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FORM, FATE, AND FEELING: THE LITERARY STRENGTH OF THOMAS HARDY'S ART

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the literary strength of Thomas Hardy's works by foregrounding the craft that animates his fiction and poetry—narrative voice, characterization, symbolic landscapes, stylistic texture, and tragic design. Rather than surveying themes alone, the study examines how technique produces meaning: how an omniscient-yet-intimate narrator cultivates irony and pathos; how psychologically credible figures are shaped by class, gender, and place; how Wessex as an ecological and social environment functions as both mirror and indifferent force; and how Hardy's prose adopts lyric strategies that intensify ethical reflection. Through case readings from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Jude the Obscure*, and selected poems (including "The Darkling Thrush" and the 1912–13 sequence), we argue that Hardy's distinctive blend of realism and fatalism yields a form of tragic honesty that avoids didactic closure while enlarging sympathy. The study also considers frequent criticisms—perceived pessimism, digressive pacing, and archaic diction—to clarify how these features, sometimes resisted by readers, enable Hardy's enduring artistic force. The paper concludes that Hardy's craft bridges Victorian and modern sensibilities, sustaining his relevance to contemporary debates in gender studies, environmental humanities, and narrative ethics.

Keywords: Hardy, Narrative Ethics, Tragic Realism, Wessex, Characterization, Environmental Humanities

I. Introduction

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) occupies a unique position in English literature, celebrated not only for the emotional intensity of his narratives but also for the meticulous craft that underpins them. His works—ranging from the Wessex novels, including *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *The Return of the Native*, to the 1912–13 poetry sequence—demonstrate a consistent integration of social observation, formal innovation, and ethical concern (Hardy, 1878/2005; 1886/2003; 1891/2008; 1895/2012; 1912/2001). Hardy's narratives confront human experience under the pressures of social hierarchy, institutional authority, and ecological constraints, reflecting both the fin-de-siècle anxieties of Victorian England and broader philosophical questions about fate, morality, and human endurance.

Central to Hardy's literary achievement is his distinctive narrative craft. His omniscient yet intimate narrator mediates between the social panorama and the inner psychological life of characters, producing a narrative tension that combines irony, empathy, and ethical scrutiny. Plots are often paced by seasonal cycles, symbolically linking human actions to the inexorable rhythms of nature. Landscapes, architecture, and the built environment function as active elements of the narrative, shaping opportunity, desire, and misfortune while reflecting the broader moral universe of Wessex. Hardy's prose style borrows the cadence and texture of lyric poetry, creating an acoustic and emotional memory that resonates with the reader, even as his narratives explore grim or tragic events.

This study aims to examine Hardy's literary strength not merely by cataloguing themes but by analyzing how form and style generate meaning. It considers how his narrative techniques—omniscient voice, psychologically credible characters, symbolically charged environments, and lyric-inflected prose—produce ethical engagement and aesthetic pleasure



simultaneously. By examining these elements in conjunction with case studies from key novels and poems, the article argues that Hardy's craft enables a form of tragic realism that balances human vulnerability with ethical reflection.

Previous scholarship situates Hardy at the intersection of Victorian realism and early modernist experimentation, highlighting his attention to social constraint, ethical ambiguity, and psychological complexity (Cecil, 1940; Guerard, 1949; Howe, 1967; Lawrence, 1936/1961; Williams, 1970/1973). Hardy's work engages with social issues—gender inequality, class oppression, and institutional authority—without resorting to prescriptive moralizing, instead cultivating readers' critical sensibilities and empathetic capacities. This dual focus on aesthetic sophistication and moral insight forms the basis of his enduring relevance.

In the present study, the analysis focuses on four major dimensions of Hardy's craft: (1) narrative voice, (2) characterization and psychological credibility, (3) the role of place in shaping human experience, and (4) stylistic and tragic design. Through close reading and interpretive analysis, this article seeks to demonstrate how Hardy's literary techniques sustain an ethics of attention, amplifying the impact of his tragic realism and ensuring his continued significance in contemporary literary, ethical, and environmental discourse.

II. Narrative Voice: Omniscience and Moral Engagement

A defining feature of Thomas Hardy's literary craft is his narrative voice, which achieves a balance between omniscience and moral engagement. The third-person narrator possesses broad knowledge of the social and historical context, while also presenting the inner thoughts, emotions, and ethical dilemmas of characters. This dual perspective allows the narrative to encompass sweeping social commentary alongside detailed portrayals of human experience (Hardy, 1891/2008; 1895/2012).

In works such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the narrator shifts between public and private spheres. Public events—the economic transactions, legal proceedings, and social customs of Wessex—are described with authorial precision, providing readers with a clear understanding of societal forces. At the same time, the narrative renders the mental and emotional experiences of characters, allowing readers to understand their motivations, struggles, and ethical challenges. For example, Tess's decisions and responses to social pressures illustrate how individual actions intersect with structural constraints, demonstrating the tension between personal desire and societal expectation.

Hardy's narrative voice maintains moral seriousness without imposing judgment. Instead of dictating ethical responses, it presents events and their consequences, prompting readers to engage in reflection on social injustice, personal responsibility, and the role of chance. In *Jude the Obscure*, the depiction of institutional barriers such as education, marriage, and clerical power highlights the limitations imposed on characters, without explicit authorial moralizing.

Irony is a central technique in Hardy's narration, revealing social pretense and the contradictions of custom while preserving respect for the complexity of human behavior. Characters confront forces beyond their control—law, tradition, and fate—yet the narration carefully balances critique and compassion. This approach encourages readers to evaluate the ethical dimensions of the narrative and to recognize the interplay of circumstance, choice, and consequence.

By combining panoramic social observation with detailed character perspectives, Hardy's narrative voice creates a multidimensional understanding of Wessex. Readers perceive societal structures, historical conditions, and patterns of inequality while also following the personal stakes and struggles of individuals. This dual function—social critique paired with ethical reflection—forms a core element of Hardy's literary strength and explains the continuing impact of his work.

III. Characterization and Psychological Credibility

Thomas Hardy's literary strength is grounded in his nuanced characterization, which produces psychologically credible and morally complex figures. His protagonists are not merely symbolic or archetypal; they are individuals shaped by social position, personal history, and ethical dilemmas. Characters such as Tess Durbeyfield, Jude Fawley, Sue Bridehead,



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Bathsheba Everdene, and Michael Henchard are depicted with a mixture of virtues and flaws, strengths and vulnerabilities, enabling readers to perceive them as fully realized human beings (Hardy, 1891/2008; 1895/2012).

Social context plays a decisive role in shaping character. Class, gender, and local customs influence language, behavior, and decision-making, demonstrating how external forces intersect with personal agency. Tess's constrained choices are informed not only by her moral convictions but also by the economic and social pressures surrounding her. Similarly, Jude's aspirations are repeatedly frustrated by institutional and cultural barriers, highlighting the limitations imposed by education, marriage, and religion. Hardy's attention to these intersecting pressures allows readers to understand characters' actions in relation to the broader social world.

The moral and psychological realism in Hardy's characterization intensifies the impact of tragedy. Downfalls are rarely caused by simple villainy or chance alone; they emerge from the complex interaction of personal desire, ethical responsibility, societal constraint, and inadvertent misfortune. For example, Michael Henchard's temper, coupled with social expectations and circumstantial events, precipitates his decline in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Hardy carefully presents such outcomes as consequences of multiple intertwined factors rather than deterministic punishment.

Moreover, Hardy's characters display emotional depth and capacity for reflection. They experience remorse, regret, hope, and courage, which allows readers to engage with their ethical reasoning and internal conflicts. This engagement cultivates empathy and moral discernment, inviting readers to consider the consequences of social norms and human decisions. Hardy's characters are simultaneously products of their environment and agents navigating its constraints, making their psychological credibility both compelling and instructive.

Through his detailed and socially situated characterization, Hardy demonstrates that literature can illuminate the ethical dimensions of human experience. Readers witness the tension between individual intention and societal pressure, between aspiration and limitation, and between moral judgment and social prejudice. It is precisely this blend of social insight and psychological realism that reinforces Hardy's enduring literary influence and the ethical resonance of his work.

IV. Place as Form: Wessex, Nature, and Built Space

In Hardy's fiction, place is never merely a backdrop; it functions as a dynamic, almost character-like force that shapes human experience. The landscapes of Wessex—the heaths, fields, rivers, villages, and towns—are imbued with symbolic and narrative significance, mediating both action and emotion. Egdon Heath, for instance, in *The Return of the Native*, represents the indifference of nature, enduring across generations while human lives unfold transiently upon its expanse (Hardy, 1878/2005). Its austere, immutable presence reflects the persistent pressures of time and circumstance that frame human tragedy. In contrast, the Vale of Blackmoor in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* combines fecundity with precarity, suggesting that abundance is inseparable from vulnerability. Through such landscapes, Hardy conveys the interplay of opportunity, limitation, and contingency in human affairs.

Built spaces—barns, cottages, bridges, churches, and town halls—carry symbolic weight, structuring narrative action and moral judgment. Thresholds and boundaries, such as doorways, gates, and bridges, often signal moments of ethical or emotional transition, marking passages between belonging and exile, safety and danger, or innocence and experience. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, public buildings like the market and the town hall stage crucial social interactions, emphasizing how communal institutions influence personal fate. Architecture and spatial arrangement, therefore, become integral to the moral and psychological texture of the narrative.

Hardy's environmental poetics anticipates modern ecological thinking by foregrounding the interdependence of humans and their surroundings. Wessex functions as an ecosystem where labor, social hierarchy, and seasonal cycles converge, making human action inseparable from ecological context. The rhythms of planting, harvesting, and weather are not merely descriptive; they frame the pace of plot, echo character emotions, and reinforce thematic concerns with mortality, resilience, and inevitability.



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Moreover, Hardy's detailed representation of place cultivates ethical reflection. By situating human dilemmas within vividly depicted natural and built environments, readers are invited to consider how context shapes behavior, how limitations are imposed by both society and the physical world, and how moral choices resonate within broader spatial and temporal frameworks. Wessex, therefore, is both mirror and arbiter: it reflects human emotion and society, and it enforces the impartiality of fate.

Through the careful integration of natural and built spaces into narrative structure, Hardy demonstrates that form and content are inseparable. Place is active, shaping story and character, and reinforcing the ethical and psychological realities he depicts. In doing so, Hardy's landscapes achieve literary and symbolic richness, bridging aesthetic beauty with moral significance, and offering readers a sustained meditation on the human relationship to the environment.

V. Realism, Fatalism, and Tragic Design

Hardy's literary strength lies in his capacity to combine social realism with a recognition of life's constraints, producing narratives that are both grounded and morally compelling. His realism manifests in meticulous attention to the details of everyday life—labor, customs, class structures, legal institutions, and interpersonal relations. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, for instance, Henchard's choices, temperament, and encounters are portrayed with precision, showing how social structures, economic pressures, and personal flaws converge to shape outcomes (Hardy, 1886/2003). Similarly, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* depicts agricultural labor, rural hierarchies, and the limits imposed on women, illuminating the material and societal forces that frame human decisions (Hardy, 1891/2008).

Intertwined with this realism is Hardy's sense of fatalism. Characters frequently confront circumstances beyond their control: inherited tendencies, social expectations, random chance, and the relentless forces of nature. Fate is neither a moral arbitrator nor a supernatural agent; it is the cumulative result of environmental pressures, social conditions, and human error. In *Jude the Obscure*, Jude's aspirations are continually thwarted by rigid educational structures, social prejudice, and clerical authority (Hardy, 1895/2012). Hardy's tragedies arise from this tension between individual effort and structural constraint, rather than from purely villainous characters or simplistic moral lessons.

The tragic design of Hardy's work is also evident in his narrative structure. Plots are carefully constructed to reveal the inevitability of consequences, yet they avoid predictability. Open endings, partial resolutions, and moral ambiguity reflect the complexity of life and human psychology. By refusing tidy conclusions, Hardy underscores the realism of human experience: triumphs are fragile, setbacks are often undeserved, and ethical dilemmas rarely admit clear solutions. This design cultivates reflection and empathy, compelling readers to consider both individual responsibility and the broader conditions shaping human suffering.

Hardy's integration of realism and fatalism creates a distinct form of tragedy that resonates across temporal and social contexts. Unlike classical tragedy, which often emphasizes the inevitability of a hero's downfall, Hardy's tragedies are democratic: any character, regardless of status, can be subjected to circumstance and misfortune. The convergence of realistic social detail and the impartial pressures of fate yields a narrative space in which ethical reflection, emotional engagement, and structural awareness coexist.

Ultimately, Hardy's combination of realism and fatalism demonstrates that literature can illuminate both the conditions of human life and the ethical choices made within them. Tragedy in Hardy's work is neither sensational nor melodramatic; it emerges organically from the interaction of character, society, and environment. By tracing the delicate balance between agency and constraint, Hardy creates narratives that are morally serious, socially attentive, and aesthetically rigorous, establishing a literary model in which form and ethical insight are inseparable.



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VI. Style and Language: Lyric Prose and Temporal Texture

Hardy's prose exhibits a distinctive stylistic texture that merges careful observation with literary artistry. His sentences are often measured, with rhythmic cadences that evoke both the flow of natural landscapes and the progression of time. This lyric quality is not poetry in a strict sense, but a heightened prose style that uses sound, repetition, and imagery to reinforce meaning. Through patterns of alliteration, consonance, and parallelism, Hardy creates an acoustic resonance that engages readers' sensory perception while subtly emphasizing thematic concerns.

Temporal texture is another defining aspect of Hardy's style. Events are often situated within seasonal cycles, agricultural rhythms, or historical contexts, which heighten the connection between character actions and broader temporal forces. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the progression of months and harvests shapes Tess's experiences and the narrative's ethical tension (Hardy, 1891/2008). Similarly, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the story unfolds over years, allowing readers to perceive the long-term consequences of Henchard's choices and the gradual accumulation of social and personal pressures (Hardy, 1886/2003). By integrating time so organically into his narratives, Hardy situates characters within a dynamic temporal framework, enhancing the realism of their struggles and the weight of their decisions.

Hardy's attention to place and landscape contributes further to his stylistic effect. Descriptions of heathlands, valleys, and village architecture are detailed and evocative, functioning both as setting and as symbolic reflection of emotional and moral states. Egdon Heath, for instance, embodies resilience and indifference simultaneously, mirroring the characters' confrontation with forces beyond their control (Hardy, 1878/2005). This attention to environmental texture complements the lyric quality of his prose, producing a seamless interplay between form, content, and ethical reflection.

Dialect and rural idiom enrich Hardy's narrative voice without reducing characters to caricature. Speech patterns, vocabulary, and syntax reflect social class, education, and regional identity, embedding characters firmly in their cultural context while maintaining literary sophistication. Such stylistic strategies allow Hardy to achieve both verisimilitude and elevated artistry, bridging the gap between social realism and aesthetic expression.

Finally, Hardy's manipulation of temporal motifs—such as retrospection, recurrence, and delayed revelation—creates narrative tension and deepens reader engagement. By revisiting past events or showing their consequences over time, he fosters reflection on cause and effect, personal responsibility, and societal constraint. The temporal structure, coupled with his lyrical prose, transforms ordinary events into morally resonant and emotionally compelling episodes, demonstrating the inseparability of style, form, and ethical engagement in Hardy's work.

VII. Ethical Complexity and Narrative Ethics

Thomas Hardy's literary craft is deeply intertwined with ethical reflection, as his narratives consistently foreground moral complexity rather than providing simple answers. Rather than instructing readers through prescriptive judgment, Hardy constructs situations that challenge them to weigh competing values, observe the consequences of social and personal decisions, and consider the nuanced interplay between agency and circumstance. This narrative ethics emphasizes moral attentiveness: readers are invited to reflect on characters' dilemmas, the influence of societal norms, and the often harsh realities of fate and social constraint.

In Hardy's novels, characters frequently encounter conflicts between personal desire and social expectation, highlighting ethical tensions that are neither easily resolved nor confined to individual culpability. For example, Tess Durbeyfield's experiences in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* expose the rigid moral codes of Victorian society, forcing readers to consider how social structures, gender norms, and economic vulnerability shape ethical outcomes (Hardy, 1891/2008). Similarly, Jude Fawley in *Jude the Obscure* struggles against institutional barriers in education and marriage, illustrating how social institutions can constrain moral agency and contribute to personal tragedy (Hardy, 1895/2012).



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Hardy's poetry also contributes to his ethical framework, often dramatizing human vulnerability in the face of natural, social, or historical forces. The poems of 1912–13, written during the period of World War I, exemplify how observation of loss, impermanence, and ecological precarity generates a moral sensibility attentive to suffering, endurance, and resilience (Hardy, 1912/2001). Through such works, Hardy encourages readers to cultivate empathy not only for individual characters but also for the broader social and ecological contexts in which lives unfold.

By avoiding didactic closure, Hardy places responsibility on the reader to negotiate moral interpretation. This strategy underscores the relational nature of ethics in his writing: morality is not abstracted into universal rules but emerges through engagement with characters' lived experiences, choices, and constraints. In classrooms and literary analysis today, Hardy's approach continues to provide fertile ground for discussions on consent, social justice, environmental responsibility, and historical ethics, demonstrating the enduring relevance of his narrative ethics across temporal and cultural boundaries.

In summary, Hardy's ethical complexity lies in the intersection of narrative form, character development, and social observation. His works cultivate moral reflection by portraying the tension between freedom and constraint, sympathy and judgment, and fate and choice, thereby reinforcing the notion that literature can shape ethical perception without resorting to moral simplification.

VIII. Case Readings

Hardy's literary techniques and ethical complexity are vividly illustrated through specific novels and poems. These case readings demonstrate how narrative form, characterization, and environmental context collectively generate moral and emotional engagement.

“The Darkling Thrush”

In this poem, Hardy depicts a winter landscape that seems exhausted and desolate, yet a thrush sings a note of unexpected hope. The poem embodies Hardy's method of combining realism with subtle ethical reflection: readers are made aware of environmental and social decay, yet they are invited to perceive resilience and possibility. The juxtaposition of bleak surroundings with a fragile yet persistent voice emphasizes the human capacity to recognize beauty and moral endurance even in adverse conditions (Hardy, 1912/2001).

Tess of the d'Urbervilles

Tess Durbeyfield's narrative exemplifies Hardy's ability to depict the collision between social norms, moral judgment, and individual circumstance. Tess's struggles with familial expectations, economic vulnerability, and societal condemnation highlight the ethical dilemmas imposed by patriarchal structures. The symbolic use of thresholds, seasonal changes, and natural landscapes mirrors her psychological and moral journey, compelling readers to examine how ethical responsibility is shared between society and the individual (Hardy, 1891/2008).

The Mayor of Casterbridge

Michael Henchard's story illustrates how character, chance, and societal pressures converge to shape tragedy. Henchard's impulsive decisions, coupled with the rigid expectations of his community, lead to a series of irreversible outcomes. Hardy's narrative design avoids assigning simplistic blame; instead, the story encourages readers to consider how personal temperament, social context, and unforeseen events interact to produce ethical complexity. The novel exemplifies Hardy's approach to tragic realism, where moral evaluation is nuanced and multifaceted (Hardy, 1886/2003).

Jude the Obscure

Jude Fawley's experiences reveal the limits imposed by social institutions, including marriage, education, and religious authority. Hardy presents these structural constraints not merely as plot devices but as forces that shape ethical possibilities



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and human aspirations. The tension between individual desire and societal limitation generates moral reflection, compelling readers to consider the ethical consequences of social policy, cultural norms, and institutional power (Hardy, 1895/2012).

Across these case readings, Hardy's literary craft demonstrates how narrative form—through pacing, symbolism, and perspective—interacts with ethical inquiry. Characters are neither archetypal nor morally perfect; landscapes are not decorative but function as active agents influencing human action. The result is a literary architecture that fosters critical engagement, empathy, and ethical discernment, ensuring that the lessons of Hardy's art resonate beyond the Victorian period into contemporary discourse.

IX. Critiques and Limits

Despite Hardy's enduring literary reputation, his works have frequently been critiqued for stylistic and structural features that some readers and scholars find challenging. One common objection concerns the somber tonal quality of his narratives. Hardy's works often portray human experience as constrained by fate, social norms, and environmental pressures, which can create a pervasive sense of pessimism. Critics have argued that this tonal gravity may alienate readers seeking more optimistic or resolution-driven storytelling (Williams, 1970/1973).

Another frequent critique relates to the digressive narrative style found in many of Hardy's novels. His tendency to include detailed descriptions of landscapes, customs, and minor characters, while enriching the thematic and ethical depth, can be perceived as slowing plot momentum. Some readers interpret these passages as unnecessary, yet they serve the essential function of embedding characters within a lived and morally significant context. The environment in Hardy's work is never mere backdrop; rather, it acts as an active force shaping human action and moral consequence (Hardy, 1878/2005; 1886/2003).

Archaic diction and period-specific language also draw criticism. Modern readers may find certain lexical choices or syntactical patterns dense or outdated. However, Hardy's careful selection of language reinforces historical authenticity and cultivates the rhythm and tone necessary to reflect his philosophical and ethical preoccupations. The diction, in conjunction with symbolic imagery, allows Hardy to modulate moral attention, guiding readers to discern subtle interactions between human behavior and social forces (Cecil, 1940; Guerard, 1949).

Finally, some critics highlight Hardy's apparent pessimism regarding social change. While his novels depict systemic constraint and tragic outcomes, Hardy's works are not devoid of ethical or emotional engagement. Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, his art emphasizes reflection, moral awareness, and empathy. In this sense, the very features sometimes resisted by readers—digression, bleakness, and historical language—are integral to the literary and ethical potency of his work.

In sum, critiques of Hardy's tone, pacing, and diction should be understood not as shortcomings but as deliberate formal strategies that deepen narrative complexity, ethical inquiry, and emotional resonance. Recognition of these elements allows readers to appreciate the deliberate artistry behind his depiction of human struggle and societal limitation.

X. Conclusion

Thomas Hardy's literary strength rests on a careful orchestration of narrative form, characterization, landscape, style, and tragic design. His novels and poems demonstrate that literary craft is inseparable from ethical and emotional engagement, shaping the way readers perceive human action, social constraint, and moral consequence. By portraying characters who navigate desire, duty, and circumstance, Hardy illuminates the complex interplay between individual agency and external forces—be they social, institutional, or environmental.

Hardy's narrative techniques—omniscient yet reflective narration, psychologically credible characters, symbolically charged environments, lyric-infused prose, and meticulously structured tragic arcs—create a reading experience that is both intellectually rigorous and emotionally compelling. Far from offering simplistic moral instruction or sentimental resolution,



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Hardy's works cultivate a reflective engagement, inviting readers to consider human behavior in relation to societal norms, ecological context, and ethical responsibility.

The enduring relevance of Hardy's art lies in its capacity to bridge historical and contemporary sensibilities. Victorian readers were confronted with social critique, moral ambiguity, and the consequences of industrial and social transformation, while modern readers find in Hardy a lens to explore issues of gender, consent, social mobility, environmental ethics, and narrative responsibility. His works continue to inform scholarly inquiry, pedagogy, and creative adaptation, demonstrating that literary form and ethical insight can operate in tandem to illuminate both past and present human experience.

In conclusion, Hardy's literary legacy is a testament to the power of art to render human complexity, ethical awareness, and social observation with precision and compassion. Through the fusion of narrative craft and moral vision, Hardy ensures that his works remain not only objects of aesthetic admiration but also enduring guides for ethical reflection and cultural critique.

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