

The Controversial Interpretation of Death in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" and Emily Dickinson's "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died"

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Abstract:

Toward the beginning of the nineteenth century (19th C.), American writers sought to create an independent literary identity of their own. This meant new writing styles as well as writing themes. It all started with Romanticism, Transcendentalism as well as Dark Romanticism. Each of these schools had different principles; therefore different writing styles. The present article will tackle two renowned poets; Emily Dickinson and her "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" and Edgar Allan Poe and his "The Raven." Since Dickinson published only poetry, the author in this article will focus only on Poe's poetry writing techniques; thus neglecting his prolific prose works. The author will then discuss that despite both poets chose death to be their central theme in most of their writings, yet both had a different view of it. Finally, the author will conclude with the fact that the different interpretation of death was actually the result of both poets' melancholic lives.

Keywords: Dark Romanticism, Death, Interpretation, Romanticism, Transcendentalism.

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الملخص:

في بداية القرن التاسع عشر (19 م) ، سعى الكتاب الأمريكيون إلى خلق هوية أدبية مستقلة خاصة بهم. وهذا يعني خلق أنماط كتابة جديدة بالإضافة إلى موضوعات جديدة. بدأ كل شيء بالرومانسية والفلسفة المتعالية وكذلك الرومانسية المظلمة. كانت لكل مدرسة من هذه المدارس مبادئ مختلفة؛ و بالتالي أنماط كتابة مختلفة. سيتناول هذا المقال شاعرين مشهورين؛ إميلي ديكنسون في قصيدتها "سمعت طنين ذبابة عندما مت" وإدغار آلان بو في قصيدته "الغراب". نظرًا لأن ديكنسون نشرت الشعر فقط ، فإن المؤلف في هذه المقالة سيركز فقط على تقنيات كتابة الشعر عند بو؛ وبذلك تم التغاضي عن أعماله النثرية الغزيرة. سيناقش المؤلف بعد ذلك أنه على الرغم من أن الشاعرين اختارا الموت ليكون موضوعهما المركزي في معظم كتاباتهما ، إلا أن كلاهما كان لهما رأي مختلف عنه. أخيرًا ، سيختتم المؤلف بحقيقة أن التفسير المختلف للموت كان في الواقع نتيجة الحياة الحزينة لكلا الشاعرين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرومانسية المظلمة، الموت، تفسير، الرومانسية، الفلسفة المتعالية.

1. Introduction

After the War of 1812, Americans had to confirm their second independence from the British. Similarly, American authors and poets found it urgent to create an independent literary identity from the British one. It all started with pioneers like Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper who took the lead of establishing American Romanticism (1820-1860). Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820) is considered as the launcher of American Romanticism and the starter of an American independent literary identity.

Indeed, in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* Irving managed to merge two different literary genres; which are Comedy and Horror into one short story. This wonderful technique earned Irving the title of the "father of American literature." Similarly, Cooper pioneered in creating the first American novel through his *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). Both Irving and Cooper are considered to be the founding fathers of American Romanticism; thus the founders of the American independent literary identity.

A decade later, another school branched out of Romanticism; it was called Transcendentalism. The later emerged during the 1830s, when a group of American authors and poets such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson built a new vision toward the human being and his position in the universe. Indeed, Transcendentalists were Romantics who viewed the human being as an idealized creature who is born pure; yet he is unpurified by governments, institutions, social as well as economic factors.

A decade later, another group had a different vision toward the human being and the environment surrounding him. During the 1840s a group of established American authors and poets, who were also Romantics, emerged as a reaction to the idealism of Transcendentalism. Pioneers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne rejected what Transcendentalists were preaching. Dark Romantics as they came to be known were no longer interested in the beauty of nature and human beings, instead they were more into the dark side of humans such as; sin, evil and greed. According to Dark Romanticism, people were born with the inclination toward committing sins and are thus capable of causing horrendous deeds.

In the present article, two of the most established poets in the history of American literature up until nowadays; Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson are being compared through their two famous poems respectfully: “The Raven” and “I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died.” It is clear that Edgar Allan Poe was purely a Dark Romantic; however, it gets confusing with Emily Dickinson. Even nowadays, numerous critics get confused where to place Dickinson; was she Romantic? Transcendentalist? Dark Romantic? Or even an early Realist? The reader to Dickinson’s poetry would definitely find out that she all of these combined together.

As argued above, Dickinson was Romantic because she wrote about themes of love, nature, individuality as well as spirituality. She was also a Transcendentalist since she highly esteemed self-centeredness as well as alienation; a thing which Transcendentalists strongly endorsed. She was further a Dark Romantic when choosing death and the afterlife as two central themes in most of her poems. Finally, she was an early Realist by employing certain elements of Realism in her poetry such as neglecting some rules related to the form like the use of full rhyme and meter. These early Realists like herself and Walt Whitman were also labelled “transitional writers,” since they were the ones leading the transitional period between Romanticism and Realism.

The reason why the present article sought to compare Poe Dickinson, is because both poets lived almost in the same time period; that is the nineteenth century (19th C.). The other reason for this comparison is the themes both poets have chosen in most of their writings; mainly the theme of death. However, the two poets differ on their vision of death and its relation to life; Poe sees death as a grim reaper whose sole mission is to hurt the living. In this sense death is represented through macabre scenes where Gothicism comes at play. However, with Dickinson death is portrayed as totally the opposite to Poe’s representation; where it is otherwise interpreted as a gentleman, king and even an angel whose presence often indicates the speaker is up for a wonderful journey to the afterlife.

In the current article, the author will explain how both poets used death as a central theme in most of their writings, however both had different visions of it; thus dissimilar interpretation of it. According to Poe, death is usually portrayed as a dark entity who is responsible for stealing away the beloved and the dear; it is a dark messenger whose presence is often unpleasant. Dickinson, on the other hand, had a different view of death. According to her, death is a beautiful and majestic creature. In most of her poems, the speaker shows no fear of death; therefore he/she is always welcoming it and ready to accompany it to the afterlife.

In the present article, the author will seek to answer the following questions: how was death portrayed differently in both Poe and Dickinson's writings? How did the two schools of Transcendentalism and Dark Romanticism affect both Dickinson and Poe in their vision toward death? Finally, how was both poets' interpretation of death affected by the melancholy in their lives?

2. Transcendentalism vs. Dark Romanticism

As mentioned before, Transcendentalism was a philosophical-literary movement which flourished during the 1830s. Transcendentalists rarely tackled dark themes like death, mystery and Gothicism; and even when poets like Dickinson tackled such issues of death and the afterlife, she did it with unequal positivity and cheerfulness. The reader to Dickinson's poetry would think she was waiting on death as someone would do on a lover. Therefore, Transcendentalism came into existence for the purpose to transcend the human soul up to a higher status where the ultimate connection with nature is accomplished.

Dark Romanticism, similarly, was a subgenre of Romanticism. The current coexisted with Romanticism; during the 1830s. Dark Romantics were simply Romantics who grew to be obsessed with macabre, mysterious and grotesque themes. Dark Romantics were also drawn to reflect the human inclination toward sin, greed and guilt.

Dark Romanticism shared almost all the elements of Romanticism. However, with Dark Romanticism it always preferred to explore the dark side of the human being; that this human being was capable of committing horrific sins. Moreover, Dark Romanticism explored the sin of going against god; often as a result of selfish behaviors like greed and arrogance. Dark Romanticism simply focused on the human fallibility and the psychological effects which follow, usually leading to punishment or guilt and self-torment. In this sense, Dark Romantics more pessimistic; whereas Transcendentalists were more optimistic.

Another aspect related to Dark Romanticism comes to question in the discussion; which is Gothicism. The latter is often confused to be another term for Dark Romanticism; that the two are the same thing. However, it is often arguable that Gothicism is the darker side of Dark Romanticism. While many tend to believe that the two currents may share more than one aspect yet they remain two distinct currents falling under the movement of Romanticism. Beside the macabre, mysterious and grotesque themes, Gothicism went far in exploring horror and scary themes. Whereas, Dark Romanticism focused only on the sinful, mysterious and fallible nature of the human being.

3. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven"

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, U.S. Edgar Allan Poe (1809- 1849) was an American writer, poet and literary critic. Poe is considered the leading figure both in the Romantic period and in American literature as a whole. His macabre, mysterious and horror themes made him the launcher of detective and even science fiction as well. Poe is also considered to be the first American writer who earned a living from writing alone, and that is why he probably led a difficult financial life until his death in 1849.

Unlike Dickinson who was not deprived of family warmth, Poe did not equally enjoy that warmth. At the age of three, his mother died leaving him alone with his younger brother. Not only this, but also Poe is reported to have stayed with his mother's corpse for two days until someone came in. This early encounter with death entitled Poe the right to write about death par excellence. Yet, despite this early, somewhat, harsh encounter with death Poe was later adopted by the Poes where he could once again feel the warmth of a family.

In his twenty-two-lines poem "Alone" (1829), Poe describes his vision of death inspired by his early encounter with it as a child. In the first four (04) lines of his poem, Poe says:

From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—I could not bring
My passions from a common spring—

Poe's "The Raven" is a considerably longer narrative poem which was composed of eighteen (18) sexains, with a refrain including the word "nevermore." The poem was published in 1845, when Dark Romanticism was at its fullest. The poem is noted for its musicality as well as supernatural themes; mainly death. "The Raven" is believed by

some critics to have predicted the death of Poe's beloved Virginia in 1847; thus serving as a bad omen in Poe's life as he died only two years after Virginia's death in 1849.

In many of his poems, Poe refers to recurrent female names like "Lenore" and "Annabelle Lee." Many critics argue that Poe did not use such names to symbolize love, rather they embody death, and remind him of nothing but death. Steinmann (1962) argues that Poe's women are 'born to die and died but to provide tenants for Poe's tombs and sepulchers and occasion for his raven to say "Nevermore" and for him to say "dark tarn" and "ghoul-haunted woodland" (p. 616).

In this sense, it is safe to claim that Poe was fascinated with melancholic themes embodied in death. It is also safe to claim that Poe was a great writer of darker themes par excellence; both during his time and also up until now. In addition, the reader to Poe might think that his writings were devoid of love; it is of course not true. The reader to Poe must always keep in mind that he was the pioneer of Dark Romanticism; therefore, love was an essential element for any Romantic writer.

Nonetheless, the way Poe referred to death was definitely not the same as the way Dickinson did. Poe used the theme of death to be a constant reminder of the lost lover. Every time death is present, the speaker plunges into a heavy state of nostalgia. Moreover, the speaker in Poe's works is often paranoid of objects, animals and even people who might symbolize death and the afterlife. In "The Raven" the speaker is awake in the middle of the night, not even sure whether he is awake or asleep. Suddenly, he hears a "tapping" at the door. At the beginning it seems that someone was actually at the door, yet after the speaker open the door the reader becomes certain that there was no one there; and it was only the speaker's imagination catapulted by the reality of longing for his lover "Lenore."

Like in most of his works, Poe's "The Raven" seems to be inspired by his longing for his "lost Lenore." In fact, this was not a coincidence. Besides, it was not only the result of his early encounter with death. Rather, Poe was fascinated with the theme of death; to him death was "allied to beauty." In his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), Poe explains his approach of death in writing "The Raven" (1845):

I asked myself- "Of all melancholy topics what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?" Death, was the obvious reply. "And when," I said, "is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?" From what I have already explained at some length the answer here also is obvious- "When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover" (p. 368).

Therefore, of all melancholic themes, Poe chose death as the central theme of most of his literary works; even those which might seem to have talked about love. In this sense, death does not symbolize darkness; rather its presence inspires the memory of the lover. However, since the lover is usually lost; the bereaved speaker is often sad and melancholic rather than happy with love as it is supposed to be. Magill (1982) argues that “Poe may be better known for his poems of longing for a lost love than for those on any other subject” (p. 2244).

Furthermore, and despite that Poe seems to be fascinated by death choosing it as his central theme. However, both Poe and his speakers do not seem to be happy by the idea of death and the lost love. Even when Poe expresses his fascination with love since to him it represents beauty, yet he is melancholic every time it is present. At first, it seems contradictory that Poe was both fascinated by death and at the same time he was melancholic every time it paid him a visit. Yet, this unusual combination of death and beauty was what fascinated Poe in the first place.

As many other writers, Poe’s true worth was not really recognized by his generation. Instead, his works were not appreciated until the twentieth century (20th C.). Poe’s greatness lies in his talent to combine death with beauty and love. In his works, Poe’s speakers are inspired by death to commemorate the lost love; this wonderful relationship between death and love is what gives beauty to Poe’s works and it is what gives Poe the true sense of beauty despite its melancholic side effects. In an essay on Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot (1946) makes a comment regarding the poet’s greatness. He argues that “greatness of a poet is not a question for critics of his own age to raise: it is only after he has been dead for a couple of generations that the term begins to have meaning. “Greatness” when the term means anything at all, is an attribute conferred by time” (p. 326).

In “The Raven” the reader notices that that the poet depended on the heavy use of mystery when he decided to talk to a talking raven. The latter, as in the poem, often symbolizes in many cultures an ill-omen. Poe, magnificently, prepared the mysterious scenes to come by arranging a dense atmosphere at the beginning of the poem. It was midnight when the speaker first heard a strange knocking at the door; “once upon a midnight dreary” (1). When the speaker hesitates to answer the door, the knocking keeps on in the background; and when his “soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer” (19), he answered the door it gets even weirder when he finds out there was no one there, except “darkness there and nothing more” (24).

After this scene, the reader starts questioning the speaker’s sanity asking the following question; was there ever a knocking at his door? The following stanza carries the answer, when the speaker reveals that there was nothing beside the darkness outside

his chamber door except his lover's name "Lenore;" which he "whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, "Lenore!"(29). In a time when he could no longer support the dense air, the speaker then comes back inside his chamber; only to be even more scared. This time he encounters "a stately Raven" (38) just outside his window. This majestic scene terrifies the speaker at first, then he starts enjoying the raven's company when "this ebony bird beguiling [his] sad fancy into smiling" (43).

After finally being able to enjoy the strange bird's company, the speaker is startled by the only word which this bird uttered; which is "nevermore." He is now afraid the raven might leave him in the morning like "other friends have flown before" (58). This becomes serious for the speaker especially after thinking the raven was some sort of a "prophet" of God carrying a word from Lenore. When he gets nothing from the bird except "nevermore," the speaker then loses all hope in getting a word from Lenore; it is then he orders the raven to "leave [his] loneliness unbroken!" (100).

The intense sadness and sorrow scenes between the speaker and raven present death to be the original and genuine cause, which brought the speaker to live in a state of melancholy and hopelessness; and of which he does not seem to see any way out. Moreover, after reading the poem, the reader can see clearly that the speaker's psychic health was already not well at the beginning of the poem; and toward the end of the poem it got far worse when his only wish was to be left alone once more into his previous state of melancholy and sorrow. It seems now that after the coming of the raven, the speaker has lost even those temporary dull moments of stillness he had once thought was unlucky to have.

In the end, the speaker realizes that after his encounter with the raven, his life would never be the same. Coming to look at it, the raven was not what the speaker thought he was; a messenger of god carrying word from Lenore. Rather, he was the messenger of darkness; a true incarnation of death and it came to finish what was left of the speaker's soul:

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting (103)
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door; (104)
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming, (105)
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor; (106)
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor (107)
Shall be lifted—nevermore! (108)

4. Emily Dickinson's "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died"

Similar to Poe, death has been a central theme in most of Dickinson's poems. While Poe's interpretation of death was related to the melancholic effects it leaves when

taking away the loved ones, Dickinson's vision of death lies in a funeral, a grave and an annoying sound like a buzz. In her poems, death is a personal experience wherein her speaker is often not afraid of death; instead death is portrayed to be a gentleman and a suitor.

According to Dickinson, death is not the infamous grim reaper whose presence often startles the bravest. Rather death is simply a means of transport which carries all creatures from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Moreover, in most of Dickinson's poems, death is presented to consume the speaker; that is to say it not a bad entity but it is definitely not a cheerful one. Therefore, Dickinson's vision of death was restricted to the different individual experience of death people experience when dying. In this sense, death shifts from being scary to mysterious causing the reader to become more curious of what really happen when people die. Thus, arousing questions like; where do people go when they die? Do they go to heaven or hell? Do they go nowhere and become dust? What becomes of the soul after the body is all rotten and decomposed?

Of course, Dickinson was a devout Christian; that is to say she presented her Christian vision of death and the afterlife. As a Christian believer she should not show any fear of death or the afterlife; instead she is always ready for it in most of her poems. In "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" (1896), Dickinson presents death to be a "king." In a room full of "eyes" bidding her farewell, the speaker does not care about anything else in her last moments on earth; instead all she could care about was to stop the annoying buzzing of a fly who "interposed" her final moments of peace before making her transition to the afterlife.

Furthermore, Dickinson seemed to have developed the fascination of experiencing death and live to write about it at a very young age. Paula Bennett (1990) narrates how Dickinson was fascinated with imagining her own death at a very young age. In 1846, when she was only fifteen years old, Dickinson wrote a letter to a friend named Abiah Root (1830-1915); where she explained her inability to imagine her own death (p. 415). Thus, from a very young age, Dickinson had already chosen to dedicate her whole life to trying to imagine her own death. Of course, over the years she developed the knack of writing about death and the afterlife; and finally she was able to imagine her own death in many of her poems.

Unlike Poe's vision of death as God's minister who steals away the souls of the dear and beloved; Dickinson's vision of death is, otherwise, an individual experience where the pain and infliction are mostly felt by the person experiencing death. In her "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" (1896), the speaker was dying with people in his/her room. At first, the speaker does not seem to worry about death; the latter is, instead, labelled a king. However, the annoyance this time is external.

Just before dying, the speaker's final moments of peace are interrupted by a buzzing fly. The buzz is described to be "blue, uncertain and stumbling" (13). The buzzing fly serves as a reminder that it was time for the speaker to die, and even when it was annoying and blocking the light which the dying person was enjoying; yet the transition to the afterlife was swift and smooth, when "the windows failed-and then, [he/she] could not see to see" (16). This indicates that death itself was not a bad experience after all; instead it was the external factor of a buzzing fly which interrupted the smooth transition to the next life.

In the poem, death was a good "king;" whereas the buzzing fly was "blue, uncertain and stumbling." In describing the nature of flies, they are known to be very dirty and annoying insects which usually produce a further annoying buzzing sound. Flies are usually known for their unbearable annoyance. It is not their fault, but they just cannot help but keep intruding inside our houses and no matter how much we keep trying to get rid of them, they will always keep coming back. In her poem, Dickinson expressed her annoyance of the fly by using words such as; "interposing," "stumbling," "uncertain," and "buzz."

Moreover, flies are strongly associated with death since their presence is often an indication that there is a rotten corpse lying somewhere. In this sense flies can be said to symbolize death itself, and its presence not only interrupts the peaceful moments of the speaker while dying; but its presence also indicates that it was time to die. Coming to look at it, the traditional name of the devil is "lord of the flies." Therefore, it is the fly which is not welcome in the scene when the speaker is dying; whereas when death (king) was "witness in the room," the speaker immediately "willed her keepsakes" and whatever "portion" was left of her.

Dickinson just could not help but personify death into a person or entity whom she could trust; or at least she wanted to. In another poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" (1890), Dickinson interpreted death as a trustworthy person. Thomas H. Johnson (1955) comments on Dickinson's different vision of death in her poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death;" "In 1963 Death came in full stature as a person. "Because I could not stop for Death" is a superlative achievement wherein Death becomes one of the great characters of literature. [...] Dickinson envisions Death as a person she knew and trusted, or believed that she could trust" (p. 222).

It becomes clear where the two poets part ways in terms of interpreting death in their poetry. Poe's vision of death does not entitle it in anyway to be a trustworthy friend; rather it is always the source of permanent agony and constant pain. Whereas, for Dickinson death always comes as a soft gentleman; a companion whose company the

speaker longs for. For Poe, death is a sneaky thief whose sole mission is to break the hearts of the living by stealing away their loved ones. However, for Dickinson death is simply an inevitable phase which everybody must experience sooner or later.

Furthermore, in her poems, Dickinson often shows little interest in death as compared to the person who is dying. That is to say, despite that the poet often portrays death as a gentleman, yet her primary interest is usually the person who is experiencing death. In this sense, death becomes nothing more than a means of teleportation. The experience of journeying to the afterlife through death was the concern of Dickinson.

No one truly knows the reason behind Dickinson's obsession of death. As a young girl, the poet showed an unusual interest in the experience of dying. The reason could be the result of the way she led her life; or simply she was too philosophical and ahead of her time when she suddenly decided to isolate herself from everybody dedicating the rest of her life in trying to understand the experience of death and the process of travelling from this world to the next. In her "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" was another good example of how Dickinson was at peace with death. Indeed, in her poem, she does not seem to be afraid of death at all; instead she seems to find solace in leaving this "buzzing" world where intellect is rarely understood and appreciated.

5. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, both Poe and Dickinson were great poets in their own times and up until now. Through their aforementioned poems, the two poets trying in their own ways to interpret death; sometimes based on their own experiences, and some other times under the influence of the literary schools they belonged to. However, based on the aforementioned discussion of the two poets as well as their poems; it becomes clear that a writer cannot seclude themselves from their writings.

As a young child, Poe had already met death when he witnessed the death of his mother and staying with her corpse for two whole days. This early encounter with death gave the young child the first impression of what life and death are. One can also find a strong connection between Poe's personal experience as a child and its impact on him as a grown up man. This of course is another argument against the claim of the reader-oriented approach which claims that the author's personal background has no effect whatsoever in the making of meaning of the text.

Even when Poe was later adopted by a "good family," yet that early impression given by his early encounter with death had already shaped his life. And no matter how great a poet Poe would become, his experience as a child had already locked him up in one interpretation of death; that it is dark, cruel and unpleasant. This could perhaps

explain the sorrowful way Poe had led his life in gambling and drinking where he died alone in a hospital room at the age of forty (40).

Unlike Poe, Dickinson's childhood was not heavily impacted the Poe's had been. As a young lady, Dickinson had proven to be a fine lady whose social life was promising. However, somewhere along the line something happened. The young lady suddenly sought seclusion and isolation and soon she was off sight. Her biography does not record any sort of shock somewhere in her life; that is why the only explanation of this sudden seclusion was her strong desire to find peace and serenity where she could pour out her ideas on paper.

Having said that, Dickinson's obsession of death and the experience of dying could simply be the result of her own taste of life. She was simply destined to write about death the way she did, because that was her interest in life. It could also be her curiosity of death and the afterlife as the embodiment of the unknown; or she was simply ahead of her time and found the only solace in leaving this mysterious world to the next one which is most surely true and clear.

In the end, Dickinson's "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" was another poem where she manifested her skills in portraying death in her own way. Dickinson may seem to have been obsessed with dying; however, the reader to her poems would definitely understand that her primary interest was in the experience of travelling to the afterlife. While Poe saw that beauty and death are strongly connected ("allies"), Dickinson saw beauty in imagining her own death. This obsession of death by the two poets, is simply derived from the human basic instinctive curiosity which is usually fed by questions like; what is death? What happens when people die? Where do they go? The process of answering these questions was Poe and Dickinson's personal experiences of interpreting death.

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