

## The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden



صناعة الذات في رواية مارتن إيدن

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## *The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden*

### **The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper explores the relationship between discourse, ideology, power, and identity in Jack London's *Martin Eden* through an interdisciplinary framework combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Marxist criticism, Foucauldian theories of discipline, and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital. While earlier scholarship has often interpreted the novel through autobiographical or purely Marxist perspectives, this study argues that *Martin Eden* is fundamentally a novel about language and subject formation. Martin's transformation from working-class sailor to intellectual writer is mediated through discourse, linguistic performance, and institutional validation. The paper examines



how bourgeois ideology operates through language, education, publishing institutions, and social interaction to construct and regulate identity.

Using close textual analysis supported by theoretical interpretation, the study demonstrates that language in the novel functions as both empowerment and domination. Martin's acquisition of elite discourse enables social mobility while simultaneously alienating him from his original social class and from himself. The paper further argues that the novel exposes the contradictions of capitalist meritocracy by revealing that cultural legitimacy depends less on talent than on ideological recognition. In addition, the article examines masculinity, the disciplined body, class anxiety, and the symbolic function of the sea as a counter-discursive space resisting bourgeois normalization.

Ultimately, the study positions *Martin Eden* as an early critique of modern subjectivity in which identity is manufactured through ideological discourse yet remains fragmented and unstable. By integrating literary criticism with discourse analysis, the paper contributes to broader discussions concerning language, class, and the politics of identity in modern literature.

### ملخص :

تستكشف هذه الدراسة العلاقة بين الخطاب والأيدولوجيا والسلطة والهوية في رواية *مارتن إيدن* لجاك لندن Jack London من خلال إطارٍ نظريّ متعدد التخصصات يجمع بين التحليل النقدي للخطاب ((CDA، والنقد الماركسي، ونظريات ميشيل فوكو حول الانضباط، ومفهوم بيير بورديو لرأس المال الرمزي. وبينما ركزت الدراسات السابقة غالبًا على قراءة الرواية من منظور سيرذاتي أو ماركسي بحت، ترى هذه الدراسة أن *مارتن إيدن* هي في جوهرها رواية عن اللغة وتشكيل الذات. إذ يتم تحوّل *مارتن* من بحار ينتمي إلى الطبقة العاملة إلى كاتبٍ مثقف عبر الخطاب، والأداء اللغوي، والاعتراف المؤسسي. كما تبحث الدراسة في الكيفية التي تعمل بها الأيدولوجيا البرجوازية من خلال اللغة والتعليم ومؤسسات النشر والتفاعل الاجتماعي من أجل بناء الهوية وتنظيمها.

ومن خلال تحليل نصّي دقيق مدعوم بتأويل نظري، تُظهر الدراسة أن اللغة في الرواية تؤدي وظيفتين متناقضتين: التمكين والهيمنة في آنٍ واحد. فامتلاك *مارتن* للخطاب النخبوي يتيح له الحراك الاجتماعي، لكنه في الوقت نفسه يعزله عن طبقته الاجتماعية الأصلية وعن ذاته أيضًا. وتجادل الدراسة كذلك بأن الرواية تكشف تناقضات الجدارة الرأسمالية عبر إظهار أن الشرعية



## The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden

الثقافية تعتمد بدرجة أقل على الموهبة، وبدرجة أكبر على الاعتراف الأيديولوجي. إضافة إلى ذلك، تتناول الدراسة قضايا الذكورة، والجسد المنضبط، والقلق الطبقي، والدلالة الرمزية للبحر بوصفه فضاءً مضاءً للخطاب يقاوم التطبيع البرجوازي.

وفي النهاية، تضع الدراسة رواية *مارتن إيدن* بوصفها نقدًا مبكرًا للذات الحديثة، حيث تُصنَع الهوية عبر الخطاب الأيديولوجي، لكنها تبقى في الوقت نفسه مجردة وغير مستقرة. ومن خلال دمج النقد الأدبي بتحليل الخطاب، تسهم الدراسة في توسيع النقاشات المتعلقة باللغة والطبقة وسياسات الهوية في الأدب الحديث.

### Introduction

Published in 1909, Jack London's *Martin Eden* occupies a distinctive position in American literature because of its complex treatment of class, language, ambition, and identity. The novel narrates the intellectual rise and psychological collapse of Martin Eden, an uneducated sailor who attempts to enter bourgeois intellectual society through relentless self-education and literary achievement. Although the novel has often been approached as semi-autobiographical due to parallels between Martin and London himself, its significance extends far beyond autobiographical reflection. *Martin Eden* is deeply concerned with the mechanisms through which society constructs legitimacy, regulates identity, and reproduces ideological power.

At its core, the novel dramatizes the struggle over discourse. Martin's social inferiority is initially marked not only by poverty but also by language. His vocabulary, manners, pronunciation, and communicative style identify him as working class. His transformation into a writer therefore requires more than economic mobility; it demands linguistic assimilation into bourgeois culture. Language becomes the medium through which identity is reconstructed.

This paper argues that *Martin Eden* can be read as a discourse-theoretical novel long before discourse theory formally emerged as an academic field. The narrative repeatedly foregrounds questions of who may speak, whose language is considered legitimate, how institutions regulate cultural authority, and how individuals internalize ideological norms. Martin's tragedy emerges from the contradiction between self-construction and ideological control. He believes language and education will liberate him, yet the very discourse he adopts ultimately alienates him from both his class origins and his authentic sense of self.

## *The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden*



The paper employs an interdisciplinary framework combining Critical Discourse Analysis, Marxist criticism, Foucauldian theories of discipline and subject formation, and Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital. Through this framework, the study demonstrates that *Martin Eden* critiques capitalist meritocracy, bourgeois individualism, and the ideological mechanisms through which modern identity is manufactured.

The article is divided into several sections. First, it reviews relevant scholarship on *Martin Eden* and identifies the limitations within existing criticism. Second, it outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. Third, it examines how language functions as symbolic power within the novel. Subsequent sections analyze discipline and self-regulation, class ideology, identity fragmentation, masculinity, and the symbolic role of the sea. Finally, the paper considers the continuing relevance of *Martin Eden* to contemporary neoliberal culture.

### **Literature Review**

Critical scholarship on *Martin Eden* has traditionally focused on three major areas: autobiographical interpretation, Marxist analysis, and existential readings. Early critics frequently treated the novel as a reflection of Jack London's own intellectual journey from working-class laborer to celebrated author. Earle Labor (1974), for example, emphasizes the autobiographical parallels between London and Martin, arguing that the novel reveals London's ambivalent relationship toward success and literary fame. Similarly, Jeanne Campbell Reesman (1994) contends that the text reflects London's ideological tensions concerning socialism, individualism, and artistic ambition.

While autobiographical approaches provide valuable historical context, they often reduce the complexity of the novel by focusing excessively on London's personal life. Such readings risk overlooking the broader ideological structures represented in the text.

Marxist critics have approached *Martin Eden* primarily as a critique of capitalism and bourgeois ideology. Christopher Gair (2008) argues that Martin's social mobility exposes the contradictions of capitalist meritocracy because success depends on institutional approval rather than individual talent alone. Likewise, Williams (1977) interprets the novel as a representation of alienation under capitalism, emphasizing Martin's estrangement from both labor and bourgeois culture.





## *The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden*

However, many Marxist readings focus predominantly on economics while paying less attention to the role of language and discourse in reproducing class hierarchy. The present study seeks to address this gap by demonstrating that ideology in the novel operates discursively.

Other scholars have examined the novel through existential and psychological perspectives. According to Foner (1963), Martin's despair emerges from existential disillusionment rather than merely class conflict. Martin discovers that the ideals motivating his ambition are fundamentally hollow. Similarly, Den Tandt (1999) suggests that the novel dramatizes the instability of modern identity in rapidly industrializing society.

More recent criticism has increasingly emphasized language and cultural power. Kaplan (1981) argues that Martin's intellectual development is inseparable from his acquisition of cultural literacy. Yet even these discussions rarely employ discourse analysis systematically.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a particularly productive framework for examining *Martin Eden* because the novel repeatedly foregrounds speech, communication, rhetoric, and linguistic legitimacy. Norman Fairclough (1995) emphasizes that discourse not only reflects social structures but actively produces them. This insight is highly relevant to London's novel, where class distinctions are encoded through linguistic behavior.

Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power has not been sufficiently applied to *Martin Eden*. Bourdieu (1991) argues that language functions as symbolic capital because certain forms of speech possess institutional legitimacy. Martin's struggle can therefore be understood as an attempt to acquire linguistic capital.

Foucauldian approaches are likewise underdeveloped within existing scholarship. Michel Foucault's theories of discipline and subject formation illuminate how Martin internalizes bourgeois norms through self-regulation and intellectual labor. The present study expands earlier criticism by integrating discourse analysis with theories of power and ideology.

This paper therefore contributes to existing scholarship by:

1. Examining *Martin Eden* through Critical Discourse Analysis.



2. Integrating Marxist, Foucauldian, and Bourdieusian frameworks.
3. Treating language as a central mechanism of ideological reproduction.
4. Exploring identity formation as a discursive process.
5. Interpreting the novel as an early critique of modern subjectivity.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis examines the relationship between language, power, and ideology. Norman Fairclough (1995) argues that discourse shapes social structures while simultaneously being shaped by them. Language is never neutral; rather, it reflects and reproduces relations of power.

In *Martin Eden*, discourse functions as a mechanism of class distinction. Speech patterns, educational language, literary vocabulary, and conversational etiquette all operate as markers of social legitimacy. Martin's transformation depends on mastering bourgeois discourse.

Fairclough's notion that discourse produces social identities is especially important here. Martin is not merely learning language; he is reconstructing himself through language.

### **Foucault and Subject Formation**

Michel Foucault's theories concerning discipline and subject formation provide another essential framework. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault explains that modern power functions through normalization rather than direct coercion. Institutions shape individuals by encouraging self-surveillance and self-regulation.

Martin's educational journey reflects precisely such disciplinary mechanisms. He imposes rigid reading schedules upon himself, regulates his speech, suppresses bodily desires, and transforms his daily life according to bourgeois standards of productivity.



## *The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden*

Foucault's concept of the "docile body" is particularly relevant. Martin disciplines himself in order to become socially acceptable. Yet this process simultaneously produces alienation.

### **Bourdieu and Symbolic Capital**

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital helps explain why language occupies such an important role in the novel. According to Bourdieu (1991), dominant social groups define which linguistic forms are considered legitimate.

In *Martin Eden*, bourgeois speech carries prestige because institutions recognize it as culturally valuable. Martin initially lacks this symbolic capital. His working-class language identifies him as socially inferior despite his intelligence. His educational transformation therefore involves acquiring not only knowledge but also legitimate speech.

### **Marxism and Ideology**

Marxist theory remains central to understanding the novel's treatment of class and ideology. Louis Althusser's concept of ideological interpellation is especially relevant. Althusser (1971) argues that ideology transforms individuals into subjects by encouraging them to internalize dominant social values.

Martin responds to the ideological promise of bourgeois culture. He believes intellectual achievement and literary success will grant freedom and fulfillment. Yet the novel gradually exposes this belief as ideological illusion.

### **Language as Symbolic Power**

From the opening chapters of *Martin Eden*, language functions as a visible marker of class hierarchy. Martin's first visit to the Morse household immediately confronts him with a world structured by linguistic superiority. He becomes painfully conscious of his own speech:

"He felt the prodigious awkwardness of his speech and gestures" (London, 1909/2001, p. 18).

This awkwardness is not simply personal insecurity; it reflects ideological exclusion. Martin recognizes that language itself operates as social



## *The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden*



power. The Morse family speaks with ease, refinement, and confidence. Their conversational style represents what Bourdieu would describe as legitimate language. Martin, by contrast, experiences his own speech as socially inadequate. Ruth Morse occupies a particularly important role in this process. She repeatedly corrects Martin's grammar and pronunciation. Although these corrections appear supportive, they also function as disciplinary mechanisms.

For instance, Ruth encourages Martin to abandon working-class expressions and adopt more refined linguistic habits. Martin internalizes these corrections intensely:

“He was not fit to carry water for her” (London, 1909/2001, p. 42).

The statement reveals how linguistic inferiority becomes internalized as existential inferiority. Language therefore functions ideologically by transforming class hierarchy into personal inadequacy.

Martin begins obsessively studying grammar, vocabulary, rhetoric, and literature. His notebooks and reading schedules resemble disciplinary exercises through which he reconstructs identity. Importantly, Martin's transformation is performative. He learns to speak like the bourgeoisie before being recognized by them. Discourse becomes a form of social costume.

However, the novel repeatedly exposes the instability of this performance. Even after Martin becomes intellectually sophisticated, bourgeois society continues viewing him as socially different. This reflects Bourdieu's insight that symbolic legitimacy depends not only on language itself but also on institutional recognition of the speaker. Martin acquires elite discourse, yet he cannot fully erase class origins.

Furthermore, London reveals the arbitrariness of linguistic prestige. Bourgeois speech appears “natural” only because dominant institutions define it as superior. The novel therefore critiques the ideological illusion that cultural refinement reflects intrinsic worth.

### **Reading, Discipline, and the Production of the Intellectual Subject**





## *The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden*

Martin's educational journey is one of the most striking representations of self-discipline in modern American literature. After encountering Ruth and bourgeois culture, he subjects himself to an almost monastic regime of intellectual labor.

He reads obsessively, often depriving himself of sleep and food. London writes:

“He worked all day, and at night he read” (London, 1909/2001, p. 67).

This routine reflects more than ambition; it represents ideological subject formation. From a Foucauldian perspective, Martin transforms himself into a disciplined subject who regulates his own behavior according to internalized standards of productivity and intellectual legitimacy.

Libraries, schools, publishers, and literary culture function as disciplinary institutions. They shape Martin's desires, aspirations, and self-perception. The body itself becomes regulated. Martin suppresses pleasure, social life, and physical comfort in pursuit of intellectual achievement. He becomes increasingly disconnected from embodied existence.

Foucault (1977) argues that modern discipline operates by producing self-monitoring individuals. Martin exemplifies this process. No external authority forces him to study; rather, he internalizes ideological expectations. Yet the novel also reveals the violence of such discipline. Martin's intellectual ascent gradually destroys emotional stability and social connection. The disciplined subject becomes fragmented.

Interestingly, London frequently contrasts Martin's earlier life at sea with his later life as a writer. The sailor's body was active, social, and physically engaged with the world. The intellectual body becomes isolated and exhausted. The novel thus questions whether intellectual success under capitalism requires self-alienation.

### **Publishing Institutions and Ideological Validation**

One of the most revealing aspects of *Martin Eden* concerns the publishing industry. Martin believes literary success depends on talent and hard work. However, the repeated rejection of his manuscripts exposes the ideological nature of cultural legitimacy. Editors dismiss his



## *The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden*



work not necessarily because of quality but because he lacks institutional prestige.

London writes:

“The editors were merely the creatures of the magazines they served” (London, 1909/2001, p. 201).

This statement critiques cultural institutions as mechanisms reproducing dominant ideology. Martin eventually becomes successful only after gaining public recognition. Suddenly, the same magazines that rejected him compete for his work. The shift reveals that literary value is socially constructed rather than objectively determined.

This process strongly resembles Althusser’s ideological state apparatuses. Publishing houses appear neutral while actually regulating cultural legitimacy. The bourgeois characters’ reactions to Martin’s fame further expose ideological hypocrisy. Individuals who previously dismissed him suddenly admire him once institutional recognition validates him. Their admiration is directed not toward Martin himself but toward symbolic prestige. The novel therefore dismantles the myth of meritocracy. Success depends less on intrinsic talent than on ideological recognition by institutions.

This critique remains highly relevant in contemporary academic and literary culture, where publication, visibility, and institutional approval continue determining legitimacy.

### **Bourgeois Ideology and the Myth of Self-Making**

One of the central ideological tensions within *Martin Eden* concerns the myth of self-making. Martin initially believes he can transcend class limitations through determination and intellectual labor. This belief reflects classic capitalist individualism.

Martin repeatedly celebrates personal willpower and exceptionalism. He rejects collective politics and embraces individual struggle. Yet the novel gradually undermines this philosophy. Despite extraordinary effort, Martin discovers that bourgeois society remains fundamentally





## *The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden*

exclusionary. He can imitate elite discourse, but he cannot fully belong. Moreover, success itself proves spiritually empty.

Martin realizes that bourgeois admiration depends entirely on fame:

“They liked him because the magazines liked him” (London, 1909/2001, p. 287).

This realization destroys his faith in authenticity. The novel therefore critiques capitalist ideology by exposing the illusion that society rewards merit fairly. At the same time, the text remains ideologically ambiguous because it occasionally romanticizes Martin’s exceptional individuality.

This contradiction reflects Jack London’s own intellectual tensions between socialism and Nietzschean individualism. Rather than presenting a stable ideological position, the novel dramatizes ideological conflict itself.

### **Identity Fragmentation and Discursive Homelessness**

As Martin ascends intellectually, he becomes increasingly alienated from both the working class and bourgeois society. Among working-class characters, Martin appears transformed beyond recognition. His speech, interests, and worldview become inaccessible to former companions. Yet bourgeois society never fully accepts him either.

This produces what may be termed discursive homelessness. Martin no longer belongs to a stable linguistic or cultural community. Identity in the novel is therefore fundamentally unstable. Martin attempts to reconstruct himself through discourse, education, and cultural performance, but the self he creates remains fragmented.

London repeatedly emphasizes Martin’s loneliness:

“He had lost touch with the world” (London, 1909/2001, p. 315).

This alienation reflects broader modern anxieties concerning identity under capitalism. The novel anticipates poststructuralist critiques of coherent subjectivity by portraying identity as produced through conflicting ideological discourses. Martin is simultaneously sailor and



## *The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden*



intellectual, worker and artist, outsider and celebrity. He can inhabit none of these identities fully. His despair emerges partly from recognizing that the self he constructed is performative rather than authentic.

### **Ruth Morse and Gendered Ideology**

Ruth Morse plays a crucial ideological role in the narrative. She initially represents refinement, intellectuality, and bourgeois aspiration. Martin idealizes Ruth because she symbolizes access to another world. However, Ruth's love remains conditional upon Martin's assimilation into bourgeois norms. She supports his ambitions only insofar as they align with respectable middle-class expectations.

When Martin resists conventional career paths, Ruth becomes anxious and critical. Her role therefore reveals how intimate relationships participate in ideological regulation. Ruth functions not merely as romantic interest but as an agent of normalization.

At the same time, the novel reflects gendered assumptions characteristic of its historical context. Ruth is frequently associated with purity, refinement, and domestic morality. Yet London also subtly critiques bourgeois femininity by portraying Ruth as intellectually limited despite her formal education. Martin gradually realizes that her understanding of literature and philosophy remains superficial. This realization contributes to his disillusionment.

The relationship thus symbolizes the collapse of Martin's idealized vision of bourgeois culture.

### **Masculinity and Intellectual Performance**

Masculinity constitutes another significant dimension of the novel. At the beginning of the narrative, Martin's masculinity is associated with physical labor, instinct, courage, and bodily vitality. He embodies a rough working-class masculinity tied to manual experience.

As he enters intellectual culture, however, he reconstructs masculinity according to bourgeois ideals emphasizing refinement, rationality, and





## *The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden*

self-control. This transformation produces tension between body and intellect.

Martin's earlier vitality diminishes as he becomes increasingly absorbed in abstraction and symbolic competition. The novel repeatedly contrasts physical immediacy with intellectual alienation. From a discourse perspective, masculinity itself appears performative. Martin learns how bourgeois men speak, behave, and display cultural authority.

Intellectual discourse becomes a masculine performance linked to prestige and power. Yet the novel critiques this performance by showing its emotional emptiness. Martin's pursuit of superiority isolates him from meaningful relationships. The text therefore questions a culture in which masculine worth depends on achievement, recognition, and competitive success.

### **The Sea as Counter-Discourse**

Throughout *Martin Eden*, the sea functions symbolically as a counter-discursive space resisting bourgeois ideology. The sea represents immediacy, movement, physicality, and collective experience. Unlike bourgeois society, it values practical skill rather than symbolic prestige. Martin repeatedly remembers the sea nostalgically after entering literary culture.

These memories suggest longing for an existence not governed by performance and institutional validation. Importantly, the sea does not eliminate hierarchy entirely, but it operates according to different principles. Value emerges through action rather than discourse.

In contrast, bourgeois society appears artificial and performative. Conversation, etiquette, and reputation dominate social life. The further Martin moves from the sea, the more alienated he becomes.

The opposition between oceanic freedom and bourgeois discipline structures the ideological tension of the novel. The sea ultimately symbolizes an alternative mode of being beyond symbolic domination.



### **Narrative Voice and Ideological Contradiction**

One of the reasons *Martin Eden* remains critically compelling is its ideological ambiguity. The novel critiques bourgeois hypocrisy while simultaneously admiring exceptional individuality. It exposes capitalism's inequalities while occasionally reproducing elitist assumptions. This ambiguity is visible in the narrative voice itself.

At times, Martin appears heroic and intellectually courageous. At other moments, his obsession with superiority appears narcissistic. London refuses to provide a single stable ideological position. Instead, the novel dramatizes contradiction.

This instability reflects broader tensions within early twentieth-century modernity. Industrial capitalism produced both democratic aspirations and intense individual competition.

Martin embodies these contradictions. His intellectual rise demonstrates the possibility of self-transformation, yet his collapse reveals the psychological cost of constructing identity through external validation. The narrative therefore resists simplistic moral conclusions.

### **Martin Eden and Contemporary Neoliberal Subjectivity**

Although written more than a century ago, *Martin Eden* remains strikingly relevant to contemporary culture. Modern neoliberal societies continue emphasizing productivity, self-improvement, branding, visibility, and individual achievement. Individuals are encouraged to treat themselves as projects requiring constant optimization.

Martin's obsessive self-construction resembles contemporary pressures surrounding academic success, professional identity, and social recognition. Likewise, modern digital culture often measures value through visibility and institutional validation.

Martin's realization that society admires fame rather than substance anticipates contemporary celebrity culture and social media economies. The novel therefore functions as an early critique of neoliberal subjectivity before neoliberalism formally emerged.





## *The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden*

Its relevance lies in exposing the psychological consequences of a society where identity depends on external recognition. Martin's despair reflects the exhaustion produced by endless self-performance.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that Jack London's *Martin Eden* should be understood as a profound exploration of discourse, ideology, power, and identity formation. Through Critical Discourse Analysis combined with Marxist criticism, Foucauldian theory, and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, the novel emerges as a critique of modern subjectivity itself.

Martin's transformation from sailor to intellectual is mediated through discourse. Language functions as symbolic power regulating social legitimacy and class inclusion. His acquisition of bourgeois discourse enables social mobility while simultaneously alienating him from both his origins and himself.

The novel further reveals how institutions such as publishing houses, educational systems, and cultural elites regulate legitimacy through ideological mechanisms. Success depends not solely on talent but on recognition by institutional authority.

London exposes the contradictions of meritocracy, individualism, and bourgeois culture. Martin's tragedy lies not in failure but in success itself. Once he achieves recognition, he discovers that bourgeois admiration is fundamentally performative and ideologically conditioned.

At the same time, the novel remains ideologically complex because it both critiques and reproduces aspects of elitist individualism. This ambiguity contributes to its enduring significance.

Ultimately, *Martin Eden* portrays identity as unstable and discursively produced. Martin attempts to construct an authentic self through intellectual achievement, yet discovers that identity under modern capitalism is fragmented by competing ideological forces.



## *The Manufacture of the Self in Martin Eden*



More than a social novel, *Martin Eden* stands as an early literary critique of the modern subject—a subject disciplined through discourse, validated through institutions, and alienated by the endless pursuit of recognition.

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