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Original research paper

SISTER CARRIE: TRAITS OF DREISER'S SELF-IDENTIFICATION

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Abstract: This research paper aims to analyse Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* and its depiction of American life, social problems and the harmful impact of material success on individual values. The study uses a qualitative research method that involves a close reading of the novel, as well as an examination of Dreiser's biographical and critical sources. The most significant findings suggest that Dreiser's novel portrays the loss of spiritual values, wisdom, wit and nobility of heart as a consequence of the pursuit of material success. Moreover, the study reveals that Dreiser's style is characterized by logical integrity, subtle contrasts, beautiful detail descriptions, timing, diversified rhythm and digression. Dreiser's symbols provide insights into the true essence of social phenomena, demonstrating his profound knowledge of society. Ultimately, *Sister Carrie* serves as a powerful document that sheds light on the "amorality" of the American way of life, which incited a denigrating campaign against Dreiser by critics. The research concludes that the novel highlights the dangers of the American dream and the importance of preserving spiritual values amidst the pursuit of material success. This study's findings suggest that *Sister Carrie* remains relevant to contemporary society, as it continues to raise questions about the American Dream and its impact on individuals and society.

Keywords: *American life, American dream, material success, spiritual values, impact.*

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the major themes and motifs presented in Theodor Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie*. Specifically, the author's critique of the "American Dream" and detrimental impact of material success on individuals is analyzed, as exemplified by the character of Carrie. Using a combination of close reading, literary analysis and critical theory, we explore how Dreiser's narrative style and use of symbolism contribute to his larger social commentary. Additionally, we draw on secondary sources and theoretical framework to support the analysis and to provide a deeper understanding of Dreiser's literary legacy.

In addition, the critical and theoretical framework underlying this research seeks to explore the ways in which *Sister Carrie* challenges the societal values

and structures the American Dream, and how novel's themes of gender, love and morality intersect with this critique.

Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie,* touches on the main themes he would explore throughout his career. In a powerful and condensed, yet spontaneous, narrative prose he shattered the myth of "great American possibilities and opportunities," demonstrating that while chasing after success in life, man loses values that are much more precious than material goods; he loses intelligence, wisdom, debases spiritual values, decency and benevolence. He is overwhelmed by deep uncertainties. He realizes that financial success does not guarantee happiness.

Thus, we find Carrie in various situations, at one point dismal, then jubilant. She gains fame and repute following Hurstwood's death. He, on the other hand, demonstrates the adverse and dire influence of material success on an artist. This represents the main motif symbolizing Carrie's inability to develop artistically while striving to gain popularity as an artist.

Dreiser criticizes "motives spurred by selfish and individual interest" as a key to success. He depicts Carrie during the process of her rise to the top of the social ladder, but she gradually loses all of her natural and human qualities, which had once made her so appealing. The reader observes as she gradually becomes indifferent to Hurstwood's feelings, compassion and understanding. Her desires are naturally understandable for an attractive and beautiful girl, who yearned to dress beautifully and have admirers, although she wanted not only to be surrounded by affectionate love but rather wished to have wealthy patrons and businessmen as her admirers and suiters.

However, what is most essential in the novel *Sister Carrie* is possibly the author's exposition of the tragic nature of life in a capitalist society. While following the life story of a common girl, the reader becomes aware of the ever-present danger. This sense of danger is also present in *An American Tragedy* (1925) and later in his journalistic masterpiece *Tragic America* (1931). Dreiser's narrative style – spontaneous, condensed and solemn – is possibly justified by the gravity of his subject matter, which is why he cannot speak lightly about tragic circumstances.

In conclusion, the research methodology used in analyzing *Sister Carrie* is literary analysis, which involves a critical examination of the literary work using primary and secondary sources and considering the author's biographical information and historical context. The analysis applies a feminist perspective to understand the portrayal of women in the novel and the social expectations and constraints imposed on them during the time the novel was written.

2. American Dream Upended

Dreiser tells us the story of a common American girl from an impoverished family of farmers, Carrie Meeber, who portrays a society in which women were supposed to conform to certain roles, with limited opportunities for self-expression or personal fulfillment. Carrie's options were to marry a man of means or to become a low-paid factory worker. She initially chooses the latter but soon realizes that her life can be much more than that. Carrie heads to Chicago to look

for work, she tries to live an honorable and dignified life, but quickly becomes a victim of the lust of a salesman named Drouet.

Later, she also falls victim to an unscrupulous and unprincipled manager named Hurstwood. The latter abandons his wife and family; steals his patron's money and elopes with Carrie to a big city, where he gradually goes bankrupt, is left jobless and becomes a janitor. In the end, he becomes dependent entirely on the wishes of his paramour, who supports him, but later gradually abandons him as she begins to achieve success in her entertaining theatrical presentations.

On her part, Carrie, having paid a high price for her success and having suffered insults and humiliations and made compromises with her conscience, begins to sink into disillusionment and despair. At this point, she is left with no moral feelings, a strong character or a clear conscience. Whereas, on the one hand, she appears to be having success in her career, on the other hand, she fails as an individual. Dreiser does not conceal the reason for her failure. The reason, Dreiser claims without the least hesitation, is a society which does not create opportunities for a common girl to lead a complete and normal life and to achieve an honorable position in society with honest and proper behavior and means.

Nature has endowed Carrie with a forthright character, she is good, kind and generous when she is initially introduced into society, but is soon spiritually, if not physically, crushed and does everything she can to secure a better and happier life. She is horrified by the life of misery and degradation that her impoverished sister, as well as other girls working in factories, lead.

Dreiser is very candid in his description of Carrie's love. Nevertheless, the novel was stigmatized and openly condemned by critics in a fierce campaign with some labeling it as "amoral," and others accusing the author of "trying to corrupt American girls."

Some American critics maintained they were appalled that Hurstwood, the male hero of the novel, was being punished and not the female transgressor. However, it must be said that there were other opinions that arose. One critic wrote that, from the time of Walt Whitman there had not been such a clear and potent projection of reality, claiming that the world should stop and examine the facts that tradition had decided to ignore. According to Swanberg (1965, p.8) the respectable middle class did not wish to hear or consider the brutal truth of "this uncouth peasant".

3. Public Backlash

Dreiser's style in the novel *Sister Carrie* is characterized by a logical integrity of the structure, with the use of subtle contrasts, beautiful descriptive details, with a varied pace and rhythm and with digressions. Dreiser's symbols demonstrate his compelling convictions about society and the employment of his talent to explain the true essence of social circumstances.

Consequently, *Sister Carrie* as a novel represents a powerful document that demonstrates the true nature of the American way of life with light and shade effects and it was precisely this that caused and incited the shameful campaign of persecution and denigration against Dreiser by establishment critics.

Henceforth, Dreiser suffered a nervous breakdown but remained faithful to his convictions and his experience even when he went hungry and was forced to sell his furniture to survive. He never stopped fighting for the truth and, in time, would be triumphant. The novel *Sister Carrie* was first published in London in 1904 and was only published in the USA in 1907.

Sister Carrie was the first great example that demonstrated Dreiser's creative cultural imagination was capable of creating a novel of a high order. The novel employs two familiar nineteenth-century motifs. The popular tale of a young and simple village girl bedazzled and seduced by the splendor of the city or by some urbanite, which was a familiar motif from the times of Goethe's *Faust* in the beginning of the nineteenth century to Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Additionally, a prevalent motif included the tale of a young girl, who achieves success and rises above her impoverished origins and becomes a theater star as is the case with the heroine of Emil Zola's novel *Nana*.

3.1. Portrait of Reality

When Dreiser began writing *Sister Carrie*, these popular topics were no longer the subjects of novels or popular plays, although they remained the motifs of dramas and operas. In fact, tales of so-called *evil women* were hot topics even for urban journalism.

With the novels of Balzac and Hardy as models, Dreiser began to write at first hastily and with understanding about Carrie, which was rarely done with other characters in novels (Lehan, 1969). It must be kept in mind that *Sister Carrie's* world is one that Dreiser knows all too well and had written about as a journalist.

Sister Carrie's world is so familiar to Dreiser as a journalist that he, in fact, used some of his experiences and essays in the novel.

More than in any other earlier novel, Dreiser admitted that he was exposing himself. He had begun to think about the meaning of family, the city, moral principles and was thus realizing that these issues would preoccupy his thoughts throughout his life. The story of Carrie and Hurstwood is a personal as well as public one – it is personal for Dreiser because he was recounting the love story between Emma and Hopkins – it is public or representative because it was also a story of deep longing and desire, of weakness and strength, of determined effort, of ambition and success and failure. Carrie's story spans the length of eight years and develops parallel to the most important events of his sister's life.

Hurstwood's fate was also a personal theme. Hurstwood's fatal downfall resembles Dreiser's father, who was never able to begin anew following the burning down of his workshop. Hurstwood also embodies Dreiser's personal experience with poverty in Chicago, Saint Louis and particularly in New York, at a time when he was working as a freelance author, following his departure from the magazine *World*. From the late 1890s, Dreiser often wrote essays about New York's jobless and starving, about vagrants and hookers wandering the streets, about the city's loneliness, about the heavy psychological toll, about the severe consequences of poverty, about suicide, about the dead and the homeless, who were buried at Potter's Field cemetery. He included some of these essays nearly

word for word in this novel. When Dreiser was writing the novel at the end of the nineteenth century, he doubted that he would achieve any degree of success and he was unsure of his future. Hurstwood is an embodiment of those doubts, musings and dilemmas, of Dreiser's fear and failures and especially of his obsession with poverty – an obsession that had troubled him from childhood (Hussman, 1983).

While Dreiser used the tale and history of his family in *Sister Carrie*, he was really depicting a novel in which the family was superfluous. All Dreiser's main characters are without families. Drouet has no family, Carrie flees from her family, first when she leaves Wisconsin and later when she moves away from her sister.

However, the nightlife is always an illusion, while indulging in the promised pleasures, most of Dreiser's characters are compelled to leave their families to begin their new lives in the city. Thus, Carrie, who came from an impoverished family, would not be welcomed into an affluent one, therefore she needed to fight for her success in an immoral social setting.

Nevertheless, the moral difference between the public and domestic life are overemphasized. The main incentive for both Mrs. Hurstwood and Carrie is money. "Ah, money, money, money! What a thing it was to have!" (*Sister Carrie* p. 61), Carrie thinks to herself when Drouet takes her to an expensive restaurant and gives her 20 dollars. In this way, Drouet pays Carrie to live with him, hence their relationship rests entirely on financial interest.

When Carrie realizes that Hurstwood offers her more money she soon loses interest in Drouet. Her moral judgement is puzzling. While she appears to be unsettled because she is afraid of beginning a relationship with a married man, she is more upset at the fact that Hurstwood is married, not because she respects the vows of marriage, but because he has compromised his ability to support her financially. Although it appears that she has no desire to elope with a married man, in the end, she allows it to happen, even though Dreiser is unclear as to how Carrie can believe that Hurstwood would leave his wife without getting a divorce. As it later becomes clear, when Hurstwood lost his ability to support Carrie, he also lost his right to sleep with her since Carrie believed that sex was something that had to be paid for; unlike the shopkeeper, she suspected that Hurstwood did not have enough money (Moers, 1970).

Some biographers and critics have labeled Dreiser as undisciplined when it comes to editing his own writing, but this characterization does not hold for S*ister Carrie*. He made alterations to individual readings, eliminated unnecessary wordiness, broke up lengthy and cumbersome sentences, and refined rough phrasing (Riggio, 1998). Significant revisions were undertaken by two individuals: Dreiser's first wife, Sara, also known as Jug, and his friend Arthur Henry, the city editor of The Toledo Blade. However, their approaches to editing the manuscript differed greatly. Henry's annotations, in particular, took on a distant character. Unlike Jug, he seemed to have read through the text quickly, occasionally skimming or skipping certain portions. While he did intervene on occasions where he encountered awkward phrases or sentences and improved them, he left the majority of the prose untouched. Nevertheless, many of Henry's alterations had a notable impact on the meaning and characterization. His changes were more

daring and consequential compared to Jug's revisions. However, it appears that Henry's reading of the manuscript was not thorough as Jug's, despite the bolder nature of his changes.

Dreiser made several revisions to the novel to shape Carrie's character. He removed explicit details about her promiscuity and made her appear less depraved. He also changed the character of Hurstwood to make him more sympathetic and less determined to divorce his wife. These changes were made to appeal to the sensibilities of the readers at the time.

Dreiser made efforts to avoid the impression that money was the sole factor tying Carrie to Hurstwood. However, through his revisions, Carrie's character transforms into a more ambitious and ruthless woman, driven primarily only by money, yet he also makes her less heartless. In chapter 43 of the novel, Dreiser initially portrayed Hurstwood awakening from his slumber, after Carrie had abandoned him, and who was now selling his remaining furniture, haggling over the prices with customers. At the same time, he depicts Carrie as she has her breakfast in her comfortable room. Thus, Dreiser concludes the contrast drawn between Carrie, in her new splendor, and Hurstwood, who had fallen into an abyss (Gerber, 1992).

Thus, Dreiser created a purely physical world in his novel *Sister Carrie*, a world in which the individual is sensitive to external stimuli and inducements, which in turn establish a certain way of thinking. Meanwhile, the tale of Carrie and Hurstwood depicts life's contradictions, "positive and negative energy," as Dreiser highlights in his book *Notes on Life* (p. 8), resembling the constriction and expansion of life experience. Hurstwood's downfall is a logical consequence of Carrie's rise and affirmation, whereas, in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser had begun to explore a subject that would enthrall him for over 50 years.

Hence, when it comes to the attributes of old age, it is said that youth is characterized by the acute feeling of expectation and hope for a brighter future, whereas in declining years, feelings of hope begin to fade. This is an important theme throughout the novel. In fact, an essential difference between Carrie and Hurstwood is their age, although not so much their physical age, hence the mental and spiritual aspects of age are highlighted.

Clearly "time" for Dreiser was synonymous with change. He considered "time" as a delicate record of the duration of something from a star to a spark, from a mountain to dust particles, from the sun to an atom. He believed that everything was finite. Every growth was part of death. Every individual had energy, which was consumed, whereas the individual returned to the earth in the primordial form of energy. This is partly the meaning of what Dreiser called – the inevitable equalization – in his book *Notes on Life* (p. 183). Hurstwood's downfall is part of the decline of everything, of life itself. His age contrasts with Carrie's youth, his vigor with her boundless energy. Inspired as always by the contrast between the strong and the weak, the healthy and the ailing, the wealthy and the poor, Dreiser detailed all of these elements in *Sister Carrie*, in general, and in Hurstwood's character, in particular. Thus, he pathetically depicted man's greatest struggle against the destructive forces of time and change.

Carrie's rise and Hurstwood's fall in this way becomes a case of insignificant people, who have fallen into the currents of the stream of time that tosses them onto unfamiliar shores, struggling to find meaning in life. Meanwhile, all people are caught up in the endless flow of the stream of life, with each responding differently to this process of destruction and devastation, and it is precisely at this stage that the drama of life unfolds. To Dreiser, life was only a matter of action and reaction, flow, fluctuation, motion and change, which lead to the contradictions that beget life; an element that engenders or jeopardizes life and is known to the enemy; the good from the bad, beauty from happiness, strength from weakness.

Carrie is well aware of life's contradictions and simultaneously suffers from them. When, for instance, she sees Mrs. Vance donned in dark blue garments, she instantly develops a fondness for her. Dreiser makes use of a series of contrasts in the novel. This prepares other characters to guide Carrie's progress and advancement from rags to riches; she then passes through the uncertain alleys of the city's bright neon lights, but at the same time learns to appreciate beauty. We first meet the pretty, imaginative, vibrant Carrie looking to have as much fun as she can and experience the high life, in contrast to her sister, and especially the boring, dull and exhausting Hanson, who has fallen into a hollow and meaningless existence. Even though Drouet lacks sensibility he is more courteous and spontaneous than Hurstwood. Similarly, Hurstwood's shallowness and hollow materialism are set against and contrasted with life's vast knowledge and poetic qualities. Carrie is intuitively drawn to beauty, even though critics of the novel have failed to recognize this fact.

In fact, Dreiser has established a spontaneous rapport and somewhat of a balance between his characters. The other characters are contrasted with Drouet, who is static and unchanging. For example, as Hurstwood begins his downfall, he tries fruitlessly to find employment as a traveling salesman for a liquor company, while Drouet held a similar job. However, Hurstwood and Carrie are idealists and dreamers and follow in Drouet's footsteps. Moreover, all Dreiser's characters have personal issues and often appear demoralized. Dreiser believed that modern man suffered from displacement. He no longer felt alone in nature or in the city. "He was scarcely beast," wrote Dreiser (*Sister Carrie*, p. 67), "in that he was no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human in that he was not yet wholly guided by reason." According to Dreiser, man was not fully formed because he was more than a simple beast motivated by savage appetites, passions, pretenses and desires. However, he was not yet completely civilized and motivated by self-interest and the common good. The modern American sought to satisfy both his physical needs as well as his aesthetic ideals. As a result, he found himself in a no man's land, since the bestial remains sullied and stigmatized his aesthetic ideals. In *Sister Carrie,* Dreiser illustrates an individual's unyielding resistance to biological and environmental circumstances. The American was on the move, halfway home on a road between what he was and what he could be, but often dissatisfied with the circumstances and with himself.

Forces greater than the individual are at work throughout the novel and create a sense of inevitability. Dreiser depicted the determinative forces that

influenced Carrie's will in particular. Each scene intensified Carrie's craving for new experiences and indulgences. Her sense of hope and ardent yearning for a better life become apparent from the very first chapter. Drouet created a thrilling sensation when he began telling her about Chicago, its shops and stores full of beautiful clothes, with its new buildings, broad streets, its bright and shimmering lights, its beautiful people and luxurious restaurants and theaters brimming with spectators. As Drouet spoke, in her imagination she felt a slight pang.

Carrie, like all Dreiser's other characters, has a sense of place and she is also responsive to her surroundings. In fact, the scene becomes a part of the motifs of Dreiser's prose, arousing the characters' hunger for and reaction to a life beyond society. When Drouet takes Carrie to a good restaurant, she feels pampered and this arouses her desire to share Drouet's lifestyle, to become a part of this splendid scene of beautifully dressed people. The meals Drouet treated Carrie to cost more than half of her weekly earnings. Carrie needed to save every penny of her weekly salary of four dollars and fifty cents so that she could have enough to buy clothes in two months' time before Drouet bought them for her. She was still unable to buy smart clothes because she had to give her sister four dollars a week for board and room. In these early scenes, Dreiser created a strong sense of inevitability by completely denying the importance of will and depicting Carrie as a victim of her environment and her ambitions (Pizer, 1976).

Time and again Dreiser makes it clear that there are only individual relationships between his characters and the world they inhabit, that they are really an extension of their surroundings or their environment, and that temperament or lifestyle is independent of thought. The mind absorbs the outer world like a paper towel.

Each character has somewhat of an essential trait, a feature in themselves, which they are trying to actualize. New York becomes a catalyst for this by releasing and intensifying the qualities of mind and character, which provides insight into the dissimilarities between Carrie and Hurstwood. New York became a sort of chasm separating them, whereas the divide grew in keeping with the novel's sense of inevitability. Carrie's lifestyle is centrifugal, given that she escapes ever further from her provincial background, whereas Hurstwood's lifestyle is centripetal as he dives deeper into total isolation and solitude, removed from his one-time friends and acquaintances. Carrie's vision broadens as she seizes the opportunity to succeed on Broadway and to become part of high society, whereas Hurstwood's vision continually dwindles. As she was having lunch at Sherry's, Carrie was aware of how far she had come from Drouet's world and their first lunch together. Whereas, when Hurstwood idled in Madison Square hotels in the bleak December, he despairingly recognized how quickly his life had passed. The setting shaped moods, whereas the moods, in turn, spawned motives. Given that characters are a product of their environments, time becomes a physical manifestation and an elusive thing when the individual falls into the trap of the process of change, in the snares of Dreiser's inescapable situations.

Despite the sense of inevitability, despite the mechanical assumptions Dreiser employs in *Sister Carrie*, a distinctive sense of chance and opportunity prevails

throughout the novel. *Sister Carrie's* world is not a world of rewards. Chance or fate is another name "for our ignorance of causes," writes Dreiser in his *Notes on Life* (p. 42). After what seems like a series of unconnected and incidental events in the novel, it becomes apparent that it is nonetheless a world of causality. Whereas many events occur or appear to occur incidentally, there is an even broader context of events shaped by causes and effects. In other words, the individual could be at the mercy of incidental events, but he is also at the mercy of the inescapable laws of man and the physical world, which he cannot circumvent even if he does not fully understand them. Given the temperaments, backdrop and situations they find themselves in, what happens to the characters in *Sister Carrie* transpires with an unpredictability that is beyond their control. Man is partially bound by fortune, with chance acting only on the individual level, and laws acting upon human nature and society. The catalyst could be incidental, but the sequence of events activates and reveals the mechanistic universe, i.e. the relationship between cause and effect, between loftier episodes of the abstract level of reality.

After chance or fate is revealed in the novel, there are the relationships between the scenes, the world of causality, like a river flowing from the source, which has a predetermined end. Thus, Carrie, Hurstwood and Drouet are compelled to behave and act as they do. As Dreiser claims, "*Drouet could possibly have a predetermined future. He could not escape what was going to happen to him. He could not have had prior knowledge to decide otherwise. He was compelled to act according to his desires, in which case he had to follow a predetermined path*" (Lehan, 1969). Those who read the novel after having read twentieth-century prose probably view it as trite, artificial, boring, melodramatic and unconvincing. But those who read it after having read nineteenth-century prose may notice that Dreiser was using his immediate surroundings, where he developed the events of the novel, imploring us not to look upon this Victorian femme fatale with malice. Dreiser was adhering to the conventions of the traditional novel of Horatio Alger. However, instead of choosing as his protagonist an honest, virtuous young man, who achieves success in life by remaining true to life's principles, he takes a young, ambitious girl and permits her to do relatively well, by adhering to questionable values. Dreiser used the norms or principles of Horatio Alger's story while morally corrupting his characters.

Thus, neither Carrie nor Hurstwood adhere to moral norms. Whereas both make mistakes, in time one of the partners benefits from the situation, whereas the other suffers from the course of events. There is no connection whatsoever in this novel between a character's behavior towards society and what happens to them personally. The laws acting upon *Sister Carrie* are mechanistic rather than conventional moral laws.

In addition, in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser expresses his faith in the blind and insignificant man, who continues the constant struggle to live his life in the face of death. Hurstwood's demise in the novel foreshadows Carrie's own demise, at least principally, as Hurstwood's story is that of all men. That Carrie is unable to understand this fact, is one of the many ironies of the novel, one that appears here as in all Dreiser's other novels, which stems from the characters' inability

to recognize the truth, from their inability to see themselves as they truly are and from their vague and obscure perceptions of life.

4. Final Observations

As the events in the novel unfold, a disconnect emerges between what really happens and what the characters believe is happening. Thus, Dreiser believed that there was a gap between modern man's pride in his achievements and accomplishments and the grander scheme of things.

There is no link in the novel between what really happens and what the characters believe is happening. The final scene in the novel is likewise ironic. Carrie, just as all Dreiser's other characters, feels that in time she will achieve fulfilment and joy in her life, whereas the truth is that the passing of time will bring only death. In this case, another voice is heard, which resonates throughout the novel, it is the voice of cruel irony, a testament of the chasm that exists between what Carrie hopes will happen and what will really happen.

The author's omniscience and foresightedness, which allows him to see those things the characters cannot, is very efficient from a technical and theoretical point of view. In a whisper that is too subtle for Carrie, and maybe even the reader, to hear, the author's point of view conveys to us an undeniable truth. That truth maintained that a blind man will pursue beauty, he will dream about and yearn for delight, but there is no delight for everyone in this world. At the end of the novel, the characters are sitting in rocking-chairs, a detail which suggests life goes on: Carrie is on the path toward fulfilling that which cannot be achieved, whereas Hurstwood is on the path to death and destruction. In the end, Carrie continues to rock in her chair completely oblivious, but not hopeless. Dreiser conveys to us the message that all of life is a gyration, and man is only a drop in life's ocean. In the world of *Sister Carrie*, man will never find a moment of peace and joy, whereas the tempest of life will not spare him as it rushes toward distant shores (Tjader, 1965).

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