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DESPAIR, LOSS AND DEATH IN HEMINGWAY'S "OLD MAN AT THE BRIDGE"

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ABSTRACT

Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961) is one of the many American writers who lived during the war time and was highly affected by it. He is mostly famous for his war novels such as "A Farewell to Arms" (1929), "For Whom the Bell Tolls" (1940), and "Across the River and into the Trees"(1950), but today is almost forgotten as a writer who has also many short stories of war. Hemingway's association with war and how he went under its influence can also be traced in many of his short stories. The representation of war and its destructiveness, both emotionally and physically, have been studied many times in his war novels but his short stories have rarely been investigated by scholars from these points of view. In the "Old Man at the Bridge", Hemingway tries to show that how his main character-the old man- is affected by the war and its atmosphere both psychologically and physically. By investigating the symbols, images, dialogues and setting manifested in the short story, this study tends to show the alienation, loss and despair, of the people under the war influence, brought about by war.

Key words: Ernest Miller Hemingway, Old Man at the Bridge, War, Alienation, Loss, Despair

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I. INTRODUCTION

The First, The Second World Wars and the Civil Wars have been the source of an important body of literature and a theme for many of the nations' major writers. As these wars have had a profound impact on the American society, the literary treatment of them continues to influence present concepts of war and its nature. After The World War I and The Spanish Civil War, American people and the authors among them were left disillusioned by the effects that war had on their society. America needed a literature that would

explain what had happened and what was happening to their society. American writers turned to what is now known as Modernism. The truthful representation of the American life and the sufferings of war were evident in post-war modern writings. The American writers created pictures of America by combining a wide variety of "details derived from observation and documentation..." to "approach the norm of experience..." (Harvey 3). Modernist writers, like most Americans, were amazed at the destructive power of war on the common man. Writers such as Ernest Hemingway,

William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald spearheaded the modernistic renaissance by employing realistic and naturalistic techniques in their post-war writings.

The literature that The First World War generated has received enormous scrutiny over the last two decades and has exercised a lasting influence on how war has been perceived and described in this century. Moreover, most of the American writers on war themes have thought of their works as describing distinct, special events, ones deserving the title of war. So, it seems justified to study their writings under the name of War Literature.

The American writers focused on different literary aspects to detail how American culture was affected by the wars. They detailed characters shaped by their society and tried to convey the good and evil aspects of life. Modernists portrayed people alienated and rejected from society due to the destructive effects of the First World War and the Spanish Civil War. They focused on detailing problems facing their characters, externally and internally, while not focusing on plot development. Thematically, they conveyed the good and bad aspects of a changing American society and showed how life was being oppressed by the dehumanizing agents of warfare on a large scale.

With the eruption of the First World War, the American people were greatly disillusioned. They turned to be skeptical of all their traditions, and questioned all their established beliefs. Traumatized by war and devoid of all morality and hope, the American writers reproduced their fragmentariness, fear and isolation through their texts. However, the Spanish Civil War has also retained an evocative quality which the other crises preceding World War II lack, by inspiring an impressive literature; during the Civil War there was an inescapable relationship between politics and writing.

Short stories of war have a common tendency to record all events and affairs straight, using the realistic and naturalistic mode. They are generally written as a direct result of war. Their language often follows the way real soldiers usually speak for the purpose of giving a true picture of a

harsh military setting. In this case, it is conceivable to notice the influence of Ernest Hemingway, whose style is based on his short sentences and quick-flowing dialogues, providing a lot of details. At the same time, however, some of his passages may look unclear and clues hidden so that the reader is forced to guess now and then. All of his war fictions seem to be highly descriptive with a great emphasis on details in order to make the reader feel as if he/she were present in the war himself/herself. A perfect portrayal of the environment can be regarded as one of Hemingway's major goals; in this sense, everything looks very vivid and close to reality.

When reading war novels and short stories, it is nearly impossible not to come across passages where death and cruel actions are being talked about. The intention of the author to present stories and events acting as true to life is achieved by means of high descriptiveness and naturalistic mode of narration, which, on the other hand, the reader may find macabre or even disgusting from time to time. The fictions are complex entities, motivated by complex social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional forces. They contribute much more valuably to an understanding of the non-combatants, soldiers, and the cruelties of war; thus for these reasons they merit the extended attention to be paid them" (Waldmeir 38).

II. Hemingway and War

Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961) is one of the many American writers who participated in almost three wars including The First World War, The Civil War and The Second World War which eventually became the settings of his war novels and short stories. The war experience and the post-war European mindset made a new generation of expatriate American writers in Paris in 1920s, a group which Gertrude Stein dubbed the "Lost Generation" and of which Hemingway was a typical representative.

Hemingway was one of the foremost authors of the era between the two world wars. His early works depict the lives of two types of people. One type consists of men and women who have lost faith in moral values and live with cynical disregard for anything but their own emotional needs. The other type is men of simple character and primitive

emotions who wage courageous and usually futile battles against the circumstances of their lives. He avoided describing his characters' emotions and thoughts directly. Instead he provided the reader with the raw material of an experience, eliminating the authorial viewpoint and having the text reproduce the actual experience as closely as possible. In his fictions he mostly tried to portray the loss, helplessness, despair, loneliness and alienation of his characters. With masterly skills, Hemingway reproduces all the nuances of the spoken word, as well as those pauses in which thought stands still. It may sometimes sound like a small talk, but it is not trivial when one gets to know his method which is the Iceberg Theory of him. He prefers to leave the work of psychological reflection to his readers and this freedom is of great benefit to him in spontaneous observation.

In his fictions on the war, Hemingway privileged direct experience, physical and material perception, and real life circumstances. Most of his texts are a product of the age that engendered it, a creative manifestation thereof, and is thus culturally inscribed. The large number of prose writings which involved representations of war authored by Hemingway in his capacities as a novelist, short-fiction writer or war correspondent, necessitated a laborious process of selection and structuring. In most of Hemingway's works war is understood as a conflict between systems of power, as a limited conflict which obliterates the individual. The existentialist hero of Hemingway's short stories lives under the sign of violence. The typical protagonist, "the Hemingway hero", is redefined in terms of the moral code born out of the violent and absurd nature of the war and ultimately subjected to the final test of death. Thus, the human condition, whose tragic nature is revealed through the war experience, remains the center of gravity of Hemingway's writings. Hemingway's goal was to measure the human capacity to endure, to accept the test of the toughest experience. As a result, the writer's focus was not much in the trauma in itself, but on the character's attitude toward it. The existentialist hero as a result of the war experience is locked into a constant struggle with alienation, despair and the absurd. The destruction and tragedy

of the war have an effect on the way the various characters behave and interact with one another. Actually, it is not the war itself but rather the aftermath of the war which has an influence on the way the characters act and think. However, most of Hemingway's writings are concerned in one way or another with the feeling of loss. This loss is directly attributable to the destructive effects of the war.

Most of Hemingway's critics employed the psychoanalysis to reconsider the trauma of the war; they did not restrict themselves to the physical wound, and instead, they extended the analysis to the psychological traumas of non-combatants. Though a large part of Hemingway's prose writings is doubtlessly based on his personal experiences and his direct involvement in all the major wars of his lifetime, he reaches beyond the realist/naturalist depiction of war. He offers a war fiction constructed by his imagination from within his own experience. The war experience serves as a catalyst of the imagination and hardly as a slice of reality to be described. Despite Hemingway's journalistic, minimalist style and a language seemingly spare in metaphors, he shares with the great modernists a use of language in which the symbolic dimension is attained through extensive use of constitutive symbols and symbolic construction of imagery and scenes. Critics have also remarked upon the psychological effects of violence depicted in Hemingway's novels and short fictions, which are ever-present in his descriptions of war. To sum it up, Hemingway's fictions are, at their strongest, in their portraits of male characters struggling to define their identities and find honor in a chaotic world.

Philip Young in his influential work named *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration*, used the "Wound Theory" in order to demonstrate that the experience of war was a turning point in the life and work of the American writers involving Hemingway. The "Wound Theory" associates the writer's physical wound with his psychological battle to overcome its effects. Hemingway tries to represent war in a minimalist way with an emphasis on its aftermath, and on the psychological and emotional effects on the survivors. Though his language is metaphorically spare, one should notice that his representations of war rely heavily on a

symbolic imagery including several recurrent images such as mud, rain, snow, winter, dust, the plain and the mountain. He pays a special emphasis on his use of themes of alienation, loss, despair and loneliness common to war symbolism.

III. Hemingway's "Old Man at the Bridge"

Ernest Hemingway is one of the finest writers of the early twentieth century. His seemingly simple and realistic style makes the meaning of his stories not immediately evident. At first encounter, his short stories seem like an exchange of dialogues with very few explanations. However, there are many hidden meanings and symbols that demand the active involvement of the reader to really grasp the message of Hemingway. "Old Man at the Bridge" is one of the works that completely illustrates the genuine meanings disguised in the apparent simplicity. Being one of the most renowned figures of The Lost Generation, Ernest Hemingway proved a high sense of experimentation at the level of form and style in the "Old Man at the Bridge". A simple glance at this short story provides us with the fact that there is an obvious deviation from the conventional narrative standards. The text reflects the state of the mind of the modern man, in this short story, the shattered mind of the old man in the war. With the eruption of The Spanish Civil War, the American people were greatly disillusioned. They turned to be skeptical of all their traditions, and questioned all their established beliefs. Traumatized by war and devoid of all morality and hope, Hemingway reproduced their fragmentariness, fear and isolation through his texts. The natural flow of ideas and events is replaced with a disrupted and fragmented narration in the "Old Man at the Bridge". This short story in particular, reflects the shattered mind of men in the war aftermath through the form and the content. "Old Man at the Bridge" demonstrates the power of narrative art. It takes a small, ordinary detail in a situation and by the art of story-telling transforms it into a powerful story about the tragedy of war

Ernest Hemingway's economical short story "Old Man at the Bridge" first appeared in *Ken Magazine* (Volume 1, Number 4, 1938). At just two pages in length, "Old Man at the Bridge" is one of Hemingway's shortest tales. It is based upon an

Easter Sunday stopover at the Ebro River during Hemingway's coverage of the Spanish Civil War in April 1938. The story conveys the subsequent problems for helpless victims, especially old people in the war. Ernest Hemingway himself also led a troubled life. The suffering he experienced due to injury, illness, love, and war undoubtedly inspired much of his writing, and ultimately culminated with his suicide in 1961. However, Hemingway used writing to remedy his ailments. Writing, illness, war and pain were intimately connected in Hemingway's life and his literature. Moreover, Injury, illness, and wounds figure prominently in much of Hemingway's life and fiction, often in similar forms. In his literature, Hemingway portrays war as disease-like, a destructive force that takes the direction and meaning from characters' lives and rendered a whole generation lost. Their losses leave the characters morally and psychologically aimless. Consequently, the characters are unable to cure their deteriorating physical and mental state.

The setting of the story is a spot in the countryside during the Spanish Civil War. As Hemingway observes the movement of vehicles and civilians fleeing across the pontoon bridge from an anticipated enemy attack, he notices a solitary old man sitting at the edge of the structure. Upon questioning him, Hemingway determines that the old man has just walked twelve kilometers from his home village of San Carlos, but fatigue forces him to halt at the bridge, for he can go no further. The last man to leave the village, the old man's duty is to take care of the animals left behind. It is obvious that he takes his obligation seriously, for he worries more about his cat, two goats, and eight pigeons that were under his care, than for his own safety. Sadly, he explains, he was forced to leave them behind. The cat will be able to take care of itself, he adds, but the goats and pigeons will have to fend for themselves. The correspondent suggests that the displaced man cross the bridge to the next crossroads, where he can catch a truck toward Barcelona, but the man explains that "I know no one in that direction." Although the correspondent is curious, he is not particularly helpful, and when the old man is unable to proceed, the journalist decides that "there was nothing to do about him." The

enemy would cross the bridge soon, and death appears imminent for the old man.

The day is described as "a gray overcast day with low ceiling." (Line 66); the gray color stands for old age, sadness, conservativeness, and something boring and solid. By this sentence Hemingway tries to establish an atmosphere of sadness, loneliness and destruction which was brought about by the war. Moreover, at the beginning of the story he describes the appearance of the old man as wearing "black dusty clothes with a gray dusty face". By using the black and the gray colors he tries to suggest what the old man has been through and how much he was destructed by the war both emotionally and physically.

In his short stories and novels, Hemingway depicts the injured nature of humankind. No one is spared pain or death. Living, for Hemingway's characters, is a struggle to accept and survive. One would be hard-pressed to name a Hemingway character with a normal life style or mentality. Body, country, and mind are all at least somewhat infected. The diseases come in disparate forms such as war and physical injury, yet they disable the characters in similar ways. His characters are deeply scarred and disillusioned. Avoiding illness and pain is impossible in the world of Hemingway's literature, just as it was for Hemingway in his own life. The themes of death and sickness were prevalent in many of his writings. In this short story, Hemingway portrays the old man's suffering from physical illness and mental disease. In "Old Man at the Bridge", the central character is a seventy six-year-old man, a war refugee who has been uprooted and displaced by the war. The old man is without politics, who was only taking care of his animals, but who has had his world destroyed by the war. The old man is caught by the war. He is disoriented, confused and disconnected. He has retreated into his isolated world in which he can only cling to his obsessive thoughts about his animals, and is too tired to go any further. He will die at the bridge, another nameless innocent victim of war. The plight of the defenseless old man who is "without politics" clearly demonstrates the author's condemnation of the senseless brutality and destructiveness of modern war

The most predominant theme in this short story is the brutal impact of the war on neutral innocents. In fact, the old man is a refugee from the village of San Carlos where he used to have some animals. Due to his plight, he sees the bridge as a dead end for him: "I am seventy six years old. I have come twelve kilometers now and I think now I can go no further." The war has affected his state of mind and destroyed the love of life in him. Neither his tired body nor his confused mind seems capable of grasping or coping with the sudden collapse of his entire world. Through this character, Hemingway is actually making an example of the old man in the aim of describing the effects of war on the state of mind of the innocent civilians. By the end of the short story, the narrator who is a soldier in this war, reports to the reader that the old man "got to his feet, swayed from side to side and then sat down backwards in the dust." This description is very telling because it reflects the inevitability of death when it comes to war. The old man was unable to cross the bridge because no matter where he goes, war will always affect him. Through this detail, it is evident that Hemingway is highly critical of war in general.

The plight of the defenseless old man who is without politics clearly demonstrates the author's condemnation of the senseless brutality and destructiveness of modern war. In this brief glimpse of war, Hemingway weaves several important symbols into the story to enhance his theme and point out the tragically ironic features of the war ability to destroy even the most innocent creatures in its wake. By referring to the pigeons as doves, the narrator is alluding to the traditional symbolism of the dove as a bird of peace and innocence. In such an environment of hatred and carnage, these symbols of peace have no place and must fly or face death. Their beauty and gentle nature are not fit for survival under such conditions, just as anyone who stands for peace will have no effect on the bloodshed to come. The narrator also points out that the story is set on Easter Sunday, a Christian holiday meant to celebrate Christ rising from the dead. The irony is apparent; no one will rise from the dead, only join the dead, when the shells begin to rain down and the skies clear to allow the fascist

bombers to make their runs. Easter is symbolically viewed as a highly anticipated, welcome time of rebirth, renewal, and possible change. For the old man at the foot of the bridge, this Easter brings only inevitable death and the destruction of all that is meaningful to him.

On the far side of the bridge lies Barcelona which symbolically represents the possibility of safety and refuge. On the near side, only certain destruction awaits as the old man was warned to evacuate his hometown because of the impending shelling by fascist artillery. In short, the bridge symbolizes the point of no return for the old man: if he crosses over, he may be safe but he must give up all that he knows and loves in San Carlos; if he stays, however, he will most likely share the fate of his beloved animals he cared for in San Carlos.

The irony of the situation is not lost upon the correspondent, who realizes that the animals for which the old man is so concerned have a greater chance of survival than their caretaker during the next crucial twenty-four hours. Unable to walk and barely able to stand, the old man's luck has run out, and he, too, seems resigned to his fate at the bridge. The old man, on the other hand, is not concerned about himself but worries about the animals he left behind. The old man's view of himself as a guardian of animals contrasts ironically with the soldier's identity as a killer of people. However, the different animals of the story were able to live together peacefully with the old man's care and love, but the two human armies, ironically, cannot.

Moreover, Hemingway portrays the natural world as morally and spiritually superior to the manufactured world of human beings because it does not destroy itself in war. As a keeper of animals, the old man, though he has no family and no political affiliations, is also morally and spiritually superior to the young soldier who leaves him behind. The old man is very much like the goats he left in harm's way, since they have nowhere to go and cannot take care of themselves. Unlike the goats, however, this man is completely alone. Ultimately, both the goats and the old man are left to their fates because the soldier admits that "there was nothing to do" but leave the old man behind. In fact, the old man feels compassion for those who

are not equipped to survive the massive destruction about to be unleashed.

The old man is without politics and has no family, so his whole life circles around only his animals and his hometown. The old man has no vitality left, he is described as "blank" and "tired" and his meaning of life has been taken away from him by the civil war; even after the soldier advises him to flee as long as it is possible, the old man does not move. The old man seems very grateful when the soldier talks to him "But thank you very much. Thank you again very much."(43-44). Perhaps it is his first contact and conversation to another person for a long time and he is happy that someone is interested in him and his worries. The man repeats "I was taking care of animals, I was only taking care of animals" a few times. This makes clear that he symbolizes the men, women and children who had to leave their home and their normal life as victims of a war with which they have nothing to do. The old man hasn't any political side. He is just someone trying to live his life to the best of his ability but because the war has reached him, he will lose many of the years he had left.

The old man is too tired to go on. He stands in front of the bridge, thus still clinging to his old life with his animals which he does not want to leave behind; but in fact, he will have to. At the end of the story, it seems to be clear that the old man does not intend to cross the bridge and go on. So, the whole story is about death. And finally, it is also clear for the soldier and the old man that death is imminent. The old man wears steel rimmed spectacles, which do not fit to a shepherd or a herdsman. He might have had a life of intellectual interests, might have been a teacher or a union activist. At the end of his life, he is neither worried about his dreams or goals or any political opinions nor about his life or health, but about a few animals for which he felt responsible. He must leave behind the pigeons, the symbols of peace and hope, and the cat, a symbol of seven lives. Only the goats, like the old man himself, are lost. The first person narrator helps the reader to identify with the scene of threat and hopelessness. Although the story is full of dialogues, attempts to comfort, offerings of help, it is a sad story.

The story deals with familiar Hemingway themes of depression, resignation, and impending death. The old man is the heroic fatalist or fatalistic hero of the story, resigned to his fate as a casualty of the war. He is too old and tired to move and the narrator reflects that he is sure to be killed once the Fascists advance to the bridge across the Ebro. However, his life is prolonged by the fact that the day is overcast and the Fascists cannot launch their planes, and his mind is eased by the fact that cats can look after themselves, but aside from that, the narrator says nothing can be done for him and his death seems certain. The narrator of the story seems more affected by the inevitability of the man's probable fate than the old man. The soldier, however, is not hopeful about the old man's fate; he bitterly remarks that "all the good luck that old man would ever have" was the fact that artillery planes were not flying that day.

The Ebro River in the "Old Man at the Bridge" is the symbol of the old man's life journey. His life is going to be changed by the war; he is going to experience a new life in Barcelona after leaving San Carlos and passing the river. A journey on or down a river is often a metaphor for life's journey or a character's journey, especially if the river is shown as a road or means of travel – pulling or pushing a character through changes. Here, the Ebro River pushes the old man toward a change, a new life (John Nath). The river can also be a metaphor for the passage of time or the stages of a human life. The Ebro River shows how quickly the time passes. There is no time to be wasted by the old man because the planes will fly over the city when the sky is clear and the old man will have no chance to survive. He is entering into a new stage of life, a life different from the older one. In fact, the war forces him to enter a new stage that he is not willing to; he is forced to leave all he had- his city, home, and animals. As the author shows, the river and its society is calm and the land and its society is troublesome in a variety of different aspects. The river is a place of freedom from the terrible situations found on land. It is a place for thought, relaxation, of feeling comfortable and generally at ease. The old man rests beside the river where he

can think about his home and his animals that he cared for.

In this short story Ernest Hemingway also uses the bridge as a symbol of uncertainty and danger; these are the feelings most of the people have during war time. In contrast to this, stands the fact that the story takes place on Easter Sunday, a holiday that stands for hope and the faith in God. The feelings of the refugees probably stand in the same contrast. On the one hand they feel very frightened and worried, but on the other hand they do not want to lose hope. The animals of the story also stand for different qualities. The pigeons, for example, represent peace and harmony and the fact that they fly away, away from the war, is a reference to the refugees who flee from the war to a safer place. The cat being a symbol of independence does not need anybody to survive, but the goat is often used as a sacrificial animal and this represents the old man and his situation; like a goat which is sacrificed, the old man's fate is sealed.

It is not mentioned what happened to the two goats, and if they were able to care for themselves or had to die. This means that people have no possibility to stop the war and they have to accept it. They have to live with this, and also with the problems which appear in the war and so the people have to try to make the best of it. The bridge also shows that some big things change but that there is still a connection between them. In this case it is the old life of the old man that lies now behind him and the new life where many things will be changed because of the war.

The Soldier tries to help the old man but he makes no difference to him; "If you are rested I would go," the soldier urged. "Get up and try to walk now." "Thank you," the old man said. The soldier tries to use family to encourage the old man to continue, but the old man has none; he tries to tell the old man the animals will be fine but the old man says the goats will most likely not be fine. The old man is thinking of the animals because they were his to take care of; the animals symbolize the victims of war that never wanted to be involved. The soldier offers a kind ear to the old man but does nothing physically to change the old man's situation. In fact,

the young soldier represents man's neglect of nature and tendency toward war or violence.

IV. Conclusion

The truthful representation of the American life and their sufferings of war were evident in post-war modern writings. Modernist writers, like Hemingway, were amazed at the destructive power of war on the common man. Hemingway focused on different literary aspects to detail how American culture was affected by the war. He detailed characters shaped by society and tried to convey the evil aspects of life under the war influence. Hemingway focused on detailing problems facing his characters, externally and internally, while not focusing on the plot development. Thematically, he conveyed the bad aspects of a changing American society and showed how life was being oppressed by the dehumanizing agents of warfare on a large scale. In his fiction "Old Man at the Bridge" he mostly tried to portray the loss, helplessness, despair, loneliness and alienation by the portrayal of his characters and settings. However, Writing, illness, war and pain were intimately connected in Hemingway's life and his literature. In his literature, Hemingway portrays war as disease-like, a destructive force that took the direction and meaning from characters' lives and rendered a whole generation lost. Their loss leaves the characters morally and psychologically aimless. Consequently, the characters are unable to cure their deteriorating physical and mental state.

Most of Hemingway's writings are concerned in one way or another with the feelings of loss. This loss is directly attributable to the effects of the war. In "The Old Man at the Bridge" Hemingway tries to show that how his main character-the old man- is affected by the war both emotionally and physically. By investigating the symbols, images, dialogues and setting manifested in the short story, this study tended to show the alienation, loss and despair brought about by the war. The most important symbol represented in the "Old Man at the Bridge" is the seventy-six-year-old man of the story. He is the symbol of the victim archetype. His life is caught by the war, and the war has threatened both his mental and physical survival. He has lost his identity, spirituality, hopes,

dreams and his sense of self. Thus, Hemingway's symbols are carefully placed and subtly developed, allowing readers to focus on the tragic fate of the old man without being sidetracked by heavy-handed literary devices. We feel sympathy and sorrow for the old man and ultimately realize that he is a symbol of all those caught in the crossfire, those who have died and will continue to die in the wake of and the inhuman business of modern war. The short story symbolized the inevitability of war and death and how some cannot avoid their fate. This story, as short as it is, has come to be considered a great example of Hemingway and his theme of the inevitability of death, fate and unfairness of war. Hemingway's "Old Man at the Bridge" details the principle of an alienation from society that had been forced upon by the circumstances of the time. In this case, it describes an old man alienated from society because of the situation brought about by war. The loss of faith and hope and collapse of former values occur to him. Even though it is a quick read, Hemingway has captured many parts of war and its disruption to people. In the end, Hemingway captures the inhumanity and barbaric nature of war. Ironically, he does so without a single shot being fired or one drop of blood being spilled in his tale of a nameless old man at a forgotten bridge.

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