

How is the exploration of female sexuality in *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* shaped by Gothic conventions?

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In this essay, I will look at how Daphne du Maurier in *Rebecca* (published in 1938) and Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* (published in 1847) explore the notion of female sexuality. In the eighteenth century, many female Gothic texts were coded as ‘expression of women’s fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body.’¹ Therefore, I will be focusing on how female sexuality was suppressed and constructed by the patriarchy as female madness and hysteria in both texts. ‘Female Gothic articulated women’s dissatisfaction with patriarchal society and addressed the problematic position of the maternal within that society.’² This framework is used by both Brontë and du Maurier to highlight how the patriarchy explicitly targets and suppresses female sexuality. Throughout the Victorian era, speculations regarding male sexuality appeared more transparent, whereas female sexuality was restricted and seen as undesirable. For instance, “the nineteenth century was a time of rules and regulations, with the state as overlord and endless guidelines for living one’s life in the most civilised and moralistic way possible.”³ This demonstrates how oppressive the Victorian society was since there were an abundance of norms restricting what considered a morally upright and civilized living. However, “many of the most outwardly judgemental of men- and it was almost always men, with a few notable exceptions – hid darker desires and secrets under their starched shirts. This isn’t to say that women didn’t possess such urges, but female

1 Andrew Smith, and Diana Wallace. "The female Gothic: Then and now." *Gothic Studies* 6. No.1 (2004): 1-7.

2 Ibid, 1-7.

3 Violet Fenn. *Sex and Sexuality in Victorian Britain*. (Yorkshire: Pen and Sword History, 2020), xi.

sexuality was repressed so firmly by nineteenth-century 'rule.'"⁴ This demonstrates how female sexuality is marginalized, repressed and regulated by patriarchy, and was categorized as deviant behaviour. Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre* and Mr de Winter in *Rebecca* both show the dangers of patriarchy. This again reinforces how female sexuality was restricted and considered unimportant while male sexuality was more profoundly and openly depicted in literature. However, by employing gothic archetypes and tropes, both writers were able to encourage women to explore their sexuality and employ feminist and queer-coded language without excluding or suppressing their audience, especially their female audience. Therefore, Victorian women were able to fantasize and become more aware of their sexuality due to the spread of gothic romance novels. For instance, "women acknowledged and accepted themselves as full, expressive sexual beings"⁵ and "majority of women[were] reported having sexual desires independent of their husband's wishes or sexual demands."⁶ Furthermore, both novels emphasize the dangers of repressing female sexuality and the oppressive views of femininity through their heroines' conflict and differences with the "fallen" women. Nonetheless, Rebecca and Bertha Mason's characters serve as a warning to the reader about the consequences of defying patriarchy, especially when it comes to openly expressing female sexuality and breaking away from conventional gender norms.

Even though both novels are romance novels, they show how patriarchy suppresses and dominates female sexuality, labelling it as abnormal behaviour. This can be seen through Mr. Rochester and Mr. de Winter who provide prime examples of the

⁴ Ibid, xi.

⁵ Steven Seidman. "Sexual Attitudes of Victorian and Post-Victorian Women: Another Look at the Mosher Survey." *Journal of American Studies* 23, no. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1989): 68-69.

⁶ Ibid, 69.

consequences of patriarchy, demonstrating their ability to imprison, neglect and abuse as well as kill women if they believe the women have strayed past the norms of socially acceptable gendered behaviour. "These socially constructed dichotomies were created by men for self-interest to exploit women under the umbrella of patriarchy."⁷ This reveals how women lived in a patriarchal, male-centred society where they were deprived of their right to self-expression and were expected to conform to the social rules set by the patriarchy. Bertha and Rebecca both defy the most atrocious rules of society when it comes to their overwhelming sexual desire and extramarital affairs. This is the antithesis of the Victorian ideal of "The Angel in the House" a famous ideology established by a popular poem written by Coventry Patmore which reiterated the ideals of feminine morality, innocence, and obedience and devotion to her husband and house. It "represents the perfect housewife, the domestic goddess of the middle class"⁸ in the Victorian society. Mr. Rochester alerts Jane of his abrasive nature toward women who, in his opinion, have erred by deceiving him as he states, "to women who please me only by their faces, I am the very devil when I figure out they have neither souls nor hearts."⁹ This illustrates the expectation that men had in the Victorian era which was to want women who would settle for being kept or maintained as inconsequential. They will, however, suffer the repercussions if they challenge or defy these behavioural norms. For instance, the fact that Mr. de Winter exhibited no remorse and regret in his confession about Rebecca's death as he states "If it had to come all over again, I should not do anything different. I'm

⁷ Muhammad Anees, Ali Akbar, Liaqat Iqbal, and Sajjad Ahmad. "Patriarchal Ideology as Gender Discrimination: A Feminist Study of Jane Eyre." *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 15, no. 5 (2021) 1077- 1078.

⁸ Sarah Kühl. "The angel in the house and fallen women: Assigning women their places in Victorian society." *Open Educational Resources, University of Oxford* 4 (2016): 171.

⁹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin Group, 1996), 292.

glad I killed Rebecca. I shall never have any remorse for that, never, never.”¹⁰ This clearly shows Mrs. de Winter that their marriage is still dangerous which highlights how women may have felt confined and imprisoned in their relationships, unable to explore their sexuality. The hostile ways in which Mr de Winter and Mr Rochester treat women reinforce a particular kind of behaviour that is deemed appropriate for males. Furthermore, this deconstruction of the conventional romantic hero portrays how the Gothic literary style evolved to address contemporary and feminist issues. “For example, the picaresque novel has usually proved easier to adapt to a male protagonist, while the Gothic novel ... has come to be dominated by women – written by women; read by women and choosing as it’s central figure a young girl, the Gothic heroine.”¹¹ Their characters make it very evident that defying conventional gender standards may have mortal repercussions for both the Gothic heroines and a wider female audience. This shows how many female writers “invented a fictional language and a set of conventions within which “respectable” feminine sexuality might find expression.”¹²

This use of fictional language is used by both writers to explore female sexuality. For instance, despite the fact that both novels re-establish the conventional heterosexual marriage with the intent of not alienating their viewers, profound feminist and queer-coded discourse can be seen throughout, which is within the conventions of the gothic genre. “As a genre, Gothic allowed authors to explore the landscape of sexual taboos and gender identities.”¹³ Furthermore, many “eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic fiction created a host of metaphors, aesthetics and settings that have resonated

¹⁰ Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca*. (London: Virago, 2015): 335-336.

¹¹ Cynthia Griffin Wolff. “The Radcliffian Gothic Model: A Form for Feminine Sexuality.” *Modern Language Studies* 9, no. 3 (1979): 98.

¹² *Ibid*, 98.

¹³ Ardel Thomas. “Queer Victorian Gothic.” *The Victorian Gothic* (2012): 142.

throughout the centuries in various forms of cultural production that contemplate, represent, condemn and celebrate queerness.”¹⁴ Consequently, contemporary queer theory claims that both novels employ the Gothic genre to explore lesbian issues. *Rebecca* was written after the first wave of feminism, when women were beginning to come out of the closet and become more aware of their sexuality. In the novel, “Rebecca is alive with erotic tensions and same-sex-cross class-intimacy, or fantasy of it: desire here, as ‘mistress’ infers ... [and]... Mrs Danvers’ portrayal and her relationship to Rebecca and to the unnamed second wife (and hers to the dead Rebecca) is rich in lesbian overtones.”¹⁵ This emphasises how the reader may have questions if Mrs. Danvers’ profound love for the late Rebecca is sexual or platonic, highlighting how the connection between the two is queer-coded in the novel. Mrs Danvers’s affectionate display of Rebecca’s lingerie (“touched the dressing -gown on the chair ...put it against my face.”¹⁶) to the new Mrs De Winter reveals her obsession with and sexual feelings for the late Rebecca. Moreover, Mrs Danvers continues to break rules in her and Mrs De Winter’s marriage by gaining possession of the home’s domestic spaces and entering the heterosexual bedroom. In their bedroom, for example, Mrs Danvers touches Mrs De Winter brushes which Mr De Winter gave to Mrs Se Winter and starts brushing Mrs De Winter’s hair much like she brushed Rebecca’s.

Furthermore, the heroine’s sexual ambiguity is further explored when Mrs De Winter enters the late Rebecca’s bedroom as Mrs. Danvers tells Mrs. de Winter that “Those were her brushes on the dressing-table, that was her dressing-gown and slippers

¹⁴ Laura Westengard. "Queer Gothic Literature and Culture." (CUNY New York City College of Technology, 2022) 260.

¹⁵ Nicky Hallett. "Did Mrs Danvers warm Rebecca's pearls? significant exchanges and the extension of lesbian space and time in literature." *Feminist Review* 74, no. 1 (2003): 35-49.

¹⁶ Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca*. (London: Virago, 2015): 187.

laid out upon the chair...They belonged to someone else. I put out my hand and touched the brushes...The nightdress was inside the case, thin as gossamer, apricot in colour. I touched it, drew it out from the case, put it against my face. It was cold, quite cold. But there was a dim mustiness about it still where the scent had been. The scent of the white azaleas.”¹⁷ This illustrates how Mrs De Winter's attraction and obsession with Rebecca may have evolved into a desire for a sexual attachment implying an act of lesbianism. This also highlights how the bedroom has become a “space[which] is erotically charged by the lesbian presence ... [for instance] touching of erogenous objects, previously activated by other women’s hands.”¹⁸ Throughout the novel, Du Maurier puts more emphasises on Mrs De Winter’s obsession with Rebecca than her relationship with Mr De Winter. The narrative depicts Mrs De Winter’s physical interaction with her husband being subtle and undetailed, whereas Mrs De Winter reacts proactively when her personal belongings are touched. For example, she expresses how “the wardrobe smelt stuffy, queer. The azalea scent, so fragrant and delicate in the air ... the breath of it wafted towards me ... I went back into the bedroom once again.”¹⁹ This reinforce how Mrs. de Winter's curiosity about Rebecca reveals that she is eager to challenge norms and explore her sexuality and perhaps queerness. Moreover, “the scent of azaleas, which still pervades Rebecca's clothing, signifies for the narrator an exotic female adult sexuality.”²⁰ This again reinforces “the fascination which Rebecca holds for the narrator therefore cannot be defined purely

¹⁷ Ibid, 187.

¹⁸ Nicky Hallett. "Did Mrs Danvers warm Rebecca's pearls? significant exchanges and the extension of lesbian space and time in literature." *Feminist Review* 74, no. 1 (2003): 35-49.

¹⁹ Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca*. (London: Virago, 2015): 187.

²⁰ Avril Horner, and Zlosnik Sue. "'Those curious, sloping letters': reading the writing of du Maurier's Rebecca." *Bells: Barcelona English language and literature studies* (1996): 107.

through the sexual. Certainly, there are intimations of 'deviant' sexual desire in the novel: Mrs. Danvers' devotion to Rebecca carries lesbian undertones."²¹

Similarly, in *Jane Eyre*, there is an abundance of female homoeroticism that transcends throughout the novel to embrace readers in the erotic experience of female-female intimacy. In order to establish an ethereal erotic connection between female characters which is free of explicit sexual pleasures, Brontë methodically employs queer language in pivotal moments. For instance, Jane has several intimate relationships with other women, even though the heterosexual romance appears to be the main focus of the work. The friendship between Jane and Helen, for example, is one example of how Brontë emphasizes the importance of female homosocial relationships. A quick glance between young Jane Eyre and Helen Burns, is one of the novel's first homoerotic scenes; what starts out as a public punishment moment for Jane transforms into an intimate encounter. The pleasure they experienced when staring at each other was considered by Sigmund Freud as scopophilia. "The first, scopophilia, emerges from the pleasure associated with the objectifying of another individual for sexual arousal."²² This can be seen when Jane gets punished for breaking her slate. She feels depressed and ashamed as she stands on the stool. However, she gets stronger when Helen stares at her. Jane's eyes are described as being sparked by a "strange light,"²³ and her emotions are expressed through an exclamatory statement such as "What an extraordinary sensation that ray sent through me! How the new feeling bore me up!"²⁴ Jane's reaction to Helen's stare is too passionate to be amicable; it's obvious that she sees more in Helen's eyes than a casual acquaintance

²¹ Ibid, 107.

²² Maria Fanourgakis. "A Norm Critical Approach to Teaching Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*: Exploring Gender, Heteronormativity & Ableism." (2019):11.

²³ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. (London: Penguin Group, 1996): 79.

²⁴ Ibid, 79.

would. In addition, the noun "ray" clearly emphasizes how direct, robust, and penetrating Helen's gaze is. Furthermore, the intensity of the interaction never ceases with Helen's gaze. Helen smiles at Jane as she walks past her a second time, and Jane exclaims, "What a smile!"²⁵ The use of exclamation mark clearly denotes how strongly, and the passionate Jane feels about Helen. Moreover, after their encounter, Jane feels utterly revived and starts to rave about Helen's great qualities as she describes the smile being "the effluence of fine intellect, of true courage ... like a reflection from the aspect of an angel."²⁶ Following Jane's passionate reaction to her stare, there are perpetual allusions to Helen that associate her with fire and light—common connotations of passion and erotica.

Furthermore, the notion of same-sex attraction and desire is further explored in *Jane Eyre*, through Jane's artistic expression as "Jane Eyre certainly paints the Blanche Ingram and Rosamond Oliver portraits with feeling; frustration and misery in the case of the former, pleasure and joy in the case of the latter."²⁷ This can be seen when she tells Mr Rochester during her first meeting with him how happy she feels when painting portraits "I was absorbed, sir: yes, and I was happy. To paint them, in short, was to enjoy one of the keenest pleasures I have ever known."²⁸ This highlights Jane's passion and excitement for painting since she gives each portrait a lot of her own essence. Moreover, to persuade herself that Mr Rochester would never be able to reciprocate her feelings, Jane draws a painting of herself and Blanche Ingram. Jane's emotions at this point in the narrative are so strong and intense that she had to use hyperbole to express them. For instance, she

²⁵ Ibid, 79.

²⁶ Ibid, 79.

²⁷ Maria Ioannou. "A brilliancy of their own': Female Art, Beauty and Sexuality in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*." *Brontë Studies* 43, no. 4 (2018): 323.

²⁸ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. (London: Penguin Group, 1996): 143.

calls herself a “fantastic idiot”²⁹ and a “Poor stupid dupe!”³⁰ Jane illustrates her own flaws and Blanche Ingram's greater attractiveness by painting a portrait of the two of them. This reveals her lack of self-confidence regarding her physical attractiveness and intellect. However, as the novel progressed, we see a character development, she gained a new self-confidence which is evident when she painted a portrait of Rosamond Oliver. Jane is able to express herself through her paintings of women as “female art can be read as a product of the whole female being, for it comes both from the mind and the heart.”³¹ This demonstrates how Jane deviates from the domestic angel ideals of Victorian female sexuality with her intense expression of joy and pleasure. Rather than “using her art to fulfil domestic roles and a domestic destiny, she paints when she is alone, and the activity is closely related to her interiority and inner self.”³² This demonstrates how Jane herself encourages female sexuality and opposes the idea of the unpassionate woman as she states “Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel ... It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.”³³ After St. John rejected Rosamond, Jane is convinced that she cannot reject Mr. Rochester's love because she cannot adhere to religious principles that prohibit marriage and draw a distinction between love and sexual desire. This shows that Jane “has learnt to see sexual love as the most important form of love and the central reason for choosing a mate.”³⁴ Jane comes to this conclusion as a result of her appreciation and love for Rosemond's figure as

²⁹ Ibid, 143.

³⁰ Ibid, 143.

³¹ Maria Ioannou. "A brilliancy of their own': Female Art, Beauty and Sexuality in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*." *Brontë Studies* 43, no. 4 (2018): 328.

³² Ibid, 328.

³³ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. (London: Penguin Group, 1996): 125.

³⁴ Maria Ioannou. "A brilliancy of their own': Female Art, Beauty and Sexuality in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*." *Brontë Studies* 43, no. 4 (2018): 329.

it “represents sexual love and beauty, and the beauty of sexual love, which neither men nor women must lightly disregard.”³⁵ This highlights how Jane believes that women should also be to explore and express their sexuality openly without the fear of being judged by the patriarchy society.

However, female characters who freely express their sexuality and deviate from traditional gender norms, such as Rebecca and Bertha, are sometimes dismissed to be suffering from madness or labelled as hysterical. The feminine trope of madness and insanity is frequently employed in Gothic literature to suggest how women should act in society. For instance, “Bertha’s antagonistic and peripheral role in the narrative, and her lack of ability to represent herself, make an important difference to the overall representation of her character: the novel associates her negative traits with her madness.”³⁶ In both novels, Bertha and Rebecca are mostly described in terms of their physical characteristics, which reinforces the idea that they are only physical beings deprived of intellectual power over their bodies. For example, Jane describes Bertha as “purple: the lips swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black-eyes widely raised over the blood-shot eyes”³⁷ and as a “tall and large [woman], with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back,”³⁸ who is “fearful and ghastly ... [and] savage”³⁹ which all reminiscent her as of a vampire “the foul German spectre - the Vampyre.”⁴⁰ Bertha is viewed as a Barbaric and a vampire because she did not fit in the beauty standards of the conventional Victorian women. Bertha's othering is turned into the root of her madness. Moreover,

³⁵ Ibid, 329.

³⁶ Shivaughn M King. "The Madwoman as Antagonist in English Gothic Fiction." (2022): 14.

³⁷ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. (London: Penguin Group, 1996): 317.

³⁸ Ibid, 317.

³⁹ Ibid, 317.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 317.

Bertha's background as a Creole woman affects Jane's depiction of her as she states, "What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal...grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face."⁴¹ This reveals the imperialist idea of white supremacy and purity that Jane portrays through Bertha's racial othering. However, even though, most of the women were pure and innocent, many "creole women in this period exhibited an aversion to sexual relations."⁴² This emphasises how Bertha's sexuality is analogistic as she cannot suppress her sexual desires like Jane. Moreover, she is continuously described in an animalistic manner, from her laugh described as "demoniac"⁴³ and "goblin"⁴⁴ to her acting as an animal by attacking Richard Mason, "She bit me, he murmured. She worried me like a tigress, when Rochester got the knife from her"⁴⁵ and "She sucked the blood: She said she'd drain my heart."⁴⁶ This highlight's how women's sexual energies were perceived as monstrous. Since, feminine sexuality is portrayed as animalistic and monstrous, women were frequently oppressed and forced marriage were accepted as a way of controlling them. This can also be seen in *Rebecca* when Mr de Winter murdered Rebecca because of her sexual activities.

In contrast to Bertha, However, who is portrayed as being insane and animalistic, Rebecca is able to present herself to the world as a respectable lady and devoted wife. This can be seen when Mr de winter states that "No one would guess meeting her that she was not the kindest, most generous, most gifted person in the world.

⁴¹ Ibid, 327-328.

⁴² Audra A Diptee. "Indian men, Afro-creole women: 'Casting' doubt on interracial sexual relationships in the late nineteenth-century Caribbean." *Immigrants & Minorities* 19, no. 3 (2000): 16.

⁴³ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. (London: Penguin Group, 1996): 317.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 317.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 239.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 239.

She knew exactly what to say to different people, how to match her mood to theirs. Had she met you, she would have walked off into the garden with you... chatting about flowers, music, painting, whatever she knew to be your particular hobby ... You would have sat at her feet and worshipped her.”⁴⁷ This emphasizes how she presents herself in society as a perfect wife, behaving flawlessly according to the idealised role of a women, and substantially reflects Patmore's Victorian Angel in the House ideal. “Tale of an ideal wife, loving towards her husband and the perfect hostess for his elegant country mansion.”⁴⁸ However, Mr de winter reveals that Rebecca “was a cruel and selfish woman who manipulated everyone around her into believing her to be the perfect wife. Rebecca was actually unfaithful to her husband Maxim.”⁴⁹ The adjective ‘unfaithful’ questions Rebecca’s sexuality as it could imply that she could either be “adulteress, lesbian [or] bisexual.”⁵⁰ This depicts how her power, desire for freedom of choice, and “sexual threat represented by Rebecca [portrays her] as ‘vamp’[ire].”⁵¹ This again reinforces how women's sexual desires was regarded as monstrous. This also portrays how Rebecca's sexuality is vilified by the end of the novel as she is viewed as a whore and evil person as opposed to the ideal wife and hostess. For instance, she is described as a “vicious, damnable, rotten ... Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency. She was not even normal”⁵² by Mr de Winter and described as “tall and dark she was ... She gave you the feeling of a snake.”⁵³ This demonstrates how, when she deviated from conventional

⁴⁷ Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca*. (London: Virago, 2015): 304.

⁴⁸ Avril Horner, and Zlosnik Sue. "'Those curious, sloping letters': reading the writing of du Maurier's Rebecca." *Bells: Barcelona English language and literature studies* (1996): 107.

⁴⁹ Sioudina Mandibaye. "Marriage as a Private Hell in Daphne Du Maurier's Novels: Rebecca and My Cousin Rachel." *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 9, no. 01 (2021): 515.

⁵⁰ Avril Horner, and Zlosnik Sue. "Daphne du Maurier and Gothic signatures: Rebecca as vamp (ire)." *Body Matters: Feminism, Textuality, Corporeality. Manchester and New York: Manchester UP* (2000): 217.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 214.

⁵² Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca*. (London: Virago, 2015): 304.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 174.

norms, she was perceived by society as an undesirable, wicked, impure and degraded woman. The only women who find happiness in a socially acceptable heterosexual marriage are those who repress and hide their sexualities. Therefore, Rebecca's murder represents the consequences woman faced who openly expressed their sexuality and sexual attraction for both genders.

Overall, "Gothic literature into the Victorian period evidences an ongoing fixation with issues of sexuality and gender."⁵⁴ Both novels explore the concepts of female sexuality and homosexuality, using the gothic and romantic genres in order to undermine gender stereotypes of femininity. *Jane Eyre* is a prominent illustration of female sexuality in the Victorian era. Throughout the novel, Jane blossoms and acknowledges her affection for Mr Rochester. She ultimately builds the courage to embrace herself for who she is. However, Jane defies the conventions of Victorian society and crosses boundaries with her drive for independence and intelligence which is evident through her employment as a governess, her leaving Thornfield, and her exploration of feminine sexuality. Similarly, *Rebecca* deconstructs female homosexuality by letting the characters enjoy finding Rebecca fascinating while condemning her. Rebecca defies social norms around ideal sexual behaviours, which makes her a perilous character. The fact that Rebecca had several extramarital affairs during her marriage is made clear to the readers, illustrating how her sexual behaviour posed a danger to the social order. Likewise, both novels emphasize the adverse consequences of confining ideas of femininity and oppressive female sexuality through the challenges and struggles of their heroines with the condemned women. Jane is free to explore her sexuality, but only inside the boundaries

⁵⁴ Carol Margaret Davison. "The Victorian Gothic and Gender." *The Victorian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2012): 125.

of her heterosexual marriage as she is aware that she needs to follow patriarchal conventions in order to succeed. This demonstrates how women who restrict and conceal their sexuality are the only ones who can find happiness in a marriage that is accepted by society. Therefore, the characters of Rebecca and Bertha Mason serve as a warning to the readers about the consequences of opposing patriarchy, especially when it comes to openly expressing one's sexuality and disobeying conventional gender stereotypes.

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