

Two Family Relations

—“A Silver Dish” and *What Kind of Day Did You Have?*—

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Saul Bellow further develops the theme of human relationships in his second collection, *Him with His Foot in His Mouth and Other Stories* (1984). Among those five stories, I may distinguish a family relation theme in both “A Silver Dish” and *What Kind of Day Did You Have?* In the former, Bellow deals with the father/son relation; in the latter, with the father/daughter relation. The author describes how the children have grown up afresh after they reached their adolescence by way of becoming independent from their parents. Son/daughter has taken large steps toward becoming a different person than their parent, comprehending s/he has blood or personality common to father and revaluing his/her life. In so doing, Bellow manifests his own stance on American materialism seen from a second-generation Jew. Interestingly, “A Silver Dish” begins with an interrogative statement. By using this narrative device, the reader is induced to seek the answer.

In this article I will examine the effects brought by this narrative device and examine the portrayal of filial relations against the American scene.

1. Narrative—an answer for the interrogative

The story of ‘A Silver Dish’ is narrated in the third-person. Though the story is perceived from the protagonist Woody’s perspective, at first it is not clear that he is the narrator. By using the third-person, the author assumes a detached attitude toward his characters and incidents; he keeps his story at a distance. The distance, however, suddenly merges, and once throughout the story the protagonist identifies with the narrator.

In a snowstorm father and son went to see Mrs. Skoglund for raising money. They were not admitted at first since they did not inform about their visit. The philanthropic widow eventually was moved to call them in, considering their arrival after a ten-mile grind through the blizzard.

At this time, the author suddenly changes the narrative perspective, and describes like this: “Sure, they let *us* in.” (Italic is mine) And because he adopts a one sentence, one paragraph form, it is unlikely that it is a careless error in the author’s part. But the protagonist shows himself naturally in the narrative. It may be said that it is an error in the narrative unity. On the other hand, from the viewpoint of narrative effects, the authorial objectiveness—author’s uncommitted attitude toward his objects—collapses all at once, and the reader is in thrown into the tension Father and Woody are now facing.

This change of the person occurs only once in the middle part of the story, but the reader nevertheless comes to identify the protagonist with the narrator thereafter. Then, the viewpoint has settled on this: the reader may interpret that the protagonist is recollecting his relation with his father after the latter’s death, at the same time the author describes what the protagonist recollects. Moreover, the author conveys lively what the protagonist brings to mind by having a good command of represented speech.

The third-person narrative in turn continues after the change, thereby it can help block out the narrator’s sentiment incidental to the reminiscence style. In summary, Bellow succeeds in investing somewhat sentimental recollections with impartiality by making the most of represented speech effective in describing psychology among the characters as well as the third-person always keeping distance so that he may express the protagonist’s true feelings.

The opening paragraph begins with the narrator’s abrupt question to the reader as to how they will deal with their old father’s death. The narrator pretends to be serious: “I *mean!* As Woody put it, be realistic” (191). And then, he introduces the reader to what the protagonist confronts; the reader is forced to take the matter into serious consideration by placing themselves in Woody’s situation.

The whole story consists of three parts. The first part (191-201) talks about the lives of both the protagonist and his father. In the middle part (201-18) the episode related to ‘a silver dish’ is recollected; and here comes the climax in this story. The final part (218-22) reports the lives of people after the silver dish episode; the protagonist reaches a greater understanding toward his father’s way of life after being with him at the time of his death. The whole recollection begins with a question and the answer is sought after in the story. The protagonist himself in the final part has found out the answer: how he should accept his father’s death.

It is the first Sunday after the funeral when the protagonist reminisces. While the bells in all the churches of South Chicago are sounding off one after another, Woody manages to feel at ease after the busy week of the funeral, the silence following the bell-tolling, however, sets off the son’s sorrow of loss—father died at the hospital on Tuesday, and Woody himself buried him on Thursday, performing his final duty as a Jewish son. Then he reflects on the way of lives between father and son, as if he tries to get over his heartbreak. Therefore, the reader is brought to the present whenever the protagonist hears the church bells ring. Such scenes where the protagonist attends to the sounds of the bells to tell the time, including the scene at the very beginning, are common. The protagonist every time reminisces about a different episode. In the seventh scene the bell-sounds stop, and silence pervades the surrounding. The protagonist finally begins to recover from his sorrow. The reminiscent story draws to an end: the protagonist confirms ‘a secret certainty’ (220) of his own, fully accepting his father’s way of life.

On the other hand, *What Kind of Day Did You Have?* is the longest story in the collection—101 pages in Harper & Row edition. Since *A Theft* published in 1989 by Penguin with 109 pages is called a novella, the former may also be called as such. Robert F. Kiernan remarks in his *Saul Bellow*, commenting on *What Kind of Day Did You Have?* that it is “presumably not the title story only because of its uncommercial title” (195). The interrogative title, however, may be said to be very uncommon in Bellow’s whole work. Daniel Fuchs, on the other hand, praises that “[t]he most ambitious and best fiction is “What Kind of Day Did You Have?”—a novella which

reaches a level near that of Bellow's best short fiction" (3).

This story has an objective narrator, whose viewpoint fixes persistently on the heroine, Katrina. The story of her so called *aventure* suddenly manifests its actual situations. The reader can never always enjoy the story; the author is as tricky and evasive as he does not project his own thoughts in the narrative. Some critics fail to discern the real authorial intention infused in the story: Karl F. Knight concludes that "[t]he story begins and ends with Katrina squarely amid her suburban complexities, but the central figure is Victor Wulpy" (35), concentrating his attention on Victor Wulpy the intellectual who has vastly influenced Katrina's intellectual development; Fuchs, on the other hand, criticizes that "[w]ith a condescension the narrator does not seem to penetrate" (4) Wulpy's coldness.

The title's interrogative statement is uttered at the end of the story by Katrina, who asks her two daughters the same question when she comes home from her secret meeting with Victor. After reading the whole story, the reader nevertheless realizes that the question is directed toward the heroine by the author. It is safe to say that the story is strictly focused on Katrina. Furthermore, the author succeeds in maintaining such complete irony that some critics have made mistakes about the distance between human relations. In other words, the narrator hardly passes his value judgments on Katrina and Wulpy. That is to say, the narrator presents these characters in a detached and disinterested way. Consequently, the reader has to appreciate the story presented by Bellow in light of one's values.

Now I will examine the relations between the narrator, the protagonist, and the author as they appear in both stories. In "A Silver Dish," as shown before, it can be discerned that the narrator is also the protagonist. Besides, the author's intention can be said to be projected on both the protagonist's sentiment for his dead father and his conviction "that the goal set for this earth was that it should be filled with good, saturated with it" (220). The author can, therefore, be identified with the protagonist. The last equation between the author and the narrator apparently fails to hold for the moment.

Cynthia Ozick deals with *Him with His Foot in His Mouth and Other Stories* in

her review “Farcical Combat in a Busy World,” and claims that “the novella [*What Kind of Day Did You Have?*] is the centerpiece of this volume, also its masterpiece” (237). In “A Silver Dish,” she asserts, “the Eye of God gazes through this story.” Ozick deduces from a reminiscence made by another character in another story entitled “Cousins” to conclude: “This metaphysical radar (suspiciously akin to the Eye of God) ‘decodes’ Saul Bellow” (241). It seems Ozick discerns that Bellow embraces some absolute values of his own based on his morality. According to Ozick’s concordance, it can be said that the last equation, namely that the author is the same as the narrator, may also hold.

In *What Kind of Day Did You Have?*, on the other hand, there is no equation among the three: the heroine Katrina, the narrator, and the author. There can be discerned a proper distance among the three. In so doing, the style maintains complete impartiality. Once the reader realizes to whom the title interrogative is directed, however, he comes to realize that the author is identifying himself to the heroine. He can also understand how the author takes his attitude toward his objects. Judging from authorial ideas of art which can be seen to be entrusted to the intellectual Victor, it is conceivable that the author’s grounds are very close to those of an intellectual.

2. Father and Son/Daughter Relations

a) “A Silver Dish”

Woody’s father Morris “passed straight through all those divided fields” [—right and wicked, good and wrong, religious and impious, etc—], gap after gap, and arrived at his side—self. He is neither sincere nor insincere; he was physical and elemental. “That was why he gave such relief from religion and paradoxes” (206). The basic principal of his way of life derives from the fact that his Polish family, on their way to America, abandoned him in Liverpool because of his eye infection; he had to make out alone there at the age of twelve. When Woody was fourteen years, therefore, Morris easily left his wife and children and took off with a Polish married

woman, proclaiming that “From now on you’re the man of the house” (196). Woody, given a partly Christian upbringing by the Reverend Doctor Kovner, an uncle on his mother’s side, went to a seminary school. Backing the Reverend Doctor were wealthy fundamentalists. The foremost of Kovner’s supporters was Mrs. Skoglund, who had inherited a large dairy business from her late husband. She was supporting not only Woody’s education but his mother and sisters’ living expenses.

Decades later Father explained about his theft of a silver dish at the Mrs. Skoglund property, saying that “at the same time [I] did you a favor” (212). On their way to the Skoglund House on the streetcar, father tried to make his son understand the difference between his own way of life and his mother’s higher life. According to Morris, they do not know what life is. The Reverend Kovner was personally honest, he admitted, but he was not a spiritual leader. This was because he converted Jewish women by stealing their hearts without knowing it. By stealing a silver dish, Pop had wanted his son to be excluded from his mother’s Christian circle. As for Morris, it might be more honest to steal women’s hearts without knowing it. On the other hand, Pop’s view of Mrs. Skoglund, who is supporting his deserted family in various ways, is also distorted. On the way to the Skoglund House, he asserts that she supports Woody, because she is crazy for this husky kid. The distorted view is considered to be mentioned from the deserting father’s humiliation in order to save his face. The real intention of his view, however, gets revealed in the conversation between father and son, when Woody was suspended from the seminary and was excluded from the people on his mother’s side. Pop argues against him, saying “Kind has a price tag” (216), while Woody does not like doing Mrs. Skoglund in the eye. He points out there is insincerity in her charities, that is to say, she is promoting her charity with bribes. As for Morris, these religious deeds of the widow’s derive from her sexual interest toward young Woody.

When he was told that Pop would take off with a Polish woman, he offered money to buy gasoline as father told him to do. For he understands “this was a demonstration on behalf of real life and free instincts, against religion and hypocrisy” (197).

It is the silver dish that brought decisive mutual understanding between father and son. On their visit with a plausible excuse, Pop picked up a silver dish in the cabinet and pushed it down into his trousers. Promising not to give him a lot of trouble, Woody wants Pop to put back the dish anyway. Then begins his desperate wrestle with Pop in silence. It is a genuine struggle between the two while there is a heavy snowstorm outside. Getting his already outweighed son on top, father fights back with all his strength. Father seems like “an unclean spirit,” and Woody releases him and gives him a hand, seeing furious father like “a stout fish” (213). Further, he excuses dropping the coal into the fire, when Mrs. Skoglund asks if something shakes the house, coming downstairs. This prompts father to tell his son that “we can forget it, seeing you stood by me” (215).

The reconciliation between father and son, however, does not come to an end. Father took the silver dish; besides, he put it in pawn. Woody admits: he “gave Pop his heart because Pop was so selfish.” The narrator continues: “It’s usually the selfish people who are loved the most” (217). The key to mutual understanding mentioned here is that the son has recognized that both have their limitation as human beings. In reality, grown-ups cannot withdraw even if they are wrong. After the silver dish matter, Woody in a sense is carried back to his father’s blood line. At the same time this event has brought a common experience between father and son—it may be called a shared crime in the sense that they cannot tell it to others. Ever since they have established total trust in each other.

After Pop deserted his family, Woody is supported by charities offered by people. He has a secret thought in his mind from his religious experience in the seminary: “the goal set for this earth was that it should be filled with good, saturated with it” (220). What’s more, Pop’s instinct on way of life with all his strength determines that of Woody’s; ever since he is enjoying his real life. Against religion and hypocrisy Pop demonstrated his real life and free instincts. Now that he succeeds “like a figure of American materialism” (203), he takes responsibilities for his family as well as enjoys himself sufficiently.

Woody has acquired still greater love by admitting his father’s selfish ways. At

the death of his father, the son inquires what his honest life meant and gets an answer as if he responded to his father's deep love: "You could never pin down that self-willed man." And he shows a right answer for human dignity: "When he was ready to make his move, he made it—always on his own terms. And always, always, something up his sleeve" (222). This would be one of the most excellent novelizations of Bellow's philosophy of human nature presented in his "Distractions of a Fiction Writer": he [man] should have at least sufficient power to overcome ignominy and to complete his own life" (381).

b) *What Kind of Day Did You Have?*

The late father Billy, who used to be a tax fixer with high connections in the Chicago Democratic machine, invested money into his daughters' education. Katrina, like her sister Dorothea, entered a state university, where they joined a sorority and studied Romance languages. Both studied abroad in Paris. Billy had called his daughters 'Dumb Dora One' and 'Dumb Dora Two.' He as a patriarch controlled his daughters as well as their mother. In long discussions with her analyst, Katrina had learned how central her father was in the formation of her character. He condemned his adolescent daughter as 'a con artist', and predicted that she would tempt a stranger. She turned out the way her father predicted. She began to secretly enjoy pleasure, and she did play the farmer's daughter until she became the mature Katrina. "Petty bourgeois sexuality" (75) happened to fascinate Victor—an avant-garde personality.

Her widowed sister Dorothea took over a small plastics factory from her husband. She had to sell plastic products. Her son was working for an MBA at a second-rate school. Forced into the world of business, she is struggling with reality. To Dorothea, her sister is a dreamer, as it were, "a Madame Bovary" (94). How dare you have an affair while being a married woman! In her opinion, Katrina's husband Alfred is somebody in his milieu. She points out that she [Katrina] tried to keep her options open, to wait for the main chance. Katrina comments in silence "[S]care me good. I'll never regret what I've done" (88).

Emma Bovary described by Flaubert was disillusioned by the monotonous life in a rural town, as her ordinary and loud doctor-husband failed to live up to her expectations. She wanted to satisfy her desires grounded on her romantic dreams and to have it her own way; and she gave way to her life. Katrina, on the other hand, did not approach Victor, only because she was unsatisfied with her husband and her married life. She wanted not only to be released from her nature defined by her father in her formative years, but also wanted to break the spell of her father's—Victor pointed out this was plain old middle-class ideology. Katrina, however, is not as dumb as her father had characterized. On the contrary, “That she knew she was not one [nitwit] was an important secret postulate of her feminine science” (66).

Marianne M. Friedrich points out the narrative difference between Flaubert and Bellow, notwithstanding repeated references made to Madame Bovary: “Both Emma and Katrina suffer from ‘vacancy heartache’ (88); “But they are driven by a romantic longing for a goal that can never be reached” (57). Katrina, however, is neither as ignorant nor as reckless as Emma. Flaubert shared the absurdity and cruelty of his epoch with his heroine, when he stated “I am Madame Bovary.”; on the other hand, Bellow makes his heroine assess the situations around her, and finally he invests her with the self-determination to initiate her self-awareness and independence.

Being the world-famous critic, Victor perceived that the pretty wife was a dark lady; she was darkest where darkness counted most, while Katrina, a homebody, helps her husband host the party. Victor, who created an aristocratic atmosphere both in intellect and in looks, became fascinated with the ordinary middle-class home maker in the natural course of events; the narrator caricatures the affair of this intellectual giant, using irony. It seems comical, judging it objectively. Daniel Fuchs, therefore, thinks their relation in terms of “the psychodynamics of master/slave” (5), and regards Katrina as a masochist. It is safe to say that Fuchs is being arrested with that ingenious irony the narrator has contrived.

Victor is not described objectively, but is represented as someone seen mostly through the eyes of Katrina. She thinks their relation as that of between a good tutor/pupil, and knows she pays her tuition with joy. Even if her sister blamed her for the

relation, Katrina could argue in her mind that “Could a Dorothea evaluate the *release* offered to a woman by such an extraordinary person, the independence?” Trying to widen her horizons, Katrina not only read some of Victor’s articles with Dorothea, but also studied Latin, resumed piano lessons, kept up her French, and took flying lessons for a Cessna pilot license. Besides, through ‘a modern thinker’ Victor, she is enjoying her social life with various celebrities.

Meanwhile, Katrina tried writing an elephant story for her children. Larry Wrangel, who is a successful playwright in SF films in Hollywood, offers his own idea. He has a troublesome son, which strikes a chord with Katrina because of her two daughters. She wants to pick his brain in order to draw some active responses from silent Pearl and wordless Soolie. Wrangel’s solution is to give the elephant hay mixed with marshmallows; Katrina likes this perfectly angelic solution, for her girls like chocolate marshmallow mousse. In this connection, Kiernan points out as follows:

That wrangle provides her with this symbolic solution to her fable suggests that whatever she will do concretely upon Victor’s death will be a happenstantial discovery rather than a calculated development, as fortuitous as her original relationship with Victor, but carefully considered too, and with an eye to her own survival. (200)

This reading overlooks the process in which Katrina’s self-awareness is slowly developing, condemning her as dependence on those who are stronger. This is why Kiernan does not think Katrina to be a view-point character. Katrina sees in Wrangel parental sufferings and thinks that “The one who’s royal may be the one who pays with his life” (136), whereas she criticizes, thinking of her daughters’ curious and science?fiction eyes that “Star Wars flicks corrupted everybody, implanted mistrust of your own flesh and blood” (163). The critic considers Katrina to be constantly dependent on men. I wonder if the critic regards Katrina with warm eyes, who is a common housewife devoid of malignancy.

When it seemed that Victor was not going to recover from the surgery, Beila being a wise wife had arranged her husband and Katrina to say their final farewell, after having asked him whether he wanted to see Katrina. The narrator describes as follows: “A perfectly objective judgment of Beila, removing all rivalry and guilt, was that she behaved with dignity.” After their last farewells, Katrina instead thought as follows: “[S]he thought how important it was that her claim to access should be affirmed, and that his feeling for her should be acknowledged. It wasn’t just another adultery. She wasn’t one of his casual women.” Although their plane did not fly because of the blizzard, they arranged another small plane, and Victor managed to be in time for his lecture; Katrina managed to come home before midnight. Meanwhile Lieutenant Krieggstein took care of her two daughters after the housekeeper went home. Katrina, however, flatly rejected his kind offer, remembering her sister’s comment that “Krieggstein was pretending himself as a successor, humble but determined.” Katrina’s mind made an important connection at that moment when Krieggstein helped her take off her coat in the hallway: Why should Victor declare, “I love you”? For her sake, he went on the road. Would he have made such a journey for any other reason? [W]hy would a woman who claimed to love him impose such hardships on him?

Unfortunately—fortunately in that it contributed to her spiritual growth—Katrina loved a tyrant in thought, who was dying. The latter, however, had enlightened Katrina who was groping about in the dark. Thus, neglecting the view-point character Katrina, Knight thinks Victor to be the central figure of the story. Describing the decline of a former tyrant, the critic one-sidedly interprets, “Bellow shows that Wulpy’s intellectual arrogance and detachment carry over into his personal life.” Bellow criticizes modern art as being over-intellectual. Katrina witnesses the end of ‘a tyrant of thought,’ which also initiates her own path for independence.

The novella is about Katrina’s personal journey toward self-awareness. Just as the elephant is very careful to go in the elevator, Katrina is timidly going to remodel her father’s framework into her own profile. In the course of her awareness, there

enters the husband, sister Dorothea, lieutenant Kreiggstein, Wrangel and Victor, with whom Katrina has a relationship. She observes each without prejudice, developing her personal opinions.

The question of the title is asked to Katrina's daughters, and it is addressed to our heroine Katrina as well. Bellow by no means describes a woman's unfulfilled love affair from his objective vantage point. Without projecting his own voice, the author tries to show the groping process of Katrina's self-understanding step by step; the reader is instead asked to seek a solution himself. He notices he is thinking over how to drag the elephant for Katrina. Going on with the story, the reader can read the authorial irony into Bellow's warm eyes.

3. American materialism

In "A Silver Dish" Bellow creates a situation in which the son, who succeeded in American society as an American citizen, recognizes his identity, and his father, who fulfilled a life of a Jewish immigrant, keeps his dignity after getting over his struggle in America. In that situation Bellow unfolds the conflict between the father's Jewishness and the son's American way of life. The reconciliation is brought about by the compromise reached by his son. Here Bellow, as a second generation Jew, conveys his attitude about adapting in American society.

Incidentally, Cynthia Ozick and Marianne M. Friedrich turn their attention to the title "A Silver Dish," and connects it with the silver cup that appears in the Joseph and his brothers' story in the Old Testament. The similarity between the two silver stories, however, is not proper; between Joseph and Woody there is a similarity in their attitudes: they earnestly pray for God. It is safe to say that the Eye of God watches those who pray for God.

In *What Kind of Day Did You Have?*, on the other hand, Bellow's criticism on society extends to class consciousness which does exist in the democratic American society. Bellow represents situations personified in the characters through class consciousness, and in so doing he gives a new light to his radical problems based on

human existence. The problems dealing with racism in his early career are refined and developed into broader and more universal themes.

Victor, a New York intellectual, is a cosmopolitan in the upper class; Wrangel is a Hollywood playwright, and a successful maker of SF films from the mid-west; Katrina, a daughter from the middle-class, is an ex-wife of an art dealer in Chicago suburbs; lieutenant Krieggstein, who is called by Victor “Krieggstein belongs to the Golden Age of American platitudes,” tries to rise up into the middle class, but in essence fails to be. With those characters posted around, Bellow, from the free and discerning viewpoint of an intellectual like Victor, sublimates the heroine’s conflict and develops his criticism against modern civilization.

Victor betrayed his natural desire, being fascinated with Katrina of “petty bourgeois sexuality.” He fully understood her as a middle-class woman; with sentiments of middle-class warmth, it is useless to deny dehumanization. In the modern age “middle-class gallantry is gone,” and “the mark of the modern” is “the coldness and isolation of people.” Intellectual Victor has been offering the products of his thought to the world. According to Victor, the values of the middle-class have “no historical reality.” He finds the major factor in creativity, that is, middle class is not inventive. He points out that it is because the middle-class lacks creativity that it is separated from historical reality, and cannot contribute to the making of history. The working class has realized self-awareness through class struggle. They have participated in historical reality through such creative energy as shook the society.

Then, what is a creative contribution that the middle class should make in society? Bellow discusses through Victor that “By combining the strength of a man (analytic power) with the ecstasy of a child you could discover the New.” It might be an improper simplification, we may find the new when modern science represented by IT and dreams caused from human instincts are in accord.

The middle class has formed the American mind. It is said that there is individualism at the root of middle-class consciousness. And that there lurks the power of individualism of the middle class behind the fact that the working class consciousness did not form easily in the US. Good Americans, so-called, would be

members of the middle-class supported by strong individualism. Bellow criticizes American society where the middle-class often exercises closed individualism through the eyes of cosmopolitan intellectuals enlightened by European civilization. In so doing, he advances inventiveness as a key that promises more possibility to the middle class, or the whole of American society. This advance cannot be neglected by the present.

These two stories in *Him with His Foot in His Mouth*, both "A Silver Dish" and *What Kind of Day Did You Have?* represents Bellow's literary characteristics as a second generation Jew. Both motifs will rise up by considering father and son/daughter relation: the former deals with the conflict between traditional Jewishness and his acquired American materialism; and the latter suggests an advance made in American society by an intellectual Bellow, describing heroine's independence from "plain, old middle-class ideology." Each story shows the main character getting along in mainstream, American materialism. The protagonist gains great understanding, having experienced the conflict between Jewishness and the American culture of Christianity and materialism, and reaches his own all embracing state. This great acceptance may be said to be an ideal Americanization that Bellow has reached as a second generation Jew. The idea is impersonated in the characterization which reminds us of a pious prayer expressed in Joseph of the Old Testament. Joseph in the Genesis is depicted as a man who is honest, full of affection and patience, and believes in God.

On the other hand, the heroine belongs to a time when a married woman with higher education is naturally considered to keep house, and she cannot solve anything for herself even in self-awareness. In order to be independent from father's patriarchy; to get rid of husband who regards wife as homebody; to abandon old middle-class ideology, she seeks for a mentor—a spiritual leader. Unlike Madame Bovary and Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), the heroine is provided with modernity that she contemplates what she has done calmly and has some power for self-judgment. Deciding heroines are seen in the early story "Dora" (1949) and "Leaving the Yellow House" (1957). Their decisions derive from spiritual

independence, but they are actually lacking convincing conclusion. Katrina's strength develops into those independent and active heroines in "A Theft" (1989) and *The Actual* (1997). And it is male understanding and cooperation that support these heroines' activities. Here we would see one of ideal human relations in our co-existent society.

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