



Silhouettes of the Abode: A Study of Emotional Determinism in Philip Larkin's Selected Poems Neelanti Nawsheen

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Abstract

This paper is designed to discover the emotional fixation of the 20th century British poet Philip Larkin through some selected poems. To dive further into the inner workings of thought, it attempts a psychoanalytical understanding of the chosen poems. Family being the primary place of human upbringing, it impacts their psychology in many ways. This extreme bond conforms the children to their socially required gender and their future relationships and way of life. For instance, in the poem 'Mother, Summer, I', Larkin paints generational anxiety and the trace of it that is still predominant ("though summer-born, and summer-loving, none the less, am easier when the leaves are gone"). To understand Larkin's psyche, particular poems of his which specialize in the connection between family and emotions are considered for this study. This research has been conducted through qualitative textual analysis, specifically close reading to examine Larkin's selected poems. The poems are analyzed through Freud's tripartite theory of human psyche alongside the defense mechanisms. To get further details regarding the poet's psychological formation, Lacan's notion of lack is studied. The necessary data and information have been collected mostly from the secondary sources. While the selected poems of Philip Larkin have been regarded as the primary texts, assistance from several books and articles has been taken to conduct a psychosocial analysis of the contents of the poem and achieve the goals of this paper.

Keywords: Bond, emotional determinism, family, psyche, tripartite

Introduction:

Philip Larkin was a poet of his thoughts. He used to write letters to his parents daily, indicating a close relationship between them. It was after his father's death when this relationship became more of a responsibility than a routine. He was stuck between two worlds, the duty of a son and the responsibility to self. The burden of these two inspired him to jot down his thoughts in forms of poetry. Thus, some brutally honest poems of twentieth century were born which focused on an issue that every adult faces at least once in their life, 'which responsibility should I fulfil first?' Emotional determinism refers to a psychological notion which views every human emotion and behavior as causative event of previous incidents and experiences. Parents play the primary role in building a child's mentality, in fact, its process of thinking is shaped in connection with the thoughts from their parents. A mother especially is the most important entity in a child's life. The first person a child encounters and spends its majority of the time with is the mother. From a psychoanalytic

lens, children pose their mothers as the mirror shaping their identity. This invisible yet strong bond furthermore conforms the children to their socially required gender and their future relationships and overall way of life. The intricate relationship between the parents and the children is something that has been discussed and analyzed by numerous psychoanalysts and psychotherapists. Sigmund Freud viewed the emotional burden as the result of some repressed emotions. Repressed emotions, according to him, can be the outcome of a traumatic event that happened in the past or of something that is simply unpleasant for us. Then came the notions of defense mechanisms, Freudian slips, and neurosis which worked as outlets for any emotionally unpleasant moment. On the other hand, Jacques Lacan focused on the three stages of the human psyche that are entirely dependent on the existence and acceptance of the parents, especially in relation to the mother. Any human relationships that the child will encounter in his future will be shaped by the parent-child relationship. Larkin was considered as one of the Movement Poets who sought to move his readers with words. In the mid-1950s, poets were trying to break away from the traditions of poetry, writing short and simple poems with straightforward messages. "In the midst of disillusionment and uncertainty, he advocated the simple and clear notions and rejected all the artificialities of the modern poetry. Clarity and elegance are two virtues of Larkin's poems" (Mastud). Larkin's poems mostly talked about the complexity of human relationships and how he could not conform to them. They stretched onto his familial bonds which he thought to be responsible for his inability to form his future relationships.

Problem Statement:

Studying two renowned poems ('Home is So Sad' and 'Mother, Summer, I') by Philip Larkin regarding his relationship with his mother and two other poems ('Talking in Bed' and 'The Whitsun Weddings') regarding his views on romantic relationships, the paper intends to bring out the poet's emotional and psychological formation. It further implies that a major part of it was determined through the actions of his parents. Focusing on specific areas from both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, this paper inspects Larkin's own words under the emotional deterministic microscope.

Literature Review:

In "Analysis of The Causes of Philip Larkin's Wounds in The Mirror of Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory", Bakir & Ismail presented the unconscious mind of Larkin through monadic solitude and dyadic engagement. The former refers to an intrapersonal push for absolute alienation and the latter signifies the interpersonal angst that occurs when one cannot fulfil familial expectations. This, according to the authors, sheltered a growing fear of intimacy and repression of libido in Larkin. The paper visited Freudian psychoanalysis as Larkin's severe anxiety and depression represented the repression of 'pleasure principle'.

Rajkumar Bera focused on Larkin's agnostic, cynical, and overly pessimist mentality. His "Death, Decay and Disillusionment: A Study of Cynicism and Agnosticism in Philip Larkin's Select Poems" reflects that Larkin's mindset made it impossible for him to find any comfort, in God, religion or the immortality of the soul. This also made him an existentialist nihilist who viewed the world in a bleak light. To protect his fragile mind, he isolated himself from everyone and everything. Being a witness of the great war left a heavy impression on his mind. This alongside losing his father shattered his belief on anything good and on life altogether. This unhappiness functioned as the primary catalyst of Larkin's poems.

"Melancholia and Creativity: A Psychoanalytic Study in Selected Poems of Philip Larkin" by Rashed & Sulaiman talks about Larkin's indifference towards therapy despite having clinical depression. Poetry functioned like a 'safety valve' that protected Larkin's burdened mind from his own self. His father's death triggered extreme thanatophobia resulting in constant overthinking about his own death at the same age as his father. Since childhood, he felt alone and different from kids of his age. When most children are wandering around not thinking about anything else, Larkin overcomplicated every emotion, every negative encounter which alienated him from a good childhood.

S. J. Perry in "'So unreal': The Unhomely Moment in the Poetry of Philip Larkin" looked into Larkin's identity formation from his early childhood. Freud's uncanny (*das unheimlich*) was real for Larkin as homely objects became alien to him. This created a sense of instability in him and raised questions in his mind about 'what is real?' and what is not. His home is often mentioned as a 'dysfunctional' space where Larkin's emotional needs were never met.

One of the most famous poems of Larkin titled 'This Be the Verse' portrays the poet's frustration regarding the familial bond. He has an outburst in the poem that some opinion of his parents will never match with him. Interestingly the reason he poses behind his parents' failure is the result of a chain-reaction. Because his parents faced the same indifference from their parents, they project their previous frustration into their own children so much so that Larkin proposes that the best way to end this cycle is to not create a family at all and live alone. Some critics view this statement as something unrealistic, "a suggestion so ridiculous that it reads as sarcastic, since few people would take this advice seriously" (Mastud). "In this regard, the poem frames emotional damage as cyclical and generational, something that people can't help but inherit from their parents and then unwittingly inflict upon their own children" (Az-Zubaidy).

"Writing the Self in the Letter- the Letters of Philip Larkin" by Maciej Bobula analyzed Larkin's letters that he wrote to his family. Bobula defined that Larkin's psyche was a combination of 'minor shelves' and most of his mind was emotionally depended on his mother, Eva. Eva was a complaining woman and had a short temperament both of which was inherited by Larkin. Larkin was forever stuck between 'wanting to get out' and 'staying with family' and this conflict found its outlet in confessional letters which had real details of his pain, need for intimacy, and sexual desires.

According to Savitha (2015), Larkin wanted his poems to be read in the huge field of modernist poets which is why his poems were fragmented yet non-fragmented, complex yet quite simple, and most importantly were blatantly real. The time he was writing in was a crucial period for human history and emotions were something which were constantly being dehumanized. Another significant instance that can be found in his poems is the treatment of time and its impact on our daily lives. Larkin viewed time to be a delicate and driving force of human life. "Time incessantly moves and destroys our desires, expectations, hopes and dreams against our choice. In the domain of time life is a constant struggle and unstoppable search for meaningful existence" (Ubeid). Larkin had thoughts about death quite often and it is something that he dreaded throughout his life. This influenced many of his works, where he mentioned the end of all our hopes and fears through death. When death appears, we cannot escape it, but it does not refer that we will not be able to enjoy our lives. He believed that among life and death, death holds the greater power which is why he advised his readers not too expect much from life. This indicated a pessimistic view of life

by Larkin which easily falls under nihilism and existentialism. Key nihilist thinker Friedrich Nietzsche often talked about the burden of life in relation to 'eternal return'. Eternal return refers to the never-ending cycle of life with its pain and sufferings. To Nietzsche, the nature of all our pain and suffering is similar and they keep happening repeatedly. Whether or not we will accept it decides our connection with fate. In his hauntingly beautiful poem 'Aubade' he explores this thought where life seems nothing but a cycle and at the end of the cycle death is awaiting. We humans are going to our works, maintaining our routines, planning for the future, knowing that death can come to us at any moment. Lives go on at their own pace, but "the dread of dying, and being dead, flashes afresh to hold and horrify" (Larkin). Throughout his life, Larkin had been living in an existential dread which was a prominent theme in his literary works. He never found peace with his situation and remained in the emotional turmoil, "needless to say, this is a very pessimistic outlook, since it suggests that there is no reasonable solution to this problem" (Chaudhury).

Theoretical Framework:

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan made significant contribution to contemporary psychoanalysis, especially in how we perceive the human mind. As he had experience in both medicine and psychiatry, he could develop his theories mixing the two. At the end of 20th century, Lacan proposed the theoretical framework of diving the human psyche into three stages: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary or the Mirror stage occurs at the very beginning of a child's development, between their six and eighteen months. Lacan observed that during this age, a child first sees itself in the mirror and identifies itself as a separate individual. Before this, the child cannot separate itself from its mother and considers itself as an extended part of the mother. As the child is now considering itself as a different independent individual, the bond between the child and the mother starts to weaken. It is in the mirror stage where the child first enters the broader world. Then the child moves into the Symbolic stage. Here the child learns language and starts to become a part of society. Language is crucial in this stage because it constructs our identity. The child slowly starts learning about the social contract and they must be adapted. Language slowly turns into a 'lack' and the child learns that it is impossible to be perfect in the outside world. Lack refers to desires which would be unmet, and this begins with the distance from the mother. More desire is hidden into the unconscious mind because of their social unacceptability. In a child's psychological development, the Symbolic stage is a turning point as this is when the child's worldview changes. Finally, the Real stage is viewed by Lacan as something impossible because it refers to a perfect, pre-conscious state that can never be achieved. In this stage, there is no sense of separation, lack, or unmet desires. It is a psychologically unattainable condition.

Sigmund Freud, one of the founders of psychoanalysis, proposed his theory based on the unconscious of the mind. He divided the human psyche into three parts: Id, Ego, and Superego. The Id contains our unconscious desires and instincts, especially related to aggression and sexuality. The ego refers to the rational part of the psyche which keeps a connection with the outside world. Lastly, superego presents the ideal moral standards that we learn from our society or any kind of authority. To keep our unconscious hidden, Freud suggested some defense mechanisms which the ego uses to protect our psyche. Through these mechanisms, we can repress our emotions, and at the same time project them on other people. They help us to remain comfortable within our own selves. Anna Freud, daughter

of Sigmund Freud, made a more detailed analysis on defense mechanisms. In any psychoanalysis, Lacan and Freud's theories can be used together as they overlap in the notions of desire and repression. Lacan specifically focused on language that is connected to social structure and the lack that comes from our desires. Meanwhile, Freud viewed desire as the outcome of the unconscious which needs to be repressed to live in the social structure. Sometimes these desires come to the surface through dreams, or different forms of expression. Many literary artists hide their inner thoughts in written words which can only confirm Freud's theory. This short study has been conducted through qualitative methodology where all the necessary data and information have been collected mostly from the secondary sources. While the selected poems of Philip Larkin have been regarded as the primary texts, assistance from several books and articles has been taken to conduct a psychosocial analysis of the contents of the poem and achieve the goals of this paper.

Research Gap:

Although Philip Larkin's has been a medium of extensive studying regarding death, alienation, pessimism, and familial relationship, limited attention has been paid to the intertwined relationship of familial lack, maternal ambivalence, and psychic conflict. Existing studies also leave scope for a systematic application of Freud's id, ego, and superego to Larkin's selected poems. This study addresses the gap by examining the relationship between Larkin and his mother and his sense of domestic lack.

Research Questions:

This research centers around these following questions-

1. How does the sense of a universal lack prevail in Larkin's psyche?
2. How does Larkin's ambivalent relationship with his mother shape and influence the psychological conflicts represented in his selected poems?
3. How can Larkin's selected poems can be understood through Freud's tripartite model of human psyche?

Research Objectives:

The general objective of this study is to analyze the emotional determinism in Philip Larkin's selected poems. The specific objectives are-

1. To investigate Larkin's psyche under the lens of a universal lack that begins from home
2. To examine the ambivalent relationship between Larkin and his mother and how it impacted his psyche over the years
3. To form an understanding of Larkin's selected poems through tripartite lens of human psyche

Research Methodology:

This research has been conducted through qualitative textual analysis, specifically close reading to examine Larkin's selected poems. The poems are analyzed through Freud's tripartite theory of human psyche alongside the defense mechanisms. To get further details regarding the poet's psychological formation, Lacan's notion of lack is studied. The necessary data and information have been collected mostly from the secondary sources. While the selected poems of Philip Larkin have been regarded as the primary texts, assistance from several books and articles has been taken to conduct a psychosocial analysis of the contents of the poem and achieve the goals of this paper.

Discussion & Findings:

As all our emotions start at the presence or absence of home, the first poem to be discussed under this study is 'Home is so sad' where the speaker feels that his home has become a sad and lifeless place. It indicates to a home that is now never visited, "it stays as it was left" (Larkin). The people who used to live in the house are not there anymore and the house is slowly "withering" away. The house seems tired waiting for all the people to come back and starts to feel empty and worn out. It, almost like a human, is unable to move on and is stuck in sadness that is left behind in picture frames, shiny cutleries, music sheets, and empty vases. The 'Home' here can be a metaphor for his own life which was filled with sadness and despair. The inability to not being able to form a proper human relationship generated from his distant relationship with his parents. When he did become close with his mother after his father's death, it was not because he wanted to, but that he had to. This forced bond felt like a heavy boulder to him, which he had to constantly roll over in the mountain of life.

Larkin's relationship with his mother can be well understood from the poem 'Mother, Summer, I' where Larkin shows the difference of opinion between him and his mother. While criticizing the nature of his mother, Larkin talks about the sweet and painful sides of being a mother. The emotion of the mother here is narrated through the seasonal changes. Sometimes she feels overwhelmed seeing her child grow and explore the universe, at the same time, she feels dreary knowing that the time will not last forever. This is what Larkin believed throughout his life that time is fleeting, and he is standstill. Like her mother, he was caught between two feelings, showing his emotions with a lot of care and understanding as well as regretting caring. The poem brings out the connection between nature and healing, and how his mother feels at peace when she sees the seasons change. This directs to the cycle of life and death, to which both the mother and the child is part of. As she accepts this cycle, she accepts her fate along with the child's and finally learns to see the beauty in her life.

'The Whitsun Weddings' takes place on Whitsun Day, a public holiday in Britain. It is interesting how Larkin chose this day to be the center of his poem as it is the day when the marriage tax is lifted in Britain, which allows many couples with little income to be married. The speaker is just a passenger on a train who is viewing an afternoon through his window. During the process, he starts to notice all the couple boarding on the train who just got married on Whitsun day. He views their happiness as something temporary and made up. He realizes how at every wedding there are always mothers who wear bright clothes, uncles who are unnecessarily loud, and couples who are unknowingly happy. He finds the entire procedure of marriage to be showy and silly. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker sounds a bit mocking, but as the journey ends, his tone changes. He realizes that the weddings are only the beginning of something new, all couple starting a new journey together. In this poem, we see the speaker's growth and maturity regarding one of the most crucial parts of life.

Another short but powerful poem that explores the complexity of human relationships is 'Talking in Bed'. Here Larkin talks about how two people can be extremely close to each other almost like a couple lying in bed yet feeling emotionally apart. He thinks about the awkwardness and sadness of that moment when a couple cannot be their true selves around each other even if they have been together for a long time. He compares human relationship with nature saying relationships have flaws as they tend to hide real emotions whereas

nature is something open and clear. The poem talks about the disappointment of love and how much discomfort it can bring to a person's life.

Although 'Mother, Summer, I' dictates the inevitable mother-son bonding, a tone of differences can also be found. His mother who apparently is not fond of summer is at difference with Larkin who is "summer-born" and "summer loving". "Larkin here focuses on the dangers of 'perfection' which works to hide underlying issues and faults of any given situation" (Saleem) which indicates that the sense of perfection has different definition to everyone. Because Eva Larkin, Philip Larkin's mother, does not like the summer breeze and its entire ambiance, the poet himself does not feel comfortable that he has love for the season. During the summer, according to Larkin, all the clouds of his head vanish away, and he feels free and capable of something. His mother on the other hand is fond of the rain and her "worried summer look is lost" whenever there is a change in weather from summer to rain. The irony of the poem is that there is no synthesis here but the proposition of thesis and anti-thesis only. "Through the extended metaphor of changing seasons, the poet hones into the faults and negativity ingrained into a relationship between a mother and her child, and whilst the speaker is characterized as eager to rejuvenate a healthy relationship with his mother- the structure of the poem warns of the ultimate futility of this quest" (Salauddin). On the other hand, 'Home is So Sad' seemingly brings out the emptiness of a home after it has been abandoned. However, the reality of the poem is very complex as he was staying with his mother at that time. The 'Home' that feels desolate now can reflect his sadness that came with the loss of his father. After his father's death, Larkin's mother became emotionally depended on him and expected him to be with her always. This, even though started as something innocent, became an emotional burden on the son. The sigh of the house can be the sigh of the speaker or Larkin himself. Maybe his home feels sad because he cannot breathe freely there anymore. Maybe it is not the home that is withering away, but it is him who is slowly fading into the crowd of emptiness. Another interpretation of it can be that the home refers to the relationship between his mother and him. The mother-son bond that used to be a place of comfort has turned into a place of forcefulness. The 'Home' can be his mother who is waiting for his son to return, but she knows too that it will never be the same again. Everything has become eerily quiet, waiting for the return to innocence, but it never happens. The train journey in 'The Whitsun Weddings' is the transition points of human life. It is the journey of life through which our views about the world change with age and experience. At first, he was cynical about marriage. He felt it was a trap from which humans can never get out of. The seemingly eternal bond felt vain to the poet. He was in the belief that marriage is a routine rather than romantic journey. This cynicism can be the representation of a repressed emotion of his inner turmoil. Pessimism and negativism are the results of a previously encountered trauma or simply a bad experience. Repression is the way of our mind protecting our unconscious from the conscious. Humor and cynicism are some of the ways to cope up with the process. However, his view changes at the end of the poem, showing that his repression is resolved as he makes more mature comments about the notion of marriage. This can also be an epiphany when suddenly everything started to make sense to the poet again. The key emotion that can be felt in 'Talking in Bed' is alienation. The poet is alienated in several layers in the text. Firstly, there is physical alienation which is between the poet and his potential partner. For some reason, he cannot feel attached to his partner even though they are like a couple who are lying in bed. This

results in psychological alienation which is observed in the poet's inability to connect with anybody and the despair that comes along with it. Along with the feeling of loneliness, the poet feels disappointed about the emptiness in emotional bonding with his partner. Even though he feels that this should be the most natural and honest emotion, their relationship seems forced from both ends.

The distance between mother and son in 'Mother, Summer, I', both mentally and emotionally, originates in the symbolic stage of Lacanian division of the human psyche. It is in that stage that a child realizes that it is completely different from its mother as well as everyone surrounding the child. In the mirror stage where the child was one with the mother, this breakage of bond does not sit well with the well. It gradually grows a sense of lack, something Lacan defined as desire. The desire that starts to form at this stage remains throughout his life and generates a series of lack. As Lacan mentioned that symbolic stage is the major linguistic stage filled with endless signifiers, the desires act as those signifiers to which there is no end. This is why we do not see Larkin coming up with any solution to mend the distance between him and his mother. His writing poems about how his childhood home seems distant in 'Home is So Sad' is another way of pursuing the meaning of the signifiers, however that attempt remains unsuccessful because signifiers have a chain formation which gradually made him indecisive, cynical, and pessimistic. What is crucial here is that the loss of the object of desire (the mother) is what gives anyone the language, which is why language represents lack. Here, lack indicates to the lack of understanding, the lack of love, and the lack of familial bond. Finally, Larkin comes to term with his emotions suggesting an ambivalent association with the mother. Throughout his life, Larkin has written countless letters to both his parents which makes it clear that they had a close enough relationship to exchange letters regularly. According to his ten years older sister Catherine ("Kitty"), both of their parents "worshipped" Philip, however some later letters say otherwise. In 1952, Mrs. Larkin wrote to her son, "Marriage would be no certain guarantee as to socks being always mended, or meals ready when they are wanted. Neither would it be wise to marry just for those comforts. There are other things just as important" (Larkin). Another letter from his mother shared a clear detest of Eva in marriage. She quoted *Love Among the Artists* by George Bernard Shaw and came across a passage that said that marriage kills the heart, so it should be starved and not be fed with emotions (Larkin). Larkin on one hand called her to be irritating, on the other hand, he mentioned her loving and caring nature. His mother was like a leech, who clung onto him always. Mrs. Larkin, a perceptive reader of her son's poetry, at the same time surprisingly unintrusive, advises him not to get involved in any romantic relationships. The critics who have studied the relationship between this mother-son duo are divided into two sections, the ones who believed that his mother was a dominating figure who did not want Larkin to be established as an individual and the others who do not agree to this notion. From a Freudian point of view, 'Home is So Sad' reflects an unresolved sadness which can be named 'melancholia'. This sense of melancholy is felt by the home itself along with the poet. Just like the house, the poet is searching for something that is lost. Little things from home, like a sheet-music or a flower vase, all seem to be joining in the uncanny, reminding the poet of what is missing. Thus, the home becomes a symbol of lingering pain and nostalgia. From Lacan's perspective, however, 'home' becomes a reflection of the poet's emotions. Lacan talked about the mirror stage, in which we first start identifying ourselves, even though we have not been fully formed yet.

In the same manner, the house looks whole, but it is empty and broken from the inside. Everything from the home, like pictures, music, and furniture are symbols which are trying to fulfill the meaning of the missing. This represents the notion of Lacan's 'Real' which is constructed with chains of signifiers without any actual meaning. The offspring of Sigmund Freud, Anna, added to her father's idea of defense mechanisms by viewing projection as the basic way by which the mind protects itself from stress and anxiety. When we do not want to admit some thoughts or feelings to ourselves, we imagine that someone else is feeling like that. This helps us to cope with the situation without any discomfort. Anna Freud called this the feeling of 'displacement' meaning posing one's own feeling to another. Psychoanalyzing 'The Whitsun Weddings', the poem discloses the pressure to meet society's expectations, which causes inner conflict and anxiety. Through Lacanian analysis, the train journey in the poem refers to the layered journey of the mind. The weddings act as the Symbolic to which the speaker does not belong to. The Imaginary here can be the idea of the perfect life or love, and the Real stage symbolizes the reality of not being able to conform to the perfection. As the poet voyeurs into their lives, a sense of longing and uncertainty looms over. The couple's silence in 'Talking in Bed' is a sign of repression as they are hiding their true feelings. It also suggests a recurring fear of showing weakness. It feels that over time, their relationship has lost that spark and now it is filled with an unspoken sadness. This notion shows the failure of the Symbolic order because language does not always help people to communicate. Once there was the perfect vision of their romance, or the Imaginary stage. Now they are facing the brutal Real in which they cannot speak even though they have words. Just like the turmoil in the wind, they have torrents in their minds, and it cannot be put to rest. This contrast depicts the difference between the unreal and honest image of love.

Conclusion:

Emotional determinism refers to the formation of emotion which is dependent on various factors like family, friends, and society in general. The first learnings of every human come from the family, and it grows gradually as per our familial bonds. Thus, home becomes the primary space for our thoughts and feelings. Relationships of any kind are seen as an exchange between people and familial relationships are the first relationship of a child to be developed. For Philip Larkin, he had always faced tension from home, whether it was from his authoritarian father, or from his overly attached mother. From a psychoanalytic point of view, his poetry can be a form of sublimation which refers to the artistic outburst of negative emotions that usually remain repressed. His disruption of romantic ideals, and overall pessimistic view of the world are the reflection of this notion. And Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis begins at the threshold of home overlooking a child's psychological development. It is needless to emphasize further on the deep connection between emotional fixation and familial relationships. To finish with, Larkin was a poet of simple thoughts. He explored simple thoughts with an extraordinary mind, and this makes his works the perfect samples for this kind of analysis.

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