
**HISTORICIZING AND CONCEPTUALIZING ALBERT
CAMUS'S DUAL PERCEPTION OF WOMEN IN *L'ÉTRANGER*
AND *LE MALENTENDU***

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Abstract

Several studies have been published on the recurring themes of death, revolt, and the absurdity of life in Albert Camus's literary works. These works mostly refer to ambiguity or contradiction regarding some of his ideologies of life. Camus's recognition of life's limitations while celebrating it to its fullness and his ambiguous attitudes towards the concept of death comes to mind. But little literature has been recorded of his mindset towards women. This study explores the evolution of Camus's multiple notions about women. It is an attempt to evaluate the ambiguity of perception inherent in his literary creation regarding his relationship with women. Camus's opus indicates that loving "at a distance" offers some advantages to men in pursuit of idealistic goals in life. An affirmation of the above statement is the blend of allegiance and disconnection which characterized Camus's relationship with his mother. Using Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic theory, the study posits that the disorienting or fluctuating limits in Camus's characters manifested through Meurseult and Jan, demonstrates lingering challenges of human existence and a critical post-modern account of the absurdity of human condition. The study maintains that Camus's loyalty and detachment

from women can be regarded as the paradigm of the rapport between man and society. This study's endgame is to, first, expose new perspective in Camus's works, and then fill in the lacuna as well as to indicate a field of research of broader value in French literature.

Key Words: Philosophy of the Absurd, Dual perception, Albert Camus, Le Malentendu, French literature

Introduction

Albert Camus, who discovered his literary voice in his youth, spent the rest of his career philosophizing. His arsenal of literary imagery about the universe in which he lived often left his audience with ambiguous conclusions. Camus believed after the two World Wars and their horror effects that the world is meaningless, absurd, and indifferent to the plight of the individual. He further maintained that in the face of this indifference, the individual must revolt against the absurdity and uphold traditional human values, though he lived in self-fulfillment and in recognition of his sense of himself as a man. These attributes are majorly measured in accordance with what he could give to others and what these colleagues, friends and lovers could in turn offer man. This notion of "reciprocity" informs the numerous ambiguous gestures Camus manifested throughout his life. Eventually, these exhibitions came to distinguish Camus's sense and style of the artist's place in the postmodern society.

In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), Camus declares that

Whether we kill ourselves or others or failing that,
whether we kill whatever is human in us, such as
our contradictory emotions and sexual needs, this
truth requires that we logically incorporate this one
and only reality into our lives to the fullest extent
possible, to become ourselves part of that death
force.

No doubt, this citation validates Camus's double standard when his goal was to be a man "privé d'avenir" in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*(1942) but in a different light declares in his *Essai* (1965) that "*There is no valid life*

without projection into the future, without promise of maturation and progress" (331).

Further exhibition of Camus's double perception is manifested in *La Chute* (1960) where he started the unfinished autobiographical novel with a woman at the verge of giving birth, thereby creating an unusual impression of giving a woman her real status in his work. The dramatic twist came when Camus presented a community of men in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942). In *La Peste* (1947), except for Rieux's wife and mother, there is an almost complete absence of female characters in the novel. Rieux's wife was eventually sent away to a sanatorium. He later pleaded to his wife for forgiveness for his negligence of her.

Clamence, in *La Chute* (1956), not taking into account his social status as a lawyer, made mockery of orphans and exploited their nativity. But deep down, he unconsciously expressed his most anxious desire to be a father. His description of women is that of a dehumanized appendage of his male ego which leaves critics with the belief that the woman in Paris Bridge was killed. Tagging it "suicide" may have been Clamence's style in denying the responsibility for his female victims.

Judging by these logical paradigms, one can understand why Camus's admirers have never ceased to enquire if he wanted to portray a womanless universe or a society of dehumanized women, thereby leaving his lovers emotionally dead or in extreme depression. But Camus, in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), admits that Don Juan was lost in abstraction and advised that "*loving all the women depersonalizes and dematerializes the real world*" (243). It is based on this notion that we seek to explore the evolution of Camus's multifaceted thoughts about women. This study is an attempt to further evaluate the ambiguity of perception inherent in Camus's literary creation regarding his relationship with women. This study adopts the Psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund to analyze the disorienting or fluctuating limits in Camus's characters manifested through Meursault in *L'Étranger* (1942) and Jan in *The Le Malentendu* (1943), demonstrate lingering challenges of human existence and a critical post-modern account of the challenges of man in the society. We maintain that Camus's loyalty and detachment from women also indicates the divorce between man and his society.

Albert camus's emblematic rapport with women and discourse

It is obvious that the Philosophy of the Absurd is well cited and is often evoked in relation to Albert Camus. Critics have analyzed his well-articulated theory from diverse angles. Some link his hostility against Communism as an "absurd reasoning". While others consider his consistent representation of violence, rebellion and suicide, and as well as his little faith on rationalism as an exhibition of his notion of the absurd.

Scholars have also made interesting contributions to importance of love in Camus's work. Anthony Rizzuto (1997), offers a provocative reading of the complicity between the erotic love depicted in Camus's works and its rapport with his sexuality and its limitations. Debra Kelly's "Le Premier Homme and the literature of loss" (2007) gives a compelling account of the importance of family love in the last few years of his literary output. Similarly, scholars such as Van der Poel and Arnaud Corbic have argued, moreover, for the importance of the "love of life" or biophilia that exist in some of his works. To varying degrees, their accounts undeniably help to situate the thought of one of the 20th century's most enigmatic writers. Wood's emphasis, however, is to show that love is the guiding thread of Camus's conception of ethics and politics throughout the course of his creative life, ranging from approximately 1935 to 1960. This assertion is confirmed in *Le Mythe ode Sisyphé (1942)* thus: "If it sufficed to love, things would be too simple. But the more one loves, the more the absurd reinforces itself". He postulates that key changes in Camus's ethical and political thought directly correspond to key changes in his thinking about love. To Rizzuto (2016), love represents, in fact, one of the more consistent threads in his notebooks, and when we look at his major works we see a similar preoccupation, hence his works: *L'Étranger (1942)*, *Le Mythe of Sisyphé (1942)*, *Lettres à un ami allemand (1943-4)* and, especially, in his editorials at *Combat (1944 – 1947)*. He maintains that the intense preoccupation with love inhabiting these works leads to the claim that "love is the very movement of revolt" that guides the political ambition of *L'homme révolté (1951)*. And it is highly significant that Camus "foresaw" writing a detailed work "on the theme of love" in the last decade of his life before his untimely death in a car crash. His double

life maps on to a deep ambiguity regarding the value of enduring love which, as we see, had a transitory value in his youth.

It is imperative to note that Rizzuto's assertion that love is guiding thread of Camus's idea of ethics and politics, did not specify the human gender in relation to this so called love professed by Camus. Rizzuto presents love as a motivation to participate in politics and not as an escape from getting drowned in a meaningless society.

When Olivier Todd enquired of Jean-Paul Sartre about Albert Camus' books he liked best, Sartre responded: '*La Chute*, and backed up his reason by saying" because Camus has hidden himself in it". With the publication of the massive biography, *Albert Camus: A life* (2000), Todd made an unveiling of Camus's 'private life as unpublished letters written by Camus; He reveals him as an obsessive womanizer. *La Chute* (1956) is the confession of a renowned Parisian lawyer who is worried and feeling guilty when he fails to come to the aid of a drowning woman. This drowning woman was Camus's second wife, Francine, who had a mental breakdown. Todd upholds thus:

Since she was the mother of his two children, Camus decided that it would be more appropriate if her relationship with him was that of a sister thus allowing him erotic freedom. For years, she appeared to go along with this but then she cracked.

Todd added that Francine said to her husband: "You owed me that book and Camus had agreed". The revelations in Todd's biography of Camus toying with women's emotions could not have come with much surprise to those who had read Camus's earlier non-fiction *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942). His reflections on Don Juanism are like both a confession and a declaration of future policy: It is because he (Don Juan) loves with the same passion and each time with his whole self that he must repeat his gift and his profound quest.

It is observed that Todd reflects on an important duality at the heart of Camus's practice as a rare human being who lives two kinds of life: the life with which most people are familiar with, the hard-living writer, the

engaged philosopher, the Playboy and the other, an uneasy life spent in sick bed for weeks reflecting upon the strangeness of life struggles. But his focus revolves around *La Chute* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*

Similarly, Anthony Rizzuto (1998) notes that Camus' Don Juan demonstrates a double standard as he provides women with sexual enjoyment but insists on what he regards as the "quantity" of conquests that guarantees him that no woman will ever acquire the dimensions of character. He believes that a complete recognition and acknowledgment of a woman's humanity would thwart the man's desire to be delivered from the human condition. Backing his position, Rizzuto (1998) draws insight from Camus notebooks written between 1942- 1944 where many derogatory remarks about women and sexuality were made; "*Beside love, a woman is boring. She is not aware. You have to live with one and keep quiet. Or sleep with them all. The most important is elsewhere not within*" The postulations by Wood (2016), Todd (2000) and Rizzuto (1998) though maintain that Camus is driven to seek meaning by the very bizarre complexities and contradictions of existence, but did not explore Camus's multifaceted notion about women as an attempt to evaluate the ambiguity of perception inherent in his literary works regarding his relationship with women which this study focuses on.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is based on Psychoanalytic Theory. It is also known as the personality theory which is largely dependent on the notion that an individual gets motivated more by unseen forces that are controlled by the conscious and the rational thought. According to Sigmund Freud, the human behavior is formed through an interaction between three components of the mind namely: ID, EGO AND SUPER EGO

ID refers to the primitive part of the mind that seeks immediate gratification of biological or instinctual needs. Biological needs are basic physical needs while instinctual needs are natural or unlearned needs, such as hunger, thirst, sex, etc. Id is simply the unconscious part of the mind that acts instantaneously without giving much thought to what is right and what is wrong. Id is the source of psychic energy, a force that is behind all the mental forces which often lead to conflicts with tragic ends.

The Super-Ego is related to the social or the moral values that an individual inculcates as he matures. It acts as an ethical constraint on behavior and helps an individual to develop his conscience. As the individual grows in the society, he learns cultural values and norms of society which help him to differentiate between right and wrong. Super ego acts as a constraint on a person's behavior and it guides him or her to follow the right path.

According to Freud, Ego is the logical and the conscious part of the mind which is associated with the reality principle. This means that it balances the demands of Id and Super-ego in the context of real life situations. Ego is conscious and hence keeps a check on the Id through a proper reasoning of the external environment.

Since these are fundamental structures of the mind, there is always existential conflict between these three components of the human mind. Efforts to attain the balance between these define the way we behave in the external environment. Linking Freud's expositions about these components, one can understand why Camus struggles with decisions that contradict his daily intentions towards his immediate environment by providing an idea of dualism such as ecstasy and misery, life and death towards inhabitants of this environment in his literary creation.

Manifestation of Camus' double perception of women in *L'Étranger*

In *The Stranger*, Albert Camus reveals his thought about women and roles that they play in society. Camus has, on several notes, materialized women in his writings as mere sexual objects with no intellectual thoughts. His perceptions of women are evidently manifested in the beginning of the novel with Meursault receiving a devastating telegram "so to say" about the death of his mother. French scholars are familiar with the famous "Aujourd'hui, Maman est morte" but Meursault is not certain or does not really care if she died that day or the previous day. Fixing her interment without any contemplation for the next day sounds more or less like he could not wait to hear the news of her passing on. Contrary to Camus's numerous letters written to his women in Paris, New York, and to Patricia Blake in America, expressing heartfelt emotions and making them feel special, his representative in the

character, Meursault neither accepts to observe even a minute of silence nor see his mother's cadaver as the director of the retirement home leads him to the mortuary where his mother lies in a coffin; rather, he offers the director a stick of cigarette and both of them stand outside to smoke. He begins a vigil where he doses and awakens to the sound of his mother's companions at the home (sitting across from him) who joined in the vigil. The night is punctuated by fits of crying and coughing by sympathizers. Meursault remains unemotional but will rather express some discomfort caused him by the noise and bright lights. According to him "I had a ridiculous impression at some point that they were there to judge me" (8).

The burial atmosphere becomes a blur of images for Meursault the next day as he continues to give them a ridiculous look. At the funeral procession in the hot desert sun to the cemetery, Meursault remains unshaken by tears and fainting spell of Thomas Pérez, a male companion of his mother. At one point in the bus ride back to Algiers, a funeral helper asks him if his mother had been very old; Meursault gives a vague response because he does not really know her exact age. His absurd comportment provokes the law to prosecute Meursault rather than for the crime of murder he committed. The prosecution recalls details from the funeral: Meursault's calmness and lack of emotion, his quick departure after the burial. Even when the director accompanies the funeral procession to the grave site and offers Meursault information about his mother's life at the home, Meursault is not very interested. He is later executed because of his obvious lack of love for a woman who gave birth to him. It is imperative to note that Meursault's composure is clearly contrary to the super-ego, thereby, refusing to learn cultural values and norms of his society which should have helped him to toe the right path in his participation in his mother's funeral.

Worthy of note is the fact that Camus chooses a beautiful girl to be his lover uniquely on grounds of her tasteless personality and astonishing looks. "He decided she was probably not very intelligent, and that pleased him. There is something divine in mindless beauty" (25), notes the narrator. Drawing from the citation above, Meursault only chooses to be with women that are quiet and pretty but never dates women that have strong opinions or thoughts about the world. He believes that

women are just there to listen to the men's social commentary and look beautiful while doing so. His desire and description align with the primordial patriarchal dichotomization of gender that assigned passivity to women and activity to men. His inclination is an instinctive gratification that emerges from id to assuage his manhood and savor the privileges it provides in the social space that Camus describes in his text.

Similarly, a day after Meursault had buried his mother, he takes a stroll to the beach and meets Marie, a former typist at his office. They have a rendezvous at a cinema after which Marie spends the night at Meursault's apartment without Meursault telling her of his most recent supposed agony. Alone on his balcony the next evening, Meursault admits that the demise of his mother has not changed his normal routine at all. According to Agwu (2018)

The first lines of *The Stranger* reveals through the hero, Meursault, the absurdity of social life and the glorification of instinctive life. He would like to lead a life without contradictions which gives no opportunity for explanations and subsequently unhappy circumstances.

Meursault believes that even if Marie sees it as an objective necessity to be told about his mother's death, he will not see it as a subjective wish to do so because unhappy circumstances breed unwarranted sympathy. The narrator admits that "He does not attach importance to anything to an extent where even the death of his own mother does not cause him any emotion" (379).

Worthy of note is the personality theory exhibited by Meursault in his unconscious quest for sex without giving much thought about it being ethical or unethical behavior at a moment as such. More so, at the staircase of his apartment building the next afternoon, Meursault encounters two of his neighbors; Salamano and Raymond the pimp. Raymond, in pretext of an invitation for a meal asks Meursault to write a letter for him to his ex-mistress, a Moorish woman. His intentions were to lure her back to punish her to have taken advantage of him; and Meursault agrees to write the letter. Meursault and Marie hear screams

coming from Raymond's apartment. His ex-mistress cries out that she was being seriously beaten by Raymond. With the hallway full of residents, a policeman arrives and talks to him and he is given a summons to report at the police station. Meursault agrees to serve as a witness for him later and Raymond is eventually let off with a warning.

Meursault's participation through writing a seductive letter which pacifies Raymond's ex-mistress to become a victim of circumstance is not in conformity with his quest for a female companion; in his decision to take her to a cinema and spend some nights with her. When she asks if he loves her, he tells her honestly that he doesn't think so. Still, he agrees to marry her. He knows he could say he loved Marie and that she would accept his love, but he does not. A true demonstration of double standards.

It should be noted that Meursault's irregular and ambiguous feelings towards Marie began barely 24 hours after his mother's funeral. This will further reveal his fundamental lack of respect for women and social values which the prosecutor believes reinforces his criminal nature. When Meursault's lawyer raises objection and questions whether his client is accused of having buried his mother or of having killed a man, the prosecutor responds that he accuses Meursault of having buried his mother with "a crime in his heart". Drawing from these analyses of double standards performed by Meursault, conclusions can be drawn to the fact that unlike Tupac Shakur who will dedicate a song to his late mother expressing how grateful he is for her extra care, Camus consistently and continually undermines women and their intelligence in *L'Étranger* with his presentation of only two female characters with submissive beautiful personalities but with vulnerable bodies meant mainly for sex. Camus explores, in *L'Étranger* (1942), his philosophy of absurdity of life, a recurring concept in his literary creation about serial questions on the essence of life. Camus's concept of the absurd implores people to accept life's lack of meaning and rebel by rejoicing in what life has to offer. Attribute of this philosophy is evident in Meursault's reaction to people around him, to things and to events as he refuses to behave as if there is meaning where he sees meaninglessness of life. It is on this notion that Camus declares in his preface to *L'Étranger* (1942) that "Meursault does not play the game, the society thus feels threatened

and cuts off Meursault's head"(ii). Extrapolating from the above assertion, one can conclude that Meursault does not act in consonance with either ID, EGO nor the SUPER-EGO in his relationship with his female characters.

Manifestation of double perception of women in *Le Malentendu*

Le Malentendu presents a narrative whereby Camus tries to accord women some real feminine status. All what Jan, the protagonist in the play, wants is a chance to locate his mother and sister in order to provide their needs that will bring them little happiness. To Jan, "I would have been nothing without them". But sadly, Jan's sudden expression of affection is coming after twenty years of neglect and abandonment to the extent that his mother will register her displeasure to Martha by saying thus: "I think I 'll rather be forgotten as I have been by your brother, than have you talk to me like that".(Act 1,scene 4).In his quest to reunite with his mother and sister, he ends up exposing them to an indifferent society where they live a life that Agwu (2019) classifies as a "life of isolation and solitude" as he maintains that a man in search of a reunion with his family after many years needs no protocol to reveal his true identity.

Jan comes from Africa to reconnect with them but when he arrives there, he meets an older mother and sister who could barely recognize him. The fact that Jan is not recognized by his own mother and sister, whom he spent his whole childhood being around with, makes him exist with solitude of the mind. But Jan has every chance to avoid this loneliness when his wife, Maria, persuades him to allow her to join him in the hotel so they could make the introduction as a family and as fast as possible. Jan, in spite of the love that exists between him and his wife, decides to express the voice of his private world and not the voice of love. Jan insists that he wants to be left alone in order to acclimatize more with the place and search for right words to make his identity known to his newly found mother and sister, Martha. And he emphatically tells Maria that he sees nothing terrible about his decision to be left alone. Maria, in her belief that love can never wait, never fails to nurse some fear of being left alone one day. She is faced with the reality of spending a night alone for the first time in many years since she got married to Jan. According to Maria

Lowering her eyes, and this will be the first night that we've slept apart. (Jan remains silent. She looks up at him again). I have always loved everything about you. Even what I didn't understand. And I have always known that, at heart, I will have you no different. I'm not the kind of wife who likes to be awkward, but today I'm frightened,
Jan "I can see that empty bed in front of me, and I feel as though you're deserting me, sending me away like this". (34)

Rather than having a change of mind to accommodate his wife, Jan quotes God to bear him witness that he will not let thoughts of her slip from his mind for a single moment as she excused him. It is worthy to note that Jan who, on one side, claims to bring peace of mind and some happiness to the two women who happen to be his mother and sister, is on the other hand, being unemotional to a wife who has so much emotion for him.

Jan's persistent delay in making his identity known to his relatives after it became clear that they didn't recognize him turns his duration in their hotel to an underserved threat to his existence. The more he hopes that they would eventually know who he really was, the more Martha and his mother become determined to kill him. Unfortunately, Jan is not given a chance to be recognized. When Jan realizes that he is going to remain unrecognized and he decides to leave the hotel so he could come back the next morning with his wife, it was too late as his tea is already poisoned and he drinks it and passes on. He is murdered by his mother and sister who are conspirators and who admit they had forgotten Jan's father even before he was in his grave. The study is a narrative case study of dramatic irony because the audience recognizes Jan but his relatives cannot recognize him. Camus's dramaturgy celebrates the suspense and dramatic conflict that are created by the procrastinated unveiling of Jan's identity and personality.

It has to be recorded that when Maria finally accepts to leave Jan behind to make himself known to his people after much resistance, while raising her hands up, her prophetic parting words to her husband Jan read: "But

look, did you see my hands? You are leaving me with nothing, your voyage of discovery leaves me alone. I will be waiting for you"(13). When Maria arrives the hotel in search of her husband after waiting patiently for his return in vein, she gets an awkward response from Martha who tells her in plain language:

Your husband isn't here because he's no longer with us. Because he's dead. (Maria spins round and stands for a moment speechless. Her eyes never leave Martha's face. Eventually, she makes a movement in her direction, and smiles.

Dumb founded and confused, Maria advances to ask Martha if she is aware that her husband is her brother. She responds in the affirmative but insists that his identity will not have changed anything as she concludes: "I have been as clear as I can already. We killed your husband last night. We were after his money. We have done it several times before to other guests"

Maria is forced into a life of isolation from her husband. Martha is faced with a self-inflicted solitude which she could not bear but kills herself as her poetry of dreams is shattered by her mother's decision to abandon her to her fate.

Camus portrays the play, an image of a woman who dedicated her entire life loving one man who didn't leave behind one word of consolation for her to see a reason to find the essence of life; but rather, she is left in emptiness. While love is the force that makes Maria cry for Jan, it means nothing to Martha as she says it sounds strange. As she debates with her mother not to allow the guilt of their crime to rob them of their future plans, she justifies it by saying;

A tiny child, caught in the heart of a continent that smothered her as she grew. No one ever kissed my lips. And no one has ever seen me naked. That creates a debt. You can't walk out on me, mother. Not now that it is due. No man's death can give you an excuse for that. Death has no significance for a

man who has lived. You must see that my brother can be forgotten. Nothing important has happened to him.

Martha's voice demonstrates inherent loads of repressions occasioned by her past. Her experience is equated to death while living as she does not differentiate death from life. The character, with the Super-Ego in her, though dehumanized by the lack of love she experienced from infancy to adulthood, admitted to the crime she is involved in not minding the consequences of her crime before the law. Her murder instincts, nourished by her dysfunctional childhood, are driven by negative psychic energies that are built up in her id. This dysfunctionality has impaired her superego and explains her inability for good moral judgment. It further explains her emotionlessness because Martha's repressed past has produced in her a zombie personality, incapable of loving and being loved.

Each of the characters in Albert Camus' *L'Étranger* and *Le Malentendu* represents without doubt an embodiment of certain aspects of Camus's 'ideologies with duality of perceptions to life and to women as the central interest of this study. Camus has denied both mother, sister and wife the supposedly superficial identities of givers of life and affection to become murderers of their child and brother; and his wife becomes a victim of circumstance. Maria will be totally alone in her sorrow over the loss of her husband. Martha, who is in despair curses her mother for leaving the surface of the earth alone without assisting her to achieve her dream. Maria, in *L'Étranger*, who dreams of spending her *life with Meursault* is rather abandoned by justice. The texts appear to be yoked with motif of abandonment.

Conclusion

This study has revealed a new view of Albert Camus's notion of the absurd nature of mankind in an attempt to establish the symbolic representation of women in his literary works. The study has unveiled his desire to eliminate women's generative influence in society and their affiliation with the procreative circle of nature. Camus in *L'Étranger* and *Le Malentendu*, is trapped in his acculturated association of men as the central reference point of thought while deconstructing women through

stereotypical qualities aimed to dismantle binary opposition. He is driven to seek meaning by the very bizarre complexities and contradictions of existence as a response to a meaningless universe in order to instill hope amidst absurdity. He provides an idealism in terms of ecstasy and misery, life and death.

This work posits that a man can decide to cry or not cry at his mother's funeral, he can decide to reveal his identity and feel happy and free or hide it and face the consequences; he can shoot or not shoot an Arab on the beach, marry or not marry a woman who declares her love for him. This work has exploited this notion through his dual perception of women to establish the futility of a search for meaning in an incomprehensible universe, devoid of God as religion could not offer humans any meaningful judgment. While Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* will prefer his affection for his woman over God and even request for Hell in order to be reunited with the woman he loves, Meursault and Jan in the novels leave women who are bound by limitations and ultimately suffer despair and grief. All the women in pursuit of joy fail to get it despite their efforts. Camus insists that it is not the human nature to behave in an unbalanced way but the act of absurdity in human attitude arises out of the tension between our desire for order, meaning and happiness and the indifferent natural universe's refusal to provide that.

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