

Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as an Entwicklungsroman*

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This essay makes a tentative interpretation of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* as an Entwicklungsroman. The growth or personal development of the boy is demonstrated in the following four perspectives, namely, acquisition of knowledge, learning of survival realities, overcome of fear, and development in ethics. The conclusion is that the boy has indeed made progress in personal development in many aspects, but we are not supposed to overestimate his growth, since he is only a growing boy instead of a mature man, therefore, it is more advisable to deem this novel as an Entwicklungsroman instead of a Bildungsroman.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, Entwicklungsroman, growth, personal development

Introduction

American novelist Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* was published in 2006 and won the Pulitzer Prize in the same year. It has gained many favorable comments since its debut in the literary world. Among others, *San Francisco Chronicle* reviewed that "His tale of survival and the miracle of goodness only adds to McCarthy's stature as a living master. It's gripping, frightening and, ultimately, beautiful. It might very well be the best book of the year." *The New York Times Book Review* deemed that "Vivid, eloquent... *The Road* is the most readable of [McCarthy's] works, and consistently brilliant in its imagining of the posthumous condition of nature and civilization." *Los Angeles Times Book Review* commented that it is "One of McCarthy's best novels, probably his most moving and perhaps his most personal." *The Boston Globe*'s comment was that "No American writer since Faulkner has wandered so willingly into the swamp waters of devilry and redemption... [McCarthy] has written this last waltz with enough elegant reserve to capture what matters most." From these reviews, we can say that McCarthy's *The Road* is undoubtedly a great success.

However, due to the fact that the novel is a relatively new publication, there is not so much criticism home and abroad. In studies abroad, statistics from PQDT show that there is no MA thesis or Ph.D. dissertation focusing on *The Road*. On the basis of the research results from JSTOR, there are 13 essays concerning *The Road*, respectively in the angle of the absurdity of hope, apocalyptic grail narrative, post-apocalyptic naming, theological virtues, hunger and the apocalypse of modernity, theme of the end of the world, and reading the novel in the light of the philosophy of Augustine and Heidegger. Further research in Sage Journals and Gale Literary

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Sources enables us to find some other essays except those overlapping ones in JSTOR, with such perspectives as ethical choice in a post-apocalyptic world, narrative empathy, secular scripture, Celtic influences, redemption, ecotheological reading, and so on. Unfortunately, there is no research taking Bildungsroman or Entwicklungsroman as its study subject. In China, there are only 22 MA theses and 21 essays regarding *The Road* according to the statistics from CNKI. There are interpretations from the angles of existentialism, structuralism, eco-criticism, eco-aesthetics, tragic aesthetics, nihilism, scientific humanism, archetypal analysis, ethical literary criticism, posthumanism, environmental apocalypse, initiation theme, journey narrative, trauma narrative, peripheral situation, holy grail motif, ethical relationship between father and son, Ingarden's theory of indeterminacy, Lefebvre's theory of space, Jameson's theory of postmodern space, and so on.

Among the above-mentioned research, there is only one MA thesis which is related to the theme of growth or personal development, that is, Wang He's "An Analysis of Initiation Themes in *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy". The author argues that "As a child who is previous [*sic*] under the care of his father, he gradually gets rid of the reliance on his father and finally gains his independence of continuing the journey of his own. Moreover, his maturity implies the self-redemption of all human beings in reality" (WANG, 2016, p. iv). As is known, initiation themes are closely related to Bildungsroman, the reason why Wang He did not take Bildungsroman as the title of the thesis may be that Bildungsroman focuses on the development of a character moving from childhood to maturity, or coming of age (Quinn, 2006, p. 53), while the son in *The Road* still remains a boy at the end of the story. Even though Wang He technically and wisely avoided such a loophole, he cannot avoid arguing that "the boy gradually grows to be an independent man" because it is a man, not a child, "who is able to take on the responsibility of finding 'the fire' after his father's death" (WANG, 2016, p. iv). However, we shall never neglect the fact that even though the boy has achieved personal development, he is still a child, without growing into an adult till the end of the story. What's more, he does not continue the journey of survival on his own, but in the company of a family. We can have high hopes for him, or believe him to be someone with great expectations, whose survival even symbolizes "the possibility of a future restoration of the earth" (Russell, 2016, p. 344), but we are not supposed to overestimate his current growth, because after all, he is a child not yet coming of age. And this is the reason why I would rather read this novel as an Entwicklungsroman instead of a Bildungsroman.

As a literary genre, Entwicklungsroman is akin to Bildungsroman, and it is "a specific sort of Bildungsroman that flourished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" (Gerhard, 1926, p. 1). The difference between the two is that "Entwicklungsroman or novel of personal development, which is broadly about the evolution of a hero [...] from any one stage of life to another" (Jeffers, 2005, p. 49). So to speak, the hero in Entwicklungsroman experiences a process of continuous change from a lower, simpler, or worse to a higher, more complex, or better state, not necessarily related to the growth of someone from childhood to adulthood. The reason why I discreetly label this novel as an Entwicklungsroman is due to the fact that we fail to witness the drastic change of the boy in character and he is not expected to grow into utter maturity just by a single epiphany upon the death of his father.

The growth or personal development of the boy will be discussed in the following four perspectives, namely, acquisition of knowledge, learning of survival realities, overcome of fear, and development in ethics.

Acquisition of Knowledge

The German critic Wilhelm Süss proposes that an Entwicklungsroman expresses “desire for an increase in knowledge” (Süss, 1928, p. 90). The boy’s desire for the acquisition of knowledge is shown all the way along the road to the south by his persistent asking of questions.

The first question the boy puts to his father is a solemn question about death and survival:

Are we going to die?
 Sometime. Not now.
 And we’re still going south.
 Yes.
 So we’ll be warm.
 Yes. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 10)

The father does not cheat the boy about death by saying they are going to be alive forever. By “sometime”, he means nobody is immortal, and everyone is doomed to die sooner or later. But he gives the boy hope and confidence by telling him that they will not die at this moment. If they keep going south, there is always the hope of survival.

One of the succeeding questions from the boy is about the dam:

What is that, Papa?
 It’s a dam.
 What’s it for?
 It made the lake. Before they built the dam that was just a river down there. The dam used the water that ran through it to turn big fans called turbines that would generate electricity.
 To make lights.
 Yes. To make lights.
 ...
 Will the dam be there for a long time?
 I think so. It’s made out of concrete. It will probably be there for hundreds of years. Thousands, even. (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 19-20)

Through this “Socratic catechetical method”, the boy who has never seen a dam before he gets to know what a dam is, as well as its function, its building material and its lasting time.

Most of the boy’s knowledge about the world is gained in real life instead of reading from a textbook, such as his knowledge of the earthquake. One night, when he is sleeping, he is awoken by something approaching, and he can feel the ground is trembling. “It neared, growing louder. Everything trembling. Then it passed beneath them like an underground train and drew away into the night and was gone” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 28). Being scared, he asks his father, “What was it, Papa?” and his father replies, “It was an earthquake. It’s gone now. We’re all right” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 28).

When they walk through the woods, the father finds a small colony of something in the mulch and ash, and he bites a piece of it and chews, thus starts the conversation between the father and the son:

What is it, Papa?
 Morels. It’s morels.
 What’s morels?
 They’re a kind of mushroom.

Can you eat them?
 Yes. Take a bite.
 Are they good?
 Take a bite. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 40)

By this conversation, the boy gets to know that morels are a kind of mushroom and are edible plants. What's more, when the boy asks whether the morels are tasty or not, the father's answer "Take a bite" means that you have to try by yourself because different people have different opinions on the same thing.

The boy is almost curious about everything. When the father is showing him the state roads on the map, the boy begins another series of questions:

Why are they the state roads?
 Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states.
 But there's not any more states?
 No.
 What happened to them?
 I don't know exactly. That's a good question.
 But the roads are still there.
 Yes. For a while.
 How long a while?
 I don't know. Maybe quite a while. There's nothing to uproot them so they should be okay for a while. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 43)

From his father's answer, the boy gets to know why the roads are called state roads. But for some of the questions, the father does not know the answer either, because no one knows how the world is destroyed and what the future of the world is going to be like, waiting for the boy to find the answers by himself.

Another conversation occurs with regard to "beachcombers":

What is that?
 It's people who walk along the beach looking for things of value that might have washed up.
 What kind of things?
 Any kind of things. Anything that you might be able to use. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 220)

From the conversation, the boy gets to know what kind of people are considered as beachcombers. And as a matter of fact they themselves are in such a condition as vagrants looking for things to survive on a beach.

Since the boy and his parents have been hiding from the cannibals, he does not have the chance to get to know things in nature, not even such basic elements in nature as lightning. "When suddenly the beach before them appeared shuddering out of the blackness and vanished again" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 234), the boy asks, "What was that, Papa?" and his father responds, "It's okay. It's lightning. Come on" (p. 234).

After the boy's father returning from the wrecked ship with a first-aid kit and a flare pistol, one more inquisitive conversation is initiated:

What's that?
 I'll show you. It's to signal with.
 ...
 It's a gun.
 A flaregun. It shoots a thing up in the air and it makes a big light.
 Can I look at it?

Sure you can.
 The boy lifted the gun from the case and held it.
 Can you shoot somebody with it? He said.
 You could.
 Would it kill them?
 No. But it might set them on fire.
 ...
 I'd like to see it.
 You mean shoot it?
 Yes.
 We can shoot it.
 For real?
 Sure.
 In the dark?
 Yes. In the dark.
 It could be like a celebration.
 Like a celebration. Yes. (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 240-241)

From this knowledge-seeking conversation, the boy gets to know that a flarepistol can be used to send signals and in case of celebration as well, but it cannot be used to kill, though it can make do as a possible means of self-defense.

From the above analysis, we come to know that all the boy's questions starting with "What" are given appropriate answers by his father, through whose education and instruction, the boy comes to know more about the world and gets personal development in cognition.

Learning of Survival Realities

Apart from being a road novel, *The Road* can also be regarded as a survival novel, therefore, the learning of survival skills and cruel realities becomes of great significance. The boy realizes step by step the harsh realities in the journey of survival.

In the first place, when they see a man who is struck by lightning, out of sympathy, the boy wants to help him, but the father does not agree, which makes the boy keep crying and looking back now and then. When they are in the distance, the father says to the boy, "But we have nothing to give him. We have no way to help him. I'm sorry for what happened to him but we cannot fix it" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 50) and "There's nothing we could have done. [...] He's going to die. We cannot share what we have or we'll die too" (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 51-52). In the father's point of view, sympathy can only be shown on condition that one's own survival is not threatened and help can only be offered on the premise that one's own safety is not endangered.

Later, when they come across an extremely aged man, who is small and bent, the boy's sympathy begins to exert its influence again. He first asks his father to give the old man something to eat, and then he even has the idea of taking in the old man, which is definitely denied by his father. But maybe a hard fact makes him realize something crucial in life. His father tells the old man that he should show thanks to the boy, because but for the boy, he wouldn't have given him anything to eat. The old man's answer may have hurt the feelings of the boy in that he says "I wouldnt have given him mine" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 173). The old man's remark may have brought about an epiphany to the boy, that is, in time of dire situation, everyone thinks of his own survival

as the top priority. As a result, unlike the case of the man struck by lightning, when “He kept looking back”, this time, “The boy never looked back at all” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 174). Even though this is only a subtle change in the boy’s behavior, it shows the change of his thought. Later on, the father’s words restate the seriousness of their situation and the correctness of his decision, “When we’re out of food, you’ll have more time to think about it” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 174). From the boy’s response—“The boy didnt answer” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 174)—we know that he seems to have reticently accepted his father’s standpoint.

The major conflict between them occurs when they are ransacked by a thief. After getting back the stolen things from the thief, the father forces him to take off all his clothes despite his begging for mercy in the cold weather. At this time, the boy’s sympathy goes out to the pitiable man again. Let’s see the conversation among the three:

Dont do this, man.
 You didnt mind doing it to us.
 I’m begging you.
 Papa, the boy said.
 Come on. Listen to the kid.
 You tried to kill us.
 I’m starving, man. You’d have done the same.
 You took everything.
 Come on, man. I’ll die.
 I’m going to leave you the way you left us. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 257)

The reason why the father is “ransacking” the thief is because he has done the same to them since he has taken away everything from them which in consequence will kill them. What the father is doing now is following the principle of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. What’s more, this may make it hard for the thief to survive and hence he will not threaten their safety again. When the boy is still sobbing for the tragedy, the father says, “What do you think would have happened to us if we hadn’t caught him?” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 258). The answer is obvious—they will die of coldness and starvation. In the case of life or death, the father is not to blame for his cruel treatment to the thief. Seeing the boy still sobbing, the father says sharply, “I’m scared [...] Do you understand? I’m scared. [...] You’re not the one who has to worry about everything” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 259).

The conflict is ended with their talk about the difference between stories and real life:

Those stories are not true.
 They dont have to be true. They’re stories.
 Yes. But in the stories we’re always helping people and we dont help people.
 ...
 Yeah, but stories are supposed to be happy.
 They dont have to be.
 You always tell happy stories.
 You dont have any happy ones?
 They’re more like real life.
 But my stories are not.
 ...
 Real life is pretty bad?
 What do you think?

Well, I think we're still here. A lot of bad things have happened but we're still here.
Yeah. (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 267-269)

There actually is a striking difference between stories and real life, the latter of which is full of brutal reality. According to the principle of "Survival is the fittest", one has to learn how to face the real life which is "pretty bad" instead of immersing themselves in the dream-like stories. Taking one bitter lesson after another, the boy begins to know the world better and upgrades his survival knowledge and skills, which lays a foundation for his future survival after his father's death.

Overcome of Fear

The Entwicklungsroman is also referred to as "developmental novel" (Martini, 1991, p. 24), in which we can see the personal development of the protagonist, especially that of his mind and character, and the development from fear to bravery is a typical one.

Almost all through the novel, the boy is haunted by fear, and the word "scared" appears frequently in the novel. As the story goes, the father and the son come to the house where the father used to live, when he wants his son to go into the house with him, the boy says "I'm scared" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 25). After visiting the house, the boy pleads his father to leave, saying "I'm scared" and "I'm really scared" (p. 27). One day, when the ground is trembling and everything is trembling, the boy says "I'm so scared" (p. 28). When the father is going to look for the wood to make a fire, he would like the boy to wait for him, but the boy says "I'm scared" and "I'm really scared" (p. 27). When they are about to search a deserted house, the boy again says "I'm scared" (p. 110), so his father let him stay close behind him. Near the house, when they are hiding from four bearded men and two women, the boy is terrified, and all his father sees in him is terror, and once again the boys says "I'm so scared" (p. 113). When the father has got a fever and is sick, the boy worries if his father is going to die, and so he says "I'm really scared" (p. 186). One night, the boy wakes from a nightmare and says "I'm scared" and "I'm really scared" (p. 189). When the father wants to go back to the boat to have one last look around, the boy says "I'm kind of scared" (p. 238). When the father is seriously ill and death is around the corner, he encourages the boy in earnest words and with good intentions, but the boy says "I'm really scared" (p. 279). The above examples are only those using direct speech, there are still some cases showing the boy's scare in the third person point of view, such as "he was scared" or "he was very scared". Apart from the examples using "scared", there are also those using "scary" or other synonyms. For example, when they are in the woods where there seems to be somebody cooking, the father looks at the boy and sees "The small dirty face wide with fear" (p. 197); when the father suggests taking a close look, the boy says "It's really scary" (p. 198). Hence we can see that fear accompanies the boy all the time on the road.

But after his father's death, the word "scared" or "scary" or "fear" never appears again, either directly or indirectly. Even when he sees a stranger coming up the road, he does not turn and go back into the woods as he used to do, instead, "He just stood in the road and waited, the pistol in his hand" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 281). He has overcome his usual fear to a great extent. Presumably he thinks running away is not the best way to solve the tough problems, and so he is supposed to face real life bravely. Confronted with the man, the boy is not frightened, and he boldly asks the man several important questions concerning life and death, namely, "Are you one of the good guys?" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 282), "How do I know you're one of the good guys?" (p. 283),

“Are you carrying the fire?” (p. 283), “Do you have any kids?” (p. 284), “And you didnt eat them” (p. 284).

The boy's overcome of fear is inseparable from his father's guidance and encouragement. For one thing, the father often tells the boy “old stories of courage and justice” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 41) as bed time stories. For another, after the father's being hurt by a stranger's arrow, the talk between the father and the son about bravery is quite meaningful:

That hurt, didnt it? the boy said.
 Yes. It did.
 Are you real brave?
 Just medium.
 What's the bravest thing you ever did?
 He spat into the road a bloody phlegm. Getting up this morning, he said.
 Really?
 No. Dont listen to me. Come on, let's go. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 272)

Even though the father says “Dont listen to me”, he actually means it while he is saying “Getting up this morning” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 272). Being brave does not necessarily mean you have to do any earth-shaking thing that others dare not; being courageous enough to get up the next day and face life boldly no matter how tough it is can really be an act of bravery. The father's bed time stories and his unique view on bravery are conducive to the boy's overcome of fear, and the father's death which deprives the boy of reliance or dependence ultimately leads the boy to face the world with bravery.

Development in Ethics

Süss proposes that an Entwicklungsroman expresses “desire [...] for ethical perfection” (Süss, 1928, p. 90). The boy gets ethical or moral development in several aspects, namely, social ethics, family ethics, and animal ethics.

First of all, the boy and his father follow one of the most basic principles of social ethics, that is, they cannot become cannibals no matter how hungry they are, because eating man is a wicked violation of social ethics.

As the story goes, after killing the man who is a member of a group of suspected cannibals, the boy begins to doubt whether they are still moral and guiltless people, so he asks his father “Are we still the good guys?”, and the father answers “Yes. We're still the good guys” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 77). The boy goes on saying “And we always will be”, and the father reaffirms “Yes. We always will be” (p. 77). In the father's viewpoint, it is not guilty to kill someone who threatens your life and they will always be good people if they don't eat other human beings for food.

The following dialogue between the father and the son shows more clearly their attitude towards eating other human beings:

We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?
 No. Of course not.
 Even if we were starving?
 We're starving now.
 You said we werent.
 I said we werent dying. I didnt say we werent starving.

But we wouldnt.
 No. We wouldnt.
 No matter what.
 No. No matter what.
 Because we're the good guys.
 Yes.
 And we're carrying the fire.
 And we're carrying the fire. Yes. (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 128-129)

The father reassures the boy that even if they are starving, even if they are dying, or so to speak, "hunger endangers their lives" (Mullins, 2011, p. 78), and no matter what happens to them, they will not eat anybody. This is their moral and ethical bottom line. On the one hand, because they are the good people; on the other hand, because they are carrying the fire, which is a symbol of hope in life.

Secondly, the boy and his father fully display family ethics. They show mutual love, care and concern to each other, parental affection on the father's side and filial piety on the son's side.

For example, when the father finds by chance a can of Coca Cola, which the boy has never drunk before in his childhood, each of them wants the other party to drink it. As is shown in the following talk:

You have some, Papa.
 I want you to drink it.
 You have some.
 He took the can and sipped it and handed it back. You drink it, he said. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 23)

As we can see, even though the boy has never tasted Cola before, he is not so selfish as to have it all to himself, and he insists that his father drink some of it, while his father, who feels it hard to turn down the warm-hearted offer, just "sipped" it, which means taking just a very small amount, for the simple reason that he wants his son to drink more of it. From this act of thoughtfulness, we can see their mutual concern.

In fighting against disaster and adversity, the father and the son depend on each other physically and mentally, as McCarthy puts it, "Each the other's world entire" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 6). As is shown in the following talk:

What would you do if I died?
 If you died I would want to die too.
 So you could be with me?
 Yes. So I could be with you. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 11)

From the above conversation, we can see that the father takes his son as his spiritual pillar. If the boy died, the father would also lose the strength to live on. This may serve as a stimulus for the boy to live on and never easily give up no matter how difficult the situation is and no matter how faint the hope is, just for the sake of his father. As his father once tells him, "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 137).

After killing the man who is most likely a cannibal, the father says to his son, "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 77). His remark shows his great responsibility as a father, which sets a role model for the boy in learning family ethics and leaves a deep impression upon the boy, who is bound to shoulder his parental responsibility to his own kids

in the future if he can survive in the catastrophe.

Even when death approaches, regardless of his weakness, the affectionate father still keeps on encouraging the boy by telling him:

You need to go on, he said. I cant go with you. You need to keep going. You dont know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You'll be lucky again. You'll see. Just go. It's all right... You need to find the good guys but you cant take any chances. No chances... You have to carry the fire... It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it... You have my whole heart. You always did. You're the best guy. You always were. If I'm not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I'll talk to you. You'll see. (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 278-279)

From the last words of the father, we can see the fatherly love and care he nourishes for his son, together with his blessing, his confidence, his encouragement, his warning, and his advice to the future life of the boy. This is bound to have a profound influence on the boy's mental development, especially in terms of family ethics.

Thirdly, the boy and his father embody animal ethics. Even though this is not the major concern of McCarthy, it is indeed one of the possible themes of the novel.

One day, the boy is really hungry and they are looking for food, and then they hear a dog bark, and a conversation between them goes as follows:

A dog?
 Yes.
 Where did it come from?
 I dont know.
 We're not going to kill it, are we Papa?
 No. We're not going to kill it.
 ...
 We wont hurt the dog, he said. I promise. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 82)

Even though they are extremely hungry, they do not want to kill the dog and take it as their food. Animal ethics calls on people to establish a harmonious relationship with animals, cherishing "reverence for all being, love for all creatures, and [...] compassion and sympathy must attend to each specific situation" (Schweitzer as cited in Barsam, 2008, p. 35). The boy has some rudimentary concern and compassion for the dog, but if it is not advocated or approved by his father, maybe the bud of animal ethics will be nipped. As luck would have it, the father endorses the boy's ethical view by repeating "We're not going to kill it" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 82), though "No" as an answer already shows his attitude. What's more, he adds as a promise that "We wont hurt the dog" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 82). The father's concern for the dog reaffirms the boy's love for animals, cultivating his animal ethics in a broad sense.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can perceive the boy's gradual growth or personal development in terms of acquisition of knowledge, learning of survival realities, overcome of fear, and development in ethics. However, the boy has not reached maturity, or he is still on the way to maturity. Even though he has accumulated some knowledge, there is still too much for him to learn; even though he has overcome fear to a great extent, he is not yet utterly fearless; even though he has witnessed some of the harsh realities of life, he has not solved any intractable and daunting problem all by himself; even though he has progressed morally and ethically, there is

still much responsibility for him to shoulder in the future, instead of only showing innocent sympathy to the seemingly pathetic strangers. There is one more reason why I argue that the boy is still not mature enough, that is, after the death of his father, in his talk with the stranger, he says "I dont know what to do" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 282). Accordingly, we may draw a conclusion that the boy has indeed made progress in personal development, but he is a growing boy instead of a mature man, hence it is more advisable to deem this novel as an Entwicklungsroman instead of a Bildungsroman.

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