

Robert Louis Stevenson and Popular Culture

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Within the traditional canon of English Literature Robert Louis Stevenson's position has oscillated between that of celebrated man of letters and popular writer of boys' adventure fiction. In his lifetime he was highly regarded as an essayist of considerable talent, a man who was seen as an equal to Henry James and whose literary reputation was jealously guarded by friends like W. E. Henley and Sidney Colvin. In the twentieth century, however, this reputation became subordinated to his popularity as the writer of the best sellers *Treasure Island* (1883) and *Jekyll and Hyde* (1886). In the last fifteen or so years, however, Stevenson has begun to receive more serious academic attention, with his later novels and stories being recognised as contributing to genres beyond the adventure romance. It has thus become a pressing task to reassess Stevenson's place within the literature of the last two hundred years because this allows us to recognise the range of genres that influenced his fiction, and how, in turn, his work influenced future generations of writers. This essay will thus explore how Stevenson's work endures through re-tellings, re-imaginings and adaptations in contemporary popular culture.

Recent works like *Stevenson and Conrad: Writers of Transition* seek to reposition Stevenson alongside his near contemporaries, and argue that he was a writer who deserves more serious attention.¹ Such works recognise the proximity between Stevenson and Joseph Conrad, acknowledging the debt that Conrad owed to the earlier writer, and allowing Stevenson to take a deserved place alongside the celebrated writers of the late nineteenth-century. Frederic Jameson claims that Conrad "floats uncertainly somewhere between Proust and Robert Louis Stevenson" (Jameson 1981: 206), a claim that elevates Conrad and

¹ See Linda Dryden, Stephen Arata and Eric Massie, eds., *Stevenson and Conrad: Writers of Transition*.

perpetuates the common misconception of Stevenson as a writer of boys' adventure fiction: he is, of course, much more than this. Yet, at the same time we cannot and should not ignore Stevenson's place within popular culture. His reputation thus poses a conundrum: Stevenson is popular, with mass appeal, but he is also a serious writer whose work both transcends the popular and embraces it.

The following discussion, therefore considers the impact on popular culture of two of Stevenson's works, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Treasure Island*. While these works are famous in their own right, there has been no detailed examination of how and why they continue to exert such a compelling influence over popular cultural products. This paper will thus begin the work of establishing Stevenson not only as a writer of immensely popular fictions, but as a writer whose narratives transcend historical specificity and speak to readers and audiences today as clearly as they did over one hundred years ago. In examining Stevenson's contribution to the popular imagination, then, what emerges is a sense of the immediacy of his prose and of a unique imagination that could produce memorable characters and enduring narratives that are signally appropriate for adaptation into new and emerging cultural forms and products.

Strange case: the cultural endurance of Jekyll and Hyde

Joseph Conrad would never be regarded as a writer of popular fiction, and yet this Polish émigré-turned-English-gentleman has had a huge influence on popular culture. For example, references to *Heart of Darkness* have become a commonplace in popular culture from newspaper headlines to the internet, from *Star Trek* to *The Simpsons* (Dryden 2002). Such pervasiveness is evidence of the symbiotic relationship between so-called "high and low culture." Popular culture relies on "high" art for the purposes of satire, but also for more serious social commentary: "high" art relies on popular culture for its very subject matter. If this were not the case, some of the great works of modernism would never have been written: *Ulysses*, a text that embraces popular culture such as newspapers and music halls, is a case in point. It is postmodernism's eradication of cultural boundaries that has enabled arguments about the role of popular culture in literature and allowed for a re-evaluation of the very notion of literary worth. Robert Louis

Stevenson's legacy thus benefits from the advent of postmodernism and, as a result, Jameson's reductive assessment of his place in the tradition of English literature is open to significant challenges.

In a world obsessed with advertising and image, Stevenson is a potent international brand. The image of the velvet coated, lanky Scotsman is as recognisable around the world as that of Dickens, and the reasons for this are two-fold: *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Treasure Island*. Probably the most influential of these two works though is *Jekyll and Hyde*, which is to Stevenson's reputation what *Heart of Darkness* is to Conrad. This is a novella that captured the popular imagination upon its publication and is so well-known today that, in the Western world at least, it cannot be read for the first time with any genuine anticipation as to the key to the riddle of its narrative—we all know Hyde's provenance, we all know how the story ends. Like Conrad's novella, *Jekyll and Hyde* has become a constant cultural referent. It is used to describe aberrant behaviour whenever an apparently respectable individual is found to have been leading a double life. However, the ubiquity of the phrase "leading a Jekyll and Hyde existence" may well be indirectly ascribed to the film adaptations of the story and not to the novella itself. It is probably the case that more people have seen a film version than have actually read the novella. The transformation of the urbane Jekyll into the monstrous Hyde is particularly suited to the medium of film because of its startling visual impact, and it is this bizarre event, filmed using ever more sophisticated special effects, that captures the popular imagination and propels this extraordinary tale into new centuries with renewed relevance and immediacy.

When he wrote *Jekyll and Hyde Adapted: Dramatizations of Cultural Anxiety* in 1996, Brian A. Rose estimated that around 80 films had been based on or influenced by Stevenson's classic, including the *Nutty Professor* series of comedy films. If we take into account television programmes based on the novella and more recent film adaptations and derivative works, then that number will have grown substantially in the intervening years. Only a handful of authors can be said to have been so influential on popular culture, and cinema in particular. Apart from Shakespeare and Dickens, one would cite Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, Conrad, and Conan Doyle as having written texts that have transcended the boundaries of literature and infiltrated our popular culture at all levels: from the covers of cereal packets to television

dramas, the works of these authors are constantly being referenced in contemporary popular culture.² Yet Stevenson occupies a liminal position in such popular company: to borrow from Jameson, Stevenson seems to “float uncertainly somewhere” between Conrad and Conan Doyle, denied the lionization and reputation for experimentalism enjoyed by Conrad, yet seeming to be more versatile, more a “man of letters,” than Conan Doyle.

Another Edinburgh Scotsman, Conan Doyle, invented Sherlock Holmes and shot to international fame, leaving a legacy in detective fiction that has shaped the genre to the present day. What Conan Doyle created was a formula and a stereotype that continue to influence the notion of the detective as having a darker, brooding or philosophical inner consciousness in conflict with his (it is usually a male) clear-cut mission to defeat crime. This conception of the inherent duality of the detective threads through crime fiction from Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe to Ian Rankin’s Inspector Rebus, and reminds us that it was *Jekyll and Hyde*, perhaps more than any other text before it, that popularized the notion of a darker self lurking within the seemingly respectable citizen.³

With *Jekyll and Hyde*, however, Stevenson goes beyond formula and stereotype, transcending genre by probing the psyche and producing a narrative of such implied horror that readers are both fascinated and repelled. So obsessed is the popular imagination with this extraordinary story that writers are compelled to revisit it in television dramas, graphic novels, cartoon strips, films, theatre productions and all sorts of images of duality in popular culture. Like Frankenstein’s monster, Mr Hyde has come to represent the darker side of the human psyche in the popular consciousness: he was made instantly recognisable as the leering simian creature by Rouben Mamoulian in his 1931 film adaptation, and it is

² A recent drama on British television, “Lost in Austen,” is a case in point, as is the Count on “Sesame Street,” an obvious reference to Dracula. In the case of Stevenson one obvious example is the British children’s television programme “Juliet Jekyll and Harriet Hyde,” which ran from 1995-98.

³ Rankin himself has often stated in the media that his work, and particularly his portrayal of Edinburgh, is strongly influenced by his reading of Stevenson.

Mamoulian's conception of Hyde that remains the most powerful and frequently imitated visual representation of Jekyll's doppelgänger.

However, the influence of *Jekyll and Hyde* stretches far beyond filmic representations: it has been fundamental in establishing doppelgänger narratives in any number of genres, not least modern comic book heroes and their inheritors in such television programmes as the recent *Heroes* series.⁴ If Mary Shelley invented the mad professor/scientist, Stevenson combined the prototype with a psychological horror in the form of a transformative duality and transported the action to the heart of London. While Frankenstein's monster murdered through childlike emotional need and destructive vengeance, Stevenson gave Hyde no apparent motive and heightened the horror—to kill or maim for the sheer pleasure of it, to combine such mindless brutality, such gleeful sadism with a virile ugliness that is repellent and fascinating at the same time is truly a monumental achievement.⁵

The story is so compelling that creative artists have been unable to resist the impulse to repeat Stevenson's vision with seemingly infinite variations over the ensuing decades. It could well be argued that the dual lives of superheroes like Superman, Batman, and Spiderman owe a great deal to Stevenson's vision of respectable citizens leading double lives. While Superman and Spiderman turn this duality into a force for good, the Batman explores the darker side of human nature by engaging in vigilante activities, a development of Stevenson's vision. Even nearer the mark is the Incredible Hulk, the monstrous result of an experiment gone wrong. As a scientist who mutates into an ugly beast with primal instincts, Bruce Banner and his alter-ego, the Hulk, are clearly comic book descendants of Jekyll/Hyde and Frankenstein.

⁴ In this programme the actor Ali Larter plays Niki Sanders, a "hero" who has a malevolent doppelgänger named Jessica. The character is evidently based on Jekyll and Hyde.

⁵ It should also be noted, however, that there are numerous readings of the novel that seek to ascribe motivation to Hyde, in particular Freudian readings that explore the father/son relationship in ways that echo *Frankenstein*. I am not disputing these readings, but merely asserting that the actual narrative ascribes no motivation—that is part of its fascination.

The story enters popular culture at the level of myth and thus becomes accessible to any number of transmutations in itself. So Jekyll, in the film versions, acquires a wife or fiancée; in the nineteenth century suggestions of Hyde's criminal activities became influenced by the Ripper Murders, and his early filmic character thus became a sexual predator who murdered prostitutes. These plot manipulations reflect the film industry's need to inject glamour (a central female character), and salacious content (murdered prostitutes) into a narrative from which women are largely absent and where the nature of the crime is deliberately elided. The novella is determinedly elliptical about the exact appearance of Hyde, and thus filmmakers, starting with Mamoulian, take their cue from the term "troglodytic," turning Hyde into a hairy monkey man, with long arms, simian features and superhuman agility—much more of a cinematic feast tailored for a visual medium than the textual original. The psychological depths of the original are stripped away and the narrative becomes an ideal vehicle for the sensation and horror that draws audiences in a more secular age where the thirst for immediate gratification is sated with the gruesome horror of Hyde's appearance and his sexual murders.

Where Stevenson's textual narrative is elusive and implicit, the popular form of the visual narrative, from film to television to graphic novels to comic books, revels in explicit images of violence and horror. In short, the very simplicity of the story, coupled with its refusal to be precise, to articulate what really happens, makes it the ideal narrative for contemporary adaptation dealing with contemporary issues and contemporary media appetites. So, in the recent British television programme *Jekyll*, the hero is a descendant of the original doctor, now called Jackman, whose ability to transform into a super-being brings him to the attention of weapons manufacturers and a game of cat-and-mouse ensues. Jackman's "Hyde" is still an alter-ego, but he is no longer a sadistic killer. Rather, the doppelgänger exists to protect Jackman's family. Even Stevenson himself features in a flashback sequence, and Jekyll becomes a real historical figure, rather than the extraordinary product of an extraordinary imagination. In this way, the story has transcended the confines of the page and become a cultural myth, open to any number of reinterpretations. Just like its protagonist, *Jekyll and Hyde* is poised to transform, to transmutate, to adapt, for as long as its very human story remains true to experience.

A new type of villain: Treasure Island, Long John Silver and the pirate's lexicon

Stevenson's other popular cultural reputation is that of boys' adventure story writer: much of his enduring appeal is a result of the fact that *Treasure Island* continues to be read by generations of young boys. Although not quite as prolific in terms of popular adaptation as *Jekyll and Hyde*, there have been over fifty movies and television productions based on the novel. As a hallmark of its entry into mainstream popular culture, Walt Disney made the most iconic of these versions in 1950, adding "Arrrgh, Jim lad" to the lexicon of *Treasure Island*, and thus providing a phrase that has become laden with meaning associated with pirate narratives in popular culture, forever associated with Stevenson's novel even though Long John Silver never utters the words in print.

It could be argued that *Treasure Island* established the boy's adventure story in the same way that *The Time Machine* marked the emergence of the genre of science fiction. Notwithstanding their predecessors in these popular genres, Stevenson and Wells are regarded as pivotal when it comes to adventure narratives and science fiction respectively. Indeed, Stevenson was unwittingly responsible for kick-starting the career of one of the most famous purveyors of adventure fiction, H. Rider Haggard, as Peter Keating notes:

In 1884 [Rider Haggard] was the author of two unsuccessful novels. Hearing the recently published *Treasure Island* highly praised, he spoke slightly of it and was challenged by his brother to 'write anything half so good.' He responded with *King Solomon's Mines*, which shared with *Treasure Island*, a string of exciting adventures and mythic appeal. (Keating 1989: 344)

On publication *King Solomon's Mines* outsold Stevenson's novel nearly three times over: thirty-one thousand copies in one year compared to *Treasure Island's* twelve thousand (Keating 1989: 16). Haggard's novel provided the template for a particular kind of boys' adventure narrative involving weird and vaguely supernatural occurrences in Africa and the East, notably influencing the *Indiana Jones* franchise: in its turn, *Treasure Island* has become a byword for piratical adventure on the high seas.

Swashbuckling pirates and enigmatic anti-heroes can be traced back at least to Long John Silver. *Treasure Island* is thus the second of Stevenson's works to establish his credentials with regards to popular

culture, though of course it occurs earlier than *Jekyll and Hyde* in the Stevenson canon. Its influence though, unlike *Jekyll and Hyde*, works at the level of genre. Predecessors in the boys' adventure story genre are characterised by Marryat's *Masterman Ready* or R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, but these are rambling, episodic novels, that are naïve and superficial. Boys' adventure fiction usually reinforces traditional values, offering nothing challenging or subversive in the way of plot or characters. They are simplistic and morally didactic. *Treasure Island* on the other hand, is rich and complex with a tightly woven narrative structure and well-defined, sometimes compromised, protagonists whose motivations can be questionable. At its heart is the pirate tale, and it is around this that the action revolves, raising questions of divided loyalties, the growth into manhood, the nature of good and evil, and issues of motivation and greed.

Treasure Island problematises the notion of the hero and offers us a colourful version of the villain in Long John Silver. Silver is a slippery, charismatic character who shifts loyalties seamlessly between the mutineers and the so-called "honest" crew. He is self-seeking, eloquent of speech, duplicitous and capable of callous murder. Yet Silver is also curiously attractive, exotic, and at bottom, loyal to those who protect him (until, that is, he spies the opportunity for escape). He can be persuasive, with an oily tongue, and knows how to manipulate those he cajoles into co-operating with him. At the same time he is not overly greedy and only takes a few hundred guineas from the surviving adventurers when he could easily, most likely, have taken more.

Perhaps Silver finds a counterpart in Magwitch in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, but rarely, if ever, had such a villain graced the pages of adventure fiction and captured the uneasy admiration of the boy-hero. Silver is unusual in the boys' adventure genre in that his villainy is mixed with a peculiar kind of charisma. Furthermore, closure in such fiction always entails retribution and usually death for the villain. Silver receives no such fate: despite the deaths for which he is responsible, he absconds in the end, a free, and reasonably wealthy man to reunite with his wife, in many ways prefiguring Conrad's *Secret Sharer*. Fenimore Cooper's Magua in *The Last of the Mohicans* or Conrad's Gentleman

Brown in *Lord Jim* are villains conceived firmly in the adventure mode, but they are characters of unalloyed evil.⁶ In fact Stevenson was inspired in *Treasure Island* by his reading of works by Daniel Defoe, Edgar Allan Poe, and Washington Irving, declaring of Irving's "Wolfert Webber": "It is my debt to Washington Irving that exercises my conscience, and justly so, for I believe plagiarism was rarely carried farther' (*Treasure Island* 1999: 194).

In *Jekyll and Hyde* Stevenson took the doppelgänger tradition of the likes of Edgar Allan Poe and James Hogg and imbued it with a modern sensibility that enables it to function as a cipher for cultural anxieties in any age. With Long John Silver he had done something different: Silver's character draws on the stereotypic tropes of a pirate fiction that had its Golden Age in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but he also represents a new type of anti-hero for modern times. Stevenson injects into the adventure of pirate narratives a moral dubiety that compromises the ostensible heroes, Jim, Squire Trelawney and Doctor Livesey, leaving Silver in an ambiguous, liminal space between villain and hero. So enigmatic is Long John Silver that his influences stretch through J. M. Barrie's Captain Hook, who added an eye patch and a genuine wooden leg to Stevenson's conception, to pantomime characters and certainly into the creation of Captain Jack Sparrow in the recent *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy. Sparrow inherits much of Silver's ambiguity and turns Silver's dangerous playfulness into knockabout farce.

Along with its colourful characters, *Treasure Island* has provided us with an entire, enigmatic vocabulary for the pirate adventure genre: "pieces of eight," "dead man's chest," "yo ho ho and a bottle of rum," and that trademark phrase of Silver's "shiver my timbers." Combine the unique characters and pirate vocabulary with the famous treasure map that features as the Frontispiece to the novel and it is apparent that Stevenson created a uniquely compelling formula for pirate stories. Lloyd Osbourne, Stevenson's stepson, in his "Note" to the Tusitala

⁶ *Lord Jim* contains elements of Stevenson's novel, even down to the name of the hero, Jim, but this is no boys' story: it is a novel that sets out to subvert the romance/adventure mode. See for more discussion, Linda Dryden, 1999. *Joseph Conrad and the Imperial Romance*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

edition of *Treasure Island* in 1923, outlines some of the further details in the novel that have subsequently contributed to its popular fame. Lloyd had been painting the original map when Stevenson entered the room:

Stevenson came in as I was finishing it, and with his affectionate interest in everything I was doing, leaned over my shoulder, and was soon elaborating the map, and naming it. I shall never forget the thrill of Skeleton Island, Spy-Glass Hill, nor the heart-stirring climax of the three red crosses! And the greater climax still when he wrote down the words 'Treasure Island' at the top right-hand corner! And he seemed to know so much about it too – the pirates, the buried treasure, the man who had been marooned on the island. 'Oh, for a story about it,' I exclaimed in a heaven of enchantment [...]. (*Treasure Island* 1923: xviii)

Thus one of the most famous and influential of all children's stories had its genesis in a rudimentary map painted by a young boy. That this initial map was lost, perhaps discarded by a careless publisher, means we will never see the artefact that precipitated such a time-honoured classic of children's literature, but its emblems have remained lodged in the popular consciousness for over one hundred years.

These emblems that Stevenson added to Lloyd's prototype map have become the symbols of pirate fiction ever since: the treasure map where X marks the spot, the one-legged pirate with a parrot on his shoulder, chests full of treasure, the black spot, and the pirates' code of behaviour. What Stevenson managed to do was to create simple, but instantly recognisable images that are ideal for popular consumption and reproduction: they are playfully sinister, immediately recognised, but containing a wealth of strange juxtapositions that are vaguely suggestive of the uncanny or the exotic. It may be that Stevenson was not the first to coin some of these phrases or to invoke these images. Indeed, popular culture, like all products of the imagination, rarely appears as the sudden, unique inspiration of one person: most imaginative ideas have their roots in previous incarnations of culture, are dependent upon lore or cultural practice. Shakespeare takes the fairy, previously a malign creature, and endows it, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with a magical mysticism and ethereal beauty that has come to define our perception of the fairy. Likewise, Stevenson amasses language and imagery that coalesce and fix around the romantic, exotic image of the roguish pirate, and thus creates a staple figure for popular culture.

As a result, *Treasure Island* is referenced whenever pirates are mentioned in contemporary culture: even the cover page of the *Times*

Higher Education on June 4, 2009, featured the byline, “Long John Silver’s lessons for Adam Smith,” even though the article this refers to made no mention of *Treasure Island* or its iconic hero (*Times Higher* 2009: cover). The novel itself has thus become a cultural reference point, and its very title conjures images of exotic pirates, treasure maps, and adventures on the high seas for producers of popular culture. From the makers of *The Muppet Treasure Island* in 1996 to a San Francisco event called the Treasure Island Music Festival, a Google search reveals over nine million hits for the term “Treasure Island.” Lloyd Osbourne’s childhood drawing truly marked the genesis of an entire popular cultural industry.

Conclusion

Much of what has been discussed here concerns the transference of the textual to the visual and aural. Popular culture in our era is dominated by visual consumption, immediate, and gratifying with imagery that works at the meta-level, lingering in our memories long after the detail of plot and character have dissipated. Stevenson was truly a writer of extraordinary imagination, one who knew how to capture the essence of an idea and weave it into a narrative of adventure or gothic horror that is immediate in effect, visually arresting and undeniably enduring. He may be responsible for much more influence than has yet been recognised, and it was thus the purpose of this paper to begin the archaeological work of recovering his place in our popular cultural history.

From the creators of those angst-ridden, duality-plagued comic book heroes, the generations of children brought up on a diet of Christmas pantomimes, to countless screenwriters and television producers, not to mention a wealth of authors of both high brow and popular fiction, the debt that popular culture owes to the imagination of Robert Louis Stevenson has yet to be fully calculated. The general public may well have cause to be grateful for Stevenson’s feverish nightmares of a monstrous Hyde-like figure and for his playful urges to entertain his stepson, Lloyd, but that still leaves the question of whether Stevenson’s reputation as popular storyteller can co-exist with that of serious author. To nail the point it is worth returning again to Joseph Conrad.

Conrad is undoubtedly one of the great writers of the last hundred years; so is Stevenson. Yet Conrad has always been regarded as a

difficult, high-brow writer; Stevenson, as we have seen, suffered from a reductive reputation as a writer of simple tales of adventure and romance for boys. Conrad himself frequently tried to distance his own work from Stevenson and his fiction, stating at one point: "I am no sort of airy R. L. Stevenson who considered his art a prostitute and the artist no better than one" (Karl 1979: 462). He deplored comparisons with Stevenson, and yet when he collaborated with Ford Madox Ford on *Romance* it was their intention to write a story that was Stevensonian in concept and popularity (Karl 1979: 438). They failed dismally; the long rambling narrative of *Romance* may contain pirates and intrigue in an exotic location, but it lacks the clarity, pace and visual impact of a *Treasure Island* or *The Ebb-Tide*.

Although Conrad would never admit it, he was certainly piqued by Stevenson's popular reputation and probably more than a little envious of his ability to evoke the spirit of romance and adventure with such evident commercial success. Stevenson's genius for conjuring vivid images through the power of words contributes to his ability to invoke pity and horror, as with the pathetic site of the dead Israel Hands as seen through the pellucid waters of the lagoon:

As the water settled, I could see him lying huddled together on the clean, bright sand in the shadow of the vessel's sides. A fish or two whipped past his body. Sometimes, by the quivering of the water, he appeared to move a little, as if he were trying to rise. But he was dead enough for all that, being both shot and drowned, and was food for fish in the very place where he had designed my slaughter.

(Stevenson 1911: 176)

At the end of *Victory* Conrad offers a surprisingly similar view of his drowned villain Gentleman Jones, as described by Captain Davidson:

'The water's very clear there, and I could see him huddled up on the bottom between two piles, like a heap of bones in a blue silk bag, with only the head and the feet sticking out.' (*Victory* 1925: 411)

The island where the action takes place in *Victory* is a type of *Treasure Island* invaded by Jones and his cronies in search of treasure, and indeed it is strongly suggestive of another of Stevenson's vivid tales of the South Seas, *The Ebb-Tide*. The force of Stevenson's imagination was not lost on Conrad, as evidenced by his intention with *Romance*, and perhaps his image of Jones in his final resting place was prompted by a distant

memory of reading about Israel Hands lifeless on the sea-bed. Potential influences such as this problematise Stevenson's reputation as a writer of popular adventure stories for boys and suggest that this reputation can indeed co-exist alongside that of serious author.

It is undeniable that Stevenson's impact both on subsequent authors and on popular culture retains a powerful hold. *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Treasure Island* were bestsellers when first published and have never been out of print since. These books have entertained generations of readers and inspired countless cultural spin-offs, and they remain to this day prime examples of how a "cracking good yarn" from the pen of a preternaturally talented writer can take on a life of its own and enter the popular consciousness of the visual, aural and textual media of any era.

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