Seen, Not Heard: William Faulkner’s Narrative Style in the Creation of African American Characters

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William Faulkner’s work, along with most literature concerning the post-Civil War American South, is ceaselessly examined on matters of racial discourse. Despite some diverging opinions, some critics claim that “more than any white writer of his time, he invented fully realized and sympathetic black characters” (Fargnoli 83). Ralph Ellison stated that “Faulkner began with a stereotype of the Negro and ended with human beings” (qtd. in Denniston
33). In this essay, I will attempt to delineate the beginning and end referenced by Ellison. Confined to the same “beginnings,” Faulkner’s black characters show different ways to disengage these stereotypes, representing different paths between Ellison’s “beginning” and “end.” This essay will examine Dilsey Gibson in *The Sound and the Fury*, and Lucas Beauchamp in *Go Down, Moses* in order to reveal how these characters represent two ways that Faulkner can create black characters that transcend stereotypes.

Written in 1930, Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* identifies and confronts the inconsistencies between words and actions, a concept presented, but not fully elucidated, in Faulkner’s novel *The Sound and the Fury* written one year prior. Addie’s sole monologue in *AILD* identifies this discrepancy, and keeping Addie’s thoughts in mind is crucial to a proper understanding of the Compson family’s black servant, Dilsey Gibson, in *The Sound and the Fury*. Addie Bundren is married to a physical representation of the phenomenon of the difference between words and actions, and in her last thoughts, she presents the recognition of this difference between saying and doing, between words and actions. In response to Cora Tull’s remark that she is not a real mother, Addie thinks:

> How words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too
far apart for the same person
to straddle from one to the
other. (*AILD* 173)

Addie recognizes that “words are no good; that words
don’t ever fit what they are trying to say at” (171). Addie
applies this idea to motherhood, a role also examined in *The
Sound and the Fury*, saying, “Motherhood was invented by
someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that
had children didn’t care if there was a word for it or now”
(171-172). Addie believes that people can attempt to apply
a word but that the word will never be able to adequately
describe true action. This concept provides an illuminated
reading of Dilsey. It shows that an analysis that confines her
to the “black mammy” stereotype attaches her to a word that
provides a more restricted and inadequate reading than one
that carefully examines her actions.

As an author intensely concerned with the
deterioration of the classic southern patriarchy, Faulkner
frames *The Sound and the Fury* in a way that places
his characters superficially into some of the recurring
stereotypes of Southern Reconstruction novels. This is
apparent specifically in Mrs. Compson as the “delicate
alabaster lady” and Dilsey as the “black mammy” (Christian
8). In her book *Black Women Novelists*, Barbara Christian
identifies the mammy through several repeated traits. She
is “black in color as well as race and fat…she is strong…but this strength is used in the service of her white master”
(11-12). Christian also explains the function of these two
roles within the traditional family in Southern literature.
While the father served as the head of the house, handling the economic and financial burdens, the Southern lady was expected to handle the home, serving as “wife, mother, and manager” (8). Yet with the employment of servants as a signifier of wealth in the post-Civil War South, the duties associated with these roles, although “necessary,” became “demeaning,” and a family’s true success came to be “measured by the extent to which the wife does or does not work” (10). From this mentality emerged the “mammy” among the stock characters of Southern literature, whose job it was to fulfill these duties in place of the white mother. With Mrs. Compson mostly confined to a sickly state of isolation in her quarters and Dilsey always working in the kitchen and around the house, it is easy for some readers to confine or reduce them, Dilsey primarily, to these all-encompassing stereotypes. This story’s brilliance lies in Faulkner’s ability to create a setting in which this stereotype is present and also create a character that through action is able to, as John T. Matthews puts, “subvert its authority even as she works within it” and transcend the restricting limitations of this stereotype (85).

Dilsey’s humanity is apparent throughout the novel, but can often be overlooked in the first three monologues of the Compson boys, whose fragmented thoughts and frequently shifting time periods of focus can often be hard to interpret. This is why multiple readings of the novel are beneficial, and a concentration on the final section of the book is paramount. The book’s four sections, titled by the dates they occur, are usually referred to by the name of the
character whose monologue inhabits that section. The last section, titled “April Eighth, 1928,” is sometimes referred to as “Faulkner,” because it is the only chapter told through the third-person, omniscient narrator and therefore represents Faulkner’s point of view. However, for the purposes of this essay, I am going to refer to this final chapter as “Dilsey’s section” because she is the central focus of the action and also because the narration, although omniscient, most closely represents Dilsey’s point of view. Until this section, the reader witnesses the Compson family internally, through the consciousness of the three sons. In Dilsey’s section, the reader finally receives a perspective from the outside, as an observer rather than an occupant, a point of view that Dilsey has inhabited for the entirety of the novel.

Dilsey is the only character who has a clear and total view of the Compson family. Unlike the other narrators, whose mental capacities or subconscious desires and feelings alter the narrative in some way, Dilsey states, “I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin” (TSATF 297), and the reader is finally granted this point of view as well. She transcends the role of “mammy” when she transcends typical human perception. Dilsey possesses the abilities of an omniscient presence in that she is seemingly aware of all wrongdoing throughout the novel. When Caddy climbs the tree to get a better look at Damuddy’s funeral, it is Dilsey who comes around the corner of the house and discovers her children as well as the Compson’s, saying, “Whyn’t you all go on up the stairs like your paw said, stead of slipping out behind my back” (45). When Jason attempts secretly
to chastise Miss Quentin without his Mother’s or Dilsey’s awareness, it is again Dilsey who asks, “What you up to now, Jason?” (183).

She also possesses an understanding beyond knowledge of the mischief of those around her. She has knowledge of the inner-sensory processes of Benjy’s mind, the closest any character gets, with the exception of Caddy, to understanding how he thinks. Benjy’s section reflects his use of “smell” to process the world around him, saying, “I could smell the cold,” and “I could smell the clothes flapping” (6, 14). In Quentin’s section, he recalls Dilsey remarking about Benjy, “He smell what you tell him when he want to. Don’t have to listen nor talk” (89). One could debate over Benjy’s use of “smell” as his actual process or mode of understanding, or his own confusion regarding the word’s meaning, but Dilsey’s knowledge of this way of thinking regardless of its meaning shows a unique understanding of Benjy’s mind that she alone possesses. She is not reduced to “a few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics” (Hall 258). Instead, she serves as an all-knowing, omniscient presence that gives the reader a view of the world in its clearest form.

The creation of stereotypes relies somewhat on establishment of what Stuart Hall calls a set of “binary oppositions” between whites and blacks (243). This is exemplified in the differences between the mammy and the Southern white mistress. Faulkner attempts to reverse this binary that is typically used to subordinate blacks and reinforce the status of whites. In her book *Faulkner’s*
Negro, Thadious Davis refers to Faulkner’s technique as a “contrapuntal design by framing the disintegration of a white [S]outhern family with the survival of a black family” (Davis 72). This is seen through Dilsey’s ability to manage her own family effectively and simultaneously keep the Compson family from total destruction, contrasting the helplessness of Mrs. Compson. When Quentin is brought to the house as a baby, Dilsey remarks, “Who else gwne raise her cep me? Aint I rased ev’y one of ya’ll?” (TSATF 198).

Thadious Davis goes on to state that “Faulkner utilizes blacks to illuminate or magnify aspects of his white characters and afterwards confines them to the background” (Davis 102). Faulkner actually reverses this profile in The Sound and the Fury, where his white characters are used to emphasize certain traits about Dilsey. Jason’s desperation to receive respect and validation from the community helps illuminate Dilsey in her own community and her lifestyle or actions which warrant this respect. Jason struggles internally in dealing with how others perceive him. When he is seen in his car at the end of the novel while chasing after Quentin, Faulkner states that “his invisible life raveled about him like a worn out sock” (TSATF 313). Jason tells Quentin, “I’ve got a position in this town, and I’m not going to have any member of my family going on like a nigger wench” (189). He also wants to better his family’s image by sending Benjy to Jackson, thinking that “it don’t take much pride to not like to see a thirty year old man playing around the yard with a nigger boy, running up and down the fence lowing like a cow” (222). Jason chases Miss Quentin
through the streets, but he does not do so out of concern for her well being. Instead, he chases her to prevent the defamation of his family’s image, thinking to himself, “I’d hate to have my business advertised all over this town” (251). The respect he seeks is never given to him because rather than acting in a way that would garner respect, he blames Quentin, Benjy, Caddy, and the Gibsons as inhibitors. Dilsey, on the other hand, receives the recognition that Jason desires. On her walk to church with Benjy and her family, she is recognized by the Negro community not because she actively seeks it but because she lives her life how she thinks is right, ignoring other opinions and dismissing any negative perceptions received from “trash white folks” on the way (290). They make their way to the church, “steadily the older people speaking to Dilsey,” addressing her formally, saying, “Sis Gibson! How you dis mawnin? (291). There is an excitement surrounding her journey to the church, as if the whole community is aware she is on her way. She is an authoritative presence not just to the Compson children but to the young children of the negro community as well, who refrain from touching Benjy “[c]ase Miss Dilsey lookin” (291). In this short walk, Dilsey shows that she contains more depth than a reductive mammy stereotype who exists merely to accentuate aspects of the white world. She possesses a complexity of character and a morality that receives recognition from her own community, a group of people whose vision of her actions is unclouded by racial prejudice.

Dilsey undoubtedly shows a certain level of devotion
to the Compson family. One could argue that this creates a stereotype because she is displaying a “kind and loyal” servitude which Christian lists as a signature trait of the black mammy (12). This being acknowledged, it is essential to realize that Dilsey’s loyalty to the Compson family exists only in her dedication to fulfilling her employment obligations. Her morality and beliefs are never compromised in any way. The mammy’s loyalty has another subordinating component, which is defined by Hall as “happiness only when under the tutelage of the white master” (243) and by Christian as looking to the white Southern mistress as “supervisor, teacher, doctor, and minister” (12). Dilsey possesses none of these qualities, holding onto a unique morality and belief system which marks her as an individual. Furthermore, she does not hold these attitudes privately but acts on them throughout the novel.

In Jason’s section, Caddy returns home in an attempt to see her daughter. Still filled with hatred for Caddy because of the job she supposedly cost him, Jason tries to prevent the reunion by keeping her out of the house. He reads to Dilsey from the Bible about leprosy, saying that Caddy has been infected and the disease will be passed on to anyone she lays eyes on (TSATF 207). Not only does Dilsey see through this lie, again reflecting her omniscient knowledge, but she also deliberately flouts Jason’s desires, saying, “I like to know whut’s de hurt in letting dat po chile see her baby” (207). Dilsey goes on to say, “yous a cold man, Jason. If a man you is” (207), directly confronting Jason with her opinion of him and also questioning his manhood. Dilsey
acts in a similar fashion in relation to Mrs. Compson as well. In Quentin’s section, he recalls having to play underneath the wisteria frame when Mrs. Compson was feeling well enough to be able to watch them from the windows. But on days when she was confined to her bed, Quentin recalls, “When Mother stayed in bed Dilsey would put old clothes on us and let us go out in the rain because she said rain never hurt young folks” (169). Dilsey opposes Mrs. Compson by letting the children play outside, doing what she thinks is right despite what Mrs. Compson decides. Thus, Dilsey not only dismisses any kind of mental or ideological loyalty to her white mistress but also positions her knowledge of motherhood above Mrs. Compson’s, reversing the teacher-student binary and placing herself in direct opposition to the black mammy stereotype. Dilsey acts entirely of her own accord. She is not a vessel through which Mrs. Compson exerts her power. The mammy is an instrument or tool used for the benefit of her white superiors, lacking the individuality that Dilsey possesses. By granting her worldly knowledge, overwhelming respect in her community, and the strong attachment to a unique set of morals and beliefs, Faulkner creates a fully human character that cannot be defined by a single label.

In addition to Dilsey Gibson, Faulkner creates another black character that transcends stereotypes in Lucas Beauchamp, a central figure in Faulkner’s novel Go Down, Moses. In order to understand Lucas fully, we must first look at another character in the novel. At the center of Go Down Moses, Faulkner places “Pantaloon in Black,” the story of
a young black man named Rider and his response to the sudden death of his wife Mannie. The story’s only explicit connection with the rest of the book is that Rider lives in a house rented from Roth Edmonds, which may lead some to question the tale’s inclusion. After originally being titled *Go Down, Moses, and Other Stories,* Faulkner wrote the editor, asking him to drop the second part of the title, insisting that *Go Down, Moses* was “indeed a novel” (qtd. Vanderwerken 149). If a novel was Faulkner’s intention, it is essential to position “Pantaloon in Black” within the context of the rest of the narrative. Celeste Lempke defines “Pantaloon in Black” as a “[f]ringe story,” saying it should be focused on due to what [it] can reveal about the author’s “underlying themes” (56). If the reader is to understand Lucas Beauchamp, the reader must make an attempt to understand Rider as well.

The story begins in a Negro cemetery during the burial of Rider’s wife and goes on to follow his ensuing emotional journey, ending with the violent murder of a white man and Rider’s subsequent lynching. In a similar fashion to his treatment of Dilsey, Faulkner positions Rider within a common black stereotype: the “Bad Buck.” Donald Bogle defines the Bad Buck as a “physically big, strong, no-good, violent, renegade… violent and frenzied as he lusts for white flesh” (10). Rider fits this stereotype not only in appearance but also in action. Through Rider, Faulkner shows that “actions” may not always serve as a means to transcend stereotypes as they do with Dilsey Gibson.

“Pantaloon in Black” is divided into two sections.
The first part is told through a third-person omniscient narrator, while the second part is a retelling of the events by the sheriff’s deputy. The first section shows the universal human traits of Rider as he goes through the stages of grief, displaying den...
illusions” and that “[s]trength (Faulkner’s “endurance”) earned through ceaseless suffering is their sole powerful province” (56). Craig Werner takes a similar stance, believing that Faulkner confines his black characters to the “long-suffering-but-enduring-black archetype” and, furthermore, defining the “narrative of endurance” as “static” (qtd. Clark 69). These interpretations, like the story of the sheriff, create a restricted view of Lucas and fail to recognize as humanizing characteristics his refusal to be subordinated and his ability to change.

Throughout the novel, Lucas Beauchamp is repeatedly described as “absolutely expressionless, impenetrable” (GDM 67). In accordance with this description, Lucas is also one of Faulkner’s more difficult characters to interpret. Irving Howe believes that “toward no other character does Faulkner show quite the same uncomfortable difference” (215). One could argue that Lucas represents a “tragic mulatto” “caught between two worlds,” who “suffers from a melancholy of the blood that inevitably leads to tragedy” (Christian 16). Yet, Richard H. King writes that “Lucas is perhaps the one black character created by Faulkner who escapes traditional stereotyping” (234). Because of these uncertainties, Martin and Werner have confined him to the “narrative of endurance” rather than a specific stock characterization. They view Lucas as a static Negro who has no capacity for change or development, who is reduced to bearing quietly and submissively the burdens of the world around him. “The Fire and the Hearth” does contain some language that could lead to this limited
reading of Lucas. First, Lucas’s “status as not only the oldest man but the oldest living person on the Edmonds plantation” (*GDM* 36) suggests his ability to endure and survive, having lived through three generations of plantation owners. His longevity is seen as almost supernatural: he “would not only outlive the present Edmonds as he had outlived the two preceding him, but would probably outlast the very ledgers which held the account” (113). A focus on this kind of language presents Lucas not as a person but as a symbol that will persist through generation after generation of white rule. Yet when critics take this evidence and label Lucas as an “enduring-black,” they draw erroneous conclusions. In order to fit this stereotype, Werner himself says that Lucas must be “static” or unchanging. Stuart Hall calls this “naturalization,” which “reduces the culture of black people to nature” thereby securing racial difference by placing blacks in a “permanent and fixed” state (245). When the black man is static or “natural” as Hall suggests, the stereotype can continue to be applied over time. Martin and Werner mistake Lucas for being unchanging because physically, superficially, he remains the same. “Fifty years ago,” Lucas’s face “was not sober and not grave but wore no expression at all” (*GDM* 94). At the end of the story, when Lucas is sixty-seven, “still, the face beneath the hat was impassive, impenetrable” (117). A reliance on these types of descriptions alone would cause Lucas to appear as unchanging. But, as made visible through his actions, Lucas undergoes transformations in “The Fire and the Hearth” which demand his recognition as a fully developed character capable of self-reflection and change.
Lucas’s first transformation happens during his flashback to the birth of Roth Edmonds. While his wife Molly helped deliver the baby, Lucas was sent across the flooded river to retrieve the doctor. Upon his return, Zack’s wife has already passed and Molly is “established in the white man’s house” (45). Here Lucas is confronted with a conflict between the Negro past and his own present, not as a Negro but as a man. During slavery, a black man would have no choice in giving up his wife as a wet nurse, or something more, if his master required it. Zack, still suffering from “the old curse of his fathers, the old haught ancestral price” (107), expected this same kind of compliance from Lucas. Like Martin and Werner, Zack expected Lucas to fit the stereotype of the “enduring-black” and submit to the recruitment of his wife. Lucas undergoes an internal struggle at this point, which resonates in his final question at the end of the chapter, “‘How to god,’ he said, ‘can a black man ask a white man to please not lay down with his black wife?’” (58). But after six months, something changes inside of Lucas. It isn’t a conscious decision, but something undefined, buried in his subconscious, when he “discovered suddenly that he was going now…to the commissary or the house or wherever the white man would be,” to “confront him” (47). Once inside, Lucas shows that he is going to resist the traditional treatment of the Negro in this regard when he tells Zack “I’m a nigger, but I’m a man too… I’m going to take her back” (46). Lucas comes back the next night with a razor and states he will not be able to stand by idly while he is disgraced, saying, “I tell you! Don’t ask too much of me!” (54). Zack
then thinks to himself, “I was wrong... I have gone too far” (54), finally realizing that Lucas is not the “long-suffering-black man” but a man who will take action.

Although there was some internal struggle, this first change that Lucas undergoes is largely prompted by outside factors. At the end of “The Fire and the Hearth,” Lucas goes through another change, but this time it is in response to a problem of his own creation. During the first chapter, while burying his whisky still, Lucas uncovers a golden coin in accordance with tales of buried treasure on the lands of the plantation. This single coin set “his brain boiling with all the images of buried money he had ever listened to or heard of,” and he “crawled on hands and knees among the loose earth” for the next five hours looking for more (38). This coin unlocks Lucas’s greedy lust for wealth. The obsession gets worse when he buys a divining machine from a traveling salesman and begins hunting for gold in the forest every night. Molly recognizes this change in Lucas and goes to Roth Edmond to ask for a divorce. She says, “Ever since he got that machine he done went crazy” (99). She can no longer be with him:

When a man that old takes up money-hunting, it’s like when he takes up gambling or whiskey or women. He ain’t going to have time to quit. And then he’s gonter be lost…. (99-100)

Molly recognizes the sickness of addiction not as it applies to blacks or whites but to “old men.” Lucas is not a poor
man. Roth Edmonds even tells him, “You may even have more money than I’ve got, which I think you have” (115). It is difficult to argue that Lucas’s greed is a product of his environment because he is not in desperate need of money. Instead, the sight of gold and the prospect of more triggered something in Lucas which is inherently human, not just confined to blacks in the South. Driven mad by this greed, Lucas comes very close to accepting his fate as a representative of the stereotype of the enduring black. Lucas is ready to accept a life ruled by money-hunting, along with the consequence of losing his wife, saying, “She wants a voice…all right…she can have it” (115). His willingness to accept his wife’s divorce without challenge or argument is the same unchanging passivity that the enduring black would display. But in the story’s last chapter, Lucas changes his ways. After the near-death of his wife, Lucas brings the machine to Roth’s house and says, “There it is…. Get rid of it” (125). Lucas truly believes that there is gold on that land, but Molly’s near-death causes him to change his manner of thinking and make certain realizations about himself. Originally ruled by selfishness and greed, Lucas says, “I done waited too late to start…I reckon that money ain’t for me” (126). By turning in the machine, Lucas realizes his foolishness and the error of his ways and saves his marriage. Lucas shows that he is not just representative of the enduring black because he makes human mistakes and also possesses the power and awareness to fix them.

Keith Clark, like Martin and Werner, makes several problematic statements in his article “Man on the Margin:
Lucas Beauchamp and the Limitations of Space.” Clark’s central thesis states that “strength” and “humanity” can be achieved in Faulkner’s black characters in only two ways: first, “by defining themselves in terms of the terms of the white community,” and second, by “distancing themselves from the black community or severing their ties with it completely” (68). I believe that there is evidence within “The Fire and the Hearth” which disproves both foundations of this statement.

Clark’s first argument, which calls Lucas an “imitation white man” (68), stems from the misjudgment that if Lucas is not acting “black,” he must be acting “white.” Because Lucas does not fit traditional black stereotyping, Clark concludes that Lucas then must be considered as trying to act “white.” This type of reading replicates a mindset that perpetuates the oppositional binary of blacks and whites, by assuming that if Lucas is not one he must be the other. Stereotyping Lucas as a white man is just as problematic as defining him as a stereotypical black man, and this type of limited reading ignores the possibility that Lucas fits neither and instead exists as a unique individual. King provides a more accurate depiction of Lucas, saying that “he is in but not of any community, not a human projection but a superhuman projection of himself” (236). There is evidence throughout the story that supports this claim for Lucas as an individual. When Roth speaks to his father, Zack Edmonds, about Lucas’s refusal to address Zack by name or by “mister,” he gains insight into the nature of the conflict between Lucas and his father. Roth tries to view the conflict
in terms of race, as his “father and a nigger, over a woman” 
(*GDM* 111). He fails to see that it was “something more 
than difference in race could account for” and that this was 
“because they were themselves, men, not stemming from any 
difference of race” (110-111). This shows that it is possible 
for a man to be defined outside of his race and that action 
and conflict cannot always be viewed in terms of being 
white or black. Roth, like Clark, struggles with this concept, 
which is why he is struck with “amazement and something 
very like horror” when he finally realizes that Lucas cannot 
be defined by race because he is “nameless now except for 
himself who fathered himself…contemptuous…of all blood 
black white yellow or red, including his own” (114).

The second part of Clark’s argument comprises the 
belief that Lucas is a “cultural orphan” (69), severed from 
the black community as well as his own family, whom he 
bears no connection with on a “deeper, psychological level” 
(70). Again, I believe that this is a misreading of the text, 
and there is evidence in *Go Down, Moses* that disproves 
this viewpoint. First, Lucas’s life, which has become a 
sort of legend, holds a place in the black community. In 
“Pantaloon in Black,” Rider and Mannie “built a fire on 
the hearth as the tale told Uncle Lucas Beauchamp…had 
done forty-five years ago, and which had burned ever since” 
(*GDM* 132). This shows that Lucas holds a position of 
respect in his community because his practice of lighting 
the hearth develops into a tradition followed by his fellow 
African Americans. Clark himself defines members of the 
same community as “linked more closely by psychological
affinities resulting from a shared history” (70), and the creation of a marriage ritual to be passed down to his following generations shows that Lucas is deserving of this definition.

In the story “Go Down, Moses,” Lucas’s actions certainly reflect that he holds his family on some “deeper, psychological level.” I have already highlighted that Lucas goes through two transformations in the novel, first, in confronting Zack in his house, and second, in turning in the divining machine. These changes, both psychological in nature, were prompted by Molly in some way, showing her influence over Lucas. Furthermore, Lucas is protective of his daughter, as fathers often are. When attempting to frame George Wilkins for possession of the still, Lucas thinks to himself, “Maybe when they lets him out it will be a lesson to him about whose daughter to fool with next time” (61). Although sometimes hard to see because of his expressionless, emotionless nature, Lucas’s actions are driven by Molly and his daughter, which shows a “deeper” connection with his family that Clark believes he lacks.

Through Dilsey Gibson and Lucas Beauchamp, Faulkner employs two different methods of creating non-stereotypical black characters. The two relate by both operating within the stereotypes that they transcend. Faulkner, being a product of the post-Civil War South, created characters in situations that he witnessed during his life. Perhaps these repeated stereotypes in literature occur because of the limited number of positions that blacks were able to inhabit during that time. As stated by
Ellison, Faulkner is able to take black characters of similar stereotypical “beginnings” and lead them along different paths to individual and unique “ends.” Faulkner’s true gift is the ability to take a black man and woman and show their innate human characteristics within the positions to which they were confined by the American South. This creates a more realistic and meaningful portrayal than if he were to create a black character totally outside a point of reference for his Southern audience.
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