

# Cowboys and Gangsters in the Carnival: Representations of Carnavalesque in Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* and *Billy Bathgate*

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## Abstract

Over the course of decades following the publication of *Welcome to Hard Times*, E. L. Doctorow produced a valuable body of works which, despite their thematic and structural differences, reflect a unique view of American life and values. While some critics state that Doctorow saw capitalism as the evil foundation of the American society, others contend he was more preoccupied with the stylistic techniques which enabled him to represent a fictionalized history of the United States. The present article aims to explore the representations of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque in Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* and *Billy Bathgate*. The article demonstrates that through a Western and a gangster story, Doctorow has challenged many of the structures and hierarchies established in the gender as well as socio-political contexts in which he wrote his novels. The research shows both novels create significant carnivalesque moments which enable Doctorow to challenge to dominant generic, gender, and social ideologies.

**Keywords:** Carnavalesque; Social Structures; Hierarchies; Gender oppression; Corporate capitalism

## I. Introduction

Bakhtin is credited to have introduced several critical notions including dialogism, chronotope and carnival, each of which has been adopted as an analyzing tool for investigating varied phenomena and various events. Given the expansive nature of Bakhtin's work, there is an evolving realization among his scholars that any attempt to discuss his major ideas within a general study is doomed to failure and will probably obscure more than it reveals. That's why many recent commentators have abandoned discussing Bakhtin in general; instead, they are trying to employ one of his key ideas or concepts in their literary or non-literary studies. Although Bakhtin is one of the most cited and much acclaimed literary theorists today, he spent most of the twentieth century in obscurity. Apart from a few scattered minor articles in periodicals, only the two editions of Bakhtin's now famous studies of the works of Dostoevsky, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*

(1963) and *Rabelais and His World* (1965) were published in his own lifetime. Successive publications of his works in the West, however, introduced Bakhtin to academic and non-academic readers. As David M. Bethea notes, "Bakhtin's terminology has entered into the critical lexicon mainly in connection with Dostoevsky, whom the philosopher saw as a culminating point in the history of European culture's drive toward 'novelization'" (185).

The present study aims to explore representations of Bakhtinian carnivalesque in E. L. Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960) and *Billy Bathgate* (1989). The next section discusses the concept of carnivalesque as elaborated on by Bakhtin and highlights its position in relation to other Bakhtinian keywords such as officialdom, laughter, and grotesque. The article then discusses the significance of the carnivalesque climate in *Welcome to Hard Times* and *Billy Bathgate* respectively. The final section of the article

draws upon the key strands of the discussion and wraps up the paper.

## II. Bakhtin's Carnavalesque: No Hierarchies Allowed

Bakhtin's discussions of carnivalesque first appeared in his *Rabelais and His World* (1968). The book elaborated on the folk festivities of Carnival, which Bakhtin discussed in relation to Rabelais' use of such traditions in Gargantua & Pantagruel. Alternative and confrontative voices, Bakhtin argues, are empowered in the opening up that occurs at the marketplace, both through the process of bargaining and through other contentious, stylized, and dramatized displays that accompany buying and selling at high pitch. The pre-Lenten Carnival develops upon these marketplace practices to the point of grotesque. Carnival, in Bakhtin's opinion, was the model occasion for the open and intense involvement of the populace in festivities. This pre-Lenten celebration reverses the values of the landscape and makes an assault upon everyday notions of order and hierarchy.

Carnival, according to Bakhtin, is Janus-headed, looking to the past in drawing on devices of traditional festival vocabulary, but at the same time looking to the present and future in elaborating on the interactional style of the face-to-face market. Catherine MacMillan argues that "The medieval carnival, for Bakhtin, while a precursor of modern-day carnivals, played a much more prominent role in ordinary people's lives" (259). This conviction is supported by Clark and Holquist who maintain that "unlike ritual, carnival is not organized by a separate caste of specialists who create it according to their exclusive dictates, whether religious or aesthetic". They add that for Bakhtin "carnival is not spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people" (300). This makes clear that carnival is a people-inspired and people-driven, and people-centred festivity.

As Richard Schechner argues, "Bakhtin's model of carnival was developed in terms of the medieval European practices as Bakhtin reconfigured them while living in the dangerous, totalitarian world of Stalinism" (3). Although he discussed Carnival mainly in European context, Beyad and Hassanzadeh Javanian posit that "the

celebration of carnival was not limited to the European territories though" (7). For instance, they refer to carnival celebrations in the West Indies where carnival "signified 'a direct revolt by the Afro-Caribbean people, against oppression'" (7) which deprived them of their basic rights. It is this strong sense of resistance and reversal that most contemporary interpretations of carnivalesque tend to deal with in different fields. What all these interpretations have in common is that the concept of carnivalesque in them signifies the subversion of the official culture and whatever it stands for. The idea of carnivalesque is pertinent to the reversal of realistic notions in modern and postmodern fiction as it signifies a force that "illustrates the way the principles of inversion and permutation work underneath the surface of carnival and festive misrule" (Laroque, 83).

One aspect of the actual practice of carnival for Bakhtin was its liberation characteristic: "As opposed to the official festival, carnival as if celebrated a temporary liberation from prevailing truth and the existing order, a temporary suspension of all hierarchical relations, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (*Rabelais* 15). Bakhtin emphasizes that carnival is an act of liberation from the predominant point of view of the official world. This has inspired critical studies which investigate the relationship between carnival and political discourse. Leszek Koczanowicz has in particular studied the relationship between carnival and democracy. Koczanowicz states that "carnival is a perfect incarnation of one of the moments of human existence, with its capacity to build authentic bonds, despite the prevailing social and political obstacles" (78). Carnival can be accounted for in terms of the opposition between democracy and totalitarianism. Koczanowicz opines that "carnival comprises all the features of free communication. Heteroglossia, hybridisation, mixing languages of different social origins – all phenomena so thoroughly explored by Bakhtin – find their embodiment in carnival" (84).

One of the key functions of carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian version is its ability to connect social, cultural, and political dimensions of the carnival to a significant literary aspect. As Daniel Bowles avers, "the primary semiotic operation of Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque is one of inversion, a constitutive

practice of satire and the means by which the social and cultural notion of the carnivalesque, derived as it is from the Saturnalian suspensions of official order in medieval carnivals, becomes literary” (47). The decentring feature of the carnival discourse, thus, turns it into an ideal tool for exploring political and social endeavors, particularly those with the potential of reversing the established order, in literary works.

### III. Welcome to *Hard Times* – A Territory of Reversals

*Welcome to Hard Times* as Doctorow’s debut novel established some of the thematic and stylistic patterns which he revisited later in his fiction. *Hard Times* is the name of a small town in the barren hills of the Dakota Territory. After one reckless wanderer to the West ruins the town and kills and rapes its residents, the mayor Blue seeks to restore peace with the help of a handful survivors of the carnage. The town has then its Gold Rush moment before it is invaded and burned down once again by outlaws. The novel is a vivid demythologizing of the romance of the promising West which, in a way to become typical of its author, investigated the need for community in a devastatingly individualistic tradition. Doctorow’s concern to elucidate paradoxes in the American society did continue after his first novel. According to Richard Gray, “Doctorow has consistently expanded or subverted established generic forms to explore an American paradox: the elaborate circuitries of wealth and influence that connect one thing to another in American society and its fundamental lack of cohesiveness, real bonds between people other than those of manipulation and use” (296).

The title of the novel makes a subtle link between temporal and spatial aspects of the narrative as it ties the setting of the novel to the tough period of time that it deals with. The interrelatedness of time and space or in Bakhtinian terms the chronotopic aspect of the title appears in Doctorow’s next novels. In *Billy Bathgate*, for instance, the last name of the protagonist reflects the chronotope of the street (he was named after his neighborhood street Bathgate). In *Welcome to Hard Times*, however, it is not the minor chronotope of street but the major chronotope of town that provides the socio-cultural context of the novel. The chronotope of town, in other words, is an urgent

concern of the novelist, sustaining an essential context for the reversals that characterize the plot of the novel.

The main incident in Doctorow’s novel – the annihilation of the town – is a reversal to the social structures and customary tranquillity of a small town. However, it fails to create a carnivalesque atmosphere in the town because it lacks the participation of the people. For Bakhtin, carnival is a feast of the people, not just a mere theatricality. He posits that “carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (*Rabelais* 7). The participation of the people is an indispensable element of the carnival. In *Welcome to Hard Times*, however, people do not benefit from but are victims of the reversal of the prevalent order.

The novel demonstrates several significant reversals/suspensions of the officialdom at different levels, though. First of all, the narrative reconsiders the long-established stereotypes of Western novels and film scripts through its parody of the genre. Michael Wutz and Julian Murphet opine that the novel “not only makes a nod to Charles Dickens, whose narratives of social justice would find a worthy successor in Doctorow’s fictions a century later, but also proposes itself as a parody of the generic Western and analogous film scripts” (5). In *Welcome to Hard Times*, Doctorow has reconsidered several prominent features of individual heroism set against a backdrop of the Old West. The novel opens with a scene of total annihilation typical of exacerbating violence that characterizes the beginning of Western novels and necessitates the appearance of a savior in the form of a physically and mentally protagonist. In other words, the violence creates the required justification for the ensuing heroic deeds. In *Welcome to Hard Times*, however, the violence is both unnecessary and unjustifiable. As the narrator describes the intruder, “Bad Men from Bodie weren’t ordinary scoundrels, they came with the land, and you could no more cope with them than you could with dust or hailstone” (7). Reacting to this unparalleled violence, inhabitants of *Hard Times* decide to abandon the town one by one. Doctorow, thus, reverses a familiar tradition in the genre of frontier stories where destruction typically and inevitably evokes heroism, unites people, and leads to a shared desire for renewal and rehabilitation.

The perpetrator of the destruction and slaughter does not meet the stereotypical standards of the frontier stories either. It is a white man and not a savage Indian who inflicts pain and wreaks havoc on the town. The only Indian of the novel is Pawnee John Bear who is both deaf and dumb. Doctorow's reversal of established generic patterns and stock characters is even more evident in the character of his protagonist, Blue. Despite his desire and attempts to turn *Hard Times* from a temporary settlement into a permanent one with profuse resources and ample wealth, his initial reaction in the wake of the attack on the territory is running away because he is neither skilful nor valiant to fight back the terror. Although he later shows that he can be the guarantor of peace and prosperity of the town, his initial reaction to the incursion deconstructs every single expectation of the novel's readers. The conversation between Blue and Avery, who urges him to save Florence from Bad Man and throw him out of his saloon, shows the depth of the protagonist's fear:

"Blue, that gentleman's in my place, you got to get him out of there."

"I saw him pay you money Avery."

"I got stock behind that bar, I got window glass in my windows, I got my grain and still in back. There's no telling what he'll do."

"Maybe he'll leave soon enough."

"He cracked Fee's skull!"

"A fight's a fight, there is nothing I can do."

"Goddamnit!"

"Well now Avery I'm forty-nine years old."

"Goddamnit!" (6)

The scared Blue then offers Avery his gun implying that he himself can face Bad Man. Avery, however, rejects the offer: "I took my gun out of my drawer and shoved it over the desk toward fat Avery but he didn't take it. Instead he sat down on my cot and we waited together" (6). Blue and Avery then ask Molly to go to Bad Man's room, entice him, and kill him with a knife. Molly acquiesces to take up the daunting task. This is how the Mayor describes Molly when she is about to head toward Bad Man: "Her face was twisted up and tears were streaming down her cheeks as she walked by me saying: 'I

hope he gets you Mayor, I swear I do, you and the rest of the crawling bastards in this miserable town" (16).

Although *Welcome to Hard Times* shows the destruction and reconstruction of a town, its central concern, in the words of Philip van der Merwe, is "the way in which the relationship between the powerful and the powerless in a society impacts on that society" (53). The question of power is thus a central subject matter in the carnivalesque environment of the novel because every Carnival inevitably engages with power relations. As Vicki Ann Cremona notes,

Carnival, like other social practices, is subject to the operations of power. While people are exaggerating their actions, transforming their appearance, making fun of their fellows, and lampooning the powers that be, they are also playing with power. Power is not only situated at the higher echelons of political and social administration, but also permeates all levels of the social system and influences all areas of social action. To wield power means to retain control. Carnival, which is originally intended to shake off, albeit for a short period of time, the shackles of power imposed from above, is not simply a moment of innocent fun, recreation and collective participation. (5)

The suspension of order and the reversal of social structures in the novel takes the story to a level – metaphorical and allegorical – that creates a counternarrative to dominant power and ideology in the context in which the work was produced. As Borzabadi Farahani and Beyad state, "in Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* we come to a community of figures, marginal though, who take a rebellion action against ideology to alter the given identity employing their [personal] acts" (466). This suggests that the carnivalesque climate of the novel in which official hierarchies are temporarily suspended is vital for the town inhabitants to see how power has impacted even the way they define their own identity.

*Hard Times* inhabitants, however, fail to benefit from the reversed hierarchies in order to form a coherent counter-voice to the dominant ideology. In other words, their detached individualism outweighs their momentarily collective participation. Except Blue, "who understands the importance of balancing individual interest with community welfare"

(Tokarczyk 52), other characters of the novel show no sign of being committed to the town's welfare and its promotion. Valeria Sterzi observes that "beside its formal aspect of an occasion for maximum social chaos and licentious play, [Carnival] may be considered particularly ritualistic because it draws together many social groups who are normally kept separate and create specific times and places where social differences are either laid aside or reversed for a more embracing experience of community" (115). In Doctorow's novel, Carnival provides the opportunity for the communal action of people against the dominant ideological system but it loses its decentralizing feature if people fall short of taking the opportunity to unite.

The reconsideration of gender roles marks another major reversal in *Welcome to Hard Times*. Before we delve into this reversal, it is noteworthy to mention that the relation between gender and power has been elaborated on in recent scholarship. Eudine Barriteau, among others, asserts that "gender relations constitute the continuous social, political, economic, cultural, and psychological expressions of the material and ideological aspects of a gender system. Gender relations encode and sometimes mask unequal power relations between women and men and between women and the state" (30). Therefore, any suspension or reversal of gender hierarchies necessarily has political and ideological implications. In other words, any attempt to resist gender inequality in a social environment poses a counternarrative against dominant political structures.

One of the clichés associated with the Western is the oversimplification of gender roles particularly in the characters of the male protagonist and his female counterpart. In these stories male protagonists are rugged and determined individuals while main female characters are vulnerable and virtuous persons whose meekness is a justification for and legitimization of the violence that "men practice in order to protect them" (Tompkins 41). Critical studies on Westerns in film and fictions have concentrated on the representation of men and women in the genre. For instance, John Cawelti in his seminal analysis of the genre *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* argues that "only two types of women appear in Westerns, the schoolmarm and

the dance hall girl, and that the genre rejects 'interchangeability of gender' roles because in order for the genre to 'affirm the new values of mobility, competition, and individualism, the female must remain feminine'" (qtd. in Wildermuth 1). Despite some changes that Cawelti cites, he concludes that the Western genre has never been without its fundamental sexist orientation.

Doctorow's revision of conventional gender representations in the Frontier stories is thus a crucial aspect of his attempt to reverse several stereotypes of the genre. As María Ferrández San Miguel states, "*Welcome to Hard Times* features alternative and transgressive models and attitudes toward the masculine and the feminine, and it engages in a complex exploration of gender violence and oppression" (54). The novel shows two opposing attitudes toward masculinity which in turn distinguishes the protagonist from the rest of male characters. In the part where Florence is savagely raped by Bad Man, the rest of the men who hear her screams in the saloon hail the rapist's physical ability to make a woman scream like that. They wonder "what kind of man it was who could make her scream" (4). The novel clearly associates the concept of masculinity with physical strength and bodily prowess, an association that town's men share with the rapist.

The characterization of the protagonist of the novel, however, departs significantly from the dominant perception of masculinity in the Western genre and more broadly in the American society during 1950s and 1960s. The chasm between how Blue and the rest of the town regard masculinity opens when people of *Hard Times* slam his non-violent reaction to the invasion: "Were you any good with a gun Mayor maybe you could teach the boy some manliness. That's not Manliness" (153). Unlike the conventional hero of the Western whose prominent skills are riding horses and handling weapons, Blue is a negotiator, a cooperative individual with a firm belief in the power of words to influence others.

Sexual Violence and gender oppression shape the world of *Welcome to hard Times*. The novel opens with a grotesque violent scene against Florence (described above), continues with sexual violence against Molly and ends with horrifying violence against Mae. Doctorow

describes Mae's body as "lying across the table, her dress pulled up around her neck. Her skull is broken and her teeth scattered on the table and on the floor" (211). A few days before this shocking violence, Mae had expressed her overwhelming dismay: "'What do you want, Mayor, goddamnit.' She was rubbing her forehead. 'Don't know what it's like to breathe any more. Used to be jes' the week's end, these days every night is Saturday' (160-61). None of the female characters in the novel is safe from gender oppression and sexual manipulation.

To the plight of women, it is not only the Bad Man from Bodie, Clay Turner – the representation of evil in the novel – but many of the male inhabitants of the town that are involved in the sexual exploitation of female inhabitants. Zar, the Russian pimp, has learned from wandering in the Great Plains that the only lucrative commodities in this part of the world are alcohol and women:

Frاند... I come West to farm... but soon I learn, I see... farmers starve... only people who sell farmers their land, their fence, their seed, their tools... only these people are rich. And is that way with everything...not miners have gold but salesmen of burros and picks and pans... not cowboys have money but saloons who sell to them their drinks [...] So I sell my farm... and I think... what need is there more than seed, more even than whiskey or cards is need for Women. (63–64)

In *Welcome to Hard Times* Doctorow has created a carnivalesque environment informed by many reversals and suspensions to challenge established hierarchies in the Frontier stories both as a genre and an ideology. The novel is not only the story of the destruction of a town, but also in the words of Douglas Fowler, "the destruction of the animating dream that made its creation possible" (9-10). As such, Doctorow has elevated a cliché Western story to an in-depth exploration of contradictions, manipulations, and horrors of life in the Great Plains.

#### IV. *Billy Bathgate*; A Novel About the Criminal Classes

In *Billy Bathgate* Doctorow delves into the world of gangsters and racketeers. Set in 1930s New York, it is the story of a fifteen-year-old

high school dropout who draws the attention of the gangster Arthur Flegenheimer, known as Dutch Schultz. Through Schultz, Billy enters a new world which is characterized by money, murder and fraud. He is led into the Schultz gang, with its "purveyed lawless might and military self-sufficiency ... so thrilling to boys" (24). The novel depicts the evolution of its protagonist from a teenager to a gangster who lives a brutal version of life in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Billy's involvement in the world of crime is therefore a clear attempt on the part of the novelist to explore the reversal of social conventions and structures in his narrative.

As Tamlyn Avery states, "In the boyhood narratives of *Daniel*, *Loon Lake*, *Billy Bathgate*, and *World's Fair*, the result of the subject's development is a jaded acceptance of the bourgeois identity which inscribes them; however, the self-reflexive formalities allow Doctorow immanently to critique those ideologies" (37). This suggests that the carnivalesque atmosphere of *Billy Bathgate* which suspends the official structures of the society allows Doctorow to target all those structures. In other words, Doctorow needs the carnivalesque climate in order to find a way into criticizing the dominant ideologies and the world of criminals and gangsters suits his purpose.

Gangsters and gang groups had long existed in American cities but the Great Depression in the 1930s provided an ideal context for the emergence of these criminals as a response to corporate capitalism and its ensuing desperate poverty. As a way of dealing with problems arising from corporate capitalism, these criminals took the law into their hands. As a result, names such as Al Capone, John Dillinger, "Baby Face" Nelson and "Pretty Boy" Floyd appeared frequently in the press and inspired a lot of stories. According to Fred L. Gardaphe,

These real-life gangsters became more than ordinary criminals by committing their crimes with dashing and daring bravado; they were all blatant transgressors of the boundaries between good and evil, right and wrong, and rich and poor. As corporate capitalism promoted consumerism and widened the gap between rich and poor, Americans became infatuated with the gangster, whose stylish dress and fancy cars yet

humble origins defied the boundaries separating social classes. (110)

Defying the boundaries that separate social classes is precisely what happens during the Carnival festivity. It is a time when all social hierarchies are halted. Gangsters, thus, create a carnivalesque environment in their reaction to a weak government by transgressing all conventional and established borders in a society. As Billy tells the readers, “How I admired the life of taking pains, of living in defiance of a government that did not like you and did not want you and wanted to destroy you so that you had to build out protections for yourself with money and men, deploying armament, buying alliances, patrolling borders, as in a state of secession” (87).

Billy’s words illustrate his longing for being identified with a strong group where his self is saturated by the group’s identity. Being part of a gangster group allows Billy to defy the boundary between his individual self and his group membership. In other words, the self and group start to merge and eventually become fused such that the independent individual self vanishes. According to DaJung Woo et al., “identifying as a gang member becomes a permanent part of social awareness for those who become involved in gangs. After joining a gang, the group’s views become central to the individual’s life, shaping their identity and personality” (140). As in a Carnival, communal feelings overwhelm the individual self in a way that is, temporarily, grotesque and violent.

Billy’s above quotation also points to another feature of the world of gangsters; that their world is not separate from the world of officialdom. They have to constantly deal with the world that lies outside their coteries. This is yet another characteristic of carnival according to Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, carnival is not an alternative life; rather, carnival world and the real world are embedded in one another. He posits that during the Carnival “birth becomes visible in death, death becomes visible in birth, in victory defeat, in defeat victory, in elevation humiliation, et cetera. The carnival laughter ensures that not one of these moments of change are is made absolute, that they do not freeze in a one-sided seriousness” (66). The evolution of Billy from a teenager to a gangster adult, from innocence to experience demonstrates the

overlap between his carnivalesque criminal world and the society that it interacts with.

The novel itself is a transgression of borders and a reversal of structures in the genre of historical fiction. With *Billy Bathgate*, Doctorow shows once again that his primary concern is neither history nor fiction but narrative. Matthew A. Henry avers that Doctorow “is neither a radical experimentalist nor a traditional social realist, though his works contain features of both. As a historical novelist, Doctorow is concerned foremost with the cultural myths of the immediate past and their role in contemporary American culture” (32). In *Billy Bathgate*, Doctorow concentrates on the evolution of his protagonist from childhood to adulthood in a socio-cultural environ that merges historical accounts with fictional inventions. As such, Doctorow challenges his readers to “question the distinction between literary artifice and historical ‘truth’” (Royal 252-3). The genre, the subject matter, and the narrative in *Billy Bathgate* all aim at crossing every single boundary that the established social system adheres to.

## V. Conclusion

The present article attempted to investigate the carnivalesque elements in Doctorow’s *Welcome to Hard Times* and *Billy Bathgate*. Following a brief description of carnivalesque in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, the article focused on representations of Carnival in *Welcome to Hard Times*. The study demonstrated that Doctorow has reversed or suspended many of stereotypes and clichés in the genre of Western in his novel. The protagonist of the novel, in particular, lacks the heroism and masculinity that are frequently associated with protagonists in the Frontier stories. The research also endeavoured to show the reversal of gender roles in the novel as the writer’s attempt to highlight the sexual abuse and gender oppression of women in Great Plains. Doctorow’s deconstruction of the genre of Western fiction which often cleaves to its clichés and stereotypes raises questions about the myth of “the western experience of endless economic opportunities or the belief of the West as the ‘Garden of the World’” (Jaupaj 4). Great Plains according to Doctorow’s delineation are no longer regions of opulence and prosperity;

instead, they are regions of loneliness, fear, fraudulence and violation of women's rights.

The study then turned to *Billy Bathgate*, a gangster story set in 1930s New York. The article argued that the emergence of gang groups in the US during the Great Depression was a response to corporate capitalism and alarming poverty that it inflicted on the American society. Representations of these criminals in American stories is thus more than an entertaining crime fiction. They often represent voices of the people who are marginalized by callous and uncaring conglomerates. These characters reveal, as Doctorow demonstrates in *Billy Bathgate*, a counternarrative against the dominant corporate ideology. Their identification with gangster groups is the result of their desire to defy the social structures that allow super rich corporates to benefit from the labour of ordinary citizens.

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