Samra Mešinovic

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The Individual/Culture Conflict in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

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Handledare: Maria Holmgren-Troy
Examinator: Elisabeth Wennö
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At the turn of the 19th century, ideas promoting women’s rights were sweeping across America. During that time Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* was published, portraying a young woman, Edna Pontellier, who after several years of emotional unfulfilment in her marriage questions her place as a woman in her marriage as well in society. Edna’s Presbyterian Kentuckian upbringing is in opposition to Catholic Creole society that her husband belongs to. Creole society, at that time, was governed by its unwritten social codes, which were especially clear on issues concerning women’s traditional roles in society in connection to marriage and social duties. In this essay I present how Edna’s emotional awakening and her struggle to achieve independence are in conflict with the cultural norms that exist in Creole society. Also, I argue that the reason why Edna fails in her search for individual freedom is because her awakening is emotional and not intellectual; she lacks knowledge and cannot perceive herself beyond the conventions that limit and oppress her. Additionally, Edna cannot find guidance in any of the other women because they all act within the frames of the role they are playing.
“There comes a time in the life of almost every woman when she has to choose between a species of slavery and freedom, and when, if she ever expects to enjoy any future liberty, she must hoist the red flag of revolt and make a fight for her rights” (Dix, “Strike” 148). These strong lines promoting women’s rights in America at the end of the 19th century appeared in The Daily Picayune, a newspaper edited by a woman, and clearly show the milieu in which Kate Chopin decided to place her protagonist, Edna Pontellier. In The Awakening, Chopin also depicts the encounter of two different cultures, Presbyterian Kentuckian on one side and Catholic Creole on the other, in the marital union of Edna and Léonce Pontellier. Edna, after several years of emotional unfulfillment in her marriage with Léonce, who is eleven years her senior, questions her place as an individual and as a woman in her marriage as well as in society. Her increasing awareness of female sexuality and individuality leads her to defy the conventions and laws of Creole society and, at the same time, her actions unveil those unwritten rules that limit and oppress the Creole woman. Edna confirms this by saying: “‘One of these days,’ […] ‘I’m going to pull myself together for a while and think – try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don’t know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex’” (Chopin 117). These codes, which are depicted in the The Awakening, were especially clear on issues concerning women’s traditional roles in society in connection to marriage and social duties. Edna’s emotional awakening and her struggle to achieve independence are in opposition to cultural norms that exist in Creole society. It is my intention, through the course of this essay, to present the individual/culture conflict and show that Edna’s failure to attain independence is due to the lack of a corresponding intellectual awakening and the lack of female role models.

At the turn of the 19th century, Creole society was governed by its unwritten social codes, which were highly respected and expected to be followed by every member of society. These unwritten rules greatly contributed to preserving the romantic image of
marriage and motherhood, “an ideological device functioning to entrap women into accepting an unfulfilling and limited role in society” (Muirhead 4). In *The Awakening*, doctor Mandelet is aware of this fact and states: “youth is given up to illusions […] a decoy to secure mothers for the race” (Chopin 155). Chopin further supports that statement in the way she depicts the “mother-women”: “They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. Many of them were delicious in their rôle” (Chopin 18, italics added).

Adèle Ratignolle is such a character, a woman who is aware of and accepts her role as a sacred mother/wife figure imposed on her by society. Chopin describes Madame Ratignolle by using romantic and fairy tale imagery, “the by-gone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams [with] […] spun-gold hair [and] […] blue eyes that were like […] sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit” (Chopin 18), giving her a romantic aura that instantly separates her from the women who are not “mother-women”. Even Edna, blinded by romantic imagery, perceives Adèle as a “faultless Madonna” (Chopin 21). As a true “mother-woman”, every two years Adèle gives birth to yet another valuable offspring. She gives herself up completely, without hesitation, both spiritually and physically to her family, something that Edna cannot do.

During a conversation with Adèle, Edna reveals that she could never be a “mother-woman” since she could never give up herself-the true essence of her being to the children. “I would give up the unessential; […] I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me” (Chopin 70). Adèle is unable to understand what her friend is saying, since she can only see herself within the frames of the traditional mother role: "but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that […] the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language” (Chopin 70). While
Adèle’s maternity is confined to the role of a devoted mother, formed by the Creole codes, Edna’s maternity is guided by her emotions. The misunderstanding between the two women is an example of the conflict between individuality and culturally based perceptions.

Since Adèle is a true Creole, she is well acquainted with the social codes that exist in her society as well as the traditional roles, concerning both women and men. She has willingly accepted and lives according to the role that is imposed on her, as a wife of a Creole man and a mother, and therefore she cannot see herself beyond that role. For Adèle, it is the only way she knows how to be. Edna feels that the role of a devoted mother and wife, according to the Creole codes, is not the role she wants to play. She does not want to uphold the social duties of a devoted wife to an upper-middle-class man nor does she want to give her inner self to the role of a devoted mother. Therefore Adèle cannot be a suitable role model for Edna.

Because Edna is not a traditional “mother-woman”, her relationship towards her children differs from that of a “mother-woman”. She does not feel the urge to be constantly around her children, talking or thinking about them. She loves her children and is attentive to them in her own way, but not the way her husband would like her to be. He always feels that “his wife failed in her duty towards their children” (Chopin 17). Nevertheless, her “habitual neglect” (Chopin 15), as her husband perceives it, is actually making it possible for the little boys to evolve into independent beings, who are “not apt to rush crying to [their] mother’s arms for comfort [but] would more likely pick [themselves] up, wipe the water out of [their] eyes and the sand out of [their] mouth[s], and go on playing” (Chopin 17). Edna’s love and care towards her children are guided by her feelings, not by the social role that she is supposed to play. I agree with Donald Pizer who states that Edna is able to refuse the traditional mother role but she is “unable to counter the instinctive hold that her children have upon her” (Pizer 2), which unfortunately for Edna, proves to be fatal. Pizer is making a useful
distinction between “the mother” created by society and “the mother” driven by her natural protective instincts towards her children. Edna does not play the role of a Creole mother but she knows that “to exercise her own personal freedom is to doom her children to social ostracism” (St. Andrews 42). Therefore, at the end, Edna knows that giving her life for her children is a way to protect them.

In contrast to Edna, Léonce Pontellier is a man who believes that “les convenances” should be upheld in order to maintain a respected place in society (Chopin 75). Therefore, as a white upper-middle-class man, he does everything that is expected of him, playing his role to perfection. He emphasises his role as a good provider and a man of his class by displaying his possessions, showing that he is a successful businessman. “He greatly valued his possessions, chiefly because they were his, and derived genuine pleasure from contemplating a painting, a statuette, a rare lace curtain-no matter what-after he had bought it and placed it among his household goods” (Chopin 73). The image that Léonce tries to maintain as an attentive and good provider makes him according to the “mother-women” at Grand Isle “the best husband in the world” (Chopin 17). But the blissful external image of their marriage, which Léonce is trying to preserve by “keep[ing] up with the procession” (Chopin 75), is far from true. According to Edna, their marriage “was purely an accident, [she is] fond of her husband [with] no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth” (Chopin 31-32). Léonce is disappointed in Edna’s lack of interest to uphold “les convenances” and her lack of attention and appreciation of him, a disappointment he often expresses to her. Since he does not receive the attention he expects from her, he appears to seek it in other places.

Madame Ratignolle comments on this by saying that:

‘It’s a pity Mr. Pontellier doesn’t stay home more in the evenings. I think you would be more – well, if you don’t mind my saying it – more united, if he did.’
‘Oh! dear no!’ […] ‘We wouldn’t have anything to say to each other.’ (Chopin 98-99)
As Elaine Showalter states: “They do not have an interest in each other’s activities or thoughts, and have agreed to a complete separation of their social spheres” (Showalter 49).

Since Léonce tries to live up to the image of the good provider, he expects Edna to be an example of the good caretaker. But since she has failed to be an attentive mother in Léonce’s eyes, and since he has taken upon himself the responsibility for the interior decoration and running of the house, he expects her to give him all the attention he deserves.

As indicated above, on several occasions we can see that Edna, according to him, fails even at that. On one occasion, when he comes home late from Klein’s hotel and is intoxicated, he wakes up his wife and demands her full attention, which he does not get. “He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation” (Chopin 14). Since he does not get the attention he thinks he deserves, he goes to the children’s room to ascertain that they are resting comfortably and comes back feeling that the situation is “far from satisfactory” (Chopin 14). Edna later thinks that “such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life” (Chopin 15-16). I believe that the main reason why Léonce and Edna cannot seem to understand one another is because Edna is not a Creole woman.

Coming from the “old Presbyterian Kentucky stock” (Chopin 95) and being a daughter of a man who likes betting on horses, “this Kentucky childhood has also allowed the freedoms of the ‘horsey-set.’ She knows many things the sheltered Creole women could not even suspect: of gambling, of judging horseflesh, of religious rebellion” (St. Andrews 50). At that time, “Kentucky had the most advanced Married Woman’s Property Act in the nation, granting married women not only the right to own separate property and make contracts, but the right to keep their earnings” (Stange 27). Creole women, on the other hand, were limited by the Napoleonic Code, which gave the husband legal ownership of his wife’s possessions and “custody of the children in the event of a divorce” (Culley 120). Edna is constantly aware of
the fact that she is not “one of [them]” (Chopin 33). Not only is she burdened by the legal Code, considering a woman’s position in contrast to her husband’s, she is also burdened by the Creole social codes.

Léonce, being a true Creole man, expects from Edna that she embraces these social codes and acts upon them. At the beginning it is precisely what Edna does by publicly acting as a wife of a wealthy upper-middle-class Creole man by keeping her “Tuesdays at home,” a ritual that is necessary in order for her family, and especially for her husband, to preserve his social status. A text which appeared in *The Daily Picayune* in January 1898, “The American Wife”, describes the woman’s expected role as a wife: “an American married man’s social position depends entirely on his wife. If she is ambitious he climbs meekly up the social ladder in her wake; if she is not ambitious, they sit comfortably and contentedly down on the lower rugs, and stay there” (Dix, “American” 147). Léonce does not only want his wife to act within the frames of Creole society, he also wants her to completely give herself up, physically as well as her individuality, which proves to be too much to ask. Edna decides to throw away “that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (Chopin 83). She starts to neglect her household duties by spending more and more of her time painting, exchanging mindless household labour for creative work that gives her inner satisfaction as an individual. She also abandons her “Tuesdays at home” and spends a lot of time walking alone through the streets of New Orleans, something that a woman of her social status should not do without a proper chaperone. Slowly she refuses to be Léonce’s wife, in all ways: “she’s making it devilishly uncomfortable for [him]” (Chopin 94). The absence of her children and total disengagement from her marital life make it easier for Edna to leave the house and her wifely and motherly duties, and move to her own sanctuary where she can start a new life - an independent life.
Edna’s actions of revolt and self-acknowledgment are looked upon as acts of madness and immaturity. “It sometimes entered Mr. Pontellier’s mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally” (Chopin 83). Madame Ratignolle’s reaction to Edna’s instincts and actions is: “In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life” (Chopin 135). But Edna “had resolved never again to belong to another than herself” (Chopin 114).

As mentioned above, Léonce is very concerned to maintain a positive image of his marriage. When Edna leaves her husband’s house, Léonce, in order to preserve the image of a blissful marital life, announces in the local newspapers that due to some house alterations the Pontelliers will not be residing in the house and are leaving in order to go abroad. “Mr. Pontellier had saved appearances! Edna admired the skill of his maneuver […]” (Chopin 132). Léonce is trying to preserve the good image of the Pontelliers in Creole society and also to maintain the image of himself as a good provider and a man of wealth, being able to afford such a journey. Thus, at the same time, he manages to keep his good reputation and status in society as well as in the business world.

Now that she has left her husband’s house, Edna is forced to become economically independent. She has consciously transformed herself from a woman who “liked money as well as most women, and accepted it with no little satisfaction” (Chopin 16) from her husband, to a woman who realizes that her financial well-being has depended entirely on her husband and is now willing to cast aside all that and start relying on herself completely. But according to the conventions of Creole society, working is something that a woman of her class should not do. Her working is considered an insult to her husband, implying that he is not able to provide for her, which is believed to be his duty in the marriage according to the social code. Marion Muirhead takes this further by stating that when “an upper- or middle class woman [is working it] is [seen as] a threat to her husband’s social
status and self-esteem” (Muirhead 1). And that is exactly what Léonce is thinking about when he hears of his wife moving away and being on her own.

However, Edna feels secure when it comes to her financial well-being. She has inherited some money from her mother and won a substantial sum of money betting on horses. But what is most important to Edna’s self-esteem and her individuality is that she has started to sell her sketches. “[… ] I am beginning to sell my sketches. Laidpore is more and more pleased with my work; he says it grows in force and individuality” (Chopin 113). In the beginning, Edna’s painting is a hobby, the hobby of a housewife who paints her family and her friends. Later on it evolves into something that helps her to grow and nurtures and strengthens her newly found inner self and individuality as well as helping her to maintain her economic independence. In comparison, while Edna uses her painting to strengthen her individuality, Adèle uses her piano playing to strengthen her family. “She was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said; because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive” (Chopin 39). As a true Creole woman, Adèle expresses herself through and for her family, even when she is playing the piano, which can be a very personal activity, revealing the player’s mood and inner emotions.

Mademoiselle Reisz, on the other hand, uses her piano playing as a way to express herself fully and unconditionally, as a true artist. She has no family or husband of her own to care for, therefore she does not feel the need to play by the rules. She is a true artist, an artist that “possess[es] the courageous soul […] The soul that dares and defies” (Chopin 92). Since Mademoiselle Reisz is a strong independent woman who lives according to her own rules and freely speaks her mind, society sees her as, “a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarrelled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (Chopin 40). Therefore, Mademoiselle
Reisz lives the life of an outsider, which gives her a type of freedom which a traditional Creole woman knows nothing about.

Mademoiselle Reisz’s life differs a great deal from Adèle’s, but nonetheless she is also restricted by the role she is playing, the role of an outsider. She is not an active member of Creole society and the Creoles accept her partly because she is a great artist who has devoted her life to music. But more importantly they accept her because Mademoiselle Reisz works on the outskirts of Creole society, not threatening the conventional woman’s role. Edna is not intellectually aware of her own revolt and therefore fails in understanding what Mademoiselle Reisz is trying to tell her. She relates an episode to Alcée Arobin regarding her latest visit to Mademoiselle Reisz: “[…] she put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. ‘The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth.’ […] I only half comprehend her” (Chopin 118). Edna cannot appreciate Mademoiselle’s advice and warning and that is why Mademoiselle Reisz cannot be a role model for Edna. The life of an outsider is not a life for Edna.

Madame Lebrun is the only female character in *The Awakening* that has preserved her social status and enjoys the advantages of being a respected Creole woman despite earning her own money. She is a working middle-class woman who runs a summer resort on Grand Isle, a vacation place for respected Creoles, and is in charge of her own life, her sons and the family economy. The only reason she still has a respected place in society despite her being an independent woman is because she is a widow- she is forced to be an independent businesswoman. Furthermore, Madame Lebrun is an advocate of the traditional Creole ways of living and behaving. Although she is a strong woman, she constantly puts herself in a subordinate position by saying that her existence and the existence of her children
would have been better if her husband had not been dead. “It was a fixed belief with Madam Lebrun that the conduct of the universe and all things pertaining thereto would have been manifestly of a more intelligent and higher order had not Monsieur Lebrun been removed to other spheres during the early years of their married life” (Chopin 36). Although she has been a good provider and caretaker for the last twenty years, and upholds her respected position in society, she feels that “the presence of men is indispensable at all times” (Samuelsson 18). On the other hand, I believe that it is because Madame Lebrun likes her independence so much and has learnt to appreciate the meaning of it that she refuses Monsieur Montel’s proposition of marriage for twenty years.

As a true Creole, Madame Lebrun is, like Adèle, well aware of her role. She has once played the role of an attentive wife and a mother and still plays the same role in spite of being a widow and the sole provider for her family. She supports the role of the traditional Creole wife and mother by constantly referring to her husband and taking care of her boys, despite them being grown men. Like Adèle, Madame Lebrun cannot perceive herself beyond the traditional role and therefore is not suitable to be a role model for Edna.

Edna cannot find guidance in any of the characters that I have mentioned, and she also fails to notice “[…] a circle of pseudo-intellectual women – super-spiritual superior beings”, as Dr. Mandelet describe them; feminists that clearly existed in Edna’s milieu (Chopin 94). Edna lacks the necessary knowledge and intellectual ideas of female rights and independence to make her independence rational and therefore, Edna’s struggle is built on pure instinct. “Instinct had prompted her to put away her husband’s bounty in casting off her allegiance” (Chopin 113). Also, although Edna is at one point reading Emerson,¹ that reading is not depicted as inspirational but as bedtime reading: “[she] sat in the library after dinner and read Emerson until she grew sleepy”, which strengthens my belief that Edna’s attempt to

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1802-1882); a radical American essayist, philosopher and poet, who believed in the transcendence of nature over religion. Transcendentalists believed in individuality and that the divinity in each individual could only be self-discovered if the person had the independence of mind to do so. (Web)
achieve liberation is not based on intellectual ideas but on instincts (Chopin 104). George Arms also points this out by saying that: “[…] to grow sleepy over a Transcendental individualist also hints that Edna’s individualism lacks philosophical grounding” (Arms 200).

Edna’s “newly awakened being” (Chopin 68) and her sexuality are aroused by her flirtation with Robert during her summer holiday at Grand Isle, a flirtation which none of the guests see as scandalous. “Many had predicted that Robert would devote himself to Mrs. Pontellier when he arrived” (Chopin 21). Edna is surprised by the duality of the Creole woman, whose “chastity […] seems to be inborn and unmistakable” while, at the same time, she freely expresses her most private and intimate moments and feelings (Chopin 20). She is also amazed at the way Adèle is flirting with Edna’s father “in the most captivating and naïve manner, with eyes, gestures, and a profusion of compliments” (Chopin 98) and seeing the effect of it: “Edna marvelled, not comprehending. She herself was almost devoid of coquetry” (Chopin 98). The Creole woman knows how she should behave in the presence of men. She uses coquetry to amuse men and make herself more amiable. Edna, on the other hand, feels that she could never behave in a kittenish-like manner to attract men’s attention. Not possessing such a skill is also what makes Edna not quite belong in the Creole world. Mrs. Ratignolle, aware of that fact, warns Robert that his attention to Mrs. Pontellier can be perceived as something more serious. “She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously” (Chopin 33). Since innocent summer flirtations are widely accepted in the Creole society, with the assurance that such flirtations will never be interpreted as signs of love, Mr. Pontellier does not act jealously when Robert’s attention towards Edna is obvious to everybody. He knows that Robert, a Creole man, would never do anything to jeopardise the Pontelliers’ marriage. That is exactly what Mrs. Ratignolle says to Robert: “If your attentions to any married woman here were ever offered with any intention of being convincing, you would not be the gentleman we all know you to
be, and you would be unfit to associate with the wives and daughters of the people who trust you’ (Chopin 34). And that is why, when Robert and Edna realise that their emotions have grown into something more than a summer flirtation, Robert acts as a true Creole gentleman by distancing himself from Edna. He knows that as long as Edna is a married woman, he cannot openly express his love towards her. Edna, believing that Robert’s love will rise above the conventions, is surprised when he leaves her abruptly.

‘This [his sudden departure] seems to me perfectly preposterous and uncalled for. I don’t like it. [...] You don’t even offer an excuse for it. Why, I was planning to be together, thinking of how pleasant it would be to see you in the city next winter.’

‘So was I,’ he blurted. ‘Perhaps that’s the-‘ (Chopin 66-67)

By not continuing his utterance, Robert, a man who is shaped by the Creole codes, shows that he is aware that they can never be together as long as she is Léonce Pontellier’s wife. He is aware of the consequences if he and Edna should act upon their feelings, but Edna feels “that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded” (Chopin 68).

Her awareness of her sexuality and the absence of Robert and her husband result in Edna’s first extramarital affair with Alcée Arobin, a man who, like Edna, defies the rules of the Creole society. He is seen as a threat to the constitution of marriage, because he refuses to follow the social code by freely engaging in different love affairs and not considering saving the women’s reputation: “his attentions alone are considered enough to ruin a woman’s name” (Chopin 135). Creole society allows intimate relationships between men and women but it also demands that every relationship is to be conducted within the frames of the Creole code: “[...] an unmarried man may flirt with a married woman, but if he undertakes an affair with her, he must do so without compromising her publicly and without endangering her marriage” (Pizer 5, note 2).

14
Robert is clearly aware of the consequences if he and Edna should engage in an extramarital relationship and that is why he distances himself from her by going to Mexico. Edna, at first, is unaware of the reasons for Robert’s departure and spends her time longing for him. At his return he is encouraged by Edna to express his feelings towards her, and he does so with honest intentions. But Edna’s affair with Arobin and her new awareness of her independence and sexuality have changed her and Robert is not prepared for that.

“You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he [her husband] were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both.’

His face grew little white. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked. (Chopin 151)

He wants to marry her, to follow the code, but after he realises that Edna does not want another marriage but an extramarital relationship, he leaves her despite his strong love for her. As Lee R. Edwards states: “Edna has […] misjudged Robert, who reveals himself to be as conventional as Léonce” (Edwards 284). Edna has realised that her awakened being demands sexual fulfilment and that she would attain that through love affairs, not marriage, which she confirms by saying: “To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one else” (Chopin 159).

But such behaviour of a woman is not accepted in Creole society and her promiscuity will put her outside Creole social life. Edna’s sexual awakening is in conflict with the conventional role she is supposed to play, and the outcome of this conflict is clear: social isolation.

Furthermore, Edna has realised that her future actions will also have an effect on her children. “The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them” (Chopin 159). At the end, she is unable to suppress her protective motherly instincts and to defy the strong hold of the Creole codes. Edna does what is expected of “mother-woman”- she sacrifices her life for the sake of her children.
Therefore, Edna’s final act ironically supports the romantic image of motherhood. She fails in her quest for individual freedom because she cannot perceive herself beyond the conventions that limit and oppress the Creole woman. Edna wants the social acceptance that she had when she was Léonce’s wife as well as her freedom and that is something that society is not willing to accept. Also, Edna cannot find guidance in any of the women she knows since she cannot see herself living the way they do, which means that she lacks a role model, someone who she can receive inspiration from and guidance. Additionally she also fails because she builds her struggle on emotions not on intellectual ideas regarding the female rights and independence, which does not give her enough strength to achieve her ultimate goal – independence.
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