

Survival Strategies in *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway

The novel *The Sun Also Rises* is just as well known for its epigraph as for the story itself. One of Ernest Hemingway's friends, Gertrude Stein, coined the expression "the Lost Generation" when she said "You are all a lost generation" (7), which serves as an epigraph to the novel. It is a fitting epithet for the characters in *The Sun Also Rises*, who are all affected by World War I, and the experiences take their toll on their lives. This essay will show that the novel centers on different strategies to learn to live with disillusionment and loss of values in postwar Europe. The essay focuses on three of the characters – Jake Barnes, Lady Brett Ashley and Robert Cohn – and describes their different survival strategies, and the way these strategies affect their personalities. Even though they share some ways of dealing with their traumas, they also have different ways of coping with their experiences. Still, they are all part of the Lost Generation. Jake is lost because of his wound, which has left him not only physically emasculated, but also mentally. Brett has lost hope in the future due to her personal losses, and cannot commit to anybody – or anything at all. Cohn has not participated in the war like the others, but is confused by being caught between old and new values.

The Lost Generation is veterans of the First World War who had to endure years of brutal trench warfare – where it was just as much luck as skill to survive; the whole generation lost faith in the foundations of a normal life. The code of values, such as family, friends, religion and work lost its meaning leaving them with no motivation to plan and think about the future. The moral values built on love, optimism and hope seemed no longer valid and left the generation "lost". Bill describes Jake and everybody else in the crowd as well as himself: "Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see. You hang around cafés" (120). The temporary solutions developed by the members of the Lost Generation - drugs, sex and a trivial existence - are shared by all of them, and they constantly move, from café to café and country to country, avoiding confrontation with their own lack of values. The emotional dysfunctions of the Lost Generation are severe and manifest themselves in more ways than one. Aimlessness leads to hopelessness, and lack of values leads to lack of belief in the future - not once is the future mentioned in the novel. No one in the story has any goals, except instant sensual gratification. Also because the rules that are supported by the values are gone, there is no way of knowing how to behave. The searching, the hope of the grass being greener on the other side, is apparent in the constant

moving from one place to another. No longer believing in the good in people, Jake Barnes defines himself by stating: "I mistrust all frank and simple people" (12).

Jake and the rest of the characters who are part of the Lost Generation spend most of their time in cafés, drinking, and drinking extensively. The old Victorian value rule of not being drunk in public has gone out the window and has been revalued to indicate manliness: the more you can drink the better. Many suffer from war traumas and drink because they want to forget or not have to think about their situation. Jake is no exception and works only when he really needs to. The rest of the time he is found in cafés, drinking with his friends. The survival strategy of drinking to numb the feelings is used by many of the characters. Jake is explicit: "Under the wine I lost the disgusted feeling and was happy" (150). For many of those who took part, the war continues long after the fighting has stopped, and just as Jake only was happy when he was drunk during the war, he and his companions use the same strategy at post war times to feel happy. Matts Djos goes so far as he describes the characters as alcoholics: "In trying to deal with circumstances and frustrations, then, Jake and his circle only seem to know how to run from their problems. In this sense, they are typically alcoholic. Indeed, an escapist impulse and an addiction to evasion and denial are hallmarks of the alcoholic perspective" (147). The mental instability of the characters and not being comfortable in the skin they are in, is shown in the novel by the feeling of wanting to escape. The drive to escape that they all seem to suffer from is a typical characteristic of an alcoholic. This self-destructive way of having to run away from themselves are caused by the fact that if they stop in one place for too long they might sober up and then they will have to start to take life more seriously. Other signs of this unhealthy relationship with alcohol, which might be seen as alcoholism, can be detected in all Jake's friends - such as a high level of anxiety, moodiness, defensiveness and impulsiveness. "There is much evidence to show that many people drink to help deal with anxiety and depressive thoughts. It reveals that alcohol can be a favourite coping mechanism" and "Therefore, the individual feels more anxious and needs more alcohol to 'numb' their anxiety" (AddictionInfo.org). "Let's have one more drink of that", Brett says, showing her anxiety when ordering a drink: "My nerves are rotten" (186). Sometimes the alcohol is the solution to almost any problem or the anxiety feeling. Jake is reflecting on the night before when he was knocked out by Cohn in the last brawl, and his conclusion is "the absinthe made everything seem better" (Hemingway 226). In the final

pages Jake comes to the rescue when Brett calls upon him; his solution to Brett's problems is simply to get drunk and go for a ride. In other words: get numb and escape.

The novel is told through the eyes of Jake, and it is around him the story evolves. Jake is working as a reporter for an American newspaper, though his ambition is to become a writer, like many of his friends in Paris at the time. Jake is a veteran and has been seriously wounded. Even if Hemingway does not describe the wound directly, the injury is understood to be of a sexual nature, which results in his impotence. Whether this is a physical or a psychological wound is not clear; there are only a few references to Jake's condition. Once he only says: "I got hurt in the war"(Hemingway 24), and on another occasion, when he is alone in his room and stands undressed in front of the mirror, he says: "of all the ways to be wounded" (Hemingway 38). When his friend Bill in a heated discussion says that all men in the Lost Generation are impotent, Jake's quick response is: "no, I just had an accident" (Hemingway 120). He struggles with this emasculation and has a feeling of being excluded from the rest of the group that he socializes with. The symbolism of this impotence and feeling of marginalization is of course powerful, since Jake impotence is thematic; many of the men felt emasculated due to the war. Through the value loss, the men have after the war lost the model that defines how a man should be and act, since in the war it did not matter if you were brave and manly, you still died if a shell landed in your trench. This made the men feel insecure about their own manliness and emasculation resulted.

One of Jake's biggest fights is the one he fights with himself. Not showing weakness is very important to him, but at night when he is alone, the feelings of hopelessness and depression come to the surface and he often cries. He puts it like this: "It is awfully easy to be hardboiled about everything in the day time, but at night it is another thing" (Hemingway 42). The major emotional struggle concerns the love of his life, Lady Brett Ashley. When she is not present the wound is almost bearable, but when she storms back into his life again and again, his defenses are shattered and his wound is opened once more. John Aldridge describes Jake and his relationship with Brett:

In *The Sun Also Rises* Jake's sexual impediment hid the possible inadequacy of his affair with Brett. Because physical consummation was impossible, we were able to forget that the only obstacle was physical and to imagine that genuine love would flourish if only that phase of it were gratified. Brett's purely sexual relations with other

men, further- more, only served to point up the purity of her feeling for Jake, and Hemingway was careful to see that no other proof was necessary. (Aldridge 39)

The love between Brett and Jake is described as a deep, true love from both parts, which Jake in the end, due to his war wound, has to decline: “We’d better keep away from each other” (Hemingway 34). Because of Jake’s inability to be physically intimate, he has developed a fear of intimacy and has taken an observer role in life. Much like a coach in sports he monitors the other characters play, which is an example of how Jake has developed survival strategies to overcome, or learn to live with his war wound and war trauma.

The castrated steers of the Pamplona bullfights serve as a symbol of Jake. They are used to control and calm down the furious bulls that have been running through the streets so they will not hurt each other or themselves. Jake is in the light of his wound a steer, and seem to have accepted the role; he looks out for his friends, and makes sure that they do not hurt themselves or the others. Lisa Tyler points out that “it is possible that Hemingway intended readers to compare the conciliatory Jake, who is in effect neutered by his war wound, to the unfortunate steers, who are all too often injured because of their efforts to make friends with the bulls” (Hemingway 54).

Jake has also taken on the role of a big brother: because of his feeling of alienation he has a distance to life, so people around him often turn to him. Robert Cohn is one of the characters who trusts to Jake and ask advice. On more than one occasion Cohn comes to Jake with problems and Jake calms or tells him what to do. When Cohn wants to go to South America because he is worried that he is not getting enough out of life, Jake answers: “Listen, Robert, going to another country doesn’t make any difference. I’ve tried all that. You can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another. There’s nothing to that” (Hemingway 19). The big brother role of Jake is an extension of his feeling of alienation from the rest of the group; he has taken himself out of the game because he cannot win or get love. The steers do not fight with the matador in the bullring; they only monitor and help the bulls and Jake does not act in the physical sexual game that the lost generation engages in. He is just there for support and advice. In the words of Cohn: “It’s no life being a steer” (Hemingway 145). Jake’s fascination with bullfighting is also a way of escaping real life and symbolizes his search for his lost manliness.

In contrast, Hemingway's "hero code", which is the author's way of describing the man's man, with features like strength, courage, confidence and to have "grace under pressure" is personified by the bullfighter Romero. The bullfighter is in the novel a prototype for how a man should be according to Jake. Indeed, his fascination with bullfighting can be explained by the sense of masculinity that Jake feels by being an aficionado, a dedicated fan, passionate about bullfighting. The deep interest in bullfighting can also be explained by the feeling of companionship that it gives Jake. To be an aficionado and a member this mystical male brotherhood one has to have the right way of expressing themselves about the action going on in the bullring. Jake tells it like this:

When they saw that I had aficion, and there was no password, no set questions that could bring it out, rather it was a sort of oral spiritual examination with the questions always a little on the defensive and never apparent, there was this same embarrassed putting the hand on the shoulder or a "buen hombre".
(Hemingway 137)

Being a member of "Club Aficion" gives Jake the sense of belonging that he lack in the company of his friends. Here Male friends talk about the very manly art of bullfighting, no need to think about war wounds or sexual dysfunctions.

Jake also shows great compassion for the people in the group. Lady Brett Ashley is, of course, the best example of the support that he can provide to others, and Jake's and Brett's love affair has transformed into a friendship, a very close friendship that a brother and sister would have. He has settled for a friendship with Brett because that is the best he can get. Jake's love for Brett also makes him accept her coming back to him, and he takes care of her every time one of Brett's love escapades backfires. Brett can always call on Jake to come and take care of the mess and he often pays the bills, just as a big brother would.

Jake is suffering from his war wound in silence but never the less it effect him on many levels and has made him a bitter man. His way of trying to live with the emasculation that his war wound has brought upon him is basically to try to be manlier. By acting manlier, he tries to regain some of his manhood. He hates it when someone pays for him; he wants to pay himself or more, he even yearns for it and never misses a chance to pay the bill: "Someone at the counter, that I had never seen before, tried to pay for the wine, but I finally paid for it myself" (Hemingway 160). When Jake picks up the prostitute Georgette at a

café because “it would be nice to eat with someone” (Hemingway 24) and then later leaves her in a bar, he still leaves a fifty-franc bill as payment for the night, as a good gentleman should. So by paying for himself, his feeling of lost manhood can be somewhat reduced or at least not as hurtful as it might have felt if he had not. Jake is a Catholic, and he compares his way of surviving his state of alienation and his war trauma with the way that the Church handles problems. “The Catholic Church had an awfully good way of handling all that ... not to think about it” (Hemingway 39). This is how Jake has learnt to think in order not to be overwhelmed by his tragic war wound.

Even if the belief in love and the belief in finding love is lost, the group of friends around Jake is very much engaged in love-making. It is of course difficult for him to constantly be reminded of his incapacity of sexual intercourse. And having Brett — the love of his life — as a friend does not make it easier. This has forced him to develop a similar way of acting and thinking about love and finding a lover: he disarms the seriousness of love by patronizing it. He says to Brett: “It’s funny. I said. It’s very funny. And it’s a lot of fun, too to be in love” (Hemingway 35). Jake takes himself out of the game so he will not be hurt or have to think about his wound.

Hemingway uses nature as a contrast to the drunken city life that Jake and his friend normally live, to suggest another kind of survival strategy. In the country, Jake and his friend Bill have a calm and nurturing time, free from the social and sexual competition of the lives they normally live. After a lovely dinner the two go walking along the river in a park. Hemingway’s way of describing the surroundings changes to emphasizing the characters wellbeing. When Jake asks Bill if he wants a drink he simply answers “I don’t need it!” (Hemingway 83). This is the only time one of the characters in the novel turns down a drink to show that the desire to numb oneself is lost. The fishing trip to Spain is a major turning point of the novel where all the tension and uneasiness of the Lost Generation is gone. Bill and Jake experience a couple of days with happiness and carefree calmness. All the social and sexual rivalry is gone, just two men out in the country enjoying each other’s company. There is no reason to see who can drink the most or whose status is higher in the group. When comparing the trout they have caught, Bill’s fishes are much bigger and Jake has not caught as many but still there is no feeling of envy, just happiness. The implication is that nature has a humanizing force that civilization paradoxically lacks.

The next character — with another kind of war wound and other kinds of survival strategies — is Lady Brett Ashley. She is the object of everybody's desire; she personifies the new woman who emerged from the value loss that the war caused. Brett's war trauma, like many of the women that took part in the war, grows out of emotional experiences. She served as a nurse in a hospital at the front where she experienced the devastating force of the war through the wounded soldiers. Seeing and experiencing all that evil and destruction of human lives has had the same effect as it had on the men that fought in the trenches: she has lost her innocence and her belief in the good of mankind. Brett also suffers two major personal losses during the war; her first fiancé died from dysentery in the trenches. As Tyler puts it, "Brett has no tangible injury but is psychically destroyed by her fiancé's death" (51). Then the man with whom she became involved returned from the war a changed man, his war experiences had made him violent and evil. She had to endure both physical and psychical abuse before she finally left and is in the process of divorcing him.

Brett is part of the new generation of women that rebels against the old values and the stereotypical Victorian ideals. They do not want to be seen as possessions and want to have a life of their own. Before the war, women lived in patriarchal households, where their men were responsible for their well-being. Many of the women in post war Europe lost their husbands in the war and needing to abandon accepted housewifely roles and fend for themselves. Brett is, according to Wendy Martin, caught between two modes of gender representation: "that of the idealized woman on the pedestal and that of the self-reliant modern woman" (71). Her situation somewhat ambiguous; she wants to stand on her own two feet but she needs men for company and financial support. She leaves the man that she is currently dating as soon as he tries to possess her. As Martin describes: "If Brett has gained a measure of freedom in leaving the traditional household, she is still very much dependent on men, who provide an arena where she can be attractive and socially active as well as financially secure" (Hemingway 71).

Her survival strategies are more difficult to define than Jake's are. To protect herself, she chooses not to commit to one man, since she is afraid of losing him. However, she needs men: her war trauma has left her with a need of companionship and financial security, so she uses men for just that. But, on the other hand, she - as a newly liberated woman - does not want to be possessed by men and she is not held back by the old values of pre-war times when women were expected to stay at home in the kitchen, and she enjoys her freedom.

Toward the end when Romero wants to marry her, she leaves him, so he can't tie her down. Here she explains it to Jake: "He really wanted to marry me. So I couldn't go away from him, he said. He wanted to make sure I could never go away from him, he said. After I'd gotten more womanly, of course" (Hemingway 246). As soon as the man she is involved with at the moment tries to possess her, she dumps him.

Brett's war trauma also results in a fear of commitment, due to the fact that the war has taken the two men that she has loved in the past. And the man she loves now, Jake, cannot give her what she needs, because of the war wound he has got. After kissing Jake, she turns away and tries to get as far away as she can, with her head down: "Don't touch me", she said. "Please don't touch me." Jake asks her what's the matter, and she answers: "I can't stand it." On the question if she does not love him she says: "Love you? I simply turn jelly when you touch me", and later: "I don't want to go through that hell again" (Hemingway 34). So by distancing herself from true love and having short intense sexual relationships with an easy exit, she avoids the risk of being left alone again.

Brett has developed a way of narrowing the gap between the gender roles by using the men of the Lost Generation's emasculation, and acting like a man herself. She gets closer to men, wears their clothes and drinks in public. The way she develops love into friendship is a way of getting the best of both the female and the male worlds; she is taken care of and can live a life without old Victorian values holding her back. Jake describes her: "Brett was damned good-looking. She wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed shirt, and her hair brushed back like a boy's" (Hemingway 29). As Spilka remarks: "With a man's felt hat on her boyish bob, and with her familiar reference to men as fellow 'chaps', she completes the distortion of sexual roles which seems to characterize the period. The war, which has unmanned Barnes and his contemporaries, has turned Brett into 'the freewheeling equal of any man'" (36). Further, as Tyler explains, it is not only Brett who represents the way that Hemingway plays with traditional gender roles. Also Jake is stereotypically "feminine" in his "passive and long-suffering acceptance of her [Brett's] tendency to stray sexuality", and Cohn as well, who "attaches great romantic meaning to what Brett sees as a brief, inconsequential fling" (54).

That Brett is very dependent is something that Jake has recognized ever since he met her, and he is one of the men that Brett uses for both financial help and companionship

when she is lonely- after one of her love affairs has crashed, or if she feels bad. When she brings Cohn along to San Sebastian, Jake tells his friend Bill: “She wanted to get out of town and she can’t go anywhere alone. She said she thought it would be good for him” (Hemingway 107). This reflection is an example of Brett’s inability to live without someone to pay her way and keep her company: “Brett needs the affirmation of herself that men’s adoration gives her, just as, like most of Hemingway’s characters, she fears being alone” (Broer 11). This lack of independence from men exposes her to men such as the Count who seek clinging women. He even offers to buy her time and maybe more for the weekend so he can bring her to Biarritz. She turns him down on this occasion, but Brett is quite quick to enjoy the count’s money and company when offered in Paris. There is a fine line between what could be seen as prostitution and what is not. As Marc Baldwin describes it: “Because he has money and she needs her bills paid, Brett allows Cohn to “buy” her for a weekend, only to inevitably lose her once she finds someone else to take over the payments. Brett sees herself as a superior social being, entitled to both money free of labor and men free of the old morals” (43). Martin, also discusses this topic: “In her exchange of sexual and psychological attention with men in return for their financial favors and protection, Brett mirrors both the traditional wife and the prostitute“(72).

Brett’s attitude towards working makes her even more dependent. When Jake tells her he cannot go out drinking because he has to work in the morning, she replies “don’t be an ass” (Hemingway 41). Not only Brett has this attitude; it is shared by many of the characters. Jake is the only one who seems to enjoy his occupation or he sees working as a refuge from the normal city life: “it felt pleasant to be going to work” (Hemingway 43). Baldwin compares Jake with Brett and Mike: “Spoiled, drunk, and decadent, they behave poorly because they are the exploiters, the non-workers. They do not personally produce anything, such as Jake does. Jake earns his way, they do not” (43). Often, the separation between people who are working - “outside on the terrace working people were drinking” (Hemingway 83) - and the characters in the novel are made. In this crowd of artists and writers it is seen lower class to be working or at least to be seen working. Jake analyzes this phenomenon: “it is such an important part of the ethics that you should never seem to be working” (Hemingway 19). So, Jake conceals with the fact that he works hard at times and enjoys it and Brett uses the men around her to make ends meet or more likely to maintain her high life style.

To escape the feeling of hopelessness, she also shares the drinking survival strategy with many of the others. The effective way of numbing thoughts with alcohol is an ongoing theme of the lives of this novel's characters. As Djos describes her: "She runs from a defunct marriage, she runs from Jake when he starts getting too close; she runs to Romero; and, having seduced him, she runs away and returns to poor Jake – and always with a drink, or two, or more for support" (148). Brett's personal losses have caused her to drop the hope and belief in a good outcome has left her an addict to men and alcohol. Men, she needs for company and to keep her financially supported but in order to live this lifestyle she must numb herself.

The third character is Robert Cohn. He is the Jewish writer who could be seen as a misfit in the crowd. What makes him so different is the fact that he has not experienced the war. Untouched by the destructive force of combat, Cohn has his values intact and thus is a constant reminder to the others of how things used to be. This causes a clash of pre war and post war beliefs. Cohn is the object of ridicule and is detested for his unchanged values. Bill tells Jake that "I like him, but he's just so awful" (Hemingway 107). Cohn's wound or emotional defect is not related to the war, but in post war Europe everybody is affected by how the war has left its mark on the population. His inability to see the contrast between his unchanged values and the value loss that his friends have endured is the problem which he must live with and try to overcome in some way. He also has a lack of self-confidence that has followed him from his university days, which definitely could be seen as a post war wound or at least as a problem to function in the environment he is in. Cohn has a reminder of the time in college, when he desperately was trying to fit in through taking up boxing; his nose was broken-wounded- from the beating it received then. These psychological wounds hinder him from interacting with the others. His inability to fit in makes him an outcast.

Cohn's strategies to try to function with the others are based on the old pre war moral value codes which he holds on to; even if they are old-fashioned in the crowd he calls his friends. Although he is constantly attacked and ridiculed by the others, he still thinks that the world works the way it used to, before the war. His inability to see the difference, and therefore not being able to adapt to the people around him and holding on to the beliefs of pre war times is the cause of his alienation. One of Jake's friends, Mrs Braddock, explains when she sees as naivety: "don't be cross with Robert. He's still only a child, you know" (Hemingway 29). In order to overcome the lack of self-confidence, Cohn has used a survival

strategy: he has always clung to people who are nice to him. In Chapter 1 Jake tells the reader about Cohn's state: "he came out of Princeton with painful self-consciousness and the flattened nose, and married the first girl that was nice to him" (Hemingway 12), and in many ways Cohn has stayed that way ever since.

The stagnation of Cohn is an ever-present topic. One of Jake's friends, Harvey Stone, attacks Cohn at a café: "I misjudge you, Harvey said. You're not a moron. You're only a case of arrested development" (Hemingway 51). First there is the fact that he still believes in the traditional ways of defining male and female. If Brett is an example of the new woman, who emotionally and intellectually wants to stand on her own feet, Cohn's values are the opposite. He still thinks that a woman should be taken care of by her man. Like a knight in shining armor, he also wants to defend his lady in a very old-fashioned chivalric style. "Oh, cut out that prep-school stuff" (Hemingway 47), Jake tells him when he wants to physically defend Brett's honor when Jake has made an insulting comment. This happens more than once; Cohn's reaction to Mike's comments on the love affair between Brett and Cohn is simple-minded: "Cohn stood waiting, proudly and firmly waiting for the assault, ready to do battle for his lady love" (Hemingway 182). This is a good example of Cohn's immaturity. Then, he also wears clothes from his university days — he does not change — and he acts very immaturely when his value system is questioned, or if he himself is insulted.

A survival strategy that Cohn shares with other member of the Lost Generation is a compulsive moving from place to place. As Djos observes, "They dash from Paris to the Pyrenees, from the Pyrenees to Pamplona, from Pamplona to Madrid. They dare not stay in any place too long, and they certainly dare not find any substantive connection with each other. Instead, they are continually setting up the next drama, the next argument or barroom brawl, or the next shattered romance or fouled relationship" (147-48). Compared to the rest of the group, Cohn does not use the strategy of numbing himself with alcohol, because of his intact beliefs in the moral code that it is bad to be drunk in public which for the others is long gone as a rule. "Cohn was never drunk" (Hemingway 152). This is a good contrast when looking at the difference between the pre war beliefs and the new generation, where expectations and goals are not as important as having fun and live for the moment.

The final clash of the new and old values or pre and post war is displayed in the final scene that involves Cohn, the brawl. Where he is trying to defend Brett's honor, but it's

just as much his own honor that needs defending. By knocking everybody out that steps on or goes against him old-fashioned pre-war way of thinking he tries to regain some kind of dignity. But his fight is pointless and Cohn's abandons his quest and runs back to safe ground, the USA. He is caught between what was true and what was expected before the war and what is after. His inability to realize this keeps him being the stooge as well as being the envy in this group of people.

To conclude, the characters portrayed in Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* are all victims of the time, post-war Europe was trying to rebuild itself from the devastating war and its population had suffered tremendously. The three characters Jake, Brett and Cohn are examples of different ways of coping with war traumas and ways of learning to live with the emotional wounds they have sustained. Jake and the rest of the veterans have experienced an emasculation through a loss of the rules that defined the values. The family father was gone; no longer could men of the lost generation rely on pre war values of how a man should be or act. Jake's way of trying to cope with his wound is to be an observer so he does not have to be confronted with his condition and never depend on anybody. Brett and other women like her in post war Europe are caught between the newly found freedom and a loss of the security that the values of Victorian times provided. Brett's survival strategy is to use men for two things, company and money without committing emotionally, and to be able to do this she has entered the men's arena and become a friend instead of a future wife. The fortunate souls that avoided the fighting of the war still got a part of the war trauma through the environment that surrounded them. Robert Cohn, finally, still believes in the old values and these clashes with the new way of thinking of The Lost Generation. Cohn's inability to recognize the difference of ideologies between himself and his Paris friends makes him an outcast and finally this causes him do flee back to the US. Hemingway tells the story of these characters' lives in post war Europe, but the novel is also a description of a whole generation that due to what they experienced in one of history's worst wars lost all beliefs in a happy ending.

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