

# Tragic Deviation from the Comic Text: Dual Narrative Dynamics in *Ah, Wilderness!*

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**Abstract**—Eugene O’Neill’s only comedy *Ah, Wilderness!* is home to plot simplicity and witty remarks. If social background beyond the text is considered, the implicit repression exerted by the dominant middle-class discourse and the resulting female predicament continue throughout the play. Richard gave up his zeal for changing the world, swallowed up by utilitarianism and instrumental rationality. Lily struggled between the call of independent consciousness and the drag of her faint expectation of family, yet finally chose to be docile and compromised with the family. Another tragic layer deviates from the comic nostalgic motif; O’Neill’s feminist concern deviates from the seemingly male-centered surface text, hence the narrative progression of the play text. Beyond the text, the stage set of the play visualizes the process of middle-class utilitarianism devouring individuals, and the directors’ tendency in the adaptations and the actors’ interpretation of their roles prove the hidden sense of repression existent. When the evidence from the stage is applied to the text interpretation, extending covert progression to drama analysis bursts with new vitality.

**Index Terms**—Eugene O’Neill, *Ah, Wilderness!* covert progression

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1936, Eugene O’Neill won the Nobel Prize for Literature for the power, honesty and deep-felt emotions of his dramatic works, which embody an original concept of tragedy [1]. Tragedy encompasses a majority of O’Neill’s oeuvre. Following the release of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the middle-class family comedy *Ah, Wilderness!* made its debut as O’Neill’s only comedy, relaxing and joyful. The playwright himself depicted it as a comedy of recollection [2], looking back on his youth and typical families in America of that time. Based on O’Neill’s miserable life experience, commentators described the play as full of touching family fun and a deep sense of nostalgia [3]. The overt plot presents the joy of life and the emotional entanglements of the Millers: Richard and Muriel’s puppy love, Nat Miller and Essie Miller’s affections, and the reconciliation between Lily and Sid. The play ends in the warm atmosphere of the National Day celebration. The light-hearted *Ah, Wilderness!* has been ignored by critiques for its seeming lack of depth and difficulty in rivaling O’Neill’s tragedies.

O’Neill pointed out that it is a nostalgic comedy not in a satiric vein like *Marco M.* and not deliberately spoofing at the period (like most modern comedies of other plays) [4]. Yet, this comedy makes O’Neill weep a few tears too [4]. It implicitly suggests that this play is not a mere comedy, but perhaps behind its comic surface lies some depth that has been overlooked throughout the play text. Shen [5] defined

that in many fictional narratives, behind the plot development, there exists what she has designated as “covert progression”, a hidden dynamic paralleling, at a deeper level, the former overt dynamic throughout the text. Those tragic elements concealed under the comic surface of *Ah, Wilderness!* constitute the covert tragic narrative layer, deviating from its comic plot and subverting its nostalgic motif. Under the hidden repression of middle-class political indifference and spiritual desolation, Richard gave up his zeal for changing the world, swallowed up by middle-class utilitarianism. The playwright conceals his feminist worries behind the male-centered surface text, enabling Lily to struggle between the call of self-consciousness and the drag of domestic chores and her faint expectation of a family role. It witnesses a tinge of tragedy in *Ah, Wilderness!*’s comic presentation.

Such deviations not only accord with O’Neill’s views on tragedy and continue the inherent consistency of his oeuvre, but also deepen *Ah, Wilderness!*’s artistic value and contribute to the introduction of comic elements in his later plays. The covert progression helps explain O’Neill’s insinuation of capitalism and better conveys his reflections on life.

## II. COVERT PROGRESSION OF THEATER: EVIDENCE FROM PERFORMANCES

According to Shen [6], many fictional narratives have certain hidden dynamics and she illustrated it with several classic novels and short stories.

The covert progression is an ethical-aesthetic undercurrent running throughout the text behind the over plot. The relation between ethical significance generated by the covert progression and the overt plot varies from narrative to narrative, ranging from supplementation to subversion, which complicates the audience’s response in various ways [6].

However, the covert progression defined by Shen [5] does not delimit the scope of discussion within the genre of short stories. She also pointed out that the covert progression not only occurs in the written medium, but also other media. Then Zhang [7] introduced the covert progression into the analysis of drama, proposing that reading a play is different from reading prose fiction. The play text’s target readers include players and the audience. To perform on the stage, the drama often faces strict censorship. Playwrights have to adopt more obscure techniques to present the complexity of the theme. Therefore, covert progression has provided a very useful reading tool for my play text interpretation, enabling her to see the multifaceted nature of drama and that of the playwrights.

This paper’s new take is that besides the above-mentioned

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target readers, the main readers of plays should also involve literary critics, performance directors, or screenwriters. This leads us to contemplate drama analysis more. The literary interpretation of any play text is supposed to seek evidence from its stage performances, which are set to make the play text alive thanks to directors and players. With performances beyond the text as a support, the interpretability of covert progression in drama studies is justifiable.

*Ah, Wilderness!*'s performances were well received and had been rehearsed repeatedly since its premiere in 1933. As a direct presentation of theater life, the stage, together with its design setting, stage effects like music and lighting, props and performance, brings the audience aesthetic feelings. In the case of *Ah, Wilderness!* the tragic progression parallel to the nostalgic comic plot can be exposed to the audience through the interpretation of directors and players.

First of all, the implicit juxtaposition between Richard and the other members of the Millers was well documented on stage. *Ah, Wilderness!* was revived in A Noise Within Theatre, Pasadena, CA in March 2017, directed by Steven Roman. This revival presented a unique musical performance through the theatre's thrust stage, on which a piano was placed from beginning to end, implying the family harmony. Before television, movies and even radio entered everyday life, people used to play musical instruments and sing for leisure. The scene of family members sitting around the piano implied a warm and harmonious overall tone. The opening image witnessed the family gathering around the piano and the rebellious Richard being separated far from others as the dissonant note in the middle-class family [8]. It was not until he learned his lesson that he was allowed to be involved, symbolizing Richard swallowed up by middle-class utilitarianism. In November 2015, the production directed by Casey Stangl featured the set design by Funichelo [9]: floating windows and translucent walls suggesting a home without quite becoming one. The invisible separation reflected the hidden boundary between Richard and other family members.

Secondly, as the main reader of the play text, theater directors' productions and reproductions of the play text explored the underlying repressing and ironic attributes of *Ah, Wilderness!* In the 1930s, World War II was imminent, and all innovative art movements were completely suppressed. Tomoyoshi Murayama, a Japanese playwright who once led the Tokyo left-wing theater movements, especially the proletarian theater movement of the 1920s, adapted *Ah, Wilderness!* into *First Love* after being released from prison under strict supervision. *First Love* served as one of the best examples of resistance to the military regime of that period. The director relocated the middle-class family from the United States to Japan. At that time, no families resembled the fictional American counterparts in Japan. Thus, *First Love* adapted from *Ah, Wilderness!* appeared as a sort of daring, bold resistance to the Japanese family system of the time [10]. By a such hidden irony, Tomoyoshi Murayama attacked the hypocrisy of capitalism.

Thirdly, the actors' interpretations of their parts highlighted the repression of capitalism on Richard and Lily and the internal conflicts of the two. In 2015, the School of Communication and the Arts, Regent University, brought *Ah, Wilderness!* onstage as its graduating play. Natalie Roy, who

played Lily, paid attention to the feminist worries implied in comedy. She put that her story was a sad and lonely one, filled with disappointment and broken promises. Though she experienced small glimmers of hope, her issues and relationships were left unresolved and she was left unfulfilled at the end of the play, even after she had chosen forgiveness [11]. Austin Fitzhugh starring Richard tried to show the subtle influence of social constraints on this once rebellious role. When Fitzhugh play Richard, he was eager to tackle the realities of a man attempting to have an open mind while being constrained by societal viewpoints that Richard did not even know he had internalized [12]. It's worth mentioning that at the end of 1987, the Berkeley Repertory Theatre reproduced O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *The Hairy Ape*, and *Ah, Wilderness!* successively. Charles Dean, a regular part of the Berkeley Rep acting company for years, starred both Sid in *Ah, Wilderness!* and Jamie in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. He tapped Sid's potential complexity and richness. Dean skillfully captured the underlying pain that united Jamie with Sid and revealed the humor of each as the fruit of this pain. Dean accomplished this without ever trivializing Jamie or making Sid too heavy [13]. Charles Dean's diversified treatment of Sid confirmed that the same act of the character has different thematic meanings in two juxtaposed orbits of representation, providing a basis for the interpretation of the implicitly tragic narrative progression of the dramatic text.

In March 2002, the Guthrie Theater's touring group announced the arrival of *Ah, Wilderness!* on the Michigan Tech campus. The audience on-site observed that Sid, played by Brian Reddy, veiled the pain with an amusing mask. His several scenes of crazy antics hid a much more serious man who masked his pain with comic shenanigans—pain at the loss of his job and his lifelong love [14]. At the same time, this production's autobiographical dimensions reminded the audience of the playwright's life, connecting the joys and sorrows of fiction and reality. Sid and Richard's heavy drinking reflected the darkness of O'Neill's more tragic play [14], referring to the intertextuality between this comedy of recollection and O'Neill's family tragedy.

The play text is vividly transformed into performances by its target readers, like the theater directors, actors and so on. After that, the dual narrative progression delivered through performances will be captured by the audience, the direct reader of the stage. Two notions have to be clarified. We are unable to equate the target reader of play text with the direct "reader" of the stage performance. This brings literary critics a new entry path to play texts. The reapplication of a series of evidence onstage provides support for literary critics to better explore the dual narrative dynamics in drama studies.

### III. THE REPRESSED IDEAL: MIDDLE-CLASS SPIRITUAL DESOLATION

*Ah, Wilderness!* commenced on July 4, 1906. The overt plot unfolded around the Millers planning to celebrate the National Day at the turn of the century. Secret dates, picnics, fireworks displays, crackers, and other festive elements heightened the family's joyous atmosphere. Yet all the noise failed to call Richard who was immersed in the book out of the door. Richard first strayed from the happy family

constructed by O'Neill, but eventually left the poetic wilderness and bowed to reality, experiencing the separation from and the integration into the family successively. From the perspective of the comedy's plot development, Richard's transformation foreshadows the happy ending; under the surface, the discrepancy between Richard at the outset of the play and other family members, combined with the restraint of Richard and Muriel's puppy love, points to another parallel tragic undercurrent, namely, the loss of the middle stratum's free discourse and spiritual garden.

The first act of the play presented a "literary debate" between Richard and the other family members, driving the subsequent plot forward: Richard was accused of moral turpitude for writing a love letter to Muriel. Nevertheless, various textual details point to the devouring of free discourse by the logic of capitalist operations. The Millers was a typical middle-class American family, with Miller as the owner of the *Evening Globe* and his wife Essie as a full-time housewife. In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the development of American state monopoly capitalism advanced unprecedentedly, and the middle class was forced to become a lifeless cog in the social chains, naturally lacking interests in highly imaginative, free and romantic literary genres (witness poetry and novel). The discovery of such a social context provides a strong support for the interpretation of the dual narrative layers of the play text. Clearly, the mainstream capitalist discourse left humanistic Richard adrift. He knew a lot about literary works, uttered good sentences from *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam at ease, and talked eloquently about Ibsen, Shakespeare, Swinburne, and others. Richard was impassioned, whereas Arthur was "bored to death by all this poetry quoting" [15]. Mrs. Miller was hit by bewilderment and certainty, equating literature with worthless waste and reckoning poems to be blasphemous. For her, the idealism and romanticism in those books were out-and-out Frankenstein. Although Lily had read *Rubaiyat*, she did not deem it decent. She quoted "with a sad pathos, awkwardly and shyly", but immediately turned "guilty and apologetic" (288) and was ashamed of Sid who spoke loudly that he needed some poetic education. Combined with the social attributes of the middle, the continuous accumulation of capital led to the continuous expansion of consumerism. Almost everyone had become lifeless and mediocre, operating like a money-making machine without the sense of the value of work nor creativity [16]. The middle class was being castrated politically and fooled culturally. As its representatives, Arthur, Mrs. Miller, and others had been brainwashed spiritually. The seemingly idle tiff can be elucidated as the unbridgeable cognitive gap between two discourse systems distanced by an invisible voice-proof wall.

The limited framework of interaction in the family environment becomes a microcosm of the competing relationships of the social environment, where individuals struggle to be recognized, to gain subjectivity, and to resolve conflicts. The romance embraced by Richard was stifled in the cradle by Muriel's father, Macomber, who accused Richard of "being dissolute and blasphemous — with deliberately attempting to corrupt the morals of my young daughter" (290). Muriel was forced to write a Dear John letter to Richard and was grounded for a month to take her punishment. When his budding romance was questioned and

denied, Richard was particularly radical, denouncing the bourgeoisie's binding to the freedom of speech. "All this lying talk about liberty—when there is no liberty! [...] Home of the slave is what they ought to call it—the wage slave ground under the heel of the capitalist class." (285) The Millers treated Richard with derision in face of his exuberant shout. Mr. Miller "put a hand to his mouth to conceal a grin" (285). Sid considered those remarks as jokes; Lily laughed after a little surprise; everyone reckoned Richard a naive boy full of youthful vigor rather than a subject in the dialogue. Such responses reflect the modernistic suppression of human nature and point to the cause of the decline of the American spirit.

At the end of the story, Richard abruptly "woke up" to reality after staying out all night and degrading himself into a drunkard in a pub. He planned to enter Yale University and join the newspaper, earned money to get married, and communicated with his father Nat Miller to remove the misunderstandings with the family. The surface plot seems to affirm the exchange of feelings between father and son, since the image of a patient father with rewards and punishments imposed fairly is vivid. In the face of McComber's unreasonable accusation that Richard deliberately corrupted his daughter's morality, Mr. Miller argued loudly with him; in the face of Richard's overnight staying out, Miller otherwise spoke highly of Richard's sense of shame and self confession after drinking. "I'm not going to read you any temperance lecture [...] I'm still giving you credit for having brains." (353) Covert progression is highly obscure and indirect, often consisting largely of details that seem trivial and off-topic [17]. The seemingly quiet and heartwarming ending conveys some social satire if we juxtapose Richard's "repentance" and his father's educational tactics. Richard had repeatedly tried to break free from social shackles. Though Mr. Miller once justified Richard's reading behaviour, he considered Richard attending Yale as a punishment and secretly planned a growth path for him. "Richard will probably forget all about her before he's away six months, and she'll have forgotten him." (351) Yale was the chosen place for Richard to follow the "discipline".

Richard completely forgot his previous political enthusiasm: "I'd rather you gave me a job on the paper because then she and I could get married sooner." (354) From striving to achieve value rationality to willingly accepting instrumental rationality (wishes to earn money), Richard was unconsciously embedded within the capitalism's framework based on instrumentality and economic benefits, subsumed into the middle-class utilitarian system and forced to cater to the production-oriented institutionalized model. He fell into the "love trap" designed for him and unexpectedly accepted the growth system that he once strongly resisted and internalized the requirements of the disciplinary society. Richard's transformation from "naivete" to "maturity" is welcomed by the Millers in the surface text, while the implicit narrative shows that the middle class in repression moves towards spiritual desolation, the signs of which are revealed in the mildly ironic narrative discourse beneath the surface.

#### IV. HIDDEN FEMINIST CONCERNS: PREDICAMENT OF MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN

Following the plot development, Sid and Lily's relationship is one of the key points of the narrative. Approaching middle age, Lily finally accepted Sid's proposal to the satisfaction of all. The story moves towards the expected happy ending of a reunion. In fact, the same act has completely opposite thematic meanings in two parallel narrative tracks. But looking deep inside the text, *Ah, Wilderness!* was born during the profound transformation of American society when middle-class women began to question the main social role of "Family Angel" and tried to pursue spiritual satisfaction in the social field outside their families. In O'Neill's play, the two main female characters, Lily and Mrs. Miller were inconsistent with the social trend of being released from domestic affairs. Mrs. Miller willingly bore the family burden and catered to her husband; Lily eventually compromised on marriage after suffering and struggling. If we pay attention to the trend that women began to be active in the social field and reread fiction after knowing O'Neill's realistic tragedy, we will realize something more under the presumed patriarchal text, in other words, the predicament of middle-class females.

First, the academic sphere's set view of O'Neill and his masculine tendencies has undoubtedly misled readers' understanding of the play to a certain extent, creating a phenomenon in which critiques of a literary work deviate from the writer's creative intention. There have been voices that associate O'Neill with the patriarchal tendency. Chen Liu proposed that in O'Neill's plays, from the individual to the institutional level, the formation of all types of masculinity and femininity should revolve around a core premise: the establishment of a gender order in line with male values [18]. In *Ah, Wilderness!*, Lily was depicted as "the conventional type of old-maid school teacher" (280), soft and sweet. In other people's eyes, she was indecisive and aloof; in Richard's eyes, she was a sinner who ruined Uncle Sid and egged him on. Mrs. Miller, who was in advocacy of male hegemony, often persuaded Lily to give up her high demands and accept Sid's flirtatious nature. She believed that it was totally regretful for women who did not tie the knot. "It's a shame for you—a measly shame—you that would have made such a wonderful wife for any man—that ought to have your own home and children!" (298) In this play, Sid appeared as a drunkard and a dissolute dandy, while Mrs. Miller still made excuses for his pernicious habits: "he's the kind that's the victim of his friends. He's easily led." (297) This plot seems to affirm O'Neill's deliberate mediation through female roles to act as a lobbyist in the patriarchal society.

We tend to form stereotypes about the author's writing style, which leads to the neglect of the covert progression in another style embodied in the work [19]. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the first wave of feminism swept the board. The rapid development of university education delayed the marriage and childbearing age of middle-class women. [...] Middle- and upper-class women with higher education generally got married late [20]. Lily, described as a forty-two-year-old unmarried teacher, was coincidentally a typical middle-class woman. Driven by a sense of independence, some middle-class woman gave up the bonds with her husband voluntarily when marriage was

unable to generate any happiness. Lily knew that Sid, an alcoholic playboy, could never create a happy marriage for her, therefore, she repeatedly refused his proposals. Leaving aside the surface plot narrative and the warm and festive atmosphere, O'Neill's implicit care for women is uncovered. We must free ourselves of the bondage of a fixed authorial image and a consideration of the historical context may shed light on the covert progression [5].

Second, O'Neill avoids spilling much ink on the plight of middle-class women, instead letting the joy of the Fourth of July dominate the play, consciously nesting Lily and Sid's emotional entanglements in the festive atmosphere with wine and laughter intertwined. Richard went to the bar to get drunk; Sid got addicted to alcohol and disclosed the fact that he lost his job with the help of drinks. If examined from the historical motives, all the depictions are not just for the rendering of the atmosphere. At that time, the prohibition movement in the United States was coming to an end, and alcohol was accused of being the main driver of social ills and family tragedies, causing direct harm to women and families. The American prohibition movement and the feminist movement were highly synchronized in time, and they closely interacted, resonated, strengthened and promoted each other in practice, resulting in a unique overlapping effect [21]. In *Ah, Wilderness!*, Sid's ingrained habit of drinking, gambling and broken promises coincided with the background of this era, referring to the direct harm of alcoholism to women in a subordinate position. O'Neill's potential concern about females in plight can be further confirmed.

Third, inter-textual comparisons may be conducive to the uncovering of the tragic layer. O'Neill's plays drew on his real life. His father James O'Neill was once a poor apprentice before he won fame. His mother Ella O'Neill, upper-class, elegant and refined, yet stepped towards destitution after getting married.

When it came to female characters, he always consciously or unconsciously brought the image of his mother into his creation, thus forming the creative characteristics of attention to women from his mother's perspective. It reflects his sympathy and respect for his mother and women [22].

It can be deduced that the previous characterization of O'Neill's patriarchal tendency is not accurate. There witnesses a striking resemblance between Ella O'Neill and Lily in this play. Many trivial details in the play are tied to profoundness. Lily, who had accepted the marriage proposal, seemed to know that she would step into the predicament. When Arthur filled and lighted his pipe with solemn gravity, "Lily forgets to pretend to read her book but looks over it, her face growing tragically sad" (328). Lily recollected Sid's previous mistakes and gave a doleful look, "disengaging her hand from his—with a hopeless sigh" (329). Their engagement was established sixteen years ago and was canceled later. Even now they restored their relationship, it faced blocks to bridge the distance between them. Faced with her gloomy and unchangeable prospect, Lily returned to the melancholy of despair and pain. She was the only character who constantly experienced the devastating pain and heartbreak caused by another family member, having no

choice but to compromise. In the explicit narration, the playwright did not explicitly show his sympathy for Lily and he consciously used comic strategies to cover the irreversible tragic reality. But hidden between the lines was O'Neill's implicit sigh for Lily's tragic fate, thoroughly deviating from the patriarchal tendency in the surface text.

In addition, some textual paradoxes also contribute to readers' detection of covert progression. At first, Lily appeared to be sober and calm, thus repeatedly rejecting Sid's proposals. Mrs. Miller's intervening efforts were of no avail. Nevertheless, Lily easily forgave Sid on the National Day. In a happy atmosphere offered by the main plots, Lily's abrupt change is easy to be ignored since some helpful information only exists in stage directions. When readers take the playwright's family tragedy and social background into account, Lily's unconventional transformation appears as a textual paradox, which once again implies a continuous tragic progression. The transformation from "Republican mother" in the early days of the United States' founding to "housekeeping worship" in the nineteenth century merely affirmed the moral role taken by females in the family, meanwhile minimizing their direct participation in public politics. It was undeniably good enough for a woman to perform the domestic duties of a mother or wife. Mr. Miller and Mrs. Miller's conjugal harmony was enviable. But the complisult of Mrs. Miller succumbing to male hegemony can be deduced from the above-mentioned persuading words for Lily. For her, the role of a woman in the family was far greater than that in the society. Under the influence of such values, Sid's remorse after drinking easily moved her. "All her bitter hurt and steely resolve to ignore and punish him vanish in a flash, swamped by a pitying love for him." (329) There are obvious signs indicating Lily's inner struggle. When the families were amused by Sid's antics, Lily "suddenly got up from her chair and stands rigidly, her face working—jerkily" (311), doubting whether she had become the motive for Sid becoming an object of derision and for him falling into a habit of drinking. Lily, who was educated and had expectations for marriage, finally gave in to reality. "Her expression is sad, although now it has lost all its bitterness and become submissive and resigned again." (322) O'Neill tactfully concealed the middle-class women's sense of independence beneath their faint expectation of a stable family role. As a result, the "mixed" Lily became desolately miserable. Women, passively forced to or actively deciding to compromise with family, inclined to calm down and accept the predictable tragic fate.

## V. CONCLUSION

Under the narrative framework of family trivialities and the national holiday's atmosphere dominating the whole play, the value of *Ah, Wilderness!* has been questioned for its simple plot and not given due attention for its lack of depth. In succession to *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Ah, Wilderness!* not only boasts plot simplicity and witty remarks, but also tends to reach a balance between laughter and tears. The explicit lines write a nostalgic comedy, while the implicit progression is laid out horizontally and vertically, writing about the spiritual desolation and realistic repression behind the trivialities of middle-class families. Thus, a tragic hidden

progression is formed throughout the play, questioning the meaning of life. Both Richard and Lily failed the game with the general environment. One gave up the passionate ideal in confusion, subsumed by the middle-class utilitarian view without knowing it, while the well-educated other struggled with the call of autonomy and the faint expectation of family, finally choosing to be docile and compromising with the reality.

O'Neill declared in his statement about play writing that a comedy won't stay funny very long. Something funny or farcical will break up into something gloomy or tragic, veering toward tragedy. With the investigation of the social landscape of the times, the continuous repression in such a typical middle-class family is exposed with mild irony. At that time, the middle class, forced to become a part of the chain of social authority, faced an unnoticed spiritual desolation. O'Neill secretly disclosed his care about women who were programmed to turn to family. The play tragically deviates from the comedy of recollection. At the same time, the potential tension of tragedy is released thanks to the witty remarks everywhere in the lines. Thus, the artistic tension between comedy and tragedy is realized. Moreover, onstage information provides a series of evidence for the interpretation of play texts. The covert progression of drama is thus more convincing and explicable. This is why theatre is differentiated from other literary genres, where the value of play text is produced, and when the vitality of stage performances is regenerated.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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