



A Narratological Analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Nightingale and the Rose*: An Application of Roland Barthes' Five Codes

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze *The Nightingale and the Rose* of Oscar Wilde using Roland Barthes five narrative codes: Hermeneutic, proairetic, semic, symbolic and cultural codes. Although quite simple in structure, Wilde's best-known fairy tale is rife with meaning which is revealed during the unfolding of the story, the characters, the symbols, and assumptions that are presented. The aim of the study is to prove that Barthes' structuralist approach is a systematic way to unveil the many levels of meaning within the text. The hermeneutic code is explored through the narrative enigmas of love, sacrifice and the ultimate worthiness of the Nightingale's love. The proairetic code is studied by examining the sequence of events which moves the action, especially the choice of the Nightingale to sacrifice herself for the red rose. The connotative meanings of characters and objects are marked by the semic code and the major oppositions between idealism and materialism, love and selfishness, sacrifice and indifference, art and reality are indicated by the symbolic code. Finally, the cultural code is used to explore the social and intellectual underpinnings of Wilde's attack on Victorian attitudes towards love, class and gender, as well as on material value. The study proposes that *The Nightingale and the Rose* is a multi-layered narrative, and meaning is constructed as a result of the interplay of these five codes. In applying Barthes' narratological model, the research is able to show that Wilde's fairy tale is not a simple fairy tale but a highly complex criticism of the relations between people and about social values. The structural and semiotic analysis of the narrative, together with its complexity is highlighted and the relevance of Barthes' theory in the analysis of literary fairy tale is illustrated, thus contributing to the Wilde scholarship.

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Introduction

Structuralism, as a mode of literary and cultural inquiry, holds that meaning is not an inherent property of isolated elements but emerges from the systematic relations among them within a coded system. This premise originates in Ferdinand de Saussure's (1959) distinction between langue and parole and his argument that the sign acquires meaning only differentially, through its position within a system of relations rather than through any intrinsic connection to its referent. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) extended this relational logic beyond linguistics to cultural and

narrative structures, proposing that myths and stories, like language itself, could be decomposed into underlying units whose combinatory patterns generate meaning. It is this structuralist premise — that a text is a system to be decoded rather than a window onto authorial intention — that narratology inherits and formalizes.

Since its emergence in the mid-twentieth century, narratological theory has furnished literary scholars with systematic tools for decoding plot structure, characterization, and symbolic meaning, formalized in works such as Culler's (1975) *Structuralist Poetics*. Among these tools, Roland Barthes' model of five narrative codes — Hermeneutic, Proairetic, Semantic, Symbolic, and Cultural — proposed in *S/Z* (1974), remains one of the most influential frameworks for analyzing how texts produce layered meaning for the reader, treating the literary text as a woven plurality of codes rather than a single transparent message.

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), the Irish playwright, poet, and novelist, remains a central figure in late Victorian literature, known for his critique of social norms, materialism, and idealized love through works such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and his short fiction collection *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. His short story *The Nightingale and the Rose* (1888) narrates the self-sacrifice of a nightingale who gives her life to produce a red rose for a student's unrequited love, only for the gesture to be rejected in favor of material wealth.

While *The Nightingale and the Rose* has received considerable critical attention, most existing scholarship approaches the story through thematic or symbolic readings centered on sacrifice, materialism, and Victorian morality (Fonseka, 2020). A structuralist application of Barthes' five-code model to this story has been attempted only once, by Soomro and Sethar (2024), whose analysis remains largely descriptive and does not systematically examine each code through sustained textual evidence, nor does it situate the analysis within Barthes' broader theoretical apparatus in *S/Z* (1974). This leaves room for a more methodologically rigorous application of the five-code model — one that treats each code individually, with multiple textual examples and sustained interpretive analysis, and explicitly grounds the reading in Barthes' structuralist theory.

This study addresses that gap by applying Barthes' five-code model to Wilde's story in a systematic, theory-grounded manner.

Research Questions

- (1) How does Barthes' Hermeneutic Code function to create suspense and reader engagement in *The Nightingale and the Rose*?
- (2) How the five narrative do codes work together to construct the story's central tension between idealism and materialism?

This study contributes to narratological scholarship by offering a methodologically rigorous, structuralist reading of a canonical Wildean short story. Where prior scholarship has treated the text descriptively, this analysis extends and deepens the application of Barthes' framework — anchoring each code in sustained textual evidence and demonstrating its relevance to Victorian short fiction more broadly.

Literature Review

Narratology

Structuralist narratology, as formalized by Barthes and his contemporaries, treated the text as a closed system whose codes could be exhaustively mapped. Later scholarship complicated that closure. Barry (1990) traces how narratology shifted from the rigid grammatical models of its founding decades toward more pluralistic accounts of narrative meaning, while Christoph (2014) documents a similar move away from single, totalizing structures. Guillemette and Lévesque (2016) go further, arguing that no one model can account for the full range of narrative forms a text might take, and that later narratologists increasingly treat structuralist models as one lens among several rather than a complete method. Birke, von Contzen, and Kukkonen (2022) extend this diversification into what they term chrononarratology, applying structuralist attention to narrative time in ways the original codes did not anticipate. Read together, this scholarship positions Barthes' five-code model not as a museum piece but as a foundational method still being extended and adapted, which is what justifies its use here rather than a newer, less text-immanent framework.

Barthes' five codes

Applications of the five-code model to specific texts remain uneven in depth. Waseem Hassan et al. (2014) apply the framework to Bina Shah's short story "The Optimist" and demonstrate that the codes translate well to short South Asian fiction, working through hermeneutic suspense and symbolic patterning with specific textual evidence — a level of detail this study aims to match for Wilde's text. Yadav and Singh (2023) apply the same five codes to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, using them to explain the novel's nonlinear structure and its postcolonial politics of memory, and argue the model has room to travel into other postcolonial and non-Western texts. Jamil, Mubashir, and Ahmad (2024) turn the framework directly on Wilde, applying it to his narrative poem *The Doer of Good* and finding that the hermeneutic code drives the poem's unresolved moral ambiguity around compassion and service. These three studies confirm the model's continued productivity, and the Jamil et al. study in particular shows it has begun to reach Wilde's shorter work, though not yet *The Nightingale and the Rose* with comparable rigor.

Studies on Oscar Wilde

Wilde scholarship on the fairy tales has stayed largely thematic. Poorghorban (2023) reads the tales through an ecocritical lens, arguing that Wilde consistently favors cultivated, artificial beauty over untamed nature, and treats this preference as central to his aestheticist project. Ebralidze (2024) reads the same tales as social satire, tracing how Wilde exposes Victorian hypocrisy and class pretension beneath their ornamental surface. Ellmann's (1988) biography and Guy's (2003) edited collection of Wilde's critical prose remain the standard references for situating his aesthetic philosophy, particularly the commitment to art for its own sake that runs through both his criticism and his fiction. None of this scholarship engages the internal narrative structure of individual tales; the focus stays on theme, biography, and cultural context, which is the gap a structuralist reading is positioned to fill.

Studies on the *Nightingale and the Rose*

Work on this story specifically falls into three groups. Fonseka (2020) reads it as a study in Victorian moral decay, organizing the analysis around sacrifice and unfulfilled love. Jalal Abbas and Kadir Mugair (2019) take a stylistic approach instead, examining Wilde's graphological, morphological, and lexical choices to account for the story's aesthetic effect, which is a linguistic reading rather than a structuralist one. Ebralidze (2022) focuses narrowly on the rose itself, tracing the shifting symbolic weight of white and red roses across Wilde's fairy tales and arguing that the color shift in this story marks the transition from innocent to consummated, and ultimately wasted, sacrifice. Poorghorban (2022) offers the most theoretically developed reading to date, arguing that both "The Happy Prince" and "The Nightingale and the Rose" stage commodified happiness as the only form of meaning their characters are capable of recognizing, which situates the story within a wider critique of Victorian materialism rather than treating it as an isolated fable.

Only Soomro and Sethar (2024) apply Barthes' five codes to this story directly. Their analysis names each code in the text but does not sustain any of them through multiple textual examples, and it does not engage Barthes' theoretical apparatus in S/Z beyond a short definitional pass.

Research Gap

Two things follow from this body of work. Scholarship on *The Nightingale and the Rose* is thematic, stylistic, or symbolic almost without exception, and where Barthes' model has reached Wilde's short fiction at all, it has either been applied to a different text (Jamil et al., 2024) or applied to this story without the methodological depth shown in comparable applications elsewhere (Yadav & Singh, 2023; Waseem Hassan et al., 2014). No existing study combines a code-by-code structural reading of "The Nightingale and the Rose" with the textual density and theoretical grounding those comparable studies demonstrate. This paper closes that gap: each of Barthes' five codes is traced through multiple passages and read against the story's central opposition between idealism and material self-interest, rather than named and left at the level of general observation.

Research Methodology

Research design

This study uses qualitative textual analysis to examine *The Nightingale and the Rose* through Roland Barthes' model of five narrative codes. The method identifies units of meaning within the text itself and interprets how those units function together, rather than testing a hypothesis against external evidence. This design suits the study's aims, since the research questions concern how meaning is constructed within the narrative rather than how readers respond to it or how the story compares statistically across a larger corpus.

Text selection

The primary text is Oscar Wilde's short story *The Nightingale and the Rose*, first published in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888). It was selected for three reasons: it is short enough to permit a close, code-by-code reading of the entire text; it has received substantial thematic and symbolic attention but only one prior structuralist treatment, leaving room for sustained analysis;

and its plot turns on a single, clearly bounded conflict between sacrificial and material value, which gives the analysis a stable axis against which to read each of the five codes.

Analytical framework

The analysis draws on Barthes' five codes as set out in *S/Z* (1974): the hermeneutic code, governing the posing and delaying of narrative enigmas; the proairetic code, governing the sequencing of actions; the semantic code, governing connotative meaning attached to characters and objects; the symbolic code, governing binary oppositions and their reversals; and the cultural code, governing references to shared bodies of knowledge outside the text. Each code is treated as a distinct lens applied to the same text rather than a stage in a linear process, consistent with Barthes' own treatment of the codes as interwoven.

Data analysis procedure

The text was divided into lexias, following Barthes' term for a short segment small enough to isolate a single unit of meaning. Each lexia was coded according to which code it most clearly activated; where a lexia activated more than one code, it was discussed under each relevant code rather than assigned to a single category. Coded units were then grouped by code and analyzed for how they build meaning across the story, from the opening exposition through the Nightingale's death to the closing rejection of the rose — tracing each code through multiple instances rather than a single example, which addresses a limitation in the one prior study to apply this framework to the same story (Soomro & Sethar, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Barthes and the structuralist text

Barthes worked from the same premise underlying structuralism more broadly: a text is not a vessel carrying one fixed meaning from author to reader, but a system of signs whose meaning is produced through the relations among its parts. Where earlier structuralists such as Propp sought a finite grammar of narrative — a fixed set of functions any story could be reduced to — Barthes moved away from that search for a single underlying structure. His interest in *S/Z* (1974) was not in what a text's structure finally is, but in how a text produces the effect of meaning as a reader moves through it. This distinction matters here because it justifies treating *The Nightingale and the Rose* not as a puzzle with one correct solution, but as a text read productively through Barthes' codes without claiming those codes exhaust everything the story does.

Readerly and writerly texts

Central to *S/Z* is Barthes' distinction between the readerly text (*texte lisible*) and the writerly text (*texte scriptible*). A readerly text offers a stable, coherent narrative the reader can consume passively; a writerly text resists that stability and asks the reader to participate in producing meaning rather than simply receiving it. Barthes argued that most classic narrative fiction leans toward the readerly end of this spectrum while still containing writerly moments — points where meaning is genuinely unsettled rather than given. *The Nightingale and the Rose* behaves similarly: its fairy-tale form and clear moral trajectory read as readerly on the surface, but the unresolved gap between the Nightingale's understanding of events and the reader's own opens a writerly space within an otherwise conventional narrative.

S/Z and the lexia

To analyze meaning without reducing the text to a single structure, Barthes divides it into lexias — short, arbitrary segments, sometimes no longer than a sentence, each treated as a unit in which one or more codes can be identified. The lexia is not a natural unit like a paragraph or sentence; it is an analytical tool, cut wherever a shift in code occurs. This is the method adopted in the data analysis procedure above: *The Nightingale and the Rose* is divided into lexias, each examined for which codes it activates, tracking how meaning accumulates and shifts across the story rather than treating it as a single undifferentiated block.

The five codes

Barthes identifies five codes operating within and across lexias. The hermeneutic code governs the posing and delaying of narrative enigmas, generating suspense around an unresolved outcome. The proairetic code governs the sequencing of actions into recognizable patterns, letting a reader anticipate what a given action leads to. The semantic code governs connotation — meaning that attaches to a character or object beyond its literal sense, often accumulating gradually. The symbolic code governs the deeper structural oppositions a text organizes itself around, such as idealism and materialism, and how a text complicates or reverses them. The cultural code governs a text's references to shared, extra-textual knowledge — social conventions, class hierarchies — that anchor its meaning within a specific historical moment.

Applied together, these five codes give this study a vocabulary for describing not simply what “The Nightingale and the Rose” is about, but how the text builds that meaning, which is the analytical work undertaken in the sections that follow.

Data Analysis/Results

Hermeneutic Code

The hermeneutic code governs how a narrative poses questions and withholds their answers, generating the suspense that keeps a reader engaged rather than simply informed. Barthes treats this delay as constitutive of narrative pleasure itself: a story that answered its own questions immediately would have no reason to be read past its opening line.

The story opens the enigma almost immediately: “She said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses... but in all my garden there is no red rose.” This line establishes both the condition for the student's desire and the obstacle to it in the same breath, so the reader's first question — will he find the rose — is inseparable from a second, unstated one: what will he give up to get it. The Nightingale's declaration, “One red rose is all I want... only one red rose! Is there no way by which I can get it?” repeats and intensifies the enigma rather than resolving it, shifting the burden of the quest from the student, who does nothing to solve his own problem, onto a character with no stake in the outcome. The Tree's condition — that the rose can only be built “out of music by moonlight,” stained with the Nightingale's own heart's blood — converts a simple quest enigma into a mortal one, and the narrative lets this threat sit unresolved for several paragraphs before the Nightingale commits to it.

This delayed revelation does more than sustain tension for its own sake. It forces the reader to sit inside the gap between the Nightingale's understanding of the situation and the reader's own

growing suspicion that the sacrifice is being made for someone incapable of recognizing it. The suspense is not “will the rose be made,” which the Tree’s instructions already answer, but “will the sacrifice matter” — a question the hermeneutic code keeps open until the story’s final lines, and one that ties this code directly to the story’s central opposition between sacrificial and material value.

Proairetic Code

The proairetic code governs the sequence of actions that carry a narrative from one state to another, organizing events into a logic of cause and consequence that the reader follows to anticipate what comes next.

The exposition places the two central figures in physical and emotional relation to one another: the student “flung himself down on the grass” in despair while the Nightingale, “from her nest in the holm-oak tree,” overhears him. The rising action introduces the obstacle directly — “But in the whole of my garden there is no red rose” — which sets the chain of subsequent action in motion: the Nightingale’s search among the trees, the White Rose-tree’s refusal, and the Red Rose-tree’s condition that a rose can be made only through song and blood. The climax arrives not at the moment the rose is created but at the moment it is offered and refused: “I am afraid it will not go with my dress,” the girl says, rejecting a gift built from a life. The falling action follows quickly — “How ungrateful!” the student says, and throws the rose into the gutter — and the resolution closes the sequence with the student’s retreat into abstraction: “What a silly thing Love is... I shall go back to Philosophy and study Metaphysics.”

What this sequence makes visible is a structural asymmetry: the Nightingale’s actions escalate toward irreversible sacrifice, while the student’s and the girl’s actions escalate toward casual dismissal. The proairetic code does not simply move the plot forward; it stages two entirely different scales of consequence unfolding in parallel, which is what makes the story’s ending land as injustice rather than as a neutral turn of events.

Semantic Code

The semantic code governs the connotative meanings a text attaches to its characters, objects, and settings — meanings that exceed their literal, denotative sense.

The Nightingale is introduced through the imagery of her “beautiful nest” in the oak tree and her habit of singing “night after night” though “no one had ever heard her,” connotations of devotion and unrecognized value that anticipate her later fate. The rose itself accumulates meaning gradually rather than arriving pre-loaded with symbolism: it moves from “white as the foam of the sea” to, through the Nightingale’s death, red “as the ruby”— a shift the text ties explicitly to the cost of its creation. The girl, by contrast, is characterized through material comparison from her first appearance, her preference established before she ever speaks through the narrator’s aside that the Chamberlain’s nephew’s jewels “cost far more than flowers.”

Read semantically, the story is building two competing scales of worth in parallel with its plot: one measured in devotion and cost of life, the other in comparative material value. By the time the girl speaks her rejection, the semantic groundwork has already told the reader which scale she is using — the irony of her dialogue depends entirely on connotations the text established long before she appears.

Symbolic Code

The symbolic code governs the binary oppositions a text sets up and, characteristically for Barthes, complicates or reverses. Read at only the level of surface meaning, the red rose signifies love, the Nightingale signifies selflessness, and the thorn signifies hardship. Read structurally, these symbols organize a sustained opposition between idealism and materialism that the plot exists to test.

The central opposition is staged directly through the rose's two possible fates: it can be worn as a sign of devotion, or it can be "not half as useful as Logic" — the student's own words once he discards it. The thorn that produces the rose — "the thorn touched her heart, and a bitter pang of pain shot through her" — encodes sacrifice literally into the object's material existence, so the rose is never simply a symbol of love in the abstract; it is a symbol of love purchased at a specific, irreversible cost. The story's symbolic structure depends on this cost being invisible to every character except the Nightingale and the reader, which is what allows the rejection scene to function as reversal rather than resolution: the story sets up sacrifice as the value that should be rewarded, then systematically denies that reward, so the opposition between idealism and materialism resolves in materialism's favor without the text ever endorsing that outcome.

This is where the story's irony becomes structural rather than incidental. Wilde does not need to state that the ending is unjust; the symbolic code has already built the terms by which the reader recognizes it as one.

Cultural Code

The cultural code governs a text's references to shared bodies of knowledge — social conventions, class assumptions, and material hierarchies — that a reader is expected to recognize without explanation.

The girl's rejection is delivered entirely in the vocabulary of Victorian social calculation: "the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers." The line assumes a reader who understands courtship as a system of competing material offers, in which a suitor's worth is legible through the value of his gifts rather than the sincerity of his feeling. The student's retreat into logic and metaphysics draws on a separate cultural code — the late-Victorian prestige of rational, practical knowledge over sentiment, which the story frames as no less self-serving than the girl's materialism, simply dressed in intellectual rather than romantic terms.

Read culturally, the story is not only about one nightingale's sacrifice; it is a critique of a social order in which both romantic and intellectual life have been reorganized around exchange value. The girl trades sentiment for jewels, the student trades love for logic, and both trades draw on the same underlying cultural logic that Wilde treats as symptomatic of the period rather than particular to either character. This is the version of Victorian materialism the analysis has been building toward: not simply greed, but a culture in which even the rejection of love has its own respectable, rational-sounding justification.

Discussion

The Nightingale and the Rose turns on a single exchange: a student weeps because he cannot produce a red rose for the woman he wants to dance with, and a nightingale, overhearing him, mistakes his self-pity for love. She sacrifices her life against a thorn to dye a white rose red, only for the woman to reject the gift in favor of a suitor with jewels, and for the student to discard the rose in the gutter and return to his books, dismissing love itself as impractical.

The story's force comes from the gap between what the Nightingale believes she is witnessing and what is actually happening. She reads the student's self-pity as evidence of a love worth dying for, and the story never corrects her until after her death, when the narrative shifts to the student's perspective and confirms what the reader has likely suspected all along. This structure stages a conflict between two systems of value that never actually meet: the Nightingale operates inside a logic of sacrifice, where a life is a currency worth spending on an ideal, while the student and the woman operate inside a logic of exchange, where a rose is worth exactly as much as the material advantage it buys. The rose is not rejected because it is imperfect, but because a better offer, in the literal form of jewels, has arrived.

Read this way, the story is less a fable about love than a demonstration of how quickly an ideal becomes worthless once it enters a marketplace of comparison. The Nightingale's death produces something of genuine value, and the narrative insists on that value even as every human character in the story fails to recognize it. That insistence is where the story's critique of Victorian materialism lives — not in the student's cruelty, which is almost incidental, but in a social world so thoroughly organized around transactional worth that even a miracle cannot survive contact with it.

This reading affirms the thematic scholarship discussed earlier while sharpening its terms. Fonseka's (2020) account of the story as Victorian moral decay and Poorghorban's (2022) argument that Wilde's tales stage commodified happiness both describe the same collapse this analysis traces structurally: the substitution of material worth for sacrificial meaning. What a code-by-code reading adds is an account of how that substitution is built into the text rather than simply asserted as its theme. Ebralidze's (2022) tracing of the story's white-to-red color shift is confirmed here and extended by connecting it to the symbolic code's broader pattern of value and devaluation. The main point of departure is Soomro and Sethar (2024), whose application of the five codes identifies their presence without showing how they interact — a gap this analysis addresses directly.

None of the five codes accounts for the story's meaning alone. The hermeneutic code opens the enigma of whether the student will get his rose; the proairetic code sequences the actions that answer it. That sequence carries emotional weight only because the semantic code has attached connotations of purity and sacrifice to the Nightingale and the rose along the way, and the symbolic code's central opposition between sacrificial and material value only functions because that meaning has already accumulated. The cultural code supplies the Victorian frame — courtship, class, the assumed worth of jewels over sentiment — against which the final reversal registers as socially legible rather than arbitrary. Remove any one code and the ending stops making full sense: the codes function less as five separate readings than as five interlocking conditions for one effect.

The Barthesian model's continued relevance

That the five codes cohere this precisely around a Victorian fairy tale, in a framework originally built to decompose Balzac's realist fiction, points to the durability of Barthes' model beyond its original context. What the codes identify are not features specific to one narrative tradition but recurring mechanisms of how meaning is built and withheld across forms — which is part of why applying the model rigorously to an under-examined text like this one has value beyond the immediate reading it produces.

Conclusion

This study examined how Barthes' five narrative codes function within *The Nightingale and the Rose*, individually and in combination. The hermeneutic code was found to sustain suspense not around whether the rose will be made, but around whether the Nightingale's sacrifice will ultimately be recognized — a question left open until the story's final lines. The proairetic code revealed a structural asymmetry between the Nightingale's escalation toward irreversible sacrifice and the student's and girl's escalation toward casual dismissal. The semantic and symbolic codes showed the rose accumulating value across the narrative only to have that value stripped away in a single line of dialogue, and the cultural code anchored this reversal within a recognizably Victorian logic of courtship and material comparison. Together, these findings answer both research questions: the hermeneutic code sustains suspense by keeping the sacrifice's significance unresolved, and the five codes construct the story's central tension between idealism and materialism by functioning as interlocking conditions for one effect rather than five separate readings.

This carries a broader implication for how Wilde's fairy tales might be read. The story's irony is not simply a feature of its plot but a product of its narrative construction, built through the accumulation and reversal of meaning across multiple codes rather than delivered solely at the ending. A thematic reading identifies what the story critiques; a structural reading shows how the text makes that critique feel inevitable — a distinction prior scholarship on this story has not drawn out.

This is the study's contribution. Where Soomro and Sethar (2024) identified the five codes' presence only in general terms, this analysis traces each code through multiple textual instances and grounds the reading in Barthes' theoretical apparatus in *S/Z* (1974), extending the model's relevance beyond the realist fiction it was built to describe.

The analysis remains limited to a single short story, which allowed close reading but does not establish how consistently these patterns hold across Wilde's other tales. Coding lexias involves interpretive judgment, and a different reader might draw the boundaries between codes somewhat differently; the study also does not incorporate reader-response data, so its claims concern how the text is structured rather than how readers actually experience it.

Future work could extend this analysis to other tales in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, testing whether the same interlocking pattern holds across the collection. A comparative study alongside Jamil et al.'s (2024) analysis of *The Doer of Good* could clarify whether Wilde's short fiction consistently stages the same opposition between idealism and materialism, or whether each tale constructs its central tension differently.

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