SERIAL KILLER IN POPULAR LITERATURE:
A FORMULA ANALYSIS OF *HANNIBAL LECTER* SERIES

Dian Nur Endah
diannurendah@gmail.com

Abstract

Using textual analysis, this research attempts to find out the formula of Hannibal Lecter novels. These formula is analyzed and studied to acquire convention and invention in Hannibal Lecter characterization compared to other serial killer fictions. These two aspects are the foremost things that enable Hannibal Lecter novel series become acceptable and popular in American society. The result of this research is that there are some aspects in Hannibal Lecter characterization that are defined as convention of serial killer genre; 1) depiction of serial killer as white male, 2) depiction of serial killer as being highly intelligent and strong. Meanwhile, aspects that show invention of serial killer characerization are; 1) Depiction of serial killer as person who commits killing to bad people, 2) Performing cannibalism practice as civilized action, 3) Being woman lover, not misogynist, and 4) Being sociable man.

Keywords: serial killer, formula, convention, invention, crimes

Introduction

Novels and films that narrate serial killing have been existing in American popular literature since the emergence of *The Killer Inside Me* (1940). It is followed by series like Robert Bloch's *Psycho* (1960-1980), Patricia Highsmith's *Mr. Ripley* (1970-1980) series and *Hannibal Lecter* series (1981-2003) by Thomas Harris. These novels are made into various adaptations such as films and serial television. All of them depicts serial killer as violence performer that torture and kill their victims.

Among the series, Hannibal Lecter is the most popular one. Hannibal the cannibal has fulfilled public enjoyment of serial killer since its emergence in 1981 in *The Red Dragon*. The sequels, *The Silence of the Lambs, Hannibal* and *Hannibal Rising* have been published in more than twwentieth different languages and have sold tens of millions of copies (Random House, 2005: Sexton).

Popularity of literary works is actually associated with sense of familiarity in which served by two conditions, first, the story provides the most basic pattern that is acceptable in many different cultural and social backgrounds. This pattern is not limited in any spesific stage like gender, age and race. Second, the story serves the spesific characteristics in which commonly used in a society where it is produced. This characteristic is limited to certain society that it can be different from one to others.

This sense of familiary is not the only measurement of novels or films' popularity. A novel or film must have a certain unique qualities that differ them to others. This unique qualities can be found in depiction of character, plot, setting or

anything that deals with the intrinsic unsure of the story. This different depiction can be called as deviation or what best called as invention. In term of popular literature, this unique quality enables a certain work to be more appealing than others.

In perspective of this research, Hannibal Lecter novel series comprises sense of familiarity and unique qualities that makes them become so much popular in American society. Hannibal Lecter in one side converge and all at once deviated from formula of serial killer convention. The focus of studying on Hannibal Lecter formula also means sudying social and cultural background.

Methodology

The data of this research are collected by the technique of library research. The primary source of the data is taken from the novel *The red Dragon* (1981), *The Silence of The Lambs* (1988)*, Hannibal* (1999) and *Hannibal Rising* (2006) by Thomas Harris published by St. Martin's Press. The secondary data taken from the movie adaptation with the same title that released from 1991 until 2007. Other discourses such as journal, articles, thesis, dissertation, essays, dictionaries, and encyclopedia taken to support the thesis-writing process.

This research uses descriptive qualitative as method of analysis, and, thus, it is methodologically qualitative research in analyzing characterization of Hannibal Lecter in *The Red Dragon* (1981), *The Silence of The Lambs* (1988)*, Hannibal* (1999) and *Hannibal Rising* (2006).

Discussion

Depiction of Hannibal Lecter as serial killer comprises conventional formulas that are specified into American society. This conventional formula enables Hannibal Lecter to be acceptable in society in spite of its violence descriptions. Hannibal Lecter comprises characteristic that are deviated from most portrayal of serial killer. Hannibal Lecter shows contradict characteristics that mostly found in serial killer fictions. These invention precisely makes Hannibal Lecter becomes more appealing than others. These unique characteristics also give new information about alteration in society.

Conventional Attributes of serial killer

Conventional attributes of serial killer comprises the depiction of white male. Hannibal Lecter is portrayed as white in spite of the fact that he is Italian who are usually portrayed as having darker skin. This can be seen from the description of four novels. This whitess is also well portrayed in movie adaptations like *The Silence of The Lambs* (1991)*, The Red Dragon* (2002)*, Hannibal* (2006) and *Hannibal Rising* (2007) that starred by Anthony Hopkins, Gaspard Ulliel and Mads Mikkelsen.

Another conventional attribute of serial killer is characteristics of having physical and intellectual strength. Both of characteristics are only found in depiction of white male. Other non-white male groups such as woman and black are in subordinate position. Whitess in novels and films depict highly intelligent whether it is attached to protagonist or anatagonist. Adi (2008) stated white villain (Euro-

America) is usually described as smart and tech master. They are the skilled people that espionage to the varying organization even with maximum security. Even if the criminal is perceived as mentally ill, still they are portrayed as highly intelligent (Adi, 2008).

Being violent or brutal is another characteristic that is attached to the depiction of white male. Adi (2008) states, *"kulit putih pucat bagi laki-laki, apalagi albino, dianggap sama seperti kulit hitam sebagai simbol kejahatan dan tindakan brutal"* (p. 109). Description of brutal or violent actions are so often found in portrayal of man that it is associated with stereotype of white male as being strong. Laura Cardey (2013) states that white male is used to be portrayed as stronger than female. The character is often angry and above all, he is aggressive in the extreme and engages in violent behavior. More specifically, Cardey (2013) states description of violent behavior is accompanied by the lack of emotional feeling.

Serial Killer depiction as Preservation of White Male Stereotype

Stereotype of white male as being highly intelligent can be seen through the way crimes are presented by Hannibal Lecter depiction. Through the novel series, Hannibal Lecter shows crime as action that needs superior ability. In *The Silence of The Lambs* (1988) Hannibal Lecter is narrated using some tricks to escape from cell with full surveillance. He purposely participated in the case of Buffalo Bill in Memphis by telling false information since he knew that the police guards in Memphis would treat him like a usual criminal not psychotic killer. Being undone from tight surveillance, Lecter had bigger chance to escape from the cell.

Hannibal Lecter is also narrated using his knowledge in surgery and human anatomy to victimize people. It can be seen through Hannibal Lecter's method in cutting open agent Kendler's skull. Using the usual scalpel, Hannibal Lecter cut off Kendler's skull and picks a part of the brain without using local anesthesia. "Dr Lecter's method in removing the top of Krendler's skull was as old as Egyptian medicine, except that he had the advantage of an autopsy saw with cranial blade, a skull key and better anesthetics. The brain itself feels no pain" (Harris, 2000, p. 350).

Another aspect that shows serial killer as highly intelligent man is that depiction of Hannibal Lecter that creates such complicated crime scene. He put much effort in displaying the bodies into such work of art. It is found that Lecter moves the bodies from the actual crime scene into such strange circumstances. He also encloses some unusual details to the bodies. For example, the murder inspector Rinaldi Pazzi in Florence Italy (*Hannibal*, 1999). Pazzi was found hung in the place his ancestor was hung, *Palazzo Vecchio* in building complex, *Piazza* in Florence. His stomach was torn with the heart is missing, replaced with the toxic flower, Belladonna.

In performing such killing or torturing, Hannibal Lecter does not leave any traceable evidence or forensics detail such as finger prints and blood sample. As lack of evidence, the crime scenes are barely possible to understand that police and psychiatrist demands the help from the one who is often depicted as genius to

participate in investigation. This depiction of genius person becomes crucial that it emphasizes the ability of the killer's in doing crimes. For example, depiction of Will Graham in *The Red Dragon* (1981) in which depicted as having great ability in analyzing human psyche. Though Graham owns such quality, still, he explains the difficulty of catching intelligent criminal like Hannibal Lecter.

Hannibal Lecter is also depicted as the lone fighter. The four novels narrates the fight of Hannibal Lecter versus FBI and psychiatrist team. Hannibal Lecter is narrated doing all criminal actions alone. He also has no partner that could hide him from police chase. On the other side, police force and mental health institution are in unity to arrest Hannibal Lecter. They have a team that comprises some experts such as forensic team, psychiatrist and FBI agents.

Through the novel series, Hannibal Lecter is not also depicted as high intelligent man but also as the strong man. Depiction of him as being strong can be seen in portrayal of Hannibal Lecter as violence performer. Four of the novels depict Hannibal Lecter as performer of punching, beating and stabbing. In *Hannibal Rising* (2006), it is narrated that Lecter often performed violent actions that he was known as rebel and a bully. Such performance of violent actions enable Hannibal Lecter to be perceived as being strong.

More specifically, in Hannibal Lecter novels, this depiction of being strong is seen through Hannibal Lecter's ways of killing. Besides showing murder as action that needs intelligence, Hannibal Lecter also shows murder as actualization of physical strength. Hannibal Lecter is never narrated using riffle or gun. He uses usual equipment that needs lots of physical strength such as rope, dagger or stick.

This depiction of Hannibal Lecter as the strong man is also accompanied by description of him as being lack of emotional feeling. Through the series, Hannibal Lecter is never narrated as being emotionally driven in killing or cannibalizing his victims. He is portrayed as tough man that commits killing and torturing without any fear or nervous. For example, Hannibal Lecter is narrated being calm while striking the nurse who tries to examine him. "He broke her jaw to get at her tongue. His pulse never got over eighty-five, even when he swallowed it" (Harris, 1988, p. 7).

Another aspect that shows characteristic of being strong is the record of victims and cannibal practice. In sum, Hannibal Lecter's victims are sixteen, as follows; two in *The Red Dragon* (1981), five in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), two in the *Hannibal* (1999) and seven in *Hannibal Rising* (2006). Meanwhile, Hannibal Lecter's record of cannibalism practice is that about five times throughout the novel. This human organ is considered as the trophies that it indicates Hannibal Lecter advancement for being killer.

Portrayal of Hannibal Lecter as intelligent and strong man implies that conventional depiction of white male as having physical and intellectual strength remains valid in society. This white male depiction circumscribes other non-white male groups like woman and non-white race to be portrayed as serial killer. Some serial killer

fictions that are deviated from this conventional depiction are not successful in their sale records, for example, *American Psycho 2* (2002). The film portrays Rachel Newman, a university student with tall-slim body and beautiful face as the killer of men from different ages with different profession such as university students, politician, detective etc. However, the film is deviated from other serial killer fiction that it narrates woman as its protagonist. In fact, the novel is deemed as the unrecommended thriller films due to bad ratings.

This conventional depiction also circumscribes white male serial killers that do not resemble the characteristic of having physical and intellectual strength. This can be seen in portrayal of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (1999). Bateman do not resemble other characteristic of white male as having intellectual strength. He merely shows killing and torturing as brutal actions. As the result, Bateman never gain good record in its sale and receives negative critic. The horror magazine *Bloody Disgusting* (2000) ranked the novel at no. 19 in its list of the top 20 horror book of the decade.

Hannibal Lecter Depiction as Deviation

It is previously stated that a successful work must have certain characteristics that are different from other works. These characteristics in which Cawelti (1976) defines as invention are embodied in the intrinsic unsure in the story become the certain appeal of the work. In this way, Hannibal Lecter depiction comprises some characteristics that make the series become more appealing than others. These characteristics can be measured through

the portrayal of serial killer that is mostly seen in other works.

Most of serial killer stories narrate the protagonist as the villain character. This can be seen from the depiction of their victims. Victims are often depicted as innocent people that they have no records in criminal action. They are people who purposely selected because they match to the pattern that the killers use, for example, depiction of victims in *Exquisite Corpse* (1996). The victims are depicted as two families from upper to middle class. They were selected based on the spesification of economic and profession background that the killer cannot afford.

Description of victim as seen in serial killers portrayal is the foremost thing that determines legality of killing they do. Adi (2008) states that killing and torturing are perceived as act of evil when it comes to innocent people. On the contrary, killing can be considered as good actions when it happens to villain. So to speak, crime is defined by the quality of its victims. Hence, character that performs violence to bad people cannot be considered as criminal but rather as hero.

In victimizing those innocent people, serial killer uses their own method of killing and torturing. Simpson (2000) calls this specific method as signature of the killer. Hence, every serial killer must has its own spesific signature, some of them practice monstrous characteristics like biting, and cannibalism, for example, depiction of cannibalism in *American Psycho* (1991). The novel depicts cannibalism through narration of protagonist, Patrick Bateman. Bateman is narrated eating the fleshy meet

and the brain of the girl that is previously killed and tortured.

Another aspect that is associated with serial killer depiction is that description of misogynist. Many serial killer fictions depict the protagonists as the woman hunter. Serial killers are often narrated performing rape, torturing and killing towards woman. This characteristic somehow becomes the inherent portrayal of serial killer fictions in twentieth century. Jane Caputi (1999) states out of ten serial killer novels, eitght of them narrates the story of woman victimization.

Beside killing and torturing, serial killer is also commonly depicted as being hateful to women. For example, John Felton in *Crimson Joy*, (1988) is so hateful to his mother that he calls her as blacky. This hatred actually comes from the traumatic chldhood that caused by troublesome mother as he is child. Many serial killer novel and films narrates woman as aunts, mother, or grandmother that torture their relatives or children physically and psychologically that it leaves the trauma.

Serial killer fictions also depict its protagonist as anti-social character. This can be seen from the portrayal of serial killer as being excluded from the society where they live. Their habitation is often narrated in such remote place; far away from most general people live, for example, depiction of Norman Bates habitation in *Psycho* (1959). Bates lives in the area of lonely roads where mostly people do not pass by.

This characteristic of anti-social person makes serial killer to be unknown. None of serial killers like Norman Bates, Thomas Ripley and John Felton have popularity among people. These serial killers are depicted as general people with no reputation in his society, for example, Norman Bates is only known as the owner of the motel, while John Felton is known as football coach.

Since those serial killers are not accustomed to gather with community, they take a little care to their looks. Many novels depict serial killer as person who does not bother with their outfit, for example, John Felton in *Crimson Joy* (1988). The novel depicts Felton as an ignorant man who wears training trousers with sport jacket and a baseball hat on everuwhere he goes.

Invention of Serial Killer Depiction

Hannibal Lecter shows the contradict characteristics that mostly seen in portrayal of serial killers like John Felton, Thomas Ripley and Francis Dolorhyde. Contrast those serial killers that is depicted as villain, Hannibal Lecter is depicted as hero. This can be seen from description of Hannibal Lecter's victims. Those who are victimized by Hannibal Lecter are categorized as bad people. For example, Nazi ex-soldiers who do harms to his family and cannibalize his sister, Mischa Lecter.

Second category of people that victimized by Hannibal Lecter are those who do not practice politeness especially towards women he respected. For example, it is narrated that in *The Silence of The Lambs* (1988), Lecter kills Miggs, the imprisoned patient next to him, because he threw cement to Clarice Starling, an FBI agent whom Lecter respects.

The last category of Hannibal Lecter's victim is that people who gives the hard times to woman he loved, Clarice Starling. They are depicted as the character that only take an advantage of Starling's investigation in finding Hannibal Lecter. Starling's senior partner, agent Kendler is portrayed as bossy man who always tries to interfere with Starling's career in the Bureau. Another example is that depiction of Dr. Chilton, the head of mental health hospital in Baltimore. Dr. Chilton is portrayed as man with popularity obsession that he makes use of Starling's investigation on Buffalo Bill case.

Commit killing towards bad people indeed makes Hannibal Lecter diverge from other serial killers. However, there are other specific aspects that enable a character to be perceived as hero. In *Mitos Film Laga* (2008), Adi (2008) explains the characteristics of hero as follows, *1) tidak pengecut, 2) pemberani, 3) memilki motif kemanusiaan yang kuat, 4) membunuh karena terpaksa, 5) penyendiri, 6) tidak dinamis, 7) memiliki integritas yang tinggi dan 8) mampu mengendalikan pikiran, kemampuan dan perasaannya* (p. 102-106).

Based on the definition above, Hannibal Lecter depiction as serial killer does not belong to the characteristics of hero. He is depicted as mentally ill that he kills his victims without remorse and guilt. As the result, Lecter does not have control to hold the urge in killing and torturing people. In *Hannibal Rising* (2006), Hannibal Lecter is asked by lady Murasaki to hand the killer of his sister to the police but he did not listen that he keeps torturing his victim.

In some occasion, there is depiction that Hannibal Lecter kills his victims joyfully. Hannibal Lecter is narrated playing musical instrument or singing while he kills his victims. Hannibal Lecter listened to a classical music, Glen Gough Variation, when he dissects agent Kendler's skull (*Hannibal*, 1999). Lecter also plays a lute before he slashes Paul Momund into pieces (*Hannibal Rising*, 2006).

Hannibal Lecter depiction as mentally ill is deviated from the convention of hero. In many films and novels, depiction of mentally ill precisely can be seen in portrayal of villain. Villain, according to urban dictionary, is a character tends to have a negative effect on other character. More specifically, Adi (2008) stated the characteristics of villain as; *1)mencari kekayaan 2)mengganggu masyarakat 3)memaksakan ideology 4)kecewa terhadap kenyataan dan 5)mencoba mengubah nilai* (p. 106).

Hannibal Lecter does not belong to those characteristics. Lecter depiction as the killer of bad people has positive effect to other characters like Lady Murasaki and Clarice Starling. By killing bad people, Lecter facilitates the safety of women he loves. Through this depiction, it is clear that Lecter's crime is not motivated by richness or power and neither had he had the primary goal to change social value.

It can be stated that though Hannibal Lecter is depicted as mentally ill, he cannot be perceived as villain. This depiction of serial killer can be considered as the changed conception of hero. It explains that there is alteration in conception of hero in society. Adi (2014) in *Anakronisme Dalam Serial TV Dexter*

has previously stated the similar thing in analyzing depiction of serial killer, Dexter Morgan. In television series *Dexter* (2003-2013), Dexter Morgan is depicted as the protagonist who killed bad people. Dexter is a mental illness sufferer that his motive of killing is actually based on his psychological need in seeing tortured bodies and blood. Adi (2014) states Dexter Morgan portrayal as anachronism of hero depiction.

This depiction of serial killer as hero is actually associated with dramatization between evil versus good. In crime narratives, dramatization between good and evil is performed by the punishment of the bad guy. Raney (2002) states that depiction of punishment in which called as retribution is crucial that it brings sense of justice to the reader. "Criminal suspects being murdered is typical of retribution that makes statement what is fair and appropriate retribution in which by means conveying the sense of justice to the reader" (p. 30).

In this way, hero becomes the agent that serves punishment for the bad guys. Therefore, how hero wins the battle over the villain becomes matter since it deals with the measurement of reader's enjoyment. "*Si pahlawan harus membalas kejahatan yang dilakukan antagonis dengan setimpal dan cara apapun jika diperlukan dengan cara yang lebih kejam daripada tindakan penjahat itu*" (Adi, 2008, p. 111).

Hannibal Lecter's depiction as psychopathic serial killer enables him to intensify enjoyment by his capability in doing sadistic action. Being lack of remorse and guilt, Hannibal Lecter

performs punishment of bad guys in more painful ways. For example, five of ex-Nazi soldier who kidnapped Lecter's sisters are tortured in different ways that they died wretchedly.

Another invention found in Hannibal Lecter series is that performance of cannibalism practice as artistic action. Hannibal Lecter is depicted as serial killer who practices cannibalism towards his victims. He cooks human organs such as livers, lungs or stomach with some proteins like eggs. Sometimes, he also marinates them with some herbs such as chianti and amarone. "A census taker tried to quantify me once. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a big Amarone" (Harris, 1988, p. 14).

Hannibal Lecter also treats food in best way. Lecter used to show appreciation toward food that he serves them as masterpiece. This can also be seen through Hannibal Lecter way in selecting people who taste his dishes. Hannibal Lecter invites respectable and famous people only to his banquet, for example, in *The Silence of The Lambs* (1988). He fetes the dinner to president and conductor of the Baltimore philharmonic.

Beside showing cannibalism as aesthetic action, another invention aspect found in Hannibal Lecter is that depiction as woman lover. This can be seen through description of his victims that are identified as men. As previously stated, Hannibal Lecter has record of killing about fourteen. The thing is that none of his victim is identified as woman. Other than that, Hannibal Lecter is never narrated torturing woman. Other aspects that show Hannibal Lecter as woman lover is his attitude in treating his

lover. Often, Hannibal Lecter shows protective actions to his little sister, Mischa Lecter. For example, when he and his sister are left alone by the death of their parents, Hannibal Lecter protects his sister from the strangers that entered their lodge to take a shelter (*Hannibal Rising*, 2006). This depiction of woman lover is also seen through Hannibal Lecter's romantic expression towards his aunt, lady Murasaki. It is verified through his way in calling lady Murasaki as my lady. In one occasion, Lecter also shows his affection by sending her flowers. "Hannibal would certainly bring flowers. Hannibal brought flowers. Tulips and Casablanca lilies and ferns in a tall arrangement sticking up from the pillion seat of his motorcycle" (Harris, 2002, p. 154). Hannibal Lecter also shows supportive actions to woman. This can be seen through his support to Clarice Starling's career as FBI agent. Lecter states his admiration of her spirit to survive in Bureau that filled with hypocrite men.

Unlike other serial killers that are hateful to woman, Hannibal Lecter is depicted as having warm feelings. This can be seen through his attachment to his sister, Mischa Lecter. Hannibal Lecter is so attached to Mischa that he feels so loss for her death. In his adult years, Hannibal Lecter often imagined his togetherness with Mischa. "..For years Lecter had teased the problem, wanting very much for Hawking to be right the first time, for the expanding universe to stop, for entropy to mend itself, for Mischa, eaten, to be whole again. Time" Hannibal, 2002, p. 268). In other ocassion, depiction of having warm feeling is also seen in his admiration of Clarice Starling. It comes from Lecter's failure in replacing the image of Mischa into Clarice Starling. In Hannibal (1999), Lecter uses drugs and hypnotic therapy to instill the image of Mischa in Starling but it did not work.

Hannibal Lecter's behavior and feeling about woman actually comes from women figures in his young age. Hannibal Lecter is raised by merciful women like his mother, and lady Murasaki. These women treat Hannibal Lecter kindly that it does not leave trauma for him. Hannibal Lecter's mother is depicted as respectable woman who raises children lovingly (*Hannibal Rising*, 2004). It is same with lady Murasaki. She teaches Lecter many things like art, language, fighting and men's etiquette.

The last thing found in Hannibal Lecter depiction is that description as sociable man. This can be seen through depiction of him as participant of different communities in society. In *The Red Dragon,* (1981), Hannibal Lecter is narrated attending orchestra and opera regularly that he made his own community with the fellow audience. Besides, Hannibal Lecter is also depicted taking part in educated and respectable circle like lecturer and professor. He used to arrange some lecture in front of Studiolo, it is the name for an ornate private study that often met in the Palazzo Vecchio. One of Lecter's acquaintances, professor Sogliato asks him to do lecture on Dante, "He is such an expert on Dante, let him lecture on Dante, to the Studiolo. Let him face them extempore" (Harris, 1999, p. 86).

Depiction of Hannibal Lecter as sociable man enables him to take care of his appearance. It can be seen through Hannibal Lecter depiction who always wears nice suits when he was outside the

jail. "His dark clothing is beautifully cut, even for Italian" (Harris, 2000, p. 208).

Conclusion

Hannibal Lecter novel series comprises general standardization and unique qualities that enable them become popular in American society. This general standardization serves sense of familiarity that it makes the series acceptable in society. It is comprises two aspects; first, archetypal pattern that enables the work to be known in many different society. Second, cultural pattern that makes the series acceptable in certain society.

Hannibal Lecter comprises cultural pattern of serial killer genre by depiction of serial killer as white intelligent man. It can be seen through; Hannibal Lecter use of intrigue in escaping from jail. Hannibal Lecter also comprises the conventional attribute of white man as being strong. This can be seen from depiction of Hannibal Lecter as violent man. He also shows the record of killing and cannibalism practices.

Hannibal Lecter also comprises some characteristics that are deviated from most of serial killer depiction. These unique characteristics enable the novels to be more appealing than others. These inventions consist of; first, depiction of Hannibal Lecter as hero, second, depiction of cannibalism practices as artistic actions not monstrous action. Other two aspects that are identified as serial killer invention in Hannibal Lecter depiction are; portrayal of serial killer as sociable man, not anti-social person, the last, depiction of serial killer as woman lover, not a misogynist.

These depictions of serial killer as seen in Hannibal Lecter series show the existence of stability and alteration in society. Depiction of Hannibal Lecter as intelligent and violent man shows that stereotype of white male as having physical and intellectual strength is still valid in society. Meanwhile, depiction of serial killer as hero implies that there is alteration about the concept of hero in society.

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