



“TO BE OR NOT TO BE”: DEATH, DESIRE, AND THE TRAGIC IMAGINATION IN SHAKESPEARE’S *HAMLET*”

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Abstract

Shakespeare’s Hamlet remains one of the most enduring explorations of human existence, grappling with themes of mortality, desire, and the tragic imagination. The famous soliloquy, “To be or not to be,” epitomizes Hamlet’s confrontation with the inevitability of death and the paralyzing tension between action and inaction. This research examines how death, both as a physical reality and a metaphysical concept, becomes the central preoccupation of Hamlet’s consciousness, shaping his desires, his fears, and ultimately, his tragic downfall. By analyzing the interplay between personal grief, political corruption, and existential reflection, the study argues that Hamlet’s delay is less a sign of weakness than a profound engagement with the meaning of existence and the morality of revenge.

The paper situates Hamlet within the broader tragic tradition, drawing intertextual connections with classical works such as Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex and Seneca’s revenge tragedies, while also engaging with modern critical perspectives on existentialism, particularly those of Kierkegaard and Camus. The tragic imagination in Hamlet is revealed not only in the prince’s musings on life and death but also in Shakespeare’s theatrical construction of uncertainty, ambiguity, and the porous boundary between sanity and madness. Desire, whether for justice, power, or love, becomes entangled with mortality, suggesting that human aspiration is always shadowed by the inevitability of death.

Ultimately, this research contends that Hamlet is less a play about revenge than a meditation on what it means to exist, to suffer, and to imagine an end. Through its blending of philosophical depth and theatrical intensity, Hamlet continues to resonate across centuries as a universal meditation on human fragility, mortality, and the tragic imagination.

Keywords

Death, desire, tragic imagination, action, inaction, identity, madness, revenge, power, mortality.

Introduction

William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* occupies a singular position in the canon of world literature as both a quintessential revenge tragedy and a profound philosophical inquiry into the human condition. First performed around 1600, the play explores the fragility of existence through themes of mortality, desire, madness, and the tragic imagination. Hamlet’s soliloquy, “*To be or not to be: that is the question*” (Shakespeare, 1603/2006, 3.1.56), has transcended the boundaries of Elizabethan drama to become a universal meditation on the dilemmas of life and death, embodying existential questions that resonate across historical and cultural contexts. More than a narrative of political intrigue or filial revenge, *Hamlet* functions as a deeply reflective exploration of human fragility and the inevitability of death, situating the protagonist’s inner conflict within both personal and universal frameworks.

At its core, *Hamlet* dramatizes the tension between action and inaction, a central theme that has been interpreted through diverse critical lenses. For Aristotle, tragedy emerges when a noble figure confronts a fatal flaw, leading to a recognition (*anagnorisis*) and reversal (*peripeteia*) (Aristotle, trans. 1996). Hamlet’s hesitation to avenge his father’s murder by Claudius has traditionally been



read as his tragic flaw, but later interpretations suggest that his delay is not weakness but rather a profound philosophical engagement with questions of morality, justice, and mortality (Greenblatt, 2018). Unlike the decisive Oedipus of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Hamlet lingers in contemplation, rendering him a tragic hero not only undone by external circumstances but also by his own interiority. This intertextual comparison highlights Shakespeare's innovation: tragedy no longer lies solely in destiny or divine will but in the complexities of human thought and imagination.

The soliloquy "*To be or not to be*" epitomizes Hamlet's oscillation between life and death, desire and annihilation. As Kierkegaard (1844/1980) later observed in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Hamlet represents the modern self's burden of choice, paralyzed by the awareness of infinite possibility. This existential interpretation aligns with Camus's (1942/1991) claim in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the central philosophical question is whether life is worth living. Hamlet, centuries before existentialist philosophy emerged, articulates this very dilemma: is it nobler to endure the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or to "take arms against a sea of troubles" through self-destruction? His hesitation reveals not cowardice but an acute consciousness of the moral and metaphysical weight of human existence.

Intertwined with Hamlet's preoccupation with death is the theme of desire, particularly his yearning for truth, justice, and stability in a world destabilized by corruption. Freud's psychoanalytic reading (1900/1997) of Hamlet emphasized repressed desires, particularly those tied to the Oedipal complex, framing the protagonist's paralysis as an unconscious conflict between forbidden love and moral obligation. While such interpretations remain controversial, they underscore the significance of desire in shaping Hamlet's identity and actions. More recent feminist and psychoanalytic critics, such as Showalter (1985), shift attention to Ophelia, whose madness becomes a counterpoint to Hamlet's feigned lunacy, exposing the gendered dimensions of power and fragility within the play. Desire in *Hamlet* is thus not limited to romantic longing but extends to deeper existential cravings: the desire for meaning, resolution, and transcendence in the face of mortality.

The tragic imagination in *Hamlet* is constructed through Shakespeare's unique interplay of ambiguity, uncertainty, and theatricality. As Bloom (1999) argues, Hamlet is a character "more real than any other in literature," whose capacity for introspection creates an imaginative space where audiences confront their own fears of death and nothingness. The imagery of rot and decay — "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (Shakespeare, 1603/2006, 1.4.90) — becomes a metaphor for the inevitable corruption of both political and bodily life, linking the personal tragedy of Hamlet's grief to the universal reality of human mortality. The ghost of King Hamlet intensifies this tragic imagination, standing as both a figure of memory and a spectral reminder of the porous boundary between life and death. In contrast to the heroes of Seneca's revenge tragedies, whose paths to vengeance are direct and bloody, Hamlet is caught in a liminal space where the tragic imagination renders revenge not merely an act but an existential problem.

Moreover, the play interrogates the instability of identity under the pressures of madness and political disintegration. Hamlet's feigned madness blurs with genuine despair, creating a duality that resonates with Foucault's (1961/2006) argument in *Madness and Civilization* that madness is both a social construct and a form of truth-telling. Ophelia's descent into genuine madness contrasts Hamlet's calculated performance, reinforcing the fragility of human identity when desire and loss collide with power and mortality. Through these dual portrayals, Shakespeare



demonstrates that madness, whether real or performed, is not merely a symptom of weakness but a mode of confronting the unbearable weight of existence.

The intertextual resonance of *Hamlet* extends beyond the Elizabethan stage to later literary and philosophical traditions. T.S. Eliot (1920/1950) famously critiqued the play for its “objective correlative” problem, suggesting that Hamlet’s emotions exceed the dramatic situation, thereby destabilizing the play’s coherence. Yet this very excess has become central to the play’s endurance, allowing successive generations to interpret Hamlet’s struggle through shifting philosophical and cultural paradigms. In modern contexts, Hamlet is frequently read as a precursor to existentialism, a tragic figure whose confrontation with death anticipates the crises of meaning articulated by 20th-century thinkers. As such, Hamlet embodies the tragic imagination not as a closed narrative of revenge but as an open philosophical inquiry that continues to unsettle and inspire.

This research article examines *Hamlet* through the lens of death, desire, and tragic imagination, arguing that the play’s enduring power lies in its ability to dramatize universal human concerns through the subjective turmoil of its protagonist. By situating Hamlet’s soliloquies and actions within both classical tragic traditions and modern existential thought, the study highlights how Shakespeare fuses personal grief with philosophical inquiry, transforming a revenge plot into a meditation on the very meaning of being. In doing so, *Hamlet* transcends its historical context, speaking to audiences across centuries as a timeless exploration of mortality, longing, and the fragile boundaries of identity. The introduction establishes the scope of this investigation: to explore how Shakespeare weaves together death, desire, and imagination in constructing a tragedy that continues to define the contours of human fragility.

Literature Review

The critical reception of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has produced an immense body of scholarship, reflecting its position as both a literary and philosophical masterpiece. Central to this discourse is the interplay between death, desire, and tragic imagination, which has been approached through classical, psychoanalytic, feminist, existentialist, and cultural frameworks. The enduring complexity of Hamlet’s character and soliloquies—especially the famous “*To be or not to be*”—ensures that critics repeatedly return to the play as a site of intertextual engagement, reinterpreting it through the lenses of philosophy, psychology, and politics.

Classical criticism situates *Hamlet* within the Aristotelian model of tragedy. According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, tragedy enacts the downfall of a noble figure through hamartia, peripeteia, and catharsis (Aristotle, trans. 1996). Early readings aligned Hamlet’s delay in avenging his father’s death with the tragic flaw, interpreting his hesitation as weakness or indecision. Yet later critics like A.C. Bradley (1904/2009) reframed Hamlet’s hesitation as an intellectual and moral burden rather than a mere flaw. Bradley argued that Hamlet’s reflective temperament prevented him from acting rashly, making his tragedy deeply psychological. This emphasis on interiority distinguishes Hamlet from classical tragic heroes such as Sophocles’ Oedipus, whose downfall stems from ignorance rather than philosophical contemplation.

The psychoanalytic tradition has been one of the most influential interpretive frameworks. Freud’s reading in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/1997) positioned Hamlet within the Oedipal paradigm, suggesting that his paralysis derived from unconscious desires toward his mother, Gertrude, and repressed hostility toward Claudius as the rival father figure. Subsequent psychoanalytic critics, such as Ernest Jones (1949), extended Freud’s insights, claiming Hamlet’s



hesitation stemmed from unresolved psychosexual conflicts. However, feminist critics have challenged the reductive nature of the Oedipal reading. Elaine Showalter (1985) argued that such interpretations marginalize Ophelia's role, reducing her to a foil for Hamlet's psyche rather than recognizing her descent into madness as a critique of patriarchal oppression. Intertextually, Ophelia's fate parallels Euripides' tragic heroines like Medea, who embody both vulnerability and resistance in male-dominated societies.

Existentialist criticism has further expanded the significance of Hamlet's soliloquies. Kierkegaard (1844/1980) identified Hamlet as an early embodiment of modern existential anxiety, his indecision reflecting the human confrontation with freedom and possibility. Camus (1942/1991) similarly saw Hamlet as dramatizing the "absurd" condition of life, where the desire for meaning collides with the inevitability of death. In this sense, the "*To be or not to be*" soliloquy foreshadows existential philosophy's central preoccupation with the legitimacy of existence. Shakespeare's Hamlet, centuries before Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943/1992), captures the essence of human paralysis when faced with mortality and moral ambiguity.

The theme of death has been pivotal in Hamlet studies. Scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt (2001) in *Hamlet in Purgatory* have emphasized the cultural and theological contexts of early modern England, where the Reformation disrupted traditional beliefs about the afterlife. The ghost of King Hamlet embodies this liminal tension, neither fully Catholic nor Protestant, reflecting anxieties about death, judgment, and remembrance. The graveyard scene, where Hamlet confronts Yorick's skull, epitomizes Shakespeare's tragic imagination: the confrontation with death strips human existence to its most material form, evoking the futility of worldly desire. Intertextually, this recalls the Stoic reflections of Seneca, whose tragedies often meditate on the inevitability of death and the fragility of power.

The tragic imagination in *Hamlet* is also tied to its performance history and reception. Harold Bloom (1999) argued that Hamlet is not only Shakespeare's most imaginative creation but also a figure through whom Western culture invented new modes of subjectivity. Hamlet's ability to imagine possibilities, to project himself into hypothetical scenarios, becomes both his strength and his downfall. In contrast to decisive avengers like Titus in *Titus Andronicus*, Hamlet is undone by his own tragic imagination—his capacity to envision outcomes too vividly to act with certainty. This interpretive strand aligns with T.S. Eliot's (1920/1950) famous critique of Hamlet as an "artistic failure," in which Shakespeare's imaginative excess exceeded the structural boundaries of drama. While Eliot's judgment was harsh, his analysis underscores how Hamlet's imaginative depth challenges dramatic conventions.

Feminist and cultural materialist critics have drawn attention to the intersections of desire and power. Ophelia's madness has been reinterpreted not only as a symptom of romantic loss but also as resistance to patriarchal structures (Showalter, 1985). Meanwhile, Claudius's usurpation of the throne embodies political desire, linking the corruption of the Danish court to Elizabethan anxieties about succession and legitimacy. From a Marxist lens, critics such as Dollimore (1984) have examined how *Hamlet* reflects tensions between feudal structures and emerging modernity, where personal desire collides with political necessity. Intertextually, Hamlet's predicament resonates with Machiavelli's *The Prince*, where rulers must reconcile moral ideals with political expediency. Finally, postmodern interpretations have highlighted the instability of meaning in *Hamlet*. Derridean critics argue that the play's ambiguity reflects the undecidability of language itself, as



Hamlet's words endlessly defer resolution (Derrida, 1978). This linguistic indeterminacy, combined with the play's obsession with performance and role-playing, situates Hamlet within broader debates about representation, identity, and truth. The tragic imagination in *Hamlet* is thus not confined to its narrative but extends to its very structure, which resists closure and compels reinterpretation across time.

Taken together, these critical traditions reveal the richness of *Hamlet* as a site of intertextual engagement. From Aristotelian models of tragedy to psychoanalysis, existential philosophy, feminist theory, and deconstruction, the play continually provokes new readings. Death, desire, and tragic imagination are not isolated themes but interconnected dimensions that situate Hamlet as a work of enduring complexity, where the confrontation with mortality and the search for meaning articulate the deepest anxieties of the human condition.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in literary analysis, intertextuality, and critical theory. The central text under examination is William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), with primary focus on the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, which serves as a nexus for the play's reflections on death, desire, and tragic imagination. The analysis integrates close reading of the text with critical engagement from existing scholarship, drawing on classical, psychoanalytic, existentialist, feminist, and poststructuralist frameworks to highlight the multiplicity of interpretive possibilities.

Intertextual references are incorporated to situate *Hamlet* within broader intellectual traditions, including Aristotelian tragedy, Senecan stoicism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and existential philosophy, thereby demonstrating how Shakespeare's work engages with and reshapes earlier and later discourses. Sources are selected from canonical criticism (e.g., A.C. Bradley, T.S. Eliot), modern critical theory (e.g., Derrida, Showalter, Greenblatt), and philosophical texts (e.g., Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre) to ensure a comprehensive analytical perspective.

The methodology is interpretive rather than empirical, aiming not to resolve Hamlet's ambiguities but to explore them as central to the play's tragic imagination. By synthesizing diverse theoretical lenses, the study seeks to uncover how Hamlet dramatizes the tension between mortality, human desire, and the imaginative structures that shape cultural understandings of tragedy.

Discussion and Analysis

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is often described as the most philosophical of his tragedies, and nowhere is this more evident than in the prince's meditation, "To be or not to be" (3.1.56). This soliloquy encapsulates the intersection of **death, desire, and tragic imagination**, situating Hamlet not merely as a revenger but as a thinker caught in the existential confrontation between action and inaction. The discussion and analysis in this section will unpack these interwoven themes, highlighting how death functions both as fear and fascination, how desire informs both personal longing and political ambition, and how tragic imagination transforms human fragility into universal significance. Intertextual connections with classical tragedy, Christian theology, psychoanalytic theory, and existential philosophy will further illuminate Hamlet's ambiguous yet profound reflections on human mortality and the meaning of existence.

Death operates as the central axis of *Hamlet*. From the ghost of King Hamlet in Act I to the graveyard scene in Act V, mortality dominates the imaginative framework of the play. In the soliloquy, Hamlet articulates death as "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller



returns” (3.1.79–80), foregrounding uncertainty as the chief obstacle to suicide. This tension resonates with Montaigne’s *Essays*, which Shakespeare is thought to have read, where death is depicted as both inevitable and unknowable (Montaigne, 1580/1991). Hamlet’s inability to embrace death stems from this epistemological uncertainty: fear of the afterlife restrains the desire to end suffering.

From a Christian perspective, this uncertainty aligns with the Protestant anxiety of Shakespeare’s age. The ghost’s ambiguous nature—whether a “spirit of health or goblin damned” (1.4.40)—reflects contemporary debates about purgatory and the soul’s fate after death (Greenblatt, 2001). Intertextually, Hamlet’s hesitation mirrors the theological dilemmas of Augustine, who wrestled with the morality of suicide, and anticipates later existential concerns raised by Kierkegaard (1844/1980), who saw despair as the human condition of facing death without full comprehension. Death in *Hamlet* is therefore not only a biological event but also a metaphysical and ethical enigma. Alongside death, desire operates as a powerful, yet destabilizing, force. Hamlet’s desire for revenge is the play’s ostensible driver, yet this desire is repeatedly deferred, interrupted by doubt, ethical reflection, and disgust at the corruption of the Danish court. As Lacan (1959/2007) argues, Hamlet exemplifies “desire in delay,” where the subject cannot act because desire itself becomes entangled with unconscious prohibitions. Hamlet’s longing for his father’s justice is complicated by his mother’s remarriage, which he interprets as incestuous betrayal: “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (1.2.146). His conflicted desire toward Gertrude, often read through a Freudian lens as an Oedipal tension, further destabilizes his identity.

Desire in *Hamlet* extends beyond personal longing to encompass political ambition and erotic attachment. Claudius’s desire for power drives the fratricide, while Ophelia’s tragic demise illustrates the destructive consequences of suppressed female desire in a patriarchal context (Showalter, 1985). The repression of Ophelia’s voice and autonomy contrasts Hamlet’s overabundance of speech, highlighting gendered asymmetries in how desire is expressed and silenced. Thus, desire is never stable in the play; it oscillates between longing for justice, erotic impulse, political ambition, and the yearning for annihilation.

The tragic imagination in *Hamlet* emerges from the interplay between death and desire. Shakespeare constructs a protagonist who reflects endlessly on human fragility and the meaning of existence. Hamlet’s soliloquies dramatize thought itself, making interiority central to the tragic form. This inward turn reflects Renaissance humanism’s preoccupation with selfhood and moral choice (Burckhardt, 1860/1990). In Aristotelian terms, Hamlet’s hamartia is not simply hesitation but the overextension of imagination—he contemplates so deeply that action becomes impossible. This tragic imagination resonates with Seneca’s philosophical tragedies, where excessive rumination often precedes violent catastrophe. It also anticipates modern existentialist literature, where figures such as Dostoevsky’s underground man and Camus’s Meursault embody paralysis before meaninglessness. Camus (1942/1991), in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, identifies suicide as the central philosophical problem, a problem Hamlet himself articulates centuries earlier. Unlike Camus, who advocates for embracing the absurd, Hamlet remains suspended in indecision, demonstrating the tragic cost of consciousness without resolution.

The imagination in *Hamlet* also extends beyond the individual to the theatrical form itself. Shakespeare destabilizes audience expectations by refusing clear moral or metaphysical closure: the ghost’s ambiguity, the uncertainty of the afterlife, and the chaotic ending resist interpretive



certainty. As Derrida (1994) suggests, *Hamlet* stages “spectrality”—the persistence of absence and the haunting of meaning. The tragic imagination thus resides not only in Hamlet’s interior struggle but also in the play’s dramaturgy, which mirrors the uncertainty of human existence.

The themes of death, desire, and imagination converge in Hamlet’s performance of madness. His feigned (or partially real) madness becomes a space for expressing desires and truths that court protocol otherwise suppresses. As Foucault (1961/1988) observes, madness historically functioned as a counter-discourse, destabilizing authority and exposing hidden truths. Hamlet’s “antic disposition” (1.5.172) allows him to critique Claudius and Gertrude indirectly, while also articulating his anxieties about mortality and betrayal.

Ophelia’s madness, in contrast, reveals the gendered dimensions of identity within patriarchal structures. While Hamlet intellectualizes madness through wit and irony, Ophelia embodies it physically and emotionally, culminating in her drowning. Critics such as Elaine Showalter (1985) argue that Ophelia’s madness represents both resistance to and victimization by patriarchal oppression, showing how female desire and subjectivity are silenced within the tragic imagination. Together, Hamlet and Ophelia illustrate how madness exposes the fragility of human identity when confronted with desire, power, and death.

Central to the tragedy is the tension between action and inaction. Hamlet repeatedly chastises himself for failing to act: “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” (2.2.577). Yet his inaction is not mere cowardice; it reflects a tragic consciousness burdened by moral reflection. As A.C. Bradley (1904/1992) notes, Hamlet’s tragedy lies in the disproportion between his intellectual depth and his capacity for decisive action. This disproportion is precisely what elevates the play from a revenge tragedy to a meditation on existence.

Intertextually, this struggle echoes the tragic figures of classical drama, such as Orestes, who also hesitates before avenging his father, and Antigone, who is torn between familial loyalty and civic law. Shakespeare reframes these dilemmas through the lens of Renaissance humanism, where individual conscience becomes paramount. The tragic irony is that Hamlet finally acts only when action is inevitable—at the moment of his own death. Thus, the interplay of action and inaction reflects both human limitation and the tragic cost of excessive imagination.

Through its complex interplay of death, desire, and tragic imagination, *Hamlet* dramatizes the profound fragility of human existence. Death is at once feared and desired; desire is both motivating and destabilizing; imagination illuminates yet paralyzes. Intertextual resonances with classical tragedy, Christian theology, psychoanalysis, and existentialism demonstrate the universality of these concerns across time and culture. Ultimately, Hamlet’s tragedy is not merely his failure to act but his profound confrontation with the meaning of being human. His soliloquy, “*To be or not to be*”, continues to resonate as a universal meditation on mortality, desire, and the tragic imagination, securing *Hamlet*’s place as one of the most enduring works in world literature.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, particularly encapsulated in the soliloquy “*To be or not to be*”, offers one of the most profound meditations on death, desire, and the tragic imagination in Western literature. This soliloquy does not merely serve as a theatrical moment of introspection but rather as a philosophical inquiry into the meaning of human existence, the paralysis of action, and the anxieties provoked by mortality. Hamlet’s reflections are shaped by his entrapment within conflicting forces: the desire for resolution through death, the ethical imperatives of revenge, and



the imaginative terror of the unknown beyond life. This oscillation between action and inaction, life and death, reveals the very essence of tragedy, where human fragility is exposed in its most vulnerable state.

The tragedy of Hamlet is that his intellectual depth becomes both his greatest strength and his undoing. Critics such as A.C. Bradley (1992) emphasize that Hamlet's delay is rooted not in cowardice but in excessive reflection, which aligns with later existentialist readings by philosophers like Kierkegaard (1844/1980) and Sartre (1943/1992), who see in Hamlet an anticipation of modern dilemmas of freedom, authenticity, and despair. Intertextual readings reinforce this by situating Hamlet within a continuum of tragic heroes, from Orestes in Greek tragedy to modern existential protagonists, highlighting how Shakespeare universalizes the psychological burden of human choice.

Moreover, feminist and psychoanalytic interpretations complicate Hamlet's position further. Showalter (1985) reminds us that Hamlet's struggle with mortality and desire is mirrored in Ophelia's descent into madness, demonstrating how patriarchal power structures shape and limit female agency in the play. Freud's (1900/1997) reading of Hamlet as an Oedipal figure underscores the psychological undercurrents of his hesitation, framing his desire for vengeance against Claudius as entangled with repressed familial conflicts. Such readings not only enhance the richness of Hamlet's tragic imagination but also affirm the soliloquy's enduring relevance across cultural and disciplinary boundaries.

Thus, Hamlet embodies the paradox of tragic desire: the yearning for transcendence through death, tempered by the terror of the afterlife. The soliloquy suggests that the very act of imagining death transforms it from a resolution into a source of perpetual uncertainty, an idea echoed by Camus (1942/1991) in his description of life's absurdity and the human condition of defiance in the face of meaninglessness. Shakespeare, therefore, constructs a tragedy that resists closure; Hamlet's vacillation remains unresolved, mirroring the human struggle with mortality and choice.

Ultimately, Hamlet is not just a revenge tragedy but a philosophical drama that bridges literature, psychology, and existential thought. Its power lies in its refusal to offer definitive answers, instead leaving audiences with the unsettling recognition of their own mortality, desires, and limitations. By situating Hamlet within intertextual traditions and critical debates, we recognize the soliloquy "*To be or not to be*" as a timeless articulation of the tragic imagination: one that continues to inspire reflection on what it means to live, to desire, and inevitably, to die.

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