

George Orwell

Nineteen Eighty-Four

Objectives

1. Relate the dystopia in *1984* to Stephen Lukes' three dimensional theory of power.
2. Locate Orwell's novel in its historical context.
3. Recognize the tension between aesthetics & political activism in art.
4. Relate *1984* to the social tensions in the Western World in 1948, such as the race tensions around the [Harlem Renaissance](#) or class tensions in Britain.
5. Relate Orwell's late modernist British novel to Thoreau and the Harlem Renaissance in America.

Reading Assignment

Christopher Hitchens & John Rodden on *Think Tank*, 2002. YouTube, 2002. Web.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=uWeLv7S38E

Orwell, George. *1984*. Adelaide: Planet eBook, 2012.

Commentary

1984 was written during the post-WWII period in 1947-48 (the final manuscript was sent to his publishers on 4 December 1948, hence the title *1984*), but it only appeared in print in 1949. It was originally titled "The Last Man in Europe," which recalls Mary Shelley's late Romantic novel *The Last Man* and emphasizes the location, which is Europe and not Soviet Russia, which [Orwell](#) has already critiqued in his book *Animal Farm*. As a novel, *1984* follows after the largest part of his writing career during which he produced satiric critiques of British culture, such as *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, which has a very similar ending to *1984*, although it is set in an advertising firm that controls people through products and manipulation. In relation to mass media, Orwell worked for the BBC during WWII, but none of his recordings survive.

Orwell was also active as a socialist and unionist. Despite his current reputation from *1984* and in particular based on the CIA-funded film version of *Animal Farm*, his works consistently critique capitalism and totalitarian governments while at the same time refuting [Communism](#) and [Stalinism](#). His other texts, and especially *Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia* (about his time among the anarchist POUM militia during the anti-Fascist [Spanish Civil War](#)), make his labour-oriented sympathies quite clear. In Spain he was closest to the Socialist and [anarchists](#). He opposed Communism (Soviet-backed forces in Spain eventually turned against the anarchists in Barcelona, which whom they were allied against the Fascist government), yet he resisted the conflation of Socialism and Communism. In the Spanish Civil War, during which he was shot through the neck and permanently damaged his voice, he witnessed the Soviet-backed Communists suppress the anarcho-syndicalists (Labour), which led to his anti-totalitarian and anti-Communist views (both the Anarchists and the Communists opposed the Fascists, though the Anarchists, who controlled Barcelona, obviously disliked authoritarian governments of any kind). In Spain, Orwell joined the Worker's Party of Marxist Unification (POUM), which called for the overthrow of Capitalism and was allied with the anarchists. POUM was also suppressed by the Communists under Soviet direction.

The Spanish combatants were (generally) divided between the Republicans (the Leftist government that was ousted by the military) and the Nationalists (Franco who had led a coup d'état with the military to take over the government and secured a Fascist dictatorship of the right wing). The anarchists were the third group, based around Barcelona, and tended to align with the Republicans. In many respects, this was a proxy war between the Soviet Communists and [the German & Italian Fascists](#), with most Western democracies supporting the Fascists, who eventually won, though the Communists also oppressed the anarchists at times despite their shared opposition to Fascism. Many surprising allegiances developed from this split:

1. Fascist Italy & Portugal and Nazi Germany directly and militarily supported the Nationalists, as did the USA's Texaco, General Motors, Ford Motors, and Firestone Tires (though the USA was officially neutral and most American volunteers fought for the Republicans).
2. The Soviets and Mexico directly supported the Republicans but directly opposed the anarchists in Aragón and Catalonia. The anarchists and POUM (Orwell's group, for whom he fought in

Catalonia) were outlawed by the Republicans and Soviets despite having been formal allies. POUM was a [Trotskyist](#) organization formed as a Communist opposition to Stalinism and was allied with the anarchists (Anarcho-syndicalism).

With this historical context in mind, it is important to our understanding of *1984* to recall that Orwell was an opponent of Imperialism, was often affiliated with the anarchist tradition (non-governmental British quietist tradition), and the first major study of his works was *The Crystal Spirit* by his friend [George Woodcock](#). Orwell self-identified as a Democratic Socialist. Although Adolf Hitler's Nazi party in Germany used the description "National Socialist" (Nationalsozialismus) in its self-title, it was actually Fascist and opposed all forms of Socialism and Communism.

When asked in a letter by an American about *1984*, Orwell commented:

My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter), but as a show-up of the perversions... which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism.... The scene of the book is laid in Britain in order to emphasize that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else, and that totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere. (*Collected Essays* 546)

Nonetheless, American scholarship has almost universally seen the novel as a critique of Soviet Totalitarianism ever since the mid-1950s. The American editions of Orwell's works (often the largest and the basis for other editions) increasingly emphasize his refutation of Stalinism and Communism while minimizing or even censoring his outspoken support for Democratic Socialism. However, Orwell's critique was articulated differently to readers in other countries.

A list of Orwell's previous major works shows the general drift of his intellectual and political thought:

- *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) recounts in an autobiographical fashion Orwell's time living homeless and destitute in both Paris and London as a part of the poor in order to understand their plight. For this reason, as his first book, he chose to publish it using the pseudonym "George Orwell" rather than his true name, Eric Arthur Blair.

- *Burmese Days* (1934) is again an autobiographical work about Orwell's time as a British civil servant in Burma. It is a biting and strong condemnation of British colonial rule.
- *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935) is Orwell's first novel. The daughter of a clergyman suffers amnesia and is abandoned by her family. She becomes destitute and homeless, is arrested for vagrancy, finds and then loses a job, and ultimately returns to her life of servitude under her father, although she has become an atheist. The combination of religious faith and social oppression marks Orwell's later attitudes in *1984*.
- *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) was Orwell's first major success as a novelist. In the novel, a poet working in an advertising agency engages in his own war against "the money god" but fails miserably and is inexorably drawn back into the advertising world and a class system that makes his life meaningless.
- *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) is a documentary of British union strikes and attempts to gain livable conditions and a living wage for British workers.
- *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) is again an autobiographical a documentary of Orwell's service with POUM in anarchist Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War.
- *Coming Up For Air* (1939) was Orwell's last pre-war novel. Like *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, it repeatedly draws on war-imagery, while it presents the life of a British traveling salesman who protests against his pre-packaged life and the social controls to which he is subjected. He ultimately fails in his attempted escape from this life and is reincorporated back into the system against which he struggles.
- *Animal Farm* (1945) appeared at the end of the Second World War as a short a fable (acceptable to the wartime paper rationing at publishers). It retells the history of the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalin's authoritarian regime from the workers' revolution under the guise of farm animals in England.
- *1984* (1949) was Orwell's last book and his most overtly dystopian novel.

After this writing career, Orwell died of tuberculosis on 21 January 1950.

Rethinking Contexts

How does this historical context launch us into an interpretive endeavor for *1984*. For instance, how do you interpret and *want* to interpret “Ingsoc” (a portmanteau of “English Socialism”)? Do we approach this novel as a literary, theoretical, or political text? In other words is it (1) a “literary” or aesthetic object to be appreciated in the context of its contribution to a tradition and for its stylistic traits? Alternatively, is it (2) a “theoretical” book, or that is, an attempt to work through the thornier elements of Marxist theory in 1948 in contrast to the Fabians, anarchists, and Socialists the likes of [Leonard Woolf](#), [John Maynard Keynes](#), and those who founded the London School of Economics? Is it primarily a way of developing critical thought? Lastly, is *1984* principally (3) a “political” book, an attempt to instigate direct action in the world, either in the form of revolution, labour organization, or agitation? Is it “agit-prop” (agitation propaganda), which Orwell was well familiar with from the Spanish Civil War and the literary work of his contemporaries (such as his condemnation of W.H. Auden’s poem “Spain” as mere propaganda, and amateurish propaganda at that).

Literary Studies

Although we typically read Orwell’s *1984* as a purely political commentary, it is also rich in literary allusions, and it continually relates itself to other modernist texts. For example, consider the close parallels to [T.S. Eliot’s](#) poetic works, particularly the major modernist poem *The Waste Land*, which Orwell admired greatly and attempted to imitate (this is despite Eliot’s royalist, conservative, and borderline fascist political views at this time). In his novel *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*, Orwell imitates Eliot’s poetry directly, and in *1984*, the opening passages mirror Eliot’s emphasis on April.

Eliot’s 1922 poem *The Waste Land* opens with the auspicious phrase “April is the cruelest month” (Eliot 1). This makes us dually aware of allusion and tradition. It anchors his poem and teaches us how to read:

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain. (Eliot 1-4)

Orwell’s allusion to Eliot is “thick” in ways that we may not anticipate, however, since Eliot’s poem has itself opened with an allusion to a very old poem, one that is arguably the greatest early English work.

These lines echo the opening of the “General Prologue” to Geoffrey Chaucer’s 14th century poem *The Canterbury Tales* (below in the original Middle English followed by a ‘translation’ into Modern English):

Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye-
(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seeke. (1-18)

When April, with his showers sweet,
Has pierced the drought of March to the root
And bathed every vine in such liquor,
As that which engenders virtue in the flower.
When the West Wind also with his sweet breath
Has inspired in every farmland
The tender crops, and the young Sun
Has run half his course in the month of Aries,
And small birds make melodies,
That sleep all the night with open eye—
(So ‘pricks’ him Nature in his courage);
Then folks desire to go on pilgrimages
And pilgrims seek strange shores abroad
To distant shires, known in sundry lands.
And especially from every shires end
Of England, to Canterbury they wander,
The holy blissful martyr to seek
Who has helped them, when they were sick.

This allusion by Eliot to Chaucer (a poet with whom virtual all of his audience would be familiar) sets out a few immediate associations: springtime, fecundity, fertility, religious faith and service, ancient fertility gods and astrology, and the healing power of prayer and pilgrimage in England after a sickness. In Chaucer, the pilgrims all set out for Canterbury Cathedral to offer prayers in thanks for healings and as a sign of devotion, but like all springtime creatures, they spend some of their time in a tavern sharing stories about other “Spring” activities, largely sexual or reproductive. In Eliot, you will find precisely the opposite caught up in a poetic structure that parallels the various Medieval Arthurian Grail quest narratives. In Orwell, we find something even worse.

For Eliot’s poem, April is no longer the source for “shoures soote” (sweet showers or sweet rain that is compared to liquor bringing the plants all back to life and reproduction). Instead, April is cruel because it forces things back to life that would rather remain in hibernation, such as “breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land” or “stirring dull roots with spring rain.” The allusion is clear, but the transformation is profound. As we continue to read through Eliot’s poem, the implication appears to be that there is no “hooly blisful martir” for the modern reader to seek or pray to for help “whan that they were seeke.” The loss of religious faith is devastating for them in the poem.

Eliot’s “dead land” in *The Waste Land* also points us to a different context from Chaucer’s. Something in Chaucer’s poem makes April a wonderful month of rebirth into Spring, fertility, and reproduction. For Eliot, April does not cure the illness of the dead land. Eliot may be alluding to Chaucer, but it seems that he is doing so in order to show how his poem differs. It reflects the loss of Chaucer and tradition rather than the comforts it can offer, and the result is a ruined and infertile country. By implication, this is the new vision for Britain just after the [First World War](#).

Orwell adds to Eliot’s allusion by showing yet another destruction of Britain, and this one also destroys the potential for a recuperative pilgrimage or pathway to religious redemption. When Orwell moves to the second page of his novel, the “little eddies of wind... whirling dust and torn paper” (Orwell 4) is a recurrence of the imagery in his previous novel *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* from the precise poem that he had written to imitate Eliot. To make the break from Eliot and Chaucer complete, the novel itself opens with the sentence “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen” (3). This combination of an opening gesture to Eliot’s April and the time counting of thirteen shows that Orwell’s novel

opens in a world entirely unfamiliar to traditional British literary matters (typically the clocks would strike ONE).

We also have a peculiar aesthetic interest in language running across the novel as a whole. Orwell wrote extensively on the persuasive power of the English language and the politics of how we use it—as a result, he advocated for a “plain style,” that is a complicated form of writing that would be clear and give the impression of an unconfusing “surface.” You will notice that Orwell generally eschews unclear phrase and overly-complicated sentences. In this, he was much like (though in important ways different from) the American author [Ernest Hemingway](#), whom Orwell admired and met in Paris in 1945. Both Orwell and Hemingway gave terribly complex and careful attention to their “simple” prose style. Orwell returns to this in his discussion of newspeak, which combines “New Speak” with “News Speak”—the implication is that the new language is also like *news* language. The news can manipulate meaning and public opinion in the same way that Newspeak does in the novel.

Notice, for instance, how Winston’s first piece of writing is distinct in style from the voice of the narrator: “April 4th, 1984. Last night to the flicks” (Orwell 11). While this gives the superficial impression of being very, very simple writing, we as readers should carefully notice that the first-person pronoun “I” is missing from the sentence: “Last night [I WENT] to the flicks.” This problem is much like newspaper headlines in which verbs or subjects are removed for brevity—Winston Smith writes like a modern news headline or “sound byte” in our contemporary news jargon. Moreover, the passage as it continues contains the literary technique “deictic shift” (the shift between pronouns). Specifically, Winston moves from the omitted-but-implicit first person “I” to the second person “you.” While recounting his *own* viewing experience at the movies (“flicks”), Winston slips from “I saw” to “*first you saw him..., then you saw him..., then you saw a lifeboat*” (11-12).

Newspeak culminates (and begins) in the novel through the three paired statements of propaganda:

WAR IS PEACE
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH
(6, 21, 34, 130-131, & 234)

This simple but repeated phrase recurs through several different forms of ambiguity (the research specialty of the British poet William Empson, whom Orwell also knew well while the two worked with

each other in the same section of the BBC for several years). We find upon closer examination that Orwell's "plain style" is confounded in Newspeak by the ambiguities of these opposites or contradictions. "WAR" is indeed the opposite of "PEACE," so the conflict in the statement is clear: via war we find peace. Likewise, "FREEDOM" is the opposite of "SLAVERY," although in this instance the nature of the contradiction is reversed—the first has "WAR" as the undesirable term made acceptable by virtue of *being* is opposite, "PEACE." In the second statement, the desirable state of "FREEDOM" is made awful by being equated with its opposite, "SLAVERY." The function of the opposition is reversed once the habit of noticing opposition is established in the reader. This leaves the final contradiction, which is no contradiction at all—"IGNORANCE" is generally unrelated to "STRENGTH," so the new meaning is to make both desirable traits. Being ignorant of how the previous two statements function is meant to bring strength, but we as readers are surely aware that ignorance in a totalitarian state such as the one in which Winston Smith lives is not in fact "STRENGTH" but rather a more complete and total form of weakness before the power of the State.

Hence, as we move through Orwell's work, his "plain style" of writing requires far more attention than we may be inclined to give it. His goal is to produce clarity, but he is also profoundly mindful of the various ways that language can be used to manipulate, obfuscate, and condition thought and expectations. If you have encountered a World Literature or related course, you may wish to ask if Orwell's concerns are akin to Ngugi Wa Thiongo's in his essay "Decolonizing the Mind."

Theoretical Studies

"Theory" may mean a variety of things, ranging from the psychoanalytic to the economic or political. All of these appear in *1984*, but for our purposes in this Study Guide, we will only consider Orwell's discussion of religion here. He begins with the very Protestant concept of God's omniscience and perpetual observation of all people, which is paralleled to the Thought Police. He describes, again using the deictic shift of "you" to engage the reader, how "You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized" (5). To this he adds The Brotherhood as the resistance organization with its "terrible book, a compendium of heresies" called only "THE BOOK" (18). The language suggests here that the brotherhood is a quasi-priesthood committing "heresies" (religious transgressions) by using THE BOOK (the literally

meaning of the Christian BIBLE in Greek: Τε Βιβλιο meaning “the book”). If this were not enough to draw Orwell’s readers to recognize a theoretical consideration of religious faith and religious institutions in society, he presents “The Hate,” a ritualized emotional outburst in which he imagines Julia “full of arrows like Saint Sebastian” (20) while she is marked by symbolic dress code that performs her chastity as if she were a Catholic nun. The same passage eventually leads to murmured prayers of “My Savior!” and the comparison of the experience to a religious “hymn” (21). In contrast, the Brotherhood presents a critique of notions of Paradise or the utopic impulse that combines much of Marxist theory with a critique of religious impulses such that “The idea of an earthly paradise... had haunted the human imagination for thousands of years” (257). The notion, for Orwell, is very close to Western, anti-Stalinist forms of Marxism that regarded the vision of “utopia” (an earthly paradise or perfect society) as ultimately destructive since people would be willing to do terribly things in order to establish an impossible paradise.

To these images combining the novel’s dystopian futuristic state, Orwell adds the supreme commandment of this god-like Big Brother, who can see all and know all, even detecting thought crime. The supreme obedience and greatest commandment is to love (355). Winston’s nemesis, O’Brien, ultimately confronts him with the requirement to love saying ““You must love Big Brother. It is not enough to obey him; you must love him”” (355). The cure for social deviance is mandatory *love* for Big Brother, which we as readers may parallel to the New Testament’s new law to replace the Ten Commandments of the Torah: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.” (John 13:34, as well as 15:12 & 3:23). The same concept repeats across the New Testament:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:35-40; as well as Mark 12:28-31, 12, and Luke 10:25-28)

As we read Orwell, we may take several different approaches to this problem. Perhaps the most likely is that Orwell present compulsory love for Big Brother as a parallel to compulsory love in the New

Testament as a way of showing how people could become their own Thought Police in *our* world, not just the fictional world of his novel.

As the novel concludes, the same religious language returns in Winston's total collapse. He has come to love Big Brother, and because of this he can speak of his "resurrection" (371), the "trumpet call" like the biblical blasting of the walls of Jericho (374), through this he finds "The rock" like the biblical rock of ages (375), and he finally finds forgiveness through his religious confession such that "He was back in the Ministry of Love, with everything forgiven, his soul white as snow" (375).

Our challenge as readers is to understand how Orwell's conceptual link between religious faith and the totalitarian state is meant to be interpreted. Is this simply a criticism of organized religion? In a more complex sense, is Orwell suggesting that religious faith can be potentially used as a form of Thought Police? Alternatively, is a universe with an omnipotent god also totalitarian? Whence individual decision-making and autonomy?

Political History & Commentary

Although Orwell become anti-Communist during the Spanish Civil War, he remained profoundly committed to Democratic Socialism and other revolutionary movements, including much support for pacifist anarchists even though he did not agree with their pacifism during the Second World War. Despite his anti-Communist stance, Orwell also regarded class and culture as instigations to reform, which is a revolutionary concept from Marxism. Some of Orwell's political commentary becomes clearer when we take time to notice the details of the novel.

For instance, consider the setting in London (5, 6, 33, and 41). In addition to the very specific location in Britain, we should also recognize the repeated references to "dollars" rather than British pounds (9, 72, 81, 121-122, and 172). Both the monetary and locational issues conflict in the novel's presentation of the existing class structure (14, 120, and 190). The notions of class are particularly British and reflect British class-consciousness in a way that cannot easily reconcile with American views, but this is also mixed with Orwell's adoption of Marxist conceptualizations of class in relation to labour and capital. Lastly, we as readers much recognize Orwell's description of the use of atomic weapons against Britain (41-43, 161, 239, and 246-247).

With regard to atomic weapons, Orwell greatly feared an atomic war and lived in unhealthy isolation while suffering from tuberculosis in an attempt to protect his son from what he felt was an

inevitable atomic war. However, we modern readers are profoundly out of touch with Orwell's contemporary circumstances. The Soviet Union did not develop atomic weapons until 1949, launching its first nuclear test on 29 August 1949—in an important contrast, Orwell's novel was finished in 1948 and had already been published on 8 June 1949. That means that the first readers (and Orwell as the author) lived in a world in which only one nation on the planet had atomic weapons: the United States of America. For more than two months, *1984* would have been read very, very differently by its audience than we read it today, though the book first became a major seller after Orwell's death in 1950.

We would do well to recall the historical process that led to the first atomic weapons. Hikosaka Tadayoshi, of Tohoku University in Japan, released his "atomic physics theory" in 1934; Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann discovered nuclear fission in 1938; and in 1939 the USA began research work on a fission weapon while Germany and Japan did the same. Stalin started a Soviet program after learning of the American efforts in 1941. The rest follows a relatively agreed-upon historical timeline:

- 16 July 1945 – first American atomic bomb tests (Trinity)
- 24 July 1945 – President Harry S. Truman reports to Stalin that the USA has atomic weapons
- 6 August 1945 – USA drops its "gun-type" uranium bomb on Hiroshima
- 9 August 1945 – USA drops its "implosion" plutonium bomb on Nagasaki to complete its testing of both types of weapons
- 4 December 1948 – Orwell completes and submits the final typescript of *1984*
- 8 June 1949 – first publication of Orwell's *1984*
- 29 August 1949 – first Soviet atomic weapon test

We should, then, ask ourselves, if Orwell describes his city using dollars, looking at a poster of "Big Brother Wants You," and atomic weapons being used against Britain, does he really mean this as an anti-Soviet novel? His preceding novel, *Animal Farm*, was very clearly anti-Soviet and was particularly opposed to Josef Stalin. However, his worries about atomic weapons attacks and a bureaucratic domination of the citizenry through surveillance, the mass media, and patriotism do not align easily with an exclusively anti-Soviet critique. In effect, by considering the contemporary circumstances surrounding Orwell's

writing and publication of *1984*, we must ask ourselves if Big Brother is American?

Alcoholism

Winston Smith is an alcoholic. Beyond this fact, however, Orwell has complicated matters by linking Gin to “Victory” (7) and calling it “a dose of medicine” (8). However, the condition that this “medical” gin might treat appears to be entirely social rather than physical—gin treats the depression brought on by social domination in a totalitarian state. This function of alcohol, as a form of social control, is also implicit in the state baton to which it is compared in Orwell’s “plain style” writing: “in swallowing it one had the sensation of being hit on the back of the head with a rubber club” (8). In precisely the same sense, the torture in Room 101 medicalizes deviance or forms of social resistance as a form of “illness” with a state-run “cure.” We might at the same time query how alcoholism is “deviance” or if it is really a form of obedience in the novel. In the same conceptualization of social control, the gin also takes on a religious function akin to the state at the end of the novel: “The stuff grew not less but more horrible with every mouthful he drank. But it had become the element he swam in. It was his life, his death, and his resurrection” (371). Hence, Orwell gives us a world in which addiction, desire, and autonomy are controlled by society in a way that medicalizes and “cures” them as if they were a form of anti-social deviance.

Questions for Self-Review

1. How would you relate alcohol or religion to Big Brother in the novel?
2. Why is the location of the novel so important?
3. How does the history of atomic weapons change the way you understand the novel?
4. Do form and content need to be in agreement in creative work, or can they differ from each other?
5. Can the novel be both a call to political action *and* an aesthetic work of art?

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