



# **Pervasive Loneliness and Isolation in John Steinbeck Of Mice and Men**

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## **Abstract**

The life of the Great Depression has been depicted in a clear picture in the book of mice and men by John Steinbeck and the impact of loneliness and isolation is seen in the lives of every character. The migrants ranch workers in the novel portray the desolation of the time because of constant movement and financial difficulties, there is no possibility of having stable relations. Other characters such as Candy, Crooks, and the wife of Curley have the particular marginalization age, race, and gender types that only make them feel even more isolated and compel them to seek comfort in the dreams. The strange friendship between George and Lennie supports the fact that there is very little true friendship between itinerant workers and the frailty of those friendships in the face of crushing conditions. These stories woven together allow Steinbeck to criticize the American Dream; finally, the dream becomes survival coping, and only a temporary hope. In this discovery, the novel unveils loneliness as a weakness of the self, but the isolation is a social and economic position that stems out of the social and economic processes.

## **Keywords:**

Isolation, Loneliness, Great Depression, companionship, Of Mice and Men.

## I. Introduction

The novella *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck is written during the great depression which was a time of huge economic instability that displaced and left many Americans a beggar. It is based on the adventures of two migrant ranch hands, George Milton, and Lennie Small whose lives are filled with cruelty, casual employment, and broken hopes. Disillusionment and despair are also contextualized in the novel vividly; the novel characters are unable to connect and find meaning in the world that does not care about their suffering. Steinbeck uses his setting-a ranch located far away in California- to highlight the fact that, economic deprivation and social changes may destroy human relations. According to Apollo Scholars, George and Lennie have a weak companionship in the world where people [are] trying to find a connection and a sense of purpose. Steinbeck uses their story to explore emotional and social consequences of poverty, indicating that loneliness and isolation are the condition of life in the margins of society which no one can escape.

This analysis thesis will be that in the book of *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck introduces loneliness and isolation as a central theme in how each of the characters influences their individual aspirations, relationships, and identity. The American Dream as depicted in the novel is not the fulfillment but a shadow that is a respite that is temporary. They all hold on to the dream they have as the cushion against the loneliness, but Steinbeck eventually reveals these dreams as impossible illusions in a system where the weak and disenfranchised are excluded. By doing this, the story shows that emotional cost of isolation are not social shortcomings but the results of a larger society and economic organization.

## II. Loneliness: as an Inevitable Facet of Ranch Life.

The life of the ranch as depicted by Steinbeck focuses on how it is tented, unstable. The male laborers in the fields are migrant workers, who never stay in one farm, never establish permanent relationships. It is mentioned in the novel several times that the majority of men are leading lonely and nomadic lives wandering job to job with no family or roots. This mobile existence creates an atmosphere in which nothing more stable and intimate is possible. George tells Lennie at the very beginning of the narrative that there is a lack of family between guys such as us. They have no one in the world that cares a hoot in hell over them. Within this pessimistic paradigm, workers possess only one material resource and this being their companionship, that too is often weak and infrequent.

The connection between George and Lennie is unique specifically in the fact that it is so unnatural.

At the very beginning, Steinbeck points to their friendship, so it is evident that both of them are outcasts in the itinerant workforce. They are united in their journey and they help each other where other men are alone. The narrator notes, pointed out, that the central theme of *Of Mice and Men* is the strained relationship between George and Lennie. They are two inter-travelling men. They provide a feeling of companionship to one another within a relatively lonely and isolating world. This friendship is in sharp contrast to the isolation of the other characters, and highlights the oddity and jeopardy of such a relationship in the Depression-era America. The friendship of George and Lennie makes them stand out of the crowd, and it makes their final destiny all the more tragic: when even two good friends cannot find their way out of the loneliness, the text suggests, the dreams of absolutely ordinary people become even more cursed.

The setting helps to add to this pervasive loneliness used by Steinbeck. The ranch and surroundings are painted in very scanty, utilitarian language: a bunkhouse with bare rooms, a small barn, and a lot of unlimited fields. The view is not crowded with details, but it is mostly a barren terrain, which symbolizes emotional barrenness of locals. The laborers are in the same, dirty bunk beds, share a shower and eat together yet are virtually strangers. The environment serves as a reflection of the inner world of the characters. The remote isolation, as one analysis observes, represents the physical and emotional distance between the men and the rest of the society, in the ranch. Even the communal areas are not very welcoming: the night, George and Lennie get to their place, the bunkhouse is empty, the men sit silently to each other, yet this silence does little to make them feel somewhat less lonely. The world created by Steinbeck is bleak, and sparse; it cannot be separated with the isolation of the characters. No celebratory fete or hospitable society; even recreation (such as horseshoes by barn) is represented as an escape until dusk. The expansive deserts between them, the silence of the parting words strengthens the segregation of each individual man into himself in the evenings.

Therefore, Lonely Steinbeck implies that loneliness is virtually an ingredient of the life of itinerant workers. The travel and labor ride keeps every man isolated. There exist unseen boundaries even in circumstances when the workers live in the same bunkhouse: racial segregation isolates Crooks, the wife of Curley is feared and ostracized and personal tragedies (such as the death of the dog belonging to Candy) are suppressed. The friendship between George and Lennie is something out of the ordinary in this setting that emphasizes the rule. The reason why the majority of men live lonely and nomadic lives is standard and the

person who creates a meaningful relationship is an exception. Yet, Steinbeck also indicates that this exception is not safe and secure; the ranch setting will eventually make its plans to separate even their relationship. The preface chapters, therefore, precondition the idea that *Of Mice and Men* is defined as the journey of loneliness, not as a temporary feeling but as a necessity of life in Depression times.

### III. Character Analysis: Candy -Solitude in Old Age and Insecurity.

The old swamper Candy is an example of isolation due to old age and insecurity. Candy is a physical handyman who becomes an outdated relic in the hard-labor environment of the ranch due to his age. He spits out bitterly, he lost his hand right here in this ranch... they give me a job swampin. An' they bottle me two hundred an fifty dollars lose my hand. This factual confession shows that utility defines the identity of Candy in the ranch. The only physical asset that he can give to the boss is the fact that he can perform menial tasks with one hand. As soon as such days are over, Candy is scared that he will be unseen. In this context, Steinbeck points to the confluence of age and disability, since Candy is still older than the other ranch hands, and by age, disability, and injury, he knows too clearly, that in this rough world, usefulness is survival. The attitude of the men toward the old dog, a working sheepdog, now useless, is the one of the attitude of the men towards Candy.

The destiny of the dog is a symbolism of this dynamic. As soon as Carlson wants to shoot the old dog of Candy to put it out of its misery, Candy consents to it reluctantly, losing: "Awright-take it away, he says, not even looking at the dog. Candy is full of regrets after the shooting of the dog: I should have shot that dog myself, George... I ought not of should have had some stranger shoot my dog. The death of the dog is a sharp contrast with the position of Candy. When Candy is watching the dog get killed by Carlson, he could not but envision his own future: being left to drown in the streets or being coldly discarded as useless and old. This is the realization of his loneliness; the only non-human being he ever had in his life has passed away, and he understands that without the dog-without work, he stands alone in the world. This incident is the event Steinbeck employs to hint at the existential fear and alienation in Candy.

Ironically, his loneliness forces Candy to desperately cling onto the hope of owning land via the dream. Candy is sure of a chance to belong and be secure when George and Lennie explain their intention to purchase a small farm. He also volunteers to give his savings: S'pose I went in with you guys. One three hunderd and fifty bucks I would invest in [8]. At this point Candy is cheerful and optimistic; this is the first time in a long time he feels that he is an important person. His strong desire demonstrates his total

loneliness. Being deprived of his hand, Candy is deprived of his job security, though when he gives money and labor to the dream, he cannot be judged purely by his utility. As in one of the analyses, Candy is desperately insisting on the vision of George and Lennie with the urgency of a desperate man, and he is trying to use it as a sort of defence against the fact of his obsolescence. The dream farm is a psychological haven where Candy sees a life outside the ranch where dignity and damage are not his defining traits.

The story of Candy therefore depicts how the marginalized (age wise and handicapped) seek companionship and meaning to fight loneliness. At first the ranch workers do not pay much attention to Candy-in fact, he is hardly heard-but once he sides with George and Lennie, it is his voice that is barely audible. Even at this, he is an outsider; his colleagues hardly recognize him immediately after the death of the dog, but in the dream Candy is temporarily dignified and accepted. This retreat is, alas! feeble. The dream is ruined when Lennie is involved in an accident, Candy goes back to solitude. Through Candy, Steinbeck demonstrates that the old and weak live alone in silence, and it is only the faint chances of having common dreams that make these people not to give up hope. Without that hope, Candy is once again invisible in the ranch, which so tragically depicts the theme of society abandoning the uselessness of those that are no longer used.

#### IV. Character Study- Crooks- Racial segregation and Forced Isolation.

The black stable-hand, Crooks, is literally alienated as the rest of the men, as he lives in a small room off the barn. This physical isolation supports his social alienation: Steinbeck mentions that the door of Crooks is painted with the words Keep Out, which is a representation of the walls to which he is subjected. Crooks is compelled to stay in the periphery, out of place and lonely unlike the other workers who go back to the bunkhouse to eat and to chat. This is not an accident of the story, this is a product of the racism that was common during that era. According to one of the critics, he uses Crooks to help Steinbeck bring out the issue of racial discrimination, which was very common during the Great Depression. Crooks is ostracized by other men, he is not part of the social life on the ranch, which only strengthens his feeling of isolation. Solitude can bring as much loneliness as physical loneliness can bring, a fact that Steinbeck demonstrates by isolating Crooks.

Crooks is bitter, defensive because it is a survival strategy due to the years spent being on the outcasts. Later, Lennie walks into the room belonging to Crooks, who first tells him off and states in a very harsh manner, You have no right to enter my room (Chapter 4). He soon turns petty and tells Lennie that

s/he ought not to have no-one. Know how you would not like to talk to anybody? and afterwards A guy gets too lonely and he gets sick. His inner hopelessness is displayed through these uncouth confessions. Despite Crooks being a proud person with a hard exterior to cover the core truth that humans do not need to be isolated is not something he can conceal. Every single time he claims distance, there is a hint of desire: he nearly takes pleasure in the momentary moment of company before reminding Lennie about his so-called place. The stuttered confessions of Crooks by Steinbeck have helped him reveal the psychological cost of segregation-emotional repression takes a toll on mental health as one of the reviews has it. Crooks is in a cage of prejudice, as his stable is a literal cage, and he undergoes the former with an embittered resentment.

But again Crooks wants someone to be with him, although he may claim otherwise. Crooks, on one occasion, lets himself dream when Lennie earnestly asks him to be part of the dream of George and Lennie of owning land. He cynically confesses, how no one ever goes to heaven, and no one gets land. It is mere fatalism in their heads, and shows learned fatalism. His is reminiscent of the Sagebrush philosopher, but he dresses it in his life; being a black man, he has experienced dreams he has seen denied. However, in the same scene Crooks is a listening onlooker. His tone briefly bears hope and his attitude becomes softer when he envisions himself working the land with George and Lennie. This will be the weak point that was mentioned in the outline. But it is fleeting. Just as Curley is about to be reminded of the racial hierarchy when his wife enters the room and threatens him, Crooks soon shakes himself out of the dream and withdraws.

The arc of Crooks brings out the depressing effect of being isolated against one's will. His shut door and even his empty bed indicate how he has been shut out by society. His physical and racial segregation, according to an analysis of Steinbeck, causes his space to not only be a setting, but an exclusion mechanism of Crooks. It is only when he briefly considers the possibility of joining the group that he gets the feeling of relief, which is immediately smashed by the social hierarchy. Ultimately, Crooks is back to the sad loneliness of realizing the momentary relief of hope before losing it. Crooks is used by Steinbeck to imply that ingrained prejudice does not merely isolate people physically but also leaves psychological scars in individuals making them lonely as a part of their identity.

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V. Character Analysis: The Wife of Curley - Lonely Women.

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The position of the wife of Curley is peculiar and tragic: she is the only woman in the ranch and is not named anywhere in the novella. This anonymity is telling. As critics have identified, her namelessness represents her namelessness and her inability to have a name and be independent in the male world. It is just a possession of Curley to the men and thus, by default, alienates her to any sense of belonging. In the ranch, she is hemorrhaged with the jealousy of Curley and the paranoia of the men on the farm, one of them even tells Curley, "That Bitch did not ought to have said that to you" when she pokes at Crooks. The wife of Curley has no allies to the environment she is in. The men run away when Curley leaves, and she is left alone in the house.

Gendered loneliness is even reflected in her words. In a scene, she admits to Lennie that she does not get a chance to talk to anyone. I get awful lonely." She goes into detail, You can speak to people, but I can speak to not one but Curley. Else he gets mad. What do you think you would like not to speak to anybody? This is a sad confession that highlights the extent of her solitude. Being in a marriage with a controlling, violent man, she feels no one to talk to at home; outside it, men of the ranch consider her a troublesome or outcast and will not talk to her. Steinbeck, therefore, demonstrates a contradiction: being a woman, the wife of Curley theoretically would have the possibility to enter the domestic society, but in this case, she is more enslaved than the men are on their own long journeys. Her circumstances compel her to develop loneliness.

The character of the wife of Curley-her coquettishness and her amours with the ranch hands-have always been misunderstood by these men as vanity or as malice. The reader however takes it as a scream of attention and comprehension. On a particular night she wakes up the men at a late hour just to chat and complain that she was bored ( Think I don't know where they all went? ) she says, and she knows that Curley and the others are snatching away without her, and she likes to brush her hair and put on make-up in front of no one. Such preening behaviors are not concerned with vanity, but an attempt at communicating with someone, anybody. Steinbeck gives hints of her regrets in subtle aspects. When she dies, Candy silently says, That Bitch did not ought to have told you that, but not because he loves her, but because he understands that it was loneliness that prompted her to talk to Crooks that night, an action that prompted the tragic turn of events.

In the end, the death of the wife of Curley is a result of her loneliness. She goes into the barn to find someone to talk to and the innocence of Lennie gives her the ability of letting her guard down. When she says, I get lonely, Lennie agrees, but then tells her to think of having some puppies, showing that she enjoys fantasizing of having a different life. The twist of the tragic events occurs when Lennie suddenly and confused accidentally kills her and she is desperately trying to find warmth and a caress. Her last moments are ironical, she is seen crying out calling Curley, saying that George will get her in hell, she is concerned about what her husband will say yet she desires innocent, maybe childlike pity of Lennie.

Steinbeck highlights a vile result of her isolation in her death. This is the direct result of the seeking of the connection that Curley denied her through both marriage and society which led to her death. The reaction of the men- the fact that Curley wants to shoot the guts out of Lennie at first- means that what matters about her death is angrily concealed. However, the reader realizes it as the last depiction of a solitary life. In his depiction of the wife of Curley as one of the perspectives observes, Steinbeck makes us look beyond her as a villain, and as other victims of the emotional sterility of the ranch. Steinbeck makes her nameless as the universal woman in her situation; she could be any woman, as she is invisible. Her death, within the themes of the novel, is an indication that even a moment of hope to find someone to bond with can ruin people totally when they are utterly disconnected to actual social networks.

#### VI. George and Lennie- Friends against Solitude.

George and Lennie are the brightest spot of the novel as such an unusual love or friendship. George and Lennie are unique because in a society where guys like them do not have family, they have one another. Steinbeck stresses on their dependency on each other even in the first chapter. George reminds Lennie when the latter makes a wrong decision, saying: I got you! You do evil and I got to get you out”. His expressions are frustrated and yet indestructible loyalty: I got you, he repeats, and he knows that they are the same, and so the two of them will share the burden. Lennie on his part values this relationship the most. He exclaims; “An’ I got you. We get each other, that is what.... that hoots hell about us. This acknowledgment of each other, that a person will give a hoot about him/her, is the direct opposite of the loneliness that he/she was conditioned to feel.

The common goal of having a small farm serves as both the story gripping device and the hope. At the beginning George and Lennie dream, we could live off the fatta the lan’... and have rabbits on land of our own. It is a defense against isolation to this extent, as well: this dream offers them a solid house to call



home. When they imagine themselves being independent and united, they generate an image of safety that the rest of the workers cannot get. They recreate the dream by re-creating it to Lennie as a lullaby. Candy even joins them in the bunkhouse, with which they have something in common. As one of the analyses observes, every retelling of the dream, changes its tone, that of hopefulness to desperation, as their relationship helps them to persevere in more desperate situations.

The importance of the friendship between George and Lennie is that it is a form of resistance to the loneliness that surrounds them everywhere. George and Lennie are a source of strength when it comes to living in a male world where every man is supposed to live alone and fight his own battle. Other people mention the subject of loneliness, and George will usually respond that he and Lennie are not the same: “With us it is not that way, George says of the loneliest men. Not only does he need the companionship of Lennie but he also needs his emotional support; the mere love and trust of the plain Lennie are what make George retain his own humanity. The delicateness in their relationship is implied by Lennie and George, whose belief in their relationship is childishly naive by Lennie, in the famous quote in which Lennie insists that since George wants him to leave, he will leave.

Nonetheless, Steinbeck also predetermines that this friendship is dangerous. George and Lennie are envied and suspicious to the men surrounding them. Slim comments how strange it is to see two men on the road; other people think that something is wrong with Lennie or George that they are going as friends. As the story develops to the climax, it is obvious that their relationship may not be able to withstand the stress of the ranch. When Lennie unleashes his strength in a violent way, George finds himself in the unnecessary situation of being forced to shield Lennie in the face of the wrath of Curley, and in the hands of a sadistic justice system.

The last thing that George does at the end of the novel is to break their friendship, a point that shows that loneliness is bound to be the dominant theme in this world. George narrates the story of the farm as a final time before he shot Lennie, assuring Lennie with fantasies. He upholds the ceremony of hope up to the very end: Lennie continues to believe that the dream has not died yet as George tells him, that we could live off the fatta the lan’... Then, out of mercy, George shoots Lennie in one instance. This heart-rending culmination points out that George will be left alone very soon. As one of the analyses sensitively notes, the conclusion leaves George as an empty shell, emotionally, and the world is still the same. By murdering Lennie, George destroys the two of their dreams, going back to a life of solitude that incited the fear in him.

Even this gesture, which is intended to be a final act of kindness, brings into focus the forces against human relationship; this is all that George can do in the world where the rest would have taken Lennie away by force.

Therefore, the relations between George and Lennie are described as a short-lived rebellion against the isolating regulations of the ranch. The friendship helps them to avoid loneliness as it gives them identity and direction. It reveals companionship could exist, but the novel eventually poses what price and what the cost. As it then concludes, Steinbeck suggests that even the purest relationships could be trampled by the pressure of the outside factors: economic difficulties, social inequalities, panic. The tragic end of this story of George and Lennie shows that in this world, lifelong friendship is a frail, perhaps doomed, attempt at defying lonely death.

#### VII. The American Dream as a Solution to loneliness.

To most characters in *Of Mice and Men*, dreams are the mechanisms used to cope with the loneliness that they experience. In a way, the promise of the little farm that recurs throughout the novel is the American Dream as one. George, Lennie, Candy, Crooks, and even the wife of Curley possess their dream farm, their own aspiration which borders on the same desire to belong. Steinbeck demonstrates that hope is able to give hope to isolated people in the short run. The fact that Candy is willing to join George and Lennie in their business is his direct response to his desperation; Crooks briefly thaws to the idea as it comes as close to being out of a confined existence as possible; even the wife of Curley holds on to her youthful dream of movie stardom to get out of the cage she is in. Every individual holds on to a vision as a mental refuge. One of the critics mentions that Candy and Crooks unveil the functioning of dreams as lifelines and illusions. The dreams provide order and purpose to their lives: without the farm plan, George and Lennie would never get a rest against the loneliness.

However, Steinbeck does not believe strongly in the eventual possibility of the dreams. He criticizes the American Dream by integrating the naturalistic determinism the characters are influenced by the forces outside their control-economic conditions, prejudice, and fate. The aspiration of land ownership proves to be a reassuring image as opposed to a feasible dream. Ultimately, the characters never merely lose their individual dreams, Steinbeck puts this loss in a broader sense of disenchantment with the American Dream itself. As one critic notes, Steinbeck turns the downfall of the personal dream of George and Lennie into the critique of the national myth and reveals the national myth of the American Dream as a survival mechanism

of psychic nature instead of a possibility. Repetition and memory support independence dream in the story Of Mice and Men, and at the end, the dream is destroyed by the reality.

This message is supported by the structure of the novel. It starts and ends at the river bank where George narrates the dream to Lennie at the beginning and right before Lennie dies. This circular plot implies that it can be fruitless; even though George and Lennie have their hopes, they are in the same place, as they were at the beginning. One of the critics clarifies that this closed loop, in which Steinbeck almost repeats the descriptions of the setting in the first and final scenes, dramatizes the impossibility of escape. The dream which was initially a comfort turns out to be a symbol of cultural betrayal. Even the way George softly narrates the dream in the final scene is not to help Lennie realize the dream is more than an illusion but to calm him on the spot, to admit that, despite being an illusion, the dream provides order and purpose to lives otherwise vanished in alienation and anonymity.

Through the dreams of each character, Steinbeck, therefore, tried to emphasize that there is a common human urge to belong and maintain a sense of dignity. But he also demonstrates how there are systemic obstacles to these dreams. The dream of George and Lennie turns out to be ruined due to the qualities of Lennie and his innocence; the dream of Candy is ruined when Lennie dies, Crooks loses the dream before it can work, and the wife of Curley is stuck in her marriage that is loveless. The American Dream in the novel is revealed as not merely something deferred and lost, it is variously a fiction, a perpetuation myth that promises something without determining anything. It is this ultimate discovery that turns the loneliness into a personal situation to a general attack. The dream was a reaction to being lonely but eventually fails due to the reality of the depression era that no one on the ranch can fundamentally change their condition.

Steinbeck in a broader meaning implies the universality of longing: each of the characters, Lennie (We got each other, we will have a little house and a couple of acres) to the wife of Curley (I coulda made somethin of myself), show the need to form part of something. These are personal dreams, in a way, but which are, compounded together, dramatizing how the society of the novel is failing its populace. The loneliness, companionship and dreams as one of the concluding analyses observes are not solitary aspects as portrayed by Steinbeck, but rather symbolic reactions to the world which is structurally unfriendly to the emotional satisfaction of the soul. The dream of each of the characters highlights the collective tragedy of the people who were oppressed by the social and economic powers of the day. At the very end of the novel,

Steinbeck places the reader in the same position as the characters with their hopes and destroys them in the most unflinching manner possible. The message is obvious, to survive in this society, people need hope, however, it is also the process that helps people avoid their loneliness in a certain time, it is a tragedy but it cannot be brought to life under the circumstances that these people have to live in.

### VIII. Conclusion

The theme of loneliness is also exploited in the novel of *Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck to reveal the emotional price of the social and economic order of the Great Depression. In the novella, isolation of every character is a reaction to the things that are outside of their control. Although this is a small rebellion against the isolating forces, the unique bond that exists between George and Lennie is eventually not able to withstand the pressures of their world. The old age of the body and handicapped hand of Candy put him at the periphery, the race of Crooks sent him to a literal door of exile and the gender and marriage of the wife of Curley doom her to silence and desperation. Their loneliness is manifested differently but all of them want to be connected-through the dreams about land, communication or escape. Steinbeck demonstrates that such dreams, as much as they are appealing are finally ruined.

By rephrasing the thesis, *Of Mice and Men* introduces loneliness and isolation as the unavoidable aspects in the lives of the characters and employs them to make the American Dream unrealistic to the people at the edges of society. The main arguments are united: the ranch environment alienates the employees; the lives of Candy and Crooks show the effects of old age, disability, and racism making loneliness more and more overwhelming, the tragedy of the wife of Curley illustrates the isolation on a gendered level, and the friendship between George and Lennie, though an island of hope, is a reminder of why real companionship is such a rarity and how thin.

Ultimately, Steinbeck provides the reader with one conclusion: the widespread loneliness in *Of Mice and Men* is not a failure in oneself but a consequence of the surrounding influences. The strength of the novel is in portraying that every suffering character has one or more people that can share this situation and that loneliness is a common state of the Depression. When *Of Mice and Men* ends with George standing on his own at the riverbank, the story does not preach on the characters as it rather gives an implication that their loneliness is predetermined by external structures. Therefore, the message Steinbeck leaves behind is one that is heartrending: man necessarily needs to be attached- Connection -guys like us got no family-[3]- and in case the system deprives a person of this, even dreams that are good will not hold.

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