Fantasy Literature and Christianity: Morality in J. R. R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" and "The Hobbit

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Mythological Influences on the Literary Work of J. R.R. Tolkien

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Summary

Tolkien invested almost twenty years of work to create his masterpieces - *The Silmarillion, The Lord of the Rings*, and its predecessor, *The Hobbit*. He created a world of imagination and mythical powers that is so intrinsically close to our real world. Using the elements of good and evil, Tolkien presents us the relation between Christian values and his characters, demonstrating great knowledge of mythology and a complexity of language. Once more the forces of good will conquer the evil and those who deserve to suffer will be punished. Raised in a profound Christian spirit, and through the influence of Greek and Norse mythology, he combines history, legend, and myth into the unique world of his own religion and mythology. There is a constant similarity between Tolkien's characters and the ones from the Norse mythology, which depicts his admiration and fascination with the concept of mythology and the complexity of the language itself. Tolkien's stories are not just another imaginary fiction, something you use simply for amusement. Because of their religious connotations and metaphoric representation of English society, his stories are of much greater universal human value for every reader. Although he was not the first publisher of the fantasy genre, it was the great success of his novels - *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* that led to the vast popularization of the genre. Because of that fact, he is often identified as the "father" of the popular fantasy literature, especially high fantasy.

Keywords: Norse Mythology, Christianity, Greek Mythology, Language, Good and Evil

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Introduction

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was an English writer, poet, philologist, and university professor. He is best known as the author of the classic high fantasy works *The Hobbit (1937)*, *The Lord of the Rings (1937 – 1949)* and *The Silmarillion (1977)*. Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic, and in his religious views he was mostly conservative, which also reflects on his works. He was also a major scholar of the English language, specializing in Old and Middle English. Throughout the complexity of his characters and breathtaking world of mystery, imagination, and magic he was illustrating his beliefs and his views against the industrialization and war policy. In his novels, he was trying to represent the life and problems of the English society in the twentieth century by using fiction and mythology. This research paper will analyze the relation among the elements of good and evil in Tolkien's work, as well as the distinction between Christian and anti – Christian origin of its characters, in order to emphasize the writer's profound connection to Christianity and its beliefs. It will also show the immense influence of the Norse and Old Germanic mythologies, which were a great inspiration to him for the creation of the characters and the adventures of his protagonists.

1. The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings

1.1 Norse Mythology

Many of the elements that Tolkien used in his mythological construction of the *Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were taken from the Old Norse mythology, especially from the *Volsunga Saga* and the Old English story of *Beowulf*. There is a substantial connection between the elves, dwarves, wizards, names of the places and creatures, forging of the ring and the sword and the prevalence of the Evil Eye in the *Lord of the Rings* and Odin's eye in the Norse mythology. There is also a great similarity between Odin himself, and the wizard Gandalf: they were both tall, powerful, with great long beards, both of them described as an "old wandering man". They were both in a possession of a great wisdom and magical artifacts, creatures of immense abilities (their horses), and they can both be characterized as conductors of the epic events and the fate of the worlds they lived in. There is also a characteristic similarity between the demon monster Balrog in *The Lord of the Rings* and the Nordic Surt, "The Giant with the Flaming Sword".

1.2 Christianity

There are many theological themes in Tolkien's narrative: the triumph of humility over pride, the importance of pity and grace, remorse, salvation, self – sacrifice, friendship, and free will. However, the battle of good versus evil is the religious foundation in the creation of his moral code and the portrayal of the Christian way of life.

In these two novels, Tolkien makes a substantial difference between good and evil characters. The first ones are defined as creative, devoted, and heroic, representing prosperity and light. On the other hand, the evil figures represent complete opposition; they know of nothing else

but destruction and chaos. These qualities are clearly displayed through particular individual actions of consequential characters, as well as its impact on plot development.

The first example can be seen in *The Hobbit*, when Bilbo Baggins meets Gollum and takes the Ring away from him, in the dark caves of the Misty Mountain. There, Bilbo has a chance to kill the evil, vicious creature. However, he decides to spare Gollum's life out of pity for him, and to risk his own life by sneaking next to Gollum on his way out of the cave, which Gandalf explains to Frodo telling him that "It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 68 – 69). This had two major consequences later in *The Lord of the Rings*; first when Gollum is being captured by the dark forces and questioned about the current location of the Ring, and secondly at the end when he destroys the Ring by falling into the fire of the Mount Doom. If Bilbo had killed Gollum, destiny of the Ring itself would have become highly questionable. According to Wood, "The pity of Bilbo will rule the fate of many", which "gradually becomes the motto of Tolkien's epic" (Wood part III).

Another example of goodness is Bilbo and Frodo's act of self–sacrificing. In numerous occasions Bilbo finds himself trapped in a situation where getting away looks like the most appealing option. However, his sense of duty and concern for his companions overcomes the fear, so he risks his life willingly in order to save the dwarves, telling them "'I shall draw the spiders off, if I can; and you must keep together and make in the opposite direction" (*The Hobbit* 76).

An even greater example of the Christian goodness is provided by Frodo, who sacrifices his life as a Ring–bearer. Not only that he accepts the task of destroying the Ring, but he also manages to resist its evil, corrupting power. In spite of the possible consequences of the fulfillment of his venture, he takes the responsibility for the extermination of the evil

and the salvation of society, putting his own life in grave danger when saying "'I will take the Ring'…'though I do not know the way'" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 284).

As opposed to the goodness and morality of Bilbo, Frodo, and others from their company, Tolkien creates an armful of ill–natured creatures of darkness, mainly servants of Evil. One of the most horrid demonstrations of evil in *The Hobbit* is the corruption of Gollum. He was not always a sluggish, cave hiding monster. He was once a Hobbit, named Smeagol. But one day he got hold of the Ring, when "he caught Deagol by the throat and strangled him, because the gold looked so bright and beautiful" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 62). The Ring itself contains a fraction of its master, and has the power to corrupt anyone who possesses it. This happened to Smeagol – the Ring besieged him, gave him an unnaturally long life, but also poisoned his mind for five hundred years. At the end, his obsession with the Ring drove him into his death, along with the Ring itself, in the deep fires of the Mount Doom.

Another great representation of evil in *The Hobbit* is the greed of the mighty dragon Smaug. Although he has no use for the great amount of gold and treasure he keeps, no gain whatsoever, he will still guard it to his death. He notices the one missing cup that Bilbo has stolen, and decides to seek his vengeance. Yet Bilbo lies to him, alleging him onto a wrong trail, where he gets killed with a black arrow and "with a shriek that deafened men, felled trees and split stone, Smaug shot spouting into the air, turned over and crashed down from on high in ruin" (*The Hobbit* 113).

If we analyze the nature of Tolkien's works, we can notice the presence of a considerable amount of religious symbols. It can be described that the ventures and deeds of his characters Frodo and Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* quite resemble the acts of Christ in the Bible.

On his quest, Frodo is confronted with the seductive and corrupting powers of the Ring, tempted to use them for the wrong reasons. However, his strong will manages to resist the lure of the evil power, similarly to Christ's resistance to Satan in the desert. He knows the great power the Ring has, and also he knows that because of that power it must be destroyed for eternity. The story ends with Frodo ruining the Ring, depriving himself of the chance for a prolonged life by wearing it, and also "learns -- and thus teaches -- what for Tolkien is the deepest of all Christian truths: how to surrender one's life, how to lose one's treasure, how to die, and thus how truly to live" (Wood part I).

The second example of the Christ–like character is the good wizard, Gandalf. As the substantial figure in both stories, Gandalf often provides guidance, counsels, and great help throughout the journey: "Gandalf, the Christ-like wizard who literally lays down his life for his friends, knows that he is an unworthy bearer of the Ring - not because he has evil designs that he wants secretly to accomplish, but rather because his desire to do good is so great" (Wood part II). He is often compared to Jesus due to his ability to perform magic and to fight the unspeakable evil. Another example of his goodness appears when he fights the mythical creature of evil, Balrog. After ten days of battle, when finally defeating the monster, Gandalf returns to the fellowship reborn, in some sort of a resurrection, telling them "Yes, I am white now" (*The Two Towers* 98).

However, there are also plenty of anti–Christian characters in Tolkien's novels, entities whose main goal is to accomplish their evil master – plans. One of them is Saruman, the White wizard who chooses to use his magical powers to do works of mischief rather than good. For the purpose of gaining more power, he makes an allegiance with dark lord Sauron, in that way betraying the forces of good. He is blinded by the greed for the Ring, and his mind gets poisoned by Sauron's words of the upcoming disaster. Saruman does not believe that the Ring can be destroyed by someone of less importance, "neither does he perceive the hidden

strength of *The Hobbit*s" (Wood part II). Ironically, at the end, he is betrayed by his own accomplice, who "rose up, drawing a hidden knife, and then with a snarl like a dog he sprang on Saruman's back, jerked his head back, cut his throat, and with a yell ran off down the lane" (*The Return of the King* 300).

Another symbol of corruption and evil power is the Ring itself. It represents the ultimate contradiction to freedom, by constantly trying to abolish a person's ability to practice the free will. Its essential purpose is to destroy all that is good in the world, using corruption and deceit to achieve that. It has the will to control animate objects, and to subordinate them to the will of its maker. The Ring convinces Frodo to put it on in a certain situation where one can notice the presence of the great evil, slowly corrupting his mind and creating an addiction which additionally gets impossible for Frodo to resist, when he says "'I can't manage it, Sam'… 'It is such a weight to carry, such a weight'" (*The Return of the King* 214). At the end, as the professor Wood states "under Gandalf's leadership, they decide not to hide or use the Ring, but to take it straight back into the Land of Mordor -- Sauron's own lair -- there to incinerate it" (…), Sauron is finally defeated by the destruction of the Ring, accomplished by the unlikely creature that anyone could imagine – Gollum.

2. The Silmarillion

The Silmarillion is a collection of tales which was edited and published after Tolkien's death by his son Christopher. Compiled together under the influence of the Norse, Christian, and many other mythologies, these stories are the foundation of Tolkien's own mythology, making "a system of stories whose greatest effect stems from their interrelation, that they are separate tales but nonetheless can only fully be understood when read as a whole" (Hiley 843). *The Silmarillion* brings us Tolkien's vision of his imaginary world from its creation up to the beginning of the War of the Ring, which takes place in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Silmarillion comprises 5 major parts. The first one, "Ainulindalë", which means the music of the Ainur, tells the story of the creation of the Eä, "the world that is". It was Iluvatar, the One, who had created Ea with the help of the divine spirits called Ainur, "out of the Void through the power of their singing. Some of the Ainur then enter Eä and become the Valar, the Powers of the World, and it is they who govern it and its fate" (Hiley 843). The second part, Valaquenta, tells us more about the Valar and the Maiar, which are characterized quite similarly to the Greek Olympian gods. The next part is called Quenta Silmarillion and it tells the story of "the Fall of Melkor, the Ainu who through his own selfish desire becomes evil, and the creation of the races of Elves, Men, and Dwarves and the tales of their doings in Valinor and Middle-earth" (Hiley 843). It also includes the war of the Silmarils, which gave the title for the book. It is comprised of twenty four separate chapters, whose tales describe most of the history of the First Age. The fourth part, Akallabeth, shows the events of the Second Age, with the main story of the Downfall of Númenor and its people. The final part of the book is comprised of the events leading to the creation of the One Ring, the rule of Sauron and the War of the Ring in the Third Age. Representing the very beginning and the foundation

for his later work, *The Silmarillion* abounds with the influence of many different sources, from Christianity to Celtic legends.

2.1 Christianity

The first and the most distinguished similarity between Tolkien's *Silmarillion* and the Christian mythology, is in the act of creation. In *Silmarillion*, it begins with Eru's creation of the Ainur, the divine spirits who will later on help him to create the world:

> There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made. . . . "Therefore I say: *Eä!* Let these things Be! And I will send forth into the Void the Flame Imperishable, and it shall be at the heart of the World, and the World shall Be. (Silm. 11, 15)

Eru Iluvatar represents the God from *Genesis*, who just like him uses his voice to create the world and all that lives from the Void:

> In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light and there was light. (*New Jerusalem Bible*, Gen. 1.1–3)

They are both Omnipotent beings who stand for the ultimate good and harmony.

Opposed to them, there is Melkor, to whom "among the Ainur had been given the greatest gifts of power and knowledge" (Silm. 12). He breaks the harmony of the music in the attempt to make a song of his own. As a corrupted figure, he stands as an equivalent to Lucifer (Satan), the fallen angel. His attempts are overpowered by the Iluvatar, each time with a new theme, as he shows Melkor:

> that I am Ilúvatar, those things that ye have sung, I will show them forth, that ye may see what ye have done. And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined (Silm. 13)

However, after being placed in the world now called Arda as one of the Valar, Melkor was continuously trying to spread his malice over the land and to disrupt the peace and harmony that Eru has created. He had corrupted a number of Elves and had even seduced some of the Maiar, drawing them into his endless web of lies. Just like Satan, Melkor also has his agents of darkness, tortured Elves that had become Orcs, creatures of fire and numerous other corrupted beasts. He reigned in the fortress called Angband, in the far North, from where he was the cause of the greatest part of Arda's suffering through wars and chaos. After destroying the Two Trees and stealing the Silmarils, he was given a more malicious name - Morgoth: "Then Fëanor rose, and lifting up his hand before Manwë he cursed Melkor, naming him Morgoth, the Black Foe of the World; and by that name only was he known to the Eldar ever after" (Silm. 73).

Another similarity with the Christian mythology can be seen in the creation and the fall of the Elves after being corrupted, which resembles quite a lot to the Christian creation and fall of the Man: "But these things come not into the tale of the Drowning of Númenor, of which now all is told. And even the name of that land perished, and Men spoke thereafter not of Elenna…nor of Númenórë on the confines of the world" (Silm. 255).

2.2 Norse Mythology

In the construction of the characters in *The Silmarillion*, it is clear that Tolkien was rather inspired by the Norse and Old German mythologies, especially the *Volsunga* and

Voluspa sagas, *Poetic* and the *Prose Edda*. The complexity of the structure of his world in *The Silmarillion* quite resembles the one in the Norse mythology. The name of the world for the humans in the Norse mythology is Midgard, while in Tolkien's book "Midgard is the Middle Earth, wherein Men, Dwarves, Dark Elves and Giants live. This world is a place of swift passing time and the battleground of good and evil" (Wettstein 1). Asgard, the city of the Nordic gods, has its equivalent in *Silmarillion* under the name of Valinor, home of the Valar, while the home of the Light Elves in the Norse mythology named Elfheim may have served as an inspiration for Tolkien's Eldamar: "Now Ossë followed after the host of Olwë, and when they were come to the Bay of Eldamar (which is Elvenhome) he called to them…" (Silm. 54). There is also a visible connection between the Angband, Morgoth's home in the far North and Norse world Nilfheim which "is a place that lies to the north of Midgard. It is a place of snow and ice" (Wettstein 2). By analyzing some of the characters and creatures from Tolkien's story, we find that "some of the most striking similarities between Tolkien and Old Norse myth are the parallels between *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Saga of the Volsungs*" (Bergstrom). He had taken numerous names and characteristics for the portrayal of the dwarves from the Norse mythology:

> The dwarves did as Durin directed, Many man forms made from the earth. Nyi and Nidi, Nordri, Sudri, Austri and Vestri Althjof, Dvalin, Bivor, Bavor, Bombur, Nori…Veignr and Gandalf, Vindalf, Thorin, Thror and Thrain…Hlevangur, Gloi, Dori, Ori…. (Wettstein 3)

They were great craftsmen, responsible for the forging of the powerful magical weapons and rings, such as "Mjölnir (Thor's Hammer) and Draupnir (Odin's magical Ring)" (Wettstein 3). There is also the similarity between the Æsir, the gods of Asgard, and "The Great among these spirits the Elves name the Valar, the Powers of Arda, and Men have often called them gods" (Silm. 21). Also, in all his works, Tolkien has adopted the Light Elves "with their

dwelling, Elfheim (Eldamar), and the Dark Elves in Midgard (Middle Earth). To the light Elves he gave the language Quenya…For the Dark Elves he invented a new one…Sindarin" (Wettstein 2). However, the greatest resemblance between the characters of the Norse mythology and *The Silmarillion* is the one of Thor and one of the Valar named Tulkas, who was "greatest in strength and deeds of prowess" (Silm. 24).

2.3 Greek Mythology

The influence from the Greek mythology is apparent in the story of the Downfall of Númenor, which very much resembles the lost island of Atlantis. Tolkien even borrows the name of the island, renaming it into the Elvish name "Atalantë": "But these things come not into the tale of the Drowning of Númenor… that was whelmed in the waves, Akallabêth the Downfallen, Atalantë in the Eldarin tongue" (Silm. 255). It also occurs in the description of the Valar, who share some characteristics with the Olympian gods; Ulmo, the god of waters, with the Greek god Poseidon, and the Zeus and Manwë "who is the noblest of the Ainur" (Silm. 14).

2.4 Other

A major influence on Tolkien's work was the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, especially the "Tale of Kullervo", which bears great resemblance to his story of Túrin Turambar, particularly described in the book *The Children of Húrin.* There is also mention of the well–known Slavic god Rodegast who Tolkien used for the role of the Istari (wizard) Radagast and his home Rhosgobel: "after him came Mithrandir and Radagast, and others of the Istari… Radagast was the friend of all beasts and birds…" (Silm 271). The influence of the Celtic mythology can be seen in the exile of the Noldorin Elves, which draws similarity from the Celtic story of "Tuatha De Danann", and between Celtic heroes Nuada and Lugh in their war

against Balor of the Evil Eye, and Tolkien's heroes Celebrimbor and Gil – Galad and their war against Sauron and the Lidless Red Eye. There is also the Persian influence, visible in the modeling of the Elvish weaponry which is quite similar to the Persian design.

3. The Children of Húrin

The Children of Húrin is the first completed novel about Tolkien's world of Middle – earth since the publication of *The Silmarillion* in 1977. It is a tragic story of a hero named Túrin Turambar and his sister Níniel, children of Húrin of the house of Hador, and the rest of their family cursed by the evil Morgoth. The story is mainly based on the Finnish character Kullervo, from the poems in *Kalevala*, and bears parallels to "the *Völsungasaga,* the Old Norse story of Sigurd the Dragon-slayer, known to many as the inspiration for Richard Wagner's operatic Ring Cycle" (Resch 1).

3.1 Norse Mythology

The greatest similarity with Tolkien's work can be found in the story of the Túrin Turambar and the Norse story of Sigurd the Dragon – slayer: "Both Túrin and Sigurd are born into militant families, and both are born into times of strife and war... both heroes manage to distinguish themselves in battle at an early age..." (Resch 2). There is the notion of the wolves in the both *Eddas* and *Völsungasaga,* concerning Sigurd's father Sigmund and his brother who "spend a significant amount of time as werewolves under enchanted skins during their time in the wild" (Resch 2). Tolkien also uses the wolf image in a description of "Túrin's men, the outlaws of the wilderness who maraud and plunder as wildly as Sigmund and Sinfjotli, are known as the Gaurwaith, the wolf-men" (Resch 2). Further on, both heroes are in the possession of the distinguished helm and a re-forged sword. In Sigurd's case, he was "bearing Fafnir's helm on his head and Fafnir's bane in his hand" (Morris & Magnusson 70).

Sigurd won the helm after killing the mighty dragon Fafnir, and "Túrin inherits the Helm of Hador, and heirloom of his father's house; this Dragon-helm becomes a symbol of such power that the place in which Túrin dons it is known as "The Land of Bow and Helm," and the minions of Morgoth fear it" (Resch 2). Sigurd inherited the mighty sword Gram after his father's death, while Túrin "eventually wields Gurthang, the Black Sword which was re-forged for him in Nargothrond and then finally breaks when he uses it to commit suicide" (Resch 2). As we look at the certain qualities of the characters in this book, it becomes clear that Norse mythology, especially the story of Sigurd, had served as a tremendous inspiration for Tolkien. However, his characters may often stand as a contrast to the ones from the Norse story, and we can almost say that in a matter of speaking Tolkien "distances Middle-Earth from this element of Old Norse culture and interjects a faint element of Christianity in place of vulgarity" (Resch 2). His characters have been greatly enriched; they have been given a certain depth and profoundness:

> His story-telling is far more sophisticated than the written record of Volsung's descendants; while many of the characters of the *Völsungasaga* have obscure or simplistic motives, or act in ways unjustified by either emotional depth or history, Tolkien's characters are spectacularly human (Resch 3)

First we can compare their foster fathers who despite they shared roles are completely different characters. Sigurd's father, Regin, teaches him to "fight, to play sports, to speak in many languages, and driven by selfish motives, he eggs Sigurd into fighting Fafnir, hoping that Sigurd will die in the attempt" (Resch 3). On the other hand, Sador, Túrin's father is dedicated and kind, and is trying to teach him that the thrall – work stands for a man "who was a man but is treated as a beast…Fed only to keep alive, kept alive only to toil, toiling only for fear of pain or death. And from these robbers he may get pain or death just for their sport" (*The Children of Húrin* 17). Furthermore, both of the heroes have their best comrades; Gunnar

being the embodiment of the true Norse warrior, connected to Sigurd by the power of the oath, and Beleg, who is "bound to Túrin out of love, and he honors that love by pursuing Túrin into his self-inflicted exile" (Resch 3). We can also draw a parallel between their stepmothers. Sigurd's stepmother Grimhild "was a fierce-heart woman" (Morris & Magnusson 82), very skilled in the arts of magic, and has taught Sigurd and Gunnar how to change shapes into wolves. As opposed to her, Melian is one of the Maiar, kind, protective, and wise, and tries to protect Túrin with her magic. Both their real mothers, Morwen and Signy, are characterized by their destructive pride:

> It is pride in her blood and the blood of her household that drives Signy to incest...drives her to plot revenge against her husband rather than bend to him...makes her walk back into the fire and die with him; it is Morwen's unyielding pride that causes her to remain in Dor-Lómin to wait for her husband's return when defeat is evident...that keeps her from returning to Doriath at her daughter's urging – pride. (Resch 3)

We can also find similarities between their lovers and wives. While his love for his mistress Brynhild is deep and passionate, Sigurd's love for his wife Gudrun can be described as weak and bland. Túrin's love for Finduilas, on the other hand, is unrequited, he never sees how much she loves him. The situation with his wife Niënor is not much better; he does not show love for her the same way she does for him: "But to Turambar her heart was given, and only at his coming would she smile, and only when he spoke gaily would she laugh" (*The Children of Húrin* 77).

3.2 Other

We can find some elements of the Christian mythology in the story, mainly in Tolkien's portrayal of the female characters and Elves, whose famous lembas bread may be

used as a symbol of the bread of communion: “she gave him a store of *lembas,* the waybread of the Elves, wrapped in leaves of silver…” (*The Children of Húrin* 35).

The Children of Húrin is a tragic story with no happy ending, which is quite unusual for Tolkien’s writing. Both heroes in their stories fight dragons; Sigurd conquers Fafnir at the beginning, but it leads to a tragic end of his story, while Túrin does completely opposite:

> Tolkien chooses to end Túrin’s life – like Beowulf’s – with his great victory. Sigurd reaches the climax of his heroism in the beginning of his life; Túrin, while he struggles against a strangling fate, rises to fight and win his greatest battle at the end of his life. The *Völsungasaga* begins with victory and ends with long, merciless, drawn-out defeat; *The Children of Húrin* begins as a long, merciless, drawn-out defeat, but it ends in victory. (Resch 4)

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