

**TWO JOURNEYS TO THE AFTERLIFE: *THE EPISTLE OF FORGIVENESS*  
AND *THE DIVINE COMEDY***

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper compares and contrasts Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy with Abu Al-Ala Al-Ma'arri's Epistle of Forgiveness. The paper investigates the similarities and differences in terms of construction, methodology, narration, description, motivation, and characterization. By raising such an issue, this paper hopes to spot the light on the relationship between the east and the west. This paper demonstrates a lot about the impact of Islamic ideology on Christian Europe. The issue of the Arab-Islamic sources of the Divine Comedy is at the heart of this paper's argument that has now been going on for two centuries.*

**KEYWORDS:** similarities, differences, the east, the west, Dante, Al-Ma'arri

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## INTRODUCTION

Death and what comes after has always been a subject of great concern. Many have attempted to portray their own perception of the afterlife, be it heaven or hell. Disputes about heaven and hell have existed even before Christ's coming to this world. People have always speculated what really happens when they cease to live. Is there life after death? Where will I go? How can I get into paradise? These are questions that people have always thought about. When people think about the afterlife, it is self-evidently to classify the locations after death: Heaven and Hell. Actually, the religions investigated for the purposes of this research believe that there is life after death. In Islam and Christianity, the concept of how to attain a good or a bad existence after death has remained fixed for centuries. The Bible and Qur'an have remained fixed throughout time with only small changes. These religions have not oscillated. There are steady themes that remain static, such as the existence of heaven or hell. A Biblical reference to heaven is Isaiah 25:8-12 and Ezekiel 28:24-26. An Old Testament reference to hell is Genesis 44:29. In Islam, Muslims believe in resurrection. Muslims believe that every human after death will be awakened and go to either hell or heaven. While Islam and Christianity have different beliefs, they have a similar belief that there is an afterlife and that behaviour on earth will determine where in the afterlife one will eventually end up. In fact, both religions state that the vicious will go to hell, and the righteous will go to heaven.

Here, I will explore the similarities and differences between the *Epistle of Forgiveness* and the *Divine Comedy* in portraying the afterlife. There are many similarities and differences between the *Epistle of Forgiveness* and the *Divine Comedy*. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is all about afterlife. Similarly, Al – Maa'arri's *Epistle of Forgiveness* portrays the afterlife.

Although there are many close similarities between the two books, not everything is exactly the same.

### **Construction and Form:**

If we compare the *Epistle of Forgiveness* and the *Divine Comedy*, we find ourselves in a journey to the other world. As a matter of fact, the similitude between Al-Ma'arri's *Epistle of Forgiveness* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* can be anticipated in the idea of ascending to the afterlife.

The letter of Al – Maa'rri starts by the uprising of Ibn – Al Qareh from his grave, and then he struggles to win forgiveness to go to the heavens, where he meets some of its population, then he passes by the hell and talks with those who are not tolerated. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the journey starts with the poet finding himself in a dark forest, and then he meets a guide from that world, who is Virgil. The subject of the epic is a journey to the hell, purgatory, and heaven. It is symbolic of the human's searching of his creator, going back to Him, and winning repentance, forgiveness, and salvation.

*The Divine Comedy*, in Italian: *Divina Commedia*, is an epic poem. The wonderful memorable *Divine Comedy* by Dante is one of the masterpieces of the Christian literature in the Middle Ages. According to Muhammad Ghunymī Hilāl, "Dante first called it comedy, but the word, Divine, was added to it after he died in 1555 AD" (1987, 149). The word, comedy, is suitable for two reasons. First, the poem is written in the vernacular, which is regarded suitable only for a comedy. Second, the plot follows the genre of a classical comedy moving from the terrors of Hell to the delights of Heaven. Despite his seeming humbleness, however, Dante was sure that his poetry exceeded that of any other vernacular writer. This is due to the fact that it tackles one of the great issues of humanity: the existence of an afterlife and the results of our lives on earth. For Dante, this issue deserves the attention of philosophers and poets alike.

This religious epic as some people call it is consisted of 3 parts: Hell (*Inferno*), Purgatory (*Purgatorio*) and Heaven (*Paradiso*). Each part is consisted of a prologue and (33) cantos except the *Inferno*, which has 34 cantos. Therefore, the epic is consisted of (100) cantos, and each verse is consisted of (11) syllables. *The Epistle of Forgiveness* is regarded one of the primary works in the Arabic literary canon. Written in prose, it describes the life in heaven and hell according to Islamic religious tenets. It is written as a response from Al – Maa'rri to the poet Ibn al-Qārih, who asked for Al – Maa'rri's opinion regarding heresy. The work is divided into two parts: a visit to heaven and hell and a direct answer to Ibn – Al Qareh.

### **METHODOLOGY**

*The Epistle of Forgiveness* is a prose letter spoiled by the verbal hyperbole and the concentration on grammar. In fact, the writer prefers the complexity of the linguistic deepness. The linguistic complexity distinguishes Al – Maarri in his *Epistle*, and this is what is expected from him because he was the leader of proficiency in his age. During that age, writing became complex in its methods and syntax (Daqqak 1974, 390). Complexity might have more than one justification in the literature of Al – Maa'rri. First, because he was confined in his house for 50 years, he resorted to many types of art which led to the

linguistic complexity employed in his *Epistle*. Such complexity's purpose was seeking to outperform his contemporaries (Daif 1977, 269). Additionally, his wide culture, his strong knowledge, and his deepness in grammar helped him to be distinguished. Salem Al – Jundi sees that the complexity of language in Al – Maar' rri's *Epistle of Forgiveness* as intentional to hide his irony (Al- Jundi 1999, 24-125). In fact, the diversification of methods makes it difficult to classify the *Epistle*. While the majority agrees that it is not a letter, others consider it a story. And a third group considers it as a novel. Another group considers it as a play because it is rich with dialogue (Al- Roubi 1994, 72-93).

On the other hand, the *Divine Comedy* depends on precise language without ornaments or ratifications. In his poetry, Dante selects his words precisely with a concise methodology. In addition, Dante makes his poetry full of life, surprise, light, color, voice, movement, and dialogue. He uses metaphors, similes, and symbols with great art. He does not stem his symbols from abstract items but from people who feel, talk, move, or from animals, plants and natural scenes. Irony is very clear in the *Comedy*. It is sometimes clear and others hidden, especially when describing the popes, his political opponents, and the tyrant rulers whom he puts in the lowest fire tracks (Hassan 1955, 47-52).

Dante formulates his journey according to an almost arithmetical method. Indeed, the preciseness of his depiction provided modern mathematicians with the ability to construct algorithms based on his construction (Palacios 1984, 172). Dante the poet uses direct language from his native Tuscan dialect to make readers perceive his moral journey easily. Indeed, the language of the *Divine Comedy* is simple and direct. A desultorily difficult and complex language in Al-Ma'arrī contradicts the vivid and systematized style found in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Al-Ma'arrī's language depicts his proficiency in Arabic; however, it prevents the readers from understanding his real intentions and beliefs. Al-Ma'arrī's language is complex for the ordinary readers to be able to trace his veiled skeptic concepts of religion and philosophy. So, Al-Ma'arrī's work is restricted to a specific group of readers: those who are able of perceiving the complex language and its hidden messages.

### **Narration:**

In Al – Maarri's *Epistle of Forgiveness*, the narrator is clearly separated from the hero, Ibn Al – Qareh. The narrator does not participate in the events although he knows all the hidden issues. So, he is in alignment with Al – Maarri. But in the *Divine Comedy*, the narrator is united with the hero; they are one, so the narration is done by the tongue of the hero. In the *Divine Comedy*, the hero conveys the events, describes the scenes, and interferes in most of the dialogue. Throughout the poem, there are two Dantes: Dante the narrator and Dante the character. Dante the narrator is a harsh, virtuous individual who acts an evaluator and decides who should go to hell or heaven. This Dante is unmerciful in his judgment. He can find little justifying circumstances, and the sinner is judged by the most severe standards. Dante is the author and protagonist of *the Divine Comedy*. Because Dante decides to narrate his poem as a chronicle of events that actually happened to him, a broad gap between Dante the narrator and Dante the character dominates the poem. For example, Dante the poet often depicts Dante the character as warmhearted and affectionate for the torture of sinners, but Dante the poet decides to put them in Hell and designs their torture. As the poem moves, Dante the character little by little learns to leave his compassion and apply a more

coldhearted attitude toward the torture of sinners, which he considers as a mirror image of divine justice.

### **Description:**

Both works are prosperous in their glowing imagery, scenic style, and pictorial details. The power of fantasy is present in both works because both of them envisage and describe an esoteric place. Description in the *Divine Comedy* is very rich, full of innovative images as if the poet reflects every audible and movable picture in the afterlife. On the other hand, Al – Maarri's *Epistle of Forgiveness* does not follow this method because he was blind (Alhindawi 1960, 114).

While Al-Ma'arrī gives a general description of hell, Dante's *Divine Comedy* gives an exact and well-formed representation of nine levels of hell, each replete with various sins and their unique penalties. What is notable about both Al- Ma'arrī and Dante is that both used poetry and poets as a vehicle to eulogize literature.

In spite of the debates about their origins, the two works strongly reveal the elements of supremacy and creativity. Nevertheless, unlike Dante, Al-Ma'arrī's depiction of the hell and heaven does not conform to a vivid approach where the reader is unequivocally navigated through the topographical aspects of the journey. The images that Al-Ma'arrī invokes demonstrate a disorganized, tattered vision of life after death. He does not delve into the spiritual spheres of the afterlife world; however, he portrays a physical world that does not greatly vary from his present world. Although he endeavors to mimic the *Quran*, he represents sardonic worldly images that insure his skepticism in the existence of such a sensual-present world. Al-Ma'arrī provides his readers with images of dead poets who are receiving strong punishments for their unrighteousness in hell but who are somehow still able to speak with Al-Ma'arrī's pilgrim, Ibn al-Qārih. Instead of feeling the regret of the sinful, we are obligated to read normal dialogues between Ibn al-Qārih and the sinners, where the latter, in an almost ironic way, indifferently answer questions asked by Ibn al-Qārih. For example, when Ibn al-Qārih speaks with Bashshār Ibn Burd about his poetry, Bashār is irritated by Ibn al-Qārih's audacity at asking a man who is being tormented in hell for the only reason of the rhyme scheme of his poetry, so he asks Ibn al-Qārih to "spare me your nonsense; I have no time for you!" (Gelder and Schoeler 2014, 127). Is this uttered like a tortured soul agonizing in Hell, or is it the response of an ordinary man in the worldly life? This example demonstrates an excellent illustration of Al-Ma'arrī's imagination and creativity in depicting the image of hell that is totally different from the conventional igneous conception of hell vulgarized by Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In Dante's hell, only the sounds of sobbing and the shrieks of torment echo as sinners are eternally tormented for their sins. For Dante, hell is a zone without hope, without forgiveness and without prospect. It is the eternal and just penalty for sins. This is opposite to the punishments received in Al-Ma'arrī's hell, where sinners are in an igneous cavity, yet they are composed enough to have a conversation with Ibn al- Qārih.

The brilliance of both Dante and Al-Ma'arrī in depicting their fancied hell is found not in their inspiration for such a journey, but rather for the unique application of their own religious and philosophical orientations. In the satiric meditations of Al-Ma'arrī, the poets

are penalized for simple mistakes in poetry, while in Dante sinners are tormented for their misbehavior in life as these influenced themselves and others around them. Indeed, the punishments for the sins are so severe that even Virgil frequently turns white-faced, claiming,

The anguish of the souls  
that are down here paints my face with pity which  
you have wrongly taken to be fear (*Canto IV*, 19-21).

Although both Dante and Al-Ma'arrī exhibit their images of heaven and hell from a religious point of view, the layout of Dante's hell strongly refers to the Christian religious demonstration of the sinners' penalties in the afterlife. In contrast, Al-Ma'arrī's presentation appears to be chaotic, lacks a harmonious means of association and contains many excursus where one story directs to another to the point that the reader is baffled.

Dante wonderfully portrays specific details of the torture of the sinful souls to the extent that many visual artists have painted his detailed portrayal of the different ways of punishment. Unlike Dante, Al-Ma'arrī does not depict in detail how his characters are being tormented, nor does he vividly describe why they were brought to this contemptuous and shameful place to start with. Every now and then he attempts to insert excerpts from the *Quran* to mislead readers from understanding the real core of his philosophy and conceal his complicated beliefs. He was skeptic, misanthropic, and satiric. The complication of his language indicates the presence of a thinker who rejected just to follow the crowd. However, he believes that hell is the place to adjudge poetry rather than the actions of human beings. The pilgrim's conversation with the sinners always refers to his convictions of poetry and not to earthly misbehaviors such as adultery, robbery, injustice, or killing.

### **Characters**

Characters of Al-Ma'arrī are limited; the poet selects them from the world of poets and writers as if he wants such types of people to return to life. Those people enjoy personal freedom to a large extent; they never forget their whims and selfishness. Al-Ma'arrī's evildoers are mostly poets. Through his journey, Al-Ma'arrī speaks with them strictly on issues that are related to their poetry not to their misbehavior. As such, the concept of hell for Al-Ma'arrī was not that of a systematized realm, where sinners team up to get their punishment. Indeed, Al-Ma'arrī's hell does not have a bisection based on kinds of sin despite the presence of a classification of sins in Islam.

Al-Ma'arrī fills his hell with a huge number of men and women, Muslims and Christians, ignorant, honest, means, rich and poor, but they are mostly writers, poets or scientists because the main objective of his journey is to make a type of literary and linguistic criticism (Fadel 2006, 73). For example, in many places in the *Epistle of Forgiveness*, Al-Ma'arrī directs his arrows towards the writers, and he achieves his goal in this regard. The irony includes the hero of the story, Ibn – Al – Qareh, where he enters the heaven on the back of a Fatimi Maid. In another place, Al – Qareh is depicted as trying to please the heaven's guide by writing a poem to praise him. Here, Al-Ma'arrī might have aimed to criticize the life of Ibn – Al – Qareh and his hypocrisy (Amin 1993, 63).

In the *Divine Comedy*, the sinners are the various kinds of people who did not conform to the path of Christ. In the *Divine Comedy*, the characters are diversified, and the people depicted in it are similar to the people in life; they include the lazy, wasters, rich, malicious, tyrants, the angry, womanizers, hypocrites, and those who exploit religion and virtue. Therefore, we see that the characters in the *Comedy* are more than the characters in the *Forgiveness* regarding the number and diversification.

Each of Al-Ma'arrī and Dante has a certain scale in distributing the characters between the hell and heaven. Al-Ma'arrī puts his characters in the hell or heaven in a place distinguished by a certain criteria of mercy, kindness, and freedom of expression; he outperforms Dante in this regard because he forgives non-believers, and this is contradictory with those who see that the entering of some people known with their disbelief or cruelty in the heaven is unforgivable infidelity. According to Khalil Alhindawi, Al-Ma'arrī does this because he thinks highly of tolerance and humanity while Dante believes in eternal punishment and torture (1960, 115).

It is clear that Dante is tough on lovers and prostitutes; therefore, he puts them in the hell although he was a strong lover. In fact, his love to the beautiful Beatrice was the strong motive for him to write *the Divine Comedy*. However, it seems that the church's view of adultery made him have this tough look on lovers and prostitutes. Like Al-Ma'arrī, Dante tolerates and forgives poets, philosophers, pagans, and Muslims ; therefore, he lets Caesar, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Vergil, along with Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, and Saladin enter the purgatory. Then, he elevates them to the heaven.

The central character in the *Epistle*, Ibn Al – Qareh, is the center that the other characters gather around with their human features, mentalities, and their psychological sediments. The same applies to the *Divine Comedy*, where the central character that is Dante himself functions as a chain that connects all other characters whom he describes and explains if he is happy about their torture or not.

Unlike Dante, Al-Ma'arrī compensates the characters for the life disasters with generous rewards in the second life. In this regard, he mentions the story of Hamdouna. In the *Epistle*, Hamdouna tells Ibn – Al – Qareh:

Do you know what I am, Ali bin Mansour? Then he replies: you are one of the heaven's nymphs whom God created as a reward to the believers, and you resembled a sapphires and coral. Then the girl said: I am like this with the power of God although in the first life I have been not. I have been known as Hamdouna. My father had a mill and I have been married to a man who sells tools of animals, and he divorced me because of my smell; I have been the ugliest woman of Aleppo. After that I renounced the deceptive life, and I devoted myself for worship ; therefore, God rewarded me and I became like this .( Gelder and Schoeler 2014, 91)

Actually, the disaster of Al-Ma'arrī's blindness forced him to compensate his characters in the other life for the life disasters.

**The Purpose:**

While both Dante and Al-Ma'arrī have different goals for their works, these discrepancies present a unique dichotomy of a religious-political set-up in Dante versus that of a religious philosophical set-up in Al-Ma'arrī. The main objective of Al-Ma'arrī's *Epistle* is to make a literary and linguistic criticism. As a secondary objective, Al-Ma'arrī aims to change the toughness of the zealously religious people and convince them with the ideology that God is merciful (Fadel 2006, 73). On the other hand, the *Divine Comedy* is not confined to the literary and linguistic ideas, but it includes all the arenas of knowledge, including poetry, imagination, philosophy, and reality in an elevating human atmosphere that records what humans think about ambition, despair, unhappiness, disturbance, pain, and regret.

In fact, an intriguing distinction would be how both poets locate people in hell: Dante according to traditional Catholic creed, Al-Ma'arrī according to Islamic tenets on the surface, yet philosophical in between the lines. Both poets had totally divergent aims and motives for writing. Dante was inspired by the Catholic creed of hell and torture and wanted to emit his political dissatisfaction through this imaginary journey while Al-Ma'arrī's was exhilarated by his religious suspicion.

Al-Ma'arrī's *Epistle of Forgiveness* represents his philosophical beliefs regarding the ideas of skepticism. *The Divine Comedy* represents Dante's symbolic journey through hell, an important phase in his total journey through the Purgatory in order to finally reach his lost love, Beatrice, in heaven. Furthermore, Dante hints at Florentine politics, which is to be expected since in that city he was oppressed and sent into exile. Dante's persona goes to hell accompanied by the Roman poet Virgil. By utilizing Virgil as a guide, Dante is able to depict his perspective on issues of religion, such as the destiny of the esteemed ancient poets and philosophers and corruption, such as the destiny of current and former politicians.

An important controversy exists on the source of the idea of the afterlife in the *Divine Comedy* and the *Epistle of Forgiveness*. This controversy has engendered a sharp bisection between scholars, with some claiming that the Islamic story of *Isrā'a* and *Mi'rāj* directly affected both works. There are many opinions about the oriental and Islamic origins of the *Divine Comedy* and its relationship with *The Epistle of Forgiveness* by Al-Ma'arrī. Some say that Dante was not creative, but he stole the subject from Al-Ma'arrī, the real creator. Others say that Dante quoted from Al-Ma'arrī the idea of the journey to the other world only. In all, the majority confirmed undoubtedly that the *Divine Comedy* was affected by the Islamic heritage in many of its resources.

It is wise to refer to the researchers' opinions about the oriental and Islamic influences on the *Divine Comedy*, including those who refuted this hypothesis. Before we enter the arena of such opinions, visions, and diligences, I must draw the attention to two important issues that will illuminate our road in this study, which, in turn, might provide explanation to those common roots between *The Divine Comedy* and *The Epistle of Forgiveness* if any. The first issue is the fact that the relations between the east and the west go back to old times extended throughout history. In the Islamic ages, such communications increased through many ways. The most important of them are the Crusade Wars, Sicily, Al – Andalous, and the translation movements. Many researchers handled this issue in the nineteenth century

partially; however, the detailed studies appeared in this field in the beginning of the twentieth century in the book written by the French historian, A. Baluchi, in 1901 A.D. Baluchi believes that Dante was affected in his epic by two separate books about **Mi'raj**. The two books were written separately in Persia. One of them was written by a Mazdki writer in an unknown age, and the other was written about Prophet Muhammad PBUH in the second hijri century. After that, the Spanish Orientalist, **Miguel Asín Palacios**, announced in a long essay with the eloquent title: *La Escatología musulmana en la "Divina Comedia"* that the *Divine Comedy* has clear Islamic roots ( Saleh 1978, 5-22).

The influence of Dante by the Islamic heritage has been confirmed after the Spanish orientalist, Monuz Sendino, affirms that **the Mi'raj** story was translated into Castilian by a Jew to comply with the order of Alfonso X. From this copy, **Mi'raj** story was translated into Latin and French by Buonaventura of Siena. Sendino believes that the translated manuscripts of the **Mi'raj might have been read by Dante** (Donat and Beaulieu 1991, 22). The story of the **Mi'raj** was mentioned in a *Quranic* verse which says: "Glory to He who plucked up at night His servant from the holy temple to the ultimate temple, with the blessed precinct, in order to show him our signs. In truth, he is the listener, the seer" (*Quran* xvii, 1). This verse refers to a secret night journey of the Prophet, "plucked up" from the mosque in Mecca to be transferred to Jerusalem, and then to an immaterial temple, located within the heavenly spaces.

## CONCLUSION

Life after death is an important issue which is discussed in every religion. The afterlife has always been something of great concern with various approaches of different religions. Each religion concentrates, explores, and clarifies the events and philosophy of this creed. The afterlife has been a dominant theme in literature. What is the afterlife? Who goes there, and why? What does it look like? Often, the endeavour to speak/write about this experience is arduous. The afterlife has always captivated the Western imagination and its descendants were very distinguished literary works that are still examined and interpreted nowadays. It can also be spotted in ancient Arabic literature. The two religions that are the core of the *Epistle of Forgiveness* and the *Divine Comedy* are Islam and Christianity. These two religions have similar ideologies about what life after death involves, and they also share analogous indications. Both religions believe in Heaven and Hell. From these two religions specifically emerge many philosophical issues regarding this doctrine of theology. Both Christianity and Islam promise certain rewards to their followers, and these rewards demand some contrast that would befall, or may befall, those who disobey their creeds and rules.

This paper that is funded by the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Arts seeks to show that Dante's *Divine Comedy* is greatly influenced by Al-Ma'arrī's *Epistle of Forgiveness*. There are many parallels between the *Epistle of Forgiveness* and the *Divine Comedy*. Poets and writers can inspire each other since conjuring something completely new is miraculous. The inspiration that arises from the reciprocation between poets does not decrease the power of their ingenuity. The creativity while writing works of literature is not confined only to the ideas depicted but relies more on the way the writer approaches his ideas. As such, there are broad topics such as love, hate, treachery, and sorrow that were examined



by many writers; however, each one is endowed with his place and recognition. A literary work does not lose its supremacy and importance if inspired by other texts; on the contrary, it might acquire a new way of tackling the same idea identified by previous writers. The afterlife as an idea has always formed a large share of philosophical and religious controversies. Religions sermonize about the afterlife; the intense punishments are in hell for those who trespass the taboos, and the blessings in heaven are for those who conform faithfully. For Dante and Al- Ma'arrī, the issue of the afterlife was not a source of suspicion because they must have thought that it was static, but they differ in their approach in representing it through their imagination.

Both works invite the reader to contemplate into his own flaws, leading him to mend himself and acquire a sense of direction, and eventually to live in infatuation and concordance with God and others. Both works' message is directed to readers, whether adherents or non-adherents, who are looking for moral discernment and a sense of optimism and direction. They open the reader's eyes to his own sins and the ways that distracted him from life's straight path as the first steps to righteousness require acknowledging one's sins. The impact of both works is dramatic. Both works lead the reader to inspect his own conscience. At the same time, they convince the reader that he is not impotently caught by his failings and sins. They persuade the reader that he still has the chance, he has free will, and he has the help of God if he wants to return to the right path. Both works wouldn't have lasted so long because they provide a luxuriant exercise in morality. They beat with life, and they demonstrate in their lambent lines and clear tableaux the power of righteousness, the deathlessness of hope for those who have the spirit to take the first step to repent. Both works should be taken into the heart and mind of that woeful journeyer who reads them as a guidebook and holds them high as a lamp, illuminating the way out of the sulky wood that, sooner or later, entraps us all. The blaze of both works' greatness will continue to glow, quietly but relentlessly, through our present time and long into the future. At least we have to believe that, as long as some trace of civilization remains, readers will keep on reading both works for their astounding fanciful scope, their moral and spiritual scope, and their creativity.

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