

## Conflict Analysis of the Main Character in the Short Story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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### Abstract

This research intends to analyze the impact of internal and external conflicts on the main character in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and to understand how these conflicts shape the character's psychological state and overall narrative development throughout the story. This research employed the qualitative method and structuralism approach in discovering internal and external conflicts showed by the character in "The Yellow Wallpaper". The data for this research is a short story with the title "The Yellow Wallpaper", written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Through the exploration of internal conflicts, such as the main character's struggle with her own desires and perceptions, and external conflicts, including her interactions with her husband and societal expectations, it becomes evident that these conflicts profoundly impact the main character's psyche and overall well-being. By examining the interplay between internal and external conflicts, this research sheds light on the complex dynamics at play within the narrative and underscores the significance of understanding how conflicts, both internal and external, can profoundly impact an individual's mental situation and welfare.

**Keywords:** internal conflict, external conflict, short story, structuralism

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### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dampak konflik internal dan eksternal pada tokoh utama dalam "The Yellow Wallpaper" dan memahami bagaimana konflik tersebut membentuk kondisi psikologis tokoh dan keseluruhan perkembangan naratif di sepanjang cerita. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dan pendekatan strukturalisme dalam mengungkap konflik internal dan eksternal yang ditunjukkan oleh tokoh dalam "The Yellow Wallpaper". Data untuk penelitian ini adalah cerita pendek berjudul "The Yellow Wallpaper" yang ditulis oleh Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Melalui eksplorasi konflik internal, seperti pergumulan tokoh utama dengan keinginan dan persepsinya sendiri, dan konflik eksternal, termasuk interaksinya dengan suaminya dan harapan masyarakat, menjadi jelas bahwa konflik tersebut berdampak besar pada jiwa dan kesejahteraan tokoh utama secara keseluruhan. Dengan meneliti interaksi antara konflik internal dan eksternal, penelitian ini menyoroti dinamika kompleks yang terjadi dalam narasi dan menggarisbawahi pentingnya memahami bagaimana konflik, baik internal maupun eksternal, dapat berdampak besar pada situasi mental dan kesejahteraan individu.

**Kata kunci:** konflik internal, konflik eksternal, cerita pendek, strukturalisme

## BACKGROUND

The yellow wallpaper short story was written around 1890-1892 in Pasadena. Then in January 1892 The Yellow Wallpaper appeared in a New England magazine, since then her work has been collected in collections of women's literature, American literature, and even textbooks. The Yellow Wallpaper is the best-selling work in the feminist press. The aim of changing the view of American society at that time regarding the role of women, especially regarding the mental and emotional strength.

In the evocative narrative of “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, readers are immersed in the poignant tale of a woman contending with depression during the late 19th century. The narrator and also the main character becomes trapped in a room adorned with yellow wallpaper, a seemingly harmless setting that gradually transforms into a canvas for her descent into madness. As the details of her isolated existence unfold, a structural exploration is expected to reveal the emergence of conflict throughout the story. Against the backdrop of Victorian society, characterized by rigid gender roles and the medicalization of women's emotions, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is presented as a first-person account in the form of a journal or diary. The unnamed narrator, stifled in her creative and intellectual pursuits by her physician-husband John, undergoes the controversial “rest cure” treatment, confining her to a room with yellow wallpaper, a symbol that evolves from benign decor to a manifestation of her deteriorating mental state. Within this context, conflicts emerge as pivotal components in her struggle, offering a lens through which the layers of her subconscious coping strategies can be unraveled.

The main character experienced a significant decline in mental health due to the isolation and restraint imposed by her husband where a ban on writing, reading, or social interaction made her increasingly obsessed with the pattern of the wallpaper in her room, which indicated a worsening mental disorder (Karniasih et al., 2024). Furthermore, the same research revealed that symptoms of psychosis such as hallucinations and delusions begin to appear in the main character where she begins to believe that there are women trapped behind the

wallpaper and feels trapped herself too. This shows the negative impact of isolation on her mental health. This story criticizes the "rest cure" method that was popular at the time. This method, which prohibits intellectual and social activities, worsens the main character's mental condition. This suggests that these treatment methods are ineffective and may be detrimental to mental health. Therefore, based on this research, it is safe to assume that the main character of this story experienced a great deal of depression caused by those around her, including her own self and her surroundings. This made researcher interested in analyzing more the conflict

Oxford Dictionary (2010) mentioned that conflict is a serious disagreement or argument as well as an incompatibility between two or more opinions, principles, or interests. Conflict can arise in various forms and intensities, from minor disagreements to major confrontations. It can occur in numerous contexts, including personal relationships, workplaces, and larger societal settings. Wellek & Warren (1956) added that conflict is something dramatic, referring to a fight between the two forces are balanced and implies the existence and action of an action in return. These interactions can range from simple misunderstandings to deep-seated disputes, affecting the dynamics of relationships and the functionality of groups or organizations.

The current study confines its investigation solely to the examination of conflicts within "The Yellow Wallpaper," with the aim of elucidating their impact on the main character's psychological state and narrative progression. In contrast, earlier studies encompassed analyses of various texts such as "Lawless," "The Old Man and the Sea," and "Twilight Saga New Moon," each examining conflict within their respective narrative contexts. Methodologically, the current study adopts a structuralism framework, drawing significantly upon the foundational contributions of Gordon & Kuehner (1999) and Kennedy (1995) as methodological pillars. In contrast, earlier studies may have employed methodological frameworks divergent from structuralism, tailored to the specific exigencies of their respective texts and analytical objectives. In terms of scholarly implications, the

current research highlights the importance of comprehending the dialectical interplay between internal and external conflicts for illuminating character development and narrative progression within literary analysis. Meanwhile, earlier studies may have yielded insights pertinent to character delineation, pedagogical practices, or broader literary discourse, contingent upon their specific thematic and analytical orientations.

The second previous study was conducted by Moge (2023), which intended to reveal internal and external conflict in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. The conclusion that may be drawn from this is that the external conflict exists between Santiago, the elderly man, and society. To begin, when fellow fishermen and members of society make fun of the elderly man, Second, when Santiago, the elderly guy, is suffering against the wild environment, the terrible sea, the marlin, and the sharks, he simply keeps quiet and continues fishing. He is struggling against the ridicule that he is being subjected to. It will not be difficult for the elderly man to become sick or find it difficult to hold out due to the morning cold. In spite of this, the elderly guy never loses faith in his capacity to push through difficult situations. The internal conflict starts when Santiago, an elderly man, has feelings of loneliness. Santiago does not have a wife or children. The second thing is that he is disheartened and embarrassed. Despite the fact that the elderly guy has been fishing for a period of 84 days, he only brings the skeleton with him when he returns home from fishing. Even though he caught fish, the shark was the only one he caught. Chile is a man who has never lost, despite the fact that he has experienced disappointment.

## **RESEARCH METHODE**

This research adopted a qualitative method, chosen over the quantitative method, as it aligns with the nature of the study. Given the focus on literary works, particularly the analysis of the main character in "*The Yellow Wallpaper*," a qualitative methodology is considered more appropriate for delving into the subjective aspects of the psychological

coping mechanisms exhibited by the the main character. This approach allows for a rich exploration of the intricacies involved in the character's responses to the psychological challenges presented in the narrative, providing a comprehensive understanding that extends beyond quantitative measures.

The data analysis techniques in this study were as follows: (1) Reduction involves condensing the material, selecting key elements, prioritizing significant information, and identifying the central subject (2) During this stage, the research presented the condensed data in a clearer manner, providing elaborate explanations for each piece of information in both the internal and external conflicts categories. The explanation provided the rationale for including each piece of data in its respective category, drawing from the works of Gordon & Kuehner (1999) and Kennedy (1995). (3) The final step, which follows the presentation of the facts, involves deriving conclusions and validating them. Verification refers to the process of answering research questions and achieving the objectives of the investigation. This research reached a conclusion about the internal and external conflicts in the characters in "The Yellow Wallpaper" using the conflict theory put forward by Gordon & Kuehner (1999) and Kennedy (1995).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter provides a thorough presentation of the results achieved through data collection, analysis, and discussions. It includes a detailed exploration of the research question and the corresponding findings derived from the gathered data.

### **STRUCTURALISM**

Intrinsic elements of a short story are an essential component of a short story since they are responsible for drawing the reader into the narrative. The elements of a short story that are most frequently recognized are the theme, plot, setting, character and characterization, style, and point of view; however, Klarer (2004) emphasized that the most

important elements are plot (what happens?), character (who act?), point of view (who sees what?), and setting (where and when do the events take place?).

1. Plot: Klarer (2004) suggests that plot is the systematic communication of the many thematic aspects of a text that ultimately results in a change of the initial circumstance that was provided at the beginning of the narrative. A plot is a series of events that occur in a specific order in order to tell the story and according to Klarer (2004), an ideal tradition plot line encompasses the following four sequential levels: Exposition- compilation climax or turning point-resolution Further, as explained by Klarer (2004), the exposition or presentation of the initial situation is disturbed by a compilation or conflict which produces suspense and eventually leads to a climax, crisis, or turning point. The climax is followed by a resolution of a compilation. Thus, plot in a short story is indispensable since it will determine whether the story is interesting or not though it's sequential level, conflict, and narrative style. However, plot can be also confusing if the sequential level is not clear whether the story is flash forward or flash- back, has random ideas, or has too much vague flash back.
2. Character: Klarer (2004) defines that typed character in literature is dominated by one specific trait and is referred to as a flat character, and term round character usually denotes a persona with more complex and differentiated features. in short story, character that commonly emergences are flat character since short story only presents the critical time of the chief character. Character plays an important role in a short story, since short story has small number of characters; the chief character usually becomes the center of interest. These might be other characters in that short story; yet, the other characters are only functioned as a supporter of the chief's character characterization.
3. Characterization: Klarer (2004) explained that characterization is the presentation of the character nature, image creation or illustration of one who becomes the characters in the story. More simply defined, characterization is the creation of imaginary persons so they seem lifelike. There is an idea about how reader can understand the story thought the



identification of characters. If the reader identifies the main character early in the story, he will understand more accurately the intricate relationship among the characters and consequently gain a full appreciation of what they do and say.

4. Point of view: Klarer (2004) stated that “narrative perspective or point of view characterizes the ways in which a text presents persons, events, and settings. The subtleties of narrative perspective developed parallel to the emergence of the novel and can be reduced to three basic positions: The action of a text is either mediated through an exterior unspecified the main character (omniscient point of view) though a person involved in the action (first person narration), or presented without additional commentary (figural narrative situation)”.
5. Setting: In short story, Klarer (2004) stated that setting always appears as place, time, and circumstance that will be the scene where the story takes place. Setting becomes one of the important elements of short story since it can create the atmosphere of the story and bring readers to the situation that the authors want to create. Setting plays a big role to this paper since this paper analyzes the contribution of setting in the short story especially the setting is related with gothic. From the explanation above, it may be concluded that setting involves time, place, condition, and atmosphere that are created as the background of the story. Moreover, setting is important since it can shape the main character, build mood and in the whole, help out-lined the general theme so reader will feel the scene of the short story

In conclusion, the structuralism approach offers a comprehensive and systematic method for analyzing literary works. By focusing exclusively on the intrinsic elements and their interrelationships, structuralism allows for a deep and objective understanding of the text's inherent structure and meaning. This approach not only provides clarity and consistency in literary analysis but also reinforces the autonomy of literary works as independent entities.



## External Conflict

Kennedy (1995) explained that external conflict happens because the contradictory between a person with something outside a person himself/herself. A man has an external conflict when he has conflict with an outside force. It is divided into two parts, they are: **1.** Physical or element conflict is a conflict man against nature or environment, for example; (a) a woman fighting to survive in a cyclone, (b) the struggles of a man climbing a mountain, (c) the struggle of a sailor to survive in a frightening wave ocean. They are the examples how a man against nature. An area was swept in a flood suddenly, until there was no one live and the owner was lost, wouldn't become object of story. It would become news, no story. It will be a good story, if there are people survive in flood, so there are relation between people and nature. **2.** Social conflict is a conflict of a man against men. It happens because the contradictory between people with others as affect a human relationship. For example; (a) a child is in conflict with his parents, (b) two women seeking to marry the same man, (c) a detective pitted against a criminal, (d) matters concerning working, labor, oppression, war.

### ***Example of external conflict***

*John is a physician, and perhaps, (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind), perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster. You see, he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do? If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression, a slight hysterical tendency, what is one to do?*

The external conflict stems from the power dynamics between the the main character and John, as well as John's influence on the wider social circle. The line "If a doctor of high standing, and a husband himself, assures friends and relatives that there is nothing wrong with her except a temporary nervous depression, a slight hysterical tendency, what is to be done?" highlights the main character's struggle not only with John but also with those around her (the woman), who are influenced by John's authority as a doctor. John uses his professional status to shape the perceptions of others, framing the main character's condition as merely anxiety or an emotional outburst. This creates an external conflict in which the

main character is pitted against a powerful figure whose opinions are readily accepted by others. The main character feels neglected, her (the woman's) physical and emotional experiences are not acknowledged by John and her social circle. John's professional authority exacerbates the conflict, as his medical opinion is valued more than the main character's personal experience, leading to a situation where the main character's suffering is minimized, even though she is the one who directly experiences the disease. The question "And what can one do?" underlines the main character's level of powerlessness in the face of something external, both medical and social. The external conflict in the story not only illustrates the conflict between the main character and John's (her husband) belittling attitude, but also shows how society in general tends to devalue women who have no power. This is especially evident when the doctors, who have power, control the way the story or situation develops, as if women have no say or authority over what happens to them.

*I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty oldfashioned chintz hangings! but John would not hear of it. He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another. He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction. I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more.*

The external conflict in this excerpt arises from the main character's relationship with her husband, John. Although he is caring and thorough in her care, making sure she takes her medications on time, he also ignores her wishes, such as her preference for a downstairs room. She says, "John wouldn't allow it," because he argues that a downstairs room is impractical due to its lack of windows and proximity to other rooms. This creates tension between the characters. Because the main character feels unheard and restricted in expressing her personal desires. Although John is affectionate, his decision-making is authoritative, leaving the main character with little agency over her own life situation. The subtle power dynamics in their relationship reflect the external conflict in which her freedom of choice is indirectly limited by John's well-meaning but assertive control over her environment. Thus,

the external conflict here **is not simply a dislike of the room**, but rather a **difference of opinion and desire** between her and John, who controls decisions about the room and her daily life. John dominates these decisions, and the main character feels frustrated at not being able to live out her own desires, which is the core of the external conflict in this situation.

Moreover, A. K. Kennedy (1975) provided a deep view of how external conflict is shown in literature. Kennedy explores different ways playwrights use language to describe and sharpen conflicts between characters and external forces, which are displayed below.

1. **Language as a Tool of Conflict:** Kennedy argues that language is not just a way to tell the story but also a tool used by characters to fight and have conflicts. The way characters talk, their choice of words, and sentence structure can show the tension and resistance they have against external forces.
2. **Conflict and Identity:** External conflict is often about the search or formation of identity. Characters often find or affirm their identity through conflicts with others, society, or other external conditions. The language they use in these conflicts reveals a lot about who they are and what they stand for.
3. **Power Dynamics:** Kennedy highlights how external conflict often involves complex power dynamics. This can be an imbalance of power between characters and authority (like government or powerful figures) or between individuals and social norms. The language used in this context often reflects and strengthens these imbalances.
4. **Representation of External Conflict in Drama:** In dramatic works, external conflict is often easier to articulate and visualize. Kennedy discusses how playwrights like Shakespeare, Beckett, and Pinter use dialogue and monologue to deeply and effectively portray external conflict. For example, in Shakespeare's plays, conflict between characters is often expressed through sharp and nuanced dialogue, showing their tension and struggles.
5. **Symbolism and Metaphor:** Kennedy also points out the importance of symbolism and metaphor in describing external conflict. External forces are often symbolized through

certain elements in the story, and using metaphors can deepen the reader's or audience's understanding of the nature and impact of the conflict

By analyzing literature through the lens of external conflict as described by Kennedy, one can gain a deeper understanding of how conflict works in stories and how language is used to describe and sharpen the tension between characters and the world around them.

### **Inner Conflict**

Gordon & Kuehner (1999) also added that traditionally, plots grow out of a conflict, which is an internal or an external struggle between the main character and an opposing force. When a story includes internal conflict, the main character is in conflict with himself or herself. For example, the writer of the concert ticket anecdote might establish that the main character was not careless or impetuous, but subconsciously did not want to attend that concert and what appeared to be careless actions actually were due to a war with self (Gordon & Kuehner, 1999). Kennedy (1995) further explained that internal conflict arises from the contradiction between an individual's inner impulses or within the depths of their own psyche, manifesting as an internal problem. The story revolves around a man who is grappling with internal conflicts, including his conscience, guilt, and the difficult decision he must make. Specifically, the story focuses on an unmarried pregnant girl who is faced with the choice of having an abortion, putting her child up for adoption, as well as raising the child on her own. This decision requires her to be courageous in the face of fear and anxiety, as she experiences a contradiction between two strong desires. A conflict happening within oneself, a dispute between agree and disagree in mind, a struggle or dilemma of mind choosing the one between two opposing options, feelings, ideas, desires, etc. that disagree with one another, or the occurrence of experiencing opposing psychological desires, beliefs, feelings or impulses is called an internal or inner conflict (Luna, 2021; Wiest, 2024). The concept of inner conflict is the dilemma facing the character inside and it is impact on that

character and it is defined as unsure of himself or his action or even what he wants (Goble, 1971).

***Example of inner conflict***

*John is a physician, and perhaps, (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind), perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster. You see, he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do? If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression, a slight hysterical tendency, what is one to do?*

The main character expresses doubt about why they haven't recovered, saying, "perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster", which suggests an underlying mistrust toward John, who is both their husband and doctor. The main character's hesitance to say this suspicion aloud, choosing instead to only write it down on paper, "I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind", illustrates a deep internal conflict. They are torn between keeping their doubts hidden and grappling with the unsettling possibility that John, the one who is supposed to heal them, may be contributing to their prolonged illness. This internal conflict revolves around the main character's conflicting feelings of trust and doubt. On one hand, John's role as a doctor should inspire confidence; as a medical professional and spouse, he is expected to care for and cure the main character. However, the fact that the main character remains unwell introduces suspicion about her ability, or willingness, to help. This leads to a sense of vulnerability and confusion, as the the main character is unsure whether to trust John or question his motives. The line between professional responsibility and personal connection blurs, heightening the internal tension as the main character begins to wonder if their illness has a deeper, more insidious cause tied to John.

This unresolved conflict is compounded by the main character's inability to voice these suspicions openly. The decision to keep these thoughts private, confined to their writing, highlights the intensity of the internal conflict. The main character's fear of confronting these doubts directly shows how the conflict festers within them, creating a sense

of isolation and emotional conflict. This dynamic also reflects a broader psychological tension: when someone close to us, who we rely on for support, becomes a potential source of distress, it triggers profound internal conflict, as seen in the main character's emotional state. In this passage, the internal conflict is central to the character's experience, revealing their sense of helplessness and internal conflict. The main character's doubts about John's role in their illness reveal how suspicion can erode trust, especially when compounded by physical vulnerability and an inability to communicate openly. The conflict thus becomes an essential part of the story, illustrating how personal relationships and health issues intertwine in complex, emotionally charged ways. The statement "You see, he does not believe I am sick!" reveals the main character's internal conflict as they grapple with the reality of their suffering, while being dismissed by those they rely on for support. The character is caught between their own certainty that something is wrong, and the overwhelming doubt planted by others, especially John, whose professional authority as a doctor complicates the situation further. This internal conflict manifests in a sense of confusion and self-doubt: if someone as qualified and close as John doesn't believe in their illness, should they begin to doubt themselves? The main character's rhetorical question, "And what can one do?", emphasizes their internal conflict and sense of powerlessness, revealing a psychological battle between trusting their own experiences and succumbing to external pressures that minimize their condition. This internal conflict is centered around feelings of inadequacy and isolation, as the the main character questions their own reality considering the dismissive attitude from their spouse and others.

*I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old fashioned chintz hangings! but John wouldn't hear of it. He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another. He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me steer without special direction. I have a scheduled prescription for each hour of the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basically ungrateful not to value it more.*

This excerpt presents the internal conflict in the main character's struggle between her personal desires and her own feelings of guilt and discomfort. The conflict will be divided into two parts for a thorough analysis. The main character is caught in a deep internal conflict. She desires a downstairs room, which has "roses all over the windows, and pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings," creating a calm and aesthetically pleasing environment. This room represents her longing for comfort and beauty amidst her illness. However, she feels hesitant to voice this preference because of John's undivided attention. She acknowledges his kindness and devotion, stating, "He was very careful and loving, and would hardly let me move without special direction." However, this confession creates feelings of guilt in her, as she feels "very ungrateful for not appreciating him more." This internal conflict stems from her struggle to balance her emotional needs with the practical care provided by John, leaving her feeling caught between gratitude and dissatisfaction. The main character's guilt over her dissatisfaction demonstrates her internal conflict, where she suppresses her desires in order to not appear ungrateful, creating a tension between fulfilling her emotional desires or the practical needs of her husband John that leaves her struggling with her feelings.

## **Discussion**

## **CONCLUSION**

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the internal and external conflicts deeply affect the main character's mental state and shape the story's development. External conflicts, especially with her husband John and the strict social expectations for women, create a controlling environment where the narrator has little freedom. John's decisions about her health, and the limitations placed on women at the time, make her feel powerless and isolated. These external pressures increase her sense of frustration and helplessness, pushing her closer to a mental breakdown. Internally, the narrator struggles with her own thoughts and feelings, especially her desire for independence and self-expression. Her growing obsession with the wallpaper



in her room reflects her inner battle. She sees the confusing patterns as a mirror of her own mind, and eventually, she imagines a woman trapped in the wallpaper, symbolizing her own feeling of being trapped. This internal conflict grows as she feels more and more disconnected from reality, made worse by her guilt and feelings of inadequacy in meeting society's expectations of her as a wife and mother. The combination of these internal and external conflicts leads to the main character's mental breakdown. The pressure from outside, such as John's control and society's rules, makes her inner struggles even worse, trapping her in a cycle of growing confusion and desperation. This story highlights how both types of conflict, both internal and external, are connected, showing how denying someone their freedom and voice can have serious effects on their mental health. In the end, the main character's wish is the narrator's breakdown reveals the harmful impact of these conflicts on her life.

In conclusion, internal and external conflicts are deeply interconnected and often influence one another, as seen through the theories of Gordon and Kuehner. Internal conflicts can shape how characters respond to external challenges, potentially intensifying these external struggles. As Kinsher (2023) explains, unresolved personal issues can cause characters to act in ways that escalate external conflicts, even when they are trying to do the right thing. Likewise, external conflicts often act as catalysts for internal struggles, pushing characters to confront their inner turmoil. As Marcy (2023) highlights, many compelling stories utilize both forms of conflict simultaneously to create well-rounded characters and engaging plots. This intertwining of conflicts adds depth, tension, and rich character development, making the narrative more immersive and impactful. When internal and external conflicts are strategically woven together, they become powerful storytelling tools that drive the success of a story.

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