Intention v. Impact: The Intersectional Cost of Representation in Female Empowerment Narratives in *The Secret Life of Bees*

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Stories have the unique power to connect people across different cultures, ages, genders, and social circles. One of the most popular forms of such stories is coming-of-age novels, which follow the story of a young character going through a life-changing experience in which they grow from. While popular with young audiences, coming-of-age novels and others like it, otherwise known as popular literature, are often overlooked by academics due to their "low value" in the academic field. The view that popular literature is worthless and futile is outdated, as many readers agree that value can come from any kind of book. Author Felski argues that literary critics have become so fixated on the idea that "meaning and value are always assigned by someone, somewhere" (Felski 3) that they have lost sight of literature's actual impact. By reducing literature to theoretical frameworks, context, and principles, critics lose sight of what literature actually does to the everyday reader. Even stories that seem simplistic deserve critical attention, not dismissal. Popular literature's wide audience makes examining its values and representations more important and not any less valuable than other writings.

While stories give meaning and create connections, they have the power to give readers a sense of empowerment and impact people's understanding of identity, aspirations, and how others may experience life. But while some empowerment deeply affects some, it can only benefit certain readers. Sue Monk Kidd's The Secret Life of Bees is a coming-of-age story that has been celebrated as a story of female empowerment by representing friendships between women and the impact of sharing and writing stories. For many readers, the novel provides a positive model for female friendships and a strong example of the power we can find in ourselves. Yet, through Lily's journey of self-discovery, Kidd reveals whose empowerment has become the priority: a young white girls growth provided by the wisdom and care of black women who remain the supporting characters. The way young white readers experience The Secret Life of Bees is completely different to the way young black readers do. One girl finds herself reflected in Lily Owen's, while the other girl may find herself erased, reduced to a side character. Despite an overall critical consensus that Kidds depiction of black female characters is empowering, the novels metaphors underlie the very empowerment it claims to offer. In attempting to create a story of the empowerment of a young white girl, Kidd has accidentally discouraged the empowerment black women; instead stealing their knowledge and emotional labor to provide such growth. The novel demonstrates both literatures power and its limitations- it can model female community and personal growth but when that community is structured around a white protagonists needs, it only empowers some young readers while teaching others that their role is to nurture and guide, never to be the hero of their own stories. This doesn't diminish the importance of the novel; rather, it gives readers the opportunity to be aware of how a single text can empower and erase simultaneously. The novel can be meaningful for some white readers

seeking female community while also reinforcing stereotypes for black readers. Both readings are true, and both matters.

To begin to understand the different layers of representation, we must first look at who wrote the novel and what perspective shapes its worldview. The author, Sue Monk Kidd, is a white woman born and raised in South Georgia during the end of segregation. In interviews, Kidd has acknowledged her personal connection to the story setting and time period, explaining that she wrote the novel “straight out of my imagination, inventing from scratch, yet bits and pieces of my life inevitably found their way into the story” (“A Penguin Readers Guide"). This explanation is crucial for understanding the novel's perspective: Kidd is writing from her imagination and memory about an era she experienced as a white Southerner. With this information in mind, we can understand that Lily is a parallel to Kidd herself, a white girl growing up in a racially segregated country. Kidd thinks (even if it’s unconsciously) of herself as Lily and empowers herself by creating a story about a young girl who discovers her sense of self through community and storytelling. This connection isn’t inherently problematic as writers often create characters who reflect aspects of their own lives. However, it becomes significant when the white identification affects how the black characters function in the story. When a white author empowers a white character by using black women’s wisdom and community, the white character is empowered at the expense of the black characters.

This dynamic raises critical questions about representation and the extraction of black individuals' knowledge and emotional labor for white narrative purposes. Within the novel's world, Lily grows, heals and transforms from a child into a young adult all with black women's wisdom, community, and emotional labor. But outside of the text, Kidd gains from imagining black characters whose primary function is to facilitate white growth. This pattern reflects what critic Partridge identifies as “narratives that conform to the expectations of a (white) reading public that wants to look back safely to a past they can feel good about” (Partridge 129). White readers are able to consume this novel and feel happy that black women were represented as strong and knowledgeable despite the racism they endure. But black readers may not walk away from the novel with the same understanding, instead, they may recognize a familiar pattern: black women once again in the position of nurturing white characters. This is not empowerment; it is erasure disguised as representation and celebration.

Set in South Carolina during the signing of the Civil Rights Act, the novel's main character Lily Owen’s is a young teenager who lives with her abusive father, T. Ray. Spurred by the assault of her caretaker Rosaleen from the local law enforcement, Lily makes the decision to run away from her father to discover her dead mother's past. Following the only clue of her mother (an address written on the back of a wooden statue), Lily escapes to Tiburn, South Carolina, meeting the African-American Boatwright sisters who own a bee farm and are members of a tight-knit religious community of women who call themselves the “Daughters of Mary.” She also meets a young black teenager who she becomes romantically involved with. Eventually she confronts her father, staying to live with the Boatwright sisters. While learning about her mother's past, Lily becomes entwined with the sisters while learning how they take care of the bees, being a part of a community, and creating her own identity.

There are two primary readings a reader can make while reading The Secret Life of Bees, the first is Kidds intended positive message of empowerment and connection created by a group of women. The main reoccurring theme of bees and their system of support represents this community young women need to be a part of to thrive- in other words, what Lily needs in her life to grow into a young woman. Not only are bees a main part of the story, but they are the main income for the Boatwright sisters, whom Lily ends up living with. Bees are known for being a highly connected group of female insects, whose interconnectedness keeps them alive. Working without males, female bees are responsible for maintaining the hive, collecting food, reproducing new bees as well as taking care of the young. The experienced beekeeper August explains bee structure to Lily with a lesson about the different roles of bees. She explicitly describes the queen's relationship to them all as “the mother of every bee in the hive, and they all depend on her to keep it going” (Kidd 149) teaching Lily the importance of her job as the mother of all. August’s emphasis of the queen's role reveals the novels central message: women thrive not through individual independence, but by connection to a maternal community. A girl who lives without her hive and queen is unable to grow, as she’s always searching for her missing family. This bee structure mirrors the Boatwright sister's own relationships amongst themselves, their friends, and Lily—a thriving female community built on mutual support.

Living together and supporting each other with their own roles and jobs, the sister's system resembles how bees work with each other. August, the eldest sister, runs her own beekeeping business. June, the middle sister, is a schoolteacher and musician, while the youngest sister, May, runs their household keeping it in tip top shape. Yet the sister's household is not without tension, May struggles with her mental health often having to write notes and put them into a stone was as its “the only thing that could bring her around” (Kidd 85). June even initially resists Lily’s presence, with the memory of Lily’s mother Deborah and the burden of her care placed on August. Mays extreme emotional sensitive requires constant care from her sisters, disrupting their calm home. These conflicts suggest that even the most loving communities require attention, comprise and a level of labor. The novel presents this friction as what makes a female community valuable. Women working though difference rather than existing in effortless perfect unity.

Just like bees, the sisters have their own “queen,” represented by the Black Madonna, a religious female figure who gives them strength beyond what they have as individuals. The Black Madonna's significance to their community becomes clear through how the sisters and the Daughters of Mary engage with her. Lily reflects that “each night after the news, we all knelt down on the rug of the parlor before Black Mary and sad prayers to her” (Kidd 89). This nightly ritual positions the Madonna figure as the spiritual center of the women’s household. The Daughters of Mary also gather around her presence using her past story as strength for their daily lives. August explains the statue's story to Lily: “The people called her Our Lady in Chains. They called her that not because she wore chains…” but rather because “she broke them” (Kidd 110). The Black Madonna represents liberation and empowerment- a black female figure who frees her followers rather than binding them. For the Boatwright sisters and the Daughters of Mary, she embodies the possibility of Black women’s strength and freedom. The Black Madonna is the

queen bee who maintains the hive, offering her strength and wisdom to her devoted worker bees empowering them through their collective strength.

For Lily, the bee metaphor takes on personal significance. Growing up without a mother or group of female relatives/friends Lily embodies a bee growing separated from a hive and queen. This parallel quickly becomes painfully clear when she discovers a community of bees living in the walls of her bedroom. When she tries to trap them to prove their existence to the unbelieving Rosaleen and her uncaring father T. Ray, they suddenly seem to disappear. After trying to capture them multiple times, she is able to catch a lone bee, forcing it to live in a jar by itself, later slowly capturing and adding more. Before she runs away from her father, she tries to let the bees go who do not budge as if they have lost the will to fly away. Later on, after living and learning with the Boatwright sisters, Lily understands that "…a hive without a queen was a death sentence for the bees" (Kidd 286). By trapping them in a jar and separating them from their queen and hive, Lily has forced them to lose the will to live. The trapped bees mirror Lily's own life under her father's power- separated from maternal love and a female community only left to imagine a different life embodying a bee growing up separated from a hive and queen.

Unlike the bees she trapped however, Lily does have one small connection that could sustain her need for a queen: her caretaker Rosaleen, an African American woman who works on her father's farm. Their relationship resembles a mother-daughter bond, and Lily is able to recognize this on some level, observing that "despite her sharp ways, her heart was more tender than a flower skin and she loved me beyond reason" (Kidd 11). Lily even daydreams that she was "white and married T. Ray, and she became my real mother" (Kidd 13). Lily's fantasy is telling of her view of Rosaleen; she can only imagine her as her mother if Rosaleen were white, unable to look past her race. She remains so fixated on her idealized dead white mother that she dismisses the living black woman who provides the maternal love she is searching for. Because of her influence Lily can continue growing into a young woman despite her neglectful father. On the same note, because Lily is unable to recognize Rosaleen as a mother figure, she still has a need for a "queen bee" in her life. Lily has lived her young life in search of the remnants of her dead mother's life. Always searching for the perfume her mother used to wear, trying on her old gloves, and imagining her mother giving her warm words of love, Lily has always felt as if she had something missing. If she were a bee, she would be missing her queen. While Rosaleen is a prominent caretaker for her, Lily is so focused on what has been lost she ignores what is present. When she begins her journey by running away from her life and father, Lily believes that she will find her missing bond from an address left on her mother's mystical wooden Black Mary figure. Kidd frames this journey as one of learning to recognize and accept the love and community that surrounds her, moving from a narrow fixation on her biological mother to embracing her broader, chosen family.

This initial reading of The Secret Life of Bees many young readers have resonated with. The novel offers a story of female empowerment created through community, spirituality and personal growth. Lily's journey feels transformative and the Boatwright sister's kindness and love towards her feels genuine and empowering. The bee metaphor successfully conveys the message that women need each other, and that healing we need within ourselves can be found

with community. However, this reading depends entirely on accepting Lily as a legitimate member of the hive- as a bee who simply needed to find her queen and colony. A closer examination of the novel's metaphor reveals a different dynamic at work. When we trace the bee metaphor throughout the text with attention to whose story is centered, whose growth matters, and whose labor enables that growth, Lily begins to look less like a lost bee finding her missing hive, and more like something else entirely: a beekeeper extracting valuable honey from her hives.

Taking the metaphor seriously reveals a fundamental flaw in Kidds representation of black characters as the novel itself provides evidence for this alternative reading. When examining the bee metaphor more closely, a key flaw in Lily's relationship with the Boatwright community is revealed. She seeks a queen for herself, not membership within the hive. When Lily discovers her idealized mother used to live with the Boatwright sisters, she realizes that the sisters were her mother's family (hive) all along. Some readers interpret this connection of mothers and lost family as only natural and even wholesome. Literary critic Lopez suggests that "the bees that Lily starts seeing in her room constitute the beginning of their connection; they are a sign that August unconsciously sends Lily in an effort to guide her home" (López 334). This reading frames August as a magical guide for Lily who sent out some mystical feelings towards her, positions their relationship as destined as natural. However, this interpretation of this interaction reveals exactly what is problematic about the novel's metaphor: it romanticizes the use of female black women's emotional labor and knowledge. August does not "unconsciously send" anything to Lily- Lily is the one who deliberately sought out the Boatwright home based on a close from her mother's belongings, and intentional pursuit not some mystical message. By framing August's role as an unconscious decision rather than an active decision, López's reading erases August's agency. Further, this reading suggests that Black women's purpose is to spiritually guide white protagonists within their journey, reinforcing the idea of the "Magical Negro" stereotype seen in media. In "Examination of Magical Negro Trope", Khan defines the "Magical Negro" character as "a character that is portrayed in novels as a black person who saves the life of a white protagonist and enabled him to fight with an identity crisis" (426). Not only does August possess an "almost supernatural ability to see through Owen's lies" she is also "essentially the high priestess" (Partridge 126) of the Daughters of Mary. The mystical mythical feeling López describes more accurately represents the "Magical Negro" stereotype that presents black characters having some form of magical powers that aid them in helping the white characters develop on their journey.

This is not a sole idea produced by Lopez, rather, Kidd seems to promote it with the creation of August as a mystical all-knowing helper to Lily. When meeting August for the first time, Lily herself says "I wasn't able to take my eyes off her, the mistress of bees, the portal into my mother's life, August" (Kidd 68). The reader's introduction to August's character is not of a person with her own life and interests but as some gateway into Lily's mother. August is not a character, rather she is an answer to Deborah's past. This realization of her mother's connection does not make Lily want to become an actual member more, instead it is a reason for her to make August her new queen. Because of August's close relationship with Deborah as her previous

caretaker, she becomes a replacement mother figure- but one Lily feels entitled to rather than one she must earn a relationship with. On some level López recognizes this dynamic but she frames it positively arguing that August is "She is not guiding or taking care of a man, but of a teenage white girl; and not only does she take care of this girl, but of all the people surrounding her, both black and white" (López 333). López celebrates August's care as a feminist portayal of the caretaker role. Yet this reading misses a crucial question: why must August care for everyone? The novel does not explore her personal dreams beyond the life she currently has. Kidd does give her a happy ending of living with her family, but this isn't different from the life she lived before and there's no in-depth understanding of her desires, dreams and actions. Instead, August primarily stays in the background only providing knowledge and love for Lily on her journey. August exists to give- her knowledge, love, and her home as well as her connection to Lily's mother is presented as a natural and beautiful instead of a wrongful extraction.

The novel briefly acknowledges the cost of this through June's resistance to Lily, though it ultimately erases this critique. Unlike August, June recognizes that Lily's connection into their lives will disrupt them as once Deborah did. The text reveals that "she still bristled at the idea of me and Rosaleen staying; it was the one sore point of being here" (Kidd 86). June's resentment is justified- she watched her sister sacrifice time and energy caring for a white woman in crisis, and when Lily comes into their lives, she knows she will watch history repeat itself. Yet instead of acknowledging this, the novel treats June's feelings as a character flaw she must overcome. When Lily realizes that June wants her out of the Boatwright home because of her race, it "was a great revelation- not that I was white but that it seemed like June might not want me here because of my skin color. I hadn't known this was possible- to reject people for being white" (Kidd 87). The narrative frames this as Lily's innocent discovery rather than June's legitimate boundary. The novel asks the reader to sympathize with Lily's hurt feelings rather than consider June's exhaustion of the invasion of her home that is now centered to a white girl's life. Predictably, June's feelings soften and she eventually welcome's Lily into her home. This one black character who questions whether the "hive" should welcome Lily is punished for her opinion, teaching readers that black women's bounders are obstacles to overcome, not legitimate self-protection.

This pattern of extraction becomes visible within the novel's imagery of heat and fire, as Lily first experiences her sense of empowerment as fire. After taking her housekeeper Rosaleen from the hospital, and getting a free ride, the two women begin to walk along a dirt road alone. Contemplating her situation and whether she had made it better or worse, Lily thinks to herself, "There wasn't a soul anywhere to help us. But still, I felt painfully alive like every cell in my body had a little flame inside it, burning so brightly it hurt" (Kidd 50). This moment defines Lily's awakening- she has defied her father, betrayed her community's racial rules and broken the law. From this act, she feels as if she's on fire; these flames are her own power. They have literally burned her, and yet she doesn't flinch from it, suggesting her awakening inner strength; despite the fact that her new power comes with fear and uncertainty of how her life is changing. For Lily, the fire equals empowerment.

But when taken seriously within the bee's metaphor, this fire reveals something darker that flips Kidds' intended meaning on its head. While the flame is empowering for Lily, to the others around her its heat could have negative effects. Midway through the novel, Lily struggles to take care of the bees due to the hot weather. Despite the love and care she feels she is giving to them, one stings her. August explains, “Hot weather makes the bees out of sorts I don't care how much love you send them” (Kidd 167). On the surface, this is regular beekeeping advice about environmental stress. But if we maintain the central metaphor- that the Boatwright sisters represent the hive and Lily represents fire and heat- the August is describing Lilys effect on their community. Lily’s empowerment comes at the cost of the very community that nurtures her, no matter how much she cares for the sisters. Her presence as a white girl demanding care and resources disrupts their household's order.

The bee metaphor becomes even more revealing when we consider how beekeepers actually use fire in their work. While beekeepers don’t use an actual flame, they do use smoke (which is created by fire) as their primary tool to manage bees and extract their honey from their hives. When smoke enters a hive, it works “better than a sedative” (Kidd 95). Not harming the bees directly, it allows the beekeeper to get inside the hive without the threat of a swarm of bees. Because they are lethargic, the keeper can walk away with the product, and the bees lose their carefully accumulated storage of honey.

Lily’s fire functions as the sedating smoke in the Boatwright sister's home. Her burning need for another and community triggers the black characters around her to care for her working to meet her needs. August provides her with wisdom by sharing Deborah's past, June’s boundaries are ignored, as she is forced to overcome her resistance, and May absorbs Lilys pain as her own. Rosaleen remains the ever-faithful caretaker and sacrifices her own safety and needs to join Lily on her journey to discover the past. All the women are giving to Lilys needs, their own desires and boundaries becoming the background amidst the smoke Lily brings. During this process Lily extracts their knowledge, emotional labor, and invades their home. By positioning black women as a hive that produces honey for a white protagonist to use the novel reinforces harmful patterns about whose wisdom, community, and knowledge exists for whose benefit. It teaches readers that black women's strength is only valuable when it can serve a white character, that black women's communities should open themselves to white women's needs. The novel removes the Boatwright sister's potential to have their own stories, instead making them serve Lily.

This dynamic extends beyond the Boatwright sisters to Zach, Augusts young employee who becomes Lilys romantic love interest. As their relationship grows from friends to mutual attraction, Zach demonstrates a genuine care for Lily and her aspirations. One day, Zach gifts her a green leather-bound journal to “get a head start on [her] writing” (Kidd 135). The gesture is thoughtful and personal- given as an ode to their previous conversations about their future goals. Lily writes in it often and well, demonstrating the skills her previous teacher saw in her. Just as Zach supports her dream, Lily is just as invested in his goal to become a lawyer despite the barriers facing black men. Their relationship initially appears reciprocal and equal; they are just two young people with ambitious dreams supporting each other against a world that is against them both. Except the world isn't really against Lily, only her father is. Aside from that

correction, the journal represents their relationship. Zach invests in Lilys future, believing in her voice and words.

However, this seemingly apparent reciprocity collapses after Zachs arrest, revealing how even seemingly mutual relationships in the novel ultimately serve Lilys development at black characters expense. When Zach's group of friends is arrested in place of one person throwing a bottle of coke at a white man, Lily visits him in his jail cell. To forget the situation he's in and perhaps seeking normalcy, August shares bee happenings with Zach until he asks Lily if she still had the journal. Lilys response once again reveals the novels problematic nature: "I'll write this all down for you" [thinking to herself] I don't know if that's what he wanted to ask me, but it's something everybody wants-for someone to see the hurt done to them and set it down like it matters" (Kidd 185). Heartwarming and moving at first glance, it seems that Lily only wants to help ease Zach's pain and ensure his experience is recorded in writing. The impulse seems generous and thoughtful; by using her writing talent to preserve his experience she will have proof that injustice happened to someone who mattered. Lily positions herself as a documenter, someone who will make Zach's experience "matter" by setting it down in writing.

But notice what Lily assumes without confirmation: that "everybody wants" someone to write their story. She doesn't ask Zach if this is what he wants, doesn't wait for him to clarify his question, or consider that he might want to write down his own story. She simply assumes that her role is to transform his experience into writing. This assumption is particularly troubling given what the reader knows about Zach. He is not incapable of expressing himself and has shown multiple times that he has complex thoughts about the world. Aware of how white society views "sports being the only thing white people see us being successful at" (Kidd 120-121). Despite the pressure from the way white society stereotypes black men, Zach is still ambitious and has a passion to change the laws around him.

Lily's assumption that Zach wants her to write his story erases Zach's own capacity to tell his own story. The novel never questions her assumption, and Zach doesn't object; he simply accepts the offer. This isn't his character making the decision but rather the story decides for him. After all this, he seems to fade away into Lilys background rather than the subject of his own narrative. The novel gives him one moment of reflection when he mentions that he feels guilty for Mays death and "that jail cell is gonna make me earn grades higher" (Kidd 230-231). Despite this glimpse of how deeply his arrest affected him and the guilt and trauma he now carries, we never get to explore its impact in depth. The reader doesn't get to watch him process the experiences he goes through; instead, we get a small summary of his high school experience with Lily. His interests aren't pursued because his character only matters when it interacts with Lilys journey. His statement about his grades serves to reassure Lily that he will be okay; it's a moment designed to resolve Lilys worry rather than open Zachs story. Like a drone bee whose sole purpose is to help with reproduction, Zach exists in the narrative to facilitate Lily's growth-her romantic awakening and her education about racism. Once this function has been served, he is expelled from the narrative, sent away to school and erased from the story's focus; his journey deemed unworthy of the same attention Lilys receives.

This reading is not meant to dismiss the novel entirely but to create necessary dialogue about how we interact with popular literature and whose empowerment these widely read texts serve. By analyzing Lily's journey, it's revealed that the narrative empowers the individual instead of the entire community, which directly contradicts how a bee colony functions and exposes the extractive dynamics beneath the novel's celebration of female community. Lilys journey inverts Kidds entire meaning entirely. She empowers herself as an individual by using the collective resources of the Boatwright hive as her growth and healing is facilitated entirely by the black women around her. While Lily goes through an arc of increasing confidence, a developing sense of identity and reconciles with her mother leaving her behind, the black women around her remain relatively static. August is wise and kind at the beginning and remains so at the end; Jue moves from resistant to accepting, but primarily only with Lily and her admirer. Mays arc ends in tragedy from her emotional instability, and Rosaleen exists to serve Lilys' needs throughout her life. Even Zach, whose arrest and dreams connects Lily and changes the characters, fades from the story once he's educated Lily about the reality of racism. The bee metaphor, intended to celebrate female community, instead exposes the extraction of black female wisdom, care, stories, and emotional and spiritual strength. Lily becomes a beekeeper rather than a bee, taking their production of “honey” to use for her own individual empowerment. The novel tries to present this aas a mutual love and chosen family, but the metaphors reveal whose empowerment matters: the white protagonist grows and transforms; while the black characters remain stagnant, still giving, nurturing the protagonist.

All of this doesn’t mean that The Secret Life of Bees has no value or that readers- especially young women- won’t be able to find empowerment within its story. The novel offers important themes of women supporting women and finding a chosen family, resilience in the face of loss, and the power of a female community. For many readers, particularly young white women these themes will resonate deeply. They see themselves in Lilys journey, feel moved by the Boatwright sister's kindness and generosity and take away meaningful lessons about strength, healing, and the search for belonging. This reading is valid as it reflects genuine responses to the text that some readers experience. However, recognizing the novels' power for some readers cannot mean ignoring its costs for others. The question of The Secret Life of Bees isn't whether it can empower anyone but rather whose empowerment it prioritizes and whose it ignores. The empowerment of white and black women exists, but unequally in the novel. White readers can feel empowered by it, but black readers may have an entirely different experience. They may recognize painful patterns of stereotypes and use of strength only shown when serving a white character's needs. The characters who look like them, such as August and Rosaleen, are in supporting roles, facilitating someone else's journey; displaying how black women's roles tend to be supportive side ones.

Ultimately, literature's power lies not only in the empowerment it offers but in teaching readers whose empowerment matters, whose stories deserve focus, and whose roles are supportive rather than central. The Secret Life of Bees demonstrates how a novel can open possibilities while simultaneously limiting readers; it can build empathy and connection but when structured around a white character who extracts knowledge from black communities, it ruins the message it tries

to share. True literary empowerment for all young readers requires not just the inclusion of black female characters in white protagonist stories, but to be their own protagonists of their own narratives. Stories that show how their wisdom serves their own communities, and personal power, drive the plot, and that their journeys matter even if they don't help a white character's plot. Until popular literature can offer this kind of representation, novels like The Secret Life of Bees will continue to only empower some readers while teaching others that even celebration of their strength means remaining in the background of someone else's story.

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