

Beyond Romantic Love: Desire, Possession and the Dynamics of Destruction in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

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Abstract

Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë is a book that doesn't fit neatly into the typical Victorian love story category. When people adapt the book into movies or plays, they often focus on the intense relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff, making it seem like a classic romance. But this overlooks the dark themes of violence, mental abuse and revenge that run throughout the novel. This study looks at how Brontë challenges traditional ideas of romantic love, turning passion into a driving force that consumes everything in its path. By exploring different viewpoints, including feminist, psychological and philosophical perspectives, we can see that desire in *Wuthering Heights* is not about romantic harmony, but rather a rebellion against the societal norms of the time. It's a powerful force that destroys not just the individuals involved, but also the world around them. In dismantling the division between self and other, the desire of Catherine and Heathcliff manifests as psychic fragmentation, necrophilic dissolution, imperialist appropriation of property and bodies. The novel illustrates that when desire demands absolute transcendence beyond social, physical and metaphysical limits, it inevitably consummates itself in annihilating violence, leaving genuine reconciliation to the domestic and subdued realm of the next generation.

Keywords: Metaphysical, Existential, Predatory, Transgression, Possession, Destruction, Necrophilia, Ontological, Violence, Coverture, Subjugation, Assimilation, Vengeance, Bourgeois, Mediation, Eradication.

Introduction

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, one of the landmark writings in Victorian fiction, was published in 1847 under the pseudonym of Ellis Bell. For nearly two centuries, this novel has troubled literary critics and readers alike by refusing to comfortably abide by any single generic tradition. Early Victorian reviewers expressed bewilderment and disgust at its unsparing cruelty. Dante Gabriel Rossetti in a letter to his friend William Allingham wrote about *Wuthering Heights*, "It is a fiend of a book — an incredible monster [...] The action is laid in hell, — only it seems places and people have English names there" (Rossetti 224). However, Rossetti also praised it as the first novel he had read for an age, and the best for two ages due to its power and sound style.

Wuthering Heights narrates the story of almost three generations of two families

called Earnshaw family and Linton family along with an outsider named Heathcliff who was picked up as an orphan by Mr. Earnshaw from the streets of Liverpool, residing at places known as 'Wuthering Heights' and 'Thrushcross Grange' respectively. To classify the relationship between Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff as the zenith of 'romantic love' fundamentally misapprehends Brontë's structural and psychological design. Romantic love, as conceived within the nineteenth-century domestic novel, operates as an integrative social mechanism. In the works of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë or George Eliot, romantic desire — despite its trials — frequently navigates individual subjectivity towards moral maturation and companionate marriage. In *Wuthering Heights*, however, desire is uncompromisingly purposeless, anti-social and violently

disruptive. It is a profound hunger of the soul that equates loving another with an urge to possess, destroy or merge with that other.

This point is important since the desire, in Brontë's sense, is not a sentimental relation between two separate and independent entities but is a crisis of the self. Heathcliff and Catherine do not desire to be united as a couple but desire to merge into one person to reach such an ontological fusion that will transcend all boundaries created by society, time, and the flesh. That is why when Catherine says to Nelly Dean, "Nelly, I am Heathcliff!" (81), she does not give a declaration of her loyalty to him, but she claims that her identity lies beyond the borders of her physical body. Therefore, when this absolute union is disturbed by class interests, separation of space and social prescriptions for marriage within Victorian morality, frustrated drive for fusion turns into a drive towards absolute destruction and possession. In the book *The English Novel: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton says, "The story of Catherine and Heathcliff is one of an absolute commitment and an absolute refusal. There is now an implacable conflict between passion and society, rebellion and moral orthodoxy — which is to say that Emily's great novel is that rare phenomenon, a tragic novel in the epoch of high realism" (Eagleton 133).

This study focuses on the transformation of desire from the drive towards consummation and legitimation into an apparatus of terror, oppression and decay. By putting *Wuthering Heights* at the juncture of the psychoanalytical theories of the death drive, Marxist criticism of accumulation of

capital and philosophical interpretations of erotic transgression, it shows that the concept of possession in the novel appears in two interconnected dimensions: the metaphysical desire for absolute possession of the essence of the loved one and the predatory urge for accumulation of property, lineage and bodies. Emily Brontë shows that the unmediated desire cannot find peaceful existence within patriarchal society based on capitalist principles.

I. The Metaphysical Void: Identity, Transgression and the Eradication of the Self

To explore the fatal course of events in terms of destructive nature of desire in *Wuthering Heights*, one should begin with analysis of the metaphysical basis of the childhood union between Catherine and Heathcliff. Contrary to the civilizing and moralizing nature of love in the Victorian fiction, their bond develops in the primeval landscape of the Yorkshire moors, which are clearly a territory beyond the civilized control of the Church and of the paternal authority of the Earnshaws' house. Their recognition takes place independently of any normal process of interpersonal courtship in the context of such geographical settings.

The concept of eros developed by Georges Bataille in *Literature and Evil* provides us with a theoretical model to interpret their relationship. According to Bataille, human beings are discontinuous entities isolated from each other and from the universe by the limits of the individual self. Eros is an attempt to bring about the continuity in this discontinuity: "Whether it is a matter of

pure eroticism (love-passion) or of bodily sensuality, the intensity increases to the point where destruction, the death of the being, becomes apparent." (Bataille 10). Catherine and Heathcliff personify this desire, which is both pure and terrifying. Their love is not a feeling of two individuals, but rather an attempt to destroy the very discontinuity of their existence and to merge into one single ontological entity. Brontë illustrates this problem of individual boundary in Catherine's important confession to Nelly Dean in Chapter IX. Differentiating her feelings to Edgar Linton from those for Heathcliff, she asserts a clear dualism:

My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I am Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being. So, don't talk of our separation again: it is impracticable (81).

Here, the language used by Catherine does not resort to any conventional terms describing erotic desires and romantic pleasures. Heathcliff is neither an aesthetic object nor a friend who can provide Catherine with some 'delight'; he is a part of her consciousness, which she needs to survive as an entity. Describing Heathcliff as 'eternal rocks beneath', Catherine situates the relationship between them in the bedrock of the Earth, which is enduring and immovable but indifferent to human happiness and reproductive processes.

As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar say in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, such a deep association of Catherine and Heathcliff is a way to preserve pre-patriarchal wholeness. According to the authors, Catherine's fall from grace means that she has been forced to adopt conventional femininity and the bourgeois order of Thrushcross Grange; therefore, 'Catherine must learn to rule herself Having fallen into the decorous 'heaven' of femaleness, Catherine must become a lady. And just as her entrance into the world of Thrushcross Grange was forced and violent, so this process by which she is obliged to accommodate herself to that world is violent and painful.' (Gilbert and Gubar 264). Therefore, Heathcliff personifies suppressed rage, rebelliousness and uncontrollable part of Catherine. Declaring that 'I am Heathcliff !', Catherine rejects patriarchal fragmentation of gender identity. Nevertheless, her attempt to achieve wholeness is doomed to failure because, in trying to occupy two different planes of existence (a plane of Edgar Linton's wife and Heathcliff), Catherine causes the breakdown of her mind. She wants Heathcliff to adapt to the condition of a triangle where Edgar's money would raise him from his degradation without understanding that Heathcliff will not tolerate any middle term.

When Catherine realizes that Heathcliff will never be able to fit in the domestic life at Thrushcross Grange, her frustrated desires begin destroying her from inside. Being unable to satisfy her passion, Catherine chooses self-starvation, neurosis and psychological suicide. In the Chapter XII, Catherine, mad with fever and plucking

feathers from her pillow, looking at the mirror and not recognizing her image, starts searching for that "It's behind there still! [...] And it stirred. Who is it? I hope it will not come out when you are gone! Oh! Nelly, the room is haunted! I'm afraid of being alone!" (114).

II. Class Enclosure, Materialistic Dominance and Predatory Ownership

Although metaphysical aspects of their relationship play a primary role here, Brontë carefully grounds it within the socio-economic reality of the nineteenth-century Britain. Reading the novel as a story of mythical otherness would mean ignoring the profound understanding of the harsh realities of social class, capital accumulation and enclosure, possessed by Brontë. Marxist literary critic, Terry Eagleton shows in his work *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* how central conflict in *Wuthering Heights* is grounded in the clash between two historical modes of socio-economic existence – the older, agricultural, quasi-feudal one, exemplified by *Wuthering Heights*, and the more modern and advanced gentry-capitalist one, incarnated by Thrushcross Grange. According to Eagleton, the marriage of Catherine to Edgar Linton is an absolute historical necessity, dictated by the necessity of social mobility and survival, and yet, at the same time, it is a deadly betrayal of Catherine's true self: "In a crucial act of self-betrayal and bad faith, Catherine rejects Heathcliff as a suitor because he is socially inferior to Linton; and it is from this that the train of destruction follows." (Eagleton 101) Her choice of Linton is an act of class-betrayal

with a surrender to the polite, bloodless and sterile world of bourgeois respectability against the vital and authentic, but impoverished and degraded world of Heathcliff.

Catherine herself candidly confesses her materialistic calculations to Nelly, declaring that "he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband" (78) and reasoning that her marriage to Heathcliff would make them beggars while marrying with Linton will enable her to "aid Heathcliff to rise, and place him out of my brother's power" (80). Catherine naively believes that she can manipulate the socioeconomic apparatus of bourgeois marriage, using Edgar's legal status and financial capital, to protect and sustain the socially excluded Heathcliff. However, Brontë exposes the deep delusion inherent in Catherine's scheme. In the patriarchal landscape of the nineteenth-century England governed by the laws of coverture, a married woman possessed no independent legal status, no property rights and no autonomy over her financial or physical self. Far from utilizing Edgar's resources to elevate Heathcliff, Catherine is herself absorbed into Edgar's estate as an aesthetic and docile ornament — a prized acquisition of the Grange.

The response of Heathcliff to the treachery is not a helpless sigh but rather an act of violent vengeance of the capitalistic kind. While the young man has been expelled and humiliated by the social stratification system based on property and pedigree, he has managed to master the very mechanisms of his

expulsion in order to revenge on them. When Heathcliff returns to Gimmerton three years after his disappearance, he has undergone a radical transformation. He has become a man of gentlemanly manners, with an iron will and enormous financial resources gained somehow. However, Heathcliff does not try to destroy the unjust social structure which had been oppressing him before; on the contrary, he identifies it with its predatory side.

As Dorothy Van Ghent argues in her book *The English Novel: Form and Function*, Heathcliff plays the role of the demonical and alien power which unmasks the violence concealed under the polite masks of Victorian social institutions. She claims that the revenge taken by Heathcliff is in fact an exploitation of the very institutions which have oppressed him. The mechanisms of civilization have turned upon themselves, mechanically (Van Ghent 158). Heathcliff takes advantage of the weakness of morality and the passion for gambling of Hindley Earnshaw in order to put the mortgage on Wuthering Heights. Then he uses the strategy of friendship and later marriage with Isabella Linton to take advantage of the patriarchal property law and destroy the family which had been discriminating him.

Heathcliff's attitude towards Isabella is one of the clearest manifestations of the absence of romantic illusions in his actions. When Nelly complains to Heathcliff about his cruelty towards the new wife, the man does not make any attempt to hide his true feelings, but says clearly, "I never told her a lie about it. She cannot accuse me of showing a bit of deceitful softness..... I have no pity! I have no pity! The

more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails! It is a moral teething; and I grind with greater energy, in proportion to the increase of pain" (136-137). The dialectic of desire has already transformed into the brutality of subordination. Isabella's romantic illusions of the woman with a childish faith that she can save Heathcliff from the evil by her femininity are destroyed violently. Heathcliff uses her only as an instrument of territorial and emotional revenge on Edgar Linton.

This situation corresponds to the theory of mimetic desire advanced by René Girard in his book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. In this work the researcher says that usually people's desire is not autonomous but rather triangular and mediated by the desire, status, and perception of the rival; besides, the prestige of the mediator is transferred to the object of desire and makes it seem more valuable (Girard 17). Heathcliff is not attracted by Isabella because of her personal qualities; she is important to him only as an extension of Edgar Linton's social and emotional status. Abducting, impregnating and breaking the spirit of Isabella, Heathcliff manages to colonize his rival's dynasty.

III. The Assimilating Violence and Tyrannical Union

The violence that pervades *Wuthering Heights* is not coincidental but rather the basic language by which desire speaks in a fallen world. Once it becomes apparent that language and society will not suffice to facilitate the mediation of their radical intimacy, the

relationship degenerates into violence and cannibalism and tyrannical oppression. Gilbert and Gubar, in their seminal psychoanalytic interpretation *The Madwoman in the Attic*, emphasize the importance of hunger, starvation and incorporation in the lexicon of the emotions. The desire to love is always equated to the desire to devour or consume the other's boundary. Heathcliff himself defines this predatory nature of their relationship in their excruciating final argument prior to Catherine's death. In Chapter XVI, when Catherine embraces Heathcliff, their passion takes the form of an attack that is almost impossible to distinguish from a murderer strangling his victim:

He dashed his head against the knotted trunk; and, lifting up his eyes, howled, not like a man, but like a savage beast getting goaded to death with knives and spears. I observed several splashes of blood about the bark of the tree, and his hand and forehead were both stained; probably the scene I witnessed was a repetition of others acted during the night. (148-149)

Even more telling, however, is the raw dialogue between the characters at their final meeting when the physical embrace is indistinguishable from devouring violence. Catherine bitterly cries that "I wish I could hold you [...] till we were both dead! I shouldn't care what you suffered. I care nothing for your sufferings. Why shouldn't you suffer? I do! Will you forget me? Will you be happy when I am in the earth?" (142). As a response to such a desperate accusation, Heathcliff replies with equal savagery demanding, "Would you like to live with your

soul in the grave?" (144), after which he also laments, "I forgive what you have done to me. I love my murderer—but yours! How can I?" (144). In this extraordinary passage, the traditional ideas of the Victorian deathbed scene — forgiveness, pious resignation and spiritual hope — are violently inverted. Catherine does not offer solace, but demands that her death haunt, lacerate and hollow out Heathcliff's continuing existence. Heathcliff, for his part, explicitly name Catherine as his 'murderer', acknowledging that her betrayal of their mutual bond has irreversibly shattered his vitality. Their physical embrace is described by Nelly Dean with instinctual terror that Heathcliff "gnashed at me, and foamed like a mad dog, and gathered her to him with greedy jealousy. I did not feel as if I were in the company of a creature of my own species" (143).

The psychological architecture of this discourse mirrors closely the psychoanalytic paradigms articulated by Leo Bersani in *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*. Bersani argues that Brontë presents us with an extreme manifestation of erotic desire which rejects social and psychological integration in favor of radical destabilizing passion. The passion of Heathcliff and Catherine is an absolute refusal to accept the boundaries of the self. It is an appetite that feeds on its own impossibility, generating an energy that is entirely destructive to psychic equilibrium and social order (Bersani 199). Their desire refuses sublimation. In classical psychoanalytic theory, civilized life requires the sublimation of primitive libidinal impulses into socially constructive channels — art,

labour and family. Catherine and Heathcliff systematically reject every avenue of sublimation. As a result, their thwarted desire can only find expression through tyrannical rage. Heathcliff's subsequent brutality towards Catherine's nephew Hareton, his own son Linton and the young girl Cathy is simply the outward projection of this fundamental and unresolved trauma. The violence inflicted upon the second generation represents the uncoiled spring of an unconsummated desire that demands the devastation of the entire human environment that witnessed its frustration.

IV. Necrophilia, the Ghostly Shadows and Metaphysical Continuity

The physical death of Catherine Earnshaw in the novel's midpoint does not put an end to the story of desire; instead, it provokes it, transferring the action from the social and household into the metaphysical and necrophilic area. Catherine's death does not free Heathcliff; instead, it brings about a horrifying, almost two decades-long grieving process in which desire breaks away from the physical world entirely. When Heathcliff finds out about Catherine's death, the first thing he says does not concern a prayer for her soul's comfort, but an incredible curse that denies Christian apocalypse:

Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living! You said I killed you—haunt me, then! The murdered do haunt their murderers, I believe. I know that ghosts have wandered on earth. Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God ! it is

unutterable! I cannot live without my life!

I cannot live without my soul! (148).

Heathcliff does not want an orthodox Christian reunion in heaven. He wants something else. He wants a haunt. Heathcliff would prefer to go mad than to live with the discontinuous reality of her absence in his everyday life. This haunting, this demand that she returns, is the basic structure around which his living death proceeds for the next eighteen years. This morbid dynamic culminates in one of the most shocking scenes in English literature i.e. the exhumation of Catherine's corpse. In Chapter XXIX, Heathcliff confesses to Nelly Dean that eighteen years after Catherine's burial, during the interment of Edgar Linton, he bribed the sexton to uncover Catherine's coffin:

I got the sexton, who was digging Linton's grave, to remove the earth off her coffin-lid, and I opened it. I thought, once, I would have stayed there: when I saw her face again—it is hers yet—he had hard work to stir me; but he said it would change if the air blew on it, and so I struck one side of the coffin loose, and covered it up: not Linton's side, damn him ! I wish he'd been soldered in lead. And I bribed the sexton to pull it away when I'm laid there, and slide mine out too; I'll have it made so: and then, by the time Linton gets to us, he'll not know which is which ! (241).

Heathcliff's necrophilic urge to blend his rotting corpse with Catherine's buried dust epitomizes the ultimate striving of his desire towards continuity. Heathcliff's notion of the physical decay is robbed of the horrific terror, it is embraced as the ultimate consummation. By removing the wood separating their caskets, he plots a literal and biological

integration that Edgar Linton can never interject. In the darkness of the earth, the boundaries of class, marriage, law and individual identity are finally deleted away via decomposition. The desire that could find no sanction and homestead in the Victorian society finds its definitive consummation in the grave.

Heathcliff's final days mark an explicit retreat from the material world that he so furiously conquered. Having achieved the absolute legal and financial ownership of both estates – Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange – he suddenly experiences a complete fall of the will to possess. As J. Hillis Miller observes in *The Disappearance of God* that Heathcliff's ultimate trajectory is a mystical and ascetic dismantling of his physical self, wherein his demise functions not as a normal death, but as a deliberate operation of self-annihilation to cross the spiritual threshold separating him from his lost soul (Miller 186). Possession of land, money and power proves entirely meaningless. The vengeance that sustained his physical being for decades loses all its strength once the image of Catherine's corpse has entirely consumed his perceptual field. His final refusal to consume food parallels Catherine's earlier, self-willed starvation. By systematically refusing the basic biological conditions of life, Heathcliff starves the discontinuous self out of existence, achieving by physical death the only union his unconventional desire could ever tolerate.

V. Narrative Mediation, Domestic Subjugation and Generational Catharsis

The terror of desire in *Wuthering Heights* is vastly amplified by the genius of Emily Brontë's framing of the narrative. The drama at the heart of the novel is never delivered directly to the reader but is filtered through two deeply conventional narrators — the gentleman visitor Mr. Lockwood and the moralizing housekeeper Nelly Dean — which according to Frank Kermode in the essay *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change*, creates an unbridgeable gap in understanding between the transgressive core of the narrative and the sensibilities of its narrators: a clever demonstration that Brontë draws on the resources of the double vision of Lockwood and Nelly Dean to constantly attempt, and consistently fail, to constrain the anarchic energies of Catherine and Heathcliff (Kermode 121). Lockwood represents the superficial metropolitan reader who views the Yorkshire moors through the lens of sentimental romance. When he is terrified by the menacing nocturnal haunting of the child-ghost of Catherine Linton at the opening of novel, his frantic cruelty — rubbing the child's wrist back and forth along the broken glass of the windowpane until the blood soaks the bedclothes — reveals that the 'civilized' gentleman harbors a capacity for reflexive violence just as vicious as Heathcliff's, yet entirely devoid of Heathcliff's elemental grandeur.

Similarly, Nelly Dean's narration while grounded and sensible always portrays the failure of conventional Victorian morality against elemental desire. Nelly is obsessed with decorum, social stability and superficial piety. Her persistent advice to Catherine to be

‘content’ with Edgar and her recurring betrayals of confidence show the failure of conventional domestic wisdom to understand the existential risks of Catherine’s soul. By passing this volcanic narrative through these biased, uncomprehending voices, Brontë makes sure that Catherine, Heathcliff remain fundamentally inscrutable, untameable and permanently resistant to ideological closure. But, Brontë does not finish her masterpiece in the devastating vortex of Catherine and Heathcliff’s mutual ruin. The destructive destruction of the primary pair clears the historical and physical ground for the appearance of the second generation i.e. Catherine of Linton and Hareton Earnshaw. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, Nancy Armstrong argues that the domestic novel historically worked as a way to redefine the value of humans away from aristocratic status and territorial wealth and show how early fiction began to depict the value of an individual in terms of his, more often in terms of her essential qualities of mind rather than in terms of birth or achieving any title and status. Young Catherine and Hareton perfectly embody this historical transition.

Hareton, although reduced by Heathcliff to the illiterate, degraded state of a brute beast, has an innate integrity and gentleness which resists total corruption. Cathy, although initially spoiled and supercilious, learns compassion and humility through her suffering under Heathcliff’s tyranny. Their courtship does not take place through wild transgressions on the desolate moors or through acts of psychological terror. It is begun over the pages of the book. When

Cathy agrees to teach Hareton to read, the act of literacy becomes a shared and collaborative act, witnessed by Lockwood as Hareton begins to read with a book before him, noting how “His handsome features glowed with pleasure, and his eyes kept impatiently wandering from the page to a small white hand over his shoulder, which recalled him by a smart slap on the cheek, whenever its owner detected such signs of inattention” (256). The language, far from being an alienating weapon of social exclusion, is an instrument of mutual salvation and connection. The primitive and chaotic energy of *Wuthering Heights* is literally cultivated as Cathy plants a flower garden in the grim courtyard, replacing the barren stone with living blooms.

Unlike Catherine and Heathcliff’s irrepressible drive towards self-destruction, Cathy and Hareton’s love is integrative, gentle and forward-looking with a positive note. They plan to get married on New Year’s Day, leave the haunted stone walls of *Wuthering Heights*, and take up residence in the civilized hospitable space of Thrushcross Grange. The cycle of intergenerational revenge is definitively broken. Brontë shows that if human beings are to survive, work and multiply within human society, desire must accept learning and ethical boundaries essential for human progress. Absolute passion belongs to the dead; the living must come to terms with the flawed and compromising conditions of social existence.

Conclusion

Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* is undoubtedly one of the most mysterious and brilliant achievements in English literature

because it does not idealize the relationships between people, especially the love of Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. Their bond is not a refuge of passion but rather a warring battlefield and the source of devastation. By exploring the border between a person's personality and the self, Emily Brontë reveals the terrible power of an all-consuming passion that consumes two people. When placed higher than conditions inherent in human life, passion becomes a destroyer, turning a beloved person into a battlefield, legal ties and money into a pretext for a bloody revenge, and a relationship between people into the most ruthless slavery.

In the novel's wistful and memorable final lines, Mr. Lockwood finds himself wandering under a cheerful sky in a country churchyard, watching the moths flutter around the heath and hare-bell, listening to the wind's whisper over the grass, and wondering "how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth" (279). Lockwood's final monologue is a wonderful example of irony, as the author finds peace and serenity in the familiar landscape. It is not the interiors of Victorian homes where true peace and comfort can be found, but in the infinite depths of nature, which extinguishes the fires of human passions with its unsparing silence.

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