

An Existential Reading of *Family Ties*

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Abstract

Examining different characters of *Family Ties* (Lispector, 1972), the present paper aims at demonstrating Clarice Lispector's projection of ties at various different levels often starting with family ties, stretching between individuals, objects, and natural world and then untying or losing previously existing ties. The paper highlights the attention she pays to the anxiety concerning all the disturbances of the body and the mind that has been so long denied. Through the research it is shown how her different characters respond to the cultivation of self, and bestows prominent attention to self-respect resulting from self-doubt. Her experimentations with female characters are not confined to the conflict of male and female; rather it continues with multifarious themes which find their abode in her collection of thirteen short stories entitled *Lacos de Familia* (*Family Ties*) where she writes about human suffering and failure, the disarray of humanity, human's total awareness of inevitable alienation and the pressing need to overcome danger, and the most forcefully of all, encountering ultimate nothingness. Influenced by existentialist writers, Lispector illuminates the conflict between public and private self, and magnifies the terror upon realizing the failure of language to communicate; that results into the use of different tools of language to find a rescue (Pontiero, 1972. p. 134). Though the existential struggle of the characters consists of series of paradoxes with no solution, the paper will discuss the steps they have taken and the time they have passed through.

Introduction

Human desire has been presented by the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector (1920-1977) as being inseparable from language. Her formula of paying attention on self resembles the idea of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984), who attributed the importance to self-respect and promotes the idea that "self-respect is exercised by depriving oneself of pleasure or by confining one's indulgence to marriage or procreation" (Foucault, 1986. P. 41). Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), the German philosopher also points out in *Being and Time* (1996), that science and reason are the highest obstacles to human self-development for presenting humans only as objects of impersonal investigation and practical manipulation since human existence could not be valued through rational-scientific thinking or through social practice, but only by examining and upholding one's self. He also looked for an alternative to the objectification of language. Likewise, Lispector unties or sets loose the ties among family members to let them experience crises so that they become aware of their existence, experience nothingness, and face absolute freedom. While facing this absolute freedom, just to avoid the anxiety, some of them choose to retreat back into their secured shells rather than consciously bearing the burden of responsibility for their actions but on the other hand, many of her characters impress us by their determination and resolve (Fitz, 1980, p. 59). Family bonds, which are supposed to represent ties of closeness and tenderness, turn out to be nothing but chains of bondage and become so frustrating that these bonds can preclude people from trying out new experiences which might have offered the family members to live richer lives. To figure out or impose any fixed meaning to the stories of *Family Ties* is difficult as they challenge the fixed notions of reality. Though *Family Ties* (*Lacos de Familia*) is a collection of thirteen separate stories, freedom, despair, solitude, and the incapacity to communicate are the themes that weave the stories into one thread.

Lispector's *Family Ties* evokes questions similar to Poststructuralism and asks important and challenging questions about the relationship of language to human existence, and about the political implications that we derive from our desire of truth, certainty, and clarity of meaning in an unstable, ambiguous world (Fitz, 2001). Not only that, the writer brought down the ontological and epistemological question posed by Poststructuralism to the level of everyday human experience. In her stories of *Family Ties*, we can see reflections of existentialist writers, most remarkably of Heidegger, who reject the application of scientific reductionist principles in the understanding of the nature of human existence. Existentialists ask us to reflect on the language we use to make sense of our experiences which often determines how we develop a view of ourselves and others (Cooper, 2003). If we put psychological perspective in contrast to this existentialist philosophy, we find that it considers human existence to be subject to laws similar to those of the natural world where personality comprises a relatively stable set of variables which change little over the lifespan (Cooper, 2003). If we observe closely, we may realize that much of our thinking about individual and collective attempts to understand why people do certain things or behave in certain ways is shaped according to this aforementioned perspective. If we pick up any book or magazine article, it will become clear that search for definitive answers to understand questions of human psychology occupy everyday experience (Cooper, 2003). Though this perspective is the most common way of deriving sense of the human condition, existential perspective can be an alternative to this and that is what we notice among the characters of *Family Ties*.

The stories of *Family Ties* present a series of "victimas agonicas" (meaning victims of agony, a term used by Miguel de Unamuno) who find themselves trying desperately to maintain an equilibrium between "reality" and their own powerful imagination. They are represented as a double-edged dagger, since on the one hand deviation from the norms that society erects leads them to rejection, unhappiness, and alienation, and on the other the failure to retreat into a personal fantasy world works for them no more than a cowardly escape mechanism (Herman, 1967, p. 69). Whether to embrace any of the defense mechanisms, like denial, disavowal, or to face sheer naked realities; conflicts keep haunting Lispector's characters. The existentialist struggle, for the author, consists in a series of paradoxes with no solution. How does one establish a balance between the need to conform and the pulsating inner life that demands expression? If one is in constant fear of revealing oneself, how can one interact with other on an authentic level? The main characters in *Family Ties*, nevertheless, are fully conscious that true communication is impossible: society is an artificial barrier that must not be transcended as they may not be courageous enough to meet the bare absurdity of life. Yet their essential problem, as might be expected, is not to find a meaning for their senseless lives, but to run from the meaning they have already acknowledged within themselves but cannot accept. In order to feel themselves part of humanity, in so far as they are able, they force themselves to cover their deepest feelings with the mechanized actions expected of them, thus perpetuating their own isolation. The outside world or other human beings delineate threats to the precarious balance necessary (Herman, 1967, p. 69).

In Lispector's short stories, we notice that the dilemma between our dual natures is we always dream to be free but end up trying to escape our freedom. We all tend to act in what Sartre calls 'bad faith' to escape our freedom (Sartre, 1956). We attempt to deceive ourselves and act as if we are not free, as if we are really determined by our nature, our body, or the expectations of other people (Sartre, 1956). We are also familiar with the way we all play roles, identifying ourselves, or seeing ourselves in terms of how other people see us, letting other people determine what we are instead of deciding ourselves what we will be. We tend to transform ourselves into the image that other people have of us (Sartre, 1956). It is often easier to let someone else determine what we will be than to do it ourselves, especially when we see our value in terms of the acceptance we get from other people. We all see little pictures of ourselves projected by other people and we often tend to

try to make ourselves into these little pictures by playing roles (Sartre, 1956). The secret of human flourishing and of moral action lies in avoiding bad faith and honoring the responsibility we have to create our own nature and values (Sartre, 1956). Existentialist enjoins us to be ourselves and make the source of our nature and values our own internal decisions rather than the pictures of ourselves that appear in our minds from external sources. Sartre says that the coward makes him cowardly, that the hero makes him heroic (Sartre, 1956). There's always a possibility for the coward not to be cowardly anymore and for the hero to stop being heroic (Sartre, 1956). What counts is total involvement; only one particular action or set of circumstances is not total involvement (Sartre, 1956).

Body and Mind; Public and Private

Maria Quiteria presents another picture in "The Daydreams of a Drunk Woman" (Lispector, 1972, p. 7-16) where she stumbles in the path of cultivation of self through communion and self-discovery, which occurred at the moment of becoming one with a group at the party when she was at a loss searching the bond or meaning of the conversation of the party people and events that result into her 'difficulties with verbal expression'. She feels the gap between the word (sign) and the reality (experience) –

the barren people in that restaurant. Not a real man among them. How sad it really all seemed And everything in the restaurant seemed so remote, the one thing distant from the other, as if the one might never be able to converse with the other" (Lispector, 1972, p. 12).

She discovered the opposition of body and mind among the party people in the party:

Saturday night, her every-day soul lost, and how satisfying to lose it, and to remind her former days, only her small, ill-kempt hands- and here she was now with her elbows resting on the white and red checked tablecloth like a gambling table, deeply launched upon a degrading and revolting existence. And what about her laughter?...this outburst of laughter which mysteriously emerged from her full white throat, in response to the polite manners of the businessman, an outburst of laughter coming from the depths of that sleep. And from the depths of that security who has a body. (Lispector, 1972, p. 11).

To find a balance between her body and mind, Maria took shelter of self-respect that she was trying to secure at the cost of her security of having a body. The urge of losing self-respect was provoking her continuously and finally she failed to act as society demands her to act. Looking at the other lady wearing hat in the party, Maria could not help noticing the lady's better social position to her own that she symbolized with the hat.

Oh how humiliated she felt at having come to the bar without a hat, and her head now felt bare. And that madam with her affectations, playing the refined lady! I know what you need, my beauty, you and your sallow boy friend! And if you think I envy you and your flat chest, let me assure you that I don't give a damn for you and your hats. (Lispector, 1972, p. 13).

The experience of sickness and physical limitation present the body as an 'other' which the mind is always endeavoring to make its own. Looking at her image in "the dressing table with three mirrors" (Lispector, 1972, p. 7), Maria gets lost into the imaginary because the little 'other' in her is in search of the reflection and projection of the 'Ego' that takes shelter on the reflection of her body in the mirror as the little 'other' is entirely inscribed in 'The Imaginary order' (Lacan, 2006, p. 69). On the other hand, the big 'Other' which mediates the relationship with that other subject must first be considered a locus, the locus in which speech is constituted. Lacan equates this radical

alterity with language and the law. The big 'Other' is inscribed in 'The Symbolic order' (Lacan, 2006, p. 40). Lacan in *Écrits* stresses that speech and language are beyond one's conscious control; they come from another place, outside consciousness, and then 'the unconscious is the discourse of the 'Other' (Lacan, 2006, p. 243). Lispector's narratives are driven by conflicted and fragmented poststructural sites than as stable presences, and in a context heavily freighted with both psychoanalysis and sociopolitical significance; they embody the desire of the 'Other' that Lacan speaks of in *Écrits* (Lacan, 2006, p. 40). In Maria's case her mind plays as the 'Other' which is trying to gain control over her body with the thoughts of the previous night at the party. The mirror here represents a specific type of threshold chronotope, an object that separates the liminal time-space between different representations visible in a narrative (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 248). A mirror is a visible marker of the threshold between where a person is and an other im(possible) space. Time is essentially instantaneous, in this Chronotope, and it appears as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of the biographical time. It delineates that the subject is "caught" by (or "up in") things (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 248). In the centre of this temporal-spatial construction lies the will of the subject to process new information and to take new decisions, which is in conflict with "the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold" (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 248).

Maria requires something that resists representations, which is pre-mirror, pre-imaginary, pre-symbolic, as everything loses its 'reality' once it is symbolized, and is not made conscious through language. Her world is so fragmented that only "stream of consciousness" fits to uphold the worlds she produces. As a way out, Maria finds that words have no connection to the thing described when "she looked around her, patient and obedient" and said, "Ah, words, nothing but words, the objects in this room lined up in the order of words, to form those confused and irksome phrases that he who knows how, will read" (Lispector, 1972, p. 14). The entire system of the unconscious/conscious manifests in an endless web of signifiers, signified and associations.

Maria gets frightened with her discovery that things, in their actual existence, have nothing to do with the names we give them, and that the existence of things has no connection with the essence which we assign them. Everyday household chores seem futile to her. All the duty she used to perform with utmost care, lose their value to her. She understands that her mind is the source of whatever meaning, truth, or value her world has. She alone absurdly, is responsible for giving meaning to her world. To handle this crisis, she started free association of words which is the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis. Like stream of consciousness, this process of free association involves allowing whatever comes to mind to be spoken, selecting nothing and omitting nothing, and giving up any critical attitude or direct forcing in the face of a problem.

'Hey there! Guess who came to see me today?' She mused as a feasible and interesting topic of conversation. 'No idea, tell me,' those eyes asked her with a gallant smile, those sad eyes set in one of those pale faces that make one feel so uncomfortable. 'Maria Quiteria, my dear!' she replied coquettishly with her hand on her hip. 'And who, might we ask, would she be?' they insisted gallantly, but now without any expression. 'You!' she broke off, slightly annoyed. How boring!

Oh what a succulent room! Here she was, fanning herself in Brazil. The sun, trapped in the blinds, shimmered on the wall like the strings of a guitar. (Lispector, 1972, p.8).

Wittgenstein told about the practice of psychoanalysis that this free association process opens a field of possibilities of sense that rather than truth and falsity can force upon us the question as to how language represents and makes sense. Instead of being aware of how the conflicts and contradictions created by confusions in the use of language create problems and despair, we try to force them into a particular pattern to achieve a desired result, to capture one

kind of experience and avoid another (Heaton, 2000, p.14). It is essential to find not merely what is to be said before a difficulty but how one must speak about it (Heaton, 2000, p.14). How something is said determines what is said - it shows the thought (Heaton, 2000, p.14). Free association encourages one to focus on the mode of speaking, the way we apply words, the way we feel (Heaton, 2000, p.14). The tone and gestures of our words express more than what we say (Heaton, 2000, p.14). In free association, a game of language is being played which shows language in use but without any particular purpose (Heaton, 2000, p.14). There is no fixed rule in free associating and it is a way of giving free reign and attention to the way the mind creates meanings and make associations, bringing them in all sorts of ways (Heaton, 2000, p.14). It helps to de-centre our fixed identity that constitutes whom we believe we are (Heaton, 2000, p.14). Like psychoanalysis, it is a talking cure; but unlike psychoanalysis, there is no external authority, no ideal, to which it must correspond (Heaton, 2000, p.14). The weight is put on the use of words, because this shows our approach to the problem, and it is this showing that lets us see the deformities that distort our thought (Heaton, 2000, p.14).

Maria talks about self-respect again and again in the story as if this is her centre. After her day long involvement with her inner self, she is thinking of coming to her regular public self. To her the source of self-respect is having youthful body, maintaining household works properly, and playing the role of mother and wife.

‘God, I’ve lost my self-respect, I have! My day for washing and darning socks... What a lazy bitch you’ve turned out to be!’ she scolded herself, inquisitive and pleased ...shopping to be done, fish to remember, already so late on a hectic sunny morning. (Lispector, 1972, p. 10).

Even though she retreats back to her comfort shell, she goes through the perplexity of her existential crisis that becomes the distinguished marker of her life.

the day after tomorrow that house of hers would be a sight worth seeing: she would give it a scouring with soap and water which would get rid of all the dirt! ‘You mark my words,’ she threatened in her rage. Ah, she was feeling so well. so strong, as if she still had milk in those firm breasts. (Lispector, 1972, p. 15).

Love and Responsibility

While Maria Quiteria keeps herself busy with the puzzle of words, Anna in “Love” (Lispector, 1972, p. 17-27) is driven to the extreme limits of her potential and in her anguish and in her confrontation with a blind man, she shows both her greatness and her misery. She can be said great in terms of existentialist philosophy because of her sudden discovered freedom and yet miserable because she is shaken confronting absolute responsibility. Anna’s status before utilizing the anxiety of life is she ‘anonymously nourishes life’. She has chosen to be a wife, a mother, and to possess a home. In the void of the blind man’s gaze, Anna finds a self that is unknown even to her. So far she has lived the life of reflection of other people, the way they want her to be.

The story probes the way in which consciousness perceives objects. Lispector has masterfully created a world of exciting and terrifying perfection pervading the way how consciousness depicts objects. Anna became shocked at the blind man’s freedom to not gaze at her. She felt insulted at the careless way of the blind man’s chewing gum. The Brazilian critic Benedito Nunes has outlined the process as “familiar situations and things which we know and can control, are suddenly transformed into something strange, unexpected, and uncontrollable” (Pontiero, 1972, p. 136). The stories are formulated on the literary epiphany that concentrates on moments of insight. The privileged instant of cognition typically expands into interlocking patterns of

illumination and reflection in the mind of the protagonist (Fitz, 1980, p. 56). Anna enters into the totality of a new, higher level of awareness and being at the sight of the blind man's chewing gum in the tram: she understands "something disquieting was happening" (Lispector, 1972, p. 19). The sight destroys her equilibrium that balances her daily repeated activities.

The string bag felt rough between her fingers, not soft and familiar as when she had knitted it. The bag had lost its meaning; to find herself on the tram was a broken thread; she did not know what to do with the purchases on her lap: Like some strange music, the world started up again around her. The damage had been done..... it seemed to her that the people in the street were vulnerable, that they barely maintained their equilibrium on the surface of the darkness- and for a moment they appeared to lack any sense of direction. (Lispector, 1972, p. 20).

Now she feels the chain of action has been interrupted by the sight of the blind man's chewing gum. After this incident, she escapes momentarily from the psychological prison in which her conventionally used language and her social existence have placed her, because a crisis is a happening which suddenly removes us from the ordinary routines of our life (Lavin, 1984, p. 329). This event did not interrupt the life of other passengers in the tram. In a situation of crisis like this, one cannot react with one's every day habitual responses and one is thrown back upon oneself. Anna explores that tortured ambiguity of our existence; the privilege and the curse of being human and of confronting both our absolute freedom and the world's indifference.

Mysterious and sudden moments of crises lead characters along the paths of indecision to crucial moments of self-discovery and at time a very trivial episode can produce the most profound and dramatic intuition - the vital moment when time stands still and our daily existence is stripped bare of its comfortable conventional surfaces, leaving man alone in the solitude of his conscience and personality. Man's real problem is not that of imposing some meaning on his senseless existence, but of finding some escape from the meaning he has already discovered within himself that he/she refuses to accept (Pontiero, 1972, p. 136). "Through her compassion Anna felt that life was filled to the brim with a sickening nausea" (Lispector, 1972, p. 21). Entering the botanical garden Anna felt:

The trees were laden, and the world was so rich that it was rotting. When Anna reflected that there were children and grown men suffering hunger, the nausea reached her throat as if she were pregnant and abandoned. The moral of the garden was something different. Now that the blind man had guided her to it, she trembled on the threshold of a dark, fascinating world where monstrous water lilies floated. (Lispector, 1972, p. 23).

The Botanical garden stands for blossom and procreation but Anna is now aware of the other side of life and living and before digging into deeper sight of her latest discovery, "when she remembered the children" (Lispector, 1972, p. 23), she hurries for home. Epiphany is a moment of revelation, of ecstasy one would like to hold on to but which escapes through one's fingers; it remains nevertheless as something valuable gained; the experience becomes an end in itself. Anna, even undergoing epiphanies, remained chained to her everyday routine. To her, epiphanies serve only as conveyors of the awareness of the drabness of everyday existence. She went through an illumination and at the same time remained tied to family bonds.

The idea that love has splitting power is an important concept that runs through all of Lispector's work. She is very concerned with the complex, multi-layered relationships of people in love, with the tortured displays of selflessness and selfishness that love engenders. At home Anna meeting her child feels, "Life was vulnerable. She loved the world, she loved all things

created, she loved with loathing. . . . She had been touched by the demon of faith” (p. 24). Her heart “filled with the worst will to live” (Lispector, 1972, p. 25). She is in a dilemma. She faces the most profound alienation of all when she becomes aware of the otherness of the object and seeks to overcome its alienation by mastering it. “She no longer knew if she was on the side of the blind man or of the thick plants....With horror she discovered that she belonged to the strong part of the world” (Lispector, 1972, p. 25). And at the end of the story we see Anna is “combing her hair before the mirror, without any world for the moment in her heart” (Lispector, 1972, p. 27). She simply gives up, finding the struggle to establish and maintain an identity too much to endure.

Public and Private

Catherine most of the time in “Family Ties” is in debate with the language she communicates with (Lispector, 1972, p. 90-107). When she speaks, she displays her public or social self that is utterly commonplace in word and deed. Though she is a character in a conventional social context, Catherine often uses words that function as transmitters of what all involved assume to be a commonly shared body of knowledge and thus engages her husband and her child in strikingly cryptic dialogue. As we notice, the story’s ultimate tension arises from the failure of language to communicate and derives from the fact that the main characters do not share a common body of language and they all operate in a state of nearly total isolation and conflict (Fitz, 1987, p. 427). Her spoken language only attempts to fill the void of lack of communication without carrying meaning for herself. On the other hand, the silence or the lapse of her communication often attempts to bear the weight of her unspoken language:

“I haven’t forgotten anything?” her mother asked. Catherine, too, had the impression something had been forgotten, and they looked apprehensively at each other- because, if something had really forgotten, it was too late now. . . .

“Mother,” said the woman. What had they forgotten to say to each other? But now it was too late. It seemed to her that the older woman should have said one day, “I am your mother, Catherine.” And she should have replied, “And I am your daughter.” (Lispector, 1972, p. 93-94).

Catherine’s conflict arises from the fact that she has to choose between either continuing a materially comfortable but intellectually blank existence or leading a new life that is intellectually illuminating but barren and perilous. The language used in Catherine’s story serves to underscore the tension that exists in Lispector’s work between the public and private identities of her characters. When Catherine, an urban middle-class wife and mother struggling to come to grip with her nascent sense of self-awareness, the text assumes the form of an indirect interior monologue (Fitz, 1987, p.426-427):

Relieved of her mother’s company, she had recovered her brisk manner of walking; alone it was much easier. . . . And things had disposed themselves in such a way that the sorrow of love seemed to her to be happiness- everything around her was so tender and alive, the dirty street, the old tram cars, orange peel on the pavements- strength flowed to and fro in her heart with a heavy richness. (Lispector, 1972, p. 94).

After the train departs with her mother, the existence that Catherine has neglected so far becomes obvious to her. Thinking of possibilities made her a conscious being, a being for itself that leads her to think of what she lacks, and what her possibilities are (Lavin, 1984, p. 354). Only as a conscious being one can be dissatisfied with oneself and desire not-to-be what one is now, and desire to be what one is not. She decides in an instant to leave her husband and went out with her son.

She understands that the relationship of love is hopeless because what her husband wants is not merely the physical possession but also to possess her freedom. For her husband Tony, "Saturdays were 'his own', but he liked his wife and child to be at home while he pursued his private occupations" (Lispector, 1972, p. 96).

Reaching home, Catherine hears her son calling her 'Mummy' and "It was the first time he had said 'Mummy' in that tone without asking for something. It was more than a verification: 'Mummy!'" (Lispector, 1972, p. 96). She tries to complete the sentence of the child and she understands "The truth could only be captured in symbols, and only in symbols would they receive it" (Lispector, 1972, p. 96). She does not confine it to symbolic communication, but like hermeneutics extended it to more fundamental, that is, human life and existence. Assertion that has played a central role in the philosophy of language, particularly in the twentieth century, has been designated as the paradigmatic linguistic form, the most neutral propositional form or attitude. Martin Heidegger claims that assertion is a derivative form of interpretation and objects the entire tradition of analyzing language, or rather sentences, in terms of the attribution of predicates to subjects because it conceives language as an *object*. There are two conceptions of language that run through the relevant sections of *Being and Time*. One is called *instrumental*, the other *constitutive*. According to the former, language is a tool; according to the later, it is an *Existenzial*, an essential attribute of Dasein means existence. Catherine became tired of the instrumental language and keeps seeking on language that is constitutive that will have the strength to carry on her existence (Heidegger, 1996, p. 114).

Lispector succeeds in showing how Catherine seeks solace in silence as we find Catherine unable to mean what she wants to mean. She fails to achieve with language what she wants to achieve, and she progressively becomes an isolated and frustrated human being. We see that characters like Catherine are battling to reanimate their existences. They are reduced to a state of frustrated silence, and isolation. The language that Lispector's characters use can neither generate nor receive the messages and codes that they want. They are acutely aware of both this linguistic failure and psychological trauma that stems from it. They become gradually frustrated, and anxious mutes, desperate to communicate but keenly aware that they are unable to do so (Fitz, 1987, p. 428).

Conclusion

Every family of *Family Ties* looks like an alienated world where solitary people are going through individual suffering. Lispector's characters are typically developed more as "different states of mind" than only flesh and blood, and that is why their pain is viscerally human (Fitz, 1987, p. 429). Most of her characters who become aware of emptiness, a gap that separates them from the region of things often confront nothingness by coming to an awareness of their existence but some of her characters escape into bad faith because they are not capable of taking the responsibility of being free in the world. Common wisdom holds that only love has the restorative power needed to overcome this isolation as Lispector repeatedly shows us that love is a poison as well as tonic. It can be destructive, even ruinous, and may become invisible from hate. Freedom and self-realization, the opportunity to grow, to secure a sense of personal dignity, and to find the courage necessary to act - these are the challenges that Lispector's characters face while cultivating their selves in *Family Ties*.

The despair that all the characters have gone through and at the same time, the spirit that many of them have displayed at the loss of their external sources of value are the necessary price of a greater value and happiness that comes from within. They can take the risk of losing all hope

of external value to seek value within. The theme that true happiness must come from within is one that is familiar to all of us, and it is the key to understanding the existentialist conception of happiness.

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