

## **Black Humour Idiosyncrasies in Cătălin Mihuleac's *În țara noastră, porcul și bradul sunt frați***

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**Rezumat:** *Cătălin Mihuleac este un cunoscut publicist, autor de articole și pamflete în diverse publicații din Iași și din România. În țara noastră, bradul și porcul sunt frați este o povestire în care umorul și satira se întrepătrund într-o modalitate unică, caracteristică lui Cătălin Mihuleac, căci satira lui Mihuleac nu este amară și ofensatoare ca cea a lui Swift, de exemplu, astfel umorul său negru fiind moderat și mucalit. Dacă scopul principal al unei satire este de a ridiculiza un viciu uman pentru a ne provoca să luăm în considerare o alternativă morală, Cătălin Mihuleac reușește să schimbe această tradiție. Umorul său negru este temperat, spiritual, surprinzător și încântător. În mod paradoxal nu există nimic amar în umorul său negru. Esența satirei sale nu constă în complexitatea mesajului moral ci în stilul abil pe care autorul îl alege. Lucrarea de față își propune să fie o abordare din perspectiva stilisticii lingvistice a povestirii În țara noastră, bradul și porcul sunt frați, menită să demonstreze faptul că, pe lângă talentul de satirist, Cătălin Mihuleac este și un pionier al umorului negru în România.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *umor negru, satiră, idiostil*

### **1. A Short Overview of Black Humour Definitions**

On the cognitive theory of humour, black humour would be defined as a meta-emotion. It is the acceptance of a negative situation (death, imprisonment, disease, war, etc.). Black humour about death and funerals makes good sense to help one begin to accept the fact that a friend died and also to criticize the hypocrisy involved with the occasion.

Black humour can also be a way of learning to enjoy even the worst and inevitable which cannot be avoided. The world seems to be a kind of chaos or cosmic joke. With black humour we may try to cope with or even enjoy our negative situation. That is we cannot always have positive emotions, so the question arises as to how we can learn to enjoy even negative situations. Black humour is one way to try to do this. Ionesco wrote: "To become conscious of what is horrifying and to laugh at it is to become master of that which is horrifying" (apud Hellenthal 1989: 95).

The question that arises is: "Is black humour black?" We have seen above that humour requires a positive acceptance and even love. If black humour is to be genuine humour, then it cannot be genuinely black. Thus, black humour is often misdefined and misconceived in the literature. Black humour is in one sense a contradiction. It means acceptance of the black or negative. That is, it cannot be a negative emotion or evaluation. Black humour is not as dark as we think. If it were, then it would not be called humour, but ridicule or a negative emotion.

Further on, we shall quote four definitions of black humour, given by different writers, which we consider relevant for the foregoing analysis. Each of the following views will be seen to be problematic and partial.

Hellenthal, in his book *Schwarzer Humor: Theorie und Definition* wrote: "If black humour is taken as acceptable it generates humour, if not it can generate horror. Black humour shows men the truth about themselves. It can be a form of provocation, a way to express one's dislike, frustration and dissatisfaction, or it may be used for shock value" (Hellenthal 1989: 130).

Louis Hasley (apud Pratt 1993: 112) says that black humour combines humour and pessimism, laughter and crying. It is based on incongruities from the ridiculous to the grotesque giving a sense of overall metaphysical disillusionment and nihilism. He also states that there is not enough play and detachment to generate genuine humour.

For the surrealist André Breton (Breton 1971: 25-38), the roots of surrealism are to be found in black humour. "L'humour noir" is a deviation from the usual, a defence against any kind of limitation. It is a deviation from societal norms. Surrealism

intentionally combines unlike things without hope of unifying them. It intends to shock as does black humour. Language is dissolved and devaluated. There is a quick switch between humour and horror. The humour comes from distancing ourselves from the hopelessness. In this way humour liberates.

Linda Horvay Barnes (Horvay Barnes 1978: 57- 69), who, in our opinion, gives the most complete and accurate definition of black humour, a definition that will be fully taken into account in the present paper, provides a dialectical metaphoric analysis of black humour. For her, black humour is a metaphoric juxtaposition of humour and the horrible, comedy and tragedy. Both humour and horror are simultaneously experienced and united, emerging as a synthesis. One can thereby learn to live with the unresolvable, paradoxical and black side of life. Humour dialectically dissolves differences and unites them. The oxymoron of black humour better describes human behaviour than literal interpretations can. Black humour is an attack on literary and social norms (wrong plot, characters, setting, theme, etc.) shattering of illusions, exposé of contradiction, self-parody of the author and the writing itself, anti-fashion, sensibility of insensibility, anti all absolutes, antinovel, defamiliarization, refusal to resolve contradictions, disintegration of the self and world, and life is seen as a joke, as a value deviation humour.

## **2. Cătălin Mihuleac's Idiostyle**

Cătălin Mihuleac is widely known in Romania as a journalist, author of different articles and lampoons published in various periodicals from Iași and from all over the country. His fiction is characterized by an existential grief, which, on the one hand, on a superficial level, arouses peals of laughter, but, on the other hand, on a deeper level, opens numerous meditation subjects. He is perfectly capable of making a story plausible, from a literary point of view, out of any commonplace fact. His humour is refined but the “wrapping” of this humour suggests serious frustrations, harmful states of mind, despair, repulsion towards what his characters come up against in their lives, and this “wrapping” is exactly what leads to Cătălin Mihuleac's unique form of black humour.

Cătălin Mihuleac has a formula that he scrupulously observes. His main characters are clichés, prejudices, flaws, bad habits and, generally, a large range of situations chosen from the contemporary social imaginary, almost all of them having negative connotations. And when using the syntagm “main character”, we do not refer to a metaphor. For it is in this that the originality of this fiction writer resides: the confusion and the passing of elements from the figurative sense to the literal one, from the ideational plane to the material one, from the objectual to the organic, most often than not in more and more absurd developments. A surprising and, at the same time, effective plot change takes place in every story, occurring unexpectedly or, on the contrary, most naturally, taking the reader out of the limits of conventional reality. The stories seem to be written out of nothing. The invention of an extraordinary or unusual perspective is everything. Examples are numerous in Cătălin Mihuleac's fiction: the city air conditioning opens its heart to the countryside fresh air; an impresario signs a contract, not with the musician who is on stage but with the audience; someone practises illicit trade with fake ages; what seemed to be a flock of birds are in fact some migratory brains; some senators' wives are exhausted because they make love to the whole electorate that is represented in the Parliament; an old woman kills a sports commentator and, in the end, the old woman proves to be, in fact, the Romanian language; a billionaire buys an inflatable day so that the day can have enough hours for him; at a special convent, the monks can “dispossess” a man of his talent, the talent being considered a source of unhappiness for humans.

Cătălin Mihuleac's imagination is mainly ironical and his cynism becomes black humour in his fiction. The writer exploits any human weakness and the ridicule is regarded

through the lens of the fantastic world and of the absurd. This is why most of his fiction is made up of farces, in which black humour prevails.

The stakes of Cătălin Mihuleac's fiction goes beyond the social plane, his characters being most often than not part of the so-called significant anonymous person – a person who lives his/her special life somewhere behind the stage as an observer, commenting upon human comedy with a bitter smile.

The sketch *În țara noastră, porcul și bradul sunt frați* is part of the volume *Ratarea unui setter*, which may be partially considered an anthology and is made up of various sketches, in each of them the author introducing his reader into a kind of fantastic world, sometimes provoking laughter and sometimes leading to meditation by the use of numerous stylistic devices.

*În țara noastră, porcul și bradul sunt frați* may be considered a stylistic masterpiece with a paroxysmal structure, rich in stylistic jewels, which turns Cătălin Mihuleac into a pioneer of black humour in Romania. The mixture of tears and laughter, of the absurd and sarcasm, of satire and irony, of reality and the fantastic gives birth to a genuine form of black humour. *În țara noastră, porcul și bradul sunt frați* reproduces a scenario that communicates with the delirious, in which the miraculous is connected with the humanization of things.

### **3. *În țara noastră, porcul și bradul sunt frați* – stylistic idiosyncrasies**

The surprising association of the pig and the fir tree in the title is clarified in the very first lines of the text: “suferința comună de Crăciun îi apropie”. The noun “suferința” and the adjective “comună” are obviously used here with an ironic intent, thus predicting the entire tone used in the sketch. In fact, irony is all-pervasive in the text. The second sentence begins with a repetition “De Crăciun”, which is meant to emphasize the connection that exists between the pig and the fir tree and which is the foundation on which the entire plot of the sketch is based. In this sentence, the author also uses a paraphrase for an ax or a saw – “unealtă tăietoare” associated with the synecdoches “conifer” and “râmător” standing for the pig – also meant to produce a humorous effect.

The first part of the sketch deals with the slaughter of pigs at Christmas time. By his skilful use of language and apparently impartial tone Cătălin Mihuleac uses in his next sentences (“Destui sunt cei care îi reproșează porcului că nu a învățat să moară demn. Acești oameni nu știu nimic despre psihologia animală. Deoarece porcul este, de departe, cea mai nedumerită ființă de pe Pământ”), the reader is unsure at this point whether to take Cătălin Mihuleac assertions as earnest or ironic. However, a hint is given to the reader by the use of the collocation “animal psychology”. But the issue does not become completely clear. Also, it should be noted the generic use of “destui” and “acești oameni”, as an attempt of the author to ground his arguments on the so-called general opinion, thus giving more truthfulness and foundation to his subsequent statements.

The author's reasoning continues with an evident irony, which makes the reader smile or, at least, intrigues him, determining him to be eager to read further on: “Deoarece porcul este, de departe, cea mai nedumerită ființă de pe Pământ”. The juxtaposition of the adverb “de departe”, situated in between commas, which could very well miss from the text, with the adjective “nedumerită” cannot have but a humorous effect, the author managing by his skilful choice of words to induce a graphic image in the mind of the reader, which instantaneously provokes laughter.

The next rhetorical question “Ce s-o fi petrecând în sufletul porcului atunci când omul – cel mai bun prieten al său – apare în antecamera cotețului, cu un cuțit de măcelar în dinți?” is, on the one hand, meant to explain the above statement about the pig being the most puzzled creature on Earth so that the author's story be believable and consistent. But,

on the other hand, the author's sharp irony is present in this sentence, too, by the use of the Romanian popular future form "Ce s-o fi petrecând", of the apposition "cel mai bun prieten al său", of the surprising noun association "anticamera" and "cotețul" and of the use of the noun "suflet" in association with the pig, whose purpose is again ironic and not at all, as it may seem, sympathy-inspiring. Also, the addition of the syntagm "în dinți", which is obviously superfluous in this context, is intended to throw a humorous light upon a terrible process such as the slaughter of pigs at Christmas time.

There follows a climactical structure: the repetition of the syntagm "El, omul" expresses the indignation of the soul-endowed pig about the criminal intentions of his best friend, the man. The climactical structure is built by an accumulation of details: "El, omul, cel care până ieri l-a slujit ca ordonanța pe ofițer, l-a scărpinat pe burtă și i-a adus dejunul la pat. El, omul, vine azi să îi ia gâtul. El, omul!" The structure culminates with the use of an exclamation mark, which best renders the indignation of the pig and motivates the above statements regarding the pig, making an obvious shift from "it" to "he": that he is the most puzzled creature on Earth and that he has a soul. In this fragment one may also notice the use of the comparison "ca ordonanța pe ofițer" in association with the verb "a sluji", thus positioning the man in an inferior position as compared to the pig and the balance given to the fragment as a whole by the repetition of "El, omul".

The author continues to play upon the idea of the consciousness-endowed pig as the next excerpt is characterised by the use of the stream of consciousness, namely of the free indirect style.

According to McArthur (McArthur 1998: 35-40), there are four types of represented discourse: direct speech, indirect speech, free direct speech and free indirect speech. The researcher indicates that the major markers of direct speech (DS) are the exact words in the report and the quotation marks in writing and print; indirect speech (IS) conveys the report in the words of the reporter, with verbs generally "backshifted" in tense and changes in pronouns and adverbials of time and place are made to align with the time of reporting; free direct speech (FDS) lacks a reporting clause to show the shift from narration to reporting, it is often used in fiction to represent the mental reactions of characters to what they see or experience; free indirect speech (FIS) resembles indirect speech in shifting tenses and other references, but there is generally no reporting clause and it retains some features of direct speech (such as direct questions and vocatives). Therefore, the main concern in the present paper regards FIS or FID. Admitting that neither dialogue nor narrator summary would allow Cătălin Mihuleac to better obtain a humorous effect, he searches for another narrative strategy, i.e. FIS or FID. As stated above, FIS is a style of third person narration, which uses some of the characteristics of third-person along with the essence of first-person direct speech. What distinguishes, however, FIS from normal indirect speech is the lack of an introductory expression such as "He said" or "He thought". It is as if the subordinate clause carrying the content of the indirect speech is taken out of the main clause, which contains it, becoming the main clause itself. Using free indirect speech may convey the character's words more directly than in normal indirect speech, as he can use devices such as interjections and exclamation marks as well as direct questions that cannot be normally used within a subordinate clause. This narrative innovation, first identified and named in 1912 by Saussure's student, Charles Bally as *style indirect libre* and translated as *free indirect style* is a narrative technique that exposes shifts in consciousness and develops characters and plot in ways that simple direct and indirect discourse can not. But more important than the visible, physical differences is the effect. Even though the authorial mode is preserved throughout, the narrator, when reporting the words or thoughts of a character, places himself directly into the experiential field of the character and adopts the latter's perspective. Consequently,

the subjective voice of the character merges with the more objective voice of the omniscient narrator. In a sense, the narrator takes on the speech of the character, with the end result being a subtle, yet powerful, alteration in the reader's perspective. In Cătălin Mihuleac's case, FIS paradoxically triggers laughter, on the one hand, and tears, on the other.

Margaret Anne Doody, in her book *George Eliot and the Eighteenth Century Novel* perceptively identifies a particular way in which free indirect style relies upon reader involvement and what happens as a result of this involvement: "The technique turns upon a discrepancy between a character's thoughts and authorial respeaking of them. The effect depends upon the reader's noticing a gap, a distance. Therefore, free indirect speech is inherently ironic, setting out limitations in a wider perspective. But the irony is not dismissive and detached, nor can we regard ourselves as prejudging the characters whose thoughts infuse the narrative. Our judgement emerges slowly, under the quiet guidance of the author, and can be completely formed only when we understand a character's point of view" (53).

By his use of FIS, Cătălin Mihuleac captures something between speech and thought, which can neither be paraphrased in a propositional form nor cast into an expression with a new first-person referent. It may be stated that by using FIS, Cătălin Mihuleac articulates the stream-of-consciousness. Cătălin Mihuleac avoids suggesting that the actual process of reflection and sensation occurs as internal speech, by distancing the language, which reproduces it, from verbal communication in suppressing both first-person and second-person pronouns. As FIS occurs in an independent expression, in the sketch *În țara noastră, porcul și bradul sunt frați*, it contains ellipsis, making FIS the vehicle for the expression of consciousness responsive to the emotional dimension. It allows inner states to be expressed in expressions where they are ordinarily constrained to be reported in sentence.

Thus, FIS empowers the reader, the reader becomes the hermeneut, looking between the lines for the *actual* motive. It both involves us in the story and trusts us to draw some of our own connections, as we do in life.

In the sketch *În țara noastră, porcul și bradul sunt frați*, the author wonderfully blends direct speech (where the words of the speaker stand on their own without narrator involvement, exposing the speaker directly) and free indirect speech (which creates the effect of heightened feelings, intensifying or dramatising the character's words) with third-person narration (which gives a panoramic view of the world of the story, looking into many characters and into the broader background of the story) and first person narration (which allows the reader to see the point of view, including opinions, thoughts and feelings, of the narrator). Thus, the author paradoxically succeeds in being subjective and objective at the same time, he manages, on the one hand, to reveal and, on the other hand, conceal certain events and manipulate the reader at his own will. The free indirect style is here introduced as a manner of presenting the thoughts and utterances of the pig, allowing a flexible and ironic overlapping of internal and external perspectives. The author manages to combine both distanced observation of a character and a sense of how he sees the world. The effect is peculiar and subtle, being a means of concealment as much as disclosure. The slaughter of the pig is here presented from the point of view of the pig, this fragment being the first subtle intrusion of black humour by the use of interjections: "Guițț!" (twice), "ah", "uiieeeeeee!", "uiieeeee!", "uiii!", of the inversion "rogu-te", of the verbs "a dura" and "a arde". With this passage, the author prepares the reader for the next instances of black humour, which are more obvious and illustrative. Cătălin Mihuleac does not thoroughly use morbid details concerning the slaughter of the pig, and yet he succeeds in obtaining black humour; it is in this technique that his originality and the idiosyncrasies of his use of black humour consist of. The death of the pig is expressed on the level of punctuation by the suspension points, by the shortening of the interjections, the author using fewer letters: "Uiieeeeeee! Uiieeee! Uiii!!!" and by the three exclamation marks in the end of the last interjection.

There follows a commentary from the part of the author, which aims at seeming impartial, but the use of the wonderfully chosen metaphor “beciurile suferinței”, which displays the feature [+EMOTIVE], and the use of the adjectives “viitorii” and “imediații,” add another argument to Cătălin Mihuleac’s fine irony. Here, both the tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor are abstract, as “beciurile” denotes “something very deep in which food is preserved” (namely the killed pig) and “suferință” is clearly an abstract noun.

Further on, the pig is compared to the fir tree in a perfectly symmetrical sentence; hence the author makes a smooth transition from the slaughter of the pig to the cutting of the fir tree: “Porcul sacrificat e împodobit cu usturoi, boia și piper. Bradul sacrificat e împodobit cu globuri, lumânări și beteală. Nu-i mare diferența.” (Mihuleac, 2004: 108)

The parallelism from this sentence provides a perfect balance to the whole structure. The author makes use of three nouns when making reference to the pig: “usturoi”, “boia” and “piper,” and of three nouns when making reference to the fir tree: “globuri”, “lumânări” and “beteală”. Mention must be made here of the repetition of the adjectives “sacrificat” and “împodobit”. “Sacrificat” would only normally collocate with the pig, while “împodobit” would only normally collocate with the fir tree. Nevertheless, the author chooses to extrapolate the meanings of the two adjectives and use them in connection with the fir tree and, respectively, the pig, therefore reinforcing the statement from the title according to which the pig and the fir tree are brothers. Their condition is so similar that this also becomes apparent on a linguistic level: they come to assume one another’s adjectives. If in the case of the pig the meaning shifts from “it” to “he” are endowed with the entire range of human feelings, the fir tree is personified throughout the text, also being endowed with feelings and reason, the main feature being [+ANIMATE]. Actually, almost every inanimate object seems to get the feature [+ANIMATE] in Cătălin Mihuleac’s fiction, a fact which gives the chance to the author to enrich the text with true stylistic jewels: the brandy bottle is “zgribulită” (trembling) and “clănțane” (chattering), the axes send a war-like shining to each other, the saws snarl, the caps on the heads of the peasants can walk as they come closer to the fir trees. One may also notice the scarcity of adjectives and the preference for nouns and verbs, although Cătălin Mihuleac’s text is mainly descriptive and aims at conveying a graphic image of the situation. However, when he does use adjectives, they play a key role in the context of irony and black humour: “tăietoare”, “nedumerită”, “viitorii”, “imediații”, “sacrificat”, “împodobit” etc.

The most majestic, impressive and moving scene of the sketch, in which this time black humour prevails over irony, is the “battle” between the two “armies”: that of the wood cutters and that of the fir trees. The whole scene is described exactly like a battle and can be very easily be taken out of the context and constitute a story in itself. The battle scene begins with the statement: “În dimineața aceea de Ajun, brazii s-au comportat *ca porcii*, în vecinătatea cuțitului de măcelar.”(109) The mere comparison of fir trees and pigs stirs laughter. In fact, this section abounds in comparisons, contributing to the accumulation of tension: “brazii și-au fremătat acele la fel cum pianiștii își încălzesc degetele înainte de concert”, “(...) spintecând, ca un fulger, aerul”, “buzele tăietorilor se fleșcăiră asemenea unor mustăți abandonate într-o gară”, etc.

If, by now, the personification of fir trees could be considered to be within the limits of normality, the reader is in for a big surprise when the author asserts, “Pentru că bradul condamnat o rupse la fugă” (109). This shock element together with “Era un pui sensibil care visa ca, într-o zi, să emigreze în Munții Liberi,” and the abrupt conclusion “Nu voia să moară” contribute to the build-up of irony and help in softening the effect that the subsequent confrontation between the woodcutters and the fir trees might have upon the reader. The next sentences build on the same idea of irony, in a climactic structure: “Îl urmă imediat mama lui, apoi alt pui de brad(...)” (109); the climax is constituted by

“întreaga pădure o luă la sănătoasa, lăsând muntele dezvelit *ca o chelie*”. The comparison “ca o chelie” is very graphic and, again, stirs laughter.

The transition from this still loose and rather calm atmosphere to the battle proper is made by means of two rhetorical questions: “Ce le era dat să vadă?”(109) and “Copacii nu crâcneau la tăiere (...) dar acum de ce fugea pădurea, unde fugea?” (109)

The beginning of the battle is marked by the repetition of “într-o secundă” three times. The sentences become shorter, they can be read quickly and give the sensation of running. The overall image is, on the one hand, nightmarish, full of morbid and gruesome details in the description: “(...) O laterală de topor îi retează capul (...). Răcnind de durere, mama puiului își năpusti miile de ace asupra ucigaşului. Un alt tăietor o măcelări din câteva mişcări. Aşchiile săreau din trupul ei ca un foc de artificii (...)” and, on the other hand, a tinge of irony can be grasped by the use of comic details: an old fir tree suffers from spondylosis, a baby fir tree sits down because he is tired, another baby fir tree stumbles, falls and begins to cry.

Nevertheless, all of a sudden, the tone of the text becomes extremely serious and the description is highly poetical, nature contributing, just like in poetry, to the suffering of the fir trees. The participation of nature to the ordeal of fir trees is rendered by the sentence “Văzduhul dădea semen că nu mai rezistă,” and by the repetition of “Văzduhul stătea să plesnească” twice. This excerpt is again rich in stylistic devices like: comparisons (“văzduhul stătea să plesnească precum un balon”, “aşchiile săreau din trupul ei ca un foc de artificii”, “brazii urlau pe sute de voci ca un cor de porci în timpul sacrificiului”), metaphors (“decibelii groasei”, “tigaia plină de sânge a feţei”, “braţele crimei”), and personifications. All these linguistic means prove to be very graphic, just like in 3D movies; the reader can almost feel the fir trees’ pain and this is all due to the craftsmanship of Cătălin Mihuleac and his unique form of black humour. The verbs are also very powerful and plastic: “a încheşta”, “a se arunca”, “a răcni”, “a măcelări”, “a executa”, “a urla”, “a plezni”, “a se împlânta”; the nouns that follow collocate with the verbs very well: “răcnet”, “călăul”, “sacrificiu”, “icnete”.

Again, one should notice the almost complete absence of adjectives. In this description only three adjectives are used: “vegetal” in the syntagm “sânge vegetal”, which is meant to emphasize the personification of fir trees, “profesionale” in the syntagm “icnete profesionale” (referring to the wood cutters), which is used with an ironic intent and “răsculată” in the syntagm “carnea răsculată a brazilor”, which is the most powerful of all and, at the same time, very graphic, being a part of the gruesome details from the description. The three adjectives are carefully chosen by Cătălin Mihuleac, being a short and all-embracing sample of black humour, which the author uses as a stylistic device (the most illustrative one being the adjective-epithet “vegetal”), irony (the adjective “profesionale”) and morbid details (the adjective “răsculată”).

Cătălin Mihuleac gradually manages to change the tone of the story, he passes from humour and irony to black humour and the grotesque. The ending of the “battle” scene is apothetic, an avalanche burying men and fir trees. In the end of the story, the prevalent figure of speech used by the author is repetition, epitomizing on a linguistic level the echo of the fir trees’ screams that the author claims have caused the avalanche: “ca o magmă inversă”, “îngheţat”, “un urlat”.

Incongruity and deviation both on the level of ideas and on the linguistic level, are the two main terms that describe Cătălin Mihuleac’s fiction and the main elements that make up the black humour of his texts. Black humour represents a juxtaposition of humour and the horrible, of the morbid and the beautiful, which Cătălin Mihuleac brilliantly manages to grasp in his sketch *În țara noastră, porcul și bradul sunt frați*. By pleating a wide range of stylistic devices like metaphors, repetitions, inversions, comparisons, personifications, irony,

free indirect speech with morbid and grotesque descriptions, Cătălin Mihuleac rightfully has established himself as a pioneer of black humour in Romania.

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