

# **WHAT A CHARACTER! COMPARING LITERARY ADAPTATIONS**

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## **Skills and strategies under development**

### **Language Arts**

1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
2. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process
3. Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts
4. Uses the general skills and strategies to understand a variety of informational texts
5. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

### **Life Skills: Working With Others**

6. Contributes to the overall effort of a group
7. Displays effective interpersonal communication skills

### **Theatre**

8. Understands how informal and formal theatre, film, television, and electronic media productions create and communicate meaning.
9. Understands the context in which theatre, film, television, and electronic media are performed today as well as in the past

### **Art Connections**

10. Understands connections among the various art forms and other disciplines

### **Overview**

How do literary characters evolve in various portrayals? How do these variations affect our understanding of the characters? In this lesson, students consider numerous portrayals of the same character to examine what gives characters lasting power and why and how they evolve over time.

### **Materials**

Videos or DVDs, projection equipment, copies of the current class text

### Section 1: In-class Activities

#### 1. Warm-Up

- 1). Read aloud the entire beginning of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes adventure «The Hound of the Baskervilles».

Mr. Sherlock Holmes, who was usually very late in the mornings, save upon those not infrequent occasions when he was up all night, was seated at the breakfast table. I stood upon the hearth-rug and picked up the stick which our visitor had left behind him the night before. It was a fine, thick piece of wood, bulbous-headed, of the sort which is known as a «Penang lawyer». Just under the head was a broad silver band nearly an inch across. «To James Mortimer, M.R.C.S., from his friends of the C.C.H.», was engraved upon it, with the date «1884». It was just such a stick as the old-fashioned family practitioner used to carry – dignified, solid, and reassuring.

«Well, Watson, what do you make of it?»

Holmes was sitting with his back to me, and I had given him no sign of my occupation.

«How did you know what I was doing? I believe you have eyes in the back of your head».

«I have, at least, a well-polished, silver-plated coffee-pot in front of me», said he. «But, tell me, Watson, what do you make of our visitor's stick? Since we have been so unfortunate as to miss him and have no notion of his errand, this accidental souvenir becomes of importance. Let me hear you reconstruct the man by an examination of it».

«I think», said I, following as far as I could the methods of my companion, «that Dr. Mortimer is a successful, elderly medical man, well-esteemed since those who know him give him this mark of their appreciation».

«Good!» said Holmes. «Excellent!»

«I think also that the probability is in favour of his being a country practitioner who does a great deal of his visiting on foot».

«Why so?»

«Because this stick, though originally a very handsome one has been so knocked about that I can hardly imagine a town practitioner carrying it. The thick-iron ferrule is worn down, so it is evident that he has done a great amount of walking with it».

«Perfectly sound!» said Holmes.

«And then again, there is the 'friends of the C.C.H.' I should guess that to be the Something Hunt, the local hunt to whose members he has possibly given some surgical assistance, and which has made him a small presentation in return».

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«Really, Watson, you excel yourself», said Holmes, pushing back his chair and lighting a cigarette. «I am bound to say that in all the accounts which you have been so good as to give of my own small achievements you have habitually underrated your own abilities. It may be that you are not yourself luminous, but you are a conductor of light. Some people without possessing genius have a remarkable power of stimulating it. I confess, my dear fellow, that I am very much in your debt».

He had never said as much before, and I must admit that his words gave me keen pleasure, for I had often been piqued by his indifference to my admiration and to the attempts which I had made to give publicity to his methods. I was proud, too, to think that I had so far mastered his system as to apply it in a way which earned his approval. He now took the stick from my hands and examined it for a few minutes with his naked eyes. Then with an expression of interest he laid down his cigarette, and carrying the cane to the window, he looked over it again with a convex lens.

«Interesting, though elementary», said he as he returned to his favourite corner of the settee. «There are certainly one or two indications upon the stick. It gives us the basis for several deductions».

«Has anything escaped me?» I asked with some self-importance. «I trust that there is nothing of consequence which I have overlooked?»

«I am afraid, my dear Watson, that most of your conclusions were erroneous. When I said that you stimulated me I meant, to be frank, that in noting your fallacies I was occasionally guided towards the truth. Not that you are entirely wrong in this instance. The man is certainly a country practitioner. And he walks a good deal».

«Then I was right».

«To that extent».

«But that was all».

«No, no, my dear Watson, not all – by no means all. I would suggest, for example, that a presentation to a doctor is more likely to come from a hospital than from a hunt, and that when the initials ‘C.C.’ are placed before that hospital the words ‘Charing Cross’ very naturally suggest themselves».

«You may be right».

«The probability lies in that direction. And if we take this as a working hypothesis we have a fresh basis from which to start our construction of this unknown visitor».

«Well, then, supposing that ‘C.C.H.’ does stand for ‘Charing Cross Hospital,’ what further inferences may we draw?»

«Do none suggest themselves? You know my methods. Apply them!»

«I can only think of the obvious conclusion that the man has practised in town before going to the country».

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«I think that we might venture a little farther than this. Look at it in this light. On what occasion would it be most probable that such a presentation would be made? When would his friends unite to give him a pledge of their good will? Obviously at the moment when Dr. Mortimer withdrew from the service of the hospital in order to start in practice for himself. We know there has been a presentation. We believe there has been a change from a town hospital to a country practice. Is it, then, stretching our inference too far to say that the presentation was on the occasion of the change?»

«It certainly seems probable».

«Now, you will observe that he could not have been on the staff of the hospital, since only a man well-established in a London practice could hold such a position, and such a one would not drift into the country. What was he, then? If he was in the hospital and yet not on the staff he could only have been a house-surgeon or a house-physician – little more than a senior student. And he left five years ago – the date is on the stick. So your grave, middle-aged family practitioner vanishes into thin air, my dear Watson, and there emerges a young fellow under thirty, amiable, unambitious, absent-minded, and the possessor of a favourite dog, which I should describe roughly as being larger than a terrier and smaller than a mastiff».

I laughed incredulously as Sherlock Holmes leaned back in his settee and blew little wavering rings of smoke up to the ceiling.

«As to the latter part, I have no means of checking you», said I, «but at least it is not difficult to find out a few particulars about the man's age and professional career». From my small medical shelf I took down the Medical Directory and turned up the name. There were several

Mortimers, but only one who could be our visitor. I read his record aloud.

«Mortimer, James, M.R.C.S., 1882, Grimpentown, Dartmoor, Devon. House-surgeon, from 1882 to 1884, at Charing Cross Hospital. Winner of the Jackson prize for Comparative Pathology, with essay entitled 'Is Disease a Reversion?' Corresponding member of the Swedish Pathological Society. Author of 'Some Freaks of Atavism' (Lancet 1882). 'Do We Progress?' (Journal of Psychology, March, 1883). Medical Officer for the parishes of Grimpentown, Thorsley, and High Barrow».

«No mention of that local hunt, Watson», said Holmes with a mischievous smile, «but a country doctor, as you very astutely observed. I think that I am fairly justified in my inferences. As to the adjectives, I said, if I remember right, amiable, unambitious, and absent-minded. It is my experience that it is only an amiable man in this world who receives testimonials, only an unambitious one who abandons a London career for

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the country, and only an absent-minded one who leaves his stick and not his visiting-card after waiting an hour in your room».

«And the dog?»

«Has been in the habit of carrying this stick behind his master. Being a heavy stick the dog has held it tightly by the middle, and the marks of his teeth are very plainly visible. The dog's jaw, as shown in the space between these marks, is too broad in my opinion for a terrier and not broad enough for a mastiff. It may have been – yes, by Jove, it is a curly-haired spaniel».

He had risen and paced the room as he spoke. Now he halted in the recess of the window. There was such a ring of conviction in his voice that I glanced up in surprise.

«My dear fellow, how can you possibly be so sure of that?»

«For the very simple reason that I see the dog himself on our very doorstep, and there is the ring of its owner. Don't move, I beg you, Watson. He is a professional brother of yours, and your presence may be of assistance to me. Now is the dramatic moment of fate, Watson, when you hear a step upon the stair which is walking into your life, and you know not whether for good or ill. What does Dr. James Mortimer, the man of science, ask of Sherlock Holmes, the specialist in crime? Come in!»

The appearance of our visitor was a surprise to me, since I had expected a typical country practitioner. He was a very tall, thin man, with a long nose like a beak, which jutted out between two keen, gray eyes, set closely together and sparkling brightly from behind a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. He was clad in a professional but rather slovenly fashion, for his frock-coat was dingy and his trousers frayed. Though young, his long back was already bowed, and he walked with a forward thrust of his head and a general air of peering benevolence. As he entered his eyes fell upon the stick in Holmes's hand, and he ran towards it with an exclamation of joy. «I am so very glad», said he. «I was not sure whether I had left it here or in the Shipping Office. I would not lose that stick for the world».

«A presentation, I see», said Holmes.

«Yes, sir.»

«From Charing Cross Hospital?»

«From one or two friends there on the occasion of my marriage».

«Dear, dear, that's bad!» said Holmes, shaking his head.

Dr. Mortimer blinked through his glasses in mild astonishment.

«Why was it bad?»

«Only that you have disarranged our little deductions. Your marriage, you say?»

«Yes, sir. I married, and so left the hospital, and with it all hopes of a consulting practice. It was necessary to make a home of my own».

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«Come, come, we are not so far wrong, after all», said Holmes. «And now, Dr. James Mortimer».

«Mister, sir, Mister – a humble M.R.C.S».

«And a man of precise mind, evidently».

«A dabbler in science, Mr. Holmes, a picker up of shells on the shores of the great unknown ocean. I presume that it is Mr. Sherlock Holmes whom I am addressing and not».

«No, this is my friend Dr. Watson».

«Glad to meet you, sir. I have heard your name mentioned in connection with that of your friend. You interest me very much, Mr. Holmes. I had hardly expected so dolichocephalic a skull or such well-marked supraorbital development. Would you have any objection to my running my finger along your parietal fissure? A cast of your skull, sir, until the original is available, would be an ornament to any anthropological museum. It is not my intention to be fulsome, but I confess that I covet your skull».

Sherlock Holmes waved our strange visitor into a chair. «You are an enthusiast in your line of thought, I perceive, sir, as I am in mine», said he. «I observe from your forefinger that you make your own cigarettes. Have no hesitation in lighting one».

The man drew out paper and tobacco and twirled the one up in the other with surprising dexterity. He had long, quivering fingers as agile and restless as the antennae of an insect.

Holmes was silent, but his little darting glances showed me the interest which he took in our curious companion.

«I presume, sir», said he at last, «that it was not merely for the purpose of examining my skull that you have done me the honour to call here last night and again to-day?»

«No, sir, no; though I am happy to have had the opportunity of doing that as well. I came to you, Mr. Holmes, because I recognized that I am myself an unpractical man and because I am suddenly confronted with a most serious and extraordinary problem. Recognizing, as I do, that you are the second highest expert in Europe».

«Indeed, sir! May I inquire who has the honour to be the first?» asked Holmes with some asperity.

«To the man of precisely scientific mind the work of Monsieur Bertillon must always appeal strongly».

«Then had you not better consult him?»

«I said, sir, to the precisely scientific mind. But as a practical man of affairs it is acknowledged that you stand alone. I trust, sir, that I have not inadvertently».

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«Just a little», said Holmes. «I think, Dr. Mortimer, you would do wisely if without more ado you would kindly tell me plainly what the exact nature of the problem is in which you demand my assistance».

2). Immediately afterward, have students freewrite about the Sherlock Holmes character – his age, mannerisms, personality, attitude, thought process and anything else they gather from this reading. Invite students to share their ideas.

3). Next, play a trailer (<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/392042/Sherlock-Holmes/trailers>) for the 2009 Guy Ritchie film «Sherlock Holmes», and then ask:

- What did you notice about how Robert Downey Jr. portrays Sherlock Holmes?
- In what ways does Downey's portrayal seem true to the novel excerpt and how you imagined him?
- In what way does it seem different?

If you like, you might also read additional excerpts from Doyle's other books to help them flesh out their ideas of Holmes, such as this section of «A Scandal in Bohemia» (note: this excerpt contains a reference to Holmes' drug use).

4). Share this reader comment on the Times article that they are about to read: «Thank you Conan Doyle for creating a character who lends himself to various interpretations, thus enabling him to remain alive for us to enjoy for decades! Each of the most enjoyable interpretations, including Rathbone, Brett and now, Downey Jr., have put a unique stamp on Holmes that contributes to his longevity. I say bravo!»

5). Along with this comment, show students these images of different actors portraying Holmes ([http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/01/25/movies/20090125\\_SHERLOCKHOLMES\\_SLIDESHOW\\_index.html](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/01/25/movies/20090125_SHERLOCKHOLMES_SLIDESHOW_index.html)):



Robert Downey Jr., 2009

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Nigel Bruce and Basil Rathbone in «*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*» (1939)



Mr. Bruce and Mr. Rathbone in «*The Secret Weapon*» (1942)



Christopher Plummer, here with James Mason and the director Bob Clark, played the role in «*Murder by Decree*» (1979)

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*Nicholas Rowe starred in Barry Levinson's youthful film about the character, «Young Sherlock Holmes» (1985)*



*Rupert Everett took on the role in a Masterpiece Theater production, «Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Silk Stocking» (2005)*

### Ask:

- Based on the images you have just seen of different Holmes portrayals, what strikes you about the character of Sherlock Holmes?
- How can portrayals of one character differ so widely?
- How do different portrayals add to our understanding of a character?

6). Finally, lead a brainstorm about other literary characters who, like Holmes, have «lived» in many different ways (film, visual art, plays, literary adaptations, fan fiction, etc.).

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- What gives some characters lasting power?
- Why and how have these characters been portrayed many times, and many different ways?
- How do these portrayals contribute to our interpretation of the literary characters?
- What might the original authors think?

### **2. Reading and discussion:**

In «Sherlock Holmes, Amorphous Sleuth for Any Era», Charles McGrath examines the «afterlife» of Conan Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes and wonders what Conan Doyle might think of the 2009 film «Sherlock Holmes».

#### **Sherlock Holmes, Amorphous Sleuth for Any Era**

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/06/books/06holmes.html#>

By CHARLES McGRATH

Published: January 5, 2010

Arthur Conan Doyle grew so to hate his greatest creation, Sherlock Holmes, that in 1893 he tried to kill him off, plunging him over the Reichenbach Falls. He called it «justifiable homicide», saying, «If I had not killed him, he would certainly have killed me».

Had Conan Doyle been able to consult with the writers of «Sherlock Holmes», the new movie directed by Guy Ritchie, he might have devised, as they did, more vengeful and imaginative perils, like having Holmes almost bisected by a buzz saw in an abattoir, or crushed by a runaway hull in a shipyard. As it was, Conan Doyle bowed to popular demand and the emptiness of his bank account, and in 1903, after the success of «The Hound of the Baskervilles», reluctantly resurrected Holmes for 24 more years.

Holmes is now unkillable – though purists will doubtless argue that Robert Downey Jr.'s rendition of him in the Ritchie film, which at times resembles a Victorian version of «Fight Club», is a fate worse than death. Even Conan Doyle's own demise in 1930 failed to finish off the great detective. Instead it propelled Holmes into probably the most successful and elaborate afterlife that any fictional character has ever enjoyed. He has appeared in countless movies, stage plays and television series, and has inspired a shelf full of literary sequels and knockoffs, as well as some cartoon versions. He has even been played by Daffy Duck.

Would Conan Doyle have disapproved of the Ritchie movie? Of course. And not just because Mr. Downey's character, antic and mugging, even wearing shades at one point, and happier to solve a crime with a punch-up

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than with his brain, so frequently bears little resemblance to the one Conan Doyle wrote about. By the end of his life Conan Doyle had become an odd combination of fuddy-duddy and ardent believer in spiritualism, forever going to séances and table-rappings, and he would have been troubled by the new movie's plot, which involves exposing some secret occultists who are in fact charlatans.

On the other hand, Holmes's scenes here of bare-knuckled fisticuffs would have surprised Conan Doyle less than they have upset some of the movie's critics. As a young man, Conan Doyle was an accomplished boxer, and in a couple of the stories he attributes the same skill to Holmes, though he probably never imagined that Holmes might have a cyborgian, Terminator-like ability to analyze the laws of physics and bone resistance before deciding how to smash his opponent into jelly.

By the time Conan Doyle died, there had already been scores of silent films based on Holmes, along with a dozen or so stage plays, several of which Conan Doyle saw. Holmes's immense public appeal was precisely what annoyed Conan Doyle. He thought Holmes took attention away from his other, more serious writing, and it gave him no satisfaction at all that he had created one of the first great pop heroes, who transcended the sphere of the Victorian pulps and took on a larger, extra-literary life.

Had Conan Doyle been a better writer, the problem might never have come up. Holmes is so memorable because, like later superheroes, he is less a fully developed character than a collection of fascinating traits. Raymond Chandler once complained that Holmes was little more than a few lines of unforgettable dialogue and an attitude: the drug habit, the boredom, the violin playing, the show-offy logical deductions, which Conan Doyle freely admitted were based on one of his medical school professors.

Yet Holmes's vagueness and incompleteness on the page are what make him so irresistible as a pop figure, on whom we can project our own interpretation. A lot of what we know, or think we know, about him – the deerstalker hat, the cloaks, the catchphrase «Elementary, my dear Watson» – comes not from the texts at all but from subsequent imaginings of him, the movies especially. By now there have been more than 200 film or TV versions of Holmes, and the actors who have played him on screen or stage include John Barrymore, Raymond Massey, Ian Richardson, Jeremy Brett, George C. Scott, Stewart Granger, Charlton Heston, Roger Moore and, improbably, Larry Hagman and Leonard Nimoy.

The most influential, the one whose Holmes lingers in the mind as an anti-version of Mr. Downey's, is Basil Rathbone, who was a movie Holmes from 1939 to 1946, and who imprinted on us such seemingly essential Holmesian traits as the high, brainy forehead; the slick, swept-back hair; the languid, aristocratic bearing; the supercilious putdowns. That's the

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imperturbable image that remained more or less unshakable until Nicol Williamson cracked the mold with his hyper, drug-crazed Holmes in «The Seven-Per-Cent Solution», Herbert Ross's 1976 adaptation of the Nicholas Meyer novel.

In 1985 we got «Young Sherlock Holmes», directed by Barry Levinson, in which the teenage Holmes turned out, in retrospect, to have been a sort of proto-Harry Potter. That movie was produced by Steven Spielberg, whose «Indiana Jones»-like fingerprints are all over the Ritchie film.

To say that our image of Holmes has evolved in ways that reflect changes in our understanding of the character is probably a stretch. More likely he has evolved simply because movies have evolved, and our appreciation of him now entails a large chunk of film history. The plot of the new movie echoes both «The Da Vinci Code» and the Nicolas Cage «National Treasure» movies. The wisecracking relationship between Holmes and Watson (here played engagingly, and not as an old duffer, by Jude Law) may now remind viewers of Butch Cassidy and Sundance. The pratfalling Mr. Downey, forgoing a deerstalker for a bowler or a slouch hat, inevitably evokes his earlier movie impersonation of Chaplin, who, as it happens, appeared in one of the early Holmes silents.

Mr. Ritchie's London is a phony London, one where the wind on the Thames seems to blow in different directions at once. The real thing was never this rainy, murky or steampunkish. But his is also the best-looking London that any on-screen Holmes has ever inhabited, and a reminder that part of the appeal of the books and stories was their atmosphere. On the other hand, the oddest thing about the movie is that Holmes is here lovable and endearing in a way that he has seldom, if ever, been before. Endearment used to be the Watson trait – on film, anyway; in the books Watson is mostly just a straight man.

One of the characters in the Ritchie film remarks that there is a fragility beneath all Holmes's logic and ratiocination, and it's true. Mr. Downey's character is as needy as he is superior. He still delights in showing off his cleverness but less out of snobbery than because he can't help himself. He lives for an audience. The boredom, the lassitude, the hint of substance abuse, the violin playing (or plucking: for much of the time, Holmes seems to have lost his bow) are all here, but his problem appears to be less mental than physical.

He requires a case not so much to exercise his formidable intellect as to get himself out of the house so he can dart around, throw some punches, wear disguises, wind up nude and shackled to the bedposts. His frustration, you can't help feeling, might stem from the fact that in the Victorian age, the proper vocation for him hasn't yet been invented. He's someone who needs to be in the movies.

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### **Questions for discussion and reading comprehension:**

- How does the author imagine Conan Doyle would feel about the current film «Sherlock Holmes»?
- Why did Conan Doyle grow to hate his most famous character?
- Ironically, the author suggests that Sherlock Holmes would be a less memorable character if Doyle had been a better writer? Why? What is it that gives him continued life?
- How does the author account for the evolution of images of Sherlock Holmes over time?
- How does the current film version dialogue with other recent hit movies?

### **Section 2: Out-of –class Activities**

- 1). Gather two or three film, television or other interpretations of the literary work currently being studied in class, with a focus on an important character.

For example, American literature teachers might pair «The Great Gatsby» with the 1949, 1974 and 2000 (TV) movies and look at portrayals of Gatsby or Daisy; in British literature, you might pair the BBC's 1995 television series and the 2003 and 2005 film versions of «Pride and Prejudice» to examine Elizabeth Bennet or Darcy.

- 2). Use the structure below (which uses «Romeo and Juliet» as an example) to lead students in comparing portrayals of the character you have chosen to focus on.

#### **Sample Character Study: Juliet**

1. Begin the activity by reading aloud, or asking students to read, a key chapter or scene from the text, such as the balcony scene (Act II, scene 2) or the ball scene (Act 1, scene 5).

2. Students freewrite about what they perceive about Juliet, considering age, mannerisms, personality, attitude, etc.

3. Students to work in small groups to consider how they would portray Romeo and Juliet, if cast in their roles. Ask them to think about how they might move, speak certain lines to bring out subtext, and generally bring the characters to life.

4. Call for volunteers to play the class's Romeo and Juliet; you might repeat this a couple of times to elicit different interpretations. Students freewrite again after the performances.

5. Show three different interpretations of the same scene, asking students to freewrite after each. For «Romeo and Juliet», three suggestions

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are Franco Zeffirelli's «Romeo and Juliet» (1968), the Royal Ballet production with Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev in the title roles (1966) and Baz Luhrman's «R+J» (1996).

6. Give students a few minutes to review their writing, then prompt discussion by asking students which portrayal they found most compelling and why.

7. Ask:

- What «unique stamp» does each actress bring to the role of Juliet?
- Which one do you think Shakespeare would prefer? Why?
- How does each portrayal resonate throughout the rest of the adaptation, affecting how we see Juliet's relationships, her situation and actions?

### **Section 3. Going Further**

Independently, students find two or three additional interpretations of this character, or another character of their choice from the same text. Encourage them to search for portrayals in film, television, art, comic books, written adaptations or satires, fan fiction or contemporary literature, etc. from around the world and across time periods.

Students examine the portrayals studied in class alongside the ones they found, considering how the character has evolved over time. They then write letters from the point of view of the author about which one he or she prefers and why.

Students might also contribute to a classroom timeline with visuals, film and television stills and literary passages which reflect the character across time and space.

(By Amanda Christy Brown and Holly Epstein Ojalvo,  
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