

**A Stylistic Analysis of Compound Epithets in  
Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet**

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**Abstract**

This paper attempts to work out a stylistic analysis of compound epithets in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* on the levels of grammar and lexis. It falls into three: Section one deals with *epithet* as a literary term together with identifying its form and function. Section two deals with compound epithets in English grammar and the way they work. A stylistic analysis of such epithets is the concern of section three, which also provides a brief discussion of the position of compound epithets in the language of Shakespeare.

On the whole, the aim of the paper is to illuminate how such epithets are used grammatically and lexically and how far this can help in categorizing Shakespeare's style.

### **Introduction**

Shakespeare is one of the great poets and play-wrights whose greatness is largely enhanced by their styles which can be clearly illuminated through analyzing the various aspects of their use of language.

These aspects can be identified by mapping out the various phonological, grammatical and lexical patterns that are manipulated in such a way to achieve certain purposes.

The use of compound epithets is regarded as one of the many prominent features which characterize Shakespeare's use of language particularly in his early works as *Romeo and Juliet* (1594). This play abounds with such epithets as a stylistic device that Shakespeare uses to project the very theme of this tragedy, and to draw the attention to the figurative aspect of his language.

This paper attempts to investigate how Shakespeare's compound epithets operate from a stylistic perspective by relying on two levels of analysis: grammar and lexis.

### **Section One EPITHETS**

This section deals with the definition, form as well as the function of *epithets* as a literary term. It also sheds light on the use of epithets as a figure of speech.

### 1.1 Definition :

An *epithet* is simply defined as an adjective or a descriptive phrase used to indicate the character of somebody or something as in 'Alfred the Great'. As a literary term, it is a word or phrase preceding or following a name which serves to describe the character of that name; it is a lexical item that makes the reader see the object described in a clearer or sharper light simply because an epithet refers to an outstanding quality.

Homer tended to join certain adjectives and nouns together which are called Homeric epithets as in 'swift-footed Achilles', 'rosy-figured dawn'; Odysseus, sucker of cities, (Beckson and Ganz, 1960: 55).

These are categorized as *compound epithets*, which are often figurative and manipulated in such a way as to pinpoint the metaphorical dimension in language.

A *transferred epithet* is regarded as another kind of epithet which is an "adjective, word, or phrase that is shifted from the noun it would most obviously and applied to an associated but expected noun," (Simpson, 1972: 420). For example in Keat's *Ode to a Nightingale*, the word 'embalmed', which evokes the nearness of an overwhelming odour of flowers, is applied to the night itself:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet  
Wherewith the seasonable month endows

The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild.

(Ibid.)

Consequently, in literature, epithet is a figure of speech which is descriptive in nature. Poetry, in particular, is essentially a combination of the familiar and the surprising, and these surprises, more often than not, are achieved by the use of carefully descriptive words or epithets.

Moreover, an epithet may be used with a negative connotation. For example, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, when Jane first meets Mr. Brocklehurst, she refers to him as the 'stony stranger'. In the same novel there is a reference to Mr. Rochester by Mrs. Fairfax, 'Old Mr. Rochester...' (Joel Carlson, 99).

## 1.2 Form :

An epithet may be a single word or adjective, or a phrase that precedes or follows a noun. Or it may be a compound epithet consisting of two descriptive words made into one. Compound epithets are either hyphenated or non-hyphenated. Preminger et al (1977) have noted that compound epithets occur frequently in Greek and English literature. As is mentioned previously that Homer used many of these compound epithets including *all-seeing Jove*, *rosy-fingered dawn*, and *loud-roaring sea*, to embrace the metaphorical aspect in his use of language.

In English literature, particularly poetry, compound epithets are used frequently as "imaginative in their reduction of multiplicity into unity, of complexity into simplicity, such as Milton's "wide-watered shore" and Keats's "far-foamed sands."

Spencer also cultivated epithets as enrichment to his diction. His compound epithets are numerous and are of various kinds: the morally serious (heart-murdering love: *Fare Queen*, 2.5.16); the classical (rosy-fingered morning; *Ibid.* 1.2.7) (Preminger et al).

Shakespeare's dramatic dialogue in some of his earlier works such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* include passages which are rich with compound epithets that emphasize the greatness of Shakespeare both as a poet and dramatist with a thorough knowledge of the terms, forms and the processes of argumentation, (Joseph, 1962: 289). He tactfully manipulates compound epithets to achieve a certain dramatic purpose. It is observed that "his [Shakespeare's] language, fresh, vibrant, exuberant, and free, makes use of the schemes of words as well as the schemes of construction. He effects sudden and vivid concentrations of meaning by a poetically superb and daring use of hypallage (the use of transferred epithets), the compound epithets, metaphor, metonymy, negative and privative terms," (Ibid., 1962: 289).

### 1.3 Function :

An epithet functions as an adjective or a descriptive phrase that describes the characteristic features of a person or thing. It may also involve abuse or contempt but is not necessarily a form of invective.

It is observed that an 'epithetic compound', which is two descriptive words made into one, is regarded as a 'trope'. The

employment of such a trope is meant to draw a picture or to trigger a sensation, (Turco, 1973:143).

Therefore, an epithet functions as a modifier and it is descriptive rather than evaluative in nature; in the sense that it specifies some qualities or features of the thing represented by the noun or pronoun to describe the thing talked about.

## **Section Two**

### **Compound Epithets in Grammar**

In English, words particularly adjectives and nouns are combined into compound structures in a variety of ways. These can be clearly recognized through examining form, order and function of those adjectives.

#### **2.1 Form :**

Adjectives are classified according to their forms into: simple and compound. The compound adjectives are composed of two or more words written variously as (1) separate words, (2) hyphenated words, or as (3) one solid word. These groups of words render the meaning of a single adjective.

According to their forms, compound adjectives are either in the closed form in which the words are joined together as in *blueprint paper*; or in the hyphenated form like *well-made screen*; or in the open form such as *slowly moving target*. As regards their grammatical structure, compound adjectives may have one of the following:

- 
- *Noun + ing-participle (v.)*                      *man-eating*
  - *Noun + ed-participle (v.)*                      *self-employed*
  - *Adjective / adverb + ing-participle (v.)*      *easy-going*
  - *Adjective / adverb + ed-participle (v.)*      *far-fetched*  
*new laid*
  - *Noun + adjective*                                *homesick*
  - *Noun + noun*                                      *ail-filter*
  - *Adjective + adjective*                          *bitter-sweet*
  - *Adjective + noun*                                *short-wave*
  - *Verb + adverb*                                  *feedback*
  - *Verb + noun*                                      *running-time*
  - *Verb + preposition*                              *pickup*

(Turner, 1971: 35-37)

a compound adjective is then a unit consisting of two elements to form a new lexical item. This shows the productive and creative nature of the compounding process, and the syntactic relations of the compounding elements by paraphrase. For example, the two compounds *play boy* and *call girl* are specifically similar, consisting of **verb + noun**; yet the relations of their elements are different: *play boy*                      *the boy plays*, i.e.

**verb + subject**, whereas *call girl*                      \* *calls the girl*, i.e.

verb + object, (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973: 499).

Most of compound adjectives are hyphenated, and these are used primarily to reduce or eliminate the possibility of confusion or misinterpretation. They are also used to reinforce clarity and facilitate

readability. Compound adjectives that come before the words they modify must be hyphenated particularly when they are formed with a present or past participle.

Compound adjectives that are formed with words ending in *ly* are not hyphenated, as in “oddly shaped head,” (Arnold, 1996: 77).

Compound adjectives can also be divided into three main groups:

- a) Endocentric single adjective center: in this group, the adjective occurs in the second position. The present and past participle in their adjectival form can also be included in this pattern

**Example:**

*Man-made* , *ever-lasting*  
*Home-made* , *light-blue*  
*Sea-going* , *high-born*

- b) Endocentric co-ordinate adjective center: this group is relatively rare in English, e.g. bitter-sweet, blue-green; Anglo-Norman. However, either element can stand as a head in this group.
- c) Exocentric adjective compound center: in this group, the head is not the center because it cannot represent the whole compound, e.g. *a running boy*, (Al-Jaburi, 1992: 65-66).

### **2.2 Order :**

Compound adjectives usually come before the noun or pronoun they modify. This is the *attributive position*. When they immediately follow the word they modify, they are in the *appositive position*, while compound adjectives coming after a non-action verb and modifying the subject are called *predicative adjectives* (adjective subjective complement).

### **2.3 Use :**

Compound adjective should be considered as a unit, not as individual words because they work together to modify a noun or pronoun instead of each doing so individually.

Adjectives that are in compound forms are used to describe, limit or quantify nouns and pronouns. Compound adjectives are thus usually descriptive rather than evaluative.

## **Section Three**

### **A Stylistic Analysis of Compound Epithets In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet***

Before embarking on the analysis of compound epithets, it is not presumptuous to outline the place these epithets occupy in Shakespeare's language and style.

### **3.1 Compound Epithets in Shakespeare's language :**

On observing the various aspects of the language of Shakespeare in a play, one can recognize how language is employed to achieve

certain dramatic purposes, and how certain linguistic structures are prioritized.

One of these prominent qualities which characterize Shakespeare's language is the frequent use of compound epithets particularly in *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare deploys such epithets flexibly in the sense that they are the principal vehicle of meaning, and encapsulates much of the metaphorical imagery within his work. However, Blake is of the contention that the use of compound epithets, in both Shakespeare's and Spencer's poetry, is an imitation of French models, especially those of du Bartas, (Blake, 1983: 18).

That compound epithets enrich language by introducing new words is beyond any linguistic uncertainty. They serve as modifiers consisting in combinations of different parts of speech.

Besides, an indulgence in modifiers, it appears, is usually considered as a feature of poetic or even too poetic style. Certainly, modifiers were liberally used in the Elizabethan period; they are more characteristic of Shakespeare's early rather than his mature style, (Ibid. p. 68).

Shakespeare's style is, hence, characterized by the use of certain stylistic devices, which cannot be available at all unless the dramatist employs them in such a way that they involve the very idea they are expressing.

Compound epithets are undoubtedly regarded as a stylistic device, and they are rendered feasible in Shakespeare's imagery, diction, and in certain grammatical constructions. A case in point,

however, is that what is stylistically significant is not only the choice of words but how they are used as well.

### 3.2 A Stylistic Analysis of Compound Epithets :

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is a love story, "celebrating the brief joy of youthful passion," (Craig and Bevington, 1975: 43). It is also a story of hatred; and throughout the play "love and hate are interrelated opposites," (Ibid. p. 45). However, this "inveterate hatred" does not in itself lead to tragedy until "its effects are fatally complicated through misunderstanding," (ibid.).

Such a theme has been presented by the notable presentation of the grammatical constructions and figures of speech. As a stylistic device, compound epithets are formed in a variety of grammatical constructions by means of joining various parts of speech.

Compound epithets function as adjectives and adjectivals that describe some entities found in the play. In addition, most of them are used figuratively. Hence, they may be called metaphorical compound epithets, as in *earth-trading stars* (Act 1, scene 2, line 25, p. 36), *gray-eyed morn* (Act 2, scene 3, line 1, p. 63) and *love-devouring death* (Act 1, scene 6, line 7, p. 77).

As far as the forms of these compound epithets are concerned, it is noticeable that the majority of them are hyphenated, while few are not. This may suggest that Shakespeare tended to eliminate the possibility of confusion in interpreting those epithets by audience, particularly those that are formed into present or past participle.

The un-hyphenated compound epithets are either close or open forms

***Close Forms***

- goodman boy (Act 1, scene 5, line 78, p. 50)
- gentlemanlike offer (Act 2, scene 4, line 161, p. 73)

***Open Forms***

- humbly bowed knees (Act 3, scene 1, line 155, p. 85)
- newly entertained revenge (Act 3, scene 1, line 170, p. 85)
- lately dead (Act 3, scene 3, line 153, p. 97)
- noble trained parentage (Act 3, scene 5, line 182, p. 106)

Moreover, the grammatical constructions into which the two elements or parts of speech are combined can be illustrated as follows:

**1. Noun + verb (ed-participle) as in :**

|                              |                                    |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| star-crossed lovers          | (prologue, line 6, p. 25)          |
| death-marked love            | (prologue, line 9, p. 25)          |
| neighbour-stained steel      | (Act 1, scene 1, line 75, p. 29)   |
| hood-winked (predicative)    | (Act 1, scene 3, line 4, p. 43)    |
| dove-feathered raven         | (Act 3, scene 1, line 123, p. 83)  |
| maiden-widowed (predicative) | (Act 3, scene 2, line 76, p. 91)   |
| tempest-tossed body          | (Act 3, scene 5, line 138, p. 104) |
| fine-eyed fury               | (Act 3, scene 2, line 135, p. 43)  |
| self-willed harlotry         | (Act 4, scene 2, line 14, p. 114)  |
| world-wearied flesh          | (Act 5, scene 3, line 112, p. 133) |

**2. Adjective + verb (ed-participle) as in :**

|                         |                                    |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| well-appareled April    | (Act 1, scene 2, line 27, p. 36)   |
| gray-coated gnat        | (Act 1, scene 4, line 65, p.46)    |
| well-governed youth     | (Act 1, scene 5, line 68, p. 50)   |
| white-upturned          | (Act 2, scene 2, line 19, p. 57)   |
| precious-juiced flowers | (Act 2, scene 3, line 8, p. 63)    |
| single-soled jest       | (Act 2, scene 4, line 62, p. 69)   |
| nimble-pinioned doves   | (Act 2, scene 5, line 7, p. 74)    |
| fiery-footed steeds     | (Act 3, scene 2, line 1, p. 86)    |
| sober-swited marton     | ( Act 3, scene 2, line 11, p. 87)  |
| black-browed night      | (Act 3, scene 2, line 20, p. 87)   |
| long-experienced time   | (Act 4, scene 1, line 60, p. 111)  |
| new-made grave          | (Act 4, scene 1, line 84, p. 112)  |
| ill-shaped fishes       | (Act 5, scene 1, line 44, p. 126)  |
| new-made bridegroom     | (Act 5, scene 3, line 235, p. 138) |

**3. Adjective + v. (ing-participle) :**

|                         |                                   |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| all-cheering sun        | (Act 1, scene 1, line 126, p. 31) |
| well-seeming forms      | (Act 1, scene 1, line 170, p. 32) |
| still-waking sleep      | (Act 1, scene 1, line 173, p. 33) |
| all-seeing sun          | (Act 1, scene 2, line 92, p. 38)  |
| ill-beseeming semblance | (Act 1, scene 5, line 74, p. 50)  |
| lazy-pacing clouds      | (Act 2, scene 2, line 31, p. 57)  |
| ill-beseeming beast     | (Act 3, scene 3, line 112, p. 96) |
| ill-divining soul       | (Act 3, scene 4, line 54, p. 101) |

**4. Noun + v. (ing-participle), as in :**

|                       |                                   |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| saint-seducing gold   | (Act 1, scene 1, line 207, p. 34) |
| earth-treading stars  | (Act 1, scene 2, line 25, p. 36)  |
| dew-dropping south    | (Act 1, scene 4, line 101, p. 47) |
| love-performing night | (Act 3, scene 2, line 5, p. 87)   |
| death-darting eye     | (Act 3, scene 2, line 47, p. 88)  |

**5 . Adverb + v.(ing-participle) :**

|                    |                                   |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| soon-speeding gear | (Act 5, scene 1, line 60, p. 127) |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|

**6. Preposition + noun, as in :**

|                       |                                 |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| without-book prologue | (Act 1, scene 3, line 7, p. 43) |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|

**7. V. (ed-participle) + preposition, as in :**

|                    |                                  |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| unlooked-for sport | (Act 1, scene 5, line 29, p. 49) |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|

**8. V. (ing-prticiple) + adjective, as in :**

|                        |                                  |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| flattering-sweet dream | (Act 2, scene 2, line 14, p. 61) |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|

**9. Noun + noun, as in :**

|                 |                                   |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|
| dove-house wall | (Act 1, scene 3, line 27, p. 40)  |
| fruit-tree tops | (Act 2, scene 2, line 108, p. 60) |

**10. Noun + adjective, as in :**

|                    |                                   |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| silver-sweet sound | (Act 2, scene 2, line 165, p. 62) |
| wind-swift wing    | (Act 2, scene 5, line 8, p. 74)   |
| heart-sick graons  | (Act 3, scene 3 , line 71, p. 94) |

|                  |                                    |
|------------------|------------------------------------|
| life-weary taker | (Act 5, scene 1, line 62, p. 127)  |
| sea-sick park    | (Act 5, scene 3, line 118, p. 133) |

**11. Adjective + noun, as in :**

|                        |                                    |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| good-man boy           | (Act 1, scene 5, line 78, p. 50)   |
| wild-goose chase       | (Act 2, scene 4, line 66, p. 69)   |
| three-hours wife       | (Act 3, scene 2, line 99, p. 90)   |
| sharp-ground knife     | (Act 3, scene 3, line 43, p. 93)   |
| green-sickness carrion | (Act 3, scene 3, line 157, p. 105) |
| sweet-heart (madam)    | (Act 4, scene 5, line 3, p. 119)   |
| bare-foot brother      | (Act 5, scene 2, line 5, p. 128)   |

**12. Adjective + adjective, as in :**

|                          |                                   |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| loving-jealous (you)     | (Act 2, scene 2, line 181, p. 63) |
| wolvish-ravening lamb    | (Act 3, scene 2, line 76, p. 89)  |
| savage-wild (intentions) | (Act 5, scene 3, line 37, p. 130) |

**13. Noun + adverb, as in :**

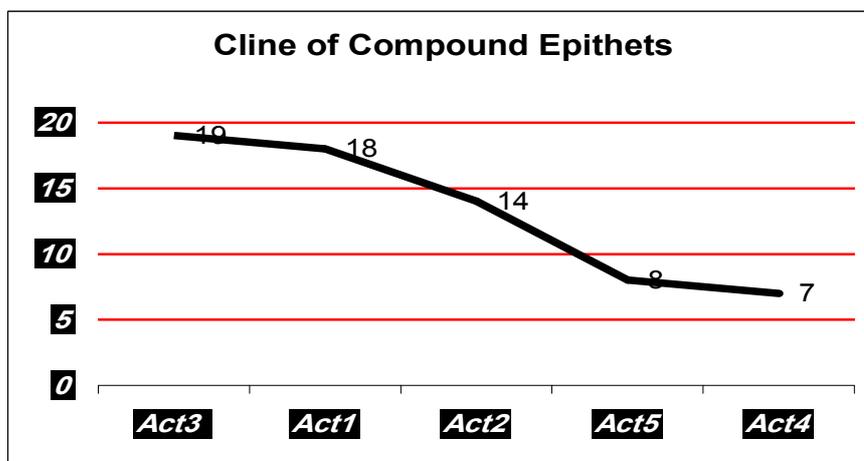
|                     |                                   |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| gentlemanlike offer | (Act 2, scene 4, line 161, p. 73) |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|

**14. Adverb(-ly) + V. (ed-participle), as in :**

|                           |                                    |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| humbly-bowed knees        | (Act 3, scene 1, line 155, p. 85)  |
| newly-entertained revenge | (Act 3, scene 1, line 170, p. 85)  |
| nobly-trained parentage   | (Act 3, scene 5, line 182, p. 106) |

A network of grammatical patterns has apparently been deployed in order to bring these compound epithets into prominence. Some of those patterns are really foregrounded in the sense that they

are more frequently used than others. This can clearly be seen in patterns (1), (2), (3) , (10) , and (11).



Furthermore, most of these epithets are attributively positioned, i.e., they precede the word they modify. Few of them are predicative.

The following clines illustrate the distribution of these compound epithets.

The cline shows that the use of compound epithets pervades the first three acts of the play, but their stylistic prominence gets lower on the scale in the last two acts.

This does really prove what has been pointed out above that Shakespeare's use of compound epithets is a striking characteristic marking of his early rather than his mature style, (see 1.3).

However, the lexical analysis of compound epithets involves their division into categories according to the type of noun they modify. Compound epithets could be categorized in terms of the

abstract/concrete dichotomy of the nouns they describe. According to this dichotomy, there are thirty concrete nouns and twenty-eight abstract nouns that are modified by such epithets. To cite few illustrative examples:

- **Abstract nouns:** *love, fury, April, death, youth, jest, intents, time, sleep, soul, south, sport, dream, groans, sound, chase, offer, revenge, morn, etc.*
- **Concrete nouns:** *steel, raven, body, flesh, flowers, fishes, bridegroom, sun, stars, gold, eye, well, wings, knife, boy, lamb, knees, gear, bark, etc.*

Compound epithets can be divided into those which describe either abstract or concrete nouns. Concrete nouns can also then be grouped into certain lexical sets such as: **nature set** as in *sun, stars, clouds, flowers, doves, raven, fishes, gnat, air, beast, lamb, etc.*; **family sets** as in *boy, wench, marton, bridegroom, brother, wife*; **body parts** as in *body, flesh, eye, wings, knees, carrion*.

Likewise, abstract nouns can also be grouped into certain lexical sets, the most lexically dominant of which are **feeling and passion sets** as in *love, fury, revenge, groans*; **mental experience sets** as in *dream, sleep*; **misery set** as in *groans, death, grave*; **time set** as in *April, morn, night, time*. Consequently, these lexical sets formulate a lexical hierarchy in the play.

Further, compound epithets distribute themselves into those which assign concrete characteristics to abstract nouns, and those which confer abstractness on concrete nouns. As regards the first

category, compound epithets are often figurative as in *wild-goose chase*, *well-appareled April*, *fiery-footed steeds*, *still-waking sleep*, *lazy-pacing clouds*, *love-devouring death*, *fire-eyed fury*, *dew-dropping south*. Epithets as these appear to be concrete, and since they are used to describe abstract nouns, they turn out to be abstract in their signification.

Another category of compound epithets can be clearly presented in the following examples: *neighbour-stained steel*, *world-wearied flesh*, *new-made grave*, *all-cheering sun*, *saint-seducing gold*, *death-darting eye*, *sea-sick bark*, *wolvish-ravening lamb*, *green-sickness carrion*. These two lexical categories are more prominent than others.

As far as the meaning of these compound epithets are concerned, what can be clearly recognized is that it is rather hard to pinpoint the specific meanings of most of such epithets unless one realizes that they are metaphorically used. Thus, the reader's attention is drawn to the way in which compound epithets in *Romeo and Juliet* are formed as well as their suggestive meanings.

It may not be wide of the mark, therefore, to point out here that some of the compound epithets may serve as clues to the overall themes of the play: *fate*, *love* and *death* as in *love-devouring death*, *star-crossed lovers*, to cite a few examples.

### **Conclusion:**

The foregoing stylistic analysis shows that Shakespeare has paid compound epithets a great deal of his attention in this play.

Linguistically foregrounded as they are, compound epithets serve as a marked stylistic feature of his style in *Romeo and Juliet*.

He has invested a network of different grammatical constructions which are tactfully manipulated with a peculiar stylistic skill to bring forth their subtle meanings.

However, compound epithets also prove to be problematic with respect to their semantic interpretations because one cannot always tell by the words they contain what the compounds mean, for the meaning of a compound is not always the total sum of the meanings of its parts. In addition, Shakespeare's use of those epithets is figurative. In broader terms, his style is marked by the frequent use of compound epithets which culminate into the descriptive aspect of his language in this play. But this frequency declines at the very end of *Romeo and Juliet*, which indicates a shift in his style from more descriptive to less or sparsely descriptive. This sparing use of compound epithets has characterized the final act in the play.

This stylistic evidence accrued corroborates what is often critically assumed that Shakespeare in this play is more of a poet than he is of a dramatist.

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