

IB Diploma Program

Title: Lighting effects in the Glass Menagerie

**Research Question: How is Light is used to depict the
course of the Wingfield Family's hope in Tennessee
Williams' The Glass Menagerie?**

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“It is my first quiet play, and perhaps my last.”¹

– Tennessee Williams on The Glass Menagerie

The Glass Menagerie is composed almost entirely of subtleties, qualifying it as a “quiet play”² for Tennessee Williams. It is the prominence of these “extra-verbal elements of the theatre”³ that allows ideas and emotions to flow fluidly and intensely from the stage to the audience. Thus, it is necessary to delve into these subtleties to fully appreciate this drama. Despite this play being renowned for its meticulous use of stagecraft and symbolism, the role of light – more specifically the use of stage lighting and symbolism related to light – has seldom been explored in its entirety.

Likewise, the idea of hope lies at the very core of this drama and yet is often disregarded. In the context of this essay, hope is defined as the Wingfield family’s desire to realize their dreams and their prospect of a financially secure future. In this drama, hope is symbolically portrayed through various forms of light, where the source, color and imagery related to the light bear different connotations. For example, the light emitted from a candle and the light emitted from a lamp imply distinct and different ideas – the former may represent the obsolete and romance and the latter may represent modernity and hope for the future. Additionally, as it is important to take note of the presence of light, the absence of light also holds great significance. Generally, melancholic experiences and events that relate to the family’s loss of hope possess sparse, ominous lighting whilst positive hope-bringing occurrences are accentuated in effect using diverse forms of light.

This American tragedy follows a dysfunctional family with conflicting aspirations set against the grim backdrop of the Great Depression. Amanda Wingfield longs for a gentleman caller for her crippled and reserved daughter, Laura. In contrast, her son Tom, who is fettered by familial obligations, is unable to satisfy his craving for adventure. Each member of the Wingfield family is unable to accept reality and hence they invest their hope in search of success, comfort and escape. This essay will

¹ Ross, Harold W, E B. White, and Katharine S. A. White. *The New Yorker*. New York: F-R Pub. Corp, 1925. 116. Print.

² Ross, 116

³ Bak, John S. *Tennessee Williams: A Literary Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 112. Print.

thus attempt to uncover how Williams employs stage lighting and symbolism concerning light to depict the course of the Wingfield family's hope artistically.

As *The Glass Menagerie* is what Williams has termed a "memory play"⁴, it is necessary to understand the effect of memory on stagecraft and symbolism before proceeding with the investigation proper. This drama is narrated through the memory of Tom Wingfield and as a result "he takes whatever license with dramatic convention is convenient to his purposes"⁵. Tom narrates the events in hindsight, hence his emotions inevitably color his memory and therefore the stage lighting and symbolism related to light often reflect the "emotional value"⁶ of the various incidents in the drama. This means that the drama is presented in a subjective form of reality. Furthermore, Williams makes use of plastic theatre, where stagecraft and symbolism are used deliberately as tools to provide "a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are"⁷, hence presenting a subjective and exaggerated form of reality in order to bring the audience "a closer approach to the truth"⁸. Thus this notion suggests that the stage lighting and symbolism concerning light depict the character's (particularly Tom's) inner emotions as well as the consequences⁹ (the family's ultimate disillusionment) of their actions¹⁰.

Tom acts as both the narrator of this drama and a character in it; thus, there is a difference between Tom as the narrator's disillusionment and the course of hope of Tom as a character. Tom as the narrator, only verbally expresses his disillusionment in his final soliloquy (it is presented in the form of regret and guilt at being disloyal to his family). However, bearing in mind the effect of memory on Tom's narration, his disillusionment and final lack of hope are exhibited throughout the drama. For Tom the narrator, recollecting these events is a cathartic attempt to absolve himself of the guilt of the past. Thus, Tom's memory is colored by guilt and as a result he does not present his experiences in a hopeful manner but with a disillusioned perspective as the

⁴ Williams, Tennessee. *The Glass Menagerie*. New York: New Directions, 1999. xix. Print.

⁵ Williams, 4

⁶ Williams, 3

⁷ Williams, xix

⁸ Williams, xix

⁹ As Tom narrates the drama in hindsight, the consequences caused by certain events being narrated are reflected through ominous lighting and symbolism.

¹⁰ This refers to the characters' actions in the events being narrated in this drama.

events being narrated in this drama have led to Tom's regret, guilt and ultimate despair. Nonetheless, Tom the character follows a similar course of hope as the Wingfield family.

Tom the narrator, who is disillusioned by the idea of escape and adventure, comes to the realization that the cause of his disillusionment is his inability to "leave [Laura] behind [him]"¹¹. Williams employs stage lighting to subtly draw attention to the often forgotten focal point of the drama – Laura, who is the family's primary reliance for hope. Thus, given that Tom provides the audience's set of eyes, it is necessary to observe how he presents his sister Laura, whom he greatly regrets leaving to pursue his selfish desires. Laura has the least dialogue in the drama, and thus Laura's light is unique to emphasize her prominence in Tom's memory. In the production notes to the play, Williams explains:

"The light upon Laura should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or Madonna. A certain correspondence to light in religious paintings, such as El Greco's, where the figures are radiant in atmosphere that is relatively dusky, could be effectively used throughout the play"^{12,13}

Williams perhaps intends for Laura to be glorified in Tom's memory as a result of his regret for abandoning her. The comparison between Laura with "female saints or Madonna"¹⁴ suggest that for Tom, she is ultimately the provider of hope. This idea is further supported with the description of El Greco's painting where "the figures are radiant in atmosphere that is relatively dusky"¹⁵; Laura is presented as happiness and optimism in a time of Tom's despair as he regrets his selfish decisions. Ultimately, Tom faces nothing but **individual** disillusionment induced by his decision to abandon the source of his family's hope and therefore his own hope.

¹¹ Williams, 97

¹² Williams, xxi

¹³ Please refer to Appendix A

¹⁴ Williams, xxi

¹⁵ Williams, xxi

Another instance where stage lighting is used to emphasize Laura's prominence in Tom's memory occurs in Scene Three during an argument between Tom and Amanda where Tom indicates his desire to leave the Wingfield home. Despite Laura's minimal verbal involvement in the argument, she is still presented in Tom's memory in a very telling manner; she is presented as the lost opportunity to bring hope to his hopeless family, an opportunity he regrets not fully realizing in the past. Williams directs "a clear pool of light on her figure"¹⁶ which is in "contradistinction to what is the apparent center"¹⁷. The focal light on Laura emphasizes that she is the center of Tom's recollection, reinforcing Tom's immense concern for his sister and re-emphasizing his regret for hurting Laura through the argument and through his final disloyalty to her. Moreover, the fact that she embodies this bright light illustrates how Tom later realizes how Laura, with her love and positivity, should have justified his struggles as the breadwinner, and how she was the key to his happiness and hopefulness.

The manner, in which the family's **collective** disillusionment sets in, in context of this investigation, will now be explored. Tom's course of hope as a character will be explored along with the rest of the Wingfield family's course of hope.

The distortion of light and the absence of light act as tools to illustrate the initial lack of hope. From the beginning of this drama, Williams sets an ominous tone with the "dim and poetic"¹⁸ interior and the "dimly lighted"¹⁹ stage. The somber setting²⁰ effectively adds to the pathos of the play as darkness often evokes the feelings of despair and hopelessness.

A by-product of this hopelessness is Tom's desire to escape family life to pursue his own ambitions, as partially revealed previously. The first clear indication of this desire is found in the aforementioned argument between Tom and Amanda in Scene Three in which Tom voices his frustration at the lack of freedom in the house

¹⁶ Williams, 20

¹⁷ Williams, xxi

¹⁸ Williams, 3

¹⁹ Williams, 5

²⁰ Please refer to Appendix B.

(where he “makes a slave of himself”²¹) he has to run. During this argument, the room is “lit with a turgid smoky red glow”²². Williams distorts the lighting in the room so that it is unrealistic to depict the vividness and the magnitude of the emotion attached to this particular memory for Tom. The use of **red** lighting in particular is fitting as not only does the color emphasize the aggression and anger in this argument, but also the danger felt by the people involved. In Tom’s case, he fears being trapped in unhappy service to his family; in Amanda’s, it is the fear of Tom abandoning his family like his father did, a man Tom so ominously resembles. This fear thus not only reminds the audience of the family’s current lack of hope and happiness, but also indicates the possibility of worse circumstances in the future. Therefore, the stage lighting associated with the argument effectively evokes emotions of despair in the audience that are more profound than they would be if lighting was not used in such a manner; in other words, this stage lighting brings the audience closer to the family and their situation.

Although the beginning of the drama presents a family that lacks hope, Williams soon depicts the possibility of a bright future for the Wingfields, particularly for Laura through the addition of various forms of light.

For Tom the character, hope lies in the idea of escape from his familial obligations to seek adventure. It is introduced through symbolism that concerns Tom’s acquisition of a magician’s “shimmering rainbow colored scarf”²³. When Tom attends a magic show, he comes home bearing the aforementioned scarf, indicating an association between rainbows and illusion (as magic shows are widely known to be predominantly comprised of illusion). Nonetheless, Tom talks admiringly and faithfully of the magician’s tricks, particularly about how the magician “got out of the coffin without removing one nail”²⁴ (hinting at his own desires to escape). To expand on the concept of light as hope, rainbows, which are created by light, symbolize deceptive hope. Fundamentally, a rainbow is nothing but a projection of refracted light. At distance, it appears tangible but within proximity, it vanishes. Thus, it can be construed that rainbows signify **false** and **temporary** hope. Similarly, as the

²¹ Williams, 21

²² Williams, 22

²³ Williams, 27

²⁴ Williams, 27

characters in the drama approach a state of true hopefulness, the hope disappears. Williams creates this apparent parallel between the magician's trick and Tom's longing to escape to purport that Tom's idea of escape and adventure provides him with false hope that will lead him to disillusionment.

The arrival of this hope for Amanda and Laura takes the form of Jim O'Connor, Tom's colleague. Having been too reserved to complete high school or college, Laura's only hope for a financially secure future is to depend on a man to support her. As a result, Amanda asks Tom to invite a colleague to dinner with "dark ulterior motives"²⁵ to arrange him with Laura. Jim's arrival gives Amanda hope for Laura, as her daughter does not have the disposition required to attract the gentlemen callers that can raise Laura's, and thus the family's living standards. Jim is therefore described as "this image, this specter, this hope"²⁶ and "seem[s] to move in a continual spotlight"²⁷. Other than spotlights, there exists only subtle, delicate light to illustrate the scarcity of hope in the present time. Thus the use of a spotlight certainly emphasizes the strength of the hope that Jim seems to embody. Subsequently, symbolism concerning light is conspicuously featured when Jim mentions a write-up on him in his school magazine, "The Torch"²⁸ which states that he "was bound to succeed in anything [he] went into"²⁹. The fact that this magazine has been deliberately named "The Torch"³⁰ is a reference to the great hope he brings Amanda and Laura in the symbolic form of bright light. Moreover, the mention of Jim's aptitude in this magazine emphasizes that for Amanda especially, Jim is an essential and positive opportunity to be captured by Laura.

In preparation for Jim's visit, Amanda purchases a floor lamp. As a result, the lighting in the apartment is enhanced, symbolically demonstrating that the opportunity that Jim embodies for her daughter, and indirectly for herself, is one that engenders

²⁵ Williams, 47

²⁶ Williams, 19

²⁷ Williams, 50

²⁸ Williams, 76

²⁹ Williams, 76

³⁰ Williams, 76

her **novel** hope. This is emphasized by the fact that whenever the lamp is mentioned, it is referred to as the “new floor lamp”³¹

Although, the audience is prominently reminded of this new hope, a stronger yet more subtle set of symbols are also featured to indicate from the onset that the new hope Jim brings with him is only temporary (as the family is later left disillusioned when Jim reveals that he is engaged to be married). In order to further understand the hope brought by Jim to the Wingfield family, the lights present during Jim’s arrival warrant close scrutiny. The lights described in this scene are in the form of the aforementioned new floor lamp and a broken ceiling light. These symbols of modern light represent modernity and Amanda’s hope for the future of her family (this notion will be further explored later in the essay).

“The new floor lamp with its rose silk shade”³² is a symbol of the novel hope that Jim brings however it also embodies **deceptive** hope. When Amanda remembers her romance with Mr. Wingfield who had deceived her with his charm into believing he would provide her with a happy and financially secure future, “she switches on the rose-colored lamp”³³. This action creates an association between this lamp and hope that will be marred by a deceptive romance. The blush-colored light shining through the rose-colored silk during Jim’s visit duly sets a deceptively romantic and promising ambience. The “rose-colored lamp”³⁴ remains switched on throughout dinner until Jim and Laura’s first real encounter (when all the lights go off). Thus indicating that without a real interaction between Jim and Laura, the family’s hope for a financially secure future is non-existent.

Williams describes “a colored paper lantern conceal[ing] the broken light”³⁵ on the ceiling during Jim’s arrival. The broken light indicates that Amanda’s hope had once been betrayed (by her husband when he abandoned the family). Similar to the aforementioned floor lamp, the shielding of the light embodies deception. The

³¹ Williams, 51

³² Williams, 51

³³ Williams, 54

³⁴ Williams, 54

³⁵ Williams, 51

“colored paper”³⁶ makes the light appear fixed just as she welcomes new hope in her life, in the form of Jim. Nonetheless, the fact that the light is broken emphasizes that Amanda’s hope will not be reignited but just as the brokenness of the light is concealed to appear undamaged, Amanda will believe that there is this new hope in the form of Jim. Moreover, the frailty of paper insinuates the fragility of this facade and strengthens the denotation of the ephemerality and falseness³⁷ of the hope brought by Jim, as a simple paper covering cannot disguise the broken light indefinitely. These observations make it clear that Amanda’s hope will be broken once again as the hope Jim brings, also represented by the paper of the “paper lantern”³⁸, is inevitably temporary.

The colored modern lights that shine through the “rose silk shade”³⁹ and the “colored paper lantern”⁴⁰ render the effect of illusion⁴¹. The dream-like lighting provides the audience a sense of illusory detachment from reality, thus further evoking the sense of deceptive hope – a hope that is a mere illusion for the Wingfield family. The hope brought by Jim has thus been established as a weak hope destined to lead to the Wingfield family’s disappointment, as it does.

This investigation will now proceed to uncover how stage lighting and symbolism concerning light are used to illustrate **specifically** how the Wingfield family’s hope is shattered. Before the lights go off completely in the Wingfield apartment as a result of Tom’s overdue light bill, “the lights in both rooms flicker”⁴² mirroring Tom’s inner conflict concerned with either providing for his family or pursuing his own ambitions. The subsequent darkness denotes the disappearance of hope as Tom decides to leave his family. This decision to leave his family is depicted when Tom admits to Jim that he has invested money in his own selfish ambitions “instead of the light bill”⁴³. It is indicative of Tom’s decision to prioritize his pleasure over sustaining the hope in his family.

³⁶ Williams, 51

³⁷ Paper is frequently used to describe imitates and fakes such as a “paper tiger” and a “paper moon”.

³⁸ Williams, 51

³⁹ Williams, 51

⁴⁰ Williams, 51

⁴¹ Please refer to Appendix C.

⁴² Williams, 67

⁴³ Williams, 62

After the lights go off in the Wingfield apartment, Amanda humorously remarks that they will be spending the rest of the evening “in the 19th century”⁴⁴ without electricity. Subsequently, regarding Laura’s personality, Jim states that “it’s unusual to meet a shy girl nowadays”⁴⁵, and as a result he describes her to be “an old-fashioned type of girl”⁴⁶ which he deems “a pretty good type to be”⁴⁷. Thus, the candelabrum is an appropriate tool to hold Laura’s **individual** hope, as it is an instrument of the past and embodies Laura’s anachronistic personality. When Amanda asks for a match to light the candles on her old candelabrum, Jim is the “gentleman”⁴⁸ who “provide[s] a match”⁴⁹ thus, illuminating the room once again and bestowing hope upon Laura and Amanda. In addition to kindling the candles on the candelabrum, Jim states that candlelight is his “favorite kind of light”⁵⁰. Once again, Jim is portrayed as the provider of hope, only now he is directly providing hope to Laura. Until this point, Williams demonstrates coercively⁵¹ that Laura’s fragile hope is being sustained well by convincing the audience of the seemingly likely possibility of a romance between Jim and Laura.

In contrast to the deceptive, modern lighting, the candlelight connotes real hope. Likewise, the light from the candle amidst the darkness renders a sense of romance and intimacy⁵¹. Throughout Jim and Laura’s encounter, the room was lit solely by the raw, unshielded light of the candle. This is symbolic as it indicates the absence of deceptive hope (the aforementioned modern lights are not present during their encounter) while suggesting that Laura possesses **real hope** and a real chance at a happy and financially secure future. However, unlike the light from the lamp, the “flickering light”⁵² of the candle is unstable and easily blown out signifying the fleetingness of this real hope. Moreover, the light of the candle is minute in comparison to the light provided by the aforementioned lamps, indicating that the hope Laura possesses is weak and her chance at a romance with Jim is slight.

⁴⁴ Williams, 69

⁴⁵ Williams, 58

⁴⁶ Williams, 72

⁴⁷ Williams, 72

⁴⁸ Williams, 67

⁴⁹ Williams, 67

⁵⁰ Williams, 69

⁵¹ Please refer to Appendix D.

⁵² Williams, 70

During Laura's encounter with Jim, Williams describes her as "a piece of translucent glass touched by light"⁵³. Williams intends to depict Laura as one of the glass figures in her glass menagerie. The description of the light on Laura suggests that her hope exists only in special circumstances (such as in the presence of candlelight, a symbolic representation of the past where she is in her element and able to overcome her insecurities). This notion can be supported by the conversation between Jim and Laura as they discuss the effect of light on the glass unicorn:

"Laura: hold him over the light, he loves the light! You see how the light shines through him?"

Jim: it sure does shine"⁵⁴

The glass unicorn is a symbol of Laura and her individuality. Thus when "the light shines through [the unicorn]"⁵⁵, it mimics how Laura's hidden charms are being exposed, which in turn increases her prospect of obtaining a gentleman caller. In this case, akin to the glass unicorn, Laura "shines"⁵⁶ in the light indicating that her true charm and aptitude are only revealed when she is supplied with hope. As it is Jim who "holds [the glass unicorn] over the light"⁵⁷, Williams is emphasizing, once again, Jim's role as the provider of hope. It must also be noted that glass shines brighter in the presence of delicate light such as candlelight that focuses solely on the glass⁵⁸. Likewise, Jim, who was accepting of her peculiarity from the start, provides her with confidence in herself, making her feel unique, exceptional and hopeful not only in the sense of a possible romance with Jim but also hopeful in her abilities and her own peculiarities. This focused and delicate care that Jim provides her with, allows Laura to reveal her potential. Moreover, just as the archaic candlelight shines through the glass unicorn, Laura was metaphorically lit with hope and confidence as her anachronistic personality was seen as a unique charm to Jim. This can be seen during the scenes illuminated by the candlelight; Laura possesses a significantly greater amount of dialogue in these scenes (Scene Six and Scene Seven) than ⁱⁿ any other scene

⁵³ Williams, 51

⁵⁴ Williams, 83

⁵⁵ Williams, 83

⁵⁶ Williams, 83

⁵⁷ Williams, 83

⁵⁸ Please refer to Appendix E.

in the play. Thus, like a piece of glass in her glass menagerie, Laura can “shine”⁵⁹ in a comfortable environment that allows her to reveal her aptitude for a hopeful future.

However, similar to the fleeting candle, Laura’s hope is not meant to last. After giving Laura a kiss (and thus building her hope up to its peak), Jim reveals that he is engaged to be married to another woman. To worsen the situation, Tom abandons his family after Amanda accuses him of playing a “wonderful joke”⁶⁰ on Laura and Amanda by inadvertently introducing Laura to a man who is engaged. The drastic decline of Laura’s hope leaves the audience devastated and knowing that this damage will be irrevocable just as a glass cannot be mended after it is shattered. In Tom’s final soliloquy, he reveals that he is regularly reminiscent of Laura when he encounters “a lighted window”⁶¹, which is perhaps indicative of his hope-filled past, that “is filled with tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of a shattered rainbow”⁶². The “shattered rainbow”⁶³ denotes the family’s **disillusionment** – Tom’s disappointment at his own dreams and Laura’s obliterated hopes and lack of prospect for a better future.

To conclude, Tennessee Williams does not purely rely on the plot to reveal ideas and emotions to the audience. The clever use of stage lighting and symbolism related to light has been effective not only in revealing the course of the family’s hope (from one of no hope, followed by one of false and temporary hope, and finally one of permanently shattered hope) but it is also effective in conveying the cause of the family’s ultimate disillusionment.

Tom has unintentionally made himself the thief of hope to Laura and Amanda through inviting Jim for dinner, and later through abandoning them and thus his regret has led to his disillusionment. His desperation to “blow [Laura’s] candles out”⁶⁴ signifies the relentless regret of thieving Laura of hope for a better future. Thus, when

⁵⁹ Williams, 83

⁶⁰ Williams, 95

⁶¹ Williams, 97

⁶² Williams, 97

⁶³ Williams, 97

⁶⁴ Williams, 97

Laura finally “blows the candles out”⁶⁵ it embodies Tom’s freedom from the guilt of his memory. Williams is possibly suggesting that Tom will be able to find hope after absolving himself of this guilt.

Laura’s final downfall (and in turn Amanda’s loss of hope) is revealed in Tom’s parting words for Laura: “for nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura – and so goodbye....”⁶⁶ Lightning is essentially a rapid flow of electricity and hence can be interpreted as a representation of modernity. The impersonal, mechanical and instantaneous nature of lightning suggests that the modern world is harsh, reflecting how Laura has not and cannot succeed in it, where her soft candlelight is continuously overshadowed. The rapidity of lighting further denotes the ephemerality of hope and opportunity in the grim era. Laura’s downfall is the result of her anachronistic personality, which is embodied by the candelabrum. As the world is run by modernity, Laura’s introverted and old-fashioned nature inhibits her from obtaining a gentleman caller to provide her with a secure future in the cruel world.

The play ends in metaphorical and physical darkness. It seems pertinent that the play concludes in darkness, reflecting the family’s ultimate despair and permanently shattered hope. In the darkness, much like glass, Laura does not shine, accentuating the unlikeliness of Laura gaining hope again.

⁶⁵ Williams, 97

⁶⁶ Williams, 97

Appendix A

The light on Laura from the production of The Glass Menagerie by Townson University's Department of Theatre Arts⁶⁶.

⁶⁶ *DC Metro Theater Arts*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Aug. 2014. <<http://dcmetrotheaterarts.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Menagerie3-460x3451.jpg>>.

Appendix B

The somber setting that reflects the Wingfield family's lack of hope at the beginning of the drama. This picture is from the production of The Glass Menagerie by The American Repertory Theater⁶⁷.

⁶⁷ "Letters Head." Photograph. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Aug. 2014. <<http://lettershead.com/2013/03/11/the-arts-the-glass-menagerie-a-southern-velvet-clash-of-cultures-lives-centuries-people/>>.

Appendix C

A lighting design for The Glass Menagerie to portray the deceptive modern lighting⁶⁸.

⁶⁸ *Pro Lighting Space*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Aug. 2014.
<http://api.ning.com/files/8antoLsocpwYFVez7WQBSQYGyiWtWYtQAf4H7FlpRrgczfa9e84Z26njZu7L9OBpOXyU*F4x3jWGHVqZ*Uu0jHeHx8nexivw/TheGlassMenagerie009nwp.jpg>.

Appendix D

The romantic and hopeful ambience set by the candlelight. This picture is from the production of The Glass Menagerie by The Old Globe Theatre⁶⁹.

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⁶⁹ *The Old Globe*. Photograph. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Aug. 2014.
<http://www.theoldglobe.org/_img/pressphotos/Glass_Menagerie_2.jpg>.

Appendix E

The light on Laura's glass unicorn. This picture is from the production of The Glass Menagerie by The American Repertory Theater⁷⁰.

⁷⁰ *The Glass Menagerie Broadway*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Aug. 2014.
<<http://theglassmenageriebroadway.com/photos/>>.

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