

Empathy amid Fear: A Study of Affect in Meg Cabot's *Abandon*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to trace affect in Meg Cabot's novel, *Abandon*. Affective analysis is a sect of the semiotic side of language which contributes to discovering the deeper and hidden layers of language. Julia Kristeva is a major figure in this regard, utilizing semiotics in the critical analysis of literary texts. She has specifically focused on how the sole responsibility of our unconscious fears and affects and their effects on others lies with us. This article, likewise, scrutinizes the same features in the novel, *Abandon*. This novel depicts the demanding moments of Pierce Oliviera, a teenager, years after her near-death experience, while the previous events of the protagonist's life are shown as a series of flashbacks. Through portraying Pierce's fears, we elaborate on how empathy, fostered among those sharing similar challenges, can facilitate overcoming the fearful conditions. Additionally, social collectiveness and affective connection among the characters can be the basis for the accumulation and the circulation of positive energy.

Keywords: Empathy, Fear, Affect, Kristeva

1. Introduction

Meg Cabot, a salient figure in American contemporary literature has won various awards, such as the Evergreen Young Adult Book Award, Volunteer State Book Award, and New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age, to mention but a few. Cabot, this time has chosen the after effects of near-death experience (NDE) in her novel, *Abandon*, the first book in a trilogy. In this novel, a version of the Greek myth of Hades and Persephone is included, as the main framework of the plot. When Hades, the god of the underworld, falls in love with Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, he kidnaps Persephone and takes her to the underworld. After some time of disapproval, Persephone begins to love Hades back. On the other side of the story, Demeter attempts at rescuing her daughter. Despite her attempts, Hades manages to persuade Persephone to eat seeds of a pomegranate in the underworld, while she is oblivious of the fact that this would necessitate her return to the land of death. Meanwhile, Demeter, the goddess of nature, mourns her daughter's absence by preventing the process of harvest, hence the arrival of winter. This is how Greeks explained the change of seasons. Likewise, *Abandon* proceeds through more or less similar events, albeit in a modern fashion.

The novel, *Abandon*, gives us an account of the life of Pierce Oliviera, an affluent seventeen-year-old high school teenager. Due to her near-death experience, she has trouble assimilating into society. Since her mother blames Pierce's father for her

being drowned and death experience, she gets a divorce. Expelled from her high school in Connecticut, Pierce is motivated by her mother to move to an Island, Isla Huesos, where her mother has been born, for a fresh start. However, Pierce is an outcast here, as well. In the meantime, through her acquaintance with the cemetery sexton, Richard Smith, she realizes the man who had intended to keep her in the afterlife has been a death deity, named John Hayden, who happens to be deeply in love with her. Pierce's death experience and communication with Richard and John give her an insight into the malic intent of the furies and the truth about the underworld.

Opting for death as the main subject of her novel, Cabot portrays the fearful moments the protagonist of the novel, Pierce, goes through, whether it is confronting death, the underworld, death deities, or furies. This paper discusses Kristevan affect in Meg Cabot's *Abandon*. Based on Julia Kristeva's semanalysis, various types of affects are categorized according to their distinctive qualities. These affects are not always consciously recognized. However, just not being cognizant of an affect does not spare us the trouble of burden. Kristeva's concept of the responsibility we have for our unconscious fears and affects and their consequences on others is utilized here. The aim of this paper is to elaborate how demonstrating empathy in those horrendous experiences can be a way to accumulate positive energy and overcome distress. Kristeva suggests affects are to "be heard in the breaks in discourse" (*Powers of Horror*, 1982, p. 30). In this article, we scrutinize the deeper semiotic side of literary language of the novel through the analysis of poetic and literary devices, readers' identification, pauses in between words, loving and frequent empathetic encounters, traumas and deprivations, social collectiveness, and life and death drive. The significance of this paper lies in its contribution to semiotic studies, Kristeva's semanalysis, and contemporary works of literature. Specifically, *Abandon* in Cabot's oeuvre is a rather neglected novel which has not been scrutinized before, whether according to its semiotic features or otherwise.

2. *Abandon*: A Prototype of Meg Cabot's Style

Abandon, like many of Meg Cabot's novels, is a paranormal romance, which itself originates from Gothic fiction. The protagonist in this subgenre is mostly a feminine teenager "in the liminal zone between life and death", who has lost "a parent (or two)" and moves to another place to live (Priest, 2014, pp. 274-276). Likewise, *Abandon*'s heroine is a teenage girl, moving with her mother to a new place, due to her parents' divorce. Their destination, the island, connects her to the cemetery, demons and death deities. The death of the protagonist, such texts' "fascination with the (dead) female body", and her resurrection are closely connected to the genre's root in Gothic fiction (Priest, 2014, pp. 275- 276). Gothic genre is naturally concerned with fearful settings and conditions. The works in this genre are known for "an atmosphere of fear and the occurrence of strange events", especially connected with death (Vanlalawmpuia, 2023, p. 829). According to Townshend, in Gothic literature, the "reality" that cannot be denied is "death" itself (2007, p. 319). In *Abandon*, the heroine's acquaintances are also prone to death, which is mostly manifested in the form of "gruesome and visceral murders" (Priest, 2014, p. 276). Pierce mourns the death of two of her friends, one of which being horrendously murdered. While in myriads of paranormal novels, the protagonists return in the form of vampires, Pierce's death and reappearance is scientifically justified as a near-death experience in Cabot's novel.

One point of similarity among many of Cabot's works is their connection to fairytales. In analyzing Cabot's *The Princess Diaries*, Gruner discerns an ironic state of "female empowerment" by rejecting the classical characteristics of fairytales (2010, p. 4). Presenting specific places, giving female protagonists voices, and opposing certain happy endings by providing "sequels" are the added elements which make the writer's intertextual approach more "realistic" (Gruner, 2010, p. 4). Cabot has also demonstrated the metamorphosis of a typical teenager into royalty in a "Cinderella-like" manner (Gruner, 2010, p. 4). While New York City replaces the lack of a specific place in fairytales, the heroine's "writing" talent in this novel substitutes for traditional heroines' passivity (Gruner, 2010, pp. 6-11). In addition, constant unsatisfying change of partners is the alternative to the fairytales' happy endings (Gruner, 2010, p. 15). *Abandon*, although a story of deities and furies, resists closure, since it has a sequel. The protagonist, Pierce, is, likewise, an active girl, determining the events of her life and living in a specific place, Isla Huesos.

Meg Cabot's novels have gone under critical examination from various perspectives. Several of Cabot's works have been scrutinized utilizing feminism, gender studies, psychological analysis, and contextual studies. They have also been analyzed with regard to their intertextuality, fairytale like qualities, realism, and their adapting to current times. The novelty of this study is taking into account Cabot's *Abandon*, which has not been under a critical scrutiny yet. Focusing on the protagonist's thoughts, words, and acts, by a close reading of the novel, we will track the affective features of the novel, while focusing on the significance of empathy amid fearful events.

3. Affect in *Abandon*: Fear and Empathy

In Kristevan theory, the significance of texts consists of the analysis of the symbolic aspect or the words of a text, which is the phenotext, along with the semiotic aspect or the hidden drives within a text, which refers to the genotext. In this study, affects and drives are discussed as factors connecting the symbolic world of the texts to their semiotic ones. After Sigmund Freud and other theorists in psychoanalysis and literary studies, Kristeva further enhances the application of the term by combining these two realms of studies. Utilizing her theories in analyzing novels is considered "highly suggestive" (Cano, 2022, p. 175). Now, semiotics is considered "both a methodology of dealing with a literary text and an attitude toward the world

in general” (Schilling, 2024, p. 39). Specifically, the NDE novels’ very topic, death, makes them more amenable to the study of affects and semiotics.

Abandon is primarily a novel concerned with death. Consequently, it contains features of horror in dealing with the topic of death. This affective encounter with death and everything related to it is described by Pierce in a way to convey the feeling to the audience. In literary texts, the readers are provided with “the opportunity to face the greatest peril, the loss of life, without risking anything” (Köllmann, 2024, p. 2). When Pierce faces John, a death deity, in the cemetery late at night, she declares, “what I felt was utter terror” (Cabot, 2011, p. 12). Similarly, when she describes her first moments in the underworld, she says, “I stood there paralyzed with fright” (Cabot, 2011, p. 15). In order to help readers identify with the characters and empathetically connect to them, authors utilize “narrative techniques—such as the use of first person narration and the interior representation of characters’ consciousness and emotional states” (Keen, 2006, p. 213). The first-person narration of the novel contributes to the expression of strong emotion throughout the work and transferring them to the readers.

Kristeva elaborates on the analysis of works of literature and their affective capabilities. She conceives the text as “the effect of the dialectic interplay between semiotic and symbolic dispositions” (*Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1984, p. 5). The symbolic refers to the fixed words themselves, while the semiotic is related to the flow in process in those words. In Kristevan mindset, “Meaning is made in large part by the poetic and affective aspects of texts” (McAfee, 2004, p. 13). Literary devices are those components of language which contribute to the semiotic side of language. Similes, in this regard, are utilized by authors and poets “to convey meaning, create literary effects, and enhance the reader’s understanding of the characters and themes” (Togaymurodov, 2023, p. 109). When Pierce describes the last moments of her life, she says, “The heavy canvas pool cover that Dad had forgotten to get fixed collapsed instantly beneath my weight and tangled around me, as constricting as the embrace of a python” (Cabot, 2011, p. 8). She uses a simile here in order to express the effect of fear shortly before her death.

In dealing with death, the first condition of survival is navigating danger. To reach this aim, Pierce simply uses a necklace John has given to her. Pierce creates a vivid and detailed mental image of the necklace through similes which represent it as the “one with a stone that changed colors like the sky, sometimes gray as a February morning, other times, black as midnight” (Cabot, 2011, p. 25). The reason why the stone changes colors is that it automatically traces danger for its wearer and reports it. Thus, the different colors mold and determine the type of affect Pierce is supposed to experience, whether it is joy in the sense of fellowship among sincere friends or fear in facing frenemies with animosities hidden to all, but the necklace.

The setting of the novel, an island, is significant in conveying affects to the audience. Auditory imagery, especially thunder, is utilized in *Abandon* to express the affect of fear. Given the setting is an island, thunder imagery is naturally expected. However, this imagery is used symbolically in situations other than the weather condition of the island. For instance, John’s “voice sounded like the thunder” to Pierce, whenever he seems intimidating to her (Cabot, 2011, p. 11). When she is in the underworld, the fall of John’s horse has the same sound to her. In her most terrifying time, when she realizes she cannot return to life or reach her final destination and that she has to stay with John forever in a purgatory-like place, she hears the same sound in her head. This is while, thunder, in its real sense, seems to rumble, whenever she is somehow in trouble. Likewise, by means of personification, she claims, “the waves were larger than usual. Maybe they, like me, sensed the unease in the air” (Cabot, 2011, p. 52). Auditory imagery, especially in the form of the elements in the nature around her contribute to the semiotic aspect of the novel affectively.

Fear shows up in this novel in the form of metaphor, as well, when Pierce describes John as “a nightmare” (Cabot, 2011, p. 62). In Kristevan mindset, metaphors travel “not only between fields of knowledge, but also, synesthetically, between different fields of perception and affection” (Pint, 2020, p. 93). When Pierce meets John in the underworld, as the affect changes from startle to fear, her account of him alters from the metaphor “dream” (Cabot, 2011, p. 22) to nightmare, synonymous words with positive and negative connotations respectively. Later, during her first intimate encounter with John, Pierce uses another metaphor, saying “He was fire, and I was kindling” (Cabot, 2011, p. 69). The two words bespeak passion, which can be related to the affect of excitement in that moment. However, kindling also symbolizes transformation and growth. It makes sense because as soon as Pierce surrenders to John’s kisses, she knows this means commitment to a death deity, opening up a new horizon in her life, which is both frightening and threatening.

In Pierce’s fearful constant confrontation with death, readers are sometimes invited to an affective identification and semiotic connection with the characters in the novel. Literature’s capacity to affectively engage readers is a type of “emotional investment” which can “arouse enthusiasm” (Sun, 2023, p. 146). In *Abandon*, Pierce shares her speculative fears with the readers, which intensifies the semiotic quality of her internal monologue. In her new school, when she sees the police officers, she wonders whether their presence is somehow related to her. She knows that John has crashed the cemetery gates the night before in a moment of rage, in her presence. Thus, when she sees the cemetery sexton, Richard Smith, in the school office with the necklace John threw to the cemetery, she begins to muse:

Did he recognize me from all those times he’d asked me to get off my bike and show some respect for the deceased? Surely not. And even if he did, so what? He didn’t know that was my necklace or that I’d been in the graveyard last night or that I had anything to do with what had happened to the gate. Except, of course, there was that clump of hair — the strands I’d pulled from my head while dramatically removing the necklace to give it back to John — still attached to the gold chain. I could see the dark brown tangle now against the lighter brown leather of his briefcase. Could he demand a DNA sample from me? Not without a warrant. (Cabot, 2011, p. 41)

In all these moments, the readers are invited to sympathize affectively with Pierce’s fear of once again being in trouble. The readers generally “engage more strongly with fiction that offers challenge and resistance” (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 97). In this

semiotic disposition, through these sentences from *Abandon*, step by step, the readers are engaged in Pierce's speculations, one after another, identifying with Pierce's anxiety over her already unstable and shaky status at school. As the text leans to semiotics, it invites the readers to empathically get engaged in semiotic affects. In other words, being invited to semiotic involvement makes the readers more inclined to empathize with the protagonist, which happens to be the narrator, as well.

Abandon is written in first person point of view, all events narrated by Pierce. However, Pierce is by no means a reliable narrator. She constantly emphasizes how she is called crazy by many different people. She sometimes wonders, "Was I as crazy as everyone back in Connecticut kept saying I was" (Cabot, 2011, p. 9). Such a narrator's comments can be "both partial and incomplete" (Gabriel, 2004, p. 163). Although Pierce is a fallible narrator, the readers can still identify with her. Even though she might distort or manipulate the truth, as is conveyed throughout the novel, her perspective and experiences can still resonate affectively with the readers of the novel. The readers do not necessarily have to believe or trust whatever Pierce claims. This is while the first person point of view helps the readers understand her motivations, emotions, and thought processes, although this may prove intriguing, given Pierce's fallibility.

Organic imagery is utilized by Cabot to portray Pierce's contradictory affects. The contradiction of coldness and warmth represents danger and safety, respectively, to Pierce. First, when she drowns in the icy water of the pool in winter, the doctors revive her by warming her up. Second, when she is in the underworld during her NDE, she feels cold and wet. However, John takes her to his own room in order to heat her. In situations other than death, whenever she is afraid, she feels "cold all of a sudden" (Cabot, 2011, p. 30). The fact that John is the one who warms Pierce can be directly related to the symbolism of poinciana petals. Wherever he shows up, these petals are to be found afterwards. It is true that this type of tree is widespread in the island Pierce lives, due to its warm climate and tropical atmosphere. However, its association with John's presence adds an extra layer of significance to poinciana flowers' being primarily the symbol of warmth of passion.

As Poinciana flowers become the symbol of passion, Pierce's scarf, with its red tassels become the sign of danger and rage to her. It is because of the fact that when she was drowning in the pool, those tassels got tangled around her legs. Thus, whenever she becomes really angry, all she sees everywhere is red. In addition, she begins to hate the tassels on shoes, whether those of Mr. Mueller, her teacher, or Richard Smith. The color red and tassels become leitmotifs, repeated through several pages of the novel to connote the affect of fear mingled with rage. However, according to Kristeva, "hatred" is to be distinguished "from aggressiveness" (*Hatred and Forgiveness*, 2012, p. 183). In the case of Pierce, she keeps all the hatred inside, without reacting aggressively.

Our feelings, especially those more subtle ones, are not without consequences for our companions. Kristeva specifically talks about our responsibility for "our unconscious fears and desires and their affective representations" and also their influence on others (Oliver, 2004, p. 13). When we consider Pierce's account in the novel, *Abandon*, we can see how her fears and distinct affects directly impact upon her close ones. Although she is always concerned about her loved ones, she cannot but save those with whom she can form an empathetic relationship. Similarly, for her, who is an outcast NDE in society, being understood by others is valuable.

Apart from Pierce, only two other characters have undergone death and only these two truly understand her. The two are Richard Smith and John. When Pierce is finally confronted with someone who totally believes in the underworld and the existence of John, she finds it difficult to articulate her experience during her NDE. The pauses in her sentence, "When I died...what happened...it was..." make her speech apparently incomprehensible (Cabot, 2011, p. 61). In semiotics silences sometimes speak louder than words. Pauses belong to the "drive-affected dimension", which can be expressed in "illogical statements" (Kristeva, "Freud and Love", 1986, pp. 246-247). In works of fiction, these pauses have the capacity to "evoke momentary affective identifications between" the characters (Zappen, 2016, p. 300) by listening to these "silences" and even laughing with each other (Zappen, 2016, p. 304). A few minutes later, Pierce herself confesses, "It felt good finally to have someone to vent to about this stuff. Someone who would actually listen, who knew what I was talking about" (Cabot, 2011, p. 62). Her addressee, the cemetery sexton, because of having an NDE beforehand, reads the unintelligibility in her words, while showing the signs of recognition.

In the case of Pierce and John, we can detect a deeper account of empathy. The manifestation can be, for instance, "a loving encounter", which can lead to "an affective relatedness between individuals" (Staels, 2007, p. 988). These encounters can have positive effects and their lack negative ones on others. That is what makes us responsible as individuals, according to Kristeva. For Pierce, how John reacts to her is of great significance. As a child, when she bursts into tears in the cemetery, John shows up for the first time, asking her why she is crying. That is why in his companionship, she declares "I was sure I was safe" (Cabot, 2011, p. 7). Years later, when she dies and transfers to the underworld, John's telling her, "You don't need to worry" and his warm support make her feel "a rush of relief" (Cabot, 2011, p. 16). Finally, when she shows up in the underworld again, in her most distressful moment, Pierce admits John talks "with another one of those smiles that tugged on my heartstrings" (Cabot, 2011, p. 80). That is when she also "smiled back at him" (Cabot, 2011, p. 80). Thus, John becomes her source of comfort in the same formidable place for her.

John, as a death deity, is naturally overwhelmed by the affect of rage, terrifying and powerful on the surface. The emotions which connote weakness in him are buried deep inside, not to be easily accessed. When in one rare moment, Pierce is able to see through John's sorrows, she describes "a flicker of pain — in his eyes" as "It was there, and then it was gone, like the fish that sometimes flashed beneath the surface of the water when I rode my bike across the bridge above the highway" (Cabot, 2011, p. 80). This simile helps Pierce portray the inaccessibility of John's fragility and, affectively speaking, distress. This is while it is Pierce who by putting a hand on John's knee is capable of calming him. She herself sees at that moment that "The

hand seemed to work. He stayed where he was, the tension leaving his body" (Cabot, 2011, p. 67). In another instance, John "buried his head in the place where my neck met my shoulder, clinging to me as tightly as if he were out there in the waves again" (Cabot, 2011, p. 77). John has lived alone in the underworld for about 150 years and now Pierce's accompaniment means a lot to him. Their kindness and support for each other leads to the affect of interest for each other.

Pierce feels a strong affinity for her uncle, Chris. She is empathetic toward him because he, like her, is an outcast on the island, since he has spent many years in prison. Uncle Chris feels the same about Pierce's traumatic condition of NDE and the effects on her afterwards. When her uncle tries to support her through words, "He smiled at" her (Cabot, 2011, p. 54). A minute later, when she sees how her uncle needs to be helpful in one way or another, she tells him he can teach her driving tomorrow. That is when "his face brightened" (Cabot, 2011, p. 54). In this scene, we can see the accumulation and circulation of positive energy, due to the sense of family members affectively connected to each other.

Apart from Pierce, who has died once, the character, who is the most deprived of all, is Alex, Pierce's cousin. His father has spent almost all of Alex's life in prison, while her mother left them afterwards to apparently become a sex worker. Financially speaking, he is below average. In addition to all these, he is grouped as D-Wing at school, the special wing for troubled students, and hence the object of humiliation. In an outburst of anger he admits his deprivations in comparison with wealthy A-Wingers of school and he says, "they all wear designer labels and drive brand-new cars their daddies bought them for their birthdays, and I wear clothes from the Salvation Army and drive a rusted old junk heap" (Cabot, 2011, p. 45). Here, he partly exhibits the affects of rage and humiliation which have hurt him for so long. In myriads of occasions, Pierce expresses her concern for him. However, because she is a wealthy girl, she cannot truly empathize with what Alex has gone through. That is why Alex repeatedly avoids her helps, which seem mere showing off of wealth to him.

Social collectiveness creates "an affective energy", which is primarily "a groundswell of support" (Zappen, 2016, p. 305). This is while the lack of such collectiveness has contradictory consequences. As soon as Pierce realizes her closest friend, Hannah, has committed suicide, she reproaches herself for it. She feels conscience-stricken at how she left Hannah alone to commit suicide, when she needed her most. She knows if she had remained close to her, she could have avoided the disaster. However, later, when she finds the authorities ignorant of Hannah's death, she decides to act on behalf of them. Thus, when she witnesses her teacher's perversion has simply left Hannah, dead, she decides to expose the true nature of her teacher, Mr. Mueller. In order to achieve this aim, in Mr. Mueller's private class, she sets a camera to prove what he has done to Hannah. This is while, she has chosen a potentially dangerous way. When her teacher reaches a hand toward her, John shows up to save her. Otherwise, the meeting could have destructive consequences for her. She repeatedly puts herself in dangerous situations, hence moving toward death.

Pierce admits that she has inherited her tenderness and her strive for empathetic encounters from her mother, who is a representation of Kristevan life drive. In Kristevan mindset, death drive or "destructive proclivities" (Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 1980, p. 220) and life drive can be put in a binary opposition. While death drive is associated with "terror", life drive is concerned with "ecstasy" (Staels, 2007, p. 984). In *Abandon*, the character who demonstrates life drive or a flow of jouissance is Pierce's mother, Deborah. When she decides to move Pierce to a new place to live, she tells her, "You'll see. We're going to make a new start. Everything's going to be great. I just know it" (Cabot, 2011, p. 5). Deborah is so excited about once again living in the island she herself was born in that she cannot hide her delight. She even throws a party at the very beginning of the novel to welcome Pierce to the island. Additionally, she is absolutely positive that Pierce is going to have a good experience there, with a certain amount of nostalgia for the good old days she herself used to savor on the island. When she hears of the old traditions on the island, she responds with "a happy bubble of laughter" (Cabot, 2011, p. 41). Despite her optimism, Pierce is not able to seize the chance, since her two empathetic allies, John and Richard Smith, one a death deity and one the cemetery sexton, are both too connected with death. That is why, by the end of the novel, she happens to be in the underworld again.

Concerning the death drive, Kernberg lists five factors involved in Freud's development of the notion of the death drive. Among them is "the phenomenon of repetition compulsion" (Kernberg, 2009, p. 1012). In the case of Pierce, the main manifestation of her death drive is her obsession with going to the cemetery, which she does quite often, without any obvious reasons. She never quits it, in spite of the hurricanes and dangerous climates, even late at night. While cemetery is generally associated with death, it is ironic how, after her NDE, she is attracted to this place, where she is most prone to be found by furies who wish her dead. Additionally, the cemetery symbolically represents death. Accordingly, riding toward it is moving toward death. The other repetitive act is saving animals in the pool. She puts herself in the situation which can have fatal outcomes for her. For instance, when Pierce sees an injured bird, she tries "to scoop it up" to save it, when she falls into the pool and temporarily dies (Cabot, 2011, p. 8). Later, in her Isla Huesos house, when she sees a "gecko", while being drowned in the pool, she tries to help it, despite her previous sad experience of death in a pool (Cabot, 2011, p. 66). Her experience of death does not prevent her from saving the animals in the pool. She does not seem to learn the lesson. That is why she moves toward death throughout all the pages of the novel.

4. Conclusion

The semiotic side of language significantly contributes to find meaning in a text, especially a literary one. Meg Cabot's novel, *Abandon*, is primarily about death. Thus, the atmosphere of this novel is imbued with fear. Based on the concepts of affect and drive in Kristevan mindset, we scrutinized the affective components, which were poetic and literary devices, readers' identification, pauses in between words, loving and frequent empathetic encounters, traumas and deprivations, social collectiveness, and life and death drive in this work amid the demanding social life of Pierce, the protagonist, after her NDE.

This affective analysis depicted how empathetic encounters among the characters and their social collectiveness can create positive energy and even survival. This finding confirms our responsibility to account for our fears and their consequences.

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