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Among Collapses and Hopes: Dystopia and Nature in Children's Novels

Entre effondrements et espoirs : dystopie et nature dans les romans jeunesse

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Among Collapses and Hopes: Dystopia and Nature in Children's Novels

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PLAN

Dystopic themes in today's youth literature
Historical and literary references on dystopia
Nature and young heroes in dystopic plots: a forbidden intercourse
Conclusion

TEXTE

Dystopic themes in today's youth literature

- 1 This contribution sets out to examine the metaphors of nature, from a narrative and pedagogic standpoint, found in the dystopic novels that have enjoyed huge success among both children and adolescents today. Suzanne Collins' best-selling narrative collection *Hunger Games* (published from 2008) and the trilogy *Divergent – Insurgent – Allegiant* by Veronica Roth (published from 2011) are clear proof of the popularity of this particular type of novel among readers, especially adolescents. Both *Hunger Games* and Roth's trilogy are such famous and popular books that they need no presentation. From many points of view, these novels represent the most significant models of the dystopic genre, as they present all the characteristics of this particular type of novel. The specific features of the dystopic genre, we should recall, are the plot set in a future time and in an oppressive society, the topic of rebellion and, finally, the narration of a forbidden, weak or even contaminated nature.
- 2 Here it wishes to analyse this last aspect in particular, and to do so, it will refer not only to the collections referred to before, but also some other perhaps less-known books but which are equally worthy of

mention, due to their great literary quality in the children's publishing field.

- 3 For the US scholar Lyman Tower Sargent (1994), dystopia consists of an accurately described and imagined, non-existent society, perceived by the reader as considerably worse than the one they live in. This brief statement describes all the fundamental characteristics of the dystopic story: fiction, descriptive precision, the otherness of space and time, degradation and cruelty. This narrative form talks of fantastic horizons in fine detail, developing coherent and recognisable stories which are however oppressive and disturbing. It is in fact the descriptive precision of dystopic novels that subtly reveal similarities and discontinuities between fiction and reality, triggering in the reader a kind of treasure hunt for clues that, at the same time, both connect and differentiate normal everyday reality and the invented world described in the novel.
- 4 Moreover, as reported by the US scholars Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry (2009, pp. 1-20), dystopia talks of issues such as the loss of innocence and rebellion against authority: these topics are very close to the sensitivity of adolescents who are the most fervent readers of dystopic novels. The two scholars note how adolescence is also the time in which young people start to look at society with critical eyes, especially as concerns the most problematic aspects of our world—global changes, nuclear hazards and the scarcity of resources. These topics can be found in practically all dystopic novels and—we add—help to define the cultural horizon of the current ecological crisis.
- 5 Another theme that runs through the relationship between dystopia and ecology in novels for young readers is disease. As we will see, in some of the books we've examined, threats to health and pandemics are disturbing and dangerous presences that characterize the plots and contribute to shaping the stories in a dystopian vein. This is a significant, very present aspect both in narratives dealing with ecological themes and in studies on ecocriticism; as Pinar Batur and Ufuk Özdağ point out in their valuable research on the relationship between shamanism and ecological narratives:

[...] disease signals instability in the web of relationships that is a threat of balance, harmony and proportion. Disease is the enemy of respect and peaceful coexistence. Nature, in this relationship, is no

longer a backdrop or scenery, but becomes integral to how the world around us is reimagined. (Batur & Özdağ, 2020, p. 329)

- 6 In addition to the trilogies *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* mentioned before, numerous other recent dystopic novels for adolescents deserve consideration, both for their success among young readers and their literary qualities. In this regard, we should remember the nine volumes in the narrative cycle *Mortal Engines* by Philip Reeve, published from 2001, *Feed* by Anderson from 2002, as well as *La Chute du soleil de fer* by the French author Michel Bussi published in 2020 as the first volume in the series *NEO* and *Borders* by the Italian author Giuliana Facchini published in 2022. As explained, these books tackle difficult topics such as death, poverty, rage, war and the destruction of nature. Young readers love these novels, despite their difficult topics, or perhaps precisely because they discuss such disturbing issues. Dystopic novels fall under the science fiction genre. The future is the time horizon in which the events of dystopic novels are narrated. After decades of almost invisibility in the publishing sphere, the science fiction literary genre has returned to the attention of adolescent and young-adult readers precisely due to these dystopic tales of catastrophe and rebellion.
- 7 Furthermore, it is also necessary to specify that the mentioned books, according to the classification developed by some established ecocriticism scholars, can be classified as pertaining both to “ecophatic” textual mode and “ecoliterate” textual mode: the ecophatic-texts draw on the non-human to affirm, model and metaphorize human social experience and self-understanding, while the ecoliterate-texts register and reflect upon the interplay of the human and non-human (McMurry, 2020, p. 18).

Historical and literary references on dystopia

- 8 Thus, many recent children's books have used dystopic plots successfully. However, dystopia is a widely consolidated theme in literature, and also offers some quite profound historical and philosophical connections. Moreover, we must underline that one aspect of dystopia is social alarm, and this should not be

underestimated; indeed, many scholars analysing dystopic narratives are also researchers in the field of political and social sciences, just like the above-mentioned Sargent. Of course, many of the dystopic masterpieces of the past, today considered some as great literary "classics", were often written to explicitly denounce dehumanising socio-political drifts: in this regard, we might think of the famous novels *We* (1924) by the dissident Soviet writer Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's world-renowned *1984* (1949).

- 9 Dystopia is the disenchanting counterpart of utopia, which has long-standing traditions as a narrative and philosophical genre. We may think only of Plato's *Republic*, *Utopia* (1516) by the English author Thomas More, *La città del sole* [*The City of the Sun*] (1623) by the Italian philosopher Tommaso Campanella and *New Atlantis* (1627) by the British intellectual Francis Bacon (to name but a few). An extensive range of stories develop the topic of a desirable, yet still non-existent, perfect (i.e. utopic) society that explicitly stands in juxtaposition to all the difficulties and injustices of actual society. Utopia is therefore tasked with showing that "another", more desirable and human world is possible: we might say that it has the role of subverting the existent. On the contrary, dystopia describes an oppressive, tiring and imaginary dimension from which the protagonists of the story seek to escape: dystopia thus apparently seems to be the result of a conservative thought that sees the existent and its everyday concreteness as a civil and human space to be defended, threatened by the brutal, decadent slavish drifts conjured up by the imagination. In fact, the dystopic genre also subtly invites us to subvert the present, offering clues that allow the reader to perceive the traces of the dangerous slope down which the world seems destined to slip, if it does not pay due attention. In other words, dystopic tales invite the reader to be on the look-out, and to rebel against the socio-political pressures that can drive them over the brink.
- 10 We should add that, as a narrative genre, dystopia has a quite consolidated tradition in children's literature. Think only of the melancholic novel by Jules Verne (1828–1905) *Paris au xx^e siècle* (1994) [Engl. transl.: *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, 1996]: this was probably one of the first novels written by the French author, although it was

published posthumously over a century later. It is significant that such a pessimistic story was kept out of the Nantes-born writer's literary "canon". This novel imagines French society in 1960, dominated by engineering and financial businesses; in such a world there is no space for poetry and literature. The France imagined by Verne in this novel is suffocating, claustrophobic, obsessed by a vacuous desire for money that sucks people dry, driving the best of them, including the unlucky young poet who is the protagonist of this sad yet highly evocative plot, over the edge.

- 11 The Italian author Emilio Salgari (1862–1911) also proposed a dystopic vision of the future in his children's novel *Le meraviglie del duemila* [*The Wonders of the Year 2000*] published for the first time in 1907: the book tells the story of two men in the early 20th century who take a special potion and fall asleep, waking up in 2000. The two time-travellers are shown round a futuristic world where food is eaten in places that very much resemble our fast-food chains, where people travel on ultra-high-speed trains to the pole to eat the last seal steak, before these animals becomes extinct in this imaginary future. Salgari describes an overpopulated world preoccupied with terrorism, threatened by ecological disasters, shaken by the depletion of resources and, finally, where an electrically charged environment affects the limbs of the poor time-travellers.
- 12 These early dystopic novels for young readers anticipate some of the themes that still characterize this peculiar narrative genre today (e.g. the dehumanization of society, the dangers of industrialization, the destruction of the environment): as we will see, in the field of dystopic novels some details and approaches seem to change over time, but a significant narrative continuity between past and present remains. It is precisely this recognizable thematic continuity that allows us to identify the dystopic narrative genre and its evolutions.
- 13 According to the Canadian critic Darko Suvin—one of the greatest scholars of speculative fiction—, science fiction seeks to imagine the future starting from elements taken from the present (Suvin, 1979, pp. 27–30). From all points of view, this creative process is also the foundation of dystopic narration, which identifies the critical points of our world, exasperates them and underlines the hazards towards which we are unconsciously precipitating as a global community. We

should also add that, from the post-war period onwards, scientific data has been gathered on a potential and unstoppable environmental decay that threatens to progressively take nature—and thus humanity—to the brink of collapse: the most effective summary of experimental tests on disease and the decline of the natural world is the famous scientific condemnation by the biologist Rachel Carson, in her 1962 essay *Silent Spring*. In any case, from the 1950s science fiction had already begun to bring these worries to the fore, developing them in many famous novels, including John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) and John Christopher's *The Death of Grass* (1956). From the new millennium, these fears of the death of nature were grafted onto the idea of “Anthropocene” (Steffen et al., 2011, pp. 842–867): many scientists used this term to label the last millennia corresponding no longer to a geomorphological area dominated by geological changes alone but also those changes caused by the reckless conduct of the human civilisation. In our current historical context, marked by dramatic climatic and social events, a particular sub-genre of science fiction has come about known as *eco-dystopia* (Malvestio, 2022, pp. 24–38); this imagines possible horizons of the demise of nature due to the thoughtless actions of humanity. Natural disasters and post-apocalyptic scenarios are therefore not only a tool for telling an enthralling story, but also a narrative resource for reflecting on our present. Practically all contemporary dystopic children's novels contain elements of *eco-dystopia*, or may even relate entirely to this narrative genre, such as the book by Giuliana Facchini, *Borders*, which we will examine in the next paragraph.

- 14 Indeed, science fiction has always investigated the dimension of the future in an unsettling and therefore dystopic manner. Just think of the film *Metropolis* (1927) by Fritz Lang (1890–1976), the famous Austrian director from a Jewish family naturalised in the United States after leaving Nazi Germany: the life of this artist was already marked by the concrete proof that a society's passage towards dystopia is a real historical possibility. Slavery and the alienation of the working masses, the concentration of power in the dictator figure, the use of technology to deceive and overwhelm, the annihilation of nature are all themes that Lang's famous film anticipates, and which have been repropounded in many later science

fiction books and films: these contents can be found in the substantial plot of *Dune* (1965) by the American author Frank (Franklin) Herbert (1920–1986) and in the 1984 film of the same name by David Lynch (1946–2025), but they are also important topics found in the long and famous *Mad Max* film saga from the late Seventies. We can also find these ideas in the disturbing dystopic societies described, for example, in *The Minority Report* (1956) and the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) by the US author Philip K. Dick (1928–1982). In both books and film, science fiction has always been able to narrate the dark and dangerous side of the future.

- 15 It is therefore inevitable that a topic so deep-rooted in the collective imagination has found both fame and hospitality in contemporary children's literature through the formula of dystopic stories for young people.

Nature and young heroes in dystopic plots: a forbidden intercourse

- 16 The pessimism of the early dystopic novels written by Verne and Salgari has not completely disappeared from contemporary stories of this genre for children: as we will see, even some recent novels tell of failed attempts to reverse the dramatic course of events. Yet, the plots of contemporary dystopic books, even in their saddest endings, allude to the need not to resign oneself to evil, pollution, and the arrogance of powerful.
- 17 One strong topic characterising all these contemporary novels is the protagonists' difficulty in having an authentic relationship with nature: indeed, in many of these dystopic works, nature is degraded, damaged and sick.
- 18 In *Hunger Games*, access to nature is forbidden by the government: in fact, the protagonist Katniss can only go to the woods surrounding her village secretly, because the laws of the regime ban even temporary escape beyond the fenced-off village in which the subjects are detained. When Katniss manages to go to the woods, not only does she capture some small game to add to her family's meals, but

more importantly she regains the profoundest part of herself; through her contact with nature, long-buried memories, emotions and desires return to the surface. Moreover, in nature she is able to practice all the physical skills that will allow her to survive in the cruel arena of the Hunger Games. Nature thus becomes a source of strength and humanity, dignity and freedom. However, at the same time, in the *Hunger Games* trilogy, nature is subject to technological intrusions, experimental changes and pointless exploitations. One of the most striking things in Collins' three novels is the abyss separating the privileged inhabitants of the capital city from the indistinct mass of subjects who live in the peripheral areas: this exploitation extends also to nature, which is bent to satisfy the whims of a caste used to consuming resources greedily and stupidly. Metaphorically, *Hunger Games* becomes a critique of amoral and avid consumerism, unable to think not only of the poor masses but even their own future. In this sense, Collins' dystopic novel is not only a clear tale of rebellion, it is also an invitation to become aware of the relations which, in emotional and biological terms, bind us to the equilibrium of nature and its resources.

- 19 Also in *Divergent*, contact with nature seems impossible, as the characters move in a degraded, isolated and dilapidated environment. Woods, streams and meadows are practically unknown. The protagonists of these adventures live in a forced separation from the rest of the world. They believe that they live in a state of perpetual siege. The concrete buildings in their city become the backdrop of a grey stage where fragile joys alternate with sad truths. The world in *Divergent* consists of five factions, each one with a specific task to perform in order to preserve the community: but soon envy takes over, obscure genetic manipulations come to light and some factions gain the upper hand through violence. There is no nature in *Divergent*: the urban landscape is the only visible horizon. This is a disturbing metaphor that seems to describe the possible fate of many of our large cities.
- 20 In the reality described in Philip Reeve's series *Mortal Engines*, reference is made to an arid, poor and desert world where cities have become huge and are similar to large multi-storey towers that move driven by enormous, polluting engines. The urban communities have survived a brief but apocalyptic world war, and—due to the collapse

of the natural environment and the communication systems—the cities are forced to become mobile structures in order to procure what they need. In this desolate landscape, the cities are like hungry beasts, searching for the last resources to consume: every community fights in a grotesque and violent parody of the Darwinian struggle for survival. The story begins in London: the city is governed by a Lord Mayor who, as time passes, becomes more and more a dictator figure. London is structured over different levels, where people live in a strict social hierarchy. The representatives of the corporations and the government live in the highest parts, while the lower classes inhabit the underlying areas, among the dust and pollution caused by the tracks and heavy engines that move the city. The protagonists are children who have become aware of the horror they are living in. Some of them wish to find a free, fertile and humid land that is said to be on the other side of the arid desert in which their city moves. Metaphorically, in this cycle of “steampunk” dystopic novels, nature becomes a destination, a goal, a purpose for continuing to live and hope: nature is also a necessary condition for obtaining freedom and dignity.

- 21 Bussi's book *La Chute du soleil de fer* on the other hand leads us through a Paris recaptured from nature after a catastrophe that killed all the adults: the adolescents are therefore all on their own. One group lives among the metallic structures of the Eiffel Tower. The famous monument has been turned into a huge tepee covered with the skins of the prey these adolescents manage to capture when out hunting. Another group lives in what remains of the Louvre, where the encounter with art makes many of them wise and educated. The first group consists of hunters, and the second of scholars, artists and farmers: each community knows of the existence of the other, but nobody wants any contact. Nature seems generous enough to allow them all to live in peace. Until a new and mysterious poison threatens both plants and animals, undermining the two communities which meet, clash, mix and divide, trying to survive in an increasingly menacing world. This is a story that—incidentally—seems to pick up on some of the topics dear to another children's novel, in which the topic of educational solitude of young people is very well represented: *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. In any case, Bussi's novel is a profound reflection on the environment and on how

humanity influences nature. The reader, along with the adolescent protagonists, gradually understands that there is always a possibility to save water, plants and animals, starting from the awareness of the fragility and strength of nature. Although in a dystopic world, intelligence, tolerance and determination can change a fate of death and destruction for the better. Bussi's novel is not just dystopia, it is also utopia, as it shows how coexistence and cooperation among different groups, while difficult, are in any case possible.

- 22 Much more pessimistic is the novel *Feed* by the US author Matthew Tobin Anderson. The plot is set in the United States in a possible future, in a world that has collapsed ecologically, where pollution and hordes of insects are the prevailing features of the landscape. Notwithstanding, the people continue to focus on careers and money as their main goals. They initiate lawsuits for the least nuisance, and are immersed in the most unbridled consumerism: a consumerism triggered by *feeds*, chips implanted directly in the brain. The *feeds* allow them to access the web with no mediation. And so everyone—especially the young people—are constantly bombarded by advertising messages, purchasing tips, prize draws offered by companies, futile *chats* and, of course, propaganda messages sent by those in power. Critical thinking and intelligence are shut down by the continuous flow of desires, stimulations and distractions coming from the web: there is no time to stop and think, to look at the real world, to linger and dream among their own emotions and thoughts. Anderson's novel tells the story of the sad love between a boy who accepts the mainstream and a girl who strives to fight the madness of society. The two seek each other out and love each other among stupid space holidays, pointless junk purchases, landscapes devastated by pollution and degradation where the woods have been replaced by air factories. In the end, the feed implanted badly in the girl's brain proves fatal: Violet—this is her name—is switched off, without any possibility for a cure, because her solitary attempted rebellion has made her an enemy of the social system, which has no interest in curing such a critical and uncooperative consumer. The dystopia narrated in *Feed* is without redemption: it is a blow to the stomach that forces the reader to consider the errors of our way of living with no illusions. The death of nature in the name of industrial production and gain in *Feed* is the prelude to the death of humanity

itself, understood as both an animal species and a profound ethical dimension: there is no more humanity where trees die, because from that moment on there will be neither health nor compassion within society.

23 Decidedly less pessimistic, but in any case narratively very impactful, is the novel *Borders* by the Italian author Giuliana Facchini. The young protagonists of this dystopic novel move in a hallucinating scenario: their city—ruled by an autocratic system—is surrounded by a huge concrete desert to keep the frightening nature, contaminated in the past by a terrible epidemic, at bay. Food is produced in a highly controlled manner and it is absolutely forbidden to grow vegetables independently. Power demands its subjects to see nature as the enemy, as a source of danger. But a group of young people—thanks to the education received from an elderly lady who looks after them—manage to escape from the city, and cross a huge concrete desert and, finally, reach a community that has been able to recover an authentic relationship with nature.

24 The topics emerging from all these dystopic novels, set in an undefined yet apparently threateningly close future, are very much linked to the present: the dangerous connection between media and power (*Hunger Games*), the worrying consequences of so-called “social engineering” (*Divergent*), the permanent threat of so-called “social Darwinism” (*Mortal Engines*), the alarming evolution of discoveries in the field of machine-mind connections (*Feed*) and, finally, the fear of contagion and diseases of uncertain origin (*La Chute du soleil de fer* and *Borders*) are all expressions of particularly common fears and distress. The guiding thread that seems to connect all these stories is in any case the difficult relationship with nature: a nature that appears technologically alterable, erasable, lootable, but above all destructible. A nature that dies among pollution, disease and environmental disasters.

Conclusion

25 The characters of these dystopic novels coping with these natural disasters are always young people who, reluctantly but with a sense of duty, struggle to find a solution to the catastrophe, to escape the decay and recover an authentic relationship with nature and their

community. They fight against a system that embodies political despotism and environmental destruction: indeed, in these plots, natural collapse is always accompanied by political collapse, as if indicating how degraded nature is the result of a degraded society. From many points of view, dystopic novels are the contemporary successors of a narrative tradition born in the mid-19th century in Great Britain, as a critique of the disasters of industrial society. John Ruskin's fairytale *The King of the Golden River* published in 1851, or William Morris's fantasy novel *News from Nowhere* published as a book in 1892, are just some examples of stories written as a clear accusation of the senseless and egoistic exploitation of nature and people. These stories use metaphors and fantastic plots to demonstrate the damage caused by the spread of pollution, the mechanisation of the means of production, the depletion of natural resources.

- 26 So, the only ones able to change things are young people. Perhaps this is the strongest message emerging from dystopic novels: there can only be environmental and social redemption if young people can change the direction of history. But young people cannot take control of their own fate without recovering an authentic contact with their own true identity, and especially with nature. In all the novels mentioned, the protagonists become aware of their tragic conditions only when they understand that reality is far greater than the oppressive and dilapidated cage they are forced to live in. The cage is broken when they meet the many dimensions of love and nature; it is certainly not by chance that sentimental freedom and the defence of the natural environment appear to be the two elements characterising dystopic novels today, as much as the ideals of the young generations.
- 27 Moreover, dystopic novels can easily be compared to educational novels in many ways. In both types of narration, the description of the physical and psychological development of the protagonists is central; during their adventures in the dystopic worlds, the main characters change, grow, learn to love and fight to assert themselves and their values against a hostile reality. Often, in dystopic stories, this hostile reality is shown in a poisoned, injured and dying environment that accompanies the characters in their adventures not only as a scenario, but also as another protagonist of the stories.

- 28 Dystopic novels are therefore a way of bringing the young generations closer to the difficult issues of our time: it is a literary form that speaks of an important and urgent topic—the safeguarding of nature—to children and adolescents, through the poetry of narrative metaphors.
- 29 I would like to end with a reflection on the relationship between pedagogy and narration, as it seems to me to be able to offer further clarity to the educational meaning of dystopic children's literature. In ancient Greek, pedagogy means to “accompany the child”; the pedagogue was a servant in a rich family who accompanied their children around the city, protecting them and helping them to get to know all that was outside the home. I believe that this ancient meaning still holds great value today. Those who work in education and pedagogy still accompany children on their explorations, holding young people's hands and helping them to get to know the world. In this accompanying function, educators, pedagogists and teachers can be helped by stories, books and novels. The metaphoric power of beautiful stories is a precious resource, because stories talk of important—and also very personal—things through apparently remote and distant tales, without embarrassing the young people (who are the recipients of these stories), without asking them to expose themselves. Like seeds, the metaphors of these tales leave a trace in the inner self of each one, offering resources and contents for thinking, planning and thus growing up. The metaphors of dystopic literature therefore offer ideas for looking at our present with greater awareness, also in the field of ecology.

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RÉSUMÉS

English

This contribution sets out to examine, in narrative and pedagogic terms, the metaphors of nature found in the successful dystopic novels that are very popular among children and adolescents. Today, dystopic novels are the most popular genre among young readers: just think of the success of Suzanne Collins' 2008 trilogy *Hunger Games*, or Veronica Roth's trilogy *Divergent*, published from 2011, and many others dystopic novels for youth. These books tackle difficult topics such as death, poverty, anger, social unrest: despite—or perhaps precisely because of—this, young readers enjoy dystopic novels. In fact, it appears that, after decades of absence, dystopic plots have relaunched the sci-fi genre among adolescents. In these plots, the collapse of nature is always accompanied by a political collapse: degraded nature is the result of a degraded society. The strongest message emerging from dystopic novels is: there can only be environmental and social redemption if young people can change the direction of history.

Français

Cet article se propose d'examiner, en termes narratifs et pédagogiques, les métaphores de la nature que l'on retrouve dans les romans dystopiques à succès et très appréciés des enfants et des adolescents. Aujourd'hui, les romans dystopiques sont le genre le plus populaire auprès des jeunes lecteurs : il suffit de penser au succès de la trilogie *Hunger Games* de Suzanne Collins en 2008, ou de la trilogie *Divergent* de Veronica Roth, publiée à partir de 2011, et de bien d'autres romans dystopiques pour la jeunesse. Il semble qu'après des décennies d'absence, les intrigues dystopiques aient relancé le genre de science-fiction auprès des adolescents. Dans ces intrigues, l'effondrement de la nature s'accompagne toujours d'un effondrement politique : la nature dégradée est le résultat d'une société dégradée. Le message le plus fort qui émerge des romans dystopiques est le suivant : il ne peut y avoir de rédemption environnementale et sociale que si les jeunes peuvent changer le sens de l'histoire.

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Mots-clés

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Keywords

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