

## Keeping the Fire of Hope: An Optimistic Approach of a Chaotic Society in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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### ABSTRACT

*Reading *The Road* is a journey through the ashes of conflicts and natural catastrophes. Social unknown reasons have turned interpersonal relationship into moments of selfishness and a constant appeal to confrontation for the survival of some individuals and the destruction of human community. Characters are doomed in the rampant darkness of death and evil. Nonetheless, at the heart of destruction lies the possibility for rebirth. Variety in characters bears the seeds of questioning war logic and yielding answers that lead to hope and optimism.*

**Keywords:** chaos – community – destruction – darkness – hope.

### INTRODUCTION

*The Road* is both the title and the setting of Cormac McCarthy's 2007 Pulitzer-winning novel. All the events in this novel occur on roads. The aim of the nameless main characters is also to follow the road that would lead them south. From its start onto its end, the novel is a process toward an expectation. This move from a prior location to another reveals their will for betterment, for change. Social realities could be questionable to such an extent that inaction could amount to their death. Set in a post-apocalyptic environment, the novel is analyzed through the lens of social skepticism, postwar anti-humanist attitudes, fear and faith. These themes stand as questions this work should answer so that it would abide by Jonathan Culler's (1997: 63) requirement for a work to be "answering questions posed by a 'horizon of expectations'". These expectations are what triggers movement in TR. Characters could be like any human being whose aims and selves can be described as made of fears and hopes. The approach of *The Road* (TR) is an approach that brings out the embedded conflicting stories as Butler (2002: 40) suggests: "Postmodernist thought sees the culture as containing a number of perpetually competing stories, whose effectiveness depends not so much on an appeal to an independent standard of judgement, as upon their appeal to the communities in which they circulate". The novel categorizes the few remaining people between 'good' and 'bad' people onto whom

lies the response to the events of TR. It depicts conflict and its aftermath as well. Nevertheless, it offers possibilities "strongly opposed to those 'dominant ideologies' that help to maintain the status quo" (40). There will therefore be an attempt at breaking away from conflicts, from opposition in order to make life look different from the depiction in the main part of TR: "the call for languor and of death" (15). How can this work turn the post-apocalyptic context of TR into an Eden-garden heaven context? Through TR, could there be a new way of portraying the world through new philosophical and political interpretative opportunities as a movement toward a better future?

### 1. THE CHAOTIC PANORAMA

McCarthy set his characters on the road: "they were on the road all day" (86). They were therefore on the move, walking away from a setting that he described in details: "the country was looted, ransacked, ravaged. Rifled of every crumb" (109). The road is the symbol of transience, danger and the fight for survival. It represents a larger place from where one can see the extent of damages, from where the travelers could describe both the country and the town "abandoned" (126). We face the aftermath of an armed conflict at both a smaller and a larger scale. The few remaining people on the road make the journey for survival because they know they were "nowhere safe" (157). The physical impact of the event that compels the journey down south is ever-present.

### 1-1. Disaster and Lack of References

Chaos in TR partly originates from a disruption in the natural order and its extent is palpable.

#### 1.1.1. Natural Disaster

Impacts of what caused the mayhem that we will describe in this section are numberless. Devices amounting to weapons of mass destruction threaten natural order and equilibrium. Like the people that felt they were unsafe, the planet feared:

A distant low rumble. Not thunder. You could feel it under your feet. A sound without cognate and so without description. Something imponderable, shifting out there in the dark. The earth itself contracting. (220)

The contracting earth gave way to a pedological disruption. Destructive forces have gathered to cause devastation: "The land was gullied and eroded and barren" (149). The ever presence of unsafety in TR partly originates from cataclysmic forces like an earthquake: "It neared, growing louder. Everything, trembling. Then it passed beneath them like an underground train...it was an earthquake" (24). This catastrophe so severely affected the environment that light gave way to "nights...long and dark and cold" (12). Light is divine, eternal and uncreated as Milton (2007, 2) put it:

Hail holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first-born,  
Or of th' Eternal Coeternal beam  
May I express thee unblam'd? since God is Light,  
And never but in unapproached Light  
Dwelt from Eternity, dwelt then in thee,  
Bright effluence of bright essence increate.

This light lauded by Milton has disappeared and has been superseded by some cataclysms. The consequences of the meteorological events are "darkness" (41), "nothingness...coldness" (49). These words, as well as being the core aspects of TR, convey ideas of deprivation, indifference and loss. With darkness, characters would errand toward their destination; no light could help them move forward. They are guideless blind people willing to walk to a distant place; a desperate situation that would only trigger desperate attitudes like the following one: "My only hope is for eternal nothingness" (49). In a doomed place, reactions are mostly those of defeat and resignation when all hope is gone. Characters move along a road through places where prevailed "dead silence" (58) and in which the narrator thinks safety is totally absent

and therefore individuals' lives were at stake (157).

The sun and the moon as well as star have completely disappeared so that darkness is total and frightening. In this darkness, uncertainty reigns and all possible dangers loom. Feelings of insecurity and fear due to the natural catastrophe are coupled with feelings of loss and disconnection. The social environment is that of an apocalyptic situation with characteristics of a doomsday: "those nights were sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening ... no sound but the wind" (13). The absence of natural elements leads to the loss of the individuals and calls into the reader's mind the notion of nothingness. Nishida (Heisig, 2001: 62) conceives nothingness as "a way of expressing the negation of the self that sets itself up as a subject perceiving the objects of the world. This self had to be "made nothing" so that it could open up into its truer self." This truer self in the context of disaster is that of finitude and weakness, a self that depends on external factors to which it is tributary and in front of which it appears powerless. Its finitude is naked when the self lives "in the forest" (20) like primitive people, "under the bridge" (44) like homeless, and in the "ravine" (65) like outcast people.

Humankind is very powerless and it has lost its dynamism all through TR. It has no influence on nature and no ability to act upon its destiny. It is compelled to live a supine and shiftless life: "no lists of things to be done...there is no later. This is later. All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth is grief and ashes" (46). Monotony and even idleness are descriptive features of that post-apocalyptic road life that lacks temporal and geographic references.

#### 1.1.2. The Lack of References

The aftermath of natural disasters is obviously chaotic. The first account is the absence of names. Names, as socializing elements are totally absent in TR. Through name of people and places, people embark on a socializing process. Names act as landmarks that assign people and places some identities and a socio-political power (Guillourel, 2012). For sure, the places that are destroyed by the catastrophe and the people that survived that catastrophe do have names but the author is making a political and an ideological rupture from the past by refusing their names. As such, neither roads, nor people nor days have names. Characters in TR have no name. The single name mentioned is "Ely" (142) but it turned to be a fake name. The reader

has no reference of the identity of the two main characters, the father and the son. The son calls the father "Pa" but the father never calls his son by his name. Both characters could be any father or any son in the world testifying the universality of their fate.

Like the characters, the road, after which the novel is named, is nameless. This could seem weird in a western country to have a main road and other roads built by the state and that can be located on a map: "These are our roads, the black lines on the map. The state roads" (36) be nameless. The descriptive reference is the following: "the long black road" (51). The definite article does not really confirm the specificity of the road. On the contrary, it raises more confusion in the reader's mind since the reference could mean a detail that he/she has overlooked in the process of setting up an intimacy with the ongoing events in the novel.

Beside the lack of spatial reference or toponymy, TR lacks time references. The events that are narrated in the novel can neither be set on a precise day "a nameless day" (103) nor at a specific moment of a year "what time of year?" (220). There is no record of life before and after the occurrence of the catastrophe because of the lack of spatial and time references. The survivors seem to have become amnesic about their past and have lost any link with their milieu. They "had little notion of where they were" (107). This situation of total loss of reference unveils the extent of the catastrophe. The disruption is serious to such an extent that "there's not any more states" (36), cities were "looted and exhausted" (152) and hamlets "burned to nothing" (161). Though the presence of characters in TR testifies that there are survivors to the catastrophe, their number is meaningless compared to the general population "bones of dead creatures sprawled in the ashes" (149). Their presence and movement amount to "no movement of life" (66). In addition, despite the reflection of Bachelard (1958: 50) about intimacy: "a knowledge of intimacy, localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates" that prioritizes the need for spatial references over time references; we can argue that both are useful in order to make fiction realistic. It is useful in order to establish a knowledge intimacy with a work of fiction.

The reader of TR has no reference of the size of the population except a vague estimation by the surviving father and his son:

- How many people do you think are alive?

- In the world?
- In the world. Yes.
- I don't think there are many. (205)

The lack of precision also deals with the categorization of living people. There is a binary division of people in TR. Bad guys, "an army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrapping" (77) opposed to "good guys" (118). The reasons why the people are divided into good and bad in TR do not exist. There are indeed testimonies of atrocities: "Huddled against the black wall were naked people, male and female...on the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt" (93). There are also reports of horrible scenes: "human bodies. Sprawled in every attitude. Dried and shrunken in their rotted clothes" (40). Nevertheless, TR lacks details about the authors of such atrocities and their motives. The novel often refers to fear "dreams of peril" (15), burning (10) and looting (109) without specification about why there is "a man in peril" (15), what caused the burning and who committed the looting. The absence of any discursive element acting as guidance for the reader matches the will of the narrator to follow a prescription of an old man in TR: "I don't want anybody talking about me. To say where I was or what I said when I was there...in times like these the less said the better" (144-145). Times are so troubled and insecure that silence, composure and refusal of disclosure would warrant safety and survival. That could justify the fact that there is no reference to a specific self as an identifying element and an obvious referential element whose mentioning could call the novel TR to one's mind. Nonetheless, Carroll (2014: 1) sees violence as "the underlying structure of human motives and passions". Therefore, we can sense innate violence as the element that triggered all the mess.

Though characters are unknown, TR depicts their living conditions. Those conditions are among the most miserable.

### **1-2. Misery-Stricken Survivors**

The scarce population of survivors in TR is a doomed community, deprived of anything that could bear fruit and life: "barren, silent" (4). Multiple details like "the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste" (9), and "the only thing that moved in the streets was the blowing ash" (20) constantly recall the lifelessness and the fruitlessness of the environment. Life is obviously unbearable if not impossible given that everything constantly

recalls death and listlessness (15) and fills survivors with their memories. Though these survivors are alive, their presence does not cast away the rampant death and the testimonies of mayhem and chaos. The amount of evidences that recall apocalypse is so overwhelming that the presence of people amounts to nothing. The number of surviving characters in the whole novel is an infinitesimal portion of the ante-apocalyptic population. Their presence is both the absence of those that died and the presence of death, a permanent recall of loss, powerlessness and deprivation.

Characters are fated to experience hunger and suffering in the atmosphere of deprivation. The boy is "scrawny and filthy" (124) and another man "lean, wiry, rachitic" (54). These physical appearances could stem from the lack of food as stated: "they'd not eaten in two days" (170). In addition, the quality of the rare food they had could justify their miserable outlook: "In an old bat board smokehouse they found a ham gambreled up in a high corner. It looked like something fetched from a tomb, so dried and drawn" (15). For their survival, they have to eat what their hands fall on: "They sat on the pack and ate handfuls of the dirty snow" (86). The truth is that they could not turn down what fortune offers them given that "it is foolish to ask for luxuries in times like these" (142). With this quality of food, they give up the noblest pleasure as categorized by Muhammad Ibn (Gelder, 2000: 1) "Pleasures may be divided into six classes, to wit, food, drink, clothes, sex, scent and sound. Of these, the noblest and most consequential is food."

Throughout the novel, dialogue between the father and the son is scarce. When it exists, it is as brief as possible. The scarcity and brevity of speech could be linked to the scarcity of feeding. The mouth rarely opens for an output of words because it rarely opens for an intake of food. The mouth is where "food goes in where words come out" (Gelder, 3). The fuel that triggers speech is the amount and the quality of the food that is taken in. The fewer it is the less words it produces and the less is socializing in TR. Survivors live in a "food desert" (Walker, Keane and Burkea, 2010: 1) since there is no supermarket or market where they can get food. Socializing therefore gives way to cannibalism. People feed on one another for survival (93), becoming wolves to one another. Social instincts vanish in front of misery and hunger. Responding to calls for help: "Please help us" (93), characters run away from one another: "Run. Run....Run,...We have to run" (94) in

order to save their lives. Characters could not afford humanism. Rather, they turn to cannibalism for survival. In the attempt to survive, characters like any social beings have their interests set in conflict with those of others.

Their emotional state does not differ from their miserable physical appearance. They were often "scared" (185) and they spent time in total despair: "There were few nights lying in the dark that he did not envy the dead" (194). The father made a descriptive statement about themselves that traduces the turmoil and uneasiness they were experiencing: "we're the walking dead in a horror film" (47). That horror is acute to an extent that neither fire: "no fires to dry by" nor light was available: "those nights....sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening" (13). In that total darkness, they trudged through ash: "It took two days to cross that ashen scabland" (13). Everything that could favor life or its thriving has been destroyed and the exiting elements testify that the survivors are in a "Desolate country" (14). The desolation of the country matches with the appearance of a character: "He was as burnt looking as the country, his clothing scorched and black. One of his eyes was burnt shut and his hair was but a nitty wig of ash upon his blackened skull" (42). Dirt has taken hold of people and dehumanized them. They are poor looking as the country itself, deprived of anything that could arise envy in anyone to visit that place or hope that the land could recover from the trial it has gone through. The country and people are just eyesores. In fact, people are additive evidence to the misery of the country. They would not be characters of TR if they looked different from the description above. They are determined by their milieu and destined to face misery and suffering since the surrounding atmosphere is the embodiment of nothingness and desolation. The milieu that is said to be "not safe" (36) is in fact marred by some constant dangers that compel the travelling people to keep a "constant watch behind ...in the mirror" (21) of the cart they were pushing.

The setting of TR in an atmosphere characterized by air filled with smoke and ash, by a severe lack of food and an extreme winter triggers some questioning about the young boy's health. Would he put up with all these unfavorable living conditions? He eventually fell ill before reaching their destination. His disease is another opportunity to assess the level of misery and how deprived the milieu is. The boy got sick: "He cupped the boy's forehead in his hand. He was burning"

(208) while the father was powerless before the situation of sickness: "He was terrified" (208). Everything he could do was prayer: "conjuring up a coolness that would not come" (208-209) since he did not have the medicine to cure the boy. His prayer is an admittance of his powerlessness.

The boy's physical growth was also at stake given the unavailability of medical units or medicines: "He needed vitamin D... or he was going to get rickets" (220). It is doubtless that pediatric services do not exist, which situation stands as a worsening detail of the deprivation of that nameless territory.

All these evidences about the impact of the catastrophe and the conflict on this territory lacking toponymical and anthroponomical details have proved that events in TR occur in a sterile environment, unable to make life thrive. The fiction is filled with testimonies of chaos and doom. Darkness amounting to devastation, deprivation and loss compels readers to perceive chaos after an overview of TR. Nevertheless, hope is at hand reach. The light that could make the rampant darkness vanish does exist in TR. The characters are obviously aware of the possibility that lies within the chaos given that they do not give up any search. Their movement on the road is a testimony of the latent conviction that the prevailing situation could be dealt with and overcome. The movement they undertake is actually a form of resistance to loss and chaos.

## 2. RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

TR constantly recalls darkness. Though there has been burnings, nowhere is there a reference to smog as the result of the encounter of chemical smoke and sunlight ([www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/smog](http://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/smog)) that is said to be toxic and to prevent any form of life as well as any possibility of movement. The ever-present darkness could indeed be defeated by a brighter source of light. In fact, in TR, darkness does not mean the total absence of light but its really low intensity. Travelling characters to the South felt some optimism as they longed for "a world to come" (158).

### 2-1. A community of resisters

Despite the deep darkness that we have just described, optimism can prevail since there remains a "faint light" (13) and the boy and his father were confident enough to assert: "nothing bad is going to happen to us...Because we're carrying the fire" (70). The fire they carry has a symbolic meaning as far as the Prometheus myth is concerned

(Hesiod, 1988). The fire that caused so much destruction and turned the setting of TR into "ashes of its ruin" (66) could also be the fire that would turn into a useful device, as it would bring warmth in a place so "cold to crack the stones. To take your life" (12). The father and the son aim at making the fire stand as an item of intelligence and wisdom as used in craftsmanship instead of an item of destruction as it is portrayed in TR. The fire of arms and bombs is now in the hands of good guys who use it now for cooking, heating and lighting. Besides, the father fulfills some actions that can be construed as the will to break away from the habits and visions that brought about the ongoing calamity: He'd carried his billfold about till it wore a cornershaped hole in his trousers. Then one day he sat by the roadside and took it out and went through the contents. Some money, credit cards. His driver's license. A picture of his wife. He spread everything out on the blacktop. Like gaming cards. He pitched the sweat blackened piece of leather into the woods and sat holding the photograph. Then he laid it down in the road also and then he stood and they went on. (43-44)

The father has made the decision to end the capitalist/selfish philosophy that consists in making enough money, having belongings; he has decided to forget about the hypocritical love between him and his wife who refused to face the challenges of life amidst atrocities by committing suicide. He has not stopped to the memories of his prior life but he knew he had to keep on moving ahead. Bygones should be bygones and one should draw lessons from the past to envision a brighter future made up of possibilities.

The son has also made suggestions to resist the destructive mind of human society. He kept on asking his father suggestive questions:

- What is wrong with the man?
- He's been struck by lightning.
- Can't we help him? Papa? (42).

His questioning is an appeal to charity, the expression of a will to value other people's lives. His attitude teaches an epistemic rationality given that amidst the calamity, every life matters since it is the rare opportunity that lies before humankind to avoid extinction and to maintain itself. In a context where survivors fend for themselves, the boy embark on a humanist mission. The few survivors represent the little possibility for humanity to outlive the

calamity that has been going on for more than six years.

The boy holds a vision of peace for the world he longs for. He does not want killings and armed conflicts to go on; therefore, he resists the old mentality of confrontation that grown-ups like his father have and would like to transmit to him and the new generation:

- I want you to do what I say. Take the gun.
- I don't want the gun.
- I didn't ask you if you wanted it. Take it. (60)

Conflicts have made him live under bridges, into ravines, in forests; they have disrupted the environment he lives in and the air he breathes. Conflicts have brought about social disuniting into good and bad people. This disunion is the cause of the disappearance of the cities and the states that the road outlives.

The presence of the boy in TR is the challenge for hope itself, the presence of possibilities. The boy is a political and human breakaway from confrontation and individualism. The boy is a political figure insofar as he calls for a new social order; he compels a rethinking of the management of human society. Through the boy, McCarthy inserts redemption in his novel. He describes rampant chaos and makes it co-occur with hope and possibility. He confirms the observation that makes "optimism...an inherent aspect of human nature" (Peterson, 2000: 44). Among cannibals, he sets a defender of human life, a character that champions life and is against death and death penalty. As such, he urges his father to respect the inalienable right to life of a captive of his father: "Papa, please don't kill the man...Just help him, Papa. Just help him" (216; 218). The boy's plea saved the captive's life; since the captive whom they ripped naked is given back his clothes, they restore his dignity as a human being (219). By acting as the captive's advocate, the boy confirms the salvific position he holds in his father's life: "the boy was all that stood between him and death" (25). Overall, the boy stands as the sole way out of the calamity that befell the people in TR. He uses peaceful and convincing methods to resist the prevailing social order that champions division, confrontation and death. He does not compel his father to adopt his vision of a society that values every life because every life counts for its harmony and equilibrium. On the contrary, he makes a bid for peace and freely lets his father adhere to the philosophy of non-violence.

Through the boy, there lies the possibility for life to resume in TR. Characters can recover from the severe calamity; they can start a new life from the ashes of the ancient life and they can hope for betterment. They have the intimate "necessities of survival" (Buss, 2005: 144) to keep on living.

## **2-2. Resilience**

The devastated environment of TR can mutate and become an environment in which life will thrive again. The level of development and civilization that helped build all those ruined structures is still attainable. Projects, plans as well as entertainment can take place again in TR as the book is full of clues that trigger expectations.

The travelling father held a map of a country that has become a "wasted country" (6). The places on that map did correspond to reality. Nevertheless, these apparent loss and mayhem could merge into dynamism and resurrection. The boy acted as a guide for his father out of the long nightmare: "In the dream from which he'd wakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand" (3). The cave could be a tomb from which the father representing the whole society emerges. Life cannot be trapped in the tomb of destruction, it can even blossom anew.

A new generation of people that will outlive war and cataclysm is on its way. Besides the boy, McCarthy introduces another young character standing as a seed for the burgeoning generation: "Three men and a woman. The woman walked with a waddling gait and as she approached he could see that she was pregnant" (164). Life has not stopped at all. The pregnancy testifies the dynamism of life itself, restarting and renewing itself as humans want to destroy it. Additionally, the presence of that single woman among four men and a boy maintains hope in the possibility for life to withstand the consequences of human greed and selfishness. Through that woman, new births will take place until the boy and the baby-to-come are able to reproduce themselves. All in all, the three characters – the boy, the unborn baby and the woman – maintain hope in TR. Humankind can proclaim like the father to the son: "I have you" (46).

The son stands as a redemptory character, a redeemer from suffering, an opportunity before whom all the people that committed misdeeds would admit their wrongdoings and beg for forgiveness: "I'm sorry" (224). They would embark

on a reconciliatory act that would trigger the renewal and the revival of things and beings. This attitude would answer a prior question about the rationale of all the ongoing destruction: "They are going to kill those people, aren't they....Why do they have to do that?" (107). The answer: "I don't know" meaning that immaturity and ignorance is the basis of conflicts.

Out of this confession comes an intimacy between the redemptory son, the offensive father, and his fellow bad people. They would pull the boy against them (198), they would hold the boy close (199). Out of this intimacy, they will sign a new deal as the commitment of all those who wage war to give up: "I will do what I promised. No matter what I will not send you into darkness" (209). Darkness amounting to destruction and conflicts. A new social contract is thereby signed. It is a warranty that the doom provoked by warlike people will no longer befall humanity and cause all the destruction and disorder described in *TR*. This reconciliation is another genesis succeeding the apocalypse of *TR*. Re-creation is taking place and it is going to turn the world of ashes into another world where mentalities would differ from the one of the former generation of *TR*: "In some other world the child would already have begun to vacate him from his life. But he had no life other. He knew the boy lay awake in the night and listened to hear if he were breathing" (230). The new world designed by the boy is a world where charity overtakes selfishness. It is the perfect world beyond which there is none, stemming from "the perfect day of...childhood...the day to shape the days upon" (12). All the survivors and the people to be born receive a call to live candidly, believing in the perfection of humanity and the possibility to live in a war-free world. The trumpet that will blow for the destruction of the world (Revelation, 15) will give way to "a flute from a piece of roadside cane" (66). This flute will play some music that instead of being "the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin" (66) will be "a formless music for ages to come" (66).

### CONCLUSION

*The Road* makes its reader embark in the transient movement it imposes on its characters. This movement is both an attempt at escaping rampant ruin, devastation and danger on the one hand and a strong will to show resilience on the other. The road symbolizes permanent movement away from death related items and a constant attachment to survival by enduring apocalyptic conditions. These hellish conditions consist in the

loss of onomastic and toponymical references, in the loss of light as symbol of goodness, life and hope as well as in the co-existence of fire and extreme cold. Evil and death are sticky companions of the people that make the journey given that they spend most of the time in darkness. Ashes and smoke add to the sinister side of the novel. Still, the novel is the journey through death in order to reach life. The numberless ambushes do not prevent the few "good guys" to keep up with the hope and will to live and go forward to reach their ideals and dreams. The triumph of the boy in *TR* who outlives all dangers is the victory of genuine kindness and innocence over calamity and human greed. Through this character, McCarthy would invite humankind to grow compassionate vis-à-vis suffering people and be kind-hearted so that this war-torn world will be a better place to live in. Every person, like the characters of *TR*, can be dynamic as Proust (1992) believes that our greatest hopes are not out of hand reach. Within each individual lies the strength to triumph over his/her worst fears and achieve those hopes that makes life liveable. At the bottom of any disastrous situation, at the heart of pandemics like the COVID-19 lies the tiniest opportunity to recover and resume life.

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