

## A Study on the Metaphors Used in Shakespeare's Poetry

Metaphor has a long history which can be traced back to Aristotle. Recently, cognitive linguistics has developed a lot so as to improve the study of conceptual metaphor, attracting huge attention in the field of cognitive science. Conceptual metaphor, as a cognitive activity, is regarded as a process of experiencing and being understood by one another. William Shakespeare and his sonnets have a worldwide reputation, using a multitude of metaphors, and has been studied by tons of researchers. His sonnets are mainly embodied in structural metaphor and ontological metaphor.

**Keywords:** *conceptual metaphor Shakespeare sonnets*

### Introduction

This paper aims at studying the metaphors in Shakespeare's sonnets based on conceptual metaphor theory. This can be divided into four parts, the first one being the background of the research, second being the importance and the purpose of the research. And the last two are the methodology and the structure of this paper.

#### *Background of the research*

William Shakespeare uses lots of metaphors in his poetry, contributing a lot to world literature. Metaphor has a really long history, dating back to Aristotle, which has dominated the metaphor studies over 2000 years. According to Aristotle, metaphor is treated only as a rhetorical device, but also a cognitive way of looking at the world.

Nowadays, more and more researchers have devoted themselves in metaphor studies and research, resulting in a brand-new look of metaphors. Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) has played a significant part in the evolution and development of cognitive linguistics. CMT indicates that metaphor is a cross domain mapping from concrete source domain to abstract target domain, holding the view that metaphor is not only a figure of speech, but also a way of thinking.

Moreover, William Shakespeare is the most prestigious poet in the period of Renaissance, for his 154 pieces of sonnets. He does well in utilizing metaphors in his poems, which has been researched by scholars for a long time.

1 All in all, this study mainly explores metaphors in his sonnets on the ground of  
2 the conceptual metaphor.

### 3 4 *Significance and purpose of the research*

5  
6 Metaphor has been and will always be vital in the field of cognitive  
7 linguistics. In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is an important cognitive method  
8 of human beings, not just a language problem. As Lakoff and Johnson put it,  
9 “our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff & Johnson,  
10 1980: 5), from which we can conclude that metaphor is ubiquitous. “A  
11 metaphor is a ‘poem in miniature’. Language is to poets what music is to  
12 musicians. Metaphor comes into being when poets appeared. Metaphor  
13 constitutes the essence of poetry” (Shu Dingfang, 2000: 12) Conceptual  
14 metaphor has been deeply rooted in every aspect of human language, and  
15 language is metaphorical in nature.

16 The significance of this thesis can be divided into theoretical and practical  
17 aspects. Theoretically, a great number of scholars have done a lot of researches  
18 on Shakespeare’s sonnets from variant perspectives, however, fewer scholars  
19 have studied them from the perspective of conceptual metaphor.  
20 Practically, Shakespeare’s sonnets are full of metaphors. This thesis is to study  
21 metaphors in his sonnets from the perspective of cognitive linguistic and to  
22 help readers build a unique and personified understanding of Shakespeare’s  
23 sonnets.

24 The combination of metaphor and poetry is an effective means of poetic  
25 detachment. The imagery power in poetry is hard to describe, and always need  
26 to use other concepts to recognize its characteristics and nature. “The  
27 distribution of these metaphors is just right, as if they were born for  
28 Shakespeare’s poetry. The conceptual metaphor used in Shakespeare’s sonnets  
29 vividly and genuinely reflects his inner world” (Liu Yuanyuan, 2002:  
30 227). “One of the reasons why Shakespeare became Shakespeare was the  
31 complexity of his thoughts, reflected in his work is the diversity of poetic  
32 metaphors” (Li Shiqin, 2007: 20)

33 The structure of this thesis is as follows: From the beginning, it helps to  
34 make the readers better understand the conceptual metaphors in Shakespeare’s  
35 sonnets. What’s more, in Shakespeare’s sonnets, plenty of metaphors are hidden  
36 behind the lines. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) is used in this thesis in  
37 order to give an exhaustive study of the metaphors in Shakespeare’s sonnets. It  
38 helps the audience to better appreciate the essence of the sonnets and, thus the  
39 thoughts of the sonnets will be researched deeper. Next, conceptual metaphors  
40 are interconnected with our lives, for the reason that “conceptual metaphors are  
41 part of modern metaphors, which are based on human daily life” (Li

Yongzhong, et al, 2001: 26). To conclude, the results of the thesis will help other researchers to comprehend the essence of metaphors from the perspective of language and linguistics, while in the mean time, the author hopes that it can also be applied onto other fields.

### *Methodology of the Research*

According to Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the methodology of the analysis is to analyze the typical metaphors chosen from Shakespeare's representative sonnets and their Chinese version translated by Zhu Shenghao.

In the first place, this thesis divides the metaphor examples selected into structural metaphor and ontological metaphor according to their classification, and then explains them individually.

In the second place, the sentences with expressions of conceptual metaphors can be singly extracted from the typical metaphors of Shakespeare's sonnets. All these expressions are analyzed from the perspective of structural and ontological metaphor accordingly.

### *Structure of the Thesis*

This thesis is made up of five sections.

Section 1 is the introduction and it is designed to demonstrate the background, significance, purpose, methodology, and the structure of the thesis.

Section 2 is the literature review, in which the author lists the studies of conceptual metaphor both abroad and at home. In addition to what have mentioned before, studies of Shakespeare and his sonnets are also included in this part.

Section 3 is the theoretical framework. After an introduction of conceptual metaphor: definition, classification, main features, and working mechanism, then come to the relationships between language, cognition and metaphor.

Section 4 is the most vital part of the thesis, which includes the cognitive analysis of the structural and ontological metaphor based on the metaphorical expressions in Shakespeare's sonnets. This article's main analysis of the target domains in Shakespeare's sonnets are LOVE, LIFE, and TIME.

Section 5 is the conclusion of the thesis which involves major findings, the limitations of the study and implications for further researches.

## **Literature Review**

### *Previous Studies abroad*

Generally speaking, studies on the development of the conceptual metaphor both abroad and domestic have been through a long history. In the 1980s, the book *Metaphors We Live By* written by Lakoff and Johnson made the study of metaphor enter a new era. The study of metaphor can be traced back to more than two thousand years in Western countries.

Aristotle was the father of metaphor and the also the first human who expounded on metaphor systematically and comprehensively. He regarded metaphor as a figure of speech. His representative works are *Poetics* as well as *On Rhetoric*. He claimed, "by far the most important is to be good at metaphor. For this is the only thing that cannot be learned from anyone else, and it is a sign of natural genius, as to be good at metaphor is to perceive resemblance" (Aristotle, 1954: 9). He declared that metaphor should be used publicly.

In ancient Rome, Cicero and Quintilian have also studied metaphor. Cicero considered metaphor as the borrowing of words, and a kind of simile. I. A. Richards saw that metaphor as the interaction between two things. Metaphor is ubiquitous and is one of the thoughts of mankind. Martin (1979) believes that "Metaphor is the display of unexplained components of human experience, and that this component cannot be clearly expressed in conventional language".

In 1987s, Lakoff launched his incredible work: *Woman, Fire and Dangerous Things*. In this book, he discussed the relationships between thinking and meaning, which caused people to rethink the cognitive subject. According to Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphor is not only a linguistic device to express one's thought but also can increase the charm of language expression.

Western scholars' continuous study of metaphor promotes the application of metaphor in multidisciplinary research. The study of metaphor is a revolution of metaphorical research from the traditional metaphorical view dating from Aristotle. But as a matter of fact, since the 1920s, the study of metaphor has gradually had been intersected gradually. This trend also provides a new realm for the study of metaphor, which makes our research more scientific.

### Previous Studies at Home

China's metaphor study still remains in traditional rhetoric in the 1980s. It was Liu Ningsheng who first introduced conceptual metaphor into China. He (1994) extracts and translates some chapters of *Metaphors We Live By*, which

1 makes Chinese scholars start to study conceptual metaphor. In 1998, Lin Shuwu  
2 pointed out that “The introduction of conceptual metaphors can enable us to  
3 understand more metaphorical expressions in our daily life” (1998: 9).

4 Li Fuyin (2000) explained the reason why objects of metaphor study are  
5 so extensive that they become targets of interdisciplinary research. Wang  
6 Wenbin (2004: 6) illustrates that “metaphor is a structure mapping from source  
7 domain to target domain”. Wang Yin (2006) made a more in-depth analysis of  
8 metaphorical classification from different perspectives. Yu Yanchun (2006)  
9 made a further exploration of three metaphors based on the classification of  
10 Lakoff and Johnson’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

11 Last but not the least, besides the prominent scholars abovementioned, Hu  
12 Zhuanglin and Zhao Yanfang also contributed a lot to the development of  
13 domestic metaphor research, having made a systematic study of both  
14 traditional and modern metaphors at the logical and theoretical levels.

#### 15 16 *Shakespeare and his Sonnets*

17  
18 William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is regarded as the greatest English poet  
19 and dramatist of the Renaissance. In his whole lifetime, there were 38 plays,  
20 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, along with two epitaphs  
21 created. Shakespeare is not only of an age but for eternity. For more than 400  
22 years, the study of his life and his works by the scholars and researchers all  
23 over the world has never stopped. Shakespeare is a bright star shining in the  
24 history of literature, either in western countries or in China,.

25 In these sonnets, Shakespeare expressed his outlook on life positively. He  
26 presents the standard of life he advocated by praising friendship and love.  
27 However, he is not mediocre to show the Renaissance British social life, but  
28 with its beautiful form and superb skills to summarize the society at that time,  
29 causing people’s beauty, giving people the enjoyment of beauty.

#### 30 31 Studies Abroad

32  
33 The western study of Shakespeare’s sonnets has undergone a long history.  
34 In 1609, Shakespeare’s sonnets first appeared in the form of a poem collection  
35 of poem in Thorpe’s version of Shakespeare’s Sonnets.

36 Bloom says that the study of Shakespeare’s sonnets in the late 19th  
37 century and early 20th century mainly concentrates on the sorting out of poetry  
38 and the two aspects of the characters in the poem, and other problems caused  
39 by these two aspects such as creative time etc. Epton was the first one to study  
40 Shakespeare’s sonnets by poetic theory, which has a profound influence on  
41 later comers.

After Epson, Shakespeare's sonnets have been greatly expanded both in breadth and in depth. There is a prediction that the future research of Shakespeare's sonnets will be diversified further and further. Under the review of the theoretical framework, Shakespeare's sonnets will continue to take on a new look.

## Studies at Home

Metaphor study from the cognitive point of view is a hot spot in the field of linguistics research. Domestic scholars have studied the conceptual lattice relatively late compared with western countries. Since the early 80s of last century, Chinese scholars have presented an upward trend in metaphor research.

From the early 80s of the last century to the mid-90s, metaphor research as a whole belonged to the traditional rhetoric and literary appreciation category (such as Zhao Zhongde 1983; Wen Jun 1990; Yu Yixun 1993).

Chinese cognitive linguistics has been widely applied and developed into the areas of grammar research, translation, literature, poetics, and foreign language teaching and many others. Compared with studies abroad, the studies of Shakespeare's sonnet at home is relatively later. In the early years, the purposes of researching Shakespeare and his works were not to set up a foreign model in traditional Chinese culture, but to introduce his sonnets to broaden Chinese readers' horizons.

Owing to the fact that Shakespeare represented the prime time of Renaissance, it seems certain that the ideological content of his poetry is positive, the language is fresh and expressive, this paper, through the study of metaphors in Shakespeare's sonnets, can help the reader understand Shakespeare's sonnets better and provide reference for future researchers who focus on study of Shakespeare's sonnets.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *A Brief Introduction to Conceptual Metaphor*

In the 1980s, the book of *Metaphors We Live By* led the study of metaphor into a new era. In this book, Lakoff and Johnson put forward "Conceptual Metaphor Theory" and it became the most vital part of metaphor research. They argued that human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and conceptual metaphor is a system of metaphor that lies behind daily language.

## The Definition of Conceptual Metaphor

Conceptual metaphor is a complicated activity. Scholars have defined it from different perspectives. “Metaphor has been the core issue since the generation of cognitive linguistics” (Zhang Songsong, 2016: 90). Lakoff and Turner suggested that “Conceptual Metaphor Theory can handle creativity by means of a number of processes: extending, elaborating, questioning, and composing” (1989: 17). Consistent with their explanation, is that “metaphor is only a surface layer phenomenon and the real thing that takes effect is the metaphorical concept deep inside our conceptual system” (Shu Dingfang, 2000: 26).

In cognitive linguistics, metaphors are presented by a simple formula: “X is Y”, where X is the target domain and Y is the source domain. In the CMT, the conceptual metaphors are the abstract concept in people’s mind. “In the metaphorical structure, the two seemingly unrelated things are compared with each other, because people have a similar association in their cognitive field, and in this way they use these two things to explain, evaluate, express their objective real feelings” (Zhao Yanfang, 2001: 101).

## The Classification of Conceptual Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have classified conceptual metaphors into three categories: ontological metaphor, structural metaphor and orientational metaphor.

Ontological Metaphor demonstrate that “human experiences with physical objects provide the basis for ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances” (Hu Zhuanglin, 2011: 136).

Structure Metaphor is grounded on systematic correlations with our own experience. “Structural metaphors imply how one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another” (Hu Zhuanglin, 2011: 136).

Oriental Metaphor gives a concept a spatial orientation for the fact that it has close relation with spatial orientation. “They are characterized not so much by structuring one concept in terms of another, but by a co-occurrence in our experience” (Hu Zhuanglin, 2011: 137).

## The Main Features of Conceptual Metaphor

Metaphor can inspire us to discover the similarity between different things and can also enrich our creativity and imagination, thus improving the ability to understand the relationship between humans and languages.

Metaphor measures in a way that cognition usually goes from the familiar, tangible, concrete, common concept domain to recognize the strange, invisible, abstract, rare concept domain, thus establishing the concept of the system between two links. For the feature of interdisciplinary and universal, contemporary metaphor has become one the central issues of close attention to many disciplines, such as philosophy, linguistics, cognitive science, psychology, sociology, education and so on.

In terms of experiential and unconscious objects, people often use a name to indicate a thing or a class of things, generally from individual to generic, and cultivate a categorical ability.

Under lots of circumstances, the process of generating metaphors is unconscious, as a result, so are these metaphors, which is a fine evidence that we often unconsciously obtain the metaphorical model of thinking. However, the process of creating similar metaphors is not unconscious. Zhang Minggang (1985: 29) also believed that “Metaphor from life, but also in life”.

### The Working Mechanism of the Conceptual Metaphor

Metaphor includes conceptual metaphor and specific metaphorical language expression, originally “Mapping” is a mathematical concept, “referring to the correspondence between the two sets, making a member of a set have a corresponding member in another set” (Lan Chun, 2005: 116). To begin with, it involves two domains, and they are source domain and target domain, which are also two different concepts.

### *The Relationships between Language, Cognition and Metaphor*

I. A. Richards ever says, “There is a metaphor in three sentences spoken in oral communication in people’s daily life” (1936: 92). The quotation indicates the relationship between language, cognition and metaphor clearly. When we are having an analysis of the linguistic data based on the cognitive metaphor theory, the relationships should be considered.

### **Analysis of the Conceptual Metaphors in Shakespeare’s Sonnets**

Based on the theoretical framework in the last chapter, this chapter will make endeavors to apply Conceptual Metaphor to the analysis of the metaphors of Shakespeare’s sonnets. The target domains of Shakespeare’s sonnets discussed in this thesis are LIFE, LOVE and TIME.



## 1 *Metaphors of LIFE*

2

3 Shakespeare's sonnets, different kinds of source domains are mapped on  
4 the target domain of LIFE. Compared with other concepts, Shakespeare uses  
5 less metaphor on LIFE concept. The source domains of metaphors on LIFE  
6 include business, journey, nature, feast, and music.

7

## 8 Structural Metaphor of LIFE

9

10 Structural Metaphor plays the most important role for the reason that it  
11 allows us to go beyond orientation and referring and gives us the possibility to  
12 structure one concept according to another. It means that structural Metaphors  
13 are grounded in our experience. Structural Metaphors imply how one concept  
14 is metaphorically structured in terms of another.

15

## 16 *LIFE is Business*

17

18 We can see that in Sonnet 6, the poet is still persuading his friend to get  
19 married and have children so as to make their children and grandchildren  
20 inherit the beauty and charm. In Line 5, the poet thinks that this kind of "use"  
21 is not "forbidden usury" and it can "happies those that pay the willing loan".  
22 Your children will make your beauty "ten times refigured". This is the very  
23 reason why you should marry and have children. Only through this method,  
24 after your death, even death also takes you helpless. That is because your  
25 beauty will be double magnified in your children and grandchildren. In the last  
26 two lines of this sonnet, the poet suggests his friend not to be "self-willed",  
27 because his friend is so beautiful and should not "make worms thine heir".

28

## 29 *LIFE is a Journey*

30

31 Generally speaking, life is always compared to a journey of humans.  
32 Whatsoever, in Sonnet 7, there is a special metaphor that life is a journey of the  
33 sun. Along with the sun travelling from east to west every single day, people  
34 see its "new-appearing sight" just like human beings' life "having climbed the  
35 steep-up heavenly hill". Here, human beings are seen as a rising sun, while our  
36 youth is the sun in the morning. In Line 8, "pilgrimage" symbolizes strong  
37 youth in one's middle age while youth is the sun at noon. And in Line 10, the  
38 sun begins to fall just like a man is growing old, while old age is deemed as a  
39 setting sun.

40

41

## Ontological Metaphor of LIFE

### *LIFE is Music*

Sonnet 8 gives a full explanation of this metaphor and makes it vivid. In this sonnet, everyone is a small part of music. Every single life is a “string” and married life is the “concord”. In this Sonnet, the poet advises his friend to get married. He regards married family life as harmonious as “Music”.

### *LIFE is a Battle*

In Sonnet 1, Shakespeare said to his friend that beautiful things are mortal and must be inherited by their children and grandchildren. To say it differently, his friend is only reliant on himself, and appreciate his own beauty, maintain his beauty himself, not rely on others even does not marry others even not allow future generations to inherit the beauty. This behavior is against his will, owing to the reason that he does not cooperate with others, and his beauty can not be passed on to future generations.

## *Metaphors of LOVE*

Shakespeare’s sonnets are full of numerous love metaphors, explaining the rationality of love in his sonnets. The love in Shakespeare’s sonnets is not only about a feeling of sexual desire, but also a devoted affection to the friend of the same sex. The source domains of metaphors on LOVE include treasure, business, appetite, burden, battle and slavery.

## Structural Metaphor of LOVE

Structural Metaphors are grounded in our experience, which imply how one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another.

### *LOVE is Treasure*

In the last two lines of Sonnet 29, “For thy sweet love remember’d such wealth brings/That then I scorn to change my state with kind.” Shakespeare presents the metaphor LOVE IS TREASURE the first time in the sequence by utilizing the expression “wealth”. The 29th Sonnet is a soliloquy of love. In this sonnet, his thoughts and feelings changed from negative to positive. At the very beginning, the poet was sad deep down in his heart because that he was looked down upon by others. However, when the poet thought of his loved one, he was satisfied with his own life. “Like to the lark at break of day arising /

From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate". At that moment, there is only endless and infinite happiness in the poet's heart. In aggregate, the poet proudly announces that "For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my state with kind."

#### LOVE is Business

Shakespeare explains to us the scar of love to the readers implicitly. In the process of business transaction, the two parties have to conclude a contract. And when they break the contract, it will be the moment when the two parties part.

In Sonnet 41, the poet found the excuse for the Fair Young Man. His beauty, his youth, and the unconstrained life after leaving the poet made him confused by women, because it is difficult to reject a woman, therefore the Fair Young Man betrayed their love and fell in love with other women is reasonable. In the last three Lines of Sonnet 41, "Where thou art forced to break a twofold truth." Here, by thy beauty tempting her to thee, Thine, by thy beauty being false to me", the poet blames the Fair Young Man for making the woman break her contract with the poet, and the Fair Young Man breaks his contract with the poet at the same time, which is "break a twofold truth".

#### Ontological Metaphor of LOVE

##### LOVE is a Battle

In Sonnet 46, the poet has a portrait of his friend, the poet's "eyes and heart are at a mortal war", because the eyes can see it, but the heart can not see it. In this battle, heart is the plaintiff, and the eyes are the defendants. Thus the poet's thoughts came to their "verdict". Finally, the judge's verdict is as follows: the poet's eyes can see the "outward part" of his friend, and the poet's heart feels the "inward love" of his friend.

##### LOVE is a Slavery

In Sonnet 57, the poet mentioned "slave" once again. He thinks it is "God" who made him the "slave", "Being your vassal bound to stay your leisure". The poet could stand it even when his friend scolds and hurts him. In Line 11 and Line 12 of Sonnet 58, the poet said that "To what you will; to you it doth belong, Yourself to pardon of self-doing crime". The poet believes that his friend could do what please himself and also he has the right to forgive his own crimes. From the two lines we can infer that although the poet does not

express himself in an explicit way, the poet is always in an inferior position in the relationship with the Fair Young Man. In the relationship of love, if the status of both parties are not equal, then this relationship can not last. In this love, the poet is a slave.

### *Metaphors of TIME*

#### Structural Metaphor of TIME

Structural metaphor refers to the construction of another concept by one concept. The cognitive domains of these two concepts are naturally different. However, their structure remains the same, that is, there is a regular correspondence between their respective components.

#### *TIME is Treasure*

We can see from Shakespeare's sonnets that there is only one expression of this metaphor in Sonnet 30. In this sonnet, the poet remembers many past sad things in the past, as well as many deceased friends. But when he came to think of his loved one, all his sufferings will disappear. In Line 4 of this sonnet, "And with old woes new wail my dear Time's waste", time cruelly took away many fancy memories of the poet, and to the poet is like being deprived of the treasure.

#### *TIME is Sugar*

In Line 8 of Sonnet 36, "Yet doth it steal sweet hours from love's delight", here "sweet" implies the tasteless time. This kind of metaphor is very previous in Shakespeare's sonnets. The last two Lines of this poem are exactly the same as the last two Lines of Sonnet 96. Since the poet is deeply in deep love with his friend, he is willing to bear the all of his friend; "thy good report" is included.

#### Ontological Metaphor of TIME

#### *TIME is a Farmer*

In Sonnet 123, the poet proclaims that he understands that things appear to be old and new, and everything in the world is going round circles. In Line 14, "I will be true despite thy scythe and thee", here, "thy" refers to time, and

“scythe” means the passing of time. The poet believes that as long as they maintain their loyalty, they will not be afraid of the cruelty of time.

#### TIME is a Tyrant

In Sonnet 16, the poet thinks his poem can make the beauty of his friend eternal in verses, because “Art (poem) is a way for humans to overcome time, and art (poem) can be long and eternal.” (Zhang Jian, 2014: 46). However, his friend can do more because he can give birth to a baby to inherit his beauty, and this is what a poet can not do. In the first two Lines of this Sonnet, “But wherefore do not you a mightier way / Make war upon this bloody tyrant Time”, here, the “this bloody tyrant Time” means the cruelty of time. In Line 9, the “lines of life” refers to the wrinkles on people’s faces. And the “sweet skill” means married and have children.

#### **Conclusion**

On the one hand, from the analysis in Section Four, we can infer that in Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets, there are mainly three types of target domains with high frequency of metaphors in Shakespeare’s sonnets: namely, metaphors of “LOVE”, metaphors of “LIFE”, and metaphors of “TIME”.

On the other hand, it is indicated that one source domain can be mapped onto different target domains, based on Part Four. And by analyzing the metaphors in Shakespeare’s sonnets, we can see that he fancies to utilize negative images as well as concepts to describe LOVE metaphors, the ones about burden, battle, slavery, weapon orphan and medicine included. There has been proof that in Shakespeare’s view, life is ruthless and cruel, and it is poetry that makes love and beauty perpetual and worthwhile, which are the things we cannot perceive as common people.

In aggregate, the author’s analysis of the representative poems of Shakespeare’s sonnets cannot fully reflect all the metaphors of Shakespeare’s sonnets. There is no denying the fact that there are still limitations to the research in the present thesis.

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