

An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum (Poetry)

—Stephen Spender
(1909-1995)

Chapter Analysis

Question Type & Marks	Year					
	2016		2017		2018	
	D	OD	D	OD	D	OD
SA	-	-	1	1	1	1
LA	1	1	-	-	-	-

Introduction :

Stephen Spender was a poet who visited the Gemini Studios in Bombay. He had left his learning and felt deeply for the poor and the downtrodden. He was not against progress and prosperity, but he wanted that the poor and the downtrodden should have equal opportunities to share the benefits. In this poem, he wants to draw the attention of the society and the government to the dismal conditions under which those children live and study. There is a map that shows beautiful cities, ships and love all around. But these children are deprived of these. He wants that children should be given education in a conducive atmosphere.

Summary :

Stephen Spender visited an elementary school in a slum. The classroom was dim. The paint on the walls was faded. Children were sick and undernourished.

A girl sat with her head weighed down in despair. A child's growth was stunted. His bones were twisted. A boy looked dreamy. He was thinking of a squirrel's game.

On the wall, there was a portrait of Shakespeare and a map of the world. The map showed beautiful cities under a cloudless sky at dawn. There were ships and love. It had symbols of modern progress and liberal attitude. But by contrast, the lives of the children were dark and dismal. Their future was written in fog.

The poet thinks that the map and Shakespeare had no significance for the children who lived in houses just like graves.

He pleads that these windows should be broken and the children should be moved to the bright daylight. They should experience the sun, the sky and the sea. They should be educated. They should have equal opportunities like others.

1. **Far far**

.....

.....

..... **other than this.**

The poem begins with a description of the children sitting in a school classroom which is located in a slum. The poet has compared these children to rootless weeds as they are not given any importance by any member of the society. They are unwanted like the rootless weeds or useless plants. Their faces are pale and untidy hair fall all over their faces.

Then, the poet describes a few children sitting in the classroom, there is a tall girl who sits with her head down due to poverty or some affliction. She seems to be in a depressed state. There is a boy who is very thin and has eyes which bulge out like that of a rat. His physical appearance clearly depicts that he is undernourished and his eyes seem to be always in search of food like a rat. There is one more boy who is unlucky as he had inherited a gnarled bone disease from his father. His physical growth is stunted and he recite his lesson from his desk as he can't stand. Another boy is seated at the back of that dull and dim room, there is a sweet boy who is not paying any attention to the class. Rather he is day-dreaming about the outside world where a squirrel is playing in the hollow of a tree. It is in contrast to his own life. He also wants to go out and play like a squirrel but cannot do so.

Simile → Like rootless weeds

2. **On sour cream**
.....
.....
.....
..... **stars of words.**

The poet then proceeds to give a detailed description of the classroom which has sour cream walls. They are dirty and yellow and are unpleasant to look at. There is a picture of Shakespeare's head on the wall. Apart from this, a cloudless sky at dawn, the domes of buildings, the beautiful scene of the Tyrolese valley with its beautiful flowers and bells are all painted on the walls. But these things have no meaning for the slum children. The names of people who have given donations for the school have also been displayed on the sour cream walls. Open handed maps have also been drawn on the walls of the classroom but they are of no use as their area has not been shown in it. This map does not have their world in it. Their world is foggy, dull and bleak. There is no ray of hope in it. Their life has no future and they live a life of uncertainty. They are doomed to live in narrow streets, with a dull, leaden sky. Rivers, capes and stars are natural beauties but for these children, they represent a world which has no meaning for them.

Metaphor → Future's painted with a fog

3. **Surely Shakespeare**
.....
.....
..... **as big as doom.**

Shakespeare's head on the map on the walls of a classroom of a slum is wicked because they can't imagine any other world except their own. The pictures of ships and sun are a bad example for these children because they tempt them to run away from their dark world to the world of adventure which is represented by the ships and the world of the rich. Their houses have been compared to narrow holes where their future is foggy and like an endless night. The slum children are emaciated as their bones seem to be peeping through their skins. They wear steel spectacles which have mended glass. The poet is comparing the mended glass to the small pieces of broken glass on stones as the world of the slum children is also broken due to their unfulfilled desires. They are supposed to use the discarded things of the rich. The slums are not marked on the maps but it should be done. The slums should be spotted and drawn on the maps so that the slum children should feel one with the others and realise that their slums can also be located on the maps.

Alliteration → Spectacles of steel

Space are foggy slum
From Fog to endless night
like bottle bits on stones

Simile → like bottle bits on stones

4. **Unless governor**
.....
.....
..... **is the sun.**

The poet further moves on saying that these miserable conditions of the slum will continue unless some governor, inspector or visitor visits this place and tries to improve the conditions of the classroom in a slum. The windows of the classroom symbolise the environment of the slums which blocks the progress of the slum children. They should not be bound to live in these places which are like catacombs. Let these children go out and face the world. Let them see the green fields which are a sign of prosperity. Let them lead a life of freedom represented by golden sands. Give them the opportunity to express themselves freely because only those people make and create history, who fight for a cause and are able to overcome their surroundings. The slum children should also be given an opportunity of being memorable.

Simile → lives like catacombs

Repetition → Break or break open till they break the town

Extracts for Comprehension

[4 marks each]

- Q. 1. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow : [Delhi Set I/II/III, 2017]

Far far from gusty waves these children's faces.
Like rootless weeds, the hair torn round their pallor;
The tall girl with her weighed-down head.

- (a) Who are these children ?

[Delhi Set I/II/III, 2017, Delhi Set I, 2015]

Ans. Value Points : From deprived and poor sections of society/slums/elementary class room students.

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 1

Detailed Answer : These children are from deprived and poor section of the society.

- (b) What has possibly weighed-down the tall girl's head ?



OR

Why is the tall girl's head weighed down ?

[Delhi Set I/II/III, 2017]

Ans. Value Points : Weighed down by poverty/ responsibility/ burden of life/ miserable condition/ mentally and physically exhausted.

(Any other relevant point)

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 1

Detailed Answer : The tall girl is probably undernourished as well as unconfident.

(c) Which is the figure of speech used in the first two lines.

[Delhi Set I/II/III, 2017]

Ans. Value Points : Simile (like rootless weeds)/ Alliteration (far from) / Metaphor (gusty)

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 1

(d) What does the word, 'pallor' mean ?

[Delhi Set I/II/III, 2017]

Ans. Value Points : pale face/unhealthy pale appearance / dull/sickly

(Any other relevant point)

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 1

Detailed Answer : The word 'pallor' means 'unhealthy pale faces'.

Q. 2. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow :

"The stunted, unlucky heir

Of twisted bones, reciting a father's gnarled disease,

His lesson, from his desk. At back of the dim class

One unnoted, sweet and young. His eyes live in a dream,

Of squirrel's game, in tree room, other than this."

[Delhi Set-I, II & III, 2013, 2012]

[Outside Delhi Set-I, II & III, 2013]

(a) Who is the unlucky heir ?

Ans. The unlucky heir is the boy with the stunted growth. [CBSE Marking Scheme, 2012] 1

(b) What is the stunted boy reciting ?

Ans. The stunted boy is reciting his lesson from his desk. [CBSE Marking Scheme, 2012] 1

(c) Who is sitting at the back of the dim class ?

Ans. Value Points : One unnoted sweet and young dreamer / one who dreams about a squirrel's game. [CBSE Marking Scheme, 2012] 1

Detailed Answer : A boy whose eyes still dream of squirrel's games, is sitting at the back of the dim class.

(d) What quality of the unlucky heir is depicted in the stanza ?

Ans. The unlucky heir is depicted with twisted bones 1

Q. 3. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow :

[Outside Delhi Set-I, II & III, 2017]

[Compt., Delhi Set III, 2015]

At back of the dim class

One unnoted, sweet and young. His eyes live in a dream,

Of squirrel's game, in tree room, other than this.

(a) Why was the class dim ?

[Outside Delhi Set-I, II & III, 2017]

Ans. Value Points : Pathetic condition of classroom (in slums) symbolic of dullness/slum drudgery/lack of light/electricity. (Any one)

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 1

The class is dim because it is a classroom in a slum, which is not well lit or maintained properly.

[Topper's Answer 2017]

(b) What was he doing ?

[Outside Delhi Set-I, II & III, 2017]

Ans. Value Points : Dreaming (of beautiful world/of squirrel's game). (Any one)

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 1

The young child is different as he does not seem burdened by the poverty around him, unlike the other children. He seems happy and his eyes are hopeful of a better world.

[Topper's Answer 2017]

- (c) How is the young child different from others ?
[Outside Delhi Set-I, II & III, 2017]

Ans. Value Points : Sweet/loving/lost in his dreams/
non visible impact of poverty/hope in his eyes/
escaping the grim reality / positive. (Any one)
[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 1

The young child is not paying attention in class.
Instead, he is looking out, watching a squirrel
play, wishing he too was out.

[Topper's Answer 2017]

- (d) What is a tree room ?
[Outside Delhi Set-I, II & III, 2017]

Ans. Value Points : Squirrel's hole/a dwelling place in
the tree, a plaything. (Any one)
[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 1

A tree room is a small hole in the tree
in which the squirrel may live or play.

[Topper's Answer 2017]

- Q. 4. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow :

On sour cream walls, donations, Shakespeare's head,
Cloudless at dawn, civilized dome riding all cities.
Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley. Open – handed map
Awarding the world its world.

[Comptt., Outside Delhi Set III, 2015]

- (a) Name the poem.

Ans. An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum. 1

- (b) What are the donations on the wall ?

Ans. They are the name of people who has given
donations to the donations to the school. 1

- (c) What does the map award the world ?

Ans. The map awards the world its own world. 1

- (d) Why does the poet mention 'Tyrolese Valley' ?

Ans. 'Tyrolese' is the name of a beautiful flower valley. 1

OR

- (a) What is the condition of the classroom wall ?

[Comptt., Outside Delhi Set III, 2015]
[CBSE, SQP 2016]

Ans. Value Points : In a state of neglect/sour cream/
poverty-stricken conditions of the room.

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2015] 1

Detailed Answer : The classroom walls of the
elementary school are sour and in a state of
neglect.

- (b) What aspects show a civilized race ?

Ans. Detailed Answer : Picture of Tyrolese valley/
Shakespeare's bust/map/dome of an ancient city
building. [CBSE Marking Scheme, 2015] 1

Detailed Answer : The picture of Tyrolese valley,
Shakespeare's bust, etc. all are depicting a civilized
race.

- (c) What is the specialty of the Tyrolese valley ?

Ans. Value Points : Full of coloured flowers and
resonates with the bells.

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2015] 1

Detailed Answer : The Tyrolese valley is full of
coloured flowers and resonates with the sound of
bells.

- (d) What type of map has been referred to here?

Ans. Open - handed map

- Q. 5. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow :

On sour cream walls, donations. Shakespeare's
head, cloudless at dawn, civilised dome riding
all cities. Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley.

[Foreign, Set-I, II & III, 2017]

- (a) How were the walls built ?

Ans. Value Points : Donations.

(Any other suitable answer to be accepted)

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 1

Detailed Answer : The walls were built by the
donations given by people.

- (b) What do you find in the classroom ?

Ans. Value Points : Malnourished children/one
unnoted sweet child/ picture of Shakespeare/ of
a modern city/ of Tyrolese valley.

(Any other relevant answer)

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 1

Detailed Answer : We find pictures of Tyrolese
Valley, Shakespeare's bust, etc. in the classroom.

(c) What is the significance of Tyrolese valley ?

Ans. Value Points : Contrast to the condition of the classroom/ a place of beauty they have never seen or which is unknown to them/can arouse desire to be part of it/a scene of beauty.

(Any other relevant answer)
[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 1

Detailed Answer : Tyrolese valley is full of flowers and symbolizes beauty.

(d) What does the word, 'Belled' mean ?

Ans. Value Points : Bells around the grazing cows in the valley/ shape of the Tyrolese valley.

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 1

Detailed Answer : The word, 'Belled' mean the bells around the grazing cows in the valley.

Q. 6. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow :

..... not this map, their world,
Where all their future's painted with a fog,
A narrow street sealed in with a lead sky
Far far from rivers, capes and stars of words.

[Comptt., Delhi, Set-I, II & III, 2012]

(a) Where is the map ?

Ans. The map is on the wall of a classroom in an elementary school in a slum. 1

(b) Who does the word, 'their' refer to ?

Ans. 'Their' refers to the students who study in the elementary school in a slum. 1

(c) How is their life different from that of other children ?

Ans. The children of the slum are emaciated and poverty-stricken, as against of other children. 1

(d) What does the poet think of their future ?

Ans. The poet feels that the future of the children studying there in the slum is all dark and bleak. 1

Q. 7. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow :

And, yet for these children, these windows, not this map their world,
Where all their future's painted with a fog.

[Comptt., Delhi & Outside Delhi, 2014]

(a) Who are the 'children' referred to here ?

Ans. The 'children' referred to here are the poor children living in the slum. 1

(b) Which map is the poet talking about in the above lines ?

Ans. Poet is talking about the map of the world displayed on the classroom wall.

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2014] 1

(c) To what do the words, "these windows, their world," refer.

Ans. Value Points : These windows – windows of the classroom in the slum – their world – world of slum (Pathetic living conditions).

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2014] 1

Detailed Answer : The pathetic living conditions of the slum that can be seen outside the window of the classroom.

(d) What sort of future do the slum children have ?

Ans. The slum children have a dark, bleak and hopeless future which is cheerless and uncertain.

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2014] 1

Q. 8. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow :

Surely, Shakespeare is wicked, the map a bad example,
With ships and sun and love tempting them to steal—

For lives that slyly turn in their cramped holes
From fog to endless night. [CBSE, SQP 2014-15]

(a) Why is Shakespeare wicked ?

Ans. Shakespeare is wicked because Shakespeare and his works are of no use to the slum children.

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2014] 1

(b) Why is the map a bad example ?

Ans. The map is a bad example because it does not depict their own world of narrow lanes. 1

(c) What is the condition of these children as described in these lines ?

Ans. They live like rats in their cramped holes where there is no brightness in their lives.

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2014] 1

(d) Explain, 'from fog to endless night'.

Ans. This means that their future is foggy and uncertain. [CBSE Marking Scheme, 2014] 1

Q. 9. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow. [Outside Delhi, Set-I, 2014]

..... And yet, for these children, these windows, not this map, their world.

Where all their future's painted with a fog,
A narrow street sealed in with a lead sky
Far from rivers, capes and stars or words.

(a) Who are the 'children' referred to here ?

Ans. Value Point : The 'children' referred to here are the children of the slum areas who come to the elementary school to study.

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2014] 1

(b) Which is their world ?

Ans. Value Points : Their world is the world of slum / of deprivation / of poverty / a world far away from rivers, capes and stars of worlds / a narrow street sealed in with a lead sky.

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2014] 1

Detailed Answer : Their world is the world of darkness where there is no hope.

(c) How is their life different from that of other children ?

Ans. Value Points : Bleak future / without any hope or progress / with unrealistic education / poverty and disease / away from rivers, capes, stars of world. (Any two) [CBSE Marking Scheme, 2014] 1



Detailed Answer : Their world is different from that of other children because these children do not have a bright future like others.

(d) **Why is the future of these children 'painted with a fog'?**

Ans. The future of these children is dark and uncertain, meaning that it cannot be seen. 1

Q. 10. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow :

With ships and sun and love tempting them to steal

for lives that slyly turn in their cramped holes
From fog to endless night.

(a) **Who are 'them' referred to in the first line ?**

Ans. 'Them' referred to in the first line are the children from slum areas who are poor and deprived. 1

(b) **What tempts them ?**

Ans. The maps on the wall, the pictures of ships, sun and other natural things on the wall of their classroom. 1

(c) **What does the poet say about 'their' lives ?**

Ans. The poet says that their lives are devoid of hope. 1

(d) **What do you understand by 'from fog to endless night'?**

Ans. 'From fog to endless night' means from morning till night. 1

Q. 11. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow :

On their slag heap, these children
Wear skins peeped through by bones and spectacles of steel
With mended glass, like bottle bits on stones.
[Outside Delhi, 2015]

(a) **Who are these children ?**

Ans. Value Points : – The poor / impoverished children of the slums. [CBSE Marking Scheme, 2015] 1

Detailed Answer : These children are the children of the slum, very poor and impoverished.

(b) **What is their slag heap ?**

Ans. Value Points : – Slum in which they are living / waste material heap / unwanted. [CBSE Marking Scheme, 2015] 1

Detailed Answer : 'Slag heap' refers to the slum in which they are living.

(c) **Why are their bones peeping through their skins ?**

Ans. Value Points : – Physically weak / malnourished / impoverished. [CBSE Marking Scheme, 2015] 1

Detailed Answer : Their bones are peeping through their skins because they are malnourished and very thin.

(d) **What does 'with mended glass' mean ?**

Ans. Value Points : – Too poor to afford spectacles / shattering of dreams. [CBSE Marking Scheme, 2015] 1

Detailed Answer : 'With mended glass', the poet means the glass or spectacles which are broken but have been repaired.

OR

(a) **Name the poem and the poet.**

[Delhi / Outside Delhi 2018]

Ans. An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum; Stephen Spender. ½+½

[CBSE Marking Scheme 2018]

(b) **Explain : 'slag heap.'**

Ans. Refers to garbage dump, mound of industrial waste/ slum. 1

[CBSE Marking Scheme 2018]

Detailed Answer : 'Slag heap' refers to the slum in which they are living.

(c) **What future awaits these children ?**

Ans. Dark/bleak/dismal/hopeless/painted with fog/miserable. 1

[CBSE Marking Scheme 2018]

Detailed Answer : The poet thinks that these children have a dark and bleak future.

(d) **Name the figure of speech used in the third line.**

Ans. Simile/Alliteration. 1

[CBSE Marking Scheme 2018]

Q.12. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow :

.....On their slag heap, these children
Wear skins peeped through by bones and spectacles of steel
With mended glass, like bottle bits on stones.
All of their time and space are foggy slum.
So blot their maps with slums as big as doom.

(a) **What does 'slag heap' refer to ?**

Ans. Suggested Value Points: 'Slag heap' refers to the slums / the heaps of garbage. 1

[CBSE Marking Scheme 2018]

(b) **What do these children wear on their eyes ?**

Ans. Suggested Value Points: spectacles of steel / spectacles made of steel and mended glass / broken spectacles / mended spectacles / spectacles discarded by the rich. 1

[CBSE Marking Scheme 2018]

Detailed Answer : These children wear mended steel spectacles which are discarded by the rich.

(c) **What other example shows their poverty ?**

Ans. Suggested Value Points: Their thin appearance / their skins peeped through by bones. 1

[CBSE Marking Scheme 2018]

(d) **Name the figure of speech used in the last line.**

Ans. Suggested Value Points: Simile. 1

[CBSE Marking Scheme 2018]

Short Answer Type Questions

[2 marks each]

(Answer the following questions in about 30-40 words each.)

Q. 1. How is the atmosphere inside an elementary slum classroom different from the one outside it? [Comptt., Outside Delhi Set-I, 2013]

Ans. The children sitting inside the elementary classroom are sick and under-nourished. The atmosphere and surroundings are pale and morose. The world outside is filled with beauty and luxuries. 2

Q. 2. The poet says, 'And yet, for these Children, these windows, not this map, their world.' Which world do these children belong to? Which world is inaccessible to them?

[HOTS] [Delhi Set-III, 2013]

Ans. There is a map on the wall. There are pictures, which show beautiful hills and valleys. But the world of the poor school children is not shown in the map. These children belong to the world which is not sunny. It is darkened with the fog of poverty and pain, from their slum, only the dull and dreary sky can be seen. The beautiful world outside is inaccessible to them. 2

Q. 3. How is 'Shakespeare is wicked, the map a bad example' for the children of the school in a slum?

[Outside Delhi Set I, 2016]

OR

Why is Shakespeare wicked for the slum children?

[Comptt., Outside Delhi Set I, 2017]

Ans. Value Points:

– Talks about the world, far removed from reality; creates ambition and desires; tempts them; children cannot identify themselves with characters from Shakespeare. (Any two)

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2017] 2

Detailed Answer : Shakespeare is called wicked and 'the map' is called a bad example as the slum children have no access to the educated world. The wonderful things of the world like the sun, love and all the beautiful things tempt the slum children to steal them because they have never experienced the beautiful world and high values represented by the picture of Shakespeare and the map.

Q. 4. How does the poem, 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum' portray the children?

[CBSE, SQP 2015]

Ans. The poem portrays the children in a very pathetic manner. They are undernourished and diseased. The poet compares their unkempt and dull hair to rootless weeds. One of the girls is sitting with her head weighed down probably burdened with the miseries of poverty. A boy had inherited his father's disease and another was sitting unnoticed with a yearning to play outside. 2

Commonly Made Error

- Most of the students answer this in generalised manner like children are day dreamers, etc.

Answering Tips

- The answer must cover the portrayal of the slum children as explained in the poem.

Q. 5. To whom does the poet in the poem "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" make an appeal? What is his appeal?

[Comptt., Delhi & Outside Delhi, 2014]

Ans. Value Points : Governor, inspector and visitors; to come to the rescue of the slum children / appeals to take them out of the slum and show them the outside world / save them from their miserable condition.

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2014] 2

Detailed Answer : The poet makes an appeal to the governor, inspector and visitors. He appeals to them to come to the rescue of the slum children, to take them out of the slum and show them the outside world and save them from their miserable condition.

Q. 6. What does Stephen Spender want to be done for the children of the school in a slum?

[Delhi Set I, 2016]

OR

What does the poet want for the children of the slums? How can their lives be made to change? (TBQ)

Ans. Value Points : Education to be related to their life / break out from confined spaces / show children green fields / use nature as teacher / want the rich and powerful (governor, inspector, visitor) to get involved (solve their problems). (Any two)

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2016] 2

Detailed Answer : Stephen Spender wants that the windows should be broken and the children should be moved to the bright daylight. They should be given education in a conducive atmosphere so that their lives can be changed, with useful and relevant education being imparted to them. The poet wants that the governor, inspector and visitors should get involved to solve their problem and their education should be related to their life.

Q. 7. What change does the poet hope for in the lives of the slum children? [Foreign, 2014]

Ans. Value Points :

- To bring about active attention of the concerned higher authorities
- To impart useful and relevant education
- To help them lead a better life



- To expose them to the beautiful world of blue skies / golden sand / green fields / literature
- To remove social injustice and class inequalities.

[CBSE Marking Scheme, 2014] 2

Detailed Answer : The poet hopes that there is a need to bring the active attention of the higher authorities concerned. Useful and relevant education needs to be imparted to these slum children so that their lives can be changed and they can lead a better life, and social injustice and class inequalities can be removed.

Commonly Made Error

- Many students are not able to express poet's hopes and feelings towards the slum children.

Answering Tips

- Attention, education, nourishment, social justice are the keywords.

Q. 8. Bring out the theme of Spender's poem "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum". What light does it show on the poet's own attitude and convictions ?

OR

What message does Stephen Spender convey through the poem ?

[HOTS] [Delhi Set-I, II & III, 2013]

Ans. The theme of Spender's poem is to highlight the plight of the slum children. Their dark homes and neglected schools are like tombs for them. They are far away from the sunshine of knowledge and a normal civilised life. They need to be removed from their unhealthy surroundings. The poem reflects the rage of the poet against the sub-human conditions of millions of slum children. 2

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