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Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*

The Poisoned Cup of Experience

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ヘンリー・ジェームズ 『ある夫人の肖像』

経験の毒盃

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『ある夫人の肖像』は、イザベル・アーチャーの旧大陸における経験を通した変容物語であり、ジェームズは、愚かな経験を通してのみ一貫して賢明になれると主張している。旧大陸におけるイザベルの経験は苦い経験であるが、その経験を通して、自己中心的な存在から愛に支えられた受容的精神性の持ち主にまで自己を高めた価値ある経験であると言える。

Introduction

Henry James started to write *The Portrait of a Lady* in 1880. In his preface to the New York edition, he wrote:

> The point is, however, that this single small corner-stone, the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny, had begun with being all my outfit for the large building of *The Portrait of a Lady.* [1]

From this description, it is clear that James had the idea of portraying a lady who confronts her destiny. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James describes the protagonist as:

> a person of great good faith, and if there was a great deal of folly in her wisdom those who judge her severely may have the satisfaction of finding that, later, she became consistently wise only at the cost of an amount of folly which will constitute almost a direct appeal to charity. (ⅩⅡ:157)

This is a story of the transfiguration of a protagonist, Isabel.[2] So, the reader has to read this story, keeping in mind how Isabel develops: in other words, according to James, *the scale of her relation to herself.*[3] Isabel's character develops finally through her folly. It seems that James is saying through Isabel that we become wise through experience ― in this case folly ― with reality. The purpose of this paper is to consider Isabel's vicissitudes through her experience.

For that purpose, first of all, we need to consider Isabel's character because James has the literary theory that a person's character necessarily decides his destiny.[4] At the same time, we will consider how Isabel's character influences her destiny and how Isabel deludes herself leading to that folly, through which she develops from a self-centered romantic, idealistic woman interested in seeing the world to a receptive woman feeling grief and pain, and love after a disastrous experience.

Chapter Ⅰ Freedom, Independence, and Imagination

The story begins with the scene at an English country-house, Gardencourt, where three men are enjoying leisurely afternoon tea talking about such "desultory" topics as a young American girl, Isabel Archer, who is supposed to come soon, thus introducing our heroine. We meet romantic Isabel Archer, who loves freedom and independence, when she arrives at

Gardencourt from Albany, N.Y. For our heroine, Isabel Archer, Gardencourt becomes "a starting point" of her future life.

She loves romantic imagination and enjoys her own world detached from real life, giving full scope to her imagination. The reader finds that Isabel is helplessly romantic in her conversation with Ralph when they spend time happily in the dimly-lit gallery of Gardencourt in the evening shortly after her arrival in Europe; Isabel says, "Then in a moment, to change the subject. Please tell me – isn't there a ghost?" Isabel's imagination of a ghost is such a romantic one detached from real life that Ralph indicates, "It has never been seen by a young, happy, innocent person like you. You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge. In that way your eyes are opened to it." Isabel's imagination is so active that one could say that "when the door [is] not open it [jumps] out of the window," and doesn't work properly on such an important occasion as deciding whom to marry, even though she enjoys her romantic imagination in her life.

In this story, James presents three types of independence which are closely related to the theme: independence in a moral sense, independence in a financial sense, and independence in freedom-of-behavior sense. Isabel flatters herself on her independence and seems to conduct herself freely and independently. When she comes to Gardencourt with her aunt after her parents' death and sees Ralph for the first time, she retorts startlingly to Ralph, "Oh no; she [Mrs. Touchett] has not adopted me. I'm not a candidate for adoption." She adds that "I'm very fond of my liberty." By this, we understand her strong desire to be free and independent. Of course, that she does not like to be under pecuniary obligations is very crucial to this story. Young Isabel seems to delude herself that financial independence is real independence, the result of which is her decision to marry Osmond, satisfied with the feeling of happiness brought about by the money that she has inherited from her uncle.

Isabel is self-assured. When she meets her aunt who has come to see her for the first time in Albany, N.Y., Isabel deals with her at ease. And when she meets her cousin, uncle and a lord for the first time at Gardencourt in Europe, they consider her manner natural as if she has been there for long time because she seems not to feel any doubts about the cultural gap with Europe. Because of Isabel's overconfident desire to be independent, the reader feels the youthful Isabel's idealism and spirit. In the conversation between Isabel and Ralph, the reader often feels Isabel's conceited confidence at being independent, and remains aware of her youthful innocence while Ralph feels affectionate toward her.

Isabel is "innocent and dogmatic," and "very liable to the sin of self-esteem," by which she leads herself to an unexpected miserable destiny in the old world. Isabel has firm self-reliance which represents transcendentalism.[5] She has a tendency to believe in rightness despite scant evidence, and her ideas are never corrected by any authority. Because of this, we can well say that Isabel has the possibility of making great mistakes in her life. In addition to this character, as "she had seen very little of the evil of the world", it is no wonder that she never doubts others, and is trapped by the monetary intrigue for her huge inheritance in the putrid old world.

Chapter Ⅱ Refusal of Proposals

James develops the story of Isabel's life focusing considerably on marriage, so we need to consider this to understand Isabel. About marriage, Isabel has an opinion seemingly suitable to that of an independent woman. Isabel has the deluded idea that staying single is a fine sign of independence for a woman. She says definitely: "I don't need the aid of a clever man to teach me how to live. I can find it out for myself." Here, the reader finds a confident Isabel, who hopes to be on equal terms with men. Upon learning that Isabel respects single Henrietta, who works as a female editor

and has adopted children, and considers her a model of feminine independence, the reader realizes her misunderstanding of the difference between financial independence and real independence in personal relationships.

Isabel doesn't want to begin life by marrying and she "doesn't wish to marry till she has seen Europe." She has a strong desire to see the world and explore life. Before her, the world spreads out so widely as to induce her to come to Europe. Isabel puts more weight on seeing the world and exploring life than marrying, with the idea that financial independence is real independence.

Isabel hopes to see a lord when she first comes to Gardencourt. Fortunately, she meets Lord Warburton and thus her wish is realized soon after she arrives in Europe. It would be seen as natural if Isabel had accepted such a nice proposal from an elegant nobleman such as Lord Warburton. James says eight or nine out of ten young women would accept such a proposal, but Isabel refuses because of her own beliefs. Here, we need to look into Isabel's mind to understand that her refusal of the proposal derives from her idealism.

The main reason why Isabel refuses Lord Warburton's proposal is that she fears her freedom might be confined in the tradition-bound society of European nobility if she marries him. James describes what Isabel thinks:

> What she felt was that a territorial, a political, a social magnate had conceived the design of drawing her into the system in which he rather invidiously lived and moved. A certain instinct, not imperious, but persuasive, told her to resist – murmured to her that virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own. (ⅩⅡ:156)

Isabel feels that marriage with a lord would make her like "some wild caught creature in a vast cage". In the letter to Lord Warburton in which she tells why she has rejected his proposal, the reader can find that Isabel has her own ideas about how to live her life. At the same time, the reader never fails to understand that Isabel rejects Warburton's proposal because she wants to prove her independence by turning away from the monetary and material benefits that such a marriage would bring. Isabel has refused the "fabulous occasion" of marriage because "she must do great things, she must do something greater."

Isabel has another suitor besides Lord Warburton: Casper Goodwood, the son of the proprietor of well-known cotton-mills in Massachusetts. He, an incarnation of energy, has the power to make Isabel feel deprived of her freedom. To Casper Goodwood's ardent courtship, Isabel gives a two-year grace, saying, "I don't' want to marry … I shall probably never do it – no, never." James stresses again how fond Isabel is of freedom and independence; Isabel says, "I like my liberty too much. If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of…it's my personal independence." Loving freedom and independence, Isabel wishes to choose the course of her life actively by herself.

By rejecting worthy proposals, she seems to feel enjoyment in putting her theory about marriage into practice, and she is excited about "the exercise of power." After refusing both proposals, Isabel feels "an irresistible impulse" and drops to her knees before her bed and hides her face in her arms, trembling all over with the complicated feeling of the pleasure of love but also of fear for a future resulting from her rejection of the fabulous proposals. This impressive scene helps the reader to understand her sense of self-satisfaction with her romantic belief, and her fear of uncertain experiences in the unforeseen distant future.

Isabel receives a large inheritance from her uncle after rejecting the two proposals. When an extremely wealthy young American woman in want of experience is romantic and innocent, we understand how unprepared she will be at the time she meets unexpected occurrences in the real life of the old world. James leads the reader to consider how Isabel will conduct herself in tradition-bound European society after purposely

refusing the fabulous occasion of marriage. Knowing the relationship between Isabel's own choices and her destiny, the reader never fails to feel her cynicism in what she says to Casper Goodwood "I shall not be an easy victim!"

Chapter Ⅲ The Poisoned Drink

Isabel, with her strong desire to see the world and explore life, has an interesting conversation with Ralph, which is crucial to the theme of this story: the process through which Isabel's character develops.

> "I don't see what harm there is in my wishing not to tie myself. I don't want to begin life by marrying. There are other things a woman can do."
> .....
> .....
> "You want to see life—…"
> "…I do want to look about me."
> "You want to drink the cup of experience."
> "No, I don't wish to touch the cup of experience. It's a poisoned drink! I only want to see for myself."
> "You want to see, but not to feel," Ralph remarked. (XⅤ:203)

In Isabel's remarks that she wants to see for herself but doesn't wish to touch the poisoned cup of experience, it is inevitable that the reader feels some kind of contradiction. However, in the contradiction, the irony of Isabel's disastrous destiny exists beyond her recognition. Despite her desire not to touch the poisoned cup of experience, Isabel is obliged to experience drinking from it by exerting her imagination to idealize Osmond and Madame Merle.

Experienced and wise Ralph, who feels profound love for Isabel, perceives Isabel's inexperienced state of mind. When Ralph says, "You want to see, but not to feel", the reader feels Ralph's desire in which he wishes Isabel to feel his love for her. However, it is not unnatural that Isabel, who wants only to see the world, can not feel Ralph's love at this point; her desire for experience is aimed outward at the world rich with beauty and traditions in Europe, not inward at human beings even though she is interested in human nature.

Isabel, believing in the theory that a woman should not begin her life with marriage, puts her theory into practice by refusing nice proposals; however she is easily charmed by Osmond and decides to marry him after his short courtship, as if it were nothing. So, what makes her decide to marry him? We need to examine Isabel closely to understand her.

When Isabel meets Osmond, she feels he is somehow a mysterious man different from anybody she has ever met. For Isabel, he seems a high-minded dilettante with his own tastes for everything. Osmond pretends not to have any interest in the vulgar world, and says the only people he envies are the Emperor of Russia, the Sultan of Turkey and the Pope of Rome. When Osmond first invites Isabel to his ancient villa on the hilltop in Florence after their acquaintance, she is so fascinated with the exquisite atmosphere surrounding the house in the soft spring afternoon that her romantic imagination exerts itself fully. In such circumstances, Osmond talks tactically about art, beauty and history, subjects in which Isabel is interested, and so she becomes more fascinated with him. Osmond is so sensitive to beauty that his unspeakable atmosphere easily attracts Isabel. Osmond's way of talking to Isabel has so sweet a feeling that she is quite naturally charmed. Thus, we have to admit that he completely suits her tastes.

As if to praise Osmond's secluded way of life, Isabel, full of romantic imagination, says: "That's a very pleasant life to renounce everything but Correggio!" At this, the reader is vividly shown that Isabel thinks she can live only with romantic ideas, but lacks practical experience.

Charmed by Osmond's apparent transcendent pose of indifference to the world, Isabel decides to marry him with the deluded idea of decency to aid him with her huge fortune, wishing to "be his Providence." Because

of her fortune, Isabel makes the mistake of thinking that she will maintain her independence despite her marriage to Osmond, who has nothing of advantages. At the same time, Isabel mistakenly thinks that it is an act of devotion to put out her hands and take Osmond, by which Osmond's orbit will enter hers. Here, we have to say that this hubris is too insolent to become "Providence" for anyone. The reader finds that Isabel almost deifies herself in her mind. Unfortunately, at this point, of course, she does not know her idea is flawed.

Insofar as Isabel chooses Osmond as a partner, the reader finds Isabel's innocent and deluded romantic idea about real life. Ralph, who has insight into real life, advises Isabel that a great risk exists in marriage with Osmond, but she does not accept his advice because of her stubborn belief. Isabel marries Osmond because of her own belief that he is the "finest," rejecting the advice of others. However, there is an undoubted mistake in her absolute self-confidence, which we can see when we consider real life.

When Isabel first meets Madame Merle, she is attracted to the older woman, though later she finds out that Madame Merle is Osmond's lover. For Isabel, Madame Merle's only fault is, that "she is not natural," but at this point, it is needless to say again that, because of her innocence, Isabel cannot understand the nature of Madame Merle's unnaturalness. It is quite natural for Isabel not to be able to have any insight into the devious designs that the experienced Madame Merle has on Isabel's inheritance. In the early part of this story, the discerning reader never fails to suspect Madame Merle's evil intentions to intrigue against Isabel, especially when reading how Madame Merle, aware of Isabel's huge fortune, meaningfully kisses her.

Isabel, who believes that spiritual value is more important than money and things, asserts, in contrast with experienced Madame Merle, that things around her do not "express" her. Their opinions clearly represent their different natures. Madame Merle says to Isabel:

> When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances....we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? ...I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things!* One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive. (XIX:253)

Isabel counters this:

> I don't agree with you. I think just the other way...but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should! (XIX:253)

The tragic irony that Isabel's undying American spirit is finally betrayed comes clear when we learn that she cannot understand Madame Merle and asserts her ideals.[6] However, though Isabel is betrayed by her temporary inability to understand Madame Merle's philosophy of life, her concrete attitude of putting importance on universal spiritual values finally leads her, without loss of her own receptive spiritual identity, to return to Rome where Osmond is waiting for her, accepting the putrid European circumstances around her, which are different from those of her native country.

Isabel, who misjudges Osmond, cannot guess the relationship between Osmond and Madame Merle. When James depicts the unnatural actions and atmosphere between Osmond and Madame Merle, the reader becomes suspicious of their relationship, whereas Isabel remains unaware. James shows Isabel's innocence by indicating indirectly to the reader the relationship between Osmond and Madame Merle.

The state of Isabel's unhappy marital life and a reflection of her choices is depicted in detail in Isabel's reflective monologue at the vigil of dying Ralph. As a result of the mutual misunderstandings of Osmond and Isabel, the distinct difference in their ideals is revealed after their marriage. Osmond's ideal is "a conception of high prosperity and propriety, of the aristocratic life," while Isabel's aristocratic life is "the union of great knowledge with great liberty." A great gap exists between the philosophies of Osmond and Isabel. In tradition-bound Europe, Osmond holds to the importance of tradition by which he is confined, and he cannot be indifferent to the world in which vulgarity exists, even though he pretends to be so. On the other hand, Isabel is free from tradition, and also cannot be indifferent to the world because "her deepest enjoyment [is] to feel the continuity between the movements of her own soul and the agitations of the world." Because of the difference in their ideals, Osmond despises Isabel, blaming her for her lack of tradition. For Isabel, with the American spirit of loving freedom and independence free from tradition, Osmond's low opinion of her is so intolerable as to undermine her identity.

In chapter XLIX, the reader meets Isabel, who at last learns of the relationship between Osmond and Madame Merle after a period of suspicion. As Isabel believes she has chosen her marriage to Osmond by herself, the revelation of the conspiracy of Madame Merle and Osmond is a fatal shock. How intolerable it is for Isabel, very confident of her own ability to choose her destiny, to find her marriage has been contrived.

To relieve her sadness, Isabel takes "old Rome into her confidence, for in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seems a less unnatural catastrophe." By visiting the ruins in Rome, where many people have suffered from time immemorial, Isabel shares suffering with others and feels the smallness of her grief compared with that of Rome's past. By sharing her suffering and grief with that of many people from the distant past to the present, Isabel's grief is abated.

Even in the deep sorrow caused by her failed marriage, Isabel feels compassion for Madame Merle, with whom she shares her grief as a woman, because, although Madame merle had planned the marriage for Osmond, she has become "so vile for nothing." By emphasizing Madame Merle's regret, James underscores Isabel's purity. At the same time, James must want to present Isabel's leniency when she sympathizes with Madame Merle's suffering and grief despite her hard experience. James says it is Isabel's "characteristic," and we can say that Isabel's compassionate character emerges from her experience. We must recognize that Isabel has changed through experience, from a woman who has only wanted to see the world and life to a woman who can feel for others.

Another shocking revelation for Isabel, besides that her marriage has been planned by Madame Merle, is that Ralph had asked his father to leave her the inheritance. Receiving notice of Ralph's critical condition, Isabel wants to go to London to see him, but Osmond doesn't allow her to do so. With complex emotions, Isabel is obliged not to see Ralph at Gardencourt. However, the catalyst that stimulates Isabel to go to him is the revelation of the unmistakable fact disclosed by Osmond's sister that Madame Merle is Osmond's lover and Pansy is their child. For Isabel, who believes that she had chosen her marriage with her own will, the revelation is so mournful as to cause her to feel the irresistible impulse of seeing Ralph. Here, the reader finds that Isabel deeply desires relief, which seeing Ralph will bring her.

Chapter Ⅳ Eternal Pleasure

On the way back to Gardencourt to see the critically ill Ralph, Isabel's single desire is "to reach her much-embracing refuge," Gardencourt, where Ralph is waiting for her. Although she hopes for eternal rest, she feels deeply in her soul the sense that life would be her business for a long time to come. James expresses his hope to Isabel that "She should never escape; she should last to the end." James stresses the importance

for Isabel to live vividly despite her predicament. From this, one cannot help believing that James seems to have the favorable feeling of supporting Isabel emotionally, despite criticism that he [James] does not seem to love Isabel....[7]

Near the end of the meditative night vigil, Isabel thinks of Ralph's generosity. With her respectful mind, Isabel feels comfortable being with Ralph. After three days in a kind of grateful silence, they talk calmly about what is on their minds. Up to this point, Ralph has held back from expressing his love to Isabel as a suitor because of his ill health, but now, near death, he asks Isabel frankly, "Ah, what is it you have done for me?," hoping to feel Isabel's love. His question is pathetic and does not fail to make Isabel reproach herself for not feeling his love.

Recalling Ralph's affectionate deed for Isabel, the reader remembers that he parts with his inheritance from his father so that she can spread her wings freely and not need to marry for money. As a result of his generosity and affection, we know well the ironical result. Even in his critical condition, Ralph is so thoughtful of Isabel's deep sorrow that he says gently, "Isabel, I wish it [life] were over for you." Ralph's words are so moving as to touch Isabel's heart:

> "You won't lose me – you'll keep me. Keep me in your heart. I shall be nearer to you than I've ever been. Dear Isabel, life is better; for in life there's love. Death is good – but there's no love." (L Ⅳ:621)

This affectionate message gives Isabel the hope to live, though she is so deeply stricken with grief as to hope to die. Feeling Ralph's affectionate love, Isabel has a heart-to-heart talk with Ralph in order to understand each other. Isabel has been wearing a mask pretending to be happy in her marital life with Osmond; however, now, she confesses that Osmond has married her for the money. Ralph regrets that he asked his father to give the inheritance to Isabel, saying that "I believe I ruined you." Hearing Ralph's self-reproach, Isabel, for the first time, confesses to Ralph the truth of her disastrous marital life, taking off her mask.

For Ralph and Isabel, now nothing matters but "the knowledge that they [are] looking at the truth together." At this point, they are completely fused mentally, and are embraced with mutual love. Ralph's affectionate but broken words continue despite his critical condition and embrace Isabel wholly: "I don't believe that such a generous mistake as yours can hurt you for more than a little." How affectionate his words are in acceptance of Isabel's personality, including even her faults.

Isabel feels Ralph's deep love during their unreserved talk, and the deep pleasure his love brings to Isabel in her miserable predicament is immeasurable. Ralph's last words to Isabel before dying, "And remember this,... that if you've been hated you've also been loved. Ah but, Isabel – *adored!*" are so moving that they will remain in Isabel's heart forever giving her support in life. Hearing Ralph's last words, Isabel prostrates herself over Ralph, uttering "Oh, my brother!" In that state, nothing exists in Isabel but the feeling of love for the dying Ralph.

Isabel's sadness is deepened by Ralph's death, but his love is immortalized by his death; the deeper her grief is, the more profound her pleasure in his love. Ralph's imperishable love for Isabel is her eternal pleasure. Although Isabel loses Ralph, his love lives in Isabel's mind forever providing her with energy to confront difficulties in real life and to accept other people as they are, just as Ralph has accepted Isabel as she is.

Chapter Ⅴ The Receptive Decision

After Ralph's funeral, Isabel finally chooses to return to Rome. James does not give any clear explanation about why Isabel does this. However, in only two simple sentences, he shows us her decision: "She [Isabel] had not known where to turn; but she knew

now. There was a very straight path."

Isabel now has learned from Ralph the pleasure and the greatness of love, and Ralph's love lives in Isabel's mind giving emotional support forever. Though she has lost so much that was precious to her, Ralph's love provides her with the resources to continue her life and to love others, accepting them as they are. In Rome, Pansy as well as Osmond are waiting for Isabel. Isabel cannot help feeling affection toward dependent Pansy, who is attached to her, so we can imagine she will love her as deeply as she loves Ralph. That is the pleasure of her life. Osmond is depicted as the incarnation of evil within tradition-bound Europe; however, he also has his hidden sorrow deriving from his life in Europe. Is it possible for Isabel, who has become sensitive to others, not to feel his sorrow? Now, as she has become receptive to others through her experience, she might love even Osmond. Considering these facts, for Isabel no other decision but returning to Rome exists.

Conclusion

In Isabel Archer's life, there are many aspects similar to the life of Henry James. According to Henry James' *Notebooks*[8], written in 1881, it is quite clear that to choose where to live is a significant problem for James just as for Isabel. Based on the fact that this novel was begun in 1880, we may say that James' experiences strongly reflects those of Isabel. In other words, Isabel's experiences represent those of James. I believe that Isabel's experiences strongly support James' idea of becoming consistently wise at the cost of having committed acts of folly.

Isabel, innocent and pure of mind, is unexpectedly obliged to meet predicaments resulting from her own choices in the old world. Isabel has transformed herself through the poisoned experience from a woman who wants to see the world from the outside to a woman who feels the inner part of human beings. Thus, only through experience has Isabel transformed herself. In other words, she has become wise. Therefore, James, I believe, is saying that we can become wise through experience. The poisoned cup of experience provides a bitter drink to Isabel, but it can be said that the drink is valuable on the grounds that, after drinking from that symbolic cup, she has become aware of her folly and learns to suffer and to love people accepting them as they are.

Notes

1 Henry James, "Preface," in *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), p. 47.
2 Einosuke Tamura, "*A Portrait of a Lady,*" in *Henry James Kenkyu.* (Tokyo: Hokuseidou Shoten, 1980), p. 145.
3 "Preface," in *The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 50.
4 Eiichi Fujita, "Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady* —Transcendentalism in Tradition and Convention," in *Amerikajin to Bunkateki Dentou* (Osaka: Sougensha, 1991), P. 63.
5 Ibid., p. 65.
6 Kenzaburou Ohashi, "From Romanticism to Realism" in *Koten Amerika Bungaku wo Kataru* (Tokyo: Nanundou, 1993), p. 220.
7 Geoffrey Moore, "Introduction," in *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), p. 36.
8 Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James.* eds. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock. (New York: Oxford University Press, A Galaxy Book 1961), p. 23.

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