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L. Petrushevskaya's Story *From the Mountain*: System of Images, Narrative Strategies in a Postmodern Text

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Abstract. The article offers a new interpretation of L. Petrushevskaya's short story *From the Mountain*. The structural and thematic emphases previously placed on the text by critics and literary scholars are revised. In particular, the character system and narrative strategies in the story are considered from a new point of view. While earlier critics based their analysis on the characters of 'He' and 'She', placing their love story at the center of scholarly discourse, this article proposes a different approach. Instead of focusing on these two figures, it examines the narrator-heroine, a witness to the love story of vacationers, as presented by her from a highly subjective perspective. The paper challenges the notion that the author's position and that of the narrator-heroine are identical, proving that the narrator cannot be considered the author's alter ego. It is demonstrated that the linguistic and stylistic features of the narrator-observer's evaluative statements serve as a means of portraying the protagonist, shaping her persona and image. The article concludes that there are multifaceted vectors for expressing the author's position, highlighting the presence of the "zero degree of writing" (Roland Barthes) in Petrushevskaya's postmodern narrative.

Keywords: narrator-heroine, postmodernism, love story, image system, narrative strategies, authorial stance

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Рассказ Л. Петрушевской «С горы»: система образов, нарративные ходы постмодерного текста

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Аннотация. Представлена новая интерпретация рассказа Л. Петрушевской «С горы», пересмотрены ранее предложенные критикой и литературоведением структурно-идейные акценты текста. В частности, с новой точки зрения рассмотрена система персонажей и стратегии повествования в рассказе. Если ранее в центре внимания критиков находились безымянные персонажи (*он* и *она*) и их любовная история, то в данной статье ключевым объектом анализа выступает героиня-рассказчица как автор-персонаж. Именно она становится свидетельницей любовной истории отдыхающих, показывая ее с особой – весьма субъективной – позиции. Оспорено представление о близости позиции автора и героини-рассказчицы, доказано, что рассказчица не может рассматриваться как *alter ego* автора. Показано, что речестилевые особенности суждений героини-наблюдателя выступают у Петрушевской средством портретирования центрального женского персонажа, контурирования его характера и образа. Сделан вывод о том, что текст Петрушевской имеет разнонаправленные векторы экспликации авторской позиции, «нулевую степень письма» (по Р. Барту).

Ключевые слова: героиня-рассказчица, постмодернизм, любовная история, система образов, стратегии повествования, позиция автора

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Introduction

Lyudmila Petrushevskaya's prose and plays hold a unique position in contemporary Russian literature. Although it should be classified as so-called women's fiction, her prose is anything but, and critics widely agree that it transcends gender boundaries (Bil, 2023; Bogdanova, 2009; Fan, Zhuchkova, 2022; Markova, 2024; Pakhomova, 2006; Prokhorova, 2007, et al.). Back in the late 1990s, we, too, came to the conclusion that Petrushevskaya's literary talent is dark and brutal enough to emerge from the pen of a male author, which allows her to write about the victims and perpetrators of Stalin's cult of personality, repressions, and tyranny (Bogdanova, 2004, p. 379; 2023). Yet, her non-women's fiction focuses primarily on the miserable and unrelieved mundane existence of discarded wives who have to raise their children all alone in the isolation of communal tenements (Krasilnikova, 2025; Muratova, 2022; Pereslegina, 2022; Zhang, 2025, et al.). However, it is neither the laws of Soviet society nor Soviet ideology that make Petrushevskaya's female characters profoundly weak, but rather human nature itself: all her female personages are totally and hopelessly unhappy, regardless of their social status.

From a postmodern perspective, Petrushevskaya's narrative represents Writing Degree Zero (Barthes, 2025). A female narrator consistently and objectively recounts the plot, but her point of view does not affect the characters' lives. This type of narrative strips the text of all evaluative aspects. As a result, Petrushevskaya's stories seem to be deprived of psychological depth because her characters lack individual traits but are reproduced as types. Petrushevskaya's prose is more than non-psychological: it is anti-psychological (Barzakh, 1995, p. 253). Similarly, her characters are more than types: they are archetypes (Lipovetsky, 1994, p. 229), they are clichés and formulas that unravel themselves in each specific story.

We intend to challenge the well-established opinions of authoritative critics. First of all, we disagree with the popular statement that Lyudmila Petrushevskaya addresses the mundane. If human life is a path of ups and downs, or a chain of dark and white stripes, Petrushevskaya selects only the downs and the darkness of human life, which are naturally full of drama, tension, and emotional charge. In the absence of ups and white stripes, this relentless darkness loses its counterweight. Deprived of the opposite pole, it is no longer pitch black: it becomes the only possible option, and, as such, it fades into grayness, becoming the mundane norm of human life (Bogdanova, 2004, p. 384). However, this kind of grim mundane reality is imaginary and pseudonormal.

In other words, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya deliberately intensifies the darkness, reducing it to a mundane gray, degrading the extraordinary into the seemingly familiar and everyday. As a result, the stories of her female characters are clusters of grim episodes, a quintessence of loneliness and tragedy. Petrushevskaya cultivates the poetics of darkness over all other narrative principles: there is no ray of light in her textual realm of darkness; her fictional worlds are impenetrably dark, oppressive, and terrifying.

However, some of Petrushevskaya's short stories openly engage with the traditionally lighthearted topic of love. One such story is titled *The Fall*, and it opens Petrushevskaya's most representative collection of short stories, *The House of Girls* (1999).

Results and Discussion

In *The Fall*, the narrator recounts the story of a holiday romance, a “true love” that sparks between nameless characters vacationing at a seaside sanatorium: *him*, the “Big Fish” in the small pond, and *her*, a Carmen-esque *femme fatale*¹. As is often the case with Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, the author delegates the function of the storyteller to an unnamed female narrator.

The Fall is less popular with scholars than other, darker stories by Petrushevskaya. T.G. Prokhorova describes it as a hidden story of how true love miraculously transforms ordinary people. It is a tragedy of lovers separated not just by life circumstances, but by cruel fate, which renders them powerless (2007, p. 120). From her point of view, love confronts vulgarity in this unique version of Bizet's *Carmen* (2007, p. 122). Researcher believes that the author explicates her own perspective through the voice of the female narrator, making the narrator her *alter ego*. However, we cannot identify *The Fall* as a purely authorial interpretation of Bizet's story about love and jealousy. It cannot be the author's intent, for both objective and fundamental reasons.

To substantiate this hypothesis, we must turn to the specific features of Petrushevskaya's narrative, examine the personages as a system, and focus on the female narrator. We strongly believe that this image is anything but the author's *alter ego*. The narrator's voice is not that of the author: it is expressively independent and emphatically characterological, not figurative, but sharply delineated.

Most critics take it for granted that *The Fall* centers around the two characters of *him* and *her* who met at a seaside resort and fell in love with each other (Prokhorova, 2007, p. 120). In our opinion, the central position of *him* and *her* is illusory and deceptive. The focus belongs not to “everyone's Carmen” and “the Big Fish” but to the nameless female narrator who recounts the love story of their holiday romance. Actually, *him* and *her* are a single complex character, essentially indivisible, a holistic image of *them*. Essentially, the story has only two characters: *them* (the vacationers) and *she* (the narrator and observer). If we assume that the focus belongs to the narrator, this new angle generates a shift in the overall semantic (interpretative) perspective.

This, the active protagonist in *The Fall* is the narrator, not the lovers: it is from her perspective that we see the story of the nameless and faceless vacationers.

¹ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls: Stories and Novellas* (p. 10). Vagrius Publ. (In Russ.)

Unlike the typologically simplified *him* and *her*, the female narrator possesses a distinctive character and vitality of her own. *They* are merely reflections of those phantom subjects, the multiple shadow characters, whom the narrator observes and judges in her story. And she judges as arbitrarily as she likes. The plot narrative is fragmentary. If the narrative belonged to the author, the story would be presented objectively. In our case, it is hued by the personal intonations inherent in the nameless witness of the holiday romance, and her perspective is paramount.

The female narrator is not personified in the text; her image has no portrait as such, but her speech is so vividly tailored that her own words portray her better than any description would do, shaping her (in)visible, yet vital persona as active and vivid.

As is often the case with Petrushevskaya, the female narrator is a smart and observant person, tough and not at all sentimental (cf. in plays: Bil, 2023; Muratova, Zhilicheva, 2022). She is fundamentally and initially devoid of empathy or compassion; skepticism and envy bordering on undisguised bitterness guide her opinions.

The narrator is, in her own way, a philosopher, a unique provincial armchair philosopher and observer. Indeed, she begins her story with a philosophical observation:

A community separated from the reality of mundane life, from home and relatives, is astonishing. All the burden of everyday life somehow disappears, along with the problem of where to get money: you're settled for a while – a week, a vacation².

It is not the author's perspective, as T.G. Prokhorova suggests, but a personal observation of the smart narrator, whom the author endows with the right to have her own voice and opinion. The entire introductory sentence is individualized and semantically marked, from the adjective *astonishing* to the indefinite *somehow* and the general *you*.

The story begins with the narrator's own speculation, which is perfectly accurate and relatable. Indeed, the burden of everyday life recedes when you are on holiday. But here, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya reaches far beyond the surface semantics, emphasizing the characterological aspect. The very first sentence speaks volumes about the female narrator and her life circumstances. Apparently, *where to get money* is her personal worry, which makes her social position clear to the reader.

The opening sentence introduces a woman who, from a distance, from her own unique perspective, observes the vacationers who have come to the seaside to relax and snatch a piece of simple human happiness for themselves. It is "*she* has no money vs. *they* do" (at least, for the period of their vacation). These two parts are incompatible, they are on opposite poles of society, they are profoundly

² Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 9).

different. The feigned arrogance that saturates the very first lines of the story may stem from the involuntary resentment and envy that torment the narrator, a witness to others' brief but refreshing holiday romances.

The certainty with which the narrator expresses her very first judgment suggests that she might have had a similar experience in the past, and it gives her a moral right to be confident in her opinions (cf. in other short stories: Krasilnikova, 2025; Pereslegina, 2022; Zhang, 2025).

The adjective *astonishing* introduces a tone of irony and sarcasm, which the narrator invariably displays throughout the text. She finds it astonishing how those around her fail to understand what she understands so well. In the second sentence, the narrator uses the word she will later use to evaluate the holiday romance, and this word is *illusion*:

Here the illusion lies in wait for you that this is how it should be, from breakfast to lunch, from dinner to night sleep, and your only concern is to look better and better with every day, and eventually someone will appreciate and admire it, and then you will admire the one who admires you³.

The gap between the characters increases. The narrator is reasonable and unsentimental while *they*, the vacationers, are naive idealists, ready to succumb to the feelings of love that sprouted during a short seaside vacation.

The narrator and *them* find themselves in different, antinomic, even antipathetic circumstances. Asserting her own point of view, the narrator finds support in the fact that she is not alone in thinking this way. She imperceptibly departs from the first-person singular to the first-person plural: "We watched it – we who lived across from their large holiday resort..."⁴. Petrushevskaya subtly explicates the envy by describing the resort as large, meaning that *our* place is not. Therefore, the narrator's speech acquires the status and function of characterization.

The shift from *me* to *us* reveals another semantic move: Petrushevskaya explains the narrator's behavior pattern by placing her among other gossips. This negative connotation is not explicit but discernible between the lines. The world of the story is split into *us* and *them*.

The emerging opposition between the narrator and the vacationers *a priori* motivates her negative judgment and diminished characterizations. For instance, she ironically names the woman *everyone's Carmen*. Some researchers believe that by using the allusion to Bizet's *Carmen* Lyudmila Petrushevskaya brings forward the motif of tragic love: the name contains the inevitability of a tragic outcome (Prokhorova, 2007, p. 121). However, no tragedy of any kind occurs in *The Fall*. We should not forget that the name of Carmen is introduced by the ironic

³ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 9).

⁴ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 9).

narrator, not the author, i.e., the intertextual allusion is nothing but sarcastic. The vacationer is not just Carmen, but *everyone's Carmen*, i.e., a very trite and banal social type.

Knowing essentially nothing about the vacationers, the narrator unhesitatingly portrays the resort Carmen as follows:

as a woman, who looked repulsively vulgar and, indeed, sort of leapt out at you. She laughed a lot, going, say, on a bus with the men from her resort to the market for fruit or to the locals for a jar of their home-made wine – as we all did. She was at the head of her pack, and here's what she looked like: a shortish haircut of messy curls, courtesy of a cheap hairdresser's, her hair all dead from a fresh perm, her eyebrows plucked and dyed blue-black, a lipsticked mouth, of course, but also kind of cheap-looking. All her beauty came, as they say, from a cheap pharmacy for a ruble twenty a jar⁵.

One might assume that the portrait of the resort Carmen is presented fairly objectively. She could indeed have been vulgar, cheaply dressed, and tasteless. But at the level of the narrator's emotional speech, the author's own subtext reveals the subjectivity of this portrayal and, consequently, its unreliability. The colloquial expressions are stylistically and grammatically incorrect and debased (*sort of leapt out at you; for a ruble twenty a jar; kind of cheap-looking*). They interweave with the description and make it impossible to abstract from the fact that the portrait is mediated through the perspective of the people (*us*) across the street from the large resort. In other words, the speech characterization suggests that the portrait is not objective: it is intentionally biased. Drawing on her own experience, the narrator addresses the vacationer with this observation:

She, poor thing, was attempting happiness; she wanted to taste, to snatch a piece of real, inaccessible happiness and the life they show you in soap operas⁶.

Against the backdrop of quasi-Freudian slips of the tongue, this philosophical observation is projected onto the narrator herself: she, apparently, was also once among those *poor things* who yearned for inaccessible happiness. The narrator goes on quipping:

So, it's the sea, the sun, and she has fashionable sandals, a cool perm, tailored eyebrows, sunglasses, and she is surrounded (attention!) by a crowd of admiring males, with whom she is going to the market⁷.

Literally every word in this internal monologue is imbued with irony: attention – with an exclamation mark; the previously vulgar sandals are now ironically described as fashionable; the admirers are emotionally charged and

⁵ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 9).

⁶ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 10).

⁷ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 10).

derogatorily marked as *a crowd of males*, etc. This emotional language reveals the voice of Petrushevskaya the Author: such an attitude toward men could only have developed after the narrator's own sad romantic experience.

The physiological perspective (*males, pack*) explicates the narrator's evaluative attitude toward the admirers of the resort Carmen. She dismissively refers to the courtship process as *a canine mating frenzy* as the *crowd* mutates into a *pack*⁸. The downward trend is obvious and deliberate; the narrator's anger and skepticism are explicit. Her invisible image takes on increasingly distinct features.

The narrator is not just a busybody: she is observant and capable of philosophizing and generalizing her observations. The author keeps her from descending to the level of a short-sighted and foolish gossip by infusing her speech with philosophically wise (albeit banal) maxims. Here is, for example, her remark about the role of seriousness:

Seriousness is generally more significant and carries much more weight than looseness and freedom, lightness and fun. Seriousness rules the roost here, as everywhere else⁹.

Her philosophical speculations aspire to universality: *as everywhere else*. Apparently, the narrator claims the role of a prophet. At the same time, Petrushevskaya the Author does not merge with the narrator, who is intelligent in her own way (Prokhorova, 2007, p. 120), avoiding confusion or conflation. The author allows the narrator to generalize and philosophize in her own, philistine manner, deriving a certain universal law from her particular observations, i.e., the law of *love as illusion*.

The narrator interprets the courtship as a reliable protocol:

Carmen and the Big Fish are already playing house, walking along sedately; she has stopped laughing, he carries her purse, and they head to the cafeteria as if punching a clock, to the beach with serious faces, to the market – as if on business, it is always a cramped bus, and they stand close together, she glances up at him but never looks him in the eye. Her attention is the first sign that she is in love¹⁰.

The narrator's experience and omniscience (her axiological remark about *attention*) are again manifested characterologically at the lexical level, actualizing an ironic attitude towards what is observed and described. In her generalization, the narrator again turns to the *us vs. them* opposition:

...the two of them love each other and are apart from everyone else; the crowd also seems to reject them, the crowd does not approve, it recoils: even in the general scrum, they look somehow doomed, as if not their own¹¹.

⁸ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 10).

⁹ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 10).

¹⁰ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (pp. 10–11).

¹¹ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 11).

This is how *us* reject *them*, do not approve of those who do not belong, separate them from their own. But the segregation of characters leads to a postmodern-wise opposite result. The seemingly happy lovers turn out to be unhappy in the eyes of the narrator: “Yes, it happened to them, the greatest misfortune”¹². The unsuspecting reader expects such words as *love* and *happiness*, but all they get is *misfortune*, obliterating the possibility of happiness in the real world. The shared unhappiness seems to reconcile the narrator with the resort Carmen. There comes a moment when the narrator describes the appearance of the unhappy Carmen almost warmly and kindly:

Within the reporting period, she, Carmen, has somehow calmed down, acquired a softness and a certain golden halo (perhaps, the influence of the southern sun, the tan). First, her straggly hair has faded, straightened slightly, and now lies in a white wave. Second, her skin has darkened, her eyes are bright and shiny. Slenderish, harmonious, no worse than any movie star, our Carmen is aglow with love and pity and looks somehow confused...¹³

The axiological dominant seems to shift, but not in an acknowledgement of the power of tragic and poetic love, as T.G. Prokhorova suggests (2007, p. 122) but as a triumph of the narrator’s petty and selfish satisfaction. She told you so: she was proven correct in her experience and observations; her point of view was confirmed and triumphed.

Lyudmila Petrushevskaya’s sensitivity to words is, as always, striking. *Within the reporting period* sounds as if the narrator were keeping some dry accounting of the emotions and feelings experienced by the lovers. Now, Carmen is *slenderish* and *harmonious*, so, in the narrator’s mind, she now belongs to *us*. Love-as-illusion has brought Carmen, an outsider, into the circle of the totally unhappy *us*. Collective conformism has triumphed, opposition is erased, contrast is blurred. Love and happiness are once again (*within the reporting time*) discredited; they are merely an illusion that, after the 24-day resort time, is doomed to roll downhill, hence *The Fall*, the story’s title in the official English translation by Anna Summers (2013).

The original title can be literally translated as *Downhill* or *Down the Mountain Side*. We seriously doubt that Petrushevskaya imbued it with a traditional symbolic meaning. Critics believe that the mountain here symbolizes the upward movement of the human soul, away from the mutilating, distorting mundane life. As a result, the story builds a whole chain of symbols that remind us of another, higher stratum of reality: *the mountains; the sea; the blinding golden light of paradise*, etc.

¹² Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 11).

¹³ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 11).

(Prokhorova, 2007, p. 123). But the narrator knows no such lofty heights; for her, they are nothing but clichés and banalities that evoke contempt and irony. The title is a statement of her confident rejection of all such lofty stereotypes and clichés, and she overthrows them in her narrative.

The background motifs of the holidays on a southern sea resort prompt an intertextual aspect and hint at a very similar setting to that in Anton Chekhov's short story *The Lady with the Dog*. Chekhov also depicted a holiday romance that begins on the Yalta seaside promenade. For the classic writer, the Yalta affair between Anna and Gurov was a background for individualizing their love story, speculations about the vicissitudes of human life, and a deep insight into the origin of human feelings (e.g., the contrast between the mundane cynicism of the watermelon episode and the subsequent drama) (Bogdanova, 2026). For the postmodernist writer, the love story shrinks into an intentionally dry and indifferent account of events: the female narrator watches how vacationers replace one another in an eternal 24-day cycle¹⁴. For her, it is the monotony of imaginary love stories and pathetic human experience:

They're gone now; new white bodies trample senselessly on the beach, the squealing nobodies, the selfish little pigs with their snouts, and our wonderful couple is no longer here. [...] They've vanished into eternity, they are flying to their different homes, somewhere in the frozen heights, by different airplanes, to their respective places, to their children and spouses, to the winter, the snow, and the work¹⁵.

Although the narrator's point of view seems to have changed (Prokhorova, 2007, pp. 120–122), it, in fact, remains the same. Once again, we see the same animal symbolism (*little pigs*) and pejorative connotation (*snouts*). Later, behind the scenes, the narrator will likely again prove the illusion of love on yet another couple and other *packs*, *canine mating frenzy*, *pigs*, and *snouts* vacationing in the sanatorium across the road. The narrator, being a representative of *us*, dispassionately observes the cycle of love stories that repeats every 24 days. None of these stories will touch her (although some researchers may believe otherwise), triggering nothing but irritation, anger, and bitterness. That is why the closing paragraph sounds all businesslike, with precise metrics of time and cost:

Carmen will run to the post office with her passport, and the Big Fish will telegram her to the public address system, and there, over a long-distance telephone line, they will once again merge in spirit, [...] they will cry and shout something for exactly ten minutes, the amount he ordered and paid for – just like back then, in the summer, when exactly twenty-four days were paid for¹⁶.

¹⁴ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 12).

¹⁵ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 12).

¹⁶ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 12).

The narrator's skepticism and arrogant irony are discernible and undisguised. The metaphor *merge in spirit* designates neither a rebirth of the narrator nor a change in her point of view on *pigs* and their *snouts*: it is the next link in a long chain of sarcasms about the banality and clichés of human life.

Ultimately, *The Fall* brings to the surface the postmodernist principle of perceiving love as an illusion, a dream, and a deceit. Poor Carmen wanted a piece of real, inaccessible happiness¹⁷, not knowing that in postmodernity, as in real life, happiness cannot be genuine and accessible: it thrives nowhere else but in soap operas.

Conclusion

Our analysis of *The Fall* would be incomplete without the following ideas. The story seemingly lacks the author's perspective: unlike Chekhov, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya reduces her presence to Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*. The narrative entrusts the axiological emphasis to the narrator, thus relieving the writer of the need to express empathy for the characters.

At the same time, the vivid stylistic rendering of the narrator's consciousness in her speech in contrast to the 'zero-degree' authorial voice is an undoubtedly deliberate strategy. Being faithful to postmodernist poetics, Petrushevskaya renounces her own authorial voice. However, Russian classical literature has always been, and still remains, thought-provoking, didactic, and, in its own way, moralistic. The Russian reader traditionally expects moral lessons, preachiness, and ready-made conclusions from the writer, even though postmodern or conceptualist theorists and practitioners reject them. Experience shows that even postmodernist writers, despite their bold declarations, provide the reader with the opportunity to decode the author's position by reading between the lines and discover the axiological depth of the text.

If Lyudmila Petrushevskaya had chosen the authorial (third-person) perspective, the narrative attitude toward love and the love story would have been *a priori* marked by the author's consciousness and would have acquired the status of objective truth. By choosing a female narrator whose persona does not coincide with the author's, Petrushevskaya leaves her own point of view unstated, hidden behind the text. This circumstance allows us to assume that the author and the narrator differ in their assessments and that the narrator's judgments are not final: they can (and, perhaps, even should) be re-evaluated by the reader. Although the judgments of the astute narrator are partly confirmed by the course of events and even aspire to philosophical generalization, they appear inconclusive and unreliable.

¹⁷ Petrushevskaya, L. (1999). *The House of Girls* (p. 10).

As a result, the postmodern theory of *meaningless fiction* is supplanted by the longstanding tradition of meaningful classical Russian literature with its inherent depth. The gap between the positions of the author and the narrator creates a bifocal narrative and semantic ambiguity, and, as a consequence, compels the reader to read between the lines for an ethically marked subtext.

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