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THEMATIC DIMENSIONS ABOUT DEATH IN UNPOPULAR TALES, BY AGUSTINA BESSA-LUÍS

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ABSTRACT

This study highlights spheres of the life and work of Agustina Bessa-Luís, the critical reception and theoretical contributions about the themes selected in the writer's short stories. More specifically, it will be researched how the theme of death composes different possibilities of literary construction in the short stories "A Cold Winter" (1984), "Green Philosophy" (1984), "The Approved Lovers" (2002) and "The Procession" (2024). This work takes place in dialogue with the considerations raised by the critical reception of Catherine Dumas (2011) and Anamaria Filizola (2022); and with some theoretical contributions from the strands of Theme and Thematology, arranged in the conceptions proposed by Álvaro Manuel Machado and Daniel-Henri Pageaux (2001) and by Boris Tomachevski (2014). The research highlights certain contributions of the writer to the modality of the short story; it highlights the procedures of social criticism, psychological investigation of the characters, compositional diversity; and it points to a specific adoption of theoretical proposals on theme and motive.

Keywords: Short stories. Portuguese Literature. Death. Critical reception. Thematic and Thematic Studies.

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INTRODUCTION

In this work we propose to investigate the importance of the presence of death in the composition of short stories by the Portuguese writer Agustina Bessa-Luís, in articulation with certain perspectives of the theoretical strands of Theme and Thematology and with part of the critical reception of these short narratives. Although the short story is a less celebrated textual modality in Augustinian production, it offers a privileged space for literary experimentation. The narratives of the works *Contos impopulares* and *A brusca* (1984; 2004), published by Agustina Bessa-Luís, provide a great variety of themes and a wide variety of procedures, as we see, for example, in "A cold winter", "Green philosophy", "The approved lovers" and "The procession", which will be part of the studies of this work. To illustrate, the short story "A Cold Winter" deals with characters who are in good socioeconomic conditions, while "Green Philosophy" reports the ills of characters who live on the margins of society. "The procession", in turn, reports hours of the daily life of a character without a name and without great characterizations, while "The approved lovers" brings details about the life of a widow who tries, unsuccessfully, to resume her affective and love life.

As a result of this investigation, the work highlights the visualization of certain biobliographical spheres of the writer, such as: the Augustinian interlocution with Lusitanian customs, folklores and myths; reflections on problems related to the feminine (such as social persecution and affective interdiction); the polyvalence of Bessa-Luís' writing; the rereadings of her narrative works for the cinematographic sphere. In relation to the critical appreciation of Augustinian short stories, the compositional intersection between the elaboration of short stories and the creation of novels is highlighted; the glimpse of the experimental inclination of Agustina Bessa-Luís' short stories; the reciprocal feedback between the mythological universe and the construction of narratives; the forms of incorporation of eroticism in short narratives; the importance of Freud's propositions in Agustina's literary composition; the metamorphoses of memory in the processes of writing; the configuration of social repression in the conflictive chains of the tales.

As for the interface with the theoretical strands of Theme and Thematology, the investigation placed as products of this research the glimpse of the following aspects: the fictional composition of diverse configurations for the disposition of the instance of death in Augustinian tales (such as, for example, natural or episodic death, the death of the aura of glory of a social group, the insertion of the unusual, the perishing of desire, death associated with the imposture of society, death in life); the writer's thematic and

compositional contributions to the narrative variant of the short story; and the analytical expedients of psychological probing and social criticism.

METHODOLOGY

This research is located in the scope of research in the Area of "Literary Studies", which is dimensioned by the investigations of an intrinsic character of the literary work (with a focus on the examination of textuality planes, disposition of compositional structures, survey of analytical levels or categories, configuration of language elaborations, etc.) and extrinsic guideline to the literary fabric (with emphasis on articulations and debates inherent, contextual and extratextual in interconnection with interdisciplinary studies and cultural studies). On the other hand, this investigation emerges from the Research Line of "Thematic composition and theoretical-reflective transport in contemporary literatures", which seeks to debate thematic horizons, constitutive paths and theoretical-reflective processes of contemporary literary texts in a disciplinary interface. In relation to the intended objectives, the article is established in the exploratory research proposal, as it seeks to go through and probe the areas marked for study in order to point out problems and launch hypotheses that expand preexisting reflections. As for the technical procedures, there is a preponderance of the bibliographic bias through the examination of theoretical contributions, critical surveys and textual samples of bibliographic origin.

Specifically, the research is based on some perspectives of the Thematic strand, in the dimension provided by Boris Tomachevski (*apud* Todorov, 2014), and the current of Thematology, in its scope pointed out by Álvaro Manuel Machado and Daniel-Henri Pageaux (2001). With the adoption of these two theoretical tendencies, it seeks to point out the thematic importance of death in Bessa-Luís' short stories and to provide reflections on his short story universe. On the other hand, the study seeks to support certain social criticisms and compositional riches present in Augustinian tales with the help of topics pointed out by researchers Catherine Dumas (2011) and Anamaria Filizola (2022).

AGUSTINA BESSA-LUÍS IN LIFE AND WORK

According to literary critics, Agustina Bessa-Luís is one of the most outstanding writers of contemporary Portuguese literature, recognized for her deep writing and a detailed analysis of the human condition. As Fernanda Ribeiro, director of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto, pointed out:

> Remembering Agustina Bessa-Luís is a privilege and an obligation, as the Faculty of Arts and Humanities is an institution where Literature has a top place. And the best way to remember Agustina is, without a doubt, to disseminate her work, so that it can be accessible to everyone without restrictions of any kind. (Ribeiro *apud* FLUP, 2021, p. 5)

Therefore, given the relevance and impact of his work, we have a rich work of elaboration of language and reflection on human and social relations, in which different universes are presented to us readers. Born in Vila Meã, in the north of Portugal (FLUP, 2021), Agustina grew up in a rural environment that influenced her worldview and narrative. This connection with local traditions and with the feminine universe has deeply marked her literature, in which complex characters inhabit stories permeated by reflections on themes such as the conduct of destiny, the maintenance of power and the depth of human relationships.

Mónica Baldaque, president of the Agustina Bessa-Luís Literary Circle (CLABL) emphasized that the writer: "She was not, Agustina, just a storyteller; He was someone who, through writing, advanced from exercise to exercise, in a permanent search for the soul, for his soul, and for each one, confirmed in the real test in each novel." (Baldaque *apud* FLUP, 2021, p. 8). This constant search for the essential, for what transcends the immediate, makes his work a space for dialogue between the individual and the universal. With more than 160 titles published, Agustina left us an extensive legacy that contains a variety of works, such as: novels, novellas, essays, chronicles, short stories, plays, children's literature, memoirs, biographies and scattered texts published in various collections. Her considered masterpiece, *The Sibyl* (2017), consolidated her name in the literary scene by exploring issues such as the role of women in patriarchal societies and the dilemmas of the possibilities of self-knowledge. For many critics, *The Sibyl* represents the starting point for understanding the Augustinian universe, where the psychological and the social are intertwined.

In addition to her literary contributions to the reading public, Agustina maintained a unique relationship with the cinematographic spheres, as listed in the work An exhibition – Agustina: Thinker among things thought (FLUP, 2021). Filmmakers Manoel de Oliveira and João Botelho made reinterpretations of several of his works, such as the films *Vale Abraão* and *A Corte do Norte*, reaffirming the universality of their themes and the depth of the aesthetic treatment of their characters.

Agustina's work transcends time and remains alive as a "heritage of thought" (Baldaque, 2021), representing a constant reflection on human beings and their contradictions. As an example, in 2019, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto organized an exhibition dedicated to the writer, bringing together 165 titles that

illustrate the richness and diversity of her literary production. As Mónica Baldaque (2021) observed, Agustina left marks that may even dissolve over time in some aspects, but the writer brings us new elements for the understanding of life and society in her fabulous beings.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The work of Agustina Bessa-Luís, especially her novels, have been the object of extensive critical analysis, standing out for its thematic reverberation and compositional construction. Although his novelistic production is more extensive and widely recognized, short stories also occupy a central place in the reflection on his writing, functioning as spaces for experimentation and synthesis. According to Catherine Dumas (2021), Agustina's short stories are "a laboratory of novelistic work", proving to be fundamental to understanding the developments and foundations of her narrative.

Agustina produced short stories throughout her career, in works such as *Contos impopulares* (2004), *A brusca* (1984) and *Contos amarantinos* (1988), and also inserted in collections or anthologies. These texts not only accompany his literary trajectory, but also dialogue with his novels. Researcher Dumas observes that Agustina's short stories seem to form a common ground to her production of novels (Dumas, 2021), especially when addressing psychological issues, the analysis of human behavior, and situations of limit. Configuring itself, then, in procedures and themes contained in the fiction of Agustina Bessa-Luís.

The researcher (2021) goes on to highlight that the Portuguese writer incorporates philosophical references in a marked way in her collections. The adoption of a fragment of Nietzsche as an epigraph in *Unpopular Tales* (2004) reinforces the idea that – like the excerpt: "All important work – you must have meaning in yourself – exerts a moral influence" – expands the inner space of literary narratives. This epigraph illustrates the consequence of a stone thrown into the water, which reverberates several circular images. This metaphor can synthesize the richness of Agustina's short stories, which transcend their limitations of extension to address universal themes.

Agustina's short stories, as previously mentioned, have great prominence for the universe of introspection and psychological exploration. The critic Catherine Dumas identifies in these texts a constant dialogue with literary making, evidenced by the complexity of the characters' sketch and the focus on inner dilemmas. Dumas observes: "In the minimalist tale 'The Procession', it is sleep and no longer the dream that projects the character into a **wait** that we can consider **eternal**, emblematic **of the human condition**".

(Dumas, 2021, p. 16; emphasis added). This analysis shows how Agustina uses the short story as a space to reflect on fundamental themes, such as the passage of time, isolation and destiny.

Another notable feature in Agustina's short stories that the researcher highlights is the fusion between the real and the mythical. About the short story "The Mother of a River" Dumas analyzes how the landscape becomes an extension of the protagonist's psychological state, transforming the setting into an essential narrative element: "The social landscape is concretized here in the cisterns, a space of superficial extension, limited to the surface of the narrative, causing a **contrast with** the **subterranean** space infinite. (Dumas, 2021, p. 18; emphasis added). Dumas also points out that, in the short stories, Agustina often accesses the mythical dimension immediately, while in the novel this occurs in a more circumstantial way. This characteristic distinguishes the short story as a textual modality in which the writer also experiences narrative and stylistic freedom. Agustina Bessa-Luís' short stories, although less known in relation to her novels, play an essential role in understanding her work as a whole. As Catherine Dumas points out:

> The short story focuses on themes and develops a metatextual discourse that runs through the entire work. Situated at the junction of the real and the supernatural, the short story provides a variegated textual modality, extended to extradiegetic discourses, including. He can contemplate both testimony and myth. (Dumas, 2021. p. 21)

Consequently, the short story in Agustina is not just another textual modality, but a dialogue with the writer's narrative universe, consolidating itself as a rich and founding component of her literary production. Agustina Bessa-Luís' work has been widely recognized for its ability to explore the depths of the human condition, often addressing controversial topics related to sexuality and desire, in an innovative and symbolic way. Reverberating these themes, one of the prominent perspectives is the study of eroticism in his work. In this sense, researcher Anamaria Filizola points out the paradox of the "eroticism of unhappiness". This expression expresses the way in which the writer in some cases permeates sexuality in the short stories, intertwining with traces sometimes of discouragement, sometimes of transgression. Filizola observes that Agustina never describes eroticism in a manifest way, preferring suggestion and mystery, which leaves room for the reader to interpret and fill in the narrative gaps. In the short story "A Cold Winter" (1984), sexuality is presented in a concise and enigmatic way, as observed by the short story writer:

> I don't mean that I don't enjoy building a text well, but what I like to do is an almost dry story and suggested by a series of guesses and not by the person's knowledge. Like 'A Cold Winter', one of the best short stories I've written to date. If everything else were lost, as in the floods of the Capibaribe, in Recife, it was enough for this tale to remain to qualify me. (Bessa-Luís *apud* Filizola, 2022, p. 140).

This approach reflects Agustina's ability to explore the unsaid, using silence and suggestion as powerful narrative tools, as in the construction of the characters in the short story "A Cold Winter". Filizola goes on to point out Agustina's dialogue with Sigmund Freud's proposals, which are central to the construction of the characters and the plots of the narratives. The writer mentions that she went through Freud's work as "a devastating novel", which deeply impacted her perception of life and literature. As the writer stated: "After this, nothing remains intact" (Bessa-Luís *apud* Filizola, 2022, p. 142). This influence can be seen in some narratives in which the social repression of desires, internal conflicts of the characters and enigmatic family relationships stand out.

Anamaria Filizola ponders that the constitution of memory is another essential element in the work of Agustina Bessa-Luís. For the critics, in the short story "A Cold Winter", the protagonist João Galeão unconsciously revisits an apparently insignificant memory of a servant's gaze that resurfaces as a dramatic revelation years later, linked to the death of the protagonist's mother. As Filizola observes: "The fictional core of the tale ends with the repetition, in the manner of Proust, of the incisive broken half, an apparently innocuous event that, after a decade, the protagonist relives as a tragedy" (Filizola, 2022, p. 141). This type of narrative expresses a peculiar style of Agustina, which combines economy of words with symbolic depth, allowing banal events to acquire transformative meanings.

The researcher also discusses that Agustina problematizes certain roles of education in the formation of perceptions about sexuality. In her interviews, the writer discusses how "Victorian education" shaped her generation, highlighting the difficulty of transgressing these norms without consequences. She states: "People are educated in the Victorian style and don't start transgressing, because it's too dangerous. [...] Nature never makes leaps" (Bessa-Luís *apud* Filizola, 2022, p. 151). This tension between tradition and desire is one of the common threads of her work, evidencing the storyteller's ability to approach taboo topics with sensitivity and boldness. As Filizola pointed out, Agustina's writing combines "transgressive eroticism with an insinuating and mysterious approach", creating a literature that demands both reflection and imagination from the reader. His work stands as a testament to literature's ability to illuminate the deepest and most enigmatic aspects of the human condition.

COMPOSITIONAL AND THEMATIC DIMENSIONS OF DEATH

The Theme, according to the perspective addressed by Boris Tomachevski (*apud* Todorov, 2014), alludes to the portion of the internal content of a literary work, particularly to the theme and the set of motifs that structure it. For Tomachevski, the study of the theme consists of the set of ideas, problems or questions that help to compose the narrative core of a work. In this sense, this theoretical element discusses issues inherent to the conduction of narratives, the aspects that the literary text presents as significant for the elaboration of constitutive tensions in the internal chain of events. The Theme, therefore, is composed within a strand of literary studies that seeks to analyze themes according to the internal progress of the architecture of the texts.

On the other hand, Thematology, according to the perspective presented by researchers Álvaro Manuel Machado and Daniel-Henri Pageaux (2001), goes beyond the specific study of themes within a work, proposing a comparative and systematic approach. Thematology analyzes how certain motifs such as agonic death, female sexuality, or freedom in exile manifest themselves throughout literary history and between different literatures, emphasizing variation and recurrence. Thus, Thematology diversifies the scope to encompass more diverse connections, crossing boundaries of time and space to understand the impact and resignification of certain motifs.

The adoption of the expedients of the Theme in the work of Agustina Bessa-Luís would explore the themes related to death as an intrinsic element of the narrative and the characters. In the short story "A Cold Winter" (1984), for example, death appears in a metaphorical and concrete way, marked by the description and trajectory of the Galleon family in the village of Bóbeda, resulting in the "strange decomposition" perceived by the protagonist João Galeão: "I thought that the world suffered from a strange decomposition; suddenly he felt like changing his house, his country, his customs; he bought old silverware, made his family tree, celebrated dates" (Bessa-Luís, 1984, p. 175). The narrative shows a certain relationship between João and the transience of life, marked by nostalgia and the symbology of the social and family degradation of his personal group. Death here may be a metaphor for the transformation and loss of perceptions that the protagonist had about the world around him (a social death of his family). Nevertheless, the theme related to death is also materialized in the figure of the mother, whose death returns to memory as if it were a cathartic moment:

> However, his mother became a little sour, a little heretical, and died of congestion at noon, while eating a water pear. They found her already cold, with her eyes open, an air of supernatural anger on her tiny face. John kissed her hands; He remained silent, without tears. And suddenly he saw in the flesh of the fruit the mark of a half-

> broken incisor tooth. He began to cry, to cry. My God, he said, my God, Lord! (Bessa-Luís, 1984, p. 175).

We have, therefore, a parallel between the death of the protagonist's mother and the visualization of the similarity of the tooth in the maid's mouth in "The Cold Winter" (this revelation being one of the causes of João Galeão's disorder). It will be up to the procedures used in the Theme to try to glimpse part of the conflictive chains of the tale (such as knot, climax and outcome) in order to then seek a theme that is internally associated with the conduct of the tale. To illustrate, we could situate for this tale the theme of the "death of the illusion of the solidity of a clan".

In "Green Philosophy" (Bessa-Luís *apud* Salema, 1984), the text addresses the commercial use of sudden death, delving into social strata more on the margins of society, certain relationships of compassion and the economic exploitation around dead bodies in a large metropolis. This depersonalized death inserted in everyday life highlights the irony of circumstances and society's indifference towards the two protagonists of the tale:

> They were simply hunters of sudden deaths. [...] they took him away from the car that exchanged between these random whereabouts and the morgue, delivered him to his home, and waited, like good officials, for the tip (Bessa-Luís *apud* Salema, 1984, p. 167-168).

The two protagonists (hunters of sudden deaths, not named in the tale) have their nocturnal and cold routine changed when one of them dies. The other protagonist needs to make decisions and review certain priorities in the face of this fact. Therefore, we are in the presence of an extreme situation, as pointed out by researcher Catherine Dumas about a constant in short stories in Bessa-Luís' book:

> I will contemplate the dichotomy present at the implicit level in the title *Unpopular Tales.* And we will see, with some examples, how the notion of popular tale fits into the novelist's work. *Unpopular* are the first short stories published by Agustina due to the preponderance given to the analysis of the human psyche through the study of individual cases placed in extreme situations. (Dumas, 2011, p. 15)

A possible motive linked to death, here, can be connected with universal issues, such as the trivialization of life and the struggle for survival. The Theme shows how the short story "Green Philosophy" would insert death in a cultural and historical context, dialoguing with the misery and ethical dilemmas of its time and with motifs from other literary works by other writers and other times. From the perspective of Thematology, the motif of the "unusual work next to death" of the short story "Green Philosophy", by Agustina Bessa-Luís, could be associated with the novel *Bury your dead*, by Ana Paula Maia (2018),

due to the similarity of the professions, the similarity of the performance with death, the profile of the characters and the action in pairs.

Death in Agustina's short stories is not just a final event, but a narrative element that illuminates human frailty and social contradictions. In "The Approved Lovers" (Bessa-Luís *apud* Melo, 2002) the life of a lady in a small town is told – the protagonist is the widow of a second-class judge and the mother of eleven children (nine children have survived) – who, after the death of her husband, has her subsequent love life questioned and interdicted by local society. In the short story, the theme related to the death of the widow and the possible death of David (her boyfriend) can be presented as a fusion of intimate drama and social judgment:

> One day, it was said that they had killed each other. She had appeared with two bullets in her chest, on the floor of her small room where she breathed that sterile misery of those who only last, only sleep, only dream, only lie. [...] David was still breathing. [...] We forgot to say that David survived. What happened to him afterwards, we do not know. (Bessa-Luís *apud* Melo, 2002, p. 316).

In this tale, death symbolizes the intersection between desire and despair, highlighting the social pressures that turn love into misfortune. In this sense, the characters, condemned by the moral standards of the community, seek in death a form of liberation for a life marked by exclusion and judgment. In "The Approved Lovers", the death of the widow and the serious injury and estrangement of David are quickly covered up by the local community: "The case, very hushed up, passed quickly, because the world likes to rescue its responsibility with oblivion" (Bessa-Luís *apud* Melo, 2002, p. 316). Thus, ironically, the text points out the hypocrisy and shamelessness of the society of this small town. Here, Thematology could highlight forgetting as a social strategy to deal with the consequences of social persecution, as in a comparison of the reason for the "removal of responsibility for death", for example, with what happens in the short story "Penelope", by Dalton Trevisan (1994). In this narrative, an elderly couple receives anonymous letters with prank calls about a possible betrayal. This fact leads to the continuous embarrassment of the elderly man on his wife, and then to her suicide. To relativize or abstain from guilt, the elderly person performs some self-convincing expedients. Death, in this sense, not only concludes the narrative of the characters, but also reinforces the cycle of repression and conformism in society.

In "O cortejo" (Bessa-Luís, 2024) the possibility of a theme related to death is suggested in a more abstract way. The protagonist awaits a procession that never arrives, in a desolate setting that evokes a world in decay:

> 'When will it pass, when will the procession come?', he asked. There he had been since dawn, trying to see the procession that would descend from the sides of the city, with its pennants, shining and flying, filling the horizon with unexpected and palpitating colors. [...]
>
> Tired, he leans his head on the parapet for a moment, and falls asleep. Not for long, not for many hours. When he retracts the edge of the curtain, looking out the window at the forlorn street that is lost in the distance between calcined bushes and barely perceptible, yet dazzling, flowers, he, perplexed and restless, asks himself: 'Had the procession already passed, when would it have passed?!') (Bessa-Luís, 2024, p. 259).

This continuous and useless waiting resonates as a metaphor for death in life, leaving the protagonist trapped between anticipation and emptiness about a possible distraction, entertainment, a pastime, etc. Therefore, in "The Courtship", death is represented as an absence that shapes life. The procession, a symbol of the final transition, remains out of reach, highlighting the uncertainty and incompleteness that surround human existence. The Theme in this tale could suggest the impossibility of acting or making a decision of the protagonist in the narrative. In this scenario, the tale does not make a point of presenting major events, preferring to emphasize the construction of an atmosphere of waiting (circumstantial or conceptual) over the protagonist's lack of perspective on what to do with life, in a present or future way. Consequently, one can visualize as a theme "death in life in solitary protagonists" in the short story "The procession".

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, we sought to discuss some dimensions about death in narratives from the book *Contos impopulares*, by Agustina Bessa-Luís. To this end, the study sought to highlight certain spheres of the life and work of Agustina Bessa-Luís, such as: the connection to the local traditions in which she was inserted, the intertwining with the feminine universe, the diversity and breadth of her publications, her interrelationship with the cinematographic sphere. On the other hand, the research intended to select topics of the critical reception of Bessa-Luís that are articulated with the writer's short story production. Together with the appreciation of Catherine Dumas (2022), the establishment of the proximity between the production of short stories and the elaboration of novels in the writing of Agustina Bessa-Luís stood out; the experimental character of Agustina's short stories; and the interrelationship with mythical spheres. With the reception of Anamaria Filizola (2011), the items of the insertion of eroticism in Augustin's work stand out; the dialogue with Freud; the crossing of memory in the short stories; social repression.

Specifically, the research sought to examine the thematic dimensions in the short stories "A cold winter" (1984), "Green philosophy" (1984), "The approved lovers" (2002) and

"The procession" (2024), in interface with the theoretical strands of Theme and Thematology. In this study, the presentation of different configurations for the composition of death in the tales of Bessa-Luís was detected: physical death, the death of the prestige of a clan, the unusual associated with death, the death of desire, death linked to social hypocrisy, death in life by inaction. In summary, the research highlights certain contributions of the writer to the modality of the short story; it highlights the procedures of social criticism, psychological investigation of the characters, compositional diversity; and points to a possible specific adoption of theoretical proposals on theme and motif.

In Agustina Bessa-Luís' short stories, death emerges as a multifaceted theme, both in its narrative representation and in its connection with social and philosophical issues. Through the approaches of Theme and Thematology, it is possible to relate the writer's narratives with transformations about death in an exchange of human frailties and the contradictions of a society that alternates between hypocrisy, repression and oblivion. These elements make death not only a narrative event, but a central axis of reflection on the human condition. Death in Agustina Bessa-Luís' short stories transits between the intimate and the universal, the symbolic and the concrete, reflecting on the human and social tensions that surround existence and finitude. Through the examination of his short stories, it is possible to shed some understandings of how death functions as a driver that articulates issues such as memory, desire, guilt and wit. Bessa-Luís' ability to explore death as a metaphor and articulating nucleus contributes to the complexity of her work, highlighting her as one of the densest voices in Portuguese literature.

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