
The American Dream Turns Dreadful for Yank: An Analytical Assessment of The Hairy Ape

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Abstract:

The ideal of the American Dream, coined by historian James Truslow Adams in his seminal work *Epic of America*, has long captivated and troubled the nation's collective imagination. Adams articulates it as a yearning for a land where life transcends material prosperity, offering all a more prosperous, more fulfilling existence. Crucially, this Dream hinges on opportunity, accessible not through inherited privilege but through individual ability and accomplishment. He acknowledges the European upper class's inherent difficulty in grasping this egalitarian aspiration, noting contemporary weariness and skepticism surrounding its validity. However, Adams emphasizes that the American Dream transcends the surface allure of consumerism and high wages. Instead, it embodies a more profound yearning for a just social order where individuals, irrespective of their fortuitous circumstances, can flourish to their full potential and be recognized and valued for their intrinsic worth. Indeed, the connotations of the American Dream have demonstrably transformed alongside the nation's historical trajectory, adapting to meet the aspirations and anxieties of each epoch. Within this narrative, Lewis posits the emergence of a novel hero, untouched by worldly corruption, landed from heaven, and imbued with inherent purity and independence. In Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, the American Dream undergoes a radical metamorphosis, its idealized vision of Edenic abundance and

inherent equality cracking under harsh reality. Yank, the play's protagonist, embodies the archetypal "American Adam" envisioned by O'Neill – a potent symbol of primal strength and unrefined passion, yet lacking intellectual depth and eloquent expression. This new Adam, however, experiences a descent into disillusionment, his initial embrace of the American Dream morphing into a chilling nightmare. His descent from stoker to outcast reveals the hollowness of freedom devoid of genuine connection and spiritual grounding. The play thus casts a stark shadow on the idealized vision of American liberty, exposing its potential to morph into a cruel mirage for those who yearn for more profound meaning and belonging.

Keywords: American Dream, Bourgeois, Proletariat, Alienation, Identity, Thinker, Industrialisation, Freedom, Animalistic existence

Introduction and Aim:

The concept of the American Dream is a cornerstone of the United States national ethos, its roots inextricably intertwined with the very fabric of the Declaration of Independence. For the document's framers, this Dream embodied political liberty and the inherent right to pursue happiness. However, Abraham Lincoln redefined it through the lens of upward social mobility, emphasizing the potential for self-advancement regardless of socioeconomic origin. The term was coined by writer and historian James Truslow Adams in his book *Epic of America*. He describes it as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (404). Adams goes on to explain it as "a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too

many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motorcars and high wages merely. However, a dream of social order in which each man and woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (404). Yet, the precise meaning of “better, richer, and fuller” has remained elusive for subsequent generations. Contemporary America often equates these qualities with material wealth and property ownership, starkly contrasting the broader, inclusive vision encompassing personal fulfillment and educational attainment initially envisioned. Indeed, the connotations of the American Dream have demonstrably transformed alongside the nation’s historical trajectory, adapting to meet the aspirations and anxieties of each epoch.

Beyond material prosperity, the American Dream has been deeply enmeshed with a potent national myth. America has been seen as a verdant Eden rediscovered, and the “American Adam” is its primordial inhabitant. Fussell says America is "a garden of Eden rediscovered and that the American Adam embodied the innocence, youth, and beauty of the original Adam” (44). This myth, explored by R. W. B. Lewis in his seminal work *The American Adam*, holds that America embodied a new beginning for humanity, a divinely granted “second chance” after the “disastrous fumble” of the Ancient World. He writes: “The American myth saw life and history as just beginning. It described the world as starting again under the fresh initiative in a divinely granted second chance for the human race after the first chance had been disastrously fumbled in the darkening Old World” (5). Within this narrative, Lewis posits the emergence of a novel hero, untouched by worldly corruption, landed from heaven, and imbued with inherent purity and independence. As Lewis eloquently describes, this hero stands "emancipated from history," free from ancestral constraints and untainted by the “inheritances of

the family and race.” He is a lone figure, “self-reliant and self-propelling.” This American Adam confronts the uncharted future with his “unique, intrinsic resources” (5).

In Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*, the American Dream undergoes a radical metamorphosis, its idealized vision of Edenic abundance and inherent equality cracking under harsh reality. Yank, the play’s protagonist, embodies the archetypal “American Adam” envisioned by O’Neill – a potent symbol of primal strength and unrefined passion, yet lacking intellectual depth and eloquent expression. This new Adam, however, experiences a descent into disillusionment, his initial embrace of the American Dream morphing into a chilling nightmare. Once celebrated by poets like Whitman and philosophers like Emerson, the fertile land of opportunity transforms into a spiritual wasteland, as O’Neill poignantly underscores: “where man, God’s masterpiece, would soon degenerate back to the ape” (O’Neill 61). This stark portrayal shatters the myth of American exceptionalism, exploding the very ideals that lured countless immigrants from across Europe. The promise of equality and freedom, so eloquently championed by countless writers, including Mary Anton, acquires a biting irony when juxtaposed with Yank’s tragic trajectory. Her words, once resounding with hope and optimism, now echo hollowly in the face of O’Neill’s unflinching depiction of social alienation and existential despair. She writes:

My father promised us something. It was this ‘America.’
Moreover, America became my Dream. . . . In America,
he wrote, ‘It was no disgrace to work in a train. Workers
and capitalists were equal. The employer addressed the
employee as ‘You’ not familiarly as ‘thou.’ The cobbler
and the teacher had the same title, ‘Mr.’ (Anton 142).

At its core, the American Dream intertwined material prosperity with social security and human dignity, inextricably

linked to the promise of freedom. However, this freedom transcended mere geographical or ideological liberty. As Malcolm Boyd eloquently articulates, it aspired to "just freedom," a state where "man feels like a human being, like himself" (9). O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* stands as a powerful counterpoint, dissecting the illusory nature of this unbridled freedom through the tragic lens of Yank's experience. Rendered as a symbol of humanity that has forfeited its former unity with nature—a unity once held in its animalistic state and not yet attained in a spiritual sense—Yank personifies the disoriented individual, adrift in a society that prioritizes material success over self-actualization. His descent from stoker to outcast reveals the hollowness of freedom devoid of genuine connection and spiritual grounding. The play thus casts a stark shadow on the idealized vision of American liberty, exposing its potential to morph into a cruel mirage for those who yearn for more profound meaning and belonging.

O'Neill's theatrical production, *The Hairy Ape*, bears the indelible mark of a discerning and philosophical intellect. The playwright, deeply enmeshed in contemporary life, harbored fascination and repulsion towards American civilization. His relationship with America was characterized by a nuanced interplay of affection and aversion, where the material prosperity of the United States manifested as both a source of strength and vulnerability. O'Neill's work is a poignant reflection of an escalating discontent with the burgeoning materialism pervasive in American civilization. This paper evaluates the frustration stemming from the rootlessness and disintegration of individuals in a realm characterized by immense prosperity, opportunity, and abundance, as elucidated in *The Hairy Ape*, a period when the American Dream was still held in high regard. The paper reflects upon questions like: To what extent does O'Neill utilize the "Hairy Ape" figure to symbolize the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and the American Dream

on the working class? Does the play suggest a deterministic relationship between the American Dream and societal evolution, or does it offer room for individual agency and resistance? What factors contribute to Yank's initial sense of belonging and purpose within the industrial system? Does Yank's ultimate rejection by both human and animal societies offer any hope for redemption or transcendence from the dehumanizing conditions of society and the American Dream? How does *The Hairy Ape* contribute to more extensive discussions about the impact of capitalism, class warfare, the American Dream, and the individual's alienation in modern society?

Analysis:

As the play commences, Yank is ensnared in an illusion, perceiving himself as an integral part of the ship and, conversely, the ship as an extension of his identity. His unwavering faith in his physical prowess and vitality leads him to complete identification with the elemental forces of steel, steam, and smoke. His proclamation, "I am smoke and express trains and steamers and factory whistles... Moreover, I am what makes iron into steel! Steel that stands for the whole thing!

Moreover, I am steel, steel-steel! I am de muscles in steel, de punch behind it!" warrants attention for its ironic commentary on the mechanistic dehumanization of man (O'Neill 17). We witness a chilling irony: the very engine of his self-worth renders him a cog in the machine. Unwittingly, Yank celebrates the mechanization of his humanity, reveling in his robotic movements and metallic metaphors. Eugene O'Neill's stage directions preceding Scene I in the play establish a potent visual link between the stokehole and its inhabitants and the primordial world of Neanderthal Man. When delineating their physical attributes, he articulates, "hairy-chested, with long arms of tremendous power, and low, receding brows above their small, fierce, resentful eyes" (O'Neill 5-6). O'Neill purposefully employs a subtle expressionistic technique to juxtapose

the ancient and the modern or the primitive and the contemporary worlds. It juxtaposes the ostensibly modern setting of the industrial ship with the primal echoes of human evolution, a clash encapsulated in the play's subtitle, "A Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life."

Through the travails and strife of an ocean liner fireman, Eugene

O'Neill lays bare the devolution of civilized man into an animalistic state. The naturalistic portrayal of the stokehole unveils, at the core of culture, a primordial barbarity characterized by irrationality, violence, and uncontrollability. Intriguingly, the blazing furnace produces an impression that is both surreal and adheres to naturalistic principles. It describes where "a line of men, stripped to the waist, is before the furnace door ... They use the shovels to throw open the furnace doors. Then, from these fiery round holes in the black, a flood of terrific light and heat pours full upon the men who are outlined in silhouette in the crouching, inhuman attitudes of chained gorillas (O'Neill 28). Valgemaie Mardi believes that the hellish climate of the stokehole produces "a sense of impersonality, vacuity, and grotesque savagery," as if it is a "surrealistic nightmare" (231). The firefighters, reduced to mere laboring animals, find themselves confined and subjected to maltreatment. The ocean liner serves as a metaphor, emblematic of the overarching subjugation and confinement of workers to a constricted stratum at the base of society. The cage-like forecastle symbolizes the restrictive environment devoid of opportunities these men endure. The cramped quarters with low ceilings compel them to stoop low, thwarting the attainment of a standard, upright posture. Valued solely for their physical strength, precisely their capacity to shovel coal into the ship's furnace, these men forsake the need for sophisticated or contemplative thought, regressing into a Neanderthal state. Moreover, the Neanderthal condition of the firefighters is accentuated through their speech patterns. The dramatist meticulously renders their fractured grammar and guttural

vocalizations not merely as a stylistic choice but as a deliberate barrier separating them from the upper echelons of society.

Yank emerges as a representative of the primeval and untarnished culture intrinsic to the inventive conception of the American Dream, in which Spiller perceives "people had dreamed of a lost paradise, of a Golden Age characterized by abundance, plenty, absence of conflict and absence of toil" (192). This Dream envisaged an American life liberated from coercion, stifling conventions, and various forms of oppression and suppression. It mirrors Whitman's celebration in *Leaves of Grass*, depicting the American as blameless, self-sufficient, and exploratory. Yank embodies these qualities, taking pride in his physical strength, work, and workplace. Conversely, his comrades, Paddy and Long, exhibit discontent. Paddy nostalgically yearns for the past, idealizing a bygone era, while Long grapples with acute class consciousness, attributing worker exploitation to the capitalists, saying:

All men are born free and equal. That is in the bleeding Bible, maties. However, what do they care for, the Bible-them lazy, bloated swine that travels first cabin? Them is the ones. They dragged us down till we were only wage slaves in the bowels of a bloody ship, sweating, burning up, eating coal dust! Hit is them to blame - the damned capitalist class! (O'Neill 11)

Long makes sense, but Yank needs to prepare to accept this moment of life. He is unable to understand that their work and system carelessly abuse their labor, giving them nothing but "deprivation, hovels, mutilation, imbecility, and cretinism," producing "marvels, palaces, beauty, and intelligence" for the wealthy in return (Marx 61) He impends to knock Long down. Calling him "Yellow," he shouts:

Put one of them down here for one watch in the stock-hole; what would happen? Dey would carry him off on a

stretcher. Don't those boys amount to anything Dey's baggage, which makes this old tub run? Isn't it us guys? Well, den, we belong, don't we? We belong, and Dey does not (O'Neill 12).

The Adamic hero, Yank, takes pride in himself and his occupation. Regarding the stokehole as his abode, Yank exhibits contentment with his circumstances, demonstrating a notable lack of concern regarding his condition. In stark contrast, he perceives himself as the driving force propelling the ship forward:

I am the one who makes it hot! I am the one who makes it roar! I am the one who makes it move!.... I am at the bottom. Get me! Dere is not nothing, either. I am the end! I am the start! I start some p'n, and the world moves! (O'Neill 17)

The primitive hero lives and works contented in this world of make-believe till he comes in conflict with the so-called civilized and modern world of Mildred Douglas. Yank's illusion is suddenly shattered when, in Scene III, Mildred calls him "the filthy beast." Here, the robot suddenly turns into a man and "feels insulted in some unknown fashion in the very heart of his pride," his unmachine-like feelings of injured pride, revenge, and hatred are aroused (O'Neill 33). However, ironically enough, the dawning of human consciousness destroys his sense of belonging. He begins to think. The verbal and visual manipulation of Yank's statement "I am trying to think" and his consequent sculptured posture of Rodin's "The Thinker" are cleverly manipulated in the play to effectively bring out Yank's growing sense of alienation not only with the world of nature and the world of machine with which he was in complete harmony but also with the world of human beings and gradually with the entire human civilization. Only then does he realize that he is not a man but an animal "caged in by steel from a sight of the sky like bloody apes in the zoo!" (O'Neill 15). In this case, Bogard explains:

"The Rodin sculpture held for O'Neill an evolutionary significance appropriate to the play – brutish man attempting to puzzle out the truth of his existence and perhaps to better it, mind triumphing over brute force. Rodin's bronze, however, is far from pessimistic (246). As Yank embarks on the treacherous path of introspection, his bestial perspective becomes entangled in existential binaries. Although he yearns to ascend beyond the brutish confines of his identity, the intellectual chasm separating him from proper human understanding proves insurmountable. He stands at the precipice of self-awareness, yet the nuanced complexities of what it means to be human remain shrouded in an impenetrable fog. This internal discord subjects him to an agonizing impasse: remain a slumbering beast or embark on the Sisyphean task of unraveling the enigma of his humanity. Yank's situation and confusion can be best explained using Bertrand Russell's idea, which states that "apes in the zoo imagine that they feel they ought to become men, but cannot discover the secret of how to do it ... something of the same strain and anguish seems to have entered the soul of civilized men. He knows something better than himself is almost within his grasp, yet he does not know where to seek it or how to find it. In despair, he rages against his fellow man, who is equally lost and unhappy (62).

Unlike Yank's unpretentious, natural, and unassuming character, Mildred is characterized as artificial, sham, and narcissistic. While Yank embodies physical strength and robustness, Mildred stands in notable contrast as weak and anemic, evoking an impression that the vitality of her lineage had been depleted before her conception. She says:

Like millions of others, I am a waste product in the Bessemer process. Alternatively, instead, I inherit the acquired trait of the by-product, wealth, but none of the energy or strength of the steel that made it. I am sired by gold and damned by it, as they say at the race track-

damned in more ways than one (O'Neill 22-23).

Mildred's gilded cage becomes a poignant symbol of the American Dream's corrupted core. Haunted by the specter of her forebears' relentless pursuit of material abundance, a warped version of the national ideal, she embodies the societal decay engendered by this obsessive materialism. She perceives herself as condemned by the relentless pursuit of material success. Her father and grandfather, driven by the aspirations of material success and economic prosperity emblematic of the debased iteration of the American Dream, inadvertently engendered a progeny embodying ineffectiveness, depravity, inactivity, and conflict. Mildred, a sophisticated yet artificial product of a purposeless and enfeebled societal framework, has severed all connections with the essence of life. In the eyes of Yank, she resembles a specter with skinny and pallid hands. The entirety of human civilization, as depicted in the play, finds itself at the mercy of scrutiny and judgment. This nightmarish portrayal of society starkly contrasts the ideals of the American Dream, underscoring a divergence of unparalleled magnitude.

O'Neill crafts a visceral critique of social stratification through the failed transgressions of Mildred and Yank. Both characters yearn to step outside their prescribed social spheres, Mildred venturing into the fiery depths of the stokehole and Yank ascending to the gilded heights of Fifth Avenue. In the Fifth Avenue scene of *The Hairy Ape*, Eugene O'Neill unleashes a critique of societal dehumanization through a masterfully crafted expressionistic tableau. Emerging from the opulent church, the Sunday crowd transforms into a "procession of gaudy marionettes," their detached demeanor and automaton-like behavior evoking "the relentless horror of Frankensteins" (O'Neill 50). Their blank expressions and mechanical movements betray an absence of genuine emotion, purpose, or soul. They appear devoid of individual thought or empathy, existing solely as robots within the

gilded cage of their privileged world. This dehumanization finds further amplification through the ironic juxtaposition of wealth and its insidious effects. Their chatter of organizing “a hundred percent American bazaar” to “rehabilitate the veil of the temple” rings hollow, exposing the emptiness and hypocrisy masked by their conspicuous displays of material splendor (O’Neill 50). The flaunted jewels – diamonds, emeralds, rubies, pearls – and the draped animal furs become potent symbols of opulence, exploitation, and enslavement. With his intuitive grasp of reality, Yank readily identifies with the forlorn monkey fur in the furrier’s window, recognizing the shared burden of their confinement and exploitation at the hands of the privileged few. Even steel, initially celebrated as a symbol of Yank’s industrial might, acquires a sinister twist in this context, transforming into a shackle binding him to the relentless machinery of capitalist production. The people in Fifth Avenue treat him as a useless item or a repulsive animal. The viciousness of the world, bitten by dreams of the American Dream, severs his need for belonging and relationships. Yank experiences “death is life, loss of human contact, and the powers of sympathy, hope, humility, and belief in man” (Bogard 419). In the face of a society bereft of compassion, Yank’s spirit crumbles under unmitigated loneliness. The relentless pressure of this unforgiving landscape renders him a stranger to himself, culminating in the nightmarish vision of his descent into the bestial form he believes embodies the only escape from the icy grip of societal alienation.

Eugene O’Neill here orchestrates two devastating failures of transgression through Mildred and Yank to illuminate the impassable social and existential chasms erected by class and identity. Cocooned in the sterile air of privilege, Mildred ventures into the fiery crucible of the stokehole. Overwhelmed by the raw power and elemental energy surging within its depths, she succumbs, collapsing under the inferno’s physical and emotional onslaught. Inversely, Yank,

stripped of his industrial might in the sterile environs of Fifth Avenue, becomes an ostracized cipher, his guttural pronouncements and brutish demeanor rendering him unintelligible to the so-called 'civilized' society. He retreats to the zoo, a symbolic enclosure mirroring his regression to a state of primal isolation. Thus, both Mildred and Yank remain tragically confined in their respective cages; their desperate quests for transcendence highlight the enduring consequences of rigid social order and the deep-seated psychological wounds inflicted by enforced alienation. In their pursuit, Mildred and Yank attempt to shed their metaphorical "spots." Analogous to the leopard elucidated by Mildred to her Aunt, both express dissatisfaction with the lives and societies into which they were born, yet remain powerless to effect substantial change. The unhappiness and vulnerability experienced by Yank and Mildred result from the overarching societal structure and a restless ignorance concerning their societal and natural counterparts.

Cages, cells, locks, bolts, and bars, all fashioned from steel, metamorphose into potent symbols of confinement. No longer merely the symbol of industrial might and progress, steel transmutes into an emblem of confinement and oppression. The very material that forms the ship's sturdy hull also shapes the cage that imprisons Yank, literally in Scene VI and symbolically throughout the play. As Yank sits in contemplative isolation, mirroring Rodin's "The Thinker," in his poignant pronouncement, he laments,

Sure-her old man-president of de steel Trust-makes half
de steel in de world-steel-where I thought I belonged-
driven' thou movin'-in dat-to make her-and cage me in
for her to spit on! Christ! He made a dis-dis cage! Steel!
It does not belong, that is what! Cages, cells, locks,
bolts, bars –that is what it means! (O'Neill 62).

Thus, the gleaming edifice of industry, initially perceived as a pathway to empowerment and social mobility, reveals its monstrous

underside, morphing into a tool of exploitation and dehumanization. The American Dream, once a beacon of liberty and equality, stands exposed as a chimera, replaced by a spectral vision of societal stratification and subjugation. In this context, Senator Queen's speech, alluded to in Scene VI and featured in the Sunday Times, bears revisiting. Characterizing the I.W.W. (Industrial Workers of the World) as the "Industrious Wreckers of the World," he is quoted stating:

The I.W.W. must be destroyed! For they represent an ever-present danger pointed at the heart of the greatest nation the world has ever known, where all men are born free and equal, with equal opportunities to all, where the Founding Fathers have guaranteed to each one happiness, where Truth, Honor, Liberty Justice and Brotherhood of Man are a religion absorbed with one's mother's milk, taught at our father's knee, sealed, signed, and stamped upon in the glorious constitution of the United States (O'Neill 60).

Even a cursory examination of this speech reveals O'Neill's ironic portrayal of the profound disparity between the ideal and the actual, illustrating the failure and scathing critique of the great American Dream. Beneath the veil of promised equality, freedom, and human dignity lies a predatory society ruled by the Darwinian calculus of success and the dehumanizing principle of survival of the fittest. O'Neill indicts not only the betrayal of foundational American ideals – liberty, justice, equality, and fraternity – enshrined in the Declaration of Independence but a more profound assault — the crisis of identity. Repeatedly derided as a "filthy beast" and likened to an ape, Yank grapples with an existential crisis. Alienated from the human world, he fixates on the moon, questioning his creator, "Where do I get off at, huh?" (O'Neill 72). This existential quandary manifests in a shattering self-doubt, questioning his place

in the human species. He turns away from humanity in shock and delirium, seeking solace and identity in the animal kingdom. Addressing the gorilla as “brother,” Yank craves a sense of belonging, a confirmation of his existence. Tragically, this desperate bid for kinship is met with rejection, as the gorilla’s murderous embrace underscores the final abyss separating him from both worlds.

Conclusion:

Beneath the roar of furnaces and the clang of machinery in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* lies a profound interrogation of the human condition in the face of industrialization, technological advancement, and the ever-present mirage of the American Dream. Reduced to cogs in an ironclad system, workers like Yank and his fellow stokers find themselves stripped of agency and intellect, mere appendages to the churning heart of the industrial beast. Their monotonous and repetitive tasks demand mindless obedience rather than independent thought, exemplified by the whistles that dictate their every move. The specter of technological obsolescence looms large, as evidenced by the displacement of the stoker by the very machines they tend. O’Neill suggests that this forced regression into mindless toil casts a long shadow on the human spirit, prompting a devolutionary descent into a bestial state. This theme of dehumanization finds visceral expression in O’Neill’s stage directions, imbuing the firefighters with Neanderthal-like features. Paddy, the veteran stoker, embodies this regression most fully, his “extremely monkey-like” appearance mirroring the depths of his alienation. However, it is through Yank’s tragic journey that the play truly dissects this pattern. O’Neill’s portrayal of man regressing into an ape, constituting a virtual inversion of Darwinian evolutionary theory, serves as a trenchant critique of modern civilization. This depiction constitutes an unequivocal denunciation of the American Dream. With clarity and conviction, O’Neill endeavors to elucidate

the trajectory of contemporary human civilization. Beneath the veneer of a dazzling and affluent world lurks the peril of a bleak and dehumanized society where the very essence and existence of humanity face jeopardy. The civilization portrayed has completed a full circle, transforming the once-cherished Dream into a nightmarish reality. We witness Yank's initial swagger and misplaced pride in mastering the furnace, a fleeting echo of the promise of individual triumph. However, as his identity fragments under the unrelenting pressure of the machine, he sloughs off his humanity, culminating in his primal confrontation with the apes at the zoo, reflecting upon his complete alienation from civilized society and the natural world. However, *The Hairy Ape* remains more than a bleak tableau of despair. O'Neill's stark portrait compels us to confront this uncomfortable truth: the allure of the American Dream coexisting with the brutal realities of society. It systematically strips its workers of their humanity, leaving the readers to grapple with the consequences of progress and the actual cost of technological and societal ascent.

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