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Learning From Plot and Characters in Musical Theatre

Lindsay Grant
Columbus State University

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LEARNING FROM PLOT AND CHARACTERS IN MUSICAL THEATRE

Lindsay Grant

Learning from Plot and Characters in Musical Theatre
By Lindsay Grant

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Thesis Advisor Earl Coleman Date May 1, 2012

Committee Member Joseph D. Fidler Date 05/02/2012

Committee Member _____ Date _____

CSU Honors Committee Member _____ Date _____

Coordinator, Honors Program Cindy Stutz Date 5/3/2012

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Introduction

Musical theatre has become a celebrated genre of entertainment throughout the years of its existence. From the late 1920s, when it was just beginning, to the present, the musical styles and flowing lyrics have caught the attention of people around the world. Musicals are not solely for entertainment though. They can also serve a higher purpose, if the audience will pay close enough attention. Many musical composers attempt to teach the audience a lesson or remind them of past wrongdoings with their elaborate plots and dialogues. The subject matter reflects some of the issues that are relevant to specific time periods. The overall themes to be discussed are: Civil Rights and the realistic view of life. Civil Rights refer not only to the unfair treatment of African-American and Hispanic cultures throughout the years, but also to the stereotypical expectations the public held for women. When referring to the realistic view of life, this indicates more than simply acknowledging that not everyone has a happily ever after. It also speaks towards the value of life and seeing things and people for what they are, not what they pretend to be. Both of these genres teach a caution to audiences in their treatment of other people and how they live their life. Musical theatre, from the 1920s to the present, acts as a conscience for the American people and attempts, through the plot and characters, to convey concepts from which all should learn.

Show Boat: Love knows no bounds

Show Boat, composed by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, was different from many musicals of its time. Not only was it based upon a book by Edna Ferber, but it was also one of the few novels during the 1920s to touch upon “difficult social issues” like miscegenation (Everett 99). The musical takes place down the Mississippi River on Captain Andy’s showboat. His daughter Magnolia falls in love with a gambling man, Gaylord Ravenal. In the beginning, Steve Baker finds a man by the name of Pete attempting to make a pass at his wife, Julie La Verne. Steve and Pete fight and Pete swears that he will make them both pay because he knows a secret about Julie. The secret is that she is a mulatto, or of mixed race, and for them to be married is illegal. As Pete runs to retrieve the sheriff, Steve cuts Julie’s hand and drinks her blood so he can honestly say he has a drop of black blood in him as well. In *Show Boat*’s time period, interracial marriages were illegal and the audience watches the effects of such laws upon normal people. In this musical, Julie and Steve’s romance cannot withstand the trials of their situation and Steve leaves Julie. Racism and miscegenation were still controversial during the 1930s, though not publicly so. Hammerstein and Kern attempted to bring this unfair treatment to the forefront of the public’s mind with *Show Boat*. It was a way to show the audience that love knows no bounds and should not be controlled by unreasonable laws.

When Julie La Verne must leave with her husband, Steve Baker, due to them being illegally married, Captain Andy hires Magnolia and Gaylord Ravenal as his leading roles. They fall in love and move away to start a family in Chicago. Gaylord, in the beginning, was supporting their family with his gambling but soon drags them into debt. Embarrassed for failing his family, Gaylord runs away leaving Magnolia to support herself and her child. She immediately begins taking auditions and her first audition is at a club called the Trocadero, where her old friend Julie La Verne sings. Julie quietly quits so that Magnolia can have her job. Magnolia becomes a hit at the Trocadero, with the help of her father, and is able to support their family for twenty years. Hammerstein and Kern illustrated to the audience the strength a woman could have. Magnolia went against the stereotypical female role and supported her family when her husband left her to fend for herself. Hammerstein and Kern introduced the thought that women are not just dainty creatures for which care is needed. They can earn a living just as much as a man. They also displayed the strong character a woman can have with Magnolia being so forgiving of Gaylord at the end when he returns to her. Despite the fact that he left her alone and with no means of taking care of herself, Magnolia still loves him and welcomes him with open arms. With *Show Boat*, Hammerstein and Kern show the audience that women can be more than simply caregivers and that the unfair iniquities that were forced on African American people were unjust and hurt many relationships that otherwise would have survived.

Porgy and Bess: The balance of hope and wickedness in human nature

In 1935, the Theatre Guild produced *Porgy and Bess* with music by George Gershwin and lyrics by DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin. *Porgy and Bess* depicts the lives of the black community on Catfish Row in Charleston, South Carolina. Porgy, a disabled beggar, believes himself to be unworthy of love due to his disability but he still has a shadow of hope for love with a woman named Bess. Bess is Crown's girl and addicted to drugs. When Crown gets drunk and murders a man, he leaves Bess to fend for herself with the police, but tells her he will come back for her one day. She attempts to find somewhere to hide from the police but no one except Porgy will take her. From then on, Bess lived with Porgy. A drug dealer by the name of Sportin' Life is always nearby to attempt to sway Bess back to his way of living but as long as Porgy is around, she is safe. When Porgy is in jail for refusing to identify the body of Crown after he killed him, Sportin' Life finally persuades Bess to go with him to New York. As Porgy gets out of jail and finds Bess gone to New York, he simply sets off after her singing "Oh Lawd, I'm On My Way."

Porgy is the essence of hope in *Porgy and Bess*. He never gives up on his love for Bess and will go out of his way to protect and be with her. Porgy even went so far as to kill to protect his love. Also, no matter how much Bess strayed, Porgy would always take her back and forgive her. The Gershwins and Heyward created a realistic love where the couple went through

many trials but Porgy never gave up on their love. Porgy was also the only person standing between Bess and her addiction. As soon as he was gone, Sportin' Life swooped in and tempted Bess back to a life of drug addiction. Sportin' Life represents the evil and temptation in the world. When he sings "It Ain't Necessarily So" to the people going on a picnic to Kittiwah Island, he plants seeds of doubt in his audience about stories from the bible. Also, as the local drug dealer, he did not have the best of characters from the beginning. After Porgy is arrested, Sportin' Life confronts Bess. He forces his "happy dust" on her and she soon relents and takes it. After she takes it, he describes a seductive life in the city of New York and how life would be if she went with him. She refuses but he leaves "happy dust" on her doorstep and waits for her inevitable falter.

The Gershwins and Heyward present a musical that embodies many lessons about life. Porgy's hopeful nature and persistence to be with his love is admirable and teaches about the value of constancy. More lessons can be learned from the follies of Sportin' Life though. Sportin' Life appears to be similar to the devil. He is always there at a person's weakest moment to attempt to persuade them into sinful actions. Even though the community knows how immoral Sportin' Life is, they do not force him out of their lives. They allow him to stay and wreak havoc on the lives of others. *Porgy and Bess* teach that one should beware of people who are blatantly evil and that avoiding problems is just as dangerous as encouraging them.

***Carousel*: The duality of human hearts**

Carousel, by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, was different from other musicals from the 1940s because it acknowledged “the evil and danger in the world – death, despair, loss, cruelty – without sugar-coating it and yet at the same time, implied that there is a goodness that can overcome the bad” (Miller 54). Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote this musical with a balance of good and evil. *Carousel* tells the story of a Julie Jordan who works at a mill that falls in love with a carousel barker named Billy Bigelow, while also telling the story of a quirky young woman named Carrie Pipperidge who is in love with a fisherman named Enoch Snow. On the night when Julie and Billy first meet, they are fired from their jobs for choosing to stay in each other’s company. They are soon married after discovering they truly love one another and they go to live with Julie’s aunt. As Billy is mulling over the thought of leaving Julie, she comes and tells him she is pregnant. Overjoyed, he soon starts planning how he will get the money to support his new family. He decides to take a robbery job and gets killed in the process, leaving Julie to care for herself and her child. Billy is allowed to come back as a spirit and attempt to make amends by helping his child.

Rodgers and Hammerstein incorporated many lessons and themes in *Carousel*. They taught about the beauty of love and how at some point, throwing caution to the wind can be acceptable. When Julie sings “If I Loved You,” she is timidly expressing her love for Billy

without actually saying that she loves him. Both Billy and Julie are scared of the vulnerability that comes with admitting you are in love but they understand each other nonetheless. Also, the power of forgiveness is illustrated when Billy is allowed the chance to gain his angel wings by helping his daughter back on earth. When he came back to earth, he was reminded of his humanity and how difficult it can be to love someone.

Carousel teaches many lessons about life and the balance of good and evil. Even though Billy had done many terrible things in his life, he was still allowed to make amends. This teaches that it is never too late to right wrongs. *Carousel* also managed to prove that a woman can survive without a husband, which was unheard of during this era. This occurred during the second act when Julie was taking care of her child without a man in her life. She seems sad but she chose to be strong for her daughter. This type of female role model became more prevalent as the years passed but typically, a woman living on her own and taking care of her family was seldom seen. The complexities of relationships are also obvious in this musical. Billy was not the perfect husband and would even beat Julie. He misguidedly attempted to do right by his family by robbing a bank for money but died in the attempt. Even though he was not a good husband, Julie still loved Billy and did not want to be without him.

***West Side Story*: How racism leads to tragedy**

West Side Story is considered to be one of musical theatre's "few great tragedies" (Miller 69). The plot was based roughly on that of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* but with many modern additions. According to Miller, at first, the musical was going to be focused upon the conflict between Catholics and Jews and was to be called *East Side Story* but they decided to focus on "Anglo-Americans and Puerto Rican Americans", recognizing the "profound racial prejudice in America against Latinos" (Miller 69). The musical begins with two rival gangs and their struggles with each other. The focus soon becomes the romance that has developed between Maria, the sister of the head of the Sharks, and Tony, the best friend of the leader of the Jets. Their romance was doomed from the very beginning due to the racial prejudices that existed between the two groups. As with *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story* ends tragically with Tony dead and Maria alone.

When looking back on this musical and all of its racially charged material, it can be baffling. Much of the banter and dialogue contained racial slurs that were common during that era, especially in New York, and portrayed the stereotypes of Latinos being "hot-blooded" and the Americans being "cool" and collected (Miller 70). To depict the stereotypical differences between the two groups, Bernstein utilized different musical devices. To describe both gangs, "complex rhythms and mixed meters" are used to "capture the violence" (Everett 200). The

Puerto Rican Sharks are described with different Latin rhythms and Latin dances were used during scenes like "The Dance at the Gym" (Everett 200). There are several scenes throughout the musical that display a great amount of racism. One in particular is at the end when Anita goes to see Tony at the shop where he works to ask him to wait for Maria. The people who were at the shop saw Anita and attacked her verbally with malicious comments as well as physically. Anita became so flustered that she yelled that Maria was actually dead and that Chino killed her in a jealous rage. This false news is what puts Tony in the position to be killed.

The lessons that are present from *West Side Story* are very simple: people are people, no matter what race or ethnicity they may be. All of the violence began because of each gang's unwillingness to coexist with the other. When a pure love is created between Tony and Maria, both sides want nothing to do with it. Their hatred forced two people into heartbreaking circumstances when otherwise they would have been able to continue their love. Because the audience sees both sides of the story, there is no way for them to misinterpret the intentions of both gangs. Sondheim and Bernstein found a way to show the humanity in both situations as well as the tragedy of their circumstances.

Fiddler on the Roof: The fading away of tradition

Fiddler on the Roof was composed in 1964 by Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick. This musical tells the tale of a Jewish family in Ukraine struggling with past traditions in more modern times. The patriarch of the family, Tevye, opens the musical with a song about tradition and how important it is. Throughout the musical Tevye must handle many situations where his daughters are attempting to break with tradition. The first is when Tzeitel wants to marry her childhood friend, Motel, not the butcher that the matchmaker has suggested. Tevye relents though and allows their marriage. Next, his second eldest daughter Hodel has decided to marry her younger sisters' tutor, Perchik. When they approach Tevye, he is outraged at their break with tradition and forbids the wedding. They then tell him they are only seeking his blessing, not his permission and he again relents. When his daughter Chava approaches Tevye to ask if she can marry Fyedka, a Christian man, Tevye will not consent. That is one line he refuses to cross with his traditions.

Fiddler on the Roof is entirely about the development of new traditions and the abandonment of the old. Tevye is reasonable and comes to his own conclusions about progressing with the times. He even explains to his wife Golde when their first two daughters decide to marry for love that love must be the new style. This outlook for a devout Jewish family is not a typical one. That is shown by Tevye's initial reactions towards his daughters'

breaking with tradition. Another important moment is when his daughter Hodel decides to marry her younger sisters' tutor, who is also a political activist. After they are married, he runs off to a rally and is excommunicated to Siberia. Hodel decides that she must follow him and tells Tevye so. This independence was unheard of for this time period, especially in this type of community. Daughters were to be obedient to their fathers and mothers until they were married and they would be obedient to their husbands. As soon as she heard the rumors of Perchik's sentence to Siberia, she made up her mind to go after him alone and to do whatever it took to be with her love.

Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock taught the audience many different lessons with this musical. Not only did they teach life lessons, but they also taught about a culture's hardships. "Although the plot, lyrics and music are at times overwhelmingly sentimental and nostalgic, the realization that the story mirrored genuine experiences of Jewish immigrants from the *shtetls* [Yiddish for towns] of the Ukraine gave the production unique credibility and power" (Everett 186). Tevye's experiences illustrated that sometimes, traditions must be updated with the mindset of the times. No matter how difficult it was, Tevye still found a way to compromise his firm beliefs and traditions to make way for the coming of a new age.

Sweeney Todd: The pitfalls of keeping revenge in ones heart

Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street describes the duality of human nature, although morbidly so. In 1979, Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* opened on Broadway and shocked many theatre-goers. Typically, musical theatre of this era would still have somewhat of a happy ending or a moral justification. *Sweeney Todd* has no happy ending and was designed to leave the audience slightly disturbed due to the tragic and horrific nature of the plot. *Sweeney Todd* has arrived back in London from a false sentence given to him by a corrupt judge. This judge had Todd, known then as Benjamin Barker, sent away because he lusted after Todd's wife. As soon as he was sent to Australia, the Judge lured his wife, Lucy into his house and raped her. Once Todd finds this out, he vows to have his revenge on the corrupt judge as well as his sidekick, Beadle Bamford. Todd meets Mrs. Lovett who owns the meat pie shop under his old apartment. She suggests that Todd become a barber again like he once was. He agrees and uses his position to kill people and inadvertently provides Mrs. Lovett with meat for her pies. *Sweeney Todd* has his revenge in the end but is killed soon after because he killed Mrs. Lovett for her lies.

After the opening of *Sweeney Todd* in 1979, journalist Harold Clurman wrote that the musical was a "social satire on an epic scale." He also stated "the London of 19th-century industrialism is viewed here as a cesspool of fraud, callousness and corruption – presumably like

our own city today. At the end of the show, the entire cast lines up and points viciously at the audience and (musically) roars ‘You are all Sweeney Todds!’” (Clurman 315). Through horrifying events, *Sweeney Todd* teaches the devastating and destructive effects of a heart bent on revenge. Revenge warped Sweeney Todd’s heart into something that even he would not have been able to recognize. At the end of the musical, when the characters accuse the audience of being like Sweeney Todd, in 1979 the audience was amused. They were not disturbed or contemplative of their own behavior towards others. They did not accept the message about the dangers of a vengeful heart. They were enraptured with the true brilliance of “American opera” (Clurman 315).

Sondheim challenges the audience to see the folly in the human tendency towards revenge. Sweeney Todd was bound and determined to have his vengeance on the corrupt judge and his cohort that he allowed his judgment to become affected. Originally, Sweeney Todd has his sights set on killing Judge Turpin and his cohort only. After his plans are ruined, Sweeney Todd falls into a rage and decides to expand his sights to everyone. He kills the rich and justifies it by saying he is ending their tyranny but he kills the poor saying he is ending their misery. Many lives are lost due to the uncontrollable revenge that has filled Todd’s heart. Sondheim also attempts to teach the audience to be weary of a lustful heart and corrupt political leaders.

All of these events could have been avoided had Judge Turpin not falsely imprisoned Todd to simply steal away his wife.

Into the Woods: Not all endings are happily ever after

In 1987, Sondheim's *Into the Woods* opened on Broadway. This musical is a different kind of fairy tale, where a happily ever after is not necessarily the outcome. The musical begins with the story of Cinderella. Throughout the first act, the audience sees the progression of her tale as well as that of Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, and a Baker and his Wife. Cinderella wants to leave her terrible situation and by the end of act one, she marries the Prince while her stepsisters have their eyes poked out by birds. Jack and his mother are poor and so he goes up the beanstalk and finds riches beyond belief. The Baker and his Wife want a child and they do everything the witch asks and are rewarded for their efforts. At the end of act one, everyone seems content and happy with his or her lives ahead. Once act two begins, ironically everyone is still wishing for something more, which proves to be their ruin.

Cinderella's Prince becomes bored with his wife and goes searching for another princess. The Baker and his Wife now have their baby but they wish they had more space. Jack misses his giant kingdom in the sky. When a giantess comes down a new beanstalk in search of the one who killed her husband, everyone comes together while still attempting to achieve his or her own

goal. They did not realize until the end that their actions have consequences, especially for the generations to come.

Sondheim found a way to talk about the human condition and help the audience understand that not every story will have a happy ending. "*Into the Woods* acknowledges that in the real world, love is not ideal, princes are not perfect, choices are not easy, human relations aren't simple, and every action has a repercussion" (Miller 172). Too often, people expect everything to work out perfectly like a fairy tale. Sondheim depicted the characters of *Into the Woods* as stereotypical fairy tale characters for the first act but gave them a sense of realism in the second act. Despite the perfect ending in the first act, none of the characters find themselves truly content with their situations.

Sondheim taught the audience that they should be careful what they wish for because it will not always be what they expect. For instance, when Cinderella confronts her prince about his infidelity, he makes a remark about being raised to be charming, not chivalrous. People are not always what they seem and no action, however insignificant it may seem, will go without a consequence. In the final scene, the Baker's Wife appears as a spirit to give some parting wisdom to her husband who will now be raising their child alone. She instructs the Baker to tell their child the story of the wood and explain that actions have consequences, even for future generations. Sondheim is able to end this unconventional fairy tale by expressing the morals of

the stories in a song called "Children Will Listen" warning to be careful what you wish for and to take care what ideas you give to children.

***Rent*: Moments are precious**

In the 1990s, *Rent* by John Larson conveyed many sensitive issues and lessons for the public. Most of what *Rent* stood for can be found in its title. According to Miller, the word rent refers to not only the monetary meaning of the word but also to a little known definition. One of the meanings of rent is "shredded in grief or rage" or "split apart" when describing communities, families or other relationships (Miller 190). There are several plot lines in *Rent* that all intertwine through friendship. Mimi is addicted to drugs and has AIDS. Roger also has AIDS but has been in a deep depression since his girlfriend committed suicide the year before. All Roger wants is to create a great song so that he can make his mark on the world before he dies of AIDS. Collins gets mugged in the street and a drag queen named Angel comes to help him. Because he is bleeding, he tells Angel not to touch his blood because he has AIDS. Angel tells him that he does as well and a friendship emerges. They soon fall in love and have a relationship. Mark, who is friends with all of them, does not have AIDS. He is scared that they all are going to die and leave him behind. When Angel does die, Mark finds his purpose again in making a documentary to celebrate Angel's life. Through the many ups and downs, at the end of

the musical, everyone decides that the petty arguments are not worth it and that they need to enjoy the time that they have left with each other.

Each character in *Rent* is completely human, which was different for musicals. The use of realism in musicals still was astonishing to a certain extent. The lives and conflicts between these characters described the situations that the public was going through daily. When this musical opened, the United States was going through an AIDS epidemic. Young adults had to think about whether or not they were going to see their friends again or if they would be left alone, like Mark always thought about. When people were HIV positive, sometimes they turned to drugs to get away from the pain. Loves were lost due to AIDS and hearts broken. This musical shows the reality of the AIDS epidemic and that the people who were affected were real people too. The audience got a short glimpse into the kinds of lives that were affected daily by this epidemic and the struggling mindset that they held.

If there is one thing that the audience should have taken away from *Rent*, it is that life is precious and should not be wasted. It is too precious to get involved with things like drugs, which can kill, or to allow silly fights to separate you from someone you love. Every moment should be cherished and lived to its fullest potential. Angel proved to be the inspiration that the entire group needed to solidify their friendships again. His death helped Roger realize that he was afraid of losing Mimi to AIDS. It also helped Mark find his purpose and Mimi come back

from the depths of drug addiction. Love is something to fight for especially when there is a limit to the time spent together.

Wicked: Things are not always as they appear

In 2005, the hit musical *Wicked* by Stephen Schwartz opened on Broadway. It is based upon the best-selling book by Gregory McGuire about a new take on the *Wizard of Oz*. This time, the entire story is from the point of view of the Wicked Witch of the West, Elphaba. Elphaba is the outcast of her family because she is green due to her mother's infidelity and a green elixir. Elphaba's father cannot stand her and only shows his affection towards her sister Nessa, also known as the Wicked Witch of the East. Elphaba's sole purpose, according to her father, is to take care of Nessa. When they go to school, Elphaba originally is an outcast until the popular Glinda takes pity on her and decides she can be popular too. Elphaba tries to be and do good but everything she does seems to only make matters worse. Because her teachers want to use her power for evil, Elphaba runs away and Glinda does not speak to her for many years. When they finally do see each other, they forgive their past wrongs and realize that they have changed each other's lives for the better.

Stephen Schwartz created a musical that makes people rethink what they know to be true about Oz. Originally, the audience probably thought the Wicked Witch of the West was

completely evil and deserved to be melted, when in reality she was just misunderstood. When you take the story of *Wicked* into account, *Wizard of Oz* can be seen as propaganda for the Emerald City. All Elphaba wanted was her sister's shoes to remember her by. It did not help that all of the people helping Dorothy, like the Tin Man, Scarecrow, and Lion were all individuals that Elphaba had attempted to help throughout the years. The Lion blamed Elphaba for his cowardly nature because she sheltered him from the world. She turned the Tin Man into tin because her sister Nessa had performed a spell that was killing him. It was the best she could do to save his life. The Scarecrow was Elphaba's love that she turned into a scarecrow because he was being beaten to death for loving her. Her spell, instead of making his flesh stronger, changed it into straw. All of her attempts at helping were twisted into malicious actions by the "victims." It did not help that she had a reputation for being wicked, which she gained because after refusing her teacher's requests to do their bidding, the Emerald City told the world that she was evil, even though she was not. No one questioned them because she looked different and acted quirky so they believed without thinking and Elphaba, to their eyes, became wicked.

Wicked teaches the difference between good and evil and the value of true friendship.

One particular song that teaches about friendship is "For Good" sung by Elphaba and Glinda.

Elphaba and Glinda have been at odds ever since Elphaba tried to live her own life and spread

goodness her way. At this point, they have come together and recognize how much of a good impact the other has made on their lives. Schwartz composed other songs like "No Good Deed" that describe Elphaba's feelings about helping others. Every time she attempts to help someone, it seems to turn awry and they blame her for all their misfortunes. Even when she finally has a love in her life, it is taken away from her because he is beaten for loving her. The main lesson is that friendship is a cherished gift and that things are not always as pleasant as they seem.

Conclusion

Throughout the many years of Broadway, composers still attempt to remind the audience of their humanity. They display conflicts and situations that everyone lives through or witnesses at some point in their lives. From the 1920s to the present, musicals have been created to teach lessons to the audience about issues like Civil Rights and realism in life. They do this using characters and plot line. Musical like *Show Boat* and *West Side Story* convey the unfair treatment of different groups of people and show how that ill treatment affects the lives that they live. Musical like *Porgy and Bess*, *Carousel*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Rent*, and *Wicked* show a realistic view of life and what the audience should learn from it. They teach that although goodness can be found, not every ending is going to be happy. They also teach lessons about learning who to trust and how to accept the times as they change. All of these musicals

relate to life and the human condition. These musicals were created with these themes to have more than a simple entertainment value. They are meant to teach the audience and to remind them of situations and feelings that they should learn from to become better people and a better society.

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