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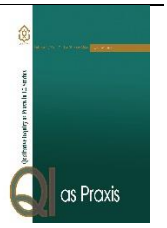

Research Paper

# A Symbolic Study of Magical Realism and the Fantastic in "The Tree House", "The Stone Wings", "The Black Box", and "The Great Mirage of Alta"

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**ABSTRACT**

The research on magical realism and its symbolic representation in literary works has been a subject of critical investigation for decades since its popular emergence in Latin American literature, and its principles have been explored by theoreticians such as Amaryll Chanady. This research aims to examine how the author has adopted the elements of magical realism and the fantastic in four of her short stories, applying Chanady's theory of the "Unresolved versus Resolved Antinomy" between the natural world and the supernatural, plus "Authorial Reticence". Using Chanady's concepts, this paper performs a textual analysis of key symbols in these works, concluding that the author has integrated fantastic and realism as a narrative technique to express deeper concepts and depict how the line between the real and the unreal is blurred. This reading not only confirms how magical realism and the fantastic in postmodern stories have uncovered a solution to perceive reality as we know it, but also provides a framework for future researchers who aim to navigate this issue in other works.

## 1. Introduction

As a narrative mode established in the 20th century, magical realism has long fascinated both writers and critics for its exceptional ability in bridging the gap between the ordinary and the

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extraordinary. Deviating from fantasy stories—which take place in an entirely separate world governed by alternative laws—magical realism combines familiar settings and realistic characters with magical elements that are treated as natural within the context of the narrative, even though there are subtle nuances in differentiating fantastic and magical realism. The term Magical Realism was first coined in 1925 by Franz Roh as a branch of German art, defined as "The depiction of the supernatural in a realistic setting" (Erickson, 1995, p. 427). Since then, it has spread in Latin American literature—specifically through the works of Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, and Jorge Borges—and has forged a path to become a worldwide literary mode.

The fantastic, however, is a more ambiguous term as scholars and critics have yet to agree on a single, concrete definition. Todorov "calls it a genre, and at the same time destroys the concept of genre by situating the fantastic on the borderline of two literary modes: The uncanny and the marvelous" (Chanady, 1985, p. 1), while Harry Belevan believes it is "a form of expression resulting from a certain technique" (1976, p. 106). Overall, because the concepts of fantastic and magical realism have several prominent features in common and are similar in essence—as both are used to symbolize higher levels of meaning—it has been quite a challenge to form a distinctive line between them.

Nevertheless, a theoretical framework to distinguish the former from the latter is discussed by Amaryll Chanady, whose book *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* investigates the nature of the "Fantastic" and its connection to magical realism. For Chanady (1985), "what sets magical realism apart is a resolved antinomy between the natural and the supernatural" (p. 69). She argues that "Whereas the antinomy appears to be resolved in magical realism, the contradictions between different conceptions of reality are placed in the foreground by the author of a fantastic text" (p. 69). This means that in the fantastic, the tension remains unresolved, resulting in hesitation, which conveys the unreliable nature of the antinomy, and whether it is questioned or not. Meanwhile, in magical realism, the nature of the antinomy is confirmed: the unreal is regarded as ordinary by the participants in the story.

Additionally, Chanady (1985) notes, "In most examples of magical realism, it is impossible to explain the supernatural, and no attempt is made to do so. The supernatural can only be accepted as it is" (pp. 149–150). This neutrality of tone and lack of explanation are essential factors that need to be considered in this mode. On the other hand, "the simultaneous presence of the natural and the supernatural in the fantastic creates an ambiguous and disturbing

fictitious world" (p. 102). This suspension of disbelief reflects a broader worldview—one that embraces multiple ways of comprehension.

Moreover, Chanady (1985) adopts the term "Authorial Reticence" to indicate the author's attitude toward the supernatural. As she notes, "'Authorial reticence', therefore, is a relative term which applies to the absence of obvious intrusions and manipulation on the part of the author" (p. 121). This implies that the narrator deliberately does not question or explain the supernatural phenomena and there's no obvious sign of attempting to rationalize the strange. This theory is practiced in both magical realism and the fantastic; however, it functions differently, as in fantastic works, "Authorial reticence serves to maintain the ambiguity of an event, object or situation throughout the narrative, and prevents the reader from resolving the antinomy between the natural and the supernatural" (Chanady, 1985, p.122). On the opposite, Chanady maintains that authorial reticence is used for withholding the essential information in order to neutralize the supernatural and show it as a normal occurrence (p. 149).

This study analyses the symbolic uses of magical realism and the fantastic in four short stories—"The Tree House", "The Stone Wings", "The Black Box", and "The Great Mirage of Alta"— based on Chanady's theoretical models. In four sections, each for one story, it first presents a brief plot summary. Second, applying Chanady's (1985) theory, it discusses whether each story is in magical realism mode or the fantastic. An elaborate focus is given to imagery, character response, and the boundary—or lack thereof—between magical and natural occurrences. Lastly, it studies the symbolic representation and demonstrates how they are rooted in the real world, proving that the symbols in the narrative—when inspected through Chanady's lens—serve as a means of revealing psychological, social, and existential truths in real life.

## 2. Literature Review

Even though there has not been any research on these four original works, other studies have discussed the interplay of magical realism and the fantastic, as theorized by Chanady (1985), in analysing various short stories. Bénédicte Meillon (2014) in her article "Unreal, Fantastic, and Improbable "Flashes of Fearful Insight" in Annie Proulx's Wyoming Stories" concentrates on the same duality in Annie Proulx's short stories from a postmodern perspective by applying Chanady's concept to "look into some of the elements of magic in Annie Proulx's stories in order to assess whether they present in the end resolved or unresolved antinomy, or, in other words whether they may read as magical realist or fantastic" (Meillon, 2014, p. 114). Likewise,

Melissa Stewart (1995) in her essay “Roads of ‘Exquisite Mysterious Muck’”, applies Chanady’s theory to postmodern short stories, such as John Cheever’s “The Enormous Radio”, Donald Barthelme’s “City Life”, and William Kennedy's "Ironweed"". Stewart highlights symbolic elements—namely, the radio in Cheever’s story—as a means of delving into the characters’ psyches and social aspects. The book *“The Postmodern Fairytale: Folkloric Intertexts in Contemporary Fiction”* by Kevin Smith also employs the concept of authorial reticence, the fantastic, and magical realism in postmodern narratives such as *“Human Croquet”* by Kate Atkinson. Despite referencing Chanady's theories, many of these works do not treat symbolism as their central focus. As Chanady (1985) indicates,

> Many magico-realist stories and novels lend themselves to a psychoanalytical interpretation, or a symbolic analysis. But this is a secondary level of meaning, just as it is in the fantastic. It should not overshadow the literal level, since this is what determines into which category the narrative falls. (p. 105).

The above-mentioned point might explain why relatively little research has been conducted on this issue. Hence, this study aims to pinpoint the possibility of symbolic representation without undermining the literal narrative mode that defines the genre.

## 3. The Analysis and Interpretation of the Texts

### 3.1. “The Black Box” and the Fantastic Library

This short story revolves around an academic individual named Raymond, who is in search of a meaning for life, or in other words, the theory of everything. He is fully committed to his experiments even though the most important people in his life do not believe in him. In the early stages of the story, however, he has a car accident, failing to deliver his newfound lab results to his professor. At first, the story implies that he is not fatally injured—which is later on dismissed—but after a time skip and a heartfelt conversation with his brother, Raymond begins to doubt his own ambition, uncertain whether pursuing his purpose is worth the effort. He even feels guilty for worrying his family. The next morning, after hearing a knock at the door, he finds a black box on his doorstep.

Despite the confusion revolving around the strange event, and his name written on the box, he brings it inside, unknowingly inviting an old man who steps out from the box. Although Raymond indulges in a conversation with the mysterious old man and ushers him out of the house, the man inexplicably reappears. Raymond begins to feel the dread, disoriented by the knowledge that the familiar reality is disintegrating before his eyes. The old man introduces

himself as the Keeper, offering to grant him his final, ultimate wish before his death. Raymond reaches a breaking point when he realizes he has been comatose for quite some time. He has no choice but to confront a truth that shatters his world.

He accompanies the Keeper into the box, which will gift him the theory of everything, the ultimate knowledge, and beyond, all in an infinite library, for a period of time before his death. At last, he is met with other people alike, roaming in the library, until he finds his very own book of life. Reaching its last page, left blank, he succumbs to his fate and leaves the world.

The narrative fits within the fantastic mode as the antinomy between natural and supernatural remains unresolved. Throughout the story, Raymond is clearly fixated on the familiar reality, where any abnormal event is, in fact, regarded as strange and supernatural. After the man reemerges, he is in denial, not believing the abnormal events. He hesitates, unsure if he has lost his sanity or if he is deluded by some insane dream. This fact is evident in Raymond's attempt at convincing himself that what he is witnessing is not real: “He was having hallucinations, yes, that’s right, maybe I’m dreaming, I haven’t woken up yet, yeah” (p. 4). He continues to question the nature of his reality: “Is this all in my head? Not real?” (p. 4). Afterwards, the mysterious man intensifies his ambiguity and uncertainty by replying, “I’m afraid, yes, but how can you say it’s not real?” (p. 4). Only at the resolution does he accept the inevitable and stop questioning, though the reader still hesitates, uncertain if the events are actually happening in Raymond's mind or in an alternate reality. Therefore, the supernatural is treated as strange and fantastic.

In addition, authorial reticence serves to increase the ambiguity and highlight the surprising effect of abnormal encounters. The only potential explanation for the supernatural is Raymond's comatose state, and the lack of further exploration on the topic creates suspense within the narrative and preserves the tension between reality and illusion.

Moreover, if we view Raymond's coma-induced world as a mere hallucination, The Keeper can be regarded as a projection of Raymond's subconscious mind, posing philosophical questions and existential dilemmas, while he clings to the last thread of consciousness and ambition. On the other hand, the box itself is interpreted as a gateway toward a final destination: death. Yet it is also indirectly suggested that what the box reveals depends on what the person most desires. “Do they all end up here? In this library?” The Keeper raised his head and replied, “not all the time” (p. 4). Consequently, it is more accurate to see this limbo—which can appear in the form of a library, as a symbolic pathway toward greatness, a personal journey that every

individual must complete in life. Thus, the symbolic representations of the Keeper, the box, and the library create an unresolved dichotomy between what is real and what is not.

### 3.2.“The Great Mirage of Alta” and the Magical Realism of Norse Mythology

Skadi is a young, ambitious traveler who embarks on a journey to the most unique places in the world, one of which is the ever-snowy city of Alta. Searching for a motel to stay the night, she arrives at a cafe at the beginning of the story, seeking a warm drink to rest. There, she meets a lovely couple named Valkyrie and Guthrie who own the dingy cafe where the majority of the narrative occurs. The kind couple is quite welcoming toward Skadi, instantly figuring out that she is a tourist looking for a motel.

The story emphasizes small details that are later revealed to foreshadow another aspect of the couple's identity. For instance: “two vertical black strands coloring her long, white-blond hair, and a piece of fur on her necklace with the same color combination. It reminded her of an animal she couldn't name” (p. 3). This hints at the couple's shape-shifting abilities, which allow them to transform into wolves.

As the story progresses, the couple tries to subtly understand what the new girl in town seeks. It's when the conversation shifts from sports activities to the Mirage that the atmosphere is altered, tension is palpably felt, and the couple begins to worry. They realize she has found out about it through some old tourist attraction pamphlets and warn her that she is placing herself in serious danger if she keeps looking for the Mirage, as it has malignant capabilities, and what the witness sees will leave a permanent mark on her psyche with no way to recover.

Skadi, however, is too determined to forget her dreams. Her purpose is not merely sightseeing, but also to find a sign that will guide her toward the right path and show her the reason for her existence. Though the astonished couple knows they are unable to stop the free-spirited girl, Valkyrie gifts her a necklace with a wooden wolf dangling from its chain—simply as a lucky omen—and watches her drive to the motel.

The next morning, she drives to the bridge before sunrise, patiently waiting for the sunrays to reflect off the snow crystals and materialize something at the other end of the bridge. After an hour without any sign of the mirage, she surrenders, hopelessly turning the car back to get away from the edge. However, just as she turns the car back and briefly glances in the rear-view mirror, she feels bewildered by what looks back, “an enormous green garden, with the tallest trees, the most beautiful flowery scenery, fountains, and large birds flying around what seemed to be the most magnificent castle she'd ever seen or read about” (p. 7). As a sign,

she wholeheartedly knows that the future is bright and a promising destiny awaits her. With that in mind, she drives back toward the town, unaware that Valkyrie and Guthrie are nearby, admiring her in the shape of two wolves.

The narrative fits within the magical realism mode, as the antinomy between natural and supernatural is resolved. Throughout the story, neither the narrator nor the characters are perplexed or surprised by this impossible event—a mirage which is manifested according to each person's thoughts, beliefs and fates—they never deny its existence, in fact, they encourage the reader to view it as a natural incident as well, only warning her to stop when they realize she has put too much faith in a dangerous, unforgiving Mirage.

They are certain that it truly exists, but they are unaware of how it may affect her. As Valkyrie says: “I don't know what you heard about that place. What you'll see or not see will affect you for the rest of your life. Not every heart is ready to face that” (p. 4). Similarly, Skadi does not doubt its reality; her willingness to embrace her destiny and the path shown by the Mirage, despite the probability of a terrible projection, highlights her resolution and unwavering faith in the Mirage.

Likewise, neither the characters nor the reader questions whether the events are truly happening; there is no hesitation whatsoever in deciding the reality of the situation. Guthrie states that clearly through his dialogue, “She's right, miss. People always see something there, it's not out of a storybook, magical and mesmerizing, it's just how it is, and how it has been for many years, but a lot of times, what people see is not what they wanted” (p. 4).

Additionally, authorial reticence combined with the characters' indifference toward the supernatural increases the effect of resolved antinomy by sharpening the narrative and distracting the reader from the symbolic elements hidden in the story.

In terms of symbolic representation, “Alta” is inspired by an actual city of the same name in the real world—indeed, without a mirage. The names of the two main characters, Skadi and Valkyrie, are taken from Norse mythology. Skadi, the goddess of winter and hunting in Norse mythology, represents strength, resilience, and independence (Kusmenko, 2009, p. 17).

The names signify the similar features of the characters in the story. Skadi is a young, independent woman seeking new adventures on her own and is steadfast in reaching her ambitions. Moreover, Valkyrie can represent one of Odin's warriors, transformed into a wolf, to guide Skadi toward the ultimate destination—Valhalla, or the heavenly castle on the other side of the bridge—but she decides against it since Skadi has learned to let go of fate, not

wanting to look back and distancing herself from the mirage, which is a symbol of personal revelation or one's final purpose.

In addition, the bridge is also a threshold or a passage toward Valhalla, the path that Skadi may have wanted to go through, but didn't. In Norse mythology, the bridge to Valhalla is named Bifrost, "the rainbow bridge that joins Asgard to Midgard/The Earth" (Gaiman, 2017, p. 272). As a result, the symbolic representations of the Mirage, the names, and the bridge serve as resolved dichotomies between natural and supernatural.

### 3.3."The Stone Wings" and the Magic of Real Society

The narrative opens by describing the setting and the protagonist: a white dove sitting on the edge of a cliff surrounded by darkness—a pit known as 'the Void'. There live humanoid avians who are small humans with wings. Each has a distinct color, and they all live in a marble prison guarded by 'the Captor'—the antagonist. He is an old, malicious man who is the only person able to see the avians' true form—as other humans assume he is simply keeping birds to sell them.

Their only source of light is the enormous, red sun in the middle of a vast, dark abyss, but one bird—the white dove—deeply longs for freedom and wishes to escape to a haven one day with the help of her wings. So, she tells stories of her dreams to the avians' children, of a beautiful land in which they can all fly and live freely in a prosperous land.

However, some days later, one of the kids leaps into the sky, and not knowing how to fly, he falls down into the pit, shouting: "The sky is blue!" (p. 2). Her mother becomes devastated, shouting and cursing at the white dove, blaming her for her son's death. A commotion arises, and the Captor arrives. Fully aware of who the culprit is, he takes her away and tears away her wings, replacing them with stone replicas.

When she returns, she is heartbroken, completely drained of any energy or purpose to find an escape route. Other avians take notice, and without any help, they leave her be, knowing that if they disobey, the same fate may befall them. Thus, devoid of any hope and feeling guilty for the boy who died, she throws herself from the cliff and down into the Void. What she sees reveals the true nature of their prison:

> Right in front of her eyes, the sight before her shifted, morphing and changing into vivid colors. Dark blue, light blue, and then yellow. 'It's a mirage! It's a mirage!' She couldn't help but shout that out loud. No one could see it unless they stepped past the edge. The whole expanse of their everyday world was just

> a facade to keep them locked away in their own misery, the misery that was digging up a pit in the bottom of the Captor's heart. (p. 4)

In that moment, she realizes it has all been a lie, and she is doomed to die. Nevertheless, there is still hope for the others. The stone wings might illuminate the reality as they did for her. The narrative fits into the mode of magical realism as the antinomy is unresolved. The protagonist sees and feels it with her five senses. There is no rational explanation, but the story does not question its validity. The magic is represented as a matter-of-fact occurrence, with no hesitation or questioning from the narrator, consequently confirming the authorial reticence.

The symbolic elements in the story reinforce the existence of a realistic world shrouded in magic, to depict the harsh social and existential truths in the human mind. First, the wings are an integral aspect of the creature, promising freedom and escape from an oppressor. Yet, when they are replaced with stone, they fail their purpose; the wings' sole existence becomes unbearable to the dove. What once promised escape, now is the opposite—a burden, a cage. So, for the dove, that leaves the only option for freedom—death—through which the stone wings can now represent legacy, a glimmer of hope amidst the despair.

Second, the Void symbolizes both fear of the unknown and the illusion of limitation. When someone leaps into it, they are met with the true reality that the void was never bottomless—it merely kept the truth at bay. What kept the creatures locked was not the actual lies of the oppressor, but most importantly, it was the creatures' belief in them, not even attempting to witness whether they were real or not.

Third, the Captor embodies the systemic oppression, or patriarchal control. His punishment of the protagonist shows how systems suppress imagination and liberty. Additionally, this dichotomy between a female protagonist—a dove, representing innocence—and the male captor, depicts a harsh social order existing in the real world, where patriarchy aims to attack the freedom of women. Ultimately, the symbolic representations of the wings, the Captor, the Void, and the Dove aim to maintain the unresolved antinomy and showcase a social, humane reality.

### 3.4.“The Tree House” and the Uncanny in Hell

In a town named “Borasca”, which means a thunderstorm, it never rains. The unnamed narrator is the little sister of the main character, Chris, narrating the horrible events that happened years ago when she was a child. She talks about a day when her brother and his friends, Will and Eddie, were running from school bullies when they ran too deep into the woods and came upon

an old tree house. As young kids are, they are intrigued to find out more, “it seemed to be inviting them to venture inside and enjoy the thrill of the unknown. A perfect headquarters for a bunch of twelve-year-olds” (p. 1). The three plan to have a sleepover at the house, and not wanting to let their families know where they are really going to sleep the night, they come up with a lie. Although Chris has no choice but to let his sister know in order to borrow her camcorder. She promises not to reveal the truth to their parents. The rest of the story is told when Chris's sister watches the recorded videos on the camcorder.

In the video, the friends are filming the path toward the tree house. Eddie's death is foreshadowed after he struggles to climb the ladder leading to the house. The eerie atmosphere is palpable for the reader, but not as much for the characters, and in the instances it is felt, it falls flat or it is ignored by the rest of the characters. After some time roaming the house, they find a backdoor, on which it is written ‘Descending to hell’. However, after the camcorder shows they have dinner and are laughing, something feels different, off, as if the video has been purposefully cut in the middle, then attached by an anonymous culprit. They are laughing but it feels forced,

> The next thing I saw was Will showing them a dead butterfly he'd found the other day. They were eating sandwiches and talking gibberish about what teenage boys would normally talk about, but for some reason, there was a different air to it. Chris was visibly perturbed, and Will kept swallowing even after he was finished eating. (p. 3)

Later on, they sleep and set the time to wake up tomorrow on the clock. However, in the morning everything is changed. At 7 am, the sun is still down, with no sign of rising anytime soon. They are now utterly horrified at what they find when they open the front door—pitch blackness, as if the house itself is suspended midair in the middle of absolute darkness. They talk of a horned man threatening them before dinner, when they opened the back door, the reason why the video was cut in the middle. An argument takes place and Eddie decides to climb down from the ladder, which is still in place and visible, but he tragically falls to his death. Chris and Will, terrified for their lives, run for the back door, surprisingly facing the sunny woods from which they came yesterday. They climb down the other ladder, thinking it has all been a nightmare, and try to find Eddie. Failing to do so, they run to their families when they hear a loud screech as they face a horned, sinister entity, and their bodies are dragged away.

The sister retells how the town and the police dealt with this tragic incident. Finding Eddie's body horribly torn apart with no sign of Will and Chris except for the camcorder, they

burn the tree house, forgetting the event, until Chris's sister, now years later, sees a missing girl's photo under which it has written ‘Descending to hell’.

The story's antinomy is resolved. The narrator never categorically defines the events as hallucinatory; she accepts their ambiguity: “The police couldn't believe it, my parents and I couldn't either. But there it was, right in front of our eyes, recorded on the camera. Some people said it was a hoax, some believe it to be a punishment from God” (p. 6). The townspeople and the parents turn to logical reasoning, trying to solve the mystery, but the sister refuses to side with their skepticism. Furthermore, the phenomenon reemerges with the missing girl's poster, implying that the supernatural is ongoing, happening in a cycle; it is not merely a legend or hallucination. Plus, the documentary mode of the camcorder—normally a sign of realism—has captured the inexplicable, which all the people are able to see, though with no explanation of how the events have happened.

On the contrary, we can also claim that there exist some elements of the fantastic, as in the characters' reactions toward the supernatural or the uncanny. They are surprised, terrified, and confused, because these occurrences are not natural. They are eerie at best and deadly at worst, even though at the end, they have to regard it as the truth—at least temporarily— in order to escape the danger. Louis Vax defines this impact of the uncanny as a feature of “the fantastic, and claims that the uncanny and the fantastic are almost synonymous. The fantastic is the result of the mysterious, the awe-inspiring, and the sacred, rather than the threat to a conventional view of reality” (Vax, 1960, p. 124). In this regard, it is possible to see the fantastic in the narrative; however, since the narrator's attitude and authorial reticence incline toward the realism of the supernatural, it is more efficient to categorize it as magical realism.

As for the symbols, most elements of the story are contradictory. The tree house, which is normally a place for children to play and entertain themselves, is a dark, supernatural portal to hell. When the house is suspended in the darkness, the reader also feels the suspension of disbelief. The double doors of the house, which both ended up in hell, suggest the final, inescapable torment awaiting these seemingly innocent kids. Finally, the missing poster with the phrase ‘Descending to hell’ suggests recurrence and points out that the phenomenon is still active, shifting the fantastic to real; that death is truly inevitable. Hence, the images in the symbols represent a resolved duality which is tainted by elements of horror, fear and the uncanny.

## 4. Conclusion

This study has argued that these four short stories employ magical realism, the fantastic, and symbolic representation to depict how the author blends reality and the supernatural in order to address real-world social, existential, and philosophical truths. Through a close reading of the texts, it becomes evident that each story engages with Chanady's (1985) concept of unresolved versus resolved antinomy in distinct ways. In "The Tree House", a supernatural, abandoned portal symbolizes the inescapable demise and the unreliable nature of the unknown. In "The Stone Wings", a girl's transformation into a caged figure with wings as a burden captures the tragic weight of knowledge and truth within an oppressive system. "The Black Box" revolves around a mysterious object that reflects each person's innermost desires, while "The Great Mirage of Alta" portrays a young woman's journey toward a city that may hold the secret of a path toward self-understanding. In each case, magical realism and the fantastic modes are in alignment with the symbolic imagery to convey deeper truths. As demonstrated, understanding the evolving nature of magical realism and fantastic as narrative modes deepens our appreciation of the magic and reality combined. Additionally, it proves an employment across various cultures and contexts—not only within Latin American literature, but also in postmodern and contemporary narratives. Lastly, magical realism and the fantastic remind us that truth is not only realized through logic, but it can also be felt, imagined, and seen in the deep layers of the inexplicable.

**Bio-data:** Kosar Taherifard is a Ph.D. student in English Literature at Razi University.

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