

## Summary

*The article aims at showing, through an analysis of the semiotic effects of the use of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs in the play, that O'Neill's work has to do primarily with the blurred boundaries between the actual and the*

# A Peircean Reading

## of O'Neill's

## Emperor Jones

(1920)

Uma leitura peirciana de  
*Emperor Jones* de O'Neill

O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* mit  
Peirce Gelesen

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*imagined, the domain of a synthesis of the real and the illusory.*

### Resumo

*O artigo demonstra, através da análise do efeito semiótico do uso de signos icônicos, indiciais e simbólicos na peça Emperor*

*Jones, que esta obra de O'Neill lida principalmente com as confusas fronteiras entre o real e o imaginado, com o território da síntese entre a ilusão e a realidade.*

An examination of the critical bibliography of O'Neill's work reveals various generations of different critical approaches. His theater as a whole and the individual plays have been analyzed from a number of possible points of view — the psychological, the literary, the sociological, the theatrical. Each critic, with the readings resulting from a particular critical methodology, has contributed something to the understanding of O'Neill's fictive universe. One critical method is not necessarily incorrect as compared to another; nor is one inherently superior and to be favored for reaching some type of ultimate interpretation of the perceptions that the playwright has encoded into his theatrical works. On

the contrary, each approach generally adds something to an ongoing process of understanding as the texts live on after their author has ceased to exist. As Tiusanen says, the dramatic text is a work of art, and "when treating this elusive thing, the best results are achieved if it is discussed not from one but from several points of view." (1968: 19-20) I propose a particular reading, using Peircean semiotics, of the play that "established O'Neill as an international figure" (Carpenter 1979: 52). I hope to bring together many elements already noted and discussed by some critics, while, at the same time, offering a somewhat different understanding and interpretation of the work.

A number of semioticians of theater have found Peirce's work to be most useful in analyzing and describing how the sign functions on the stage (cf. Elam 1982: 21; Pavis 1982; Pladott 1982). As Pladott has noted:

*The main advantage of applying this model lies in the possibility of classifying all the signs of a theatrical performance structure according to their 'representational' function... On the basis of this classification we may then explore the various types of relationships that the global functional systems form with one another. Consequently, we are able to avoid such unnecessary antinomies as written text/performance; illusionist/non-illusionist theatre, etc. (1982: 30)*

With Peirce's definition and division of the sign in terms of how the sign vehicle relates to its object, we can explain the dynamic of O'Neill's text systematically in terms of sign function.

For Peirce a sign is "some--"

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thing that stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity." (CP 2.228) It is of a dynamic, triadic nature, composed of three moments in a constant mediating relation: the sign in itself (the sign vehicle), the object (the referent; the something for which the vehicle stands), the interpretant (the sign created in the perceiving mind; this sign functions as a sign of a sign). Peirce defines a number of trichotomies of the sign; the three major ones based on the relation of the sign to the three elements of the triad, however, constitute the basis of his semiotic: (1) the sign in relation to itself; (2) the sign in relation to its object; (3) the sign in relation to its interpretant. These categories, in turn, yield further divisions resulting in sixty-six classes of signs. The most exploited of the three basic divisions, particularly by semioticians of theater, and the most fundamental according to Peirce (CP 2.275) is that which concerns sign and object; this breaks down into the well-known tripartite model of icon, index, and symbol.

The relation between the iconic sign and its object is grounded on similarity; the icon "has no dynamical connection with the object it represents; it simply happens that its qualities resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness. But it is really unconnected with them" (CP 2.299). The index functions as a sign when it points to its object; the relation between the sign and its object is purely causal or contiguous. The indexical sign "is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair, but the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established" (CP 2.299). The relation between iconic and indexical signs constitutes an interesting aspect of theatrical sign systems in that the spectator generally tends to see indexical signs as iconic; as Pladott notes, "while iconicity takes indexical elements, such as gesture, costume, etc., for granted, the viewer tends to see all gestures as iconic"

(1982: 36). The symbolic function of the sign rests on the arbitrary and conventional relation of sign to its object; in the theater (as in art in general) this sign function is context bound and is associated with the aesthetic function of work. The symbolic sign "is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist" (CP 2.299). In using this trichotomy for purposes of analysis of theatrical signs, it is important to keep in mind a most important fact: a sign may function as icon, index, and symbol simultaneously, and "it is even possible for it to refer to the same object in all three ways at once" (Ransdell 1986: 688). The notion of hierarchy is important here; Peirce, in his description of the phenomenological categories, associates the icon with firstness, the index with secondness, and the symbol with thirdness in a hierarchical structure, the higher category always implying the lower one(s). As we will see in our analysis, most of the signs in the text are all three, but the spectator does not necessarily identify all three at the same time. On the contrary, as we will see in this reading of the text it is the constantly shifting sign function (the tension between the iconic and the symbolic) and the foregrounding and backgrounding of one or the other function in the various theatrical sign systems (cf. Kowzan [1968] who identifies and defines 13 such systems) that create, or at least move toward, an understanding of the sign that the text becomes.

*The Emperor Jones* revolves around the fall from power of a petty dictator, and his subsequent disintegration as a human being. It is the story of the Black man Brutus Jones who has become the strong man of "an island in the West Indies as yet not self-determined by White Marines." (O'Neill 1954: 2; subsequent references to the text are to this edition). This is pretextual information supplied in bits and pieces in Scene I in an exchange between Jones and Smithers, a cockney trader who has helped

Jones reach his success through corruption. Smithers informs Jones that the natives have fled the palace and are preparing to assassinate the Emperor. The remaining seven scenes of the text chronicle the external (iconic and indexical) and internal (symbolic) flights of Jones up to the point of his death.

Various sign systems merge to create the tension and contrast of reality and illusion — the dynamic of the text — as their signs are perceived either as iconic and indexical or symbolic. The most immediate and obvious are the visual (actors, props, décor, gesture, movement, costume) and the auditory (language, sound effects). The spectator must view Jones' journey as an actual flight through a forest on an island at night; at the same time, because of the tension, he is forced to rethink this and see it in its symbolic function, i.e., as a journey through a troubled and frustrated mind, from the personal to the collective, if an understanding beyond the mere mimetic is to be reached. The spectator, in a sense, is placed in the same position as Jones. Certain moments of the performance constitute Jones' interpretants, i.e., the signs produced in his mind as he perceives and interprets the world around him. The spectator, as is Jones, is torn between the reality and illusion of the situation as he views the ghosts of Jones' personal and racial past. However, unlike Jones, who is in this situation because of guilt and fear, the spectator is finally able to discern the real from the illusory of the text and understand that the illusions are produced by the protagonist's guilts and fears. Jones remains entrapped in his situation and becomes a victim of his own devices.

The sets that capture the duality of sign function, and thus Jones' entire being (external and internal), consist of those from Scene II through Scene VII, i.e., those that occur at the edge of and in the Great Forest. The forest, as portrayed on stage, suggests both the external and internal as a place of great

harshness and chaos; it is "a wall of darkness dividing the world." It is a symbolic division between the real and the illusory, night and day, and life and death. The darkness should be intensified, as O'Neill indicates in his sidetext: "Only when the eye becomes accustomed to the gloom can the outlines of separate trunks of the nearest tree be made out, enormous pillars of deeper blackness" (p. 17).

As Jones progresses on his flight through the forest, escaping his supposed pursuers, the iconic is transformed into the symbolic as he enters not only the forest but also himself. The dialogue of Scene I becomes a monologue as characters who could exist only in his mind appear on stage — The Little Formless Fears (Scene II); Jeff, a man whom Jones had killed before the time of the text (Scene III); convicts and a prison guard on a chain gang where Jones had served time (Scene IV); an auctioneer, plantation owners, and slaves at a slave auction of the last century (Scene V); slaves on a slave galley (Scene VI); a Congo Witch-Doctor and a Crocodile God (Scene VII). None of these constitutes independent personalities; they are simply projections of the protagonist's mind (i.e., interpretants) and function at his will as signs of his personal and racial past. The contrast and tension between sign functions are emphasized throughout the text by a number of other contrasts, which Carpenter (1979: 89) refers to as physical and psychological, and Tiusanen as "interaction within and between the scenic images" (1968: 107). The figure of Jones synthesizes all the contrasts as he becomes a symbol of the entire text; all the signs on the stage, which are really Jones' interpretants (his perception of the world around him) create other interpretants for the spectator who attempts to impose order and understanding on the text.

The various scenes in the forest represent different states of mind, both conscious and unconscious, personal and collective (what Car-

penter [1979: 88] calls a combination of the "reality of the actual jungle with the confused fantasy of Jones' mind"). Jones serves as the principal unifying element of all the scenes. Although the spectator remains aware that an actual flight is occurring, the unconscious state comes to dominate the events on stage. This is foregrounded by the theatrical sign systems of sound effects, specifically the tom-tom and gun shots, that function indexically and symbolically. In each scene, beginning with the end of Scene II where Jones enters the forest, through Scene VII, where he dies, the stage space is transformed (and this can be done only through the symbolic function) into different physical and temporal spaces (while still functioning as a forest in the present moment, which is a period of one night) in Jones' personal and racial existences.

The scenes represent abrupt, rapid movements back in time, while maintaining the element of the present moment:

*Scene I: the present moment; the palace of the Emperor Jones;*

*Scene II: the present moment; Jones has fled the palace and is on the edge of the Great Forest; this scene, with the Little Formless Fears and the sense of "edge" serves as a transition in the transformation of the stage space that will occur in the following scenes and signals the audience that Jones is beginning to suffer delusions (the Little Formless Fears will assume specific and concrete forms as the text progresses);*

*Scenes III-VI: Jones is lost in the forest; however, each scene represents a different place and time;*

*Scene III: Jones has moved to the point in the past in which he kills the negro Jeff; he shoots him again and Jeff disappears in a puff of smoke;*

*Scene IV: Jones' days on the chain gang when he killed a guard and escaped; Scenes V-VII predate Jones' personal existence; they relate to his racial past;*

*Scene V: an auction on a southern plantation;*

*Scene VI: the ocean crossing of a slave ship;*

*Scene VII: an encounter with a Congo Witch-Doctor and the Crocodile God.*

The order of the time sequence is broken, as Tiusanen indicates, with the placing of Jeff before the killing of the guard, which is a more recent event (1968: 105). This interruption of the order, however, simply serves as another sign of Jones' chaotic state of mind in his flight.

On the levels of the iconic and indexical (the mimetic) Jones becomes lost because it is night and he does not know the terrain well. The sense of being physically lost becomes symbolic of his mental confusion, chaos, and ultimate disintegration as a person. As he wanders around, this is reflected in his glorious emperor's uniform ("a light blue uniform coat, sprayed with brass buttons, heavy gold chevrons on his shoulders, gold braid on the collar, etc. His pants are bright red with a light blue stripe down the side. Patent leather laced boots with brass spurs..." [Scene I; p. 6]), which is torn to shreds. This sign of authority is symbolic of Jones' arrogance in this position in life which is unnatural for him; as emperor he pretends to be something that he is not, different from others of his

race, those whom he dominates and refers to derogatorily as "low-lung bush niggers". Over the following scenes the outfit becomes symbolic of Jones' disintegration as a human being:

*"He has lost his panama hat... his brilliant uniform shows several large rents" (Scene III, p. 21);*

*"His uniform is ragged and torn" (Scene IV, p. 23);*

*"His pants are in tatters, his shoes cut and misshapen, flapping about on his feet" (Scene V, p. 26);*

*"His pants have been so torn away that what is left of them is no better than a breech cloth" (Scene VI, p. 29).*

His disintegrating uniform is then indexical of flight through a rough place, while at the same time, it is symbolic of the stripping away of layers of his being, i.e., his state of mind. He regresses from Emperor (i.e., civilized; reflected in the setting of the palace in Scene I) to his racial origins (i.e., primitive; reflected in the forest scenes). The civilized and the primitive are suggested by the name Brutus (irrational; stupid) Jones (a common human name). The disintegration is also reflected in a symbolic fall from the palace, which is described as situated on high ground and where Jones is emperor, to the forest where he is lost and a fugitive.

O'Neill carefully indicates certain kinesic aspects (movements, facial expressions, gestures, etc.) in his sidetext, particularly those that relate to the antinomy of the real and the imagined. The imagined personages who appear in the forest scenes move in such a way as to suggest that they are not real; generally, the descriptions imply

corresponding facial expressions and body postures. Although the movements, and the pantomime that occurs, are iconic in that they refer to real movements, they become symbolic of Jones' chaotic confusion of the real and the imagined. In other words, the meaning emerges from the context and is arbitrary, not necessarily signifying the same outside the text. Jones moves around the stage in a manner that is an iconic and indexical representation of a man in flight. On occasion, his movements change and are similar to those of the creations of his mind (in Scene VII he enters into the dance with the Witch-Doctor: "...he beats time with his hands and sways his body to and fro from the waist." [p. 32]). At these moments there is a sense of metaperformance achieved; Jones participates in a drama that his mind creates and then withdraws from this when he realizes that it is not real. In general, however, a contrast is realized to indicate that the other figures on the stage during the forest scenes exist only in Jones' mind at that moment:

*Scene II: the Little Formless Fears are black and shapeless forms that move around with difficulty and in silence on the stage;*

*Scene III: Jeff moves with mechanical movements like an automaton, in silence, and disappears in a cloud of smoke when Jones fires on him;*

*Scene IV: the convicts' movements are "those of automatons, — rigid, slow, and mechanical" (p. 24); in the same scene, Jones, reliving the killing of the guard, performs this in pantomime with an invisible shovel; he realizes, however, that his hands are empty and for a moment the characters are caught between the illusion and reality of the situation: "They stand fixed in*

*motionless attitudes, their eyes on the ground. The guard seems to wait expectantly, his back turned to the attacker." (p. 24);*

*Scene V: at the slave auction, the planters and spectators of the sale, "exchange greetings in dumb show, and chat silently together. There is something stiff, rigid, unreal, marionettish about their movements" (p. 27); Jones becomes caught up in this silent spectacle and put on the auction block but suddenly realizes that it is not real, as seen in his facial expressions: "He dares to look down and around him. Over his face abject terror gives way to mystification, to gradual realization..." (p. 28);*

*Scene VI: the slaves on the ship are silent and motionless as the scene opens, but "Then they begin to sway slowly forward toward each and back again in unison, as if they were laxly letting themselves follow the long roll of a ship at sea" (p. 29); the only props used to suggest a ship are two rows of chairs and seated figures in loincloths;*

*Scene VII: the place is suggested by the costume and actions of the Witch-Doctor, i.e., his chant and dance that gives way to a narrative pantomime: "...his croon is an incantation, a charm to allay the fierceness of some implacable deity demanding sacrifices. He flees, he is pursued by devils, he hides, he flees again. Ever wilder and wilder becomes his flight, nearer and nearer draws the pursuing evil, more and more the spirit of terror gains possession of him" (p. 31). As Jones observes this, he is seeing a mirror image of himself and his own flight, terror, and fears.*

As Carpenter has noted, there are two devices that function as unifiers for the various scenes: the two very noticeable sound effects of the tom-tom and the gun shots. This critic sees these in terms of both the physical and psychological (cf. Carpenter 1979: 89), which corresponds somewhat to our notion of the shifting function of the sign. As Tornqvist (1969: 157) says, "we vacillate between regarding the sound as internal and external reality as our minds fluctuate between the rational and the irrational, reason and emotion." Tiusanen (1968: 102) also explains the tom-tom in terms of the real and symbolic: "At this point [in the opening scene] there are no symbolic overtones; the tom-tom is simply a sign that the Emperor's subjects have deserted him and gathered on the hills...". Both the tom-tom and the gun shots, as these critics have pointed out in different terms, are signs that function in different ways. The sounds are physically experienced by the audience, i.e., they are reproduced to serve as iconic signs with indexical functions. They are, in other words, mimetic. However, they also function symbolically in that they come to signify Jones' inner chaos, his being torn between the real of the present moment and the imagined from the past, as he flees through the physical chaos of the forest. The sounds of the tom-tom function indexically as a war call and symbolically as a sign of nervousness, reflecting Jones' heart beat at various moments of the text. The gun shots are indexical in that they point to the fact that a gun has been fired and symbolic in that they signify Jones' fears and nervousness as he tries to dispell the ghosts of his personal and racial past. Both sound effects are used in the forest scenes to punctuate the emotional state of the protagonist, and thus support the underlying tensions of sign function in different sign systems that signify Jones' confusion of the real and the imagined.

O'Neill introduces the sound effect of the tom-tom in Scene I and

repeats it in each of the following scenes until Jones' death in the last: Scene I: "From the distant hills comes the faint, steady thump of a tom-tom, low and vibrating. It starts out at a rate exactly corresponding to normal pulse beat — 72 to the minute — and continues at a gradually accelerating rate from this point uninterruptedly to the very end of the play" (p. 14). The significance of this sign, in addition to a purely mimetic function, is established in the written text in the first scene. However, this is perhaps not comprehended by the spectator until Scene II and subsequent ones when the instructions are carefully reiterated by the playwright, usually in conjunction with the gun shots:

*Scene II: "He fires. There is a flash, a loud report, the silence broken only by the far-off, quickening throb of the tom-tom" (p. 20);*

*Scene III: "He fires... The beat of the far-off tom-tom is perceptibly louder and more rapid" (p. 22);*

*Scene IV: "He frees the revolver and fires point blank at the Guard's back... The only sounds are a crashing in the underbrush... and the throbbing of the tom-tom still far distant, but increased in volume of sound and rapidity of beat" (p. 25);*

*Scene V: "He fires at the Auctioneer and at the Planter... Only blackness remains and silence broken... by the quickened, ever louder beat of the tom tom" (p. 28);*

*Scene VI: there is no shot in the scene where Jones becomes a part of the imagined aspect of the slaves on the ship; he joins in their wails of despair; the shots up to this point have*

*been established as a pattern and the lack of one in this scene thus is a sign in itself signifying Jones' joining his past and not attempting to "kill" it; the tom-tom is used, however; it accompanies the voices of the slaves, their despair "directed and controlled by the throb of the tom-tom..." (p. 20); as the scene ends and Jones returns to the reality of his physical flight, the tom-tom "beats louder, quicker, with a more insistent, triumphant pulsation" (p. 20);*

*Scene VII: the tom-tom accompanies the dance of the Witch-Doctor; "...the tom-tom grows to a fierce, exultant boom whose throbs seem to fill the air with vibrating rhythm"; as the scene ends Jones fires the last bullet (the silver one that he has used to dupe the natives into thinking that it is the only thing that will kill him) into the head of the crocodile; he lies on the ground "whimpering with fear as the throb of the tom-tom fills the silence about him with a somber pulsation of a baffled but revengeful power" (pp. 32-33);*

*Scene VIII: the tom tom continues and "seems to be on the very spot, so loud and continuously vibrating are its beats" (p. 33); the sounds here are indexical of the closeness of Jones' pursuers and symbolic of his final moments of life; when the rifle shots are heard, "the beating of the tom tom abruptly ceases", "indicating that the chase has ended and symbolizing the end of Jones' internal journey.*

Ultimately the Great Forest, as a sign of Jones' internal and external realities, comes to function symbolically as a sign whose object is the protagonist's sense of total entrapment. The stage, divided \*

between the real and the imagined, the here and now vs. the then and there, becomes in the moments of the imagined (the then and there) interpretant signs in the mind of Jones — i.e., it is what he is actually thinking, his actual perception of reality. These interpretants provoke interpretant signs in the mind of the spectator who becomes caught between the presented interpretants and his own. He synthesizes the interpretants as he compares and contrasts the two states clearly drawn out by the opposing sign functions of iconic and indexical and those converted into symbolic functions in Jones' imagination. The stage space, which is a space of confinement and enclosure in its own right marked off for performance as opposed to other activities, comes to represent a space of confinement and entrapment in which the tensions between sign functions occur. This parallels and reflects the inner sense of Jones' imprisonment as the stage space is transformed into a symbolic sign of his confusion of the real and the imagined. The stage thus constitutes a commentary on the individual's reality as consisting of both the imagined and the actual.

A number of elements support the construction of a final understanding of the text being a sign of man's entrapment and the corresponding feelings of aloneness and frustration. These appear in various sign systems of the performance text: the visual signs of the settings, including the actors; the use of what is essentially a monologue throughout most of the text; the circular plot structure.

The stage decor includes a number of visual images that suggest the overall metaphor of entrapment and isolation. Each scene contains some image in the setting that suggests enclosure or confinement. The physical signs are indicated in his sidetext, beginning with the notion that the entire action is played out on a remote, unknown island. Scene I occurs in the emperor's palace with its "bare, white-washed

walls" situated on high ground away from the other inhabitants of the island. The natives, with whom Jones feels no racial solidarity as evidenced in his constant references to them as "low-flung, bush niggers" (p. 7), have fled and abandoned their leader. As Smithers says of the palace, giving it more an air of confinement, "This palace of his is like a bleeding tomb" (p. 4). The remaining scenes take place either on the edge or in the Great Forest. Scene II: the edge of the Great Forest where the world is divided into plain and forest; the forest and the sense of aloneness it manifests visually ("...its brooding, implacable silence" — p. 17) become signs of Jones' physical entrapment as he becomes lost and cannot escape. Within the forest scenes the protagonist is alone with his ghosts; the dialogue of Scene I becomes monologue for the remainder of the text, and the monologue becomes a sign of Jones' aloneness and entrapment. It is language directed to himself since there is no other person in the forest except his ghosts. Language then in the text is a self-expression of all the protagonist's fears and frustrations. When Jones speaks with the figures that appear in his delirium, they do not reply; they are simply projections of his inner self, his own creations that cannot answer him. Scene III: "A dense low wall of underbrush and creepers is in the nearer foreground, fencing in a small triangular clearing. Beyond this is the massed blackness of the forest like an encompassing barrier" (p. 21). Scene IV: "A wide dirt road runs diagonally from right, front, to left, rear. Rising sheer on both sides the forest walls it in" (p. 23). Scene V: "A large circular clearing, enclosed by the serried ranks of gigantic trunks of tall trees whose tops are lost to view" (p. 26). Scene VI: "A cleared space in the forest. The limbs of the trees meet over it forming a low ceiling about five feet from the ground. The interlocked ropes of creepers reaching upward to entwine the tree trunks give an arched appearance to the sides. The space thus enclosed is like the dark, noisome hold of some ancient vessel" (pp. 28-29). Scene VII: the scene

represents a space with an altar between a forest and a river.

Other signs, while functioning symbolically signifying Jones' inner disintegration in his journey back in time, serve as indices of enslavement and confinement. The choice of a black man as protagonist, particularly at the moment when the text was written, is significant; O'Neill chose a member of society already recognized as restricted and limited in freedom. Jones' blackness is indexical of his race and symbolic of his lack of freedom. These signs refer to race, both in the past and in the present; some actually occur during Jones' life, others appear in his delirium:

*Scene II: the Little Formless Fears of Jones' first hallucination are black; these are "formless" in that Jones' fears have not become concretized and defined into specific forms as they will in the following scenes;*

*Scene III: Jeff, the man that Jones killed, is a black and dressed in a Pullman's uniform, a sign of a servile profession, limited mostly to blacks at the time of composition of the play;*

*Scene IV: costumes and guard indicate a prison scene; all the convicts are black;*

*Scene V: the auction scene — with black slaves being sold to whites;*

*Scene VI: the slave ship;*

*Scene VII: the Congo Witch-Doctor, suggesting the black man's earliest ancestry and perhaps an enslavement to beliefs and magic.*

In these scenes Jones is torn between the entrapment of the actual moment in the forest and the situation of the enslaved characters of his hallucinations. His entrapment is then both real and imagined. In Scene VIII, Jones enters a final enslavement, the final entrapment: death. This is reiterated by the fact that his journey, internally a regression to his

origins and nothingness, is externally circular. Jones has not managed to escape his pursuers and ends up in the exact spot where he entered the forest. A final irony emerges in that Jones is killed by a silver bullet like the one he considered his "rabbit's foot" (p. 10).

Jones is a man torn and trapped between reality and illusion

because of his fears and guilts. He is the synthesis of both reality and illusion, as confirmed by the visual aspects of iconic, indexical and symbolic signs of the stage. In a sense, he is like the stage, like theater itself — i.e., a synthesis of the real and the illusory, a sign that the real consists of both the actual and the imagined. ☺

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