Bloom's Literature

Anderson, Sherwood

On a gray November day in 1912, a businessman from Elyria, Ohio, was dictating a letter to his secretary when he suddenly turned to her and said, "My feet are cold and wet. I have been walking too long on the bed of a river."

With that odd and inexplicable statement, he stood up and left the office, never to return. Four days later he showed up in a drugstore in Cleveland, unshaven and still wearing his business clothes, which were now wrinkled and splattered with mud. He was dazed, confused and appeared to be suffering from amnesia. Clinging desperately to his last shred of sanity, he handed his address book to the druggist, hoping the man would be able to call a friend to come to his assistance.

The shocked druggist recognized the man. Why, it was Mr. Sherwood Anderson, the gentleman who used to run a mail-order business in Cleveland. The druggist shook his head and called one of Anderson's old business associates, who came down to collect him.

By leaving his office that day, Anderson walked out of obscurity and into American literary history. Caught up in a cultural revolution that challenged the conventions of the age, he soon became one of its leaders, profoundly influencing a generation of American writers who followed him, such as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

The man who would have such a profound effect on American letters was born on September 13, 1876, in the small town of Camden, Ohio, the third of seven children of Irwin and Emma (Smith) Anderson. The Andersons moved frequently so that Irwin could find work, and the family lived in a number of small Ohio towns before finally settling in Clyde. Anderson would later blend his imagined memories of Camden—the "little white town in a valley with high hills on each side," where the simple townspeople worked the fields by day and closeted themselves in their "poor little houses" at night—with his actual experiences in Clyde to write his most famous book, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919).

The Andersons were one of the poorest families in Clyde, and young Sherwood helped out by taking on dozens of odd jobs around town. He was such a go-getter that people in Clyde nicknamed him "Jobby." Since "Jobby" Anderson was so busy working, his attendance in grammar school was erratic, and at 17 he quit high school, after attending for a total of only nine months. He went to work in a livery stable and then a bicycle factory in order to help support his family.

During his adolescence, Anderson experienced the usual anxieties and confusion about sex and his own sexuality, and the frustrations and mysteries of sexual desire became one of the themes of his fiction.

Reacting to the pressures of his unhappy home life, and because he was teased by other boys in the neighborhood, Anderson sometimes lapsed into momentary trances. In these states he saw his life "flying away" from him until it became a "speck in the distance" before returning to him "with a rush." In his biography, *Sherwood Anderson*, author Kim Townsend attributes these so-called "mystic episodes" to a psychological state of mind called a "fugue." Sometimes experienced in adolescence, a fugue is a condition in which the mind temporarily shuts out reality. Epilepsy is another possible explanation for Anderson's trances.

In 1895, Anderson's mother Emma died. His father abandoned the family, and suddenly there was nothing left in Clyde for the 19-year-old Sherwood. Like thousands of other midwesterners, he migrated to the big city of Chicago in 1896 to seek his fortune. He got work as a laborer and took accounting classes at night to advance his career.

After briefly serving in the military during the Spanish-American War, Anderson returned to Ohio in April of 1899 and enrolled in a high school equivalency course at Wittenberg College in Springfield. He befriended a local high school teacher who introduced him to what he called "fine literature."

Although he did well enough to earn entry to the college at Wittenberg, Anderson instead took a job offer from the advertising department of the *Woman's Home Companion* in Chicago. He became good at producing ad copy and by 1902 was writing articles for *Agricultural Advertising*, a trade journal.

"[A]dvertising gave [Anderson] the chance to write, and in writing the chance to come to terms with the conflicts in his life," Townsend observes. It may be hard to imagine that writing about canned peas could inspire such resolution of conflicts, yet it was the creativity and the daily practice at writing that cultivated Anderson's talent for loftier prose.

In 1903, Anderson met Cornelia Platt Lane, the daughter of a well-to-do president of a wholesale firm in Toledo, Ohio. She and Anderson courted for a year and married in the spring. Life was becoming more stable and prosperous for Anderson who turned 30 in 1906. He took charge of a Cleveland mail-order house while continuing to write business articles for trade publications. He managed the Cleveland company poorly, then struck out on his own in 1907 and founded the Anderson Manufacturing Company (later the American Merchants Company), a mail-order paint firm in Elyria, Ohio. That year his first son, Robert, was born; a year later another son, John, came along and in 1911 the Andersons had a daughter, Marion.

Although Anderson looked the part of the fine, upstanding member of the community, he sometimes became withdrawn, moody and self-absorbed. He often sought isolation in the sparsely furnished upstairs room in his house where he went to write.

He was obsessive about keeping the room spotlessly clean. In his own peculiar way, Anderson was attempting to cleanse himself and his environment of his social image. He had written for others long enough; now, he wanted to write for himself.

"I had become a writer," he recalled in *A Story Teller's Story* (1924). "Flinging aside the fake devotion that must always be characteristic of all such jobs as the advertising writing I had been doing for several years I had accepted my passion for scribbling."

And so he began to write the drafts of his first two novels, *Windy McPherson's Son* (1916), the story of a country boy's moral education in the big city of Chicago, and *Marching Men* (1917), an ode to labor leadership and the struggle of the working class in America. Neither book is representative of Anderson's best work, but each laid down a section of the foundation on which he would construct his masterpiece, *Winesburg, Ohio*.

In the winter of 1913, he left Cornelia and went to Chicago. The couple attempted several reunions, but it became evident to both of them that their marriage was no longer working. Anderson's leaving was actually something of a relief to Cornelia, since she was convinced that he was mentally unstable.

Meanwhile, Anderson took a job at the advertising firm of Taylor-Critchfield, continued to write fiction in his free time and began to associate with a local colony of artists, poets and writers. This group—the flower of the city's "literary renaissance"—included Floyd Dell, editor of the Chicago *Evening Post*'s "Friday Literary Review"; the quick-witted journalist, novelist and playwright Ben Hecht; and poet Carl Sandburg, who immortalized Chicago in his free verse as the "City of the Big Shoulders" and "Hog Butcher for the World."

This cultured crowd often met at Floyd Dell's apartment to tell stories, discuss art and shrug off the confines of conventionalism. Anderson longed to be one of them, and the moment he set foot in Floyd Dell's studio apartment he knew he was in the right place.

"A new life began for me," Anderson recalled in his *Memoirs* (1942). "It was a time of excitement, something seemingly new and fresh in the air we breathed."

Here in Floyd Dell's apartment Anderson found an audience for his fiction. The group was impressed with *Windy McPherson's Son*, and Dell thought enough of the manuscript to place it in the hands of John Lane, a publisher in London, England. To Anderson's delight, Lane agreed to publish the book through the company's American branch.

Meanwhile, Anderson devoted more time to writing short fiction, the genre on which his reputation rests. The colorful collection of tenants in the ramshackle boarding house in which he lived provided inspiration for many of his characters.

"The idea I had was to take them, just as they were, as I felt them," Anderson wrote in his memoirs, "and transfer them from the city rooming house to an imagined small town..."

In turning his focus to small-town America, he was probably influenced by poet Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* and Hamlin Garland's *Main-Traveled Roads*, both of which took critical looks at life in the rural Midwest. But the town of Anderson's imagination—Winesburg, Ohio—and the characters who inhabited it were all his own, and the collection of stories that bears its name remains one of the most important works of American literature.

Winesburg, Ohio contains 23 short stories, most of which are woven together as the memories of George Willard, a writer and former reporter for the *Winesburg Eagle*. Each chapter is a fictional portrait of a member of the community. It was a narrative structure that Anderson credited himself with inventing. Each story is able to stand on its own, but the book's true craft and impact are appreciated most when the stories are read as a whole.

The stories first appeared between 1915 and 1916, published separately in periodicals like the *Masses*, a socialist publication edited by Floyd Dell, and *Seven Arts*, a new literary magazine in New York. *Winesburg, Ohio* as a collection would not find a publisher until 1919.

What makes *Winesburg, Ohio* such a powerful piece of literature is that the seemingly simple country people of Anderson's fictional town are not quite so simple. On the surface, they all play the assigned roles that one would expect to find in a small town—doctor, minister, school teacher. Yet inside they are desperate, tortured individuals, burdened with feelings of isolation, loneliness and defeat.

"Nothing ever turn[s] out" for the people of Winesburg, no more than for Enoch Robinson in the story "Loneliness":

> He never grew up and of course he couldn't understand people and he couldn't make people understand him. The child in him kept bumping against things, against actualities like money and sex and opinions. Once he was hit by a streetcar and thrown against an iron post. That made him lame. It was one of the many things that kept things from turning out for Enoch Robinson.

Enoch Robinson's deformity is more than physical: it is spiritual. As an old man, he tells George Willard the story of his thwarted career, his failed marriage and self-alienation. As Willard leaves, he hears the pathetic voice of the old man "whimpering...'I'm all alone, all alone here...'"

Enoch Robinson and the other residents of Winesburg, Ohio, are indeed "all alone." They are cut off from each other and from society by fatal flaws in their natures.

Teacher Wing Biddlebaum in "Hands," for example, is at first admired for the quickness of his hands at strawberry-picking time. Wing's hands and how he touches people are his means of communicating

approval, joy, affection. But when the imagination of "a half-witted boy" ignites a series of sexual abuse charges against him, he becomes an outcast and is forced to live on the edge of town.

The people of Winesburg exist in a rural wasteland that is in a state of decay and under the threat of extermination by the industrial age. The stern morality and Puritan values their forebears carried with them across the wilderness have crumbled and left them vulnerable and struggling. We can see evidence of this conflict in the story "The Strength of God," as the Reverend Curtis Hartman grapples with the "carnal desire to `peep'" from behind the stained-glass window of the church tower into the bedroom of the school teacher, Kate Swift.

Anderson called these characters "grotesques," and defined them as people who "snatched up" truths for themselves and tried to live by them, only to find that they had become "falsehood." One after another, these grotesques seek out and confess to George Willard their innermost secrets in a final, desperate attempt to escape the imprisonment of their isolation. What Willard comes to realize is that liberation is possible only through compassion. He has compassion for these characters, but they cannot muster any for each other, and so they are doomed. In essence, *Winesburg, Ohio* is the story of one man's education through his exposure to the tragic experiences of others—"a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood."

Winesburg, Ohio succeeds on different levels. On the one hand, it works as a classic book of American folk tales, illustrative of a way of life that has vanished. But *Winesburg, Ohio* is more significant for the way in which it challenged the literary standards and traditions of the day. The characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* are disturbing, not heroic; they are conflicted and complicated, not flat and identifiable. Anderson's straightforwardness on sexual issues shocked many readers, and he was compared to D. H. Lawrence, a British writer contemporary with Anderson whose books were condemned and sometimes banned for their eroticism.

But models for *Winesburg, Ohio* could be found closer to home. In his unconventional use of language and frank handling of human sexuality, Anderson was following in the footsteps of poet Walt Whitman. Like Mark Twain, he attacked and ridiculed the conventions of society. By stressing that fulfillment comes from within and that change is an essential element of human progress, he was resonating the philosophies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," Thoreau had written. Anderson showed us, in intimate detail, who these people were.

In 1916, Anderson ended a two-year affair with Marietta "Bab" Finely, a reader at a local publishing company, and took up with a flamboyant and colorful sculptress and member of Floyd Dell's artistic colony, Tennessee Mitchell. She and Anderson joined a band of fellow artists that summer on a retreat to Lake Chateaugay in upstate New York, 30 miles north of Lake Placid, and not far from the Canadian

border. By this time Cornelia had divorced Anderson, and so he was free to marry Mitchell in the little village of Chateaugay in July 1916.

In October, *Windy McPherson's Son* was published to mostly good reviews. The novel was compared to Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Anderson was crowned the successor to Theodore Dreiser for his insights into the human condition, especially within the sweeping context of modern American urban life. Reviewer Waldo Frank in *Seven Arts* wrote that Anderson's first effort had "an unleashed and unsophisticated power that we have all along awaited in the American novel." At 40 years of age, Anderson had finally arrived.

By 1918, Anderson was working less on his advertising accounts at Taylor-Critchfield and more on his fiction and poetry. He produced a volume of 49 poems, *Mid-American Chants* (1918), which praised America's rural and agricultural tradition in the face of the modern era of industrialization. He also reworked the draft of his second novel, *Marching Men*, which turned out to be a failure. He himself admitted it "should have been an epic poem" instead of a novel.

Not to be discouraged, Anderson took a leave from Taylor-Critchfield, moved to New York City and began working on a new book. In just a few months he produced *Poor White* (1920), considered by many to be his best novel.

Drawn from childhood experiences, Anderson's story concerns the fictional town of Bidwell, Ohio. Part Winesburg, part Clyde, Bidwell is a simple midwestern town overrun by the complexities of the industrial age:

> ...all over the country, in the towns, the farm houses, and the growing cities of the new country, people stirred and awakened. Thought and poetry died or passed as a heritage to feeble fawning men who also became servants of the new order. Serious young men in Bidwell and other American towns, whose fathers had walked together on moonlit nights along Turner's Pike to talk of God, went away to technical schools.

Poor White has three main characters: Hugh McVey, his wife Clara Butterworth and the town of Bidwell itself.

McVey bears an unmistakable resemblance to Twain's Huck Finn. He is an idle dreamer, "born in a little hole of a town on a mud bank...on the Mississippi River," with a shiftless drunk for a father and a stern, practical Yankee "Aunt Polly" figure who later takes him under her wing. "[T]all, gaunt, [and] slow-speaking," McVey also bears a resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. Huck and Lincoln, in Anderson's estimation, were classic midwesterners.

Clara Butterworth is a so-called "modern woman" who struggles against the oppression of a late-Victorian, male-dominated society and thereby contributes to McVey's spiritual growth.

Finally, the town of Bidwell experiences its own growth through the gradual process of evolving from an agrarian community into a modern, midwestern city: "Men worked hard, but were much in the open air and had time to think. Their minds reached out toward the solution of the mystery of existence...There was a feeling, ill-expressed, that America had something real and spiritual to offer the rest of the world."

McVey, an inventor, is associated with the machinery and the gadgetry of the 20th century. He is seen by the men of Bidwell as the "instrument" of this "new forward-pushing impulse in American life." By inventing a cabbage-harvesting machine, he unwittingly sets off the spark of modernization in Bidwell. In doing so, he contributes to the destruction of his own environment and its loss of simple innocence.

In May 1919, Anderson's collection of stories about Winesburg was published. The reviews were good and Anderson began to earn his reputation as the spokesman for the new American Midwest. He followed up *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Poor White* with another collection of short stories, *The Triumph of the Egg* (1921), which included one of his most famous short stories, "The Egg."

Set in Bidwell, "The Egg" is the story of a chicken farmer who himself resembles an egg, with a "bald path over the top of his head" and a fat, round body. Like many of Anderson's "grotesques," the farmer is constantly victimized by his environment.

"One unversed in such things can have no notion of the many and tragic things that can happen to a chicken," relates the farmer's son as he recalls his father's frustrated attempts to ward off the numerous poultry diseases and pitfalls that go along with the business. Among these are the various two-headed, five-legged "little monstrous things" that sometimes hatch from eggs, which the farmer preserves in jars of alcohol, believing them to be potential money-making attractions.

He brings them along and displays them in the restaurant that he opens after finally giving up on chicken farming. He is convinced that the way to bring in customers is to provide them with entertainment, such as showing them the deformed chickens, telling stories and performing a variety of tricks involving eggs.

He is about as successful at entertainment, however, as he was at chicken farming, and the ultimate "triumph of the egg" takes place when he absurdly tries to pass one through the neck of a bottle. Defeated, he reverently places an egg on the table before his wife, then kneels at her feet and weeps, leaving his son with the terrible legacy of wondering "why eggs had to be and why from the egg came the hen who again laid the egg."

The egg is an obvious symbol of life. It is mysterious, unyielding, simple in appearance yet complex in nature, and extremely fragile. The father's frustration thus stems from his inability to deal with life. He is "at once comical and pathetic," as Anderson scholar Rex Burbank observed—a classic example of the "grotesque" character who haunts Anderson's fiction, trying desperately to manipulate a world he cannot even begin to understand.

Anderson worked on this story and others, plus the draft of his next novel, *Many Marriages* (1923), in Mobile, Alabama, where he spent the winter and spring of 1920. Back in Illinois, he continued to work sporadically at Taylor-Critchfield and moved to the suburbs. When *Poor White* came out, his work was spoken of in the same breath as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*.

One evening in January of 1921, he attended a party at a coworker's apartment and there met a scruffy and struggling young writer named Ernest Hemingway, who had recently arrived in Chicago.

Like legions of other aspiring young writers of the day who went about with dog-eared copies of *Winesburg, Ohio* stuffed into their pockets, Hemingway looked up to the older, established author. Anderson became Hemingway's mentor and later brought his work to the attention of publisher Horace Liveright, of Boni&Liveright.

(Hemingway eventually repaid Anderson's generosity by writing *Torrents of Spring*, a scathing parody of Anderson's 1925 novel *Dark Laughter*. Anderson was puzzled and hurt by this unwarranted attack.)

In May of 1921 Anderson went to Paris where he was welcomed into Gertrude Stein's celebrated circle of literary disciples. There he met such contemporary writers as James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Ford Maddox Ford and John Dos Passos.

When he returned to the United States four months later, his *Triumph of the Egg* was being hailed by the critics for its "glamorous beauty" and "unmistakable power." He was given the first *Dial* award (for a contribution to literature by "a young American writer") by the editors of *The Dial*. *The Dial* was a highly respected literary magazine founded by the Transcendentalists, a 19th-century group of American writers and philosophers, based largely in New England, who believed that the natural world was a unified reflection of spiritual truths and that the path to enlightenment could be found by seeking out these basic truths.

The *Dial* award included a cash prize of $2,000, which gave Anderson the means and the courage to finally quit his job at Taylor-Critchfield and go to New Orleans for the winter of 1922. He lived a comfortable life there, taking in the colorful and curious sights of the city and writing stories for the *Double Dealer*, a local literary magazine that also published the works of Hemingway, Faulkner and Hart Crane.

Anderson's next novel, *Many Marriages*, was widely considered to be a colossal failure. But Anderson redeemed himself with *Horses and Men* (1923), another collection of short stories, which included a number of his greatest tales, such as "The Man Who Became a Woman," "I Want to Know Why" and "I'm a Fool." *Horses and Men* and *The Triumph of the Egg* represent "the heights of [Anderson's] genius" as a short story writer, according to Rex Burbank; rarely did he ever approach this level of craft and quality again.

By now Anderson had once again fallen in love with another woman, this time a bookstore manager in New York named Elizabeth Prall. His relationship with Tennessee Mitchell had always been somewhat detached (the two only occasionally lived together and maintained separate residences throughout their marriage). In 1924 he moved to Reno, Nevada, where divorces could be easily had after a six-month residency. He spent his time in Reno working on his first autobiography, *A Story Teller's Story*, and married Prall as soon as his divorce came through.

The couple moved to New Orleans where Anderson met Horace Liveright, the dashing and colorful New York publisher, of Boni&Liveright. Anderson was in the market for a new publisher and Liveright agreed to take him on. While in New Orleans, Anderson also met William Faulkner. Like Hemingway, Faulkner initially revered Anderson but later took some shots at his former mentor in reviewing *Many Marriages* and *A Story Teller's Story*. Perhaps out of regret, Faulkner finally acknowledged his respect for Anderson in a posthumous 1953 tribute, "Sherwood Anderson: An Appreciation," in which he called Anderson "a giant in an earth populated to a great...extent by pygmies."

In 1925, Boni&Liveright published Anderson's one best-selling novel, *Dark Laughter*, which was inspired by Anderson's exposure to the lives of Southern blacks. Although the book was a popular success, it was taken to task by many of Anderson's contemporaries for its meandering style. Fitzgerald simply called it "lousy," and Hemingway found rich material for his parody in Anderson's stylistic habit of asking the reader questions in the narrative.

Anderson pressed on, however, and published another autobiography, *Tar: A Midwest Childhood*, and *Sherwood Anderson's Notebook*, a compilation of previously published pieces together with some new sketches (both 1926). During 1926 and 1927, he went out on the lecture circuit to raise some badly needed capital. He had purchased a farm in Marion, Virginia, and was building a large country home there, which he christened Ripshin, after a creek that ran through the property.

He also bought two competing local newspapers—the *Smythe County News* and the *Marion Democrat*—and fancied himself a country publisher. The people in the small town of Marion, however, resented a big-time writer barging into their lives and editorializing on their community affairs. Anderson eventually grew tired of the whole business and turned over the reins to his eldest son, Robert. He published some of his sketches from the papers in *Hello Towns!* (1929).

By the late 1920s, Anderson had lost his edge as a writer, and the reviewers claimed that he was "dying before our eyes." This type of criticism threw Anderson into moods of suicidal depression, and his mood wasn't elevated any by the failure of his third marriage. Yet Anderson, as Kim Townsend observed, "was a man who constantly renewed, remade himself." At 54 years of age he found a new companion (Eleanor Copenhaver, a society girl from a distinguished Marion family) and a new cause—politics.

Revitalizing a theme he had touched on in *Marching Men*, he became passionately dedicated to improving the lot of the working class in America. He spoke at rallies in the South, lobbied on behalf of

workers' rights before labor organizations in New York, and went to Washington, D.C., to personally deliver a letter of protest to President Herbert Hoover. Anderson summed up his stance on the unfair treatment of the working class in his novel *Beyond Desire* (1932), which ends with a violent clash between striking workers and National Guard troops.

In 1933, Anderson published his final book of short stories, *Death in the Woods and Other Stories*, and married Eleanor Copenhaver. She made him happier than any of his previous wives, and he was beginning to feel more at peace. Just as John Steinbeck was to do a few years later, Anderson went on the road in 1934, gathering material for a series of articles about the poverty-stricken towns of the Midwest and the people there who had been crippled by the Great Depression. He collected many of these articles in *Puzzled America* (1935). His last novel, a romance named *Kit Brandon*, was published the following year.

Anderson enjoyed a minor revival during the late thirties. *Winesburg, Ohio* and stories from *The Triumph of the Egg* were produced as popular stage productions. In 1937, he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. During these years his byline could be found in numerous periodicals, including *The New Republic*, the *Nation* and various socialist-movement publications.

He maintained his interest in politics until his very last days. He was cruising toward the Panama Canal on a goodwill tour of South America in February of 1941 when he was struck with peritonitis, brought on by a perforated intestine. He hung on for three days until the ship came into port. He was rushed to the hospital at Colón in the Canal Zone and died there on March 8.

Today, Anderson may seem too old-fashioned for the modern reader. Indeed, many of his longer works are heavily draped in symbolism and ramble on about this or that cause, such as truth and the struggle for justice, in ways that are not always effective.

But, on closer inspection, we find much in Anderson that has relevance today. The influence of technology on traditional moral behavior, the effect of industrialism on the environment, the strained relationships that can exist between men and women, between human beings and their social institutions—these are all themes that can be found in the pages of Anderson's fiction and in the daily events of our own lives.

Above all, Anderson helped to bring the modern American short story into existence. He refined and advanced the literary technique of character development through the use of introspection and self-exploration—threads of technique he had picked up from Whitman and Stephen Crane. He allowed us to observe the way simple, ordinary people react when faced with "intense moments of happiness, defeat, triumph or revelation," as critic Rex Burbank puts it. We watch as they "move from the moral certainty of youth to the difficult adult world of ambiguities and paradoxes."

William Faulkner once called Anderson "the father of my generation of American writers," and he was right. Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, Wolfe, Dos Passos—all were influenced by the

pioneering achievements of Sherwood Anderson. And if he was the father of Faulkner's generation, he could be considered the grandfather of this one, as we can trace his literary bloodline through the works of John Cheever, Flannery O'Connor, Raymond Carver, John Updike and others.

In a letter to a friend, Anderson wrote that "man's real life is lived out there in the imaginative world," and that it was a writer's obligation to seek reality out there. Anderson spent a lifetime wandering up and down the streets of his "imaginative world"—the world of *Winesburg, Ohio,* of Bidwell and other prototypical American towns that still exist today.

What he showed us was that there were things we may not always like to see or learn about ourselves, but to which we must necessarily turn every time we examine our heritage and question how far we as a moral nation have come.

Further Information

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