

Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea: A Glimpse at Female Writing Divergence and Consensus from Jane and Antoinette

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Abstract: This essay mainly focuses on the female writings in the 19th and 20th century that are represented by *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, considering the strong connections between them. In particular, the stark contrasts between the two fictions' settings, plots and attitude toward love and female identities leave plenty room for exploring the interconnections. In Chapter One, the essay will introduce the two fictions briefly, and reveal the mirror image relationship between the two heroines. Chapter Two will devote to identifying the commonalities behind the aforementioned characters, pointing out a potential female writing paradigm among contemporary female writers. Despite the overlapping features with male writing paradigm, topics usually focusing on marriages and the large proportion of mean women figures mark the uniqueness of the paradigm that belongs to females. Based on the two features, Chapter Three will postulate the exclusion mindset among female writers, and explain the possible historical and psychological reasons behind this theory. Chapter Four will offer a glimpse at a growing woman consensus under the discrepancies by discussing two women figures in the two fictions, who shed light into the awakening female wisdom. Finally, Chapter Five will focus on the collective identity recognition concluded from female writers, and bring up the continuing problem in female communities.

Keywords: *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Feminism, Writing paradigm, Exclusion, Writing consensus

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1 Falling vs. climbing - Jane and Antoinette as mirror images

As feminism first emerged, the women figures appeared in 19th and 20th century fictions became more well-rounded and elaborated. When discussing these vivid characters, female authors, unlike their male counterparts, would particularly focus on love affairs and marriage topics. Being successful in love or not served as the most common vehicle to express their insistence or reflections upon certain personalities and relationships: such as the support for a self-esteemed and independent figure in *Jane Eyre*, and the fight against cultural and racial destruction on interpersonal relations in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The settings for the two heroines are decisive for their harvest or loss of love in the end, which in turn reflects the authors' understanding and viewpoints for literary and cultural feminism. Particularly, they build characters from the mould of themselves. In *Jane Eyre*, most critics consider the heroine Jane's search for freedom and spiritual equality as an allusion to the author Charlotte Bronte, who spends most of her life with only two sisters and no males. As a female writer and once a teacher, Charlotte has a self-reliant and pioneering female-manipulating lifestyle that may have shaped the values of Jane. On the other hand, Jean Rhys, the author of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, creates a Creole female image Antoinette based on herself. She expands her experiences of racial discrimination as a Creole, and applies it to the heroine Antoinette. Rhys eagerly expresses her indignation at cultural conflicts by writing this love tragedy with a typical narrow-minded man. In

fact, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a secondarily created prequel of *Jane Eyre*, setting up a storyline that partially overlaps with it. For example, the superficial marriage between Antoinette and Rochester lays a foundation for the latter's richness in *Jane Eyre*, and Antoinette also becomes the mad ex-wife of Rochester in it. The two books' interrelationship provides a different angle of narration that renders the comparative studies of female figures and female writing paradigms possible.

The most apparent comparison starts with the two heroines. If Jane Eyre's love is referred to as a brave climbing from the bottom to the peak, then Antoinette's love is to fall down the hill. Both pursuing the love from Rochester, Jane earns the appreciation from this man with a much higher social identity, while Antoinette only serves as a cornerstone for him to claim wealth. Though possessing no properties after she becomes an orphan, Jane holds strong faith in the pursuit of equality in souls regardless of people's wealth and appearances, which she finds inevitably conflicted with people around her. She suffers from the bullying of the son of her aunt^[2], and receives criticism for her rebellious characters. In her aunt's house, Jane even never has the powers of discourse. However, after attending Lowood Orphanage, Jane has contact with various people. She gradually grows up into a versatile and self-esteemed female who later stands out from the faceless ladies and wins the heart of her new master, Rochester. Contrary to her inconspicuous initial identity, Jane turns over the impression of being plain yet radical and acquires love from a master. Unlike Jane, Antoinette is born in a wealthy family of colonists. Yet despite this ruling class identity, she is isolated by the islanders in malignity because of their hatred toward her colonist family. But white people also ostracize her family for their impure blood, calling her "White cockroach"^[1]. Antoinette successively experiences losing accommodation, the departure from the family and the mental breakup with Rochester. When Jane breaks down the identity barrier between a landlord and a governess, Antoinette fails to connect herself with the British man. In these two stories, the paradigm creates a thorough discrepancy with contemporary comments on female qualities: actually low-class women with a broader horizon win out, and upper-class women living a tranquil and wealthy life fall. In short, their love receives different reciprocation - the former acquires a soul mate regardless of the identity gap between a landlord and a governess, but the latter caves into the racial gap

between a Creole and a British. Apart from marriages, Jane and Antoinette are even more opposite: Jane's openness to the society to Antoinette's withdrawal from the outside (mainly due to her unwelcome identity); Jane as a new money to Antoinette as an old money; and Jane's courageous and rebellious spirits to Antoinette's evolutional and introverted disposition.

Furthermore, in *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte builds up Jane and the crazy ex-wife of Rochester as two mirror images. Throughout the book, the depictions of Jane are in an approving tone, while those of the crazy ex-wife are in a mysterious yet contemptuous tone. While most of the actions and decisions made by Jane could be explained to her sensible image, the ex-wife is made opposite to it. One has almost pure intellect, and the other has almost pure insanity, as if split from another woman unity. By polarizing the two characters, Jane intentionally praises and repels certain qualities. Jean Rhys, on the other hand, simply picks up the fragmented and simplistically evil ex-wife figure and expands it based on her own experience during the post-colonization era.

2 The consistency under discrepancies - a female writing paradigm

Yet despite all their discrepancies, this pair of antithesis has commonalities. In the 19th century when Capitalism rapidly penetrated into people's life, a universal common sense came into existence: those who systematically inherit properties would gradually be knocked out, yet those who are adventuresome and independent could enrich themselves. This idea points to a common factor in the contemporary female's writing: challenging certain stereotypes toward females. Such paradigm sets up a mousetrap when readers foresee the plots, since it always leads to unpredictable polar opposite endings. In *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jane and Antoinette are thoroughly different considering their identities, but both are attributed to this paradigm. Such paradigm of writing love stories with unpredictable development also applies to more examples. Apart from Jane, Jo March in *Little Women* likewise turns over the prejudices upon female leadership and finally shares responsibilities with her husband; apart from Antoinette, Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* also owns a wealthy family but gets ruined by marrying an undeserving man out of innocence. In these cases, pioneering female images that are commonly considered morally unacceptable live happily ever after,

yet rich and somehow unsocial female images that are avidly sought after by most contemporary women lose their wealth, love and everything.

Yet even though male writings also have surprising arrangements such as how a poor wretch becomes a billionaire, there are several factors differentiating it from the female-unique paradigm being discussed. First, largely prevented from occupations and politics, a large number of women writers in the 19th and the early 20th century, and even modern day, have a narrower topic - often limited in marriages and love affairs. "Hence, perhaps, the peculiar nature of women in friction; the astonishing extremes of her beauty and horror; ... for so a lover would see her as his love rose or sank, was prosperous or unhappy."^[3] Their male counterparts, instead, talk about feats, politics or socialization by virtue of wider experiences. Second, the obstacles and adversaries in female and male writers' works are different. Fights between women images usually relate to competitions for men, while men images encounter difficulties with not a specific gender group, but with the outside world. Many male literature works include political conflicts, career rivalries, physical duels, or even natural challenges. In conclusion, the contemporary female writers are trapped in the relationships with males. However, when escaping from it, females hardly find connections to the entire society, not to mention creating new topics other than marriage.

Interestingly, the very notion of creating a woman figure challenging the common prejudices always involves a pattern - in most of the female literature works, "evil women" always outnumber "nice women". Negative women together build obstacles for the heroines to overcome. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane's aunt is depicted as a mean adopter, the two cousins are deaf to her sufferings, and Rochester's ex-wife (Antoinette after the *Wide Sargasso Sea* storyline) is described as a totally mad woman trying to destroy Jane's marriage. Also, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's only friend Tia throws stones at her out of fear and disgust to her when Antoinette is hopeless^[1], and her mother goes into insanity after the death of her youngest son. Other female writers also apply the same pattern to their works. Jane Austen creates a number of women figures in *Pride and Prejudice*, and among them, Caroline is portrayed as a boastful girl who feverishly obstructs the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy, while Lydia is rather an impulsive and stubborn girl who elopes

with her heavily indebted husband. In conclusion, a sheer number of female writings set up an environment full of "evil women". It is common to see that most 19th and 20th century female writers avidly express their appreciation or disapproval for certain personalities and lifestyles by creating conflicts among characters with different backgrounds. Interestingly, when lifting up a specific character, these female writers tend to outwardly debase the heroine's counterparts. Female writers are hard on these characters, so it is with their heroines to them^[3]. Often in a female literature work, "evil and foolish" women take up a large proportion, while their positive counterparts occupy only a small amount. This phenomenon brings up a question: are these female figures excluded all by a coincidence?

3 Polarization not by coincidences - potential female exclusion ideology

The answer is absolutely no. Behind the contexts, there lies a series of cause and effect relations. The conduct of labeling women with "role-models" and "negative examples" splits the female group into two. While one camp endeavors to acquire success, the other camp obstructs. This interactive pattern among women creates a realistic competition environment, though the enormous difference between the capacity of each camp seems dramatic. This gives insight into the tendency that many female writers regard other women as competitors. Men, apparently, are the fruit they are competing for. Whether appreciated by males or not almost completely implies a female's prospects. Hardly finding a standpoint in society, women have to rely on a parasitic marriage to gain success. In the 19th and 20th century, a majority of females still could not get employed. Even if some had, the pittance could not meet their needs. The strong reliance upon males to make a livelihood is passed down from the feudalism in the Middle Ages, in which only males could be granted lands and titles. Even it is a new age with the feminism in the cradle, the conventional dependence upon males continues. As a result, the competition continues. If most female literature works allude to the author herself like the aforementioned *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and if these authors bear such competition principle in mind, they often regard other women, no matter faceless or mindless, as adversaries. In order to emphasize their appreciation for certain types of women, these female authors write about a Triton among the minnows, allowing the heroine to

upstream. Such arrangement, in particular, manifests their advocates for “unique and innovative ways to win men’s heart”.

Although female writers had long been trying to challenge the conventional prejudices against women, and although they did rebel by creating a counter-intuitive story, they were still constrained by the patriarchal society. They created polarized women figures to place competitions for men, and left these women developing around men as well. Nevertheless, the idea of designing successful women that challenge the common views itself marked the first phase of feminism in literature. Yet it was still influenced by a male-dominant reality, so all the struggles and challenges took place under the topics and labels already set up by males. In other words, most of the female literature works in the 19th and the beginning 20th century makes judgments about the already existent evaluations, instead of creating new topics and definitions for females: women were still objects, not subjects.

The incomplete struggle is mainly due to the male-monopolized powers of discourse. Even though a certain number of women already realized the necessity of revolution, they were still restricted to males ultimately, which is evident in a panoply of contemporary, and even in some modern, female fictions. Exquisite and sensitive as those female literary narrations are, they inevitably show the characteristics that are infected by the male discourse powers. Especially when creating and portraying female characters, it is not hard to perceive that these female writers are examining them from a male perspective. “She was admitting that she was “only a woman”, or protesting that she was “as good as a man”... She had altered her values in deference to the opinions of others”^[3]. If every female figure is marked by a specific key word, it would probably be characteristics related to appearances, backgrounds or temperaments, which can all be categorized into marrying conditions. In addition, these female writers would subconsciously stand as a male to reveal the female personalities they repel: the adversaries of heroines are always depicted as jealous, sentimental, submissive, or melodramatic. Rather, figures that possess male-dominant dispositions, such as the courageous and sensible Jane in *Jane Eyre*, smart and decisive Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, self-reliant and passionate Jo in *Little Women*. The fierce conflicts on values among women figures often

are the debates over well-defined male morals. The compromise to male discourse powers contributes to an actually dramatic narration to the “evil camp”. For example, some female writers are exclusively strict with some evil women figures, and sometimes turn their advantages into shortcomings. Sometimes beauty equals jealousy or foolishness. Therefore, critically, women were not necessarily that evil and foolish. Instead, the fact was twisted. As for Charlotte Bronte, her imaginations and depictions were deeply influenced by something other than indignation: ignorance, for example^[3]. The potential misogyny complex (which describes a disposition that repel women or certain women spirits) also gives rise to this exclusion mindset.

All these possible reasons contribute to a common process of designing characters among female writers - splitting a female entity into dual parts that correspondingly represent pure goodness and evilness. They collect unwanted qualities to create a character that inherit it and vice versa, which is how Jane and the ex-wife of Rochester are born in *Jane Eyre*, and it is the same with similar characters in other books. Undoubtedly, a strong enough exclusion mindset did exist among many female writers.

And such mindset is always an obstacle feminist want to overcome. Apparently, feminism movements set out to form a collective consciousness that “we women are a group”, but such mindset would ultimately split this unity. How compatible feminism could be with the exclusion mindset worth considering? How could they establish themselves at the same time? If they do, are feminism movements a failure? It depends on the special nature of early feminism, which is traceable in a historical aspect. Other human rights movements shed light on the germination of it to some extent. A deeper reflection upon racism and civil rights, gender equality movements initiated afterwards. Females, similar to black people, were soon classified as a specific group. Led by a few pioneering women, this gender group sailed to explore new definitions of women and to retrieve the divined rights of them. Yet even though there is no violence-armed conflicts along the development of feminism even till now, it does not mean that the process of their rebellion went easier than abolitionism did. Rather, it is very likely that this course lasted longer and proceeded more difficultly than abolitionism did.

Why is it harder for women to reach an agreement through the feminism movements? Physical distances,

for example, build the first wall for women interactions and communications. Unlike other racial groups such as black people and Jewish people who usually live in packs, women are more scattered in society: where there is a family, there is a woman presented. Furthermore, the scattering nature goes beyond the accommodations. Women are also separated by wealth. In the 19th and the early 20th when upper-class females coexist with female workers, the gap between their social identities leaves room for indifference. Since wealth prevents them from contacting the society, while some women are indignant at the unfair treatment toward them, others feel just fine with knitting and cooking at home: they even consider being protected by men is their privilege. On top of that, because female groups comprise multiple ethnics, the cultural barrier between them - educational levels, traditions, division of labors, and so forth - unavoidably prevent them from a natural community.

Therefore, hatred among women is inevitable. Even though it was not impossible for some women to leave the arena, and “endeavor rather to make him the instrument of her pleasure”^[4], competitions hardly stopped. As Simone de Beauvoir indicates, “... this reconciliation between the active personality and the sexual role is, in spite of any favorable circumstances, much more difficult for woman than for man; and there will be many women who will avoid the attempt, rather than wear themselves out in making the effort involved” (389).

4 The unity coexisting with repelling - the awaken of female consensus and morals

However, women unity still strives under such circumstances. As Virginia Woolf suggests, this dispersing force would be turned over as female writers receive more respects, rights, and salaries in the future. Ultimately, they would find a female-unique consensus that is supposed to be sincere, genuine and related more to reality instead of interrelationships^[3]. Although the social restrictions on female writers in the 19th and the early 20th century kept them away from a natural community, it remained possible to establish a more matured and complete writing consensus. In fact, showing an on-going evolutionary trend, this possibility has been realized by some of their works already. These female writers are gradually developing a type of female-unique wisdom in their works. *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* both reveal the early phase of it. In the two books, a few female figures are intriguing:

they are not equipped with competitive characteristics that attract males. Instead of being an obstacle, they guide the heroine to overcome difficulties using their own experience and philosophies. The emergence of such image marks the breakthrough of female writing tradition.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bessie is a strict but kind maid in Jane's house. She educates Jane every time when she is punished for her hysterical complaints about being treated unfairly. In chapter two, Bessie tells Jane the importance of being obedient, and asks her not to act so aggressively toward others^[2]. By Bessie's own account, Jane should learn to tolerate unfairness and adapt to living her aunt's house to avoid a hard time. Although Jane insists on a spiritual equality, she indeed behaves more calmly than before after getting into the Lowood Orphanage. Not main character as Bessie is, she is among the few who provides advice to Jane. “Endurance and stamina makes you likeable” is what Bessie concludes as her life experience. Such simple idea evoked a potential female-unique wisdom.

Yet, most of the 19th century fictional female figures, including Bessie, expressed such wisdom in a narrow way, in which they still did not escape the boundary set by males. The contemporary female writers represented by Charlotte Bronte were in the process of refining such writing tactic, so characters with the potential unique wisdom tended to be plain. How did they obtain this experience? How did they evaluate this wisdom? In fact, what can be inferred is limited. Plus the slight monotonousness of their images, these female figures are more likely to be interpreted as someone who assists the heroine with a wisdom submissive to a patriarchal society. Furthermore, in the early phase, this type of wisdom is also susceptible to being confused with that of males. In terms of how to blend in a specific environment, women shared similar experiences with men, in the 19th century when the economy could not allow everyone to live without bearing and suffering. In the previous part discussed, the female paradigm of creating “counter-intuitive” plots differ from that of male paradigm in that most of the former focus on love affairs, topics much narrower than the latter's. The early female-unique wisdom manifested among some women characters, however, did not fully take advantage of this corpus.

Of course, this potential writing consensus is refining as time goes on. Finished and published later than *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* has a female figure that is

worth paying attention to. Christophine, the nurse of Antoinette, is sculptured more vividly. Christophine, a colonized woman, shows a strong rebellious spirit, for which she receives respect in the house. Such self-respect also triggers the feminist identity deep in her heart: she does not cave into a white-dominant and male-dominant world, but earns a living by her black woman identity. This realization of female independence (regardless of races) is the start of the later feminism development. Therefore, unlike the female figures represented by Bessie, Christophine tends to be more reliable in terms of her more “knowledgeable” image. Actually, Christophine is depicted as a woman incapable of reading and writing, but she handles various troubles and sorrows that are unique to women. When Antoinette shares her concerns toward the tense relationship with Rochester, Christophine shows her seasoned side. In Christophine’s words, Rochester is unreliable, crafty and fascinated with money^[1]. She observes Rochester’s hypocrisy and insincerity in advance, asking Antoinette to jolt herself out of the entangling with him^[1]. In addition, Christophine reckons that men are worthy of no expectations, since “when man don’t love you, more you try, more he hate you, man like that.”^[1], which she concludes from her life experience - three children to raise, with no men aside^[1]. It is she who keeps supporting Antoinette and serves as the only person whom Antoinette trusts.

Christophine, compared to Bessie, is undoubtedly a more complete literary female entity. Apart from more abundant depictions and a tighter relation to the heroine, Christophine is more potent in influencing the heroine. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane herself should be regarded as the reasonable and trustworthy person who makes important decisions and makes observations on others, while in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Christophine plays the role of the wise. The improvements of the female writing consensus from the 19th to the 20th century are not a mere wiser woman image. Despite the relatively unilateral depictions about her wisdom, Christophine and her similar counterparts reflect a growing consciousness of female independence. In particular, Christophine shows a disdainful attitude toward male discourse powers, reckoning it is herself that makes a livelihood. Instead of teaching the heroine to be obedient and patient like Bessie, Christophine teaches Antoinette to be self-esteemed the emergence of such positive female images implies that potential writing consensus is getting increasingly independent from men

and marriages, turning from an object into a subject. Based on the historical backgrounds, it is reasonable that in the 19th century women might need endurance to survive, but starting from the 20th century, when post-colonization began, women realized that rebellious spirits could awaken their self-reliance. Before, there was no definition for female morals. While a myriad of moral principles evaluate males from multiple aspects, only amusing males and taking care of babies measure how successful females are. However, as time elapsed and feminism grew, the overarching male discourse powers were finally genuinely challenged. More female writers embraced experimental wisdom that is neither widely recognized nor dominated by males. Instead of considering female identities from a male perspective, women began generating a female-unique aspect that is not limited to males and male discourse powers. And “when she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no need for a masculine mediator”^[4]. Hence, the range of female wisdom was expanded with more women figures stepping into the outside world, rather than being caged in their “female atmosphere”. Although a sense of exclusion and separating women images continue and could be seen in many works, it is undeniable that an overall trend of uniting does survive under such exclusion mindset. Together they form the female-unique writing consensus: while female writers are expressing opinions toward different female qualities, they ultimately merge into a concurrent flow of experience. In a sense, female writers make self-improvements in terms of the shifting of feminist icons from their fictional characters to themselves.

5 The female collective recognition and the continuing problems

In the study of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the adoption of the same paradigm but different perspectives allows a generalization of a prevalent female writing ideology, among female writers represented by Charlotte Bronte and Jean Rhys. These two prominent fictions reveal how some contemporary female writers depict female images in their works. The heroine, as the core of a fiction, could have backgrounds that are in a stark contrast, which can be exemplified by Jane (an orphan with a low-class identity) and Antoinette (a daughter of a colonist who is in possession of wealth). Nonetheless, they are usually built as a righteous or a poignant figures

that readers are inclined to feel compassion for. Jane is depicted as exceedingly reasonable and sensible in her pursuing respects and appreciations from others, while Antoinette is described as an understandable woman who fails in love due to the distrust and malice that her surroundings cast on her. On the other hand, all the positive spirits revealed from the heroines have their unwanted opposites. After different women qualities are separated, they respectively form mirror images: a “good women” camp and the other a “bad women” camp. These antagonistic characters emerge mainly because of the writers’ repelling toward certain undesired characteristics or backgrounds and potential competing psychology toward other women as a whole. These usually lead to a relatively stricter criticism on the “bad women” camp, or, defame them. Antoinette, in particular, is an interesting example that applies to this writing paradigm. In *Jane Eyre*, she is Rochester’s ex-wife, who essentially belongs to the adversary camp. Compared to Jane, she is portrayed as a mysterious, crazy and evil woman that seeks to destroy Jane’s wedding^[5]. However, when this figure is recaptured by Jean Rhys, and granted the name Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she turns out to be an innocent woman suffering from isolation by islanders and deception by Rochester. The sharp contrast between the depictions of this character is greatly attributed to the paradigm that beautifies the heroine while debasing her competitors. Furthermore, together with the glimpse of different female wisdom from a tutor character, these women figures reflect how the writers recognize themselves and females as a whole.

Charlotte Bronte, for instance, shows a potential dislike toward ubiquitous female qualities, which can be inferred from her miniature, Jane. In the book, Jane’s indignation toward discrimination and the lofty values of love are exactly what any other female figures lack. Moreover, she is not depicted as an exceedingly beautiful or wealthy woman. All these factors hardly contribute to a lady worth pursuing. Instead, they are rather masculine characteristics. To say Jane is a man trapped in a woman’s flesh is probably not an

exaggeration. Contrary to Bronte, who endeavors to express her outstanding values different from ordinary females, Jean Rhys shows a tendency of trusting females and their experimental wisdom. The designing of a guardian-like woman image and the contrast between female wisdom and male craftiness manifest Rhys’ appreciation of the emerging female ideologies toward love, marriages, and males. The depiction of a failed marriage caused by a money-oriented man Rochester emphasizes the credibility of Christophine, who suggests that women should make a livelihood independently. To sum up, Charlotte Bronte recognizes the women identity and women qualities differently from Jean Rhys does. In a sense, the female-exclusion ideology in *Jane Eyre* gives insights into a split of women communities, but *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides a new aspect to define women unity.

However, both the conflicts and the unification of women communities in these two books are somehow unrealistic. An ultimate women consensus is hard to reach in reality. This is evident in the fact that women are separated by physical distances, social classes, and ethnics.

Even entering the 21st century, such difficulty lasts into this fast developing world. Nevertheless, with the emergence of Internet, a potential new female community may be constructed regardless of those hurdles. To what extent can such space-time compression influence women’s recognition of their identities and their gender communities is worth studying.

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