

MERGING THE TWO REALMS: A MAGICAL REALIST ANALYSIS OF KLUNE'S *UNDER THE WHISPERING DOOR*

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Abstract

The study examines the manifestation of magical realism in Klune's Under the Whispering Door (2021) through the lens of Wendy B. Faris's elements of magical realism from her book Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community (1995). By applying textual analysis, the article highlights the irreducible elements, such as supernatural objects and ordinary characters endowed with ability to see and communicate with ghosts, two contradictory understanding of nature as the mention of conflicting or competing interpretations disrupt conventional logic and the third element of closeness and near merging of two realms which shows the coexistence of two realms (life and death). The research not only enhances the understanding of magical realism in the present context but also underscores the significance of magical realism beyond traditional literary genres. The research eventually addresses the objectives of the study by analyzing specific lines of the novel within the context of postmodernism and the findings revealed how Klune seamlessly used magical realism to dissipate the boundaries between the real and ethereal and gave a profound study on the existence of unordinary and afterlife.

1. Background of the study and related works

American novelist, T.J. Klune- born in Roseburg, Oregon in 1982, had a passion for writing at a young age. He published his first piece of fiction at the age of eight. His fantasy novel *The House in the Cerulean Sea* (2020), as a queer novel, has become a New York Times bestseller. Klune also won the Lambda Literary Award for his book *Into this River I Drown* (2019). Beginning his career with an indie publisher, Klune reflected on his early efforts and frankly admitted the mistakes of his debut. He demonstrated his commitment to progress by writing frequently, reading extensively, and recognizing the need for editing in developing his skills. In 2016, he made the daring choice to pursue full-time writing, which brought uncertainty but reaffirmed his devotion to excellence. Klune first followed a strict writing schedule and aimed for 10,000 words per day, but subsequently realized the significance of letting the story evolve organically and rejecting excessive self-imposed word counts. His journey demonstrates a consistent commitment to self-improvement and a mindful attitude to the writing process.

On 21st September, 2021 Klune's fantasy novel, *Under the Whispering Door*, was released and was nominated for the Locus Award the same year. It has also been included in BuzzFeed's list of Best Books of 2022. *Under the Whispering Door* (2021) is a magical realist narrative about a self-centered lawyer, Wallace Price, who dies due to a heart attack. Wallace encounters a reaper when he is sitting in a church at his own funeral. Wallace refuses to accept that he's dead and demands to make him alive again, but the reaper leads him to a far away tea shop instead of taking him towards afterlife. There, Wallace meets Hug, a ferryman and the owner of the tea shop whose role is to help the dead to leave the world without worries and move towards the afterlife through a magical door in the ceiling of the fourth floor while also helping the living as an owner of a tea shop. There living with Hugo, the reaper Mei, and two other ghosts (Hugo's granddad and a dog),

Wallace experienced a lot of things and went through a huge character development. He slowly learns the importance of both life and death and becomes thoughtful from the previously egocentric self he once was when he was alive. The novel is filled with the elements of magical realism and these elements contribute to all the hilarious, heartwarming, queer, and emphatic scenes of the novel that sometimes lead to heartbreaking scenes as well. While following the two main objectives are; 'to explore the contribution of magical realism in portraying the life and post-death experiences' and 'to examine the concept of death and its impact on different characters in *Under the Whispering Door* (2021). So the study inquires about the portrayal of magical realism along with the post-death experiences and to justify the impact of 'death' on various characters in the selected novel.

The significance of the research lies in the use of magical realism in contemporary literature and the study provided an insight on how this literary form is used and applied on a specific novel. The technique of textual analysis of the present novel has identified and explored the elements of magical realism through Faris' concepts about magical world. *Under the Whispering Door* (2021) is a novel enriched with the magical realist elements and this research has proven to be instrumental in analyzing how the different magical realist scenes of the present narrative have been categorized according to the applied literary technique.

The existing literature argues magical realism as a genre which deals mundane to supernaturalism and vice versa which relates this selected novel to be written under the influence of postmodernism. Begum (2014) has explained that a response to colonialism's growth is postcolonial discourse. Both postmodernism and postcolonialism use a variety of methods and themes in common. These two narratives frequently use magic realism, history, marginality, irony, and allegory. Magical realism, although closely related to other forms such as fantasy and metafiction, encompasses both the ordinary and the extraordinary. Salman Rushdie was a postmodern writer who uses magical aspects that defy logic yet are still part of the story. These components fit the definition of magic realism as it is applied in postmodernism. In postmodern literature, magic realism addressed the topics that are fundamental to postmodern concerns and is used as a tool to question accepted conventions in a variety of spheres of public life. Roger & Sasser (2020) has visualized that Latin America and magical realism have been inseparably intertwined in the common imagination, with both good and bad overtones. Recently, writers tackling varied subjects such as feminism, ethnic narratives, post-memorial Holocaust stories, trauma literature, terrorism, and globalization have found worldwide adaption in this genre. These alterations have been studied by scholars such as Frederick Luis Aldama, Jenni Adams, Eugene Arva, and Sara Upstone, among others. Although many prominent Latin American authors turned away from magical realism following Garcia Márquez's Nobel Prize and subsequent global recognition, its breakthrough in Latin America impacted writers from various cultural and political peripheries. Currently, magical realism has an extended influence in places as disparate as Anglo Britain and the United States, and spans numerous timeframes preceding the Boom era and continuing to the modern day. Its topics ranged widely throughout the literary spectrum, from feminism and trauma to globalization and beyond. Slemon (1988) explored the concept of magic realism in literature and its challenges in terms of classification and differentiation from neighboring genres. Slemon discussed that the expansion of magic realism is beyond Latin America and the Caribbean to include other regions, such as English Canada, and emphasizes its association with cultures at the fringes of mainstream literary traditions. Slemon has aimed to position magic realism within the context of post-colonial cultures as a unique form of literary

discourse by using examples from two Canadian novels to demonstrate how they reflect social and historical relations. It highlighted the battle between realism and fantasy in magic realist fiction, its resistance to hierarchical arrangements of narrative modes, and its ability to mirror the speech and cognition within post-colonial cultures.

Bennet's (1999) work focused on the magical realist genre in twentieth-century Latin American fiction. The theoretical reinforcements of magical realism are addressed in the first portion, which is divided into three chapters. The first chapter narrated the evolution of critical debate surrounding magical realism, outlining important obstacles. The second part explained the literary foundations of magical realism in Europe and Latin America, while the third chapter delved into the political and artistic implications of the genre. It investigated the genre's dependence on realist approaches to depict magical happenings, as well as its distinguishing features in comparison to other types of realism. Furthermore, this chapter focused on a special postcolonial setting associated with magical realist fiction, in which South and Central American writers' consciousness incorporates both colonizer and colonized cultures, hence influenced the structure of emotion in magical realism. Suyoufie (2009) has delved into the use of magical realism as a technique to investigate the nature of reality in Ghadah al-Sammn's collection of short novellas entitled as *'The Square Moon'* (1994) (al-Qamar al-Murabba'). While her novels evoke a sense of "wonder" (al-dahshah) through summoning a sense of "wonder," al-Sammn's principal goal is to criticize modern Arab culture. Each of the writer's pieces covers a different subject related to the Arab world's cultural, social, and economic situations. Suyoufie's study analyses issues like as the supernatural, exile, identity, and gender by framing al-Sammn's body of work within a postmodern and postcolonial context. Finally, it is proposed that al-Sammn sees her as a line through which her illusion of the magical and supernatural injects new life into what appears to be a drained universe. On the other hand Feignenblatt (2009) emphasized Gabriel Garcia Marquez's importance in contemporary Latin American literature as a reflection of the regions of socio-political reality. It examines how he successfully depicts the socio-cultural uniqueness of Latin America from the viewpoint of common people by employing magical realism, notably through the genre of historiographic metafiction. Marquez's writings give voice to the widely held idea that the rest of the world is unable to grasp the area, which leads one to believe that Latin America carries the weight of its solitude. Writing of Rave (2003) has offered a brief introduction of magical realism with an emphasis on its definition, history, and applications in art and literature. Rave's article follows the evolution of the phrase from Franz Roh, a German art critic, who used it for the first time, through Latin American writers like Miguel Angel Asturias, Angel Flores, and Alejo Carpentier, who explored it. Notable writers like Gabriel Garcia Mikquez and Isabel Allende's viewpoints are also examined, as are those of the critics Enrique Anderson, Seymour Menton, Massimo Bontempelli, and André Breton. The definition of magical realism varies between Europe and Latin America, with the latter's creatives drawing inspiration from its particular experiences. Rave's project consists of 26 pieces of art that reflect how she views magical realism.

2. Faris's Stance of magical realism in literature

The qualitative approach is adapted to analyze Klune's *Under the Whispering Door* (2021) while applying postmodern technique for analyzing the various aspects of magical realism provided by Wendy B. Faris in her book *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995). The selected novel has been navigated between two coexisting realms that disrupted the assigned perceptions of reality. Two contradictory events that challenged one's notion of the real world have been presented as something normal in the novel. The analysis has revealed the subtle coexistence

of these realms which then offered insights into how the text challenges and redefines established notions of reality through the lens of magical realism. In Sheherazade's *Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction*, a section from the Faris's book *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995), magical realism combined with realistic settings naturally emerges within the portrayed reality. Faris explained this magical world as:

1. **Phenomenal world** within reality as an "**irreducible element**".
2. **Conflicting interpretations** of events as "**a strong presence of the phenomenal world**".
3. Two contradictory understanding of events as "**the convergence of two contrasting realms**".
4. The concept of "**closeness and near merging of two realms**"
5. "**Exploration of time, space, and identity.**"

Three of the Faris's magical realist elements have been applied which are the irreducible elements, closeness or near merging of two realms and two contradictory understanding of events for the nature of the text. Faris has described "irreducible element" as events that resist explanations, such as logic and common knowledge. These situations have been frequently seen in traditional myths or folklore, which have caused readers to uncover proof supporting the integrity of events and people and disturb the conventional logic of cause and consequence. When actual yet remarkable occurrences have been combined with causal disturbances and depicted without criticism, reality appeared impossible or unreasonable. Despite neatly merging into the story, irreducible elements has become a surprise and hint at one's odd character. Magical realism has emphasized both the absurdity and normalization of these events which then reflects on the remarkable features of life. In magical realism, "closeness or near merging of two realms" refers to the blending of the mystical and real worlds which results in a story in which fantastic components coexist smoothly with normal life. This attribute has blurred the distinction between reality and imagination and allowed remarkable occurrences to occur in ordinary situations and questions conventional notions of reality. This close fusion has indicated a distinct connection between magical forces and human experiences, which then provided levels of meaning as humans across the world in which the supernatural is considered normal. Frequently, magical realism has weaved old cultural histories into the current world and combined the spiritual with the material in a rhythmic, metaphysical combination. The element of "two contradictory understanding of events" refers to a situation or tale in which there are conflicting or competing interpretations of a series of events. This feature is typically seen in magical realist writing or narrative when various characters and topics of belief provide contrasting interpretations of the same events. In literature, authors purposely provide contradictory interpretations in order to add complexity, ambiguity, and layers of meaning to the narrative. This method is engaging by pushing one to consider many points of view and question the authenticity of various characters or sources of information.

3. Critical reading of the text

The textual analysis of *Under the Whispering Door* (2021) focused on Klune's adequate use of magical realism which then resulted in a story that blurs the '**boundary between magic and reality**'. Each selected line from the selected novel has been thoroughly analyzed to reveal Klune's deliberate creation of a universe in which magical elements not only coexist but also enhanced daily life. The research has emphasized the points in the text where Klune's narrative strategies expose magical realism which has allowed the reader to enter a universe that defies conventional reality. The research has revealed the subtle yet effective ways in which Klune employs magical realism to elicit amazement and contemplation in one's mind. The study thus

eventually increased one's knowledge of how magical realism is highlighted by using the method of textual analysis.

“Here he was, sitting in the back of the church, staring at himself in the front of the church, lying in a casket.” (Klune, 2021, p.16) The given text shows how the protagonist, Wallace, finds himself in peculiar circumstances where he is **‘simultaneously present into two realms’** within the church. This duality of Wallace's existence, sitting in the back of the church while also observing his own body lying in a casket at the front, challenged the traditional notions of reality. This blending of the ordinary setting of a church with the extraordinary experience of being observed both as a ghost and a corpse has exemplified the magical realist technique of seamlessly blending the fantastical elements into the usual and realistic life that created a narrative that surpasses traditional boundaries between the real and the magical. *“Feeling like he was in two places at once, staring up at the ceiling while also staring down at himself.”* (Klune, 2021, p.18) This experience is from when Wallace took his last breath and the situation has been described by Wallace himself. It implies a simultaneous presence in two distinct spatial orientations. This sensation of existing in two places at once is unique to magical realism as a fantastical aspect like this violates traditional laws. The duality of Wallace looking up at the ceiling and down at himself from two different situations as one is a dead body has given a peculiar element to the story by showing two contradictory understanding of nature. This depiction of coincidences has contradicted views and expanded the overall magical realist atmosphere, in which the lines between the ordinary and the unordinary have purposefully been blurred.

“She grinned. “Oh, man. Just you wait.” She raised her hand toward him, turning her palm up. She pressed her thumb and middle fingers together and snapped. The cool, spring sun was shining down on his face. He took a stumbling step back, looking around wildly. Cemetery. They were in a cemetery.” (Klune, 2021, p.25)

At his funeral, Wallace meets a woman who could see him. She introduced herself as his grim reaper that was here to take him towards next life. In these lines, the magical realist element is portrayed through Mei, the reaper's ability to manipulate the surroundings. As a reaper, Mei can switch places with just a snap of her fingers. Mei's casual gesture of snapping takes a supernatural turn and Wallace finds himself from the church to a cemetery. This abrupt shift from the church to a cemetery, where Wallace's dead body is going to be buried, is a smooth integration of the magical into ordinary life and is one of the first representation of irreducible elements in the novel. The casual manner in which Mei wields this magical power leaves Wallace disoriented and adds an element of surprise and wonder. The sudden change of setting through a seemingly simple gesture underscores the fantastical nature of the story while maintaining a connection to the ordinary world.

“He was hit by a car. Wait. He should have been hit by a car. The car approached, the headlights bright. He managed to bring up his hands in time to block his face, only to have the car go through him”. (Klune, 2021, p.32)

In this passage, the magical realist aspect is powerfully depicted as Wallace witnesses a **‘supernatural occurrence’** after his death. Wallace's accident with the car, which should have been fatal but instead the car went through him in other direction defies reality. This incident calls

into question the traditional notion of mortality and provides a magical aspect in which living and dead are in the same place, thus showing the element of merging realms in the passage.

“The house itself looked as if it had started out one way, and then halfway through the builders had decided to go in another direction entirely. The best way Wallace could think of to describe it was that it looked like a child stacking block after block on top of one another, making a precarious tower. The house looked as if even the smallest breeze could send it tumbling down. The chimney wasn’t crooked, per se, but more twisted, the brickwork jutting out at impossible angles...People come from all over to see it. It’s pretty famous, for obvious reasons.” (Klune, 2021, p.41)

Charon's Crossing, a not so ‘**ordinary looking tea shop**’, provides tea and breakfast in the morning to humans but caters the ghosts at night. It has an exquisite outlook that is described in the selected passage. When Wallace shows his disbelief in the structure of Charon's Crossing by saying: *“It doesn’t look safe. It’s obviously not up to code. It’s going to fall down at any moment.”*(Klune, 2021, p.42) Mei mentions that people come from all over to see a pretty famous place, for obvious reasons, which implies recognition of something remarkable as the precarious building of the tea shop is ordinary for the humans who come to the tea shop every day and have not been thinking of it as something out of the ordinary. Though, the humans show their astonishment and amusement at the architecture of the tea shop but took it very normally as compared to Wallace who is now a ghost and still scared to go inside the building fearing that it will fall. This scenario aligns with the magical realist tradition and shows the merging realms as humans and ghosts both come to this tea shop and also a contradictory understanding of nature as to how a building like this is even standing and seems so ordinary for the people who come for breakfast daily.

“He sighed and reached for the cup, expecting his hand to pass through it, ready to glare at Hugo as if to say See? But then he felt the warmth of the tea, and he gasped when his fingers touched the surface of the cup. It was solid. It was solid.” (Klune, 2021, p.60)

After entering the tea shop, Wallace meets two other ghosts and a human. The tea shop owner, Hugo is a human and also a ferryman who guides and helps the dead in moving towards the afterlife. The other two ghosts are Hugo's grandfather Nelson and his dog Apollo. Every ghost who comes to the tea shop is offered a unique tea and the same thing happens with Wallace as well. Wallace was not expecting to touch the cup without his hand going through it and this expectation clashes with the tea cup's definite reality which creates a distinct magical realism aspect in these lines. As Wallace is now a ghost, the traditional assumption, and his previous car accident experience made Wallace think that his hand would pass through the cup. However, the surprising feeling of warmth and the tangible touch of the cup's surface defied this assumption and questioned the accepted conventions of reality. *“These teacups are special,” Hugo said. “For people like you.”* (Klune, 2021, p.60) The special cups used to offer tea to a ghost, just like Wallace, has taken on symbolic meaning and presented as an irreducible element as these are some magical cups for the dead ones only. It indicates a link to the mystical and challenges the common perception of teacups as ordinary things, thus imbuing them with a deeper and otherworldly

significance as these special tea cups make the ghosts remind them of their best memories from the time when they were human.

“No. Why would it? It’s true. You’re a ghost. Grandad and Apollo too. And you’re not the first, nor will you be the last. Charon’s Crossing is always haunted, though not like most people think. We don’t have anyone rattling chains or causing a ruckus.” (Klune, 2021, p.90)

In these lines, the explanation of Charon's Crossing's bizarre nature adds to the novel's magical realist environment. The **‘existence of ghosts’**, including Wallace, Nelson, and Apollo, in Charon's Crossing is consistent with the magical realism idea of merging realms. The tea shop is a place for both living and dead and so it blurs the boundary between life and death by catering to both humans and ghosts. The casual acceptance of ghosts as usual in Charon's Crossing represents the merging of the magical and the ordinary, which is a distinctive feature of magical realism.

“Children are different. Their connections to life are stronger.”... Hugo said, “Part of them lingers because they burn so brightly in such a short amount of time. While I slept, Lea thought of her mother. And it somehow manifested itself to Nancy. She was hundreds of miles away.” (Klune, 2021, p.203)

In these lines, magical realism and children's particular **‘relationship to life and the afterlife’** has been addressed. The phrase about the children being different than the other spirits is used by Hugo to symbolize a unique character or energy linked with children even after their death. The concept of the children’s connection to their parents even after death has been explained in these lines. Hugo elaborates on this topic by explaining how Lea, a child ghost, kept missing her mother dearly even after she died and how Lea's thoughts somehow presented to Nancy despite their physical distance as **Nancy was in the real world while Lea was now a ghost**. This event has defied conventional explanations and the lingering presence of Lea and her connectivity with her mother via supernatural manifestations adds to the contradictory understanding of nature.

“Except Alan shouted, “Nancy!” The light bulbs in the sconces flared. Nancy stopped, her hand on the doorknob ... Nancy turned toward the sound of his voice as she frowned ...The tables on either side of him shifted as if someone had bumped into them, sloshing tea and knocking muffins over.” (Klune, 2021, p.273)

These lines have been taken when Alan was screaming angrily at every human's face inside the tea shop. Alan was another **‘ghost’** who came to the tea shop and was unable to accept death. When Alan saw that Hugo was giving special attention to one lady, Nancy the mother of Lea, who is very sensitive to supernatural happenings, Alan screams her name. This scene from the present novel is an example of magical realism which combined the ordinary and the magical. Alan's yelling is accompanied by a startling flare in the light bulbs and a disruption in the physical environment of the human world merges the two realms, the dead and the living. The synchrony between Alan's vocalization and the immediate consequences of it in the human world and on humans also implies a link between the real and magical world, hence showing the aspect of closeness and near merging of two realms.

“It’s ... apt. For what he is. An empty shell of who he used to be. His humanity is gone. Everything that made him who he is, every memory, every feeling, it’s just ... gone. And there’s nothing I can do to bring him back. That was my first earthquake as a ferryman. I’d failed someone.” (Klune, 2021, p.201)

In these lines from the selected novel, the notion of a husk is portrayed as a sad indication of the aftermath if a ghost tries to leave Hugo's tea shop. Hugo refers to the husk in these lines as an empty shell that is devoid of the emotions, sense of humanity, and thoughts that formerly distinguished an individual. This picture deviates beyond the usual bounds of reality and enters into the world of magical realism. This narrative shows how ‘**death**’ has been different for different ghosts and humans. While Hugo learned so much after his death, Cameron was someone who was unable to accept death which then resulted in him becoming someone devoid of any human emotions.

“It was just a door. In the ceiling, yes, but it was still just a door. It was wooden, the frame around it painted white...A hush had fallen in the house around them as if it held its very breath.” (Klune, 2021, p.213)

This section from *Under the Whispering Door* (2021) includes a magical realist aspect by describing ‘**an ordinary door in an exceptional location—the ceiling**’. The author has emphasized the door's ordinary characteristics, such as its wooden structure and white-painted frame, which adds to the feeling of normality yet the placement of the door in the ceiling shows the contradictory understanding of nature. The magical realism touch is clear when the story discusses the home holding its breath. This personification of the home, in response to the presence of the odd door, brings a touch of the magic into the ordinary surroundings. The suspicious setting implies a mystical environment and the strong presence of something magical (the whispering door) as that ordinary-looking door was the place through which the dead move towards the afterlife. This merging of the ordinary and the exceptional characteristic of the door shows irreducible element epitomizes the novel's magical realism which results in causing one to question the distinction between the real and the imaginary.

“There, standing in the road, was a stag. It was bigger than any stag Wallace had ever seen in pictures. Even from a distance, the creature looked as if it would tower over all of them ... Wallace could see flowers hanging from the antlers, their roots embedded into the velvet, blossoms in shades of ochre and fuchsia, cerulean and scarlet, canary and magenta. At the tips of its antlers were tiny white lights, as if the bones were filled with stars.” (Klune, 2021, p.293)

The novel repeatedly discusses the character ‘**the Manager**’, who is a mysterious and powerful character and works at a cosmic level. He hired Hugo as a ferryman and Mei as a reaper, and assigned Hugo assignments for the dead ones who need help crossing towards the afterlife. The Manager enters the scene with a sense of power that demands attention as everyone and everything at the tea shop stops moving. These lines are taken from when the manager's first appearance can be seen. Outside the tea shop, he appears as a mystical stag that is bigger than any stag Wallace had ever seen. These words depict a colorful and imaginative setting that reflects the novel's magical realist themes. The look of a particularly huge stag with its antlers decorated with blooming flowers and lights has defied the confines of ordinary reality. The manager's magnificent and surreal features as a stag with antlers resembling a cosmic display of stars and bright colors of

embedded flowers evoke surprise and enchantment in the reader's minds. This description of the stag, which goes beyond the natural stag one can see on earth is an example of magical realism and shows both the merging realm, as the cosmic figure is one the land of human beings, as well as an irreducible element, as the manager can shift his appearance.

3. Findings and discussion

The study revealed the Klune's unified use of magical realism in *Under the Whispering Door* (2021) to depict the merging of two realms in the form of life and death. The method of textual analysis is applied to identify the key concepts in which Klune has effortlessly intertwined the ordinary and extraordinary, such as the portrayal of Charon's Crossing tea shop, which serves both the living and the dead. The characters' distinct post-death experiences, notably those of Wallace, Alan, Cameron, Lea, and Nancy have demonstrated how each character has been affected by the death in both positive and negative ways. Wallace showed character growth after his death from his egocentric personality to a caring one, while Lea, Cameron, and Alan showed resistance towards death and reactions to death. Characters of Hugo and Mei, who can see and communicate with ghosts as well as humans were actually humans and so connected both realm which emphasized the merging of two realms. Furthermore, the tea shop's creative structure and a mysterious door on the ceiling of the shop leading to the afterlife symbolize the presence of magical realism and questioned the traditional views of death and the afterlife. Thus, the study has explained that Klune used magical realism to seamlessly blend the two realms and how this blending has impacted the different characters of the novel.

It is concluded that Klune has used magical realism to portray the post-death experiences of the characters and these experiences have also impacted the individual growth of most of the characters. The presence of such a whimsical tea shop, which stands out as a unique construction yet it is depicted as something normal for the humans who come in the morning for breakfast and teas, explains the presence of irreducible element in the novel. The coexistence of both humans and ghosts inside that tea shop is a remarkable example of the merging of two realms.

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