



Tess: A Girl Doomed to Tragedy

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the tragic character of Tess in Hardy's masterpiece *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Tess, as the heroine of the novel, has charmed the readers with her sweet nature, innocence, purity, and beauty. Her misfortunes and final tragic death are most touching and unforgettable. Several factors contribute to Tess's tragedy: the social reality, a mysterious force called fate, and her innate personality flaw all play a part in her downfall. We can conclude that Tess is a doomed girl, and her tragedy is inevitable.

Key words: Tess; Tragedy; Doom

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INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), one of the representatives of English critical realism at the turn of the 19th century, expresses his pessimism and sense of tragedy in human life throughout his works. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) which is generally regarded as Hardy's masterpiece centers on the tragic occurrences of its heroine Tess's life. Tess, as the heroine of the novel, has charmed the readers with her sweet nature, innocence, purity, and beauty. Her misfortunes and final tragic death are most touching and unforgettable. The tragedy of Tess is inevitable, and this paper holds that there are mainly three factors which lead to her fall: the society, Hardy's fatalistic outlook on human life and Tess's innate flaw in personality.

This tragic story of Tess seems to focus on the heroine's love and marriage, yet what Hardy attacks in the novel is not only the system of marriage in the hypocritical bourgeois society but also the legal, moral, and religious systems of the Victorian society. Hardy gives a vivid and realistic description of the destruction of the English peasantry towards the end of 19th century, the intrusion of capitalism into countryside and people's doubts on religious beliefs. Hardy tries to explain the tragic fate of the heroine as under the influence of some mysterious force, especially by attributing the whole tragedy as a result from the chance discovery by Tess's father of their ancestry and by emphasizing the chance happening as largely responsible for the unhappy relations between Tess and Angel Clare. Tess also suffers because of her innate tragic flaw in personality. Having an innocent, pure and persistent nature, Tess would not settle for an undesirable life; she is doomed at the start to suffer and to die.

1. DISCUSSION

1.1 Social Reality

The story of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* took place in the late half of 19th century, which saw the decline and destruction of the English peasantry. It was an age of transition and great social upheavals. England was slowly developing from a mainly agricultural country to an industrial society. The pastoral village life was on its way out and the encroaching feet of modern civilization moved in. Agriculture and dairy farms were being replaced, and the railway appeared as a dark menace on the fringe of the village which was the backbone of rural life. The outside world was impinging upon the pastoral scene: the presence of the threshing machine and the way that Londoners handle their milk are just two indicators of this. Hardy always sets almost all his novels in the agricultural region of the southern countries of England.

His novels truthfully portray the impoverishment and decay of small farmers who roam the country in search of seasonal jobs and become hired laborers, who are mercilessly exploited by the rich landowners. Hardy is pained to see the deterioration of the patriarchal mode of life in rural England. Tess is brought up under these social circumstances.

Tess Durbeyfield is born into a very poor family in a small village. It so happens that Tess's father, Jack Durbeyfield's small trade goes bankrupt, which is caused by the death of their horse in an accident. As the horse used to be the family's only means of livelihood, Tess blames herself for the death of the horse and wants to make up for it. She intends to find some occupation in the neighborhood in order to earn enough money to purchase another horse, but in vain. It is under such circumstances that Tess is persuaded by her mother to visit the prosperous d'Urbervilles to claim kindred, though actually the latter is a family of capitalists who have recently acquired wealth and bought their way to the gentry. She takes an employment there to look after poultry. At this time, "she is in the special position of a woman laborer, that as a woman as well as a worker she is exposed to the market, with its range of possibilities in seduction, marriage, desertion, kept mistress" (Page, 1980, p.35).

After Tess is seduced by Alec and returns home, she is unable to find anything to do. She stays at home for about two and a half years during which she gives birth to a child who dies in infancy. Being considered as a sinful woman, she then leaves home and finds a job in the Talbothays Dairy farm. In spite of the hard work at early hours, Tess is not unhappy, for the atmosphere there is fairly friendly to her. However, Tess here becomes a wage-laborer. The work itself is seasonal, which means she has taken another step in her social descent by leading a precarious and insecure life. Most importantly, here she meets Angel Clare, a son of a clergyman goes to work on the farm for some experience. They fall in love with each other and get married. Tess has no idea that that man will change her life completely—first raises her hope of life, then destroys it without any mercy. When she is abandoned by Angel Clare, the disgraced Tess goes home again, but the poverty of her parents forces her to come out to look for work again, and after many vain attempts she finally arrives at Flintcomb-Ash, where she becomes a typical wage earner who has to work under the hardest working conditions. The land here is barren; the atmosphere is hushed and death-like; the weather is cruel. Tess is insulted and oppressed by the master. The farm at Flintcomb-Ash is the typical representative of capitalist mode of production, where the workers are mercilessly exploited. Professor Chen gives the following comments on the conditions of Flintcomb-Ash farm:

The striking scene of capitalist exploitation and oppression on the Flintcomb-Ash farm is one of the highlights in the novel,

for here as rarely elsewhere in English fiction do we witness a vivid picture of how women laborers were especially heavily exploited, with their lower wages but not lighter work, how they were insulted as well as maltreated with harsh words and orders, how they had to work under the most terrible conditions of weather and long hours until all except the very staunchest of them collapsed with over-fatigue. (Chen, 1994, p.436)

Strong-willed Tess bears all the sufferings and waits patiently for Angel's return. But misfortune and hardship pile upon her and her family. Her father's death finally deals her a hardest blow. As a result of her father's death, Tess's family are expelled from their cottage and they become landless and homeless. Tess, now wearied and in despair, in urgent need to find a place for her family to live in, surrenders herself to Alec's persistent pressure and moves in with him. Angel Clare has, however, somewhat repented of his treatment of Tess and now returns from Brazil to be reconciled to her, but finds her living again with Alec. Thinking that Alec's relations with her prevent her from going back to live happily with Angel for the second time, Tess hates Alec for ruining her life and kills him. After a short interval of happy life with Angel, the police come after her. Tess is arrested, tried, convicted and hanged.

Obviously Tess's tragic fate has its social nature. She is the victim of social oppression. Tess's and her family's tragedy is not that of an individual or a family, but rather is symbolic of the destruction of the English peasantry toward the end of the 19th century. "The problem Tess experiences is that she cannot fit into society, yet she has to live in society and consequently is punished for her waywardness" (Peck, 1987, p.52).

1.2 Fate and Chance

Hardy's fatalistic outlook on life can be detected in many of his novels. The fact that Hardy lived in an age of transition contributes to his melancholy view of life. In his works, Hardy gives a biting exposure and criticism of the greed, hypocrisy and sordidness of the bourgeoisie. He sees the social problem of his day, yet he fails to find a solution. As a result, he turns to fatalism in explaining his heroine's tragedy. In this novel, Hardy employs a lot of coincidences and accidents to render Tess's tragedy inevitable. Hardy indicates that human destiny is determined by a kind of force similar yet superior to any god and that human beings have no control over their destiny, they can only be controlled by the unseen yet powerful force, "the President of the Immortals", or maybe "fate" or "chance". Humans get caught up in the web of Fate, or the malignant universe, whose job is to destroy human lives. There is no free will, circumscribed as it is by society. A tragic fate therefore is inevitable. Many Victorian authors use chance and coincidence as a means of furthering the plot, but with Hardy it becomes something more than a mere device. Fateful incidents, overheard conversations, and undelivered letters

symbolize the forces working against man's efforts to control his own destiny. Examples of the fateful incidents abound in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Fate and chance determine Tess's destiny at some critical moments, as shown in many accidents and coincidences.

First of all, Tess is the daughter of a poor, shiftless villager John Durbeyfield, who at the beginning of the novel happens to discover that he is the last descendent of the ancient noble family of the D'Urbervilles. Getting overexcited at the prospect of being a nobleman, he goes to a tavern to celebrate his noble ancestry and naturally gets drunk. It's no surprise that he is in no condition to make the long trip to the market. Tess and her brother have to go in his place. Because it is too early, both of the two children (Tess at that time is only sixteen) fall asleep. Thus the tragedy happens: a mail coach crashes into their wagon, and kills their horse, which deprives them of their only means of livelihood. Tess's mother then comes up with a plan to make Tess claim kinship with Mrs. d'Urberville and asks for some help. Tess is not enthusiastic about her mother's proposal, but as she feels guilty about the death of the horse, she finally agrees. And this is only the beginning of her tragedy.

When Tess works for the d'Urbervilles, she has the habit of going every Saturday night to a decayed market-town to have some fun, and when she comes back, she usually has the company of the other girls. One night, one of the village girls accuses Tess of thinking herself better than the rest of them just because she has got the young master Alec's favor, so they get into an argument with each other. After this unpleasant quarrel, Tess then decides to walk home alone. The young master Alec who happens to ride by offers her a ride, and she accepts it, which would never have happened under other circumstances. It happens that Tess is extremely tired that night.

She was inexpressibly weary. She had risen at five o'clock every morning of that week, had been on foot the whole of each day and on this evening had in addition walked the three miles to Chaseborough, waited three hours for her neighbors without eating or drinking, her impatience to start them preventing either; she had then walked a mile of the way home, and had undergone the excitement of the quarrel, till, with the slow progress of their steed, it was now nearly one o'clock. (Hardy, 1996, p.115)

Owing to the extreme exhaustion, she does not notice that they have already drifted off their course and pass by a wood; unfortunately she falls asleep because of the weariness. So, in the woods, in the dense fog and complete darkness, Tess is seduced by Alec and loses her virginity. Her life changes since then. Hardy (1996) asks: "Where was Tess's guardian angel? Where was the providence of her simple faith?" (p.119). Tess dislikes Alec and she has always been cautious of him. Had it not been for the quarrel with the women, she would not have ridden with him; and had it not been for her tiredness, she

would not have gone to sleep at the critical and dangerous moment. However, what is done cannot be undone. "An immeasurable social chasm was to divide our heroine's personality thereafter from that previous self of hers who stepped from her mother's door to try her fortune at Trantridge poultry-farm" (Hardy, 1996, p.119).

When Tess has recovered from her misfortune and is ready for a new life in Talbothays Dairy farm, she unexpectedly meets Angel Clare, the young man whom she saw several years ago in Marlott's annual May Day Dance. Angel did not choose Tess as a partner because at that time he did not see her, which was a great pity for both of them, especially to Tess. If he had noticed charming and pure Tess at that time, Tess's fate would definitely have changed. Now, several years have passed, Tess has suffered a lot and Angel does not recognize her. Angel Clare, son of a clergyman, goes to work also on the farm just for the experience of work, learning dairying in preparation for a life as a farmer. Angel is charmed by Tess's purity and beauty. On the other hand, although she feels guilty about her past, Tess cannot resist the strong love she has developed for Angel. Tess has been trying to lead a repressed life, but she "little divined the strength of her own vitality" (Hardy, 1996, p.181). Their love for each other grows stronger with the passage of time. Tess is happy now, and she has the strong hope that things should go on like that for ever. When Angel makes a proposal to her, she feels guilty, painful and hesitates to accept it because of her tainted past experience. She does not know what to do and tries to confess to Angel before things go too far. But various events frustrate her attempts, either she loses her courage at the last instant, or just Angel dismisses her since he does not believe that a girl as pure as Tess has experienced anything serious in her young simple life. The wedding day is approaching; Tess makes a decision to write of her past relations with Alec on the four pages of a note-sheet and thrusts it from under the door into his bedroom. But here again, Fate plays a cruel joke on her. The paper gets stuck under the rug and Angel never has the chance to see it. If Angel had read the letter before their wedding, he might have forgiven her and Tess's life would have changed. On the wedding night after Tess's confession he blames her for not telling him beforehand, and in a later chapter he says "O Tess! If you had only told me sooner, I would have forgiven you!" (Hardy, 1996, p.341). It seems the Fate's arrangement; the accidents and incidents are always against Tess's happiness.

Then the distressed Tess decides to visit Angel's parents to seek their help. On her way to Angel's father's house, Tess unfortunately overhears the conversation of Angel's brothers. The two brothers express their regret about Angel's hasty and ill-considered marriage: "Ah! Poor Angel, poor Angel! I never see that nice girl without more and more regretting his precipitancy in throwing himself away upon a dairymaid, or whatever she may be.

It is a queer business, apparently” (Hardy, 1996, p.376). The snobbish two brothers have full prejudice against Tess just because she belongs to a lower class. Though both of them are religious, neither has any true religious feeling, nor do they possess their father’s moral generosity or good heart. Tess can not bear those unkind words; she abandons her visit half way. Bad luck comes to Tess again: suppose she had not overheard the conversation and had instead stuck to her plans to visit Angel’s parents, she would get some help from them, and life would be different.

Tess’s final bad luck is the death of her father. Since her father is a life-holder, his death ends automatically their tenantry on the land, and Tess’s family becomes homeless. As her mother is a weak and shiftless woman, Tess has to take the responsibility of supporting her little brothers and sisters. Desperate as she is, under the economic oppression and social injustice, without any information from her husband, Tess is forced to go back to Alec who can economically help her family to survive. The repented Angel Clair now returns from Brazil too late to prevent the tragedy from happening.

So many coincidences occur in Tess’s life that the hand of chance and fate can be seen wherever Tess goes. Tess seems to be trapped in the claws of Fate and Chance, and she is never able to get free, therefore, she must die.

Hardy’s fatalism is both presented through accidents and coincidences and revealed by means of many omens and signs in the novel. To the people of Wessex, almost everything has significance. Tess’s mother Joan, an uneducated woman, lives by her fortune-telling book. She tries Tess’s fate in this book and believes it is a good idea to send Tess to claim kindred to a rich relation. And after Tess is raped and comes home in disgrace, she accepts this misfortune as fate’s arrangement. In Talbothays Dairy, on the first day of Tess’s coming, these dairymen and dairymaids find the cows produce less milk than usual and they believe that it is because there is a new hand. When the butter does not come in the churn, Mrs. Crick believes that somebody in the dairy farm must be in love. They have their beliefs and explanations for every common incident. On Tess’s wedding day, the cocks’ crows in the afternoon are regarded as bad omens almost by everybody, and it does indicate that something terrible is going to happen. Misfortune and disaster do fall upon Tess that night: Angel deserts her after her confession.

When Tess unexpectedly meets with Alec on her way back from Emmister, Alec asks her to put her hand upon the stone hand on the cross in a place called “Cross-in-hand”. He tells her that it was once a Holy Cross. Tess is frightened and swears on the strange cross. But then Tess meets a shepherd who tells her that the Cross-in-hand never was holy at all. Instead, it was put up by the relatives of an evil-doer in the old times who was first tortured there by nailing his hands to a post and was afterwards hanged. “Tis a thing of ill-omen. They say

he sold his soul to the devil, and that he walks at times.” (Hardy, 1996, p.391). Tess is horrified by his words and feels depressed, for she has sworn on the cross. This incident indicates her later unfortunate encounter with Alec and being entangled with him.

In the final stage of the story, Tess has a few happy days in the company of her beloved husband. One night they come upon the gigantic pillars of Stonehenge, which is a group of huge upright stones, dating from prehistoric times. It is in the form of two concentric rings of stones that enclose a central “altar stone,” which is probably used in some ancient religious services as a place for offering sacrifices. Tess is very tired by this time and she lies down upon an oblong slab which is an altar stone used probably for sacrifice to a sun. Tess falls asleep and gets arrested on the stone. And as the sun rises, she is also sacrificed to the guardians of social law and morals, the “President of the Immortals.”

Since there is a kind of mysterious power hidden in nature that has man’s fate in control, what is the use of man’s struggle to change their fate? Therefore, Tess has to accept what has happened and what will happen to her. Whatever she does, she is doomed to tragedy.

1.3 Flaw in Character

Besides the factors that are mentioned above, another notable factor that contributes to Tess’s tragedy lies in her innate tragic flaw in personality. “In a novel where the heroine is so central to every important consideration, an understanding of how her character shapes her fate is essential for an interpretation of the meaning of her tragedy” (Kramer, 1979, p.136). Hardy’s fictional world operates in such a way that the less sensitive, self-conscious and intelligent ones have better chances of survival, while the innocent ones like Tess must die. Tess is doomed because she is so innocent and persistent in her quest of the true meaning of life. It is fair to say that Tess herself is somewhat responsible for her tragedy.

Tess is an extraordinarily beautiful country girl. She is not only beautiful in appearance, but also noble at heart. In a world otherwise populated by morally fragmented individuals, Tess is the only morally sound person. We should remember that Tess is not totally a country girl; she is the descendant of the once noble family of the D’Urbervilles. Just as she herself claims “I am only a peasant by position, not by nature!” (Hardy, 1996, p.302). It is her striking beauty and nobleness in disposition that appeal to both Alec and Angel strongly. But paradoxically, it is also this very spiritual nobility that makes her so vulnerable to men like Alec and Angel. She is the only one who can care for others, who can enter into complete and satisfying relationships with others; she is the only one who does not exploit and use the other people. But ironically, in this unprincipled world, it is always the kindest and noblest people who are apt to be hurt

and taken advantage of by the others and are doomed to unluckiness upon misfortune. Virtues may turn into disadvantages sometimes.

Tess's physical attractiveness is one of these virtues which turn against her. Her beauty is continually stressed throughout the novel. When she first meets Alec, it is her beauty and innocence that impress him greatly and make him determined to take advantage of her.

She had an attribute which amounted to a disadvantage just now; and it was this that caused Alec D'Urberville's eyes to rivet themselves upon her. It was a luxuriance of aspect, a fullness of growth, which made her appear more of a woman than she really was. She had inherited the feature from her mother without the quality it denoted. (Hardy, 1996, p.82)

And when she takes a ride with Alec it is also her prettiness and youthfulness that attract Alec. Finally, Alec seizes the chance and possesses her beauty, but surely not her heart. As to Angel Clare, he is also charmed by Tess's physical beauty: his first impression of her is "What a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature that milkmaid she is!" To him, Tess is "visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form" (Hardy, 1996, p.176). Tess's unearthly beauty and purity make her stand out among the other girls, making her become pray for those immoral men.

As to Tess's personality, it consists of the contradictory qualities of pride and independence of spirit and a passivity and submissiveness towards other people and her fate. These qualities contribute greatly to her tragedy. Tess's pride and independent spirit can be seen in many cases: her determination to leave Alec, her unwillingness to tell her parents the truth about her marriage or to ask help from Angel's parents. It is also this pride that prevents her from trying to win Angel back after he abandons her. After Alec takes advantage of her innocence and physical exhaustion to seduce her, she becomes his mistress for a short time. Hardy gives no explanation as to why she should agree to stay after this. This may be attributed to her passivity and submissiveness. But once Tess realizes that she does not love him at all, she breaks up with him immediately. This again shows her pride and nobleness. Although she is poor by birth, she does not give herself up to Alec's money, as some other women would willingly do. By leaving the rich master Alec, Tess shows her independent spirit. She does not rely on a rich man for life.

Tess's pride and independence do not allow her to stay in Marlott after her baby's death. So she leaves for the Vale of Frome to search for a new life and there she meets Angel. Her agreement to marry Angel is not based on money issue, either. Though a poor girl who is in need of money to improve her life and help her family, material gains do not come into her mind in choosing a husband. True love only is in her consideration of

happiness in marriage. Sadly, her happy days there do not last long. After the woeful wedding night, she is deserted by her husband. She does not make a scene or makes any efforts to urge him to stay owing to her pride. During the following days, though she meets with great difficulties economically and spiritually, she seeks help neither from her own parents nor from Angel's parents who do have the ability to assist her. Because of the same consideration, she is reluctant to return to Talbothay's dairy though the boss there would surely take her in out of compassion. As a result, her pride and independence prevent her from getting any help from the others and she has to live and suffer on her own.

Tess also possesses the qualities contrary to pride and independence: passivity and submissiveness. Her passivity under the assaults of Alec and her failure to claim her own rights from Angel, her tendency to drift into acquiescence and her habit of falling asleep at critical moments are all examples of Tess's passivity. Angel makes the connection openly: "I cannot help associating your decline as a family with this other fact—of your want of firmness. Decrepit families imply decrepit wills, decrepit conduct" (Hardy, 1996, p.302). Submissiveness often implies a lack of forethought, a willingness to take whatever may come. Tess derives this characteristic from her parents, but shares it with other rural characters. Tess is not only submissive to events, but also to people. She says to her husband Angel that "I will obey you like your wretched slave" (Hardy, 1996, p.300). Of course, she is not completely submissive all the time, occasionally she does show her anger and resistance. She once argues with Angel that she is only a peasant by position, not by nature. And when she is in despair, she writes her anguished second letter to Angel to show her protest. "O why have you treated me so monstrously, Angel! I do not deserve it. I have thought it all over carefully, and I can never, never forgive you! You know that I did not intend to wrong you—why have you so wronged me? You are cruel, cruel indeed! I will try to forget you. It is all injustice I have received at your hands!" (Hardy, 1996, p.440). She also strikes Alec heavily and in the end of the story, she stabs Alec to death for hurting her so and runs away with Angel. These mixed characteristics help to make Tess a credible character, while at the same time making clear that she is partly responsible for what happens to her.

Besides her passivity and submission, Tess also suffers from the burden of over-sensitivity. Her susceptibility to other's miseries and conventional sense of guilt initiate each downward turn in her own tragedy. She feels responsible for her family's welfare; she assumes more responsibility to take care of her younger brothers and sisters than her parents. But this sense of responsibility leads to her economic difficulties. Alec senses her great concern for her families and takes advantage of this point. He sends gifts and money to her family in order to move

and manipulate Tess. Tess is reluctant to accept his help and thus to be indebted to him, but the overwhelming burden of the large family is eventually too much for her to bear alone.

As to her conventional sense of guilt, Hardy asserts that “most of the misery had been generated by her conventional aspect” (Hardy, 1996, p.141). Tess, who has received an education in the village school, has absorbed the values of Christianity and convention. Certainly it is her upbringing which makes her feel guilty at the birth of her child, which allows her to accept so completely Angel’s verdict on her. Of course, Tess’s tragedy results mainly from the imposition of conventional values on her by other people, but her suffering would not have been so intense if she had not acknowledged those values.

Tess’s experience with Alec is very similar to that of Angel with a woman in London, but the consequence is quite different. Tess’s experience becomes a burden to her and affects her life while nobody blames Angel for his similar mistakes. Tess, who possesses the conventional morality on chastity, blames herself too. In her subconsciousness, she feels guilty and would not marry any man. In her contact with Angel, she is always caught in a dilemma between loving him and rejecting him. She has realized before the wedding that the person Angel loves is not herself but one in her image. She accepts Angel’s verdict without protest because she also takes it for granted that she is impure and guilty. The society blames Tess more than it does Angel for their similar mistakes. The double sexual standard is certainly unfair towards women and shows women’s lower position in the society. Even the villain Alec can become a preacher while Tess has no opportunity for a new life. Tess can be said to be a victim of society’s unfair attitude towards sex and woman.

In Hardy’s other novels, such as “The Return of the Native” and “Jude the Obscure”, female characters with sexual experience prior to or outside marriage usually do not survive. However, this is not the case with male characters. The prospects for a successful union between Tess and Angel are in fact never bright. Tess should not have gone off with Clare, and “lived happily ever after”. A sensitive man like Angel Clare could never have been happy with her. Under any circumstances they are doomed to unhappiness. After the first few months he would inevitably have thrown her failings in her face indeed.

CONCLUSION

Hardy in this novel tries to explain the tragic fate of the heroine mainly as under the influence of some mysterious force, especially by attributing the whole tragedy as resulting from a chance discovery by Tess’s father of their noble ancestry and by emphasizing the chance happening as largely responsible for the unhappy relations between Tess and Angel Clare, yet Hardy also points to the disintegration of English peasantry and the hypocritical morality of the society as the obvious causes of the tragedy. This novel can be considered as a passionate accusation of the capitalist society. Tess is not free from the influence of social conventions, moral standards and her upbringing. However, Tess’s innate tragic flaw in character also brings about her tragedy. She is too innocent. Her guilty feeling of her sin and her complete obedience to Angel Clare as her husband also display her weakness in character. When Hardy gives the novel a subtitle “A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented”, he is defying the Victorian moral standard by calling Tess a pure woman. Tess is portrayed as a brave, sweet-natured, pure and hard-working girl who meets her downfall. Tess, a most pure girl who deserves a happy life is doomed to a tragic end. The author’s sympathy for her is most striking.

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