

**HAWTHORNE'S OPERA PRIMA:  
THE PERMANENCE OF THEMES IN FICTION\***

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*ABSTRACT*

Nathaniel Hawthorne's first novel *Fanshawe*, partially due to its author's deliberate and quite successful efforts to suppress it, has never attracted the attention it deserves. The critics who have heeded it have mostly focused their discussions on its derivative characteristics. Also, Robert E. Gross detected and called attention to the timid presence of the great Hawthornean themes which he thought had survived until the end of his career. This brief paper attempts to analyse some other very essential features in *Fanshawe* that Gross neglected. Not only are Hawthorne's traditional themes and his distinct style perceptible in *Fanshawe*, but also his personal likes and dislikes, his obsessions, his dreams and pre-occupations. These and many other idiosyncrasies of Hawthorne permeate *Fanshawe* and were an essential part of his later literature.

A scrutiny of the scanty, and somewhat aged, literary criticism on Nathaniel Hawthorne's first published work, *Fanshawe*, evinces that the novel has been traditionally labelled as being a sort of composite formed by the combination of the following sources: Sir Walter Scott and the Waverley traditions, the Scottish common-sense school of philosophers, Charles Maturin and the gothic romance (Orians 1938; Sattelmeyer 1955; Ciffeelli 1976). Another view is that the essential value of this novel lies in the fact that within it the timid presence of Hawthorne's literary powers can already be detected (Bode 1950; Gross 1963; Pearce 1964). Robert Eugene Gross observed:

The balanced and concessive syntax, the abstract and general diction, the alienation theme, the whole arsenal of moralizing devices, the portentous tone,

the grotesquery, the wise announcements, the imagic play, and the static plotting which appear in *Fanshawe* in 1828 appear not only in *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, but also in *The Marble Faun* in 1860. (64)

Indeed some of the motifs Gross identifies, such as the theme of alienation and the tendency to moralising, are central to Hawthorne's art, but Gross overlooked other less conspicuous aspects which have remained unnoticed ever since. In addition to the above, the novel constitutes a remarkably extensive inventory of the author's own idiosyncrasies —personal desires, anxieties, obsessions, etc.— which were later to permeate his fictional universe. It is not uncommon that an untried author should project his personality in his *opera prima*, but it is not nearly as common that this should continue to be true throughout his entire literary career; however, this is exactly Hawthorne's case. He admits it when in the preface to *The Snow Image* collection he advises his readers to look “through the whole range of his fictitious characters, good and evil, in order to detect any of his essential traits” (XI: 8).<sup>1</sup> This brief study calls attention to those biographical elements in *Fanshawe* which, in spite of remaining in Hawthorne's literature through the years, have not been the subject of literary criticism.

To begin with, let's examine Hawthorne's attitude concerning popularity and prestige. Externally he was the most self-effacing, unpretentious, and modest of the authors of his time. When his son Julian was collecting material for the publication of *Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife* he made inquiries about his father to his aunt Elizabeth Peabody, and her authoritative view sheds light on the matter. She told Julian: “But your father was a man wholly destitute of vanity; he had not even the germ of it” (Pearson 261). However, a detailed analysis of his private and public writings finds evidence of contrary feelings in his bosom.

A perusal of his personal letters demonstrates that the author's aspiration to achieve some kind of celebrity was long standing. In 1819, when he was attending school in Salem while his mother and siblings resided in Raymond, Maine, he wrote to his younger sister Louisa enclosing some examples of his own poetry. Those early attempts to minimise the value of fame paradoxically ignite our suspicions that he in fact yearned for it; at any rate what cannot be doubted is that he was thinking about it. He was fifteen when in September 1819 he wrote:

Oh, earthly pomp is but a dream,  
And like a meteor's short-lived gleam;  
And all the sons of glory soon  
will rest beneath the mould'ring stone.  
And genius is a star whose light  
Is soon to sink in endless night,  
And heavenly beauty's angel form  
Will bend like flowers in winter's storm (XV: 114).

Then, when *Twice-Told Tales* became somewhat popular, he hurried to the chamber of his isolation in Salem and in October 1836 he privately wrote: “In this dismal chamber FAME was won. (Salem, Union Street)” (VIII: 20). Fame was one of his

favourite topics, for even in his love letters he discusses it with his fiancée Sophia; to her he wrote in October 1840 expressing a mild complaint that he should have been so long ignored by the general public:

Here sits thy husband in his old accustomed chamber, where he used to sit in years gone by, ... and here I sat a long, long time, waiting patiently for the world to know me, and sometimes wondering why it did not know me sooner, or whether it would know me at all- at least, till I were in my grave (XV: 494).

The title character of *Fanshawe*, an accepted embodiment of his creator, also betrays this early interest in fame. Curiously, both seem to have felt vague suspicions that yearnings for fame were in some odd way shameful. Even at the tender age of nineteen Fanshawe is fame-hungry. His fantasies are clearly detectable, and, though he is said to deem himself “unconnected with the world, unconcerned in his feelings, and uninfluenced by it in any of its pursuits” (III: 350), the narrator immediately reveals that in this point the youth probably deceived himself, for in the former’s own words “If his inmost heart could have been laid open, there would have been discovered that dream of undying fame, which, dream as it is, is more powerful than a thousand realities” (III: 350). Elsewhere in the story a more than common interest in celebrity is detected. In presenting the setting where the action is to take place Hawthorne alludes to the limited reputation of the institution, and draws a comparison between Harley and “an almost countless multitude of rivals” (III: 333) specifically in terms of reputation. Thereafter fame is further discussed involving the President of the institution, and the narrator is quick to observe that Dr. Melmoth’s “fame was in all the churches” (III: 335); even more enlightening is that his fame happens to be due to authorship, for Melmoth was “the author of several works which evinced much erudition and depth of search” (III: 335). Even Hugh Crombie, in his more modest but decidedly more popular artistic toils, is said to have gained through his songs “a continuance of fame ... which many, who called themselves poets then, and would have scorned such a brother, have failed to equal” (III: 367). Additionally, other indirect references to fame are made, like that in the Thomson poem introducing chapter III (III: 352). Finally, the happy denouement of the tale is, to some extent, clouded when the narrator curiously takes time to remind the reader of how little renown Ellen’s and Edward’s bliss achieved in the world. He pointedly observes: “and what matters it, that, except in these pages, they have left no name behind them?” (III: 460); once again an active attempt to lessen the value of fame has the contrary effect. Even the novel taken as a whole demonstrates the same focus; Roy Harvey Pearce observed that it was a calculated attempt “to write for a popular audience” (III: 316). Thus, according to Pearce, Hawthorne was courting the general public, and adapting his writing to popular taste in order to acquire a reputation, he then believed, wider than that which texts more in consonance with his native bent might ever have procured for him.

Subsequent stories and characters are further witness to Hawthorne’s regard for celebrity, and their contained yearnings for recognition display some variation. Sometimes characters expect at least a posthumous fame. For instance, the young traveller in “The Ambitious Guest” has a secret hope that “obscurely as he journey now, a

glory was to beam on all his pathway- though not, perhaps, while he was treading it" (IX: 327). A variation in *The Scarlet Letter* is Dimmesdale's main concern with maintaining his reputation spotless while alive, and his confession, which he knows will stain it, takes place only moments before his death. At times the search for recognition appears to be of a practical nature. In "Rappaccini's Daughter" professor Pietro Baglioni, "a physician of eminent repute" (X: 117), is engaged in a warfare of reputation with Dr. Rappaccini, apparently due to their rivalry for a university chair. Ralph Cranfield in "The Threefold Destiny" and Owen Warland in "The Artist of the Beautiful" have more abstract ambitions. In particular, Fanshawe's doubts concerning the validity of earthly ambition would later crystallise in "The Great Stone Face", where the emphasis is precisely on the lack of it. Ernest obtains a widespread repute by means of his simplicity of life and self effacement; moreover, these qualities ensure that his reputation significantly exceeds that of the land's "deep sighted poet" whose lesser reputation was gained through much literary toil. But if reputation was important to Hawthorne, so was physical beauty.

Hawthorne always ascribed an exaggerated importance to physical attributes. According to standing reports, he was a very handsome child and man. His beauty is now documented by numerous portraits and by the testimony of several of his contemporaries: James T. Fields relates that a friend of his who had been a neighbour of the Hawthornes was "very clear as to the beauty of the infant", and that she thought that Nathaniel "was a pleasant child quite handsome, with golden curls" (1871: 43); and Ebe confirms that "He was a very handsome child, the finest boy, many strangers observed, whom they had ever seen" (Stewart 320). As an adult he no doubt was equally attractive. The first meeting between the Hawthornes and the Peabodys at the latter's home elicited the following account from Elizabeth Peabody to her sister Sophia, who, suffering from one of her perpetual migraines, was upstairs in bed: "O Sophia, you must get up and dress and come down! The Hawthornes are here, and you never saw anything so splendid as he is, -he is handsomer than Lord Byron!" (Julian Hawthorne 178). Rita Gollin, in her work on Hawthorne's iconography, observed that "Everyone who encountered Hawthorne, whether in youth, or in middle age, or in old age ... had something to say about his looks," (19).

Perhaps it was because he was himself in possession of such beauty that Hawthorne valued it so highly. His sister Ebe once commented: "beauty was the great attraction to him, and one which he declared he never could dispense with in a wife" (Stewart 326). He not only appreciated beauty but he was actively irritated by ugliness. Elizabeth continues:

In his childhood homeliness was repulsive to him. While he was lame, a good, kind-hearted woman used to come to see him, and wanted to carry him about, in her arms, as he was fond of being carried; but he seemed to feel as if she were an Ogress, and hated to have her look at him, only because she was ugly, and fat, and had a loud voice. (Stewart 326)

Fields, who knew him well, made an observation which echoes the above and might be the explanation of this interest in beauty that approached obsession: "Where there was beauty he fancied other good gifts must naturally be in possession" (67).

Hawthorne's fiction reflects these feelings, and as early as in *Fanshawe* attractiveness seems to be of utmost significance. The descriptions of the three young protagonists repeatedly emphasise their physical comeliness. Edward Walcott, for instance, is said to be "much superior, in most of the particulars of which a lady takes cognizance" and he happens to be "tall", his manners show "natural grace", and his features are "handsome" (III: 343). The beauty and charm of Dr. Melmoth's ward is such that neither pen, nor pencil can give "an adequate idea of Ellen Langton's loveliness" (III: 340). The title character, Fanshawe, in spite of the weariness caused by his excessive dedication to study, is "possessed of a face and form, such as Nature bestows on none but her favorites" (III: 346). In later works, consistent with Fields' words, Hawthorne would apply a moral symbolism to beauty. In "The Gentle Boy" saintly Ibrahim's beauty is contrasted to the uncomeliness of his evil and physically deformed false friend. In his master piece *The Scarlet Letter* Hester and Pearl are of course extremely good-looking, but Hawthorne also demands the female Messiah of whom Hester speaks to the women in the colony to be "lofty, pure, and beautiful;" (I: 345). The case of Queen Maria Eleanora in "Queen Christina" reaches the disturbing: she "did not love her [daughter] as much as she ought ... Partly, perhaps, on account of Christina's want of beauty" (VI: 84). If we take into account Hawthorne's essential goodness and his democratic bent, it is surprising that he should allow himself to be so disgusted by ugliness. But beauty, or lack thereof, has long been a social force in American culture, and it is believed to have been a shaping factor in the development of other literary careers. For instance, Ann Waldron in her 1998 biography of Eudora Welty intimates how this author's lack of attractiveness might have influenced her work. Beyond Hawthorne's glorification of beauty, the openness of his statements about it is startling because he possessed an extremely reserved nature that he characteristically projected in his fiction.

Reserve and introversion are two characteristics often applied to Hawthorne, but he was actively secretive as well. The standing private letters written by him in childhood and early manhood frequently testify to this tendency. He frequently begs, even demands secrecy from the recipients, sometimes about specific details in the letters, sometimes about the existence of the letters themselves. Remarkably, something so important as his engagement to Sophia was kept secret for years, which might explain why Hawthorne's family did not attend his wedding. He apparently had a constitutional need for secrecy. Julian reported that in 1883, while writing his parents' biography, he made a visit to Herman Melville hoping he had kept some letters from his father. He apparently had not, but, according to Julian: "He said several interesting things, among which the most remarkable was that he was convinced Hawthorne had all his life concealed some great secret, which would, were it known, explain all the mysteries of his career" (Leyda 782-3).

Whether or not Melville was right we cannot tell, but judging from remaining letters it is certain that, at least while they were neighbours in the Berkshires, Melville had understood his friend's mind and soul better than anybody else. Mirroring his personal inclination Hawthorne's fiction is fraught with all kinds of mysteries, many of them central to the plot. Each of his five complete novels has a mystery at the core of its structure: such are Pearl's paternity in *The Scarlet Letter*, both Old Moodie's identity and Zenobia's past in *The Blithedale Romance*, Holgrave's ancestry in *The*

*House of the Seven Gables*, and Miriam's relationship with "the model" in *The Marble Faun*. In fact, to the very end Hawthorne was fascinated by secrecy. The plot in the incomplete *Dr. Grimshawe's Secret* is about an emigrant to America who may have carried away a family secret which would enable him to bring about the ruin of the family. Another late and incomplete novel, *The Dolliver's Romance*, also has a plot involving the practice of secrecy, and in *Fanshawe* one can find several of the earliest examples of this characteristic.

In *Fanshawe*, secrecy is compounded for, beyond that found within the plot, there was secrecy involved in the process of composition and in its anonymous publication. The plot is permeated with secrecy. The angler's identity is a mystery to everyone except Hugh Crombie, and both hide ominous shared secrets, the nature of which is so awful that it is not even mentioned but merely hinted at. The angler fabricates a "secret" about Langton that Ellen is not supposed to tell to others, and which is verily the motor of the action. Fanshawe knows about the clandestine garden meeting between Ellen and the angler, but he, strangely enough, does not confide it to anyone; Hugh won't disclose the whereabouts of Ellen and her abductor; Walcott deliberately conceals valuable information from Langton about the whereabouts of his daughter; and even the unsophisticated Dr. Melmoth manages to hide from his wife his discovery of Ellen's visit to Crombie's inn, and he quite actively manipulates to keep that circumstance secret.

As for publication, we know that Hawthorne tried to obliterate his authorship and he succeeded to the degree that years after his death his wife was unaware of its existence. Ebe Hawthorne explained to her nephew Julian in 1865 how his father had given her a copy of *Fanshawe*, and how he had demanded it be returned later, probably to burn it. Of these procedures they did not talk to anybody because as she puts it:

We were enjoined to keep the authorship a profound secret, and of course we did, with one or two exceptions; for we were in those days almost absolutely obedient to him. I do not quite approve of either obedience or concealment. Your father kept his very existence a secret, as far as possible. (Julian Hawthorne 124-5)

Obviously, from the outset of his literary career, Hawthorne understood that secrecy was an interesting fictional subject. Because he liked both secrecy and childhood he fictionalised them in association; secrets affecting the lives of young children are often found in his literature.

His interest in childhood is currently well documented. His notebooks are fraught with references to young people, and he wrote several collections for the younger ones. Much of his work testifies that childhood and its welfare were ever present in his mind. As a writer of juvenile literature he felt a heavy responsibility concerning the potential influence of literature on young readers. In the preface to *Biographical Stories* Hawthorne declares:

This small volume and others of a similar character, from the same hand, have not been composed without a deep sense of responsibility. The author regards

children as sacred, and would not, for the world, cast anything into the fountain of a young heart that might embitter and pollute its waters. (VI: 24)

Hawthorne's concern with childhood in *Fanshawe* has been overlooked so far. But, brief as they are, this novel includes the first explicit literary indications of a preoccupation with the young that lasted throughout his life. In the scene where Langton meets Dr. Melmoth near the village the former intentionally delays demanding any particulars of his daughter's elopement simply because there are children present, and he, presumably, does not want to pollute their young hearts. Even more important is the case of Hugh Crombie, whose precocious depravation is fully blamed on adults in general, and he is portrayed as having been a toy in the hands of adult tavern haunters (III: 366); and, as will be seen below, the angler's doom is also blamed on uncaring adults.

Thus, related to Hawthorne's interest in childhood and mistreatment of young people, is his persistent modelling of inefficient fathers. Young Nathaniel was orphaned at four when his father, a sea captain, died in Surinam. Psychologists believe that children in these circumstances may perceive the absence of a father as deliberate abandonment, or as incapacity on the father's part to perform his appointed duty. It may also have been due to these painful early experiences that Hawthorne exhibited such a tendency to portray fathers as inefficient. Among the number of his incompetent fictional fathers we can count Dimmesdale, Midas, King Gustavus, Mr. Temple, and many others. Indeed, in most cases, it is precisely the inadequacies of men which initiate and drive the conflict. This bias can be detected as early as in *Fanshawe*, where the angler's downfall is blamed first on the cruelty of his biological father, and then on the coldness of Langton, the surrogate father figure. We are pointedly reminded that during the period in which the merchant had young Butler under his protection "there was no evidence of dishonesty on his part" (III: 453). Also, the narrator stresses here the protégé's zeal for the interest of his protector, and his respect for the older man. It is Langton's hard response to, and punishment of, "certain youthful indiscretions" that causes the younger man to become destitute, "irrecoverably ruined and irreclaimably depraved" (III: 453). What makes Butler's destiny even more tragic is that, according to the said narrator, his heart "was not destitute" of "goodness and nobleness" (III: 453), and that therefore he might have led a happy honest life had it not been for Langton's lack of compassion and forgiveness. The effect is that of accumulated guilt on the "father figure" which, no doubt, would have soothed the author's resentments.

But it is not just fathers who are inferior to mothers; in Hawthorne's fiction, men at large, and especially good men, are remarkably less competent and able than women. In the novel under examination Melmoth, Langton, Edward, and even the titular character, Fanshawe, are remarkably inefficient. The venture undertaken by them all to search for Ellen and the angler is ineffectual at its base, and it is only due to pure chance that Fanshawe accomplishes Ellen's deliverance. In fact, to have him succeed, Hawthorne must violate the law of probability in the plot, and the denouement is somewhat contrived. The only person who seems to have sound ideas about how to initiate and proceed in the chase is Mrs. Melmoth, and that, as explained below, casts her as a termagant wife.

Hawthorne's ambiguity towards women is transparent here. Throughout his literature his admiration for them coexists with crude chauvinism. In spite of his conspicuous belief in their superiority, even in areas traditionally reserved for men, as the liberation of a young abducted maiden can be considered, it is clear that their destiny is restricted to performing the role of mothers and wives subjected to the needs and whims of the men in their lives. This chauvinistic attitude, first detected in Hawthorne's notebooks, infiltrated his literature. Women are meant to be mothers and when they are they are better people. An instance of this bias is the difference in personality between the angler's mother and his aunt (the first mild and gentle, the second evil and conniving) which seems to be based simply upon the fact that one is a mother, and the other is not. On the same note, in *The Scarlet Letter* the only compassionate woman among those who watch Hester's exposure to shame, is the one who is holding a baby.

Contradictorily, though mothers are seen in a positive light, and though women's only resource is marriage, wifehood does not become Hawthorne's women; they often become frightful beings even before they marry. In *Fanshawe* it is Hugh Crombie who voices this Hawthornean attitude when he comments, regarding his profitable marriage, that the trouble "follows such bargain, instead of going before it" (III: 376). Melmoth's marriage is by no means a model of happiness either. The character of his wife's domestic government is said to often compel him "to call to mind such portions of the wisdom of antiquity, as relate to the proper endurance of the shrewishness of woman" (337). Hawthorne resents women's efficiency, and about Mrs. Melmoth's capacity for doing almost everything better than her husband, he observes that her firmness, decision, and confident sagacity, "made her a sort of domestic hedge-hog" (III: 415). It is also in tune with his sanctification of motherhood that Mrs. Melmoth has not born children. These strong apprehensions towards marriage were long held. In college he made a bet (which he won) that he would not marry before he was thirty-six, and many of his characters, as do Father Cooper in "The Minister's Veil" or Richard Digby in "The man of Adamant", desperately flee from entanglements with women.

Indifference towards and rejection of wives occasionally reaches children. To be indifferent to one's own children, or vice-versa, was indeed a shocking idea in the nineteenth century, but Hawthorne might have been trying to excuse his own personal deviation from the established pattern by endeavouring to demonstrate in fiction, to himself and to others, the possibility of natural indifference between parents and their children. As shown in his letters, for months after the birth of his first-born, Una, he carried on a struggle to justify the feebleness of his paternal sentiments. It can be conjectured that Hawthorne was both bewildered and afraid of his own response to fatherhood when he writes to Sophia in April 1844 about their offspring: "She has not yet sufficiently realised herself in my soul; it seems like a dream, therefore, which needs such assurances as thy letter, to convince me that it is more than a dream" (XVI: 29). And a few months later in June: "Ownest wife, am I really a father? —the father of thy child! Sometimes the thought comes to me with such a mighty wonder that I cannot take it in" (XVI: 52). A passage from *Doctor Grimshawe's Secret*, written twenty years later, is also highly revealing. The narrator tries to explain the circumstance that the doctor feels stronger for Ned than for Elsie, in spite of the fact that the latter is his niece:

We speak of the natural force of blood; we speak of the paternal relation as if it were productive of more earnest affection than can exist between two persons, one protective but unrelated; but there are wild, forcible, unrestricted characters, on whom the necessity and even duty of loving their own child is a sort of barrier to love. They perhaps do not love their own traits, which they recognize in their children; they shrink from their own features in the reflection presented by those little mirrors. (XII: 337)

In her editing of *Passages from the American Notebooks*, Sophia's censure of those of her husband's entries that suggested doubts about his paternal feelings, may prove that she, too, suspected there was something missing in Nathaniel's love for Una. However, though he was evidently confused, his anxieties about his own feelings for his first-born in 1844 cannot possibly explain the conspicuous presence of this theme in his 1828 novel. His ideas on paternity, as they were portrayed in his early literature, foreshadowed his personal experience.

In *Fanshawe* several circumstances occur, and several observations are made, that evidence Hawthorne's awareness of the possibilities of this theme. Langton practically abandons his daughter to the hands of various relatives, some of them quite indifferent to her; meanwhile the merchant finds enough time to play the role of father to a perfect stranger. Conversely, lack of feelings for parents is also systematically justified. On the occasion of the Melmoths receiving the false news of Langton's death, Mrs. Melmoth, "with the good sense of which she had a competent share", retorts to her husband's concern about Ellen's affliction: "But she had never known her father, and her sorrow must arise from a sense of duty, more than from strong affections" (III: 403). The narrator endorses this same idea observing that "Her [Ellen's] affection for Mr. Langton was not, indeed —nor was it possible—, so strong, as that she would have felt for a parent who had watched over her from her infancy" (III: 428). Even negative feelings towards a father are warranted when such an innocent, well-behaved maiden as Ellen could shrink "with something like dread from the idea of meeting her father" (III: 428). Other fictional relationships between parents and children often show a dearth of love in Hawthorne's narrative: Dimmesdale's love for Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* is doubtful, since he would rather keep his reputation than confess and assume care of his daughter; Ilbrahim's parents have decided that their immoderate devotion to Quakerism is more important than their child; and Dr. Rappaccini subordinates Beatrice to his scientific experiments.

Although a deeper analysis is not feasible within the limits of this brief study, the topic is by no means depleted, and a good number of other related aspects are in need of examination. Such aspects as Hawthorne's use of charismatic individuals, the like of Ethan Brand, can be traced back to Fanshawe who is, or was intended to be, the first of them. The germ of the oft-found traditional association between art and poverty is manifest in Hugh Crombie, of whom we are told that two of the accomplishments "in which his excellence was generally conceded, were both calculated to keep him poor rather than to make him rich. He was a musician and a poet" (III: 367). Hawthornean literary techniques such as tableaux or the use of nature as a commentary on the characters' states of mind are also traceable to his first novel. Although so much is left undone, we trust that the present study sufficiently demonstrates how in

Hawthorne's first published work not only can most of his narrative themes, techniques, and strategies be discerned, but also many of his most deeply imbedded personal anxieties which were projected into his literary universe and contributed to conform his beautiful writings. Obviously, though at the time of its composition Hawthorne was a student or a newly graduated young man, his artistic imagination continued treading the same path he had trod so early in life when he was writing *Fanshawe*.

## Notes

\* Some of the ideas in this article were originally included in the introduction to a Harvard Thesis project written by author.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from *Fanshawe* and other works by Hawthorne are parenthetical in the text, and are taken from *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Roman numerals correspond to volume number of this edition.

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