



Literary Studies

Social Class Inequality in 1912 English Society as Reflected in J.B. Priestley's Play Script *An Inspector Calls*

Wirda Humaira Yahya¹, Agus Salim Mansyur², Agry Pramita³

^{1,2,3}English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Adab and Humanities, UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung

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CORRESPONDENCE

E-mail:wirdahumaira09@gmail.com

A B S T R A C T

This study examines social class inequality in 1912 English society as reflected in J.B. Priestley's play *An Inspector Calls*. The play highlights the structure of society based on powerful class differences, where the upper class represented by the Birling family and Gerald Croft have privileges that the working class represented by Eva Smith does not have. The study uses a mimetic approach that views literature as a reflection of human life. To explore how inequality is portrayed through interactions between characters, this study uses a qualitative descriptive method. In addition, it uses the concept of base and superstructure in Marxism to examine how the economic structure (base) shapes and maintains social norms, ideologies, and institutions (superstructure) to perpetuate the dominance of the bourgeoisie over the working class. The results of this study reveal three main aspects: labor exploitation, class domination and social control, and gender inequality in capitalism. The results show that *An Inspector Calls* not only serves as a play, but also as a critique of capitalist society, by exposing how the economic structure maintains class-based oppression.

INTRODUCTION

Social class inequality in literature refers to how literary works reflect, explore, or criticize the inequality due to social class that occurs in society. Literary works often serve as a medium to illustrate social injustice, whether through conflicts between class, gender, or ethnicity. Such works demonstrate how hierarchical social structures create suffering or marginalization, inspiring readers to understand and confront these social realities. Eagleton says that literature is an ideology. He defines ideology as a way of thinking, feeling, and believing that relates to the structure and relations of power in society (Eagleton, 1996, p. 13). That is, ideology is not just a personal belief, but a collection of values and views that support or maintain certain power relations. These ideologies influence how people perceive the world and how power is reproduced through various systems, including literature. In this context, literature is considered as a reflection of existing ideologies, as well as a tool to question or criticize them. Eagleton emphasizes that the relationship between literature and ideology cannot be separated from the dynamics of power in society.

Literature cannot be separated from the context of society. In describing life, literature not only presents fictional stories, but also portraits of social reality. Literature can be considered as a reflection of the reality experienced by society, whether in terms of social, cultural, political, or economic aspects. As a depiction of real events in an era, literary work becomes one way to understand the social history of a

particular society. Abrams (in Pradopo, 1995, p. 81) says that literary work can be understood based on the overall context that surrounds it, namely nature (life), the reader, the author, and the work itself. Based on this, there are four types of orientation in literature, mimetic, pragmatic, expressive, and objective (Abrams & Harpham, 2014, p. 72). The mimetic orientation views literary work as an imitation, or reflection, or representation of the world and human life (Nurrachman, 2023b, p. 11). Swingewood in his book *The Sociology of Literature* says that “The most popular perspective adopts the documentary aspect of literature arguing that it provides a mirror to the age” (Laurenson & Swingewood, 1972, p. 31). He sees literary work as a historical document or mirror to the age in which it was created. This perspective argues that literature reflects the social, cultural, and political conditions of a particular time, such as lifestyles, values, and events that affected society at that time.

The death of Queen Victoria marked the end of the long Victorian Era, during which England was known for its stability and imperial expansion. In 1901, England began to enter a new era known as the Edwardian Era, under the reign of King Edward VII. The Edwardian Era that lasted from 1901-1910 brought cultural, social, and political influences that continued until World War I in 1914. The Edwardian Era was known for the prosperity of the upper classes but the inequality of the working class. People’s lives were heavily influenced by strict social stratification, with the upper classes living in luxury with glamorous lifestyles, big parties, and high fashion. They typically live in comfortable urban or rural areas, have large houses, and personal servants. Masterman in his book *The Condition of England* says that “It is a society organized from top to bottom on a money basis, a business basis, with everything else as a side show” (Masterman, 1909, p. 36). It suggests that society was divided based on wealth and business, where money and economic activity became the main basis for organizing social relations, values, and hierarchy. Everything else beyond the financial aspect is considered less important. It demonstrates a clear inequality between social classes.

Authors of the 20th century often criticized the rigid social classes and the injustices faced by the working class. The gap between the aristocracy and the working class increasingly became a central theme in literature. One author who used his work as a sharp critique of social inequality and the injustices of social class was J.B. Priestley. John Boynton Priestley, born in Bradford, England, on September 13, 1894, grew up in a working-class environment that shaped his social views. His background as the son of a working-class teacher provided an in-depth perspective on English society in the early 20th century, particularly Edwardian society. Priestley produced many plays and essays that were critical of social inequality and injustice in British society during the Edwardian era, especially in his famous play, *An Inspector Calls*. Although written after the Edwardian era, through this work Priestley criticized social inequality and often questioned the morality of the upper class who lived in luxury without caring about the suffering of the lower class.

An Inspector Calls is a three-act play, written by J.B. Priestley in 1945 and first performed in Moscow the same year. The following year it was staged in London. The play is set in 1912, just before World War I. It tells the story of the Birling family, Mr. Arthur Birling, his wife Sybil, and their children, Sheila and Eric, as well as Sheila’s fiancé, Gerald Croft who are celebrating Sheila and Gerald’s engagement. Mr. Birling, a successful businessman, is talking about the bright future and his belief that the capitalist system will continue to bring prosperity. However, the celebration is interrupted when a detective called Inspector Goole arrives to investigate the death of a woman named Eva Smith, who has just committed suicide. The play highlights the structure of society based on powerful class differences, where the upper class represented by the Birling family and Gerald Croft have privileges and power that the working class represented by Eva Smith does not have. Priestley demonstrates that the upper class is often unaware or uncaring of the suffering of the lower class.

Marx and Engels (1848) divided society into two main classes: the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who sell their labor (Marx & Engels, 1969, p. 14). The economic relationship between these two classes creates a fundamental conflict of interest, where the bourgeoisie seeks to maximize profits, while the proletariat demands better wages and working conditions. This conflict will eventually lead to revolutionary change towards a classless society. According to Marx, human reality is material reality. Everything in society from ideology to institutions is rooted in economic

relations and production. Therefore, material activity (production and distribution) is the true language of human life (Nurrachman, 2023a, p. 178). Marx's analysis focuses on material conditions and the economic base as the main determinants of social class. This concept is reflected in his theory of base and superstructure. The base refers to the production system, materials and resources that produce the goods needed by society, while the superstructure includes other social aspects such as law, politics, religion and culture. The economic base becomes the main foundation of social life, with the superstructure always adjusting itself to serve the interests of the dominating class within the base (Singh, 2013, p. 75). In the capitalist system, inequality and exploitation occur because the bourgeoisie derive more value from the labor of the proletariat, while the superstructure through ideology and cultural institutions serves to maintain the dominance of the upper class.

Several scholars have conducted studies on the social class gap. First, a study conducted by Nurhajjah, Mardliya Pratiwi Z, and Fatimah M (2023) entitled *The Struggle for Equality of Social Class Portrayed in Solomon Northup's 12 Years A Slave: A Marxist Analysis*, examines the struggle of an African-American man against the extreme inequality in the United States created by the slavery system and the importance of class consciousness in fighting oppression. Second, a study by Natasha Fabrianne, Didik Sucahyo, and Ida Wardani (2022) entitled *Class Struggle in Bong Joon-Ho's Film Parasite: An Analysis by Using Marxist Theory*, highlights the stark social inequality between the rich family (Park) and the poor family (Kim), illustrating how structural inequality traps the lower classes in a cycle of poverty in South Korea. Third, a study titled *Pertentangan Kelas dalam Drama Marsinah: Nyanyian Dari Bawah Tanah Karya Ratna Sarumpaet: Perspektif Marxisme* by Gabriela Melati Putri (2015), illustrates the struggle of a female laborer in Indonesia against injustice in the workplace as well as the broader conflict between the working class and the ruling class. Overall, these studies highlight class conflict and social inequality, and demonstrate how Marxist theory reveals social class inequality in various cultural and historical contexts.

However, those studies differ from this study, which specifically examines the social class inequality in 1912 English society. While previous studies have focused on slavery, modern capitalism, and the struggle for labor rights in various countries, this study explores how the rigid class system of the Edwardian era enabled exploitation and shaped the power dynamics between the bourgeoisie and the working class, providing a historical perspective on class struggle in early 20th century England. This study aims to find out how the social class inequality in 1912 English society is depicted through the interactions between characters in J.B. Priestley's play *An Inspector Calls*. In addition, this study is expected to contribute to the study of literature and sociology by exploring how literary works can reflect social conditions at a certain time and enrich the understanding of the theory of social class inequality.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method. A qualitative method is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behaviors (Hikmat, 2011, p. 31). Creswell states that qualitative research is an approach used to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the context of literary studies, qualitative research helps to understand how individuals or groups assign meaning to specific issues or phenomena in literary works and the themes they address.

The researcher uses a descriptive method to explore and understand how social class inequality is depicted through interactions between characters. As the play reflects the reality of English society in 1912, the qualitative method supports research that connects the content of the script with the historical and cultural context of the time. This approach helps to understand Priestley's social critique of social class inequality. In analyzing the play, the researcher applies Karl Marx's theory to examine the relationship between social classes at that time.

The primary data used in this study comes from the text of the play *An Inspector Calls* by J.B. Priestley. The analysis is conducted through several elements of the text and characters in the play, such as dialogue, characterization, actions, and socio-economic background, to identify the themes of social class inequality present in the play. Secondary data is obtained from literature studies, academic journals,

and books about English society in 1912 and the theory of social class inequality. By using these data, the researcher gathers information to analyze social class inequality in 1912 English society as reflected in J.B. Priestley's play script *An Inspector Calls*.

There are several steps taken in collecting data; 1) reading the play *An Inspector Calls* carefully, 2) identifying and marking dialogues and actions that reflect social class inequality, 3) searching for literature on the socio-economic conditions during the Edwardian era that became the background of the play, 4) analyzing the data with a Marxist theoretical approach, 5) interpreting how social class inequality is depicted through interactions between characters, and 6) drawing conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the study, it was found that the play *An Inspector Calls* by J.B. Priestley comprehensively depicts social class inequality in the 1912 English capitalist society through the interaction between base (economic structure) and superstructure (ideology, social norms, and institutions). In the play, the Birling family represents the bourgeois class that owns the means of production and controls the labor force, while the character of Eva Smith symbolizes the exploited proletariat class in the capitalist system. As explained in Figure 1, the base consisting of ownership of the means of production and relations of production shapes the superstructure that includes ideology, law, and social institutions. On the other hand, the superstructure also maintains the base by justifying social and economic inequality.

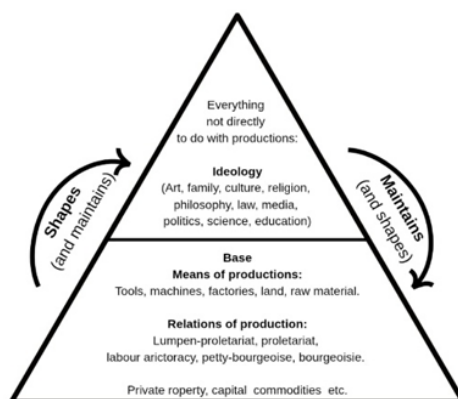


Figure 1. The relationship between the base and the superstructure in Marxist theory

The results demonstrate that the capitalist system represented by the Birling family not only shapes economic inequality but also maintains it through social and cultural mechanisms that benefit the bourgeois class and suppress the working class. By using characters from the upper class and a female laborer as a symbol of class struggle, the play highlights how economic power determines one's social status and life opportunities.

In more detail, analysis of the play reveals that the relationship between the base and superstructure serves to maintain upper-class domination in three main ways. First, through the labor exploitation in which capital owners oppress the working class for their own financial profit. Secondly, through the social control exercised by the upper class, either directly or through social institutions, to ensure that the system remains in their favor. Thirdly, through gender inequality that further worsens the position of working-class women who are victims of economic and social exploitation simultaneously. The following is a further description of the main results of this study.

Labor Exploitation in Capitalism

The Industrial Revolution began in England in the 18th century, spreading unevenly to countries in Continental Europe and other parts of the world, transforming the lives of Westerners, changing their social structures and their relationships with other peoples of the world (Landes, 1969, p. 1). This transformation also brought the capitalist economic system to flourish in England until 1912, when England was dominated by the bourgeoisie, causing class exploitation and social inequality for the proletariat.

In *An Inspector Calls*, labor exploitation in the capitalist system is represented through the relationship between Mr. Birling (capital owner) and Eva Smith (working class).

BIRLING: ... Now – about this girl, Eva Smith. I remember her quite well now. She was a lively good-looking girl – country-bred, I fancy – and she’d been working in one of our machine shops for over a year. A good worker too. In fact, the foreman there told me he was ready to promote her into what we call a leading operator – head of a small group of girls. But after they came back from their holidays that August, they were all rather restless, and they suddenly decided to ask for more money. They were averaging about twenty-two and six, which was neither more nor less than is paid generally in our industry. They wanted the rates raised so that they could average about twenty-five shillings a week. I refused, of course (Priestley, 1945, p. 14).

The dialogue represents the relationship between base and superstructure in the capitalist system. As a factory owner, Birling reflects the bourgeois class who owns the means of production and controls the labor force, while Eva Smith represents the proletariat class who depends on wages to survive. When Eva Smith and her colleagues asked for a wage increase from 22 shillings 6 pence to 25 shillings per week, Birling flatly refused. He argued that this increase would increase labor costs by 12%, which he felt was against his business interests. Birling’s attitude reflects the exploitation of the working class in the capitalist economic system, in which the company’s profits take precedence over the welfare of workers. Karl Marx (1867) in *Das Kapital* said that, “Capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks” (Marx, 1887, p. 235). Marx equates capitalism to a vampire that can only survive by sucking the labor of workers, indicating that exploitation is at the core of the capitalist system.

BIRLING: Well, it’s my duty to keep labour costs down, and if I’d agreed to this demand for a new rate we’d have added about twelve per cent to our labour costs. Does that satisfy you? So I refused. Said I couldn’t consider it. We were paying the usual rates and if they didn’t like those rates, they could go and work somewhere else. It’s a free country, I told them (Priestley, 1945, p. 15).

Birling’s refusal also reflects how the superstructure maintains class inequality. He justifies his decision by stating that “we were paying the usual rates,” as if industry standards are a fair measure, despite the fact that workers like Eva Smith have weak bargaining power. His statement that “It’s a free country” also reflects the illusion of freedom in capitalism, in which workers can theoretically find other jobs but in practice remain in the same conditions, exploited and powerless in the economic system. Birling regards suppressing labor costs as his duty, showing how the values of capitalism shape the morality of the bourgeois class. He sees no moral problem in Eva Smith’s dismissal, as capitalist ideology has normalized class inequality and labour exploitation. Capitalists have full authority to fire workers and close factories for the benefit of their business, which allows for various forms of coercion to maintain control over labor. Capitalism functions not only as an economic system, but also as a political system that organizes power and reinforces the exploitation of the working class (Mansyur et al., 2022, p. 5). Overall, the dialogue illustrates how workers are faced with a limited choice: accept unfair working conditions or lose their jobs, a condition that continues to favor capital owners and weaken the bargaining power of the working class.

Class Domination and Social Control in Capitalism

Besides labor exploitation, the study’s results also demonstrate how the upper class uses social control to maintain their power, as represented by the relationship between Sheila and Mrs. Birling (upper class) to Eva Smith (working class).

SHEILA: I went to the manager at Milwards and I told him that if they didn’t get rid of that girl, I’d never go near the place again and I’d persuade mother to close our account with them.

INSPECTOR: And why did you do that?

SHEILA: Because I was in a furious temper.

INSPECTOR: And what had this girl done to make you lose your temper?

SHEILA: When I was looking at myself in the mirror I caught sight of her smiling at the assistant, and I was furious with her. I'd been in a bad temper anyhow (Priestley, 1945, p. 23).

The dialogue illustrates that as a part of the bourgeois class, Sheila has economic privileges that allow her to influence business decisions, including forcing the dismissal of a worker just because of an emotional impulse. Eva Smith, as part of the proletariat class, depends on her job to survive. However, in the capitalist system depicted in the play, workers like Eva have no power to challenge decisions made by the upper class. Sheila, with ease, threatens the Milwards manager that she will not shop there anymore and will have her mother close their family account if Eva is not fired. This shows how economic relations allow the bourgeois class to control the lives of the working class in an arbitrary way.

More than just economic relations, Sheila's actions reflect the superstructure that maintains class inequality. Her attitude reflects how the bourgeois class is used to exercising power without considering the impact on the working class, as they are supported by social norms that benefit them. She does not think about the consequences of Eva's dismissal because the bourgeois morality embedded in her social system has normalized class inequality. In addition, the reason for Sheila's anger also shows how social status and self-image are important values in a capitalist society. She is offended just because Eva smiles at the shop assistant, which she perceives as an insult to her status. This shows that in bourgeois society, self-interest and social self-esteem take precedence over justice for the working class.

INSPECTOR: Was it owing to your influence, as the most prominent member of the committee, that help was refused the girl?

MRS BIRLING: Possibly.

INSPECTOR: Was it or was it not your influence?

MRS BIRLING: (stung) Yes, it was. I didn't like her manner. She'd impertinently made use of our name, though she pretended afterwards it just happened to be the first she thought of. She had to admit, after I began questioning her, that she had no claim to the name, that she wasn't married, and that the story she told at first – about a husband who'd deserted her – was quite false. It didn't take me long to get the truth – or some of the truth – out of her (Priestley, 1945, p. 43).

As a member of the bourgeois class with power in the charity committee, Mrs. Birling refused to provide assistance to Eva, who was poor and in need of help. This decision is not just an individual act, but reflects how the upper class uses social institutions to maintain their dominance over the working class. As part of the base (economic structure), the bourgeois class not only controls the means of production but also has control over the social institutions that are supposed to help the poor. In this case, Mrs. Birling uses her power in the charity committee to deny assistance to Eva simply because she considers Eva disrespectful and has used the name "Birling" without rights. This decision shows how social assistance in a capitalist system is often discriminatory, depending on the moral standards set by the upper class.

Mrs. Birling's actions reflect how the superstructure (bourgeois ideology and morality) works to maintain class inequality. She judges Eva as unworthy of assistance because of her status as a poor, unmarried woman. In a capitalist society, the bourgeois class creates moral standards that emphasize social image and manners over justice and the welfare of the poor. Mrs. Birling's attitude shows that social norms created by the upper class are often used to justify the oppression of the lower class, rather than to help them out of poverty.

Marx & Engels (1846) in *The German Ideology* say that the ruling class (bourgeoisie) controls not only the economy (material production), but also ideology (mental production), so that they can shape people's way of thinking according to their interests (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 35). The concept is evident in how the Birling family (Sheila and Mrs. Birling), as a representation of the bourgeoisie, use their

power not only to control the economy but also to uphold a social structure that benefits them.

Gender Inequality in Capitalist Society

Another finding in this study highlights that social inequality in *An Inspector Calls* is not only based on class but also on gender, as depicted in Gerald and Eric's relationship to Eva Smith (Daisy Renton).

GERALD: ...that in fact she hadn't a penny and was going to be turned out of the miserable back room she had. It happened that a friend of mine, Charlie Brunswick, had gone off to Canada for six months and had let me have the key of a nice little set of rooms he had – in Morgan Terrace – and had asked me to keep an eye on them for him and use them if I wanted to. So I insisted on Daisy moving into those rooms and I made her take some money to keep her going there. (Carefully, to the INSPECTOR) I want you to understand that I didn't install her there so that I could make love to her. I made her go to Morgan Terrace because I was sorry for her, and didn't like the idea of her going back to the Palace bar. I didn't ask for anything in return....

INSPECTOR: But she became your mistress?

GERALD: Yes. I suppose it was inevitable. She was young and pretty and warm hearted – and intensely grateful. I became at once the most important person in her life – you understand? (Priestley, 1945, p. 36).

The dialogue shows the interaction between base and superstructure in the relationship between Gerald Croft and Eva Smith (Daisy Renton). As a part of the bourgeois class, Gerald has strong economic control over Eva, a poor woman who has lost her job and is homeless. This economic inequality allows Gerald to offer her a place to stay and financial assistance, which in turn creates an unequal power relation between them. Although Gerald emphasizes that he helps Eva without asking for anything in return, their relationship still reflects the superstructure that supports class and gender inequality. In a patriarchal capitalist system, working-class women are often in a vulnerable position, where economic dependence on upper-class men is the only option for survival. Gerald himself recognizes that he is the most important figure in Eva's life, which shows how capitalism creates a social structure where the working class, especially women, remain in a position of dependency.

Moreover, the way Gerald describes their relationship, referring to Eva as “She was young and pretty and warm hearted, and intensely grateful,” shows how the capitalist and patriarchal superstructure objectifies women. Eva is not seen as an equal individual, but as someone who should be grateful for the mercy of the upper class. In this system, bourgeois kindness is often not a form of social justice, but a tool to maintain their dominance.

INSPECTOR: You went with her to her lodgings that night?

ERIC: Yes, I insisted – it seems. I'm not very clear about it, but afterwards she told me she didn't want me to go in but that – well, I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty – and I threatened to make a row.

INSPECTOR: So she let you in?

ERIC: Yes. And that's when it happened. And I didn't even remember – that's the hellish thing. Oh – my God! – how stupid it all is! (Priestley, 1945, p. 51).

As part of the bourgeois class, Eric has economic and social privileges that give him power over Eva, a working-class woman living in vulnerable conditions. This inequality creates a situation where Eric can impose his will on Eva without immediate consequences. In this scene, Eric admits that he was drunk and in a state where a man can easily become violent, leading to his coercive actions towards Eva. His statement reflects how the patriarchal superstructure in capitalist society shapes the behavior of upper-class men, where they feel they have rights over women from the lower class. Eva, already experiencing economic hardship, has little choice but to succumb to social pressure and unequal economic forces.

Eric's stance that he does not fully remember the incident, but still recognizes that it was horrific, reflects how the capitalist social superstructure often protects upper-class men from the consequences of their actions. This system allows them to remain in power despite their grave mistakes, while poor women like Eva remain victims without protection or justice.

In a capitalist system, working-class women often experience multiple layers of discrimination. Not only are they economically oppressed by receiving low wages for grueling work, but they also have to face social norms that limit their role in society. Capitalism creates an environment that reinforces this discrimination by assuming women's work is less valuable, so they are paid less than men despite having the same or even heavier workload (Octavia et al., 2021, p. 56). *An Inspector Calls* not only criticizes class inequality, but also shows how capitalism and patriarchy work together in oppressing women, especially those from the lower class. Priestley depicts how working women like Eva Smith are doubly victimized by a system that puts them in a vulnerable position, both in economic and social aspects.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, J.B. Priestley's play *An Inspector Calls* effectively illustrates how the capitalist system shapes and maintains social inequality through the relationship between the base (economic structure) and superstructure (ideology, social norms, and institutions). By using characters that represent different social classes, the play highlights how economic power determines the fate of individuals and forms a social structure that benefits the bourgeoisie and oppresses the working class.

The three main results of this study reveal that: First, labor exploitation is a major aspect in the relationship between base and superstructure. Arthur Birling, as the owner of capital, refused to increase workers' wages on the grounds of maintaining business profits, reflecting how capitalism prioritizes capital accumulation over labor welfare. Second, class domination and social control are used by the upper class to maintain the status quo. Social norms, institutions and the influence of individuals such as Sheila and Mrs. Birling demonstrate how the bourgeois class can use their social power to suppress the working class. Third, the gender inequality in capitalist society further worsens the position of working-class women. The character of Eva Smith symbolizes women who experience multiple discrimination, both in class and gender, which demonstrates that capitalism and patriarchy work together to maintain social inequality.

The play asserts that social inequality is not just the result of individual mistakes, but is the result of an economic system and ideology that supports the interests of the upper class. Thus, *An Inspector Calls* serves not only as a play, but also as a social critique that highlights the impact of capitalism on the working class and women. This study reinforces the understanding that the relationship between economics and ideology in the capitalist system systematically creates inequality, and that social awareness is the first step to creating equitable change.

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