Heterosexual/Homosexual definitions and the homosexual narrative of James Purdy's "The Candles of Your Eyes"

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Eve Sedgwick argues that heterosexual/homosexual definitions are central to the creation of knowledge systems in modern Western culture, and order too understand its literary discourse an analysis of heterosexual/homosexual definitions are required. When looking more closely at this binary pairings, one observes that one position in the binary pair (in this case, the homosexual) becomes devalued through homophobic cultural pressure in order to subordinate it to an inferior position or identity, but it is also its existence and subordination that gives powerful meaning and privilege to the heterosexual position or identity. Despite the apparent naturalness of this distinction, the heterosexual/homosexual distinction is really a historically based and culturally specific classification scheme of the modern Western world, which has the effect of classifying forms of desire on the bases of object choice rather than acts of sexual behavior, and reduces widely diverse sexual practices into a normative (natural)/non-normative (unnatural) formula where the "normal" becomes privileged and oppresses the non-normative defining it as "unnatural." The normative nature of the category "heterosexual" sets up the category "homosexual" as a something to be explained and corrected (while leaving itself unexplained) because of its assumed deviance from the normal. What is critical is that this definitional binary quickly became assimilated into Western cultural discourse and systems of knowledge production, in areas of medical, legal, literary and psychological discourse as a form of cultural labeling, and structures knowledge about the organization of the world. Heterosexual/homosexual definitions became aligned with forms of social categorization, scientific description and subjective identification. Sexuality (in either form) also became a privileged construct for defining identity. Heterosexuality/homosexuality became a master binary, and many other cultural binaries became articulated through this distinction so that there ended up being
little intellectual or cultural knowledge that was not free from the structuring influence of these sexual definitions. Because of its cultural pervasiveness, this pattern of cultural thinking about sexuality inevitably leaves its mark on literary compositions, particularly those narratives dealing with sexuality, and the ways in which writers handle character development and plot structures, and how characters with different sexual/subjective identities work out their stories.

2 Diana Fuss also performs a similar kind of deconstructive analysis, but with an emphasis on identity formation rather than cultural knowledge. She uses the binary metaphor of inside/outside to further elaborate the relationship between the concepts of heterosexual/homosexual as mutually defining subject positions. In her analysis, homosexuality comes to stand for that which is excluded, that which stands outside of the normalcy as defined by the heterosexual, so that the binary heterosexual/homosexual is "fundamentally a structure of exclusion and exteriorization [that] constructs that exclusion by prominently including the contaminated other in its oppositional logic." In other words, people acquire identities in terms of what they are not, by the exclusion of what is different, and by the production of a sense of otherness that is silenced from one's identity. For Fuss, the excluded outside (the "other," the homosexual) defines the inside (the "normal," the heterosexual) by what the inside casts away from its own self-definition. The excluded other/outside is fundamental to formulating what is normal/inside. The inside terra cannot recognize that which it excluded and externalized from itself without raising the possibility of a threat to the identity of the inside. To protect itself, the inside/normal identity projects part of itself outside and stigmatizes it as other, and does not recognize it as within the inside/self.

3 Both Sedgwick's and Fuss' analysis are examples of queer theory, which places its emphasis primarily on social analysis and critique, rather than traditional forms of literary criticism. Literary texts are seen as sites of political and social practices that organize social and cultural codes, and are seen as possessing social force that helps structure identities, social norms and power relations, as they are organized around master sets of binary pairs such as heterosexual/homosexual. These binaries inevitably become organized into superior and inferior hierarchical relationships, that reinforce patterns of exclusion and dominance, in which certain feelings, acts, desires, identities and social formations are excluded, marginalized and made inferior. By forcing people to define themselves in terms of heterosexual/homosexual knowledge structures, where the heterosexual is privileged and the homosexual is marginalized. Van Leer asserts that this connection between sexuality and knowledge cannot be disconnected from the context in which the marginalized are known, since knowledge is dependent on cultural power, and the "ways in which the disempowered know the empowered are not merely inversions of the ways in which the empowered know them." One must consider how the dominant culture knows the marginalized, and how minorities know themselves. Van Leer draws on DuBois' concept of "double consciousness," in which minorities do not know themselves directly, but know themselves through the lenses of the dominant culture, so their identities is told to them through someone else's narrative about them, and their identities are formed in light of someone else's knowledge about who they are. If heterosexuals know themselves by what has been valorized as normative as superior and natural, than many persons who formulate a homosexual identity will come to know themselves as inferior and other. Homosexual persons run the risk of reading themselves in terms of the knowledge structures and narratives that normalize heterosexuality. In
this case, homosexual persons would construct themselves through the dominant sexual
discourse that disparages them as inferior. It is the constructing of one's identity in
someone else's terms and reading oneself in light of someone else's narrative that
interests me here. What I am suggesting is that the reading of the homosexual in
heterosexual narrative terms shapes literary narratives in such a way that some stories
can be understood as a "homosexual" narrative constructed by heterosexual perceptions
about the nature of homosexuality.

I want to consider the title short story by the contemporary gay American writer James
Purdy from his 1987 collection "The Candles of Your Eyes." James Purdy has been a
continuously active American writer since the late 1950's and continues to produce
fiction, poetry and plays today. Purdy often expresses a vision that is pessimistic, and his
work is filled with violence, dark visions of sexuality, and a general rejection of modern
American culture. As a gay writer, Purdy often refuses to produce positive images of gay
men and is not interested in celebrating and asserting sexual diversity as a positive basis
for individual subjectivity. This kind of subjectivity Purdy often denies to his characters.
Although the author of this story is himself a gay man, he has created a story that is
imbued with textual homosexualizing that is a formulation of the heterosexual other in
cast off homosexual terms. My reading of this story will be structured around three sets
of binaries that articulate heteronuclear/homosexual definitions: dominance/submission,
beauty/ugliness, and dynamic/static. These three binaries are informed by the structural
imperatives of Western heterosexual/homosexual definitions, where the homosexual
exists as the cast off and inverse of the heterosexual normative. All three of these binaries
figure longstanding tropes of gay (and anti-homosexual) fictions. My current purpose is
to examine some of the ways in which heterosexual/homosexual definitions inform, and
are deployed, through these binaries, as manifested in the character development and
plot structure of Purdy's short story. These three binaries are both structured by
heterosexual/homosexual definitions in their contents, as well as constitute the
manifestations of the heterosexual/homosexual definitions themselves.

Patterns of dominance/submission involve not only the cultural subordination of
homosexuality to heterosexuality, but also the projection of patterns of heterosexual
gender roles into homosexual relationships, where homosexual partners act out
heterosexual roles of masculine and feminine, that is, homosexual relationships become
structured in normative heterosexual terms. At the same time, homosexual persons are
cast into "female" submissive roles in relation to heterosexual persons, as inferior
regardless of their participation in active or passive sexual behavior with their
homosexual partners. For instance, Dyre notes that heterosexuality is posited on the
gender difference of masculine/feminine (and the power differential this implies), and is
conceptualized in terms of opposites, so male and female sexuality are defined within the
context of heterosexuality as male-active/female-passive. This is grafted into homosexual
relationships in the form of top/bottom, replicating the heterosexual pattern, a pattern
defined by the dominant cultural power holders and imposed on the identities of weaker
subjects. Another interesting pattern is how homosexuality tends to be coded as "white,"
and "blackness" tends to get coded as heterosexual in a racial context. In this case,
blackness becomes assimilated to maleness/heterosexuality as a violent threat to civility
and culture, whereas whiteness gets depicted as something nurturing, to be protected,
and thus feminine and homosexual.
This counter-intuitive connection between white and homosexual shows the often-unexpected cultural connections that heterosexual/homosexual definitions will form with other cultural binaries. In the case of beauty/ugliness, this binary is aligned with both the heterosexual and the homosexual but in different contexts. For instance, the heterosexual is aligned with beauty when it is normalized as moral and good, making the homosexual appear as its sinful and ugly opposite, but beauty is also linked to the homosexual through youthful male beauty, which is eventually corrupted through moral decline. Dynamic/static also has complicated links to heterosexual/homosexual definitions. The static is idealized in heterosexual terms when it exists in the privileged forms of marriage and family life and "happily ever after" romantic endings, and is privileged as dynamic in the form of rebirth/reproduction of children (within the static stability of "home and family"). In comparison (and this connection makes clear the ways in which the homosexual becomes inferior when defined in heterosexual terms, as its cast off cultural opposite) homosexuality can never achieve privileged dynamicism because of its "inherent" sterility/stasis as non-reproductive, and is thus doomed to inferior statics in the form of repetitious sexual acts, for their own sake, and as selfish and superficial pleasure with no larger moral (reproductive) goal. All homosexual relationships are by comparison static and morally inferior because they lack the heterosexually productive and "proper" balance of dynamic/static. The homosexual then can only produce a form of infantilism among its participants, because it cannot mature and develop beyond its own limited state.

These complicated patterns and interconnections are at play in Purdy's "homosexual" story because of its way of defining and presenting homosexuality in heterosexual terms, as its cast off opposite. For the purpose of making the workings of these binaries clearer, I have coded the occurrence of each binary pair through different typefaces. The bold typeface indicates moments and images of dominance/submission; italics code beauty/ugliness, and dynamic/static instances are underlined. In the following, I will consider key moments from Purdy's story. Each of these moments are organized around one of these binaries, which interacts with and informs the expression of the other two binaries. At the end, I will look at the closing event of the story and consider how heterosexual/homosexual definitions structure Soldier's "coming out" as a murderer.

The dominance/submission binary, as informed by heterosexual/homosexual definitions, has the effect of re-coding heterosexual gender roles into a homosexual/context. This effect is found in Purdy's story in the following: "Soldier insisted Beaut always wear a gold chain he had picked up from somewhere, but the younger man did not like the feel of metal against his throat. He said it reminded him of a gun pointed at him. But in the end he gave in and wore the chain." This is a transparent trope of dominance/submission of Soldier over Beaut through the imposing of marks, signs or indicators of ownership onto the body of another person because it incorporates heterosexual gender codes that masculinize and feminize Soldier and Beaut respectively. This passage imports heterosexual courting and marriage tropes of jewelry exchange (such as engagement rings and wedding bands) to denote the restrictions placed by one onto another as public markers of ownership. Although, his passage does not make it explicit, the chain is meant to represent the binding/chaining of Beaut to Soldier, with the implicit threat of violence encoded in the reference to a gun, to which Beaut surrenders. Soldier's dominance over Beaut is further encoded in Soldier's name. This is a minor but straightforward moment. The central scène in which domination/submission is encoded
contains a much more complicated collusion of the three binaries that help structure the
definition of homosexuality in a heterosexual context that renders homosexuality as
either weak or invisible.

Soldier used to hold Beaut in his arms and lullaby him in a big rocking chair.... He
rocked Beaut in the chair as one would a doll. It was their chief occupation, their
sole entertainment. It was an unforgettable sight, midnight-black strapping Soldier
holding the somewhat delicate, though really tough, Beaut. If you looked in on
them in the dark, you seemed to see only Beaut asleep in what looked like the dark
branches of a tree..... Then he would rock Beaut and lullaby him as the night settled
down over the city.

This is a love scene, demonstrating the affection between these two men, but this scène,
in the heterosexual context of the three structuring binaries I have identified, render
homosexual relationships as one of parent/child, not equal partners, and one that is
naturally immature The weak/beautiful is subordinated into infantilism, suggesting that
"homosexual" relationships are caught up in a form of stasis, where children never grow
up and parents don't nurture but exploit for co-dependent reasons. The unbalanced
power dynamic is further emphasized by the whiteness of the submissive one and the
blackness of the dominant one. The dominant one forces stasis on the weaker of the two,
while blackness renders the dominant one invisible. In this case, the homosexual is either
weak and passive, or strong but rendered invisible. In this passage, Beaut seems to
disappear as an active participant in the relationship (as static), reduced to an infant by
Soldier's dominance, and Soldier seems to disappear because of his blackness of the night.
Whereas Beaut's beauty makes him shine in the darkness, Soldier's blackness (here a
form of ugliness) makes him invisible in the dark. This passage suggests that the proper
place for ugliness and blackness (and homosexuality) is to be unseen in the darkness,
unless it can be rendered into a passive art object admired for its beauty. The
heterosexual cultural force as articulated through the dominance/submission binary, in
this case, renders the homosexual as passive and invisible.

The binary of beauty/ugliness, also has a role to play in the defining of homosexuality as
inferior and negative in comparison to heterosexuality. Beauty/ugliness tends to play on
ideas about surface and of sensual and sexual attractions. Further, it becomes the vehicle
for the moral decline and fall of homosexual characters because they lack of depth (which
becomes coded as heterosexual "love/depth" as opposed to homosexual "lust/surface").
For instance, in Purdy's initial description of Beaut, he is cast in the role of the tragic
condemned beautiful boy that suffers and dies because of his beauty.

Beauty Orleans, or Beaut...grew more handsome the older he got, we thought, but
he was always from the time he appeared in the Village a cynosure for all eyes. At
seventeen Beaut looked sometimes only thirteen. His most unusual feature, though,
happened to be his eyes, which someone said reminded one of flashes of heat
lightning .... He had no education, no training. no skills. He wore the same clothes
winter and summer. and was often even on frigid December days barefoot. In
summer he put on a German undershirt which he pulled down almost as far as his
knees. He found most of his clothes outside the bock door of a repertory theater.

What is most notable in this description of Beaut, beyond the obvious significance of his
name, and celebration of his beauty, is the collusion of beauty with stasis, which reduce
Beaut to a beautiful surface to be admired and actively looked upon, but not internally
active or self-directing. The only thing that comes from within is beauty, the flashes of his
eyes, otherwise there is nothing else notable about him: no education, no training, no
skills. Beaut's clothing further associates him with surfaces, wearing tossed-off theater
costumes. Beaut is characterized as a passive thing to be viewed as a beautiful object, and as a superficial object of the lust of others. Not only is beauty to be admired, it is also something to take possession of and exploit.

Because of Beaut’s extraordinary good looks and his strange eyes, artists were always clamoring to make drawings of him. His friend Soldier...protected or perhaps imprisoned Beaut out of his love for the boy. If you wanted to get permission to draw Beaut, you had to go straight to Soldier first and finagle the arrangements. Soldier would hesitate a long while with a suing artist...after arguing and scolding, would arrive at a just price, and Beaut was begrudgingly allowed to leave for a calculated number of hours.

In terms of the homosexual definition (as defined by heterosexual cultural influence) homosexual characters are rendered as exploitive (of other men's bodies for sexual purposes) to be manipulated for sexual conquest or superficial physical intimacy. This seems to be the subtext of the artists wanting to draw Beaut, where the "drawing" is a displaced form of sexual encounter and superficial physical contact, which is projected into a flat one-dimensional surface, another representation of homosexual sensual shallowness. Soldier with his dominance and control over Beaut can exploit his beauty to make available or withhold him as an object of desire. Here the motifs of beauty and dominance collude in a way that is consistent with the structuring of the heterosexual/homosexual definitions that inform the representation of homosexuality.

But beauty cannot last, and in a heterosexually defined context, its renewal is not possible (renewal defined in terms of reproduction). Beauty only exists as momentary stasis leading to eventual decay, as happens to Beaut after Soldier abandons him.

As days and weeks passed, the young boy got older-looking, but anything more beautiful. His eyes located deep in his skull looked like Utile birthday candles flickering. After wrinkles began forming around those candlelike eyes. Some of his teeth came out, but he looked handsome still even without them.

Beauty is always somehow linked to stasis, as reflecting timelessness, but is also simultaneously subjected to decay, thus the aligning of beauty/stasis and ugliness/decay (decay as a negative form of the dynamic). The homosexual logic here drives toward the fall of beauty because beauty cannot renew itself, implying a creeping moral corruption that must underlie the stasis of homosexuality. The dynamic/static binary codes the heterosexual as dynamic in the sense of producing growth, change and development, especially through the metaphor of rebirth and reproduction, as opposed to "homosexual" stasis of (sexual) repetition, infantilism and decay. I have already suggested that stasis and beauty are interconnected in homosexual representations, and that stasis must lead to eventual decline. Here Purdy makes the connection explicit.

People in the Village wondered how these two could go on so long together. But it was finally understood that Beauty and Soldier had reached some kind of perfection in their love for one another. They had no future, and no past—just the now in which Soldier rocked Beauty on his knees and kissed his smooth satiny reddish-gold hair.... We knew it couldn't last. Nothing perfect and beautiful has any future. And these two were already overdue in their paradise together. Doom is what perfect love is always headed for. So then one night Soldier did not come back to that shell of a building they had lived together in. Beaut stirred after a while in the chair, like a child in his mother's body wanting to be born. Still. no Soldier. Hunger at last drove Beaut out into the street. Outside. he rubbed his eyes and stared about as if he had been asleep for many considerable years.
This passage draws on stasis imagery, with the specter of decay and collapse raised as the necessary outcome of any kind of perfection that could be temporarily achieved in a homosexual relationship. This is the inevitable outcome of a homosexual relationship defined in the context of a "heterosexual" bias, because by definition a homosexual relationship can never be sustained; it cannot renew itself. The assertion that "nothing perfect and beautiful has any future," read in a Platonic philosophical context, would be an absurd statement, because the perfect and the beautiful are eternal, where stasis is ideal. But heterosexual/homosexual definitions are not located in a Platonic philosophical space, stasis not ideal in a heterosexual/homosexual definitional context where the homosexual is by definition doomed to failure because of its non-reproduction. The homosexual is countered by a heterosexual narrative that strives for "happily ever after" endings, where a proper or morally correct stasis is staged through "family life" that enacts the dynamism of rebirth through reproduction within the context of the static/stable form of marriage/family. From the heterosexual view, the relationship between Soldier and Beaut can have no future except to re-enact dominance/submission and infantilism. At the end of this passage, Purdy evokes heterosexual dynamics that makes Beaut into a child, a sleepy child awakened by hunger. Homosexual characters are reduced to the status of children because of their inability to perform the "adult" biological fraction of reproduction.

By the end of the story, stasis imagery becomes predominate, even forming an object correlative to the narrative action (or non-action) with the freezing influence of the cold and the subsequent freezing to death, into human blocks of ice, of Beaut and Orley. This freezing is also associated with the theme of decay that links stasis to negative dynamics (in the homosexual context, the decline and death of beauty, rather than, in a heterosexual context, the linkage of positive dynamics to reproduction). So in the homosexual narrative there is a connection of freezing to decay and the death of beauty.

The pipes all froze the front Windows turned to a kind of iceberg, and even the rats were found ice-stiff on the stairs. Ice hung from the big high ceiling like it had grown chandeliers. The staircase collapsed from broken pipes and accumulations of giant icicles. At the first break in the weather, wouldn't you know, Soldier returned. He had some difficulty getting to the upstairs on account of the was no stairs now, only piles of lumber, but he crawled and crept his way up to the rocking-chair room. What he saw froze him like the ice had frozen the house. He saw his place taken by Orley. who was holding Beaut in his arms in his chair, their lips pressed tightly together. Their hands holding one another more securely than Soldier had ever dared hold Beat. They looked to him like flowers under deep mountain streams, but motionless like the moon in November.

The winter freeze is an object correlative to the stasis motif of the homosexual relationship; aligned with the theme of stasis is the theme of decay. The association of stasis and decay might seem counter-intuitive. The two would not normally be associated in a heterosexual context where stasis is a suspension of growth/change, but in a homosexual context where stasis is the only possibility, decay in the form of death itself, is its only outcome, thus the linkage.

At the story's conclusion, Beaut is locked into permanent stasis (in the form of his literal freezing), and with Soldier's return, domination is momentarily pitted against stasis (in the form of the bullets against the ice), but stasis wins out. Soldier's act of violence, trying to shoot the already dead bodies, cannot penetrate them. Soldier's act of violence also brings him into a permanent state of stasis.
"Explain me" was all Soldier was able to get out from his lips. "Explain me!"
When they did not answer. and did not so much as open their eyes, he brought out his stolen gun.
"Tell me what I am lookin' at ain't so," he thought he said to them. When nobody spoke. he cocked his gun.
He waited another minute in the silence, then he fired all the bullets. But as they flew through the melting air, he saw something was wrong even with the bullets, for though they hit their target, their target deflected them like stone, not flesh and blood.
We have decided that Soldier had gone crazy even before he emptied the gun on the two lovers. but the realization his bullets did not reach flesh and blood caused him to lose his mind completely.

19 Beaut and Orley are reduced to hard (but beautiful) surfaces, and because Soldier's act of dominance has no effect, he too becomes locked in stasis in the form of insanity. The theme of decay is brought to its conclusion, culminating in Soldier's insanity. Soldier metaphorically joins the stasis of Beaut and Orley, and remains frozen there in his insanity. He becomes trapped in a vision of reality that is not true, where he is unable to recognize what he is and is not responsible for, explaining why he carries the placard that opens the story, and setting the scene for his "coming out"

20 One of the primary modes of gay self-affirmation has been formulated in the rhetoric of "coming out," in which the gay person achieves a form of self-awareness and self-acceptance in the process. This rhetoric presupposes that "closeted life" is one in which the sexual self is repressed, or that gay desire or activity is denied or hidden, and coming out is a way of escape into a more honest self-identity.15 Van Leer finds this characterization of coming out as limited and "philosophically primitive," because it takes the basic form of a Puritan confession narrative, where the self must battle and abandon it former ways (the struggle of the gay self to be straight), and achieve a true self when it accepts its true identity and finds wholeness and acceptance. Here the phrase "coming out of the closet" is parallel to the religious expression "coming out of sin."16 This rhetoric, of course views the situation from the homosexual point of view, but this point of view is still structured by the definitional influence of the heterosexual, which would see "coming out" as a confession of sin; a confession of one's nature as unnatural, insane or criminal. Soldier's confession thus conforms to this Puritan confession narrative, whereas the homosexual "coming out" deviates from it by reverses its impulses. The closing of this story takes this Puritan logic seriously in its representations of homosexual characters, and can be read as the catalyst of identity formation and "coming out," but in terms of the heterosexual impulse to define homosexuality as its inferior other, and construct a subjective identity accordingly.

After the shooting he went to the police station and charged himself.
The police hardly said two words to him, and took down nothing he said. But they did finally get around to going to the rocking-chair room in their own good time. They must have seen at once that Beaut and Orley had been dead for days, maybe weeks. long before Soldier reached them. No gun can kill people who have frozen to death.
Every day for many weeks Soldier went to the police precinct and confessed to murder. Some of the cops even pretended to take down what he said. They gave him cigarettes and bottled soda.
Soldier lives in a different building now with an older white boy. But every day, especially on Sundays, he carries up and down Fourth Street this placard, whose letters are beginning to fade.
I AM A MURDERER
Why Don't They Give Me the Chair?

Soldier's confession of sin is consistent with the heterosexual definition of homosexuality as its "cast out" other that Fuss notes in her analysis of identity formation, as well as Van Leer's discussion of minority self-definition in terms of the empowered group's discourse about the disempowered. Soldier "comes out" in the oppressor's terms and creates a negative identity for himself in light of the heterosexual/homosexual definitions as a criminal. Soldier declares his negative subjective identity over and against a positive form of cultural identity, which requires that he be insane and others not take him seriously at the same time, just as heterosexual society does not take homosexuals seriously, but continues to reinforce negative self-abnegating attitudes. Soldier's "coming out" is enacted in terms complicit with the heterosexually derived definition of homosexuality. That is, Soldier comes out in terms set by the heterosexual/homosexual definitions, as defined by dominant culture, that create knowledge Systems for the defining of normative and deviant forms of sexuality, which are metaphorically transferred into Soldier's confession of murder, and is another way of expressing and defining the homosexual as deviant and inferior, as grounded in sin that one bas to "come out" of through a confession of being a criminal and insane.

NOTES

2. Sedgwick 8-9, 84.
4. Sedgwick 2.
7. Seidman 147.
8. Siedman 149.
10. Van Leer 121.
ABSTRACTS

Cet article cherche à montrer qu’en définissant l’hétérosexualité, on modifie la perception conceptuelle de l’homosexualité de telle sorte que cette perception façonne très fortement la manière dont l’homosexualité est perçue dans « The Candles of Your Eyes », nouvelle de l’écrivain américain, James Purdy (1914-2009). L’article montre en particulier que la présentation des personnages et la structure de l’intrigue créent un récit sur l’homosexualité. Le récit se construit sur des oppositions (dominant/soumis, beau/laid, dynamique/statique) comme autant de concepts soulignant l’opposition hétérosexuel / homosexuel, et conduisant à la construction de personnages homosexuels basée sur les notions de domination et d’apparence extérieure, et d’une intrigue qui présente l’homosexualité en termes de décadence, d’immobilisme et d’aveux de son dévoiement et de son exclusion. (Traduction : Amélie Rioual)

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