as it can negatively impact their perception of events and also cause them to step out of the realm of reality, in turn, ostracizing them from society. Unfortunately, it is in the past that the characters live; being so condemned in a kind of prison of the time.

III-Doom, the Synonym of the Past

It is in the interaction of natural and human time that Faulkner's concept of doom finds its source and its meaning. In his novels, it is synonymous with death and as such, it is shared by all his characters.¹³ Yet for him, doom is not merely an awareness that the inevitable goal of the life of the characters is death. It is also time seen as the medium which not only leads his characters' thoughts but also determines their mode and manner of life. It is in this context that Gavin Steven has said in *Intruder in the Dust* that: "all man had was time, all which stood between him and the death he feared and abhorred was time." (p.30).

On the ground of Gavin Steven's conviction, it is obvious that none of the characters can evade time without having to accept death. It is as if Faulkner's characters were helpless and victimized by supra-time force. Force that, according to Faulkner, closes the characters to the future.¹⁴ There is no hopeful happening for the characters who live in a continued grief and sullen due to their involvement in a present where the past reoccurs constantly.

Faulkner's characters live in the moment, the now. The present [now] in *The Sound and the Fury* by Faulkner contains the reoccurring past and re-experiences of events that have already happened. For example Benjy cannot distinguish between what is the future and what is the past because his autism disables him to do so. He seems fully capable to realize when his thoughts are in the present, and when he slips back into the past. As we can see in the first paragraph of the chapter dealing with

¹³Jean-Paul Sartre, *Op. Cit*, p.126.

¹⁴ Alice Hall, *Disability and Modern Fiction: Faulkner, Coetzee, and The Nobel Prize for Literature*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p.130.

Benjy, he is describing the actions of the golfers he sees, but when he hears the word Caddy he begins to cry. This means that his mind does live in the present. His conscious mind can't distinguish his current surroundings from past experiences, yet his subconscious is constantly connected to past pain and past experiences. His autism makes it so he cannot express his pain in a way anyone would understand it.

The experiences Benjy remembers most are those which caused him a great pain, as stated in regards to Caddy leaving. He may not outwardly pass judgment but his emotions show that he does pass a sort of abstract judgment of the characters. It is the reason why he sees Jason as a trouble maker, or cuts up Benjy's dolls. We have the sensation that Jason is more concern with spiritual matter than Caddy who Benjy's sensations describe as being more a care taker and a free spirit. Also, we get a sense that Benjy is somewhat afraid of his mother and the idea that a child is afraid of his parent is unsettling and causes us to pass judgment. He can only live from the sensations that he experiences.

Benjy is a severely autistic man who is trapped in the constraints of his own mind. He is now thirty-three years old and unable to speak or even care for himself. It is hard for someone like Benjy to enjoy the time that life has to offer. Each time someone moves to the left, Benjy acts up because he keeps re-experiencing the times of his sister Caddy, the only person who really seemed to care, love, and accept him. This shapes Benjy's perception as a character which can only live through the sensations. His mind cannot process complex conclusions about his life. It is not because Benjy cannot differentiate between questions and statements, but the time period in which he lives restrains his progress and ability to contribute to his surroundings.¹⁵

In *The Sound and the Fury*, the characters are always denying the fact that time has moved on and in turn, they develop a sort of internal timeline within their heads. This perception of time causes them to fall out of the progression of the present and create their own world of the past in which they, at least mentally, function and exist. Benjy, for example, has chosen to live in the past; he has made of it his reality.

¹⁵ Michael Frederickson, "A note on 'The Idiot Boy' as a Probable Source for *The Sound and the Fury*" *Minnesota Review* 6 (1966): 368-70.

Though the outside world around the characters moves and still continues, their frame of reference in regard to time is reverted to an alternative point on their internal timeline. The past has never passed away and the characters can turn back and go behind it; there they will find everything as it once was. It means that they find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously; in which case none of what the history of each character tells us would be true. The past events open up the bleak prospect of ever lasting misery and never-ending anguish. Benjy, who is the living incarnation of this idea, shows the consequence of living a life mixed between recognition of the present and recollection of the past.¹⁶

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner made time such a prominent portion that he came to the conclusion that to his healthy characters time is scarce; while to those who are disabled or unhappy, time is in abundance. Quentin, who is a depressive and mentally ill character, spends his free time trying to figure out how he could kill himself successfully. His mind seems to be trapped in a kind of endless time.

In Faulkner's conception of time this doom can appear throughout all time, not solely at the extreme end of a rapidly diminishing future. This is seen most dramatically in the case of Joe Christmas whose death is the inevitable but not preordained result of his past that he has never succeeded to escape. With the example of Joe Christmas, we notice that doom appears as a subtle time process that not only causes and encourages the characters' actions, but motivates their final decision.

The subtle process of doom that backs the deeds of the characters unfortunately annihilates certain characters' desire to escape the destructive effects of doom. For that purpose, they develop various strategies of evasion. And all these strategies of evasion are based on the paradox, enunciated by Harry Wilbourne, Quentin Compson, and Darl Bundren, who have understood that if man is in time, he also contains time within himself. So long as he exists, he preserves the past through memory; with his death the past is either obliterated or altered. It is what justifies the attitude of some characters who want to evade doom by committing suicide.¹⁷ Labove in *The Hamlet* and Quentin

¹⁶ Michael Frederickson, "A note on 'The Idiot Boy' as a Probable Source for *The Sound and the Fury*" *Minnesota Review* 6 (1966): 368-70.

¹⁷ Henry Bergson, *Time and Free Will: Essays on The Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. Pogson, New York: Macmillan, 2008, p.102.

Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* corroborate our statement. It is also the example of Gowan Steven in *Requiem for a Nun* who like Quentin, envisages drowning as the means by which he can “stop having to remember, stop having to be forever unable to forget.”(p.74). Harry Wilbourne, on the other hand, chooses doom as time in order to avoid the obliteration of love and his memory of Charlotte.

For Faulkner, each character carries the seeds of his/her own destruction; destruction that is reflected in the fate of each one splendid estate. For Quentin Compson, Bayard Sartoris, and young Gail Hightower time is remembering. Remembering that deepens them in the obscurity of the past where new experience is impossible.

Indeed, the life of the characters of Faulkner, instead of being filled with new experiences or new reactions, is characterized by the gathering memories of a past they have never seen. The disparity between their actual youth with its anticipation of the future and their psychological and genealogical old age with its memories results in the frustration of the characters such as Quentin, the indifference of Hightower, or the despairing recklessness of Bayard.¹⁸ So that each character in his present action reshapes or confirms the design of the past. It is what Gavin Stevens suggests in *Intruder in the Dust* when he remarks that: “‘It’ is all now you see. Yesterday won’t be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten years ago.”(p.194). It is also what we should understand in Quentin’s attitude when he spends so much time defending the honor of his sister and his family; he does not focus on allowing himself the chance at a better life. He feels guilty that Jason cannot go to college. He doesn't focus on the future and work to make a life so he can actually help his family. As he is too caught up in time, Quentin thinks about the past and the time in hours that pass. Finally he cuts his time short by committing suicide, the ultimate irony.

The obsession of Quentin is typical of the one of all the characters who are too obsessed with the past and frequently lapse into flashbacks. They never look ahead. They face backwards as the car of the time carries them along. The coming suicide which casts its shadow over Quentin's last day is not a human possibility; not for a

¹⁸Jaqui Griffiths, “Indeterminate Children and Dogs in *Flush* and *Sound and the Fury*” *Yearbook of English Studies* 32, 2002: 163 – 176.

second does Quentin envisage the possibility of not killing himself. This suicide is an immobile wall, a thing which he approaches backwards, and which he neither wants to nor can conceive. With the example of Quentin, the past takes on a sort of super-reality in *The Sound and the Fury*; its contours are hard and clear, unchangeable. The present, nameless and fleeting, is helpless before it. It is full of unforgettable gaps of pain, and, through these gaps, things of the past, fixed, motionless and silent as judges or glances, come to invade it, dooming Faulkner's hero's consciousness back into the dark meanders of the past.¹⁹

Faulkner's entire art suggests that his characters' attitude and way of thinking predispose them inexorably to a fatal destiny and the suicide of Quentin is an example. In *The Sound and the Fury*, the present is unexpected, but can be determined only by an excess of memories.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, duration is the characters' characteristic misfortune. As the future has no reality them, thus time cannot withdraw them from the past; worse it traps them in the present; so that by doing away with the future, time is that which separates and paradoxically that which cuts the present off from itself.

Faulkner's characters seem to spend their lives struggling against time, and time, like an acid, eats away at them, eats them away from themselves and prevents them from fulfilling themselves.²⁰ In this context, everything seems absurd for Faulkner's characters. Unfortunately, Proust doesn't subscribe to the point of view of Faulkner. For he asserts that: "salvation lies in time itself, in the full reappearance of the past."²¹ For Faulkner, on the contrary, it must be forgotten.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, the past is never lost, it always exists, and it is an obsession. An obsession Quentin holds about Caddy's loss of virginity to Dalton Ames. Paradoxically he does not want to assume the consequences of this obsession. Quentin has neither succeeded to assimilate nor possess the past. Worse, it became for him an agony of shame and destruction. It is in this perspective that Jean Pouillon says

¹⁹ Winthrop Tilley, "The Idiot Boy in Mississippi: Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*" *American Journal of Mental Deficiency* 59 (1955): 37-44.

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, "On The Sound and the Fury: Time in the Work of William Faulkner." *Literary and Philosophical Essays*. Ed. Annette Michelson. London: Rider, 1995, p.126.

²¹ Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*, NRF, 1927, p.46.

that Faulkner's characters live in a present that is «eaten up» by the past. He also sustains that Faulkner's characters are not determined by their past because they are the past; the past is «extra-temporal» in the sense that the past for them exists in the present. As such, the characters are psychologically dominated by destiny.²² As example, Henry and Judith Sutpen are caught in the wake of their father's rejection of his first wife. In this act of his they find their own test and make their judgment and decision. Like their father, they perpetuate the guilt by committing fresh crimes and initiate new moral outrage. Faulkner's characters do not try to foresee what could happen to them. They seem to be blinded by the doom of the past. Doom being a part of time, its attracting force can, in fact, never be completely erased.

Conclusion

William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* is the deliberate and complicated embodiments of the artistic efforts to capture the different facets of time. For Faulkner, reality as well as time is a matter of human consciousness. He uses delicate and complex time scheme setting to explore his characters' consciousness.

The Sound and the Fury focuses on Faulkner's various facets of time and the delusive transformation brought about by the seeming time shiftiness. Faulkner has established fake time shiftiness as a focus of his novel to show the absurdity of the events that are to come in his characters' lives.

Time as well as the absurdity of life, both overwhelmingly entities affect the characters. Through them, Faulkner reveals a world that signifies nothing. It is important to recognize that it is not the past that Faulkner is concerned with. He is rather interested to the notion of the past continuously and eternally encroaching on the future. Therefore the actual distinction between the two entities is blurred. Faulkner's despair seems to precede his metaphysics. For him, as for all of his characters, the future is closed. And yet change is not even conceivable, except in the form of cataclysm. Faulkner's characters are living in a time of impossible revolutions, and he uses his extraordinary art to describe their suffocation and their dying world.

²² Jean Pouillon, *Temps et roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993, p.213.

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