

Reconstruction of the Image of the Child in the Literature of the New Period: Comparison of British and New World Literature

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Abstract

The article focuses on the reconstruction and comparison of a gallery of child images in the literature of the New World and Great Britain in the late 19th and early 21st centuries. The child character is considered not only an artistic device but also an essential sociocultural marker that reflects social problems, traumatic experiences, and the peculiarities of the formation of national self-identification. The methodological basis of the study is a combination of comparative, postcolonial, and typological approaches. Moreover, close reading and distant reading literary strategies were used because they allowed the detailed consideration of 28 works (14 British and 14 from New World literature). Therefore, it was easy to identify the recurrent typological structures. The results showed significant variation in the archetype distributions of child images across British and New World literature. The British corpus is dominated by the archetype of the “child-innocence” (52%), while New World literature is dominated by the image of the “child-martyr” (38%). Rarer archetypes were also identified – “child-collective memory” and “child-nation” - which reflect historical and cultural characteristics and national experiences. The scientific novelty of the study lies in the comprehensive comparative analysis of two literary corpora, which were previously considered either separately or exclusively in a synchronous aspect. The results obtained may be helpful to literary scholars and lecturers for deepening their understanding of cultural memory and studying world literature and culture. This will help strengthen awareness of one's own national identity through the prism of literary narratives.

Keywords: archetypes, British literature, children's literary character, comparative analysis, New World literature, postcolonial studies.

1. Introduction

1.1 *The Image of the Child in Contemporary Literary Studies*

In contemporary literary studies, the analysis of transformational images and types is of significant importance, with the key goal not simply the embodiment of personal experience but, above all, the mental evolution of society. An important place among such images is occupied by the child and the depiction of childhood as a key stage in the formation of the future personality (Anand, 2020). Contemporary world literature demonstrates an awareness of childhood as a symbiosis of faith in the future, purity, naivety, and, at the same time, mental trauma associated with various sociocultural processes (slavery, colonialism, assimilation) (Pattison, 2008). It is crucial to consider not only British but also New World literature, in which the image of the child has become the embodiment of faith in new cultural identities formed at the intersection of European and indigenous cultures (MacCann, 2013).

There is a stereotypical image of the child and childhood as a social phenomenon in globalized art and literature (Veerman, 2021). Some studies examine this phenomenon in a diachronic context, analyzing the primary historical and cultural shifts of the Romantic, Realistic, and Modern eras (Hwang, 2014; Koops, 2003). Some researchers conduct a contrastive analysis, comparing the symbolism of the child image in the East and West (Imada, 2013). Meanwhile, systematic research on this issue in the context of comparative British and New World literature remains a peripheral motif, hindering an in-depth interpretation of the culture of this region.

One of the key issues in contemporary humanities is the interpretation of the future through the analysis of memories (Barsch, 2025). Interpreting the palette of child images in literature can increase the productivity of this process. Considering the postcolonial paradigm, scholars emphasize the importance of analyzing the literatures of the so-called “periphery” (Juvan, 2019; Hauthal, 2021). In this case, the analysis of cultural heritage helps interpret these countries' aspirations for self-determination, national consciousness, and related objectives. Thus, there is a relatively substantial theoretical basis for analyzing sociocultural national processes. Still, it needs to be specified through the prism of the child's image as a key symbol of the New World.

This study aims to conduct an in-depth comparative analysis of the gallery of children's images in British and New World literature, drawing on postcolonial and typological literary approaches.

The research objectives are:

- To explore the theoretical foundations for interpreting the gallery of images of children in world literature.
- to identify the key features and functions of the representation of the motif of the child and childhood in British and New World literature (in the late 19th and the early 21st centuries);
- to formulate the practical significance of the results obtained and their place in the perspective of further humanities research.

1.2 Review of Theoretical Literature

More and more modern literary researchers can interpret the figure of the child in literature not simply as an artistic device, but as a marker of cultures as such, pointing to essential alterations of social life, sociocultural issues, or even national ideologies (Čermáková, 2021). When interpreting the aspect of childhood in New World literature, one should rely on theoretical approaches in global literary studies that highlight key patterns in its functioning (Ellis, 2022).

In the works of J. W. Goethe in the 19th century, the thesis on the perception of the literary process, known as "Weltliteratur," began to emerge actively (Schrimpf, 2024). The writer proposed considering the works of authors from different nations and ethnic groups not in isolation, but within the framework of a single cultural process. Thus, individual literary works are like bricks that build and interconnect the world's literature into a single global phenomenon. Goethe's concept was later established as the basis of modern comparative studies. It was, in particular, reinterpreted by D. Damrosch, who argued that literature is significant to the world only when it exists outside national space and is reproduced in translations and intercultural discourses (Anistratenko, 2020).

More recent studies, particularly those conducted by F. Moretti, have put forward the concept of "distant reading," whereby entire literary strata (e.g., of a particular country or part of the world) can be analyzed not through the prism of a detailed interpretation of a single specific literary work, but through the identification of typological patterns and images in the entire body of works (Ross, 2014). This concept is currently receiving a lot of attention in the context of increased interest in distance learning tools (Iskakova, 2024); for us, it is of significant importance when it is necessary to trace how a single image of a child is modified and acquires new shades in different literatures of the New World depending on the national and sociocultural context (Clark, 2005).

At the same time, Christopher Prendergast argues that regional comparative studies should be combined with global approaches in thorough research (Prendergast, 2005). Thus, when analyzing local characteristics, for example, the European image of a child and the same image in the New World, globalized trends (the child as a symbol of innocence, naivety, and belief in a bright future) must be taken into account (Alieva, 2024). Such a comparison enables the authors to identify both features confirmed by the global context and entirely authentic details characteristic of a particular country/culture.

Comparative analysis of world literature often relies on geographical areas: Europe and Asia, America, Africa, and Oceania (Hajdu, 2025). Thus, British literature of the modern period should be interpreted as a matrix of European awareness of the image of childhood (Scudder, 2025). Here we have a basic archetype of the soul of the child: a beacon of innocence and intuition in the poet William Wordsworth (Berdiboeva, 2025); a beacon of despair and misery in the author Dickens (Phelps, 2023); the beacon of the quest of the self in the author Brontë (Glasscott, 2023). These canons formed the basis of New World literature, the image of the child in which was influenced by postcolonial theory (Majumdar, 2021). In one of his works, scholar Edward Said emphasized that colonial literature was based on the concept of difference and otherness in self-awareness, which was naturally reflected in children's images (Said, 2025). Regional sociocultural characteristics influenced the formation of New World literature uniquely: here, the image of the child undergoes a hybrid transformation from a symbol of slavery in Harriet Beecher Stowe (D'Amico, 2021), racial trauma in Toni Morrison (Toplak, 2023), to the bearer of collective memory in George Lamming (Lewis, 2022). Thus, it is extremely important to study the intercultural hybrid transformation of the image of the child, from a symbol of social inequality to a symbol of the nation, which becomes the creator of a new cultural identity.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The study's conceptualization draws on comparativistics (Li, 2025), synthesized through postcolonial, cultural-historical, and typological methods. This literary symbiosis allows the re-creation of the image of the child in traditional British prose and in the works of New World writers who lived at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. The presented methodological complex provided an in-depth textual analysis with a broad intercultural comparison. In general, using the comparative method, it was possible to combine elements of detailed analysis of a literary work – the so-called "close reading" (Yuhan, 2019) – and the identification of general patterns in the literary corpus – "distant reading." To trace all the symbolic and cultural motifs in children's images from the literature of selected parts of the world, in addition to the authors themselves, two literary scholars joined the research group. While the first one specialized in the analysis of British literature of the Modern Age, the other one was engaged in the study of postcolonial literature of the New World, namely, American and the Caribbean. Thanks to collective work, it was possible to avoid the problem of one-sided analysis and expand the research to an interdisciplinary level.

2.2 Data Analysis

The total duration of the study was six months (January-June 2025) and covered chronologically three key stages: the formation of a general corpus of literary works, a detailed analysis of selected texts, and a comparative interpretation of the analysis results.

Table 1. Corpus of British literature in the late 19th and early 21st centuries

Author	Title	Year of publication
William Wordsworth	<i>Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood</i>	1807
Charlotte Brontë	<i>Jane Eyre</i>	1847
Emily Brontë	<i>Wuthering Heights</i>	1847
Charles Dickens	<i>Oliver Twist</i>	1837
Charles Dickens	<i>David Copperfield</i>	1850
Lewis Carroll	<i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i>	1865
J. M. Barrie	<i>Peter Pan</i>	1911
Virginia Woolf	<i>The Waves</i>	1931
J. R. R. Tolkien	<i>The Hobbit</i>	1937
William Golding	<i>Lord of the Flies</i>	1954
Iris Murdoch	<i>The Bell</i>	1958
Ian McEwan	<i>Atonement</i>	2001
J. K. Rowling	<i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</i>	1997
Kazuo Ishiguro	<i>Never Let Me Go</i>	2005

Source: Own elaboration

Table 2. Corpus of New World literature in the late 19th and early 21st centuries

Author	Title	Year
Harriet Beecher Stowe	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>	1852
Mark Twain	<i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i>	1876
Mark Twain	<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	1884
Zora Neale Hurston	<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>	1937
James Baldwin	<i>Go Tell It on the Mountain</i>	1953
George Lamming	<i>In the Castle of My Skin</i>	1953
Sandra Cisneros	<i>The House on Mango Street</i>	1984
Toni Morrison	<i>The Bluest Eye</i>	1970
Toni Morrison	<i>Beloved</i>	1987
Jamaica Kincaid	<i>Annie John</i>	1985
Edna O'Brien (Irish-American)	<i>The Light of Evening</i>	2006
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	<i>Americanah</i>	2013
June Jordan	<i>His Own Where</i>	1971
Colson Whitehead	<i>The Underground Railroad</i>	2016

Source: own elaboration

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, 28 literary works were selected in the first stage, including 14 examples of contemporary British prose and another 14 examples of postcolonial literature from America and the Caribbean. It was determined that this number of literary works was optimal for sufficiently analyzing each work and maintaining a balance between the depth of interpretation and the breadth and representativeness of the sample.

Thus, in forming the British gallery of children's images, the works of W. Wordsworth, C. Dickens, the Brontë sisters, I. McEwan and other authors were used as a basis, where the image of a child serves as the primary symbol. At the same time, the corpus of New World literary works is a synthesis of the prose of H. Beecher Stowe, T. Morrison, and J. Lamming, which reflects the child in a postcolonial and multicultural hybrid society. The choice of these authors is due to several reasons: they constitute the so-called literary canon of their region; in these works, children and childhood play a key cultural and symbolic role; the texts raise critical sociocultural processes (industrialization, colonialism, slavery, national identity, the struggle for rights, racial and class inequality).

Initially, a detailed textual analysis of the gallery of children's images in all 28 works was conducted. A total of 120 characters were identified. Based on their functional roles, symbolism, and narratives, a typological analysis was then conducted. Thus, at the typological level, all these images were classified according to four archetypal characteristics:

1. Child-innocence (embodiment of childlike purity, naivety, and belief in a better future).
2. Child-martyr (representation of social, class, or racial disparity, mental trauma).
3. Child-collective memory (embodiment of national traditions, cultural values of a particular people or ethnic group).
4. Child-nation (representation of statehood, national revival struggle).

The last phase of the research included a comparative analysis of British and postcolonial literary corpora using content and quantitative analysis techniques. This consisted primarily of determining the frequency of each archetype's appearance in the British and American corpora. Thus, frequency analysis made it possible to identify common patterns across the literary works and, of course, to trace differences between British literature and New World prose in the late 19th and early 21st centuries.

2.3 Ethical Issues

The research was based on published works publicly available to readers, so this part does not involve any ethical risks or caveats. At the

same time, the content analysis took into account the aspect of sensitivity and caution in interpreting topics related to historical trauma, slavery, racial prejudice, violence, etc.

2.4 Research Limitations

The study did not cover all the national literatures of the New World or create a comprehensive encyclopedia of children's images, as this would have significantly reduced the quality and depth of the analysis of the works studied. Focusing on a small number of representative works made it possible to trace the evolution and transformation of the basic archetypes in children's images, but this could be expanded by analyzing a larger number of literary images.

3. Results

3.1 Archetypes of Children's Images

During the frequency analysis of 28 literary works, the authors identified a gallery of 120 children's images. A general analysis demonstrated a tendency toward symbolic and stereotypical meanings of children's images in British literature (purity, naivety, fantasy). At the same time, New World prose was more characterized by signs of collective memory and psychological trauma caused by the colonial historical background. Archetypal analysis provides a clear understanding of the similarities and differences between the two literary corpora.

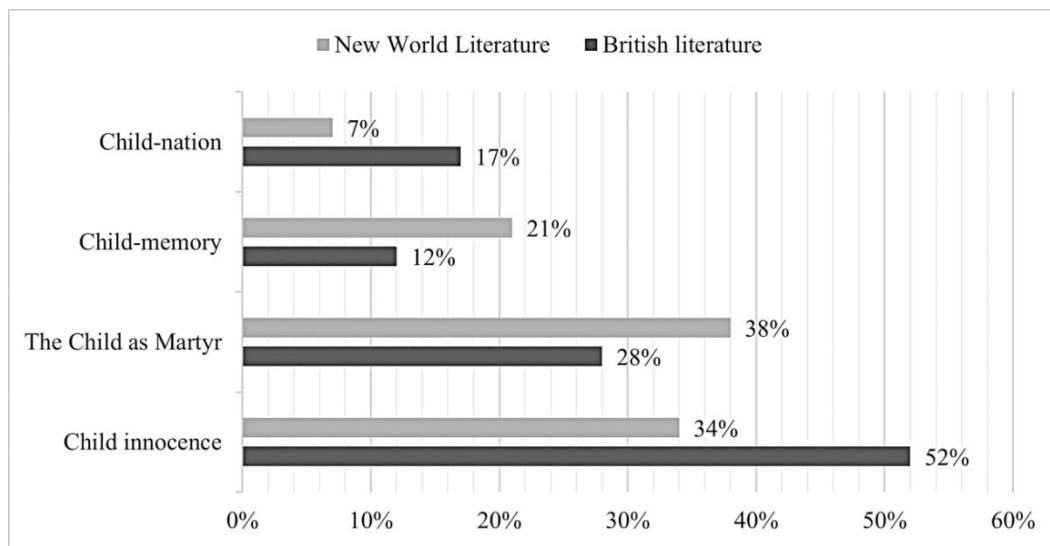


Figure 1. Distribution of archetypes in British and postcolonial literature

Source: Own elaboration

The results in Figure 1, which present general characteristics of the British literary corpus, indicate a high concentration of the "child innocence" archetype, accounting for 52% of all uses of child images, compared to 34% observed in New World literature. This implies that British literary traditions more often than not csmast the child as an icon of innocence, moralistic ideality, and defenselessness, which is sometimes not even connected to any political or historical conflict. On the contrary, the New World literature is more inclined to politicize the child character. This archetype of The Child as Martyr can be observed in New World writings (38%) more than in British literature (28%), which is why childhood is more closely connected with the idea of sacrifice, suffering and collective trauma and is commonly associated with colonial past, nation-building, and social upheaval. Likewise, the concept of Child-memory is more noticeable in New World literature (21%) than in British literature (12%), which emphasizes the cultural memory, historical reflection, and intergenerational trauma-induced and identity-promoting memory as a location of childhood. In British literature (17%) than in New World literature (7%), the child-nation metaphor is more commonly used in the text to signify that a nation continues, has a past and a future, and is stable with respect to its ideals.

"Heaven lies about us in our infancy!" (Wordsworth, 1807).

As for New World literature, the archetype of innocence is less prevalent, accounting for 34% of the total number of images. Even when analyzing the classics of children's literature – such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain – the child loses their naivety in the face of the cruel reality of the surrounding world. Thus, a peculiar hybridity of the archetypal image can be traced: the reader is presented with an innocent rebel who must oppose the social order and fight for justice. Therefore, the archetype of innocence in American literature is often conflated into the image of the child martyr, making it difficult to separate them. In general, the character of the child martyr in its pure form appears in 38% of cases in New World prose, emphasizing primarily racial and colonial trauma. This image is most vividly embodied in Toni Morrison's book *Beloved*, where the main character embodies the devastating impact of slavery on the individual.

"124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (Morrison, 2004).

In British literature, the martyr archetype is less common, accounting for 28% of the total. It is vividly embodied in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. Here we see a child who has fallen under the pressure of industrial Britain and feels the oppression of class inequality. Speaking of the archetype of the "child-collective memory," it appears much less frequently, in only 12% of cases. Among the main authors, Tolkien and Ishiguro can be singled out, in which child characters embody lost cultural values. This interpretive difference is supported by statistical analysis. The meaningful, high level of correlation between the martyr figure and New World literature (phi coefficient $\phi = 0.42$, $p < 0.05$) indicates that it is not an accident but a structural feature of New World literature. This implies that the New World writings are likely more about mobilizing the child as an image of historical suffering and shared memory. In contrast, British literature uses the martyr image more selectively and within narrow social codes.

"For even the young no longer remember the songs their fathers sang" (Tolkien, 1954).

This archetype is more typical for the New World and occurs in 21% of cases. An interesting example is the novel *In the Castle of My Skin*, written by Lamming. The depiction of the protagonist in this case is not just autobiographical, but the collective image of the colonial experience and memory of a whole nation.

"Change was the history of my people, and I witnessed that in my boyhood when I witnessed how the village transformed" (Lamming, 1953).

Finally, the "child-nation" archetype is quite rare in both literary corpora (17% in British literature and 7% in American literature). And while, in the first corpus, it is the embodiment of national revival, as in Brontë's novels, in New World literature, it is a secondary image that again embodies the traumatic colonial experience.

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will" (Brontë, 2024).

Thus, a specific hybridization of archetypal attitudes can be traced again. In terms of statistical comparison, we find considerable variations between the two bodies of literature ($\chi^2 = 11.47$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests a notable variation in the distribution of archetypes across different cultural and historical contexts and social strata.

Themes of images in the plot

A typological analysis of plot roles indicates the predominant aesthetic and symbolic function of British children's literature, which accounts for 47% of cases. At the same time, New World prose is more typically characterized by a socio-critical function, found in 42% of cases. In the novel *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, therefore, the author portrays the conflict between childhood fancifulness and the harsh reality of the world. At the same time, in Sandra Cisneros's prose, *The House on Mango Street*, the younger generation reflects social inequality and racial struggle.

Table 3. Semantic dominants of the image of a child in British and postcolonial corpora

Corpus	Most frequent lexemes	Symbolic dominants	Dominant archetype
British	innocence, family, protection, play	continuity, harmony, morality	innocent child
Postcolonial	orphan, trauma, rebellion, identity	trauma, protest, search for one's own voice	Rebel

Source: Own elaboration

A detailed analysis of the dominant themes enables the identification of key themes in the selected literature. Thus, for British literature, the main themes were the development of imagination, morality, the search for oneself, awareness of one's own value and place in life (41%). New World literature is characterized by the predominant motifs of slavery, racial discrimination, and hybrid identity (44%). If, in Morrison's work, child characters symbolize the loss of the future due to the burden of the past, then in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, the child carries within himself the collective experience of universal fear and the destructive influence of civilization's development.

In summary, the primary features of children's images in British literature are purity, naivety, and spirituality. Postcolonial literature, to the contrary, reflects the traumatized child, who is the representative of the whole nation. The image of the child in both literary corpora acts as a dominant cultural marker, but differs depending on socio-cultural and historical circumstances.

4. Discussion

The results fully support the initial hypothesis regarding the formation of the image of children in British and New World prose from the late 19th to the early 21st centuries. Even though the figure of the child is used as a significant symbolic tool in both literary traditions, the results show that the specific historical, cultural, and ideological circumstances inform these representations. Instead of being a simple mirror of taste, the child figure becomes a culturally specific construct according to which the more general moral, political, and historical conflicts are played out.

Based on a comparative analysis of twenty-eight works of literature, the findings revealed that in the British literary tradition, children are most often represented as bearers of moral virtue, ethical innocence, and socially acceptable behavior. This repetitive image makes the child a moral cornerstone, a stabilizing force, and supports the prevailing societal values and national identity. Conversely, the prose of New World and postcolonial childhood anticipates childhood as a realm of psychological fragmentation, historical trauma and divided identity. These results are consistent with and build on the available literature in comparative literature. Koops (2011) views the child in British literature as a symbolic measure of the moral state of society, a view that the current study empirically supports. But the current discussion transcends validation by showing how this moral symbolism functions as a culturally conservative mechanism, which

strengthens continuity and moral sanity in the British canon. On the same note, postcolonial scholarship focuses on the child's role in expressing resistance and social criticism. The present research paper establishes that, in the literature of the New World, the child is not necessarily an innocent victim of historical events but, in many cases, becomes the source of possible resistance and moral disturbance.

The secondary hypothesis, which states that common archetypal patterns are present in modern literature, is partly supported by the study (Hancock, 2016). Universal archetypes were named, including the naive child, the rebel, the martyr, and the mediator and had been found in both corpora. More importantly, though, these archetypes are not universal and timeless models; they are more or less common, more or less functional in their focus, and more or less ideological in their echoes across different contexts. As an example, the percentage of the child of innocence prevails in British (52), whereas the child as martyr prevails in New World prose (38). This imbalance is not just quantitative but also shows a divergence in cultural investments in childhood, one towards moral idealisation, and the other towards historical reckoning and collective memory.

The study puts the very concept of archetypes in the critical spotlight by foregrounding such differences, which assume that they are universal. While British literature is characterized by moralizing and value-based ideas (Fleming, 2024), New World literature's ideological emphasis is on the preservation of colonial domination and psychological trauma (Talley, 2014). This meaning is also substantiated by Bradford (2011), who states that in postcolonial literature, children serve as agents of colonial memory and culture. The study develops this observation and shows how archetypal hybridity functions as a narrative device that combines innocence with trauma, disrupting established symbolic structures.

5. Conclusions

The theoretical value of the article lies in confirming the quality of the comparative approach in literary studies. In addition, the attempt to combine close reading and distant reading methods in a single study proved highly effective. This enables the successful combination of universal archetypes with a cultural and historical foundation. Thus, the study confirms several theses at once, making a significant contribution to the humanities at the present stage:

1. The initial hypothesis about differences in the representation of children's images in British and New World prose at the end of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries has been fully confirmed. While moral and value-based narratives take precedence in British literature, postcolonial prose focuses on the representation of children's experiences of psychological trauma and the struggle against social inequality.
2. The theory of the universality of archetypes has been partially confirmed (cases of cross-hybridization of archetypes were often encountered. As an illustration, a collective of the literature on the New World found that the archetype of child-innocence is frequently associated with the archetype of a rebel or martyr. Thus, the study confirmed that the description of child characters in global literary prose is not only a metaphorical artistic device but, above all, a demonstration of a universal cultural code that performs various social functions, from reflecting the moral state of society to depicting collective memory.

In general, the study can be applied in fields such as literary education and intercultural communication. The study of cultural differences through the lens of children's images can be incorporated into educational programs on postcolonial literature. The results obtained open up broad prospects for further scientific research. Future studies might extend this model by adding both genre variation (e.g., drama, speculative fiction, or life writing) and non-Anglophone New World literatures, which may have different archetypal structures due to varied colonial and linguistic backgrounds. As stated in the methodology, the use of close and distant reading introduces a certain subjectivity in interpretation, but this was compensated for by independent expert validation, with an inter-coder-consistent score of 83 within the acceptable range. It may also be a subject of further study to examine the areas of childhood, gender, and class intersection beyond the character of the child, thus expanding the horizons of the archetypal analysis to a wider social structure.

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Fariza Abdraimova and Aslan Zhakysylykov were responsible for data collection and the writing of the Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, and Discussion sections. Fariza Abdraimova and Karina Galay contributed to the data analysis and the writing of the Discussion and Conclusion. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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No additional data are available.

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