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CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION AS AN AESTHETIC AND DIDACTIC MECHANISM IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE: “JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH” BY ROALD DAHL⁵

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ABSTRACT

This article examines character formation in children’s literature in terms of its aesthetic, performative, and didactic functions. The research combines psychological interpretation with linguistic and stylistic analysis and explores, from the point of view of literary studies, the significance of character portrayal in the formation of children’s ethical perception, emotional and cognitive development, imagination, and psychological level. The findings reveal that constructing characters in children’s literature performs developmental, allegorical, aesthetic, cognitive, and pedagogical functions. The article uses the novel “James and the Giant Peach” by Roald Dahl to investigate the characterization techniques employed in it and the importance of the novel’s symbolically layered narrative strategies in negotiating power, morality, and identity formation in young readers. Through analytical examples from this novel, the paper illustrates that effective character formation depends on paying attention to the age characteristics and the psychological and cognitive level of children. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that character portrayal in children’s narratives is a peculiar pedagogical process involving linguistic precision, symbolic meaning, and sensitivity to the cognitive and emotional capacities of children.

KEYWORDS

Children’s narrative, character portrayal, narrative characterization, aesthetic function, didactic role.

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BOLALAR ADABIYOTIDA XARAKTER QURISH ESTETIK VA DIDAKTIK MEXANIZM SIFATIDA: ROALD DAHLNING “JEMS VA ULKAN SHAFTOLI” ASARI ASOSIDA

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ANNOTATSIYA	KALIT SO‘ZLAR
Ushbu maqolada bolalar adabiyotidagi personajlar obrazini yaratishning estetik, performativ hamda didaktik vazifalari tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot psixologik talqin, lingvistik va stilistik tahlilni o‘zida birlashtirib, adabiyotshunoslik nuqtayi nazaridan personaj tasvirining bolalarning axloqiy idroki, hissiy va kognitiv rivojlanishi, tasavvuri hamda psixologik darajasini shakllantirishdagi ahamiyatini o‘rganadi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko‘rsatadiki, bolalar adabiyotida personajlar obrazini yaratish rivojlantiruvchi, allegorik, estetik, kognitiv va pedagogik vazifalarni bajaradi. Maqolada Roald Dahlning “Jeyms va ulkan shaftoli” romani misolida asarda qo‘llanilgan personaj yaratish usullari hamda asarning ramziy qatlamli hikoya strategiyalarining yosh kitobxonlarda kuch, axloq va o‘zlikni anglash tuyg‘ularini shakllantirishdagi ahamiyati tadqiq etiladi. Ushbu romandan keltirilgan tahliliy misollar orqali samarali personaj yaratish bolalarning yosh xususiyatlari, psixologik va kognitiv darajasiga e‘tibor qaratishga bog‘liqligi ko‘rsatib beriladi. Bundan tashqari, tadqiqotda bolalar uchun mo‘ljallangan hikoyalarda personaj tasviri lingvistik aniqlik, ramziy ma’no va bolalarning kognitiv hamda hissiy imkoniyatlariga nisbatan sezgirlikni talab etadigan o‘ziga xos pedagogik jarayon ekani ta’kidlanadi.	Bolalar hikoyasi, xarakter tasviri, hikoya xarakteristikasi, estetik vazifasi, didaktik roli.

МОДЕЛИРОВАНИЕ ХАРАКТЕРОВ В ДЕТСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ КАК ЭСТЕТИЧЕСКИЙ И ДИДАКТИЧЕСКИЙ МЕХАНИЗМ: «ДЖЕЙМС И ГИГАНТСКИЙ ПЕРСИК» РОАЛЬДА ДАЛЯ

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АННОТАЦИЯ	КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА
В статье рассматривается создание образов персонажей в детской литературе с точки зрения их эстетической, перформативной и дидактической функций. Исследование сочетает психологическую интерпретацию с лингвостилистическим анализом и с позиций литературоведения раскрывает значение созданных образов персонажей для формирования нравственного восприятия детей, их эмоционального и когнитивного развития, образного мышления и психологического становления. Результаты исследования показывают, что созданные в произведениях детской литературы образы персонажей выполняет развивающую, аллегорическую, эстетическую, когнитивную и педагогическую функции. Материалом исследования послужил роман Роальда Даля «Джеймс и гигантский персик», на примере которого были проанализированы приёмы создания образов персонажей, а также роль символически многослойных повествовательных стратегий произведения в осмыслении темы власти и формировании нравственных ценностей и личности юных читателей. На основе примеров из романа показано, что эффективное создание образов персонажей требует учёта возрастных особенностей, а также психологического и когнитивного уровня развития целевой детской аудитории. Кроме того, в статье подчёркивается, что создание образов персонажей в детской литературе представляет собой особый педагогический процесс, предполагающий точность языкового выражения, использование символических значений и учёт когнитивных и эмоциональных возможностей детей.	Детская литература, изображение персонажей, повествовательная характеристика, эстетическая функция, дидактическая роль.

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature plays a crucial role in children's mental, communicative, psychological, and social development, and the problem of character construction stands among the central aesthetic categories of this field. Literary personages are people or items formed through the author's imagination; they serve to stimulate young readers' fantasy, to shape ethical behavior, and to cultivate aesthetic principles. Characters in children's fiction are distinguished from those of other genres by their symbolic meaning, didactic function, and simple yet colorful and memorable features, and they encourage children to form ideal models for their real lives. Children's literature occupies a distinct position within literary studies due to its dual nature as both artistic expression and pedagogical instrument, since every children's book contains an implicit adult perspective that organizes its values (Nodelman P., 2008, 77). Unlike adult fiction, it addresses a readership in the process of cognitive and emotional formation (Hunt P., 2005, 87). Consequently, characterization in children's narratives performs functions that go far beyond narrative progression. Literary personages become ethical models, symbolic figures, and psychological guidelines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Character construction in children's literature possesses several peculiar features, including simplicity and clarity, emotional accessibility, moral value, imaginativeness, and archetypal resonance. Every writer is therefore expected to take these features into account while creating a fictional book for children. The defining features of character formation in children's narratives may be summarized as follows.

Firstly, authors are expected to develop simple and clear characters that remain coherent and understandable for young readers, so that they can quickly identify the nature of each personage. Such simplicity does not imply artistic shallowness; rather, it defines a communicative strategy. By avoiding overly complex levels of characterization, authors enable children to focus on narrative events and their didactic meaning.

Unlike adult literature, children's books often express emotions explicitly through the actions, reactions, or speech of characters conveyed in simple dialogues. In most cases, personages express their feelings openly and describe their emotional states in clear and concrete language. This openness generates empathy, allowing children to build a coherent relationship with fictional characters. Furthermore, such emotional accessibility strengthens plot immersion and stimulates moral reflection.

Although modern literary research criticizes traditional didactic storytelling, moral meaning in children's narratives still remains a principal aspect of character formation for young audiences. Personages mostly embody ethical contrasts such as kindness versus cruelty, courage and fear, honesty and deception, bravery and cowardice. These moral oppositions help readers to differentiate good from bad and to draw real lessons for their own lives.

Imagination is also a highly significant element of children's literature, offering young audiences a genuine childhood experience through fantasy and wonder. Animals communicating with humans, magical objects, and extraordinary talents of children function not only as entertainment but also as symbolic elements reflecting children's inner worlds, desires, fears, and aspirations. With the help of such imaginative figures, authors depict ideal magical worlds for children and stimulate the development of their creative thinking skills.

Archetypal resonance. Many children's authors employ universal archetypes such as the hero, the wise mentor, the villain, the trickster, and the innocent child. These archetypes provide children with familiar experiences and make stories easy to follow. Writers sometimes use these archetypes creatively, combining them with original personages or magical items. In "James and the Giant Peach", for instance, Roald Dahl portrays James as an innocent child and introduces magical elements such as the Giant Peach and the creatures inside it, which gives young readers a chance to broaden their imagination and makes the novel more engaging (Öztürk A. Z., 2024, 109).

Language plays an important role in shaping character perception. Authors use various stylistic devices, including allegory, alliteration, sound symbolism,

repetition, and rhythm, to increase the linguistic and aesthetic value of a novel. Different speech patterns can convey humor or innocence, while abrupt and unusual sentences may express tension or stubbornness; since children are usually sensitive to sound and rhythm, linguistic texture serves as an important tool of characterization. Speech is one of the crucial means of expressing character. Distinctive vocabulary, grammatical structures, and syntactic patterns help distinguish figures and make them more memorable. In children's books, simple dialogues often balance realism with imaginative worlds, making the story more comprehensible and believable. The actions of characters provide concrete evidence of personality. Young audiences interpret behavior more readily than abstract description, so authors frequently show character through deeds rather than words. Acts of kindness, bravery, curiosity, or wisdom characterize figures through reliable conduct and allow readers to infer traits independently. The physical appearance of personages often carries symbolic meaning, as colors, clothes, or bodily features may indicate personality or narrative function. Bright colors may express optimism, while unusual physical traits may signal magical or extraordinary status; such visual cues assist readers in forming mental images and remembering characters.

The theoretical foundation of characterization derives from classical poetics and has evolved within modern narratology. E. M. Forster distinguished between "flat" and "round" character types and emphasized their psychological significance (Forster E. M., 1927, 32). In children's literature, however, the opposition between simplicity and complexity functions differently. Maria Nikolajeva claims that children's books usually involve clear power relations and moral polarities; instead of psychological ambiguity, children's literature favors clarity and accessibility (Nikolajeva M., 2015). Peter Hunt likewise argues that it is inadequate to analyze children's narratives within frameworks designed for adult literature, because they operate in an entirely different communicative context (Hunt P., 2005, 65). Scholars who investigate Roald Dahl's fiction reveal his capacity to blend exaggeration, moral value, and humor, as well as the significance of visual symbolism in his works (Cesa L., 2024, 287). Maria Tatar, in turn, argues for the cognitive importance of

counterfactual imagination in children's narratives and analyzes linguistic, psychological, and aesthetic elements of character construction (Tatar M., 2009, 20).

Character formation in children's literature can be understood through the following five interconnected dimensions:

Psychological Dimension – emotional development and identity formation

Aesthetic Dimension – stylistic devices and symbolic representation

Didactic Dimension – moral modeling and ethical clarity

Narrative Dimension – plot function and structural transformation

Ideological Dimension – representation of authority and power

These five dimensions interact dynamically rather than functioning independently, and their integration is particularly valuable in children's literature owing to the genre's communicative transparency. So far, scholars have investigated characterization in children's narratives from linguistic, narratological, and stylistic perspectives. Classical literary studies divided it into direct characterization, that is, explicit description by the narrator, and indirect characterization, revealed through the actions, speech, and interactions of personages (Nikolajeva M., 2002). In children's literature these categories also function differently from other genres because of the characteristics of young audiences. Reader-response theory shows that meaning is formed through the cooperation of text and reader; in the case of children's literature, interpretive competence is still developing, and texts therefore offer readers additional support in understanding characters. Cognitive literary criticism indicates that readers rely on mental schemata to interpret fictional figures, so writers of children's books design characters that align with familiar archetypes while still allowing imaginative expansion. From a pedagogical point of view, characters also function as models of social learning. Developmental theorists suggest that children absorb patterns of behavior demonstrated in narratives. Thus, characterization becomes an important educational instrument shaping ethical perception and emotional intelligence.

Personages in children's narratives play a highly significant role in the mental, psychological, and social development of young readers. This role includes the following functions:

1. Psychological identification. While reading a novel, children experience the same feelings as the protagonists, sharing their fears, dreams, and challenges. They place themselves in the position of these protagonists, and this identification produces emotional involvement and makes the reading process more meaningful. Children recognize similarities between the protagonists and themselves; as a result, the narrative becomes more reliable and significant for them.

2. Ethical exploration. Through the actions of fictional figures, children can face moral dilemmas within a safe imaginative world. When they observe how characters undergo challenges and problems, they begin to consider consequences without real-life risk, and literature thereby teaches them ethical reasoning and behavior.

3. Cognitive development. Reading narratives and following the adventures of the protagonists demand serious mental work from children, including interpretation, prediction, and inference. Furthermore, it develops analytical thinking and narrative understanding, enabling readers to follow the structure of character, conflict, and transformation and to grasp cause-and-effect relationships.

4. Cultural transmission. Characters in novels often carry cultural values, traditions, and social norms, and by following different personages readers gain insight into diverse ways of life. In this respect, character formation fosters cross-cultural awareness and promotes mutual understanding. Old fairy tales and children's books employed traditional idealized or simplified heroes in order to serve didactic aims, whereas contemporary literature presents diverse personalities with internal conflicts and realistic emotions. In modern children's literature, personages may struggle with anxiety, questions of cultural identity, or social issues, which makes such works more suitable for a complex developmental stage. Furthermore, contemporary books portray characters from different cultural, linguistic, and social

backgrounds; this diversity broadens readers' perception and allows them to encounter perspectives beyond their own experience.

The theoretical study of character construction involves multiple disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, semiotics, stylistics, and narratology. While classical literary scholarship conceptualized characters as functional elements within plot structures, modern narratology treats them as cognitive constructs formed through reader interaction. According to cognitive narratology, readers do not simply observe personages but actively engage their imagination and emotions, and in children's literature this kind of engagement is essential for comprehension. Researchers of the fairy-tale tradition emphasize that these principles partly derive from traditional oral storytelling, in which characters had to be immediately understandable to listeners. Moreover, picture-book theorist William Moebius argues for the importance of visual and descriptive cues in the formation of character identity (Moebius W., 1986). Together, these perspectives suggest that character portrayal in children's literature is shaped both by historical narrative traditions and by contemporary pedagogical concerns. However, scholars often treat individual aspects of characterization in isolation: psychological research rarely considers stylistic elements, stylistic analysis seldom addresses cognitive theory, and narratological studies frequently neglect pedagogical questions.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, linguistic and stylistic analysis, contextual interpretation, and didactic and psychological analysis are combined to examine the problem of constructing literary characters in children's literature. The novel "James and the Giant Peach" by Roald Dahl is chosen as the research material and used to analyze the portrayal of characters, their literary and linguistic features, the fantastic elements of children's literature, and their influence on children's minds.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In children's literature, authors employ various components to construct unique and lively personages and to make the novel more believable and acceptable. Literary studies identify the following components of character formation:

Character's inner portrayal – inner world, emotions, and motives;
External description – character's appearance and behavioral actions;
Individuality of speech – each personage's unique speech style;
Actions and events – character's active participation in the plot;
Allegorical features – expression of the novel's main idea through the personage.

In children's literature, these elements are usually intensified by the author, since young readers tend to accept clear and lively characters rather than complex psychological descriptions.

One of the most compelling aspects of characterization in Roald Dahl's "James and the Giant Peach" is the structural transformation of the protagonist from a passive victim into an active narrative agent. At the beginning of the novel, James is described as "a small boy" living "miserably" under the authority of his aunts (Dahl R., 1961, 2). This concise description immediately establishes vulnerability and social marginalization, and the simple language of the novel provides emotional clarity: the reader does not need interpretive mediation to understand James's suffering. The cruel behavior of Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker is not psychologically subtle; it is deliberately hyperbolic. They are depicted as grotesquely exaggerated personages whose physical descriptions illustrate their moral deformity. Dahl writes that Aunt Sponge was "enormously fat", while Aunt Spiker was "lean and tall and bony" (Dahl R., 1961, 7). This clear negative physical contrast visualizes moral distortion, and their speech is sharp, abrupt, commanding, and humiliating. From a stylistic perspective, such exaggeration transforms them into symbolic antagonists rather than psychologically complex individuals; for child readers, these descriptions demonstrate the negative consequences of such behavior. James's development begins with his encounter with the mysterious old man who gives him the magical crystals, and this episode serves as a transition from realism to fantasy. Importantly, the fantasy element does not erase trauma; it reconfigures it. The giant peach becomes a symbol of rebirth and psychological regeneration, functioning as a transitional imaginative environment in which the protagonist reconstructs his

identity. Inside the peach, James shifts from silence to articulation: his speech becomes more confident and his suggestions more strategic. When danger threatens the peach during its journey, James proposes to lift it by harnessing hundreds of seagulls with strands of silk, and this decision marks his emergence as a problem-solver. The narrative arc here exemplifies dynamic characterization: action generates identity. The insect characters further deepen the symbolic layering; the Old Green Grasshopper, for instance, functions as a mentor figure whose calm tone and reflective dialogue introduce rational stability.

Another significant aspect is developmental transformation. Even though children's characters are often presented vividly and simply, they frequently undergo noticeable growth: a timid protagonist may become brave, a selfish character may learn generosity, or an isolated figure may discover friendship. This transformation provides narrative satisfaction and models psychological and social development for young readers, aligning the story with their own processes of maturation. In "James and the Giant Peach" the main character, James, is a young orphan boy who is fearful and lonely at the beginning of the novel but becomes a brave, intelligent, and caring person in the end; the figure of the orphan itself carries rich symbolic potential in Dahl's narrative (Cesa L., 2024). Such a character is called a "dynamic character" or "dynamic protagonist" in literary studies, and this transformation demonstrates the didactic model of the hero peculiar to children's literature (Öztürk A. Z., 2024). According to Maria Nikolajeva, "Nowhere else are power structures as visible as in children's literature... children's literature is a unique art and communication form, deliberately created by those in power for the powerless" (Nikolajeva M., 2015, 56). The author uses various elements, including fantastic adventures, other characters' dialogues, and the contrast of cowardice and bravery, to construct this character. William Moebius observes that "James is shown alone, small in stature, and behind a fencing structure, suggesting entrapment and solitude" (Moebius W., 1986, 143). Additionally, the following three groups of characters can be distinguished in the novel:

James's friends inside the peach, such as the Old Green Grasshopper, Miss Spider, the Ladybug, and the Glowworm. As noted in the study guide of the novel, "the supportive characters are frank about their own experiences of loss and mortality as they travel on the peach" (Lauer C., Kennedy P., n.d.). These personages represent goodness, sympathy, friendship, and wisdom, and they serve to explain the importance of these qualities to young readers.

Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker, the aunts of James, who symbolize cruelty and selfishness in the novel.

The Centipede, who provides humor and lively action in order to give psychological relief to children.

These personages make the plot more engaging and play a significant role in the development of the main protagonist into a clever and brave person. The contrast between negative and positive characters makes the novel vivid and colorful, which is among the most important qualities of children's literature. Ashley Hazelwood claims that "the theme of James and the Giant Peach is that it's never too late to make friends. Even though James loses his parents and his aunts are mean to him, he still desires to make friends who care about him, and he doesn't give up" (Hazelwood A., n.d.). Initially, James is afraid of Miss Spider because of the stereotypical prejudice associated with her species, but her kindness gradually dismantles this association. The Ladybug provides James with maternal warmth and emotional reassurance, while the Centipede brings humor to the plot and gives readers emotional confidence. Together they become an alternative family for James, operating on cooperation and dialogue. Thus, characterization in this novel performs ideological work: it critiques the authority of adult power and emphasizes the significance of collaborative social models (Nodelman P., 2008).

Another essential stylistic feature of children's literature involved in "James and the Giant Peach" is rhythmic dialogue. Dahl uses repetition and sound play to increase memorability and mental engagement, while humor reduces psychological pressure whenever tension arises in the plot; the hyperbolic boasting of the Centipede, for instance, offers comic relief that protects readers from trauma.

Importantly, James does not become brave in a short time; his courage emerges through gradual interaction, which illustrates realistic developmental models for young readers. Courage is thus depicted as learned resilience rather than innate heroism. From a psychological perspective, James's journey shows the process of individual formation. Initially dependent and silenced, he transforms into a decision-maker, and such an evolution provides readers with a symbolic representation of maturation. Furthermore, the destruction of Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker by the rolling peach is narratively abrupt yet symbolically important, as authority faces moral and physical collapse in the end. This scene dramatizes the victory of justice. Dahl's narrative justice aligns with traditional fairy-tale structures while retaining modern irony. Fantasy therefore operates not as escapism but as empowerment, and the giant peach represents imaginative expansion beyond imposed limitations. Maria Tatar's concept of counterfactual imagination is relevant here: by presenting impossible scenarios, Dahl expands the cognitive flexibility of his readers (Tatar M., 2009). In terms of aesthetic strategy, simplicity becomes a vehicle for symbolic density; sentences remain syntactically accessible, yet the imagery carries allegorical significance. This dual layering ensures developmental accessibility without sacrificing interpretive richness.

James's transformation exemplifies how narrative agency emerges through relational interaction, the insect community illustrates the reconfiguration of social belonging, and the antagonistic caricatures highlight ethical boundaries while enabling cognitive clarity. Together, these elements confirm that effective children's literature negotiates aesthetics and pedagogy through character-centered storytelling. The integration of stylistic economy, symbolic resonance, and developmental psychology suggests that characterization remains the core mechanism through which children's narratives achieve enduring cultural relevance. In this sense, Dahl's novel continues the fairy-tale tradition while adapting it to modern sensibilities of autonomy and empowerment. These stylistic patterns also function as mnemonic devices, enabling children to track characters easily and to associate them with specific narrative roles.

Character construction in “James and the Giant Peach” illustrates how children’s literature integrates aesthetic pleasure with pedagogical intent. The narrative avoids psychological opacity but achieves symbolic depth through exaggeration and fantasy. Dahl’s strategy demonstrates that simplicity does not equal superficiality; it constitutes a deliberate communicative choice aligned with cognitive accessibility. The interdisciplinary synthesis applied in this study highlights how linguistic form, narrative structure, and psychological modeling operate collectively. James is introduced as isolated and oppressed. His psychological portrayal emphasizes loneliness and vulnerability, his physical smallness externally reinforces symbolic marginalization, and the fencing imagery surrounding him visually encodes entrapment. As the narrative progresses, internal fear transforms into courage. This developmental arc classifies James as a dynamic protagonist whose transformation mirrors the developmental journey of child readers. Children’s literature frequently constructs clear ethical oppositions. Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker function as exaggerated antagonists whose cruelty is hyperbolically represented, reinforcing moral clarity. Such polarization enables young readers to distinguish ethical boundaries without interpretive ambiguity.

The giant peach itself represents imaginative expansion. Fantasy in Dahl’s narrative does not escape reality but reconfigures it, and the peach becomes a transitional space between trauma and empowerment. Hyperbole, personification, and rhythmic dialogue enhance memorability and function as cognitive anchors for young readers. The Old Green Grasshopper embodies wisdom, Miss Spider represents resilience, the Ladybug symbolizes kindness, and the Centipede introduces humor and subversion; collectively, these characters construct a micro-community of cooperation whose dialogic interactions facilitate James’s maturation. Friendship replaces isolation, demonstrating social development as narrative resolution. Children’s literature often reflects adult authority structures, and Dahl simultaneously critiques and reconstructs authority. Oppressive guardians are removed, while alternative communities emerge, and this ideological shift empowers the child protagonist, subverting traditional hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

Character creation in children's literature represents a complex artistic process that combines narrative technique, psychological insight, and aesthetic sensitivity. Successful characters are not merely fictional constructs but dynamic figures who inspire imagination, empathy, and reflection. They help young readers understand themselves and others, explore moral questions, and engage creatively with language.

This study confirms that the artistry of characterization lies in balancing simplicity with depth, clarity with symbolism, and entertainment with meaning. As children's literature continues to evolve, character construction will remain a central domain of scholarly inquiry, offering valuable insights into the relationship between narrative art and human development. The analysis of character portrayal in "James and the Giant Peach" shows that authors of children's fiction are expected to blend character evolution, fantastic elements, symbolism, and simple literary language in order to create distinctive and believable characters. The aim of this style is not only to provide aesthetic enjoyment but also to convey didactic meaning. Roald Dahl's novel, with its brave, kind, strange, and lively personages, embodies all of these features and stands as an exemplary work of children's literature. Character construction in children's literature thus proves to be a multilayered process encompassing psychological, didactic, and literary values.

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