

"Wait Till You Have an Evil Twin": Jane Espenson's Contributions to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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[1] Jane Espenson is a writer for the fans. Her episodes and interviews clearly demonstrate that she is a writer of the show but also an avid fan of it. Though she has been on the writing staff since the third season, she maintains a love of the show that comes through in her writing. In a high-drama show (or "universe," if we include her writing on *Angel*), Espenson portrays deep feeling that requires emotional responsiveness from her audience, while nearly always using comedy to balance that, encouraging intellectual playfulness. She recognizes that fans watch *Buffy* for pleasure as well as to see an intelligent show in a world largely devoid of such--especially on network TV--and provides for both of those desires. Espenson's best work is character-centered, rather than advancing the overall narrative arc of the season. She often employs an alternate version of a character to provide more insight into him or her. Espenson also presents the ability to be vulnerable as a virtue. For her, it is one necessary step towards a truer understanding of the character's strength. Finally, Espenson's placement as a fan as well as a writer of the series makes her episodes rewarding to other fans. One way in which she does this is her frequent use of intertextual references which recall previous episodes. The episodes also often play like fanfiction, showing her sympathy with fans and underscoring her own and the series' emphasis on the importance of collaboration. While I have taken what appears to be an auteurist approach to my examination of Jane Espenson's work on *Buffy*, it is important to realize that her contributions really contradict that theory, which seeks to define only one author for a given work. It's impossible to identify a single author for a long-running series like *Buffy*, despite the heavy involvement and creative vision of Joss Whedon. Espenson's creative life embodies many of the ideals of the series as a whole, which are that collaboration, inclusiveness, playfulness, and resilience are essential to building a genuine community; all of these refute the auteur theory.

[2] Espenson is quick to identify her favorite *Buffy* characters (Spike and Jonathan, as stated in her interview in *The Watcher's Guide Volume 2*). She delights in rewarding fan investment and attentive viewing by referencing previous episodes. For just one example of many, take this exchange between Willow and Xander in *The Replacement* (5003):

Xander: "Wait 'til you have an evil twin. See how you handle it."
Willow: (miffed) "I handled it fine." (Espenson)

Of course, what's referenced here is *Doppelgangland* (3016), which featured a vampire version of Willow from an alternate dimension. Espenson excels at this "community-building" type of humor, which is defined by Henri Bergson: "Laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imagined" (Bergson 64). This is

one of Espenson's most important uses of humor. *Buffy* has long had a devoted cult following. By referencing past events, Espenson allows fans to smile and nod at each other in recognition (either literally, if they are in the same room, or metaphorically, over the Internet). Not only that, but she creates the sense that the fan is part of the Scooby gang. They get the in-jokes, and they remember the important events in the Scoobies' lives, because they were important to the fans as well.

[3] Espenson even goes out of her way to inform fans of what's going on in the show. In *Band Candy* (3006), we see Joyce and Giles kissing on the hood of a police car. Later, in Espenson's episode *Earshot* (3018), we find out, definitively, that Joyce and Giles had sex there--twice. "To my surprise, a lot of people were confused about how far Giles and Joyce had gone [in *Band Candy*]," Espenson says on the DVD commentary for *Earshot*. "And so I really enjoyed this as an opportunity to make very clear...that they actually had sex on top of that police car. I just sort of wanted America to know that." For Espenson, it was important that the fans knew exactly what had happened.

[4] Such intertextuality is common in fanfiction. Indeed, Espenson wrote the first episode to start on *Buffy* and conclude on *Angel: The Harsh Light of Day* (4003). And Espenson is one of the few writers who acknowledges and appreciates fanfiction:

"[*The Harsh Light of Day* (4003)] was a script I lay in bed thinking about and realizing that every scene was going to be a joy to write--the most fan-ficcy script I have ever got to do except for *Superstar*. Getting to write Spike and Harmony and then the Buffy-Spike fight was a joy to write." (Kaveney interview 111)

Also, in reference to *A New Man* (4012), Espenson says:

"And yes, I have always felt that there was something between [Giles and Ethan] when they were younger. It is one of those places where slash and canon merge - much like Jonathan and Xander in *Superstar*. I am not trying to hide anything. Run with it, kids." (Kavney interview 112)

These are unusual statements for a writer to make. As Judith L. Tabron says, "Slash fandom is subversive and media creators tend to hate it, if they are even aware of it." But Espenson is aware and openly encouraging of fanfiction. {1} Her affection shows that she has a degree of confidence in her work and a lack of possessiveness about it that is very rare. She seems to view *Buffy* as a text open for collaboration. Indeed, she herself is a collaborator, as she is but one of a team of writers. Her position within the creative team emphasizes one of Espenson's strengths: flexibility. She's comfortable in writing well about a number of different themes as the episodes demand. In her commentary on *Superstar* (4017), she says that, "This is all Joss, of course, the whole shape of the episode and the themes." That's surely true of many, if not most, episodes of *Buffy*, and it's to Espenson's credit that she can shape her writing to fit his ideas. (*Superstar* has often been heralded as "an episode for the fans," and I discuss this in more depth below.) Espenson is unwilling to deny fans the pleasure of being part of the creative process, even if it's not in an officially sanctioned capacity. She recognizes that fans who engage with the show in such a way become more deeply entrenched in it. In addition to developing an emotional

attachment to the series, it becomes an important part of their creative lives. Espenson acknowledges that collaboration on *Buffy* and *Angel* extends beyond the official authors of the series. She appreciates that both the writers and the fans play in the language of the Buffyverse in a way that enriches the lives of those who create and view the series.

[5] One of Espenson's best devices, and one she uses frequently before season six, when she begins to write more plot-advancing episodes, is the creation of a doppelganger of a given character. Her strength as a writer is her able characterization: as she herself says, "Getting voices is something I get easily without effort...what I am good at is the funny and the voices" (Kaveney interview 101). Both of these strengths are showcased in her doppelganger episodes, which she writes for the adults of Sunnydale, Jonathan, Giles, Xander, and Buffy, in five separate episodes. I would like to take a look at each of those individually.

[6] The first episode on which Espenson is given a writing credit is *Band Candy* (3006). "I had this notion that we think our parents would be better if not so responsible, but actually it is scary and dangerous" (Kaveney interview 109). Indeed, without the grownups running things, Sunnydale is chaotic. But what's most interesting to the viewers in this episode is the fact that we get the opportunity to see the adults as their teenaged selves, most notably Giles. Since *The Dark Age* (2008) we've known about Giles' colorful, demon-worshipping, bacchanal-holding past, but this is the first time we get to really witness it; and without flashbacks. We also see Joyce as a teenager. Unsurprisingly, she's rather an airhead and works very hard to be cool and rebellious. Even Principal Snyder reverts, trying to tag along with the Scoobies but copping out when the going gets rough. This new information adds dimension to the characters, especially Giles. Also, as Espenson points out in her commentary of *Earshot* (3018), Buffy learns about her relationship to the adults in her life through their transformation as well:

"*Band Candy* was the same ['be careful what you wish for'] structure...In *Band Candy* it had to do with, she's getting a lot of supervision from Giles and Joyce; 'I wish I didn't have these adults in my life, running everything,' then they're not adults anymore and she realizes she needs them, and she needs them as grownups."

[7] Espenson's next doppelganger episode is *A New Man* (4012), and also concentrates on Giles, this time much more strongly. As some theorists have pointed out, Buffy and her friends are "outsiders" in their school, but the real outsiders on the show are the demons. (See "The Undemonization of Supporting Characters in Buffy" by Mary Alice Money for more on this.) Giles discovers this firsthand when he is turned into a demon by Ethan Rayne, his feelings of being left out of the group made literal by his transformation. Looking like a monster, physically unable to communicate with the others (he can speak only Fyarl, a demon language) Giles is forced to rely on Spike's paid assistance. Because he is hurt by Buffy's perceived emotional distance, his pride won't allow him to go to her for help. However, she proves her love for him in her anger against Ethan and the demon she believes hurt or killed Giles (though in fact, is him) and ultimately recognizes him in his demon body, by looking into his eyes and seeing how annoyed he is with her. *A New Man* reaffirms the strength of Buffy and Giles' relationship, while acknowledging that there are problems to be dealt with.

[8] *Superstar* creates an alternate reality in the Buffyverse, one in which Jonathan, who was even less popular in high school than Buffy, Willow, and Xander, becomes, through magic, the coolest person in the world. What's particularly striking here is that Jonathan takes over not only the narrative, but the show itself--he's featured in the credits multiple times, and the last shot, always reserved for Buffy, now shows Jonathan. Even the score seems to think he's "it," giving him Bond-like background music whenever he does something cool (which, let's face it, is all the time). Justine Larbalestier suggests that this episode mocks fans, particularly those that write "Mary Sue" fanfiction (self-insertion fanfiction in which the thinly veiled author is the best at everything and beloved by everyone).

"One of the discomforts of *Superstar* is seeing the Scooby Gang bowing to someone not nearly as cool, capable, or worthy as they are...Does it imply that all fans are wanna-be's?" (234)

This criticism becomes especially poignant when one considers that in the sixth season, Jonathan becomes a part of the Trio, three nerds who attempt to cast themselves as Buffy's nemeses, but are mocked through the writing and by the Scoobies as they do so. This can be read as a mockery of intense fans of *Buffy* the show, as well. However, I think it's important to note that Jane Espenson was a big fan of the Trio (in fact, in the commentary on *Conversations With Dead People* (7007) she declares "I'm Jonathan and Andrew"), and it's clear that she respects and encourages intense fan involvement with *Buffy*. She's even quoted by Blasingame as saying, "With so many of us laboring over so many years and with so many fans writing about the show, and indulging in creative fanfic, together we have extended the language of the Buffyverse." Espenson is clearly a bit of a fangirl herself, and I find it hard to believe she would ridicule fans in a truly mean-spirited fashion. While there may be some self-aware poking fun, there's no derision.

[9] And while *Superstar* can certainly be read as Larbalestier describes it, and contains many elements that make fun of the Mary Sue phenomenon, I believe that its intent is to reward rather than mock fans. Xander makes reference to the fact that Jonathan "crushed the bones of the Master, [and] he blew up a big snake made out of mayor,"--both things longtime fans of the show know to have been things Buffy did. And in another scene, Willow mentions how Buffy "gave [Jonathan] the Class Protector Award at prom"--very much a reversal from the memories of the fans, who know that it was actually Jonathan who gave it to Buffy. Longtime *Buffy* fans like *Superstar* because it gives them a humorous look at what-could-be and it rewards their investment in the show. As Larbalestier points out, "I have successfully introduced some friends to [*Buffy*]. What they all say is that the more they see of the show, the more pleasure they find in it" (228).

[10] In *The Replacement* (5003), Xander is split by a demon spell into his stronger and weaker halves, his best and worst qualities. However, throughout most of the episode we follow the weaker Xander, believing that he is the real Xander while the other is an imposter. When the reality of the situation comes forward, it's a shock to both the Scoobies and the audience, and this forces us to challenge our assumptions about his character. Since he graduated high school, Xander has been a bit of a loser--living in his parent's basement and working a variety of minimum-wage jobs. However, in *The Replacement*, he turns that all around--he is kept on at the

construction company with which he's been working, and gets a beautiful apartment. But since the audience (and the weaker Xander) see the strong Xander doing this, it's hard to believe it's him--though in retrospect it seems obvious. His boss tells him "your work here has been first-rate" for the *three months* he's been there, not the few minutes since his strong double appeared. The audience and Xander's friends as well as Xander himself realize that he's capable of quite a lot:

Weaker Xander: "How'd you do it? How'd you get the promotion?" Stronger Xander: "Well, I'm good at that stuff."
Weaker Xander: "I am?"
Stronger Xander: "Yeah." (Espenson)

[11] *Intervention* (5018) features the appearance of the Buffybot, acquired by Spike to be his love slave. While the Buffybot is not connected to the real Buffy, by magic or anything else, she provides some interesting parallels to the actual Slayer. For example, while Buffy was never as perky as the 'bot, she used to be a lot happier in earlier seasons than she seems to be in season five, and the Buffybot harkens back to those days. Also, the robot's sexual relationship with Spike foreshadows the real Buffy's, which will occur in the next season. Though Buffy is never a literal slave to him, she eventually feels trapped by her lust--in season seven's *Conversations With Dead People* (7007), in fact, Buffy admits that she "let Spike completely take [her] over" (Goddard and Espenson). The Buffybot looks so much like Buffy that she is used as a stand-in for her on many occasions--once when she fights Glory at the end of season five, and continuously throughout the months after Buffy's death so that no one knows the Slayer is dead (though one would think the gravestone with her name on it would clue someone in, particularly the vampires that frequent Sunnydale's cemeteries). Dawn even seems to view her as a surrogate for the real Buffy: before her resurrection, Dawn cuddles at night with the recharging 'bot and is the only one who seems sincerely sad when it "dies," ripped to pieces by a demon motorcycle gang. Also, the last shot of all of season six, classically Buffy's hero-shot, is taken by the Buffybot (though, to be fair, it's from a scene in which the 'bot acts a lot more like the real Buffy than its perky self).

[12] Arthur Koestler identifies another type of humor that Espenson makes extensive use of in these episodes featuring the various character's shadow selves: bisociation, or having two frames of reference. "It is the sudden clash between these two mutually exclusive codes or rules...which produces the comic effect" (Koestler 330-2). Think of Joyce handing Buffy the keys to her car without a encouragement or even prompting; Giles the Fyarl Demon saying "Bloody humans!" as he rampages helplessly through Sunnydale; Jonathan's disturbingly confident "Sounds like you need my help" upon his first reveal, or the Buffybot's unendingly perky litany.^{2} These clashes are hysterically funny for those of us who know what things are really like.^{3} And having two contrasting frames of reference doesn't only provide for hilarious hijinks--it's challenging for the viewer, forcing one to juggle two points of view in order to understand and fully appreciate the story.

[13] Jane Espenson is a fan of vulnerable characters. Frequently, her episodes reveal that she's rooting for the underdog. As I said, she's stated that her favorite characters are Spike and Jonathan. Jonathan is an obvious case, and while Spike may not seem to be an underdog at first glance, keep in mind that Espenson didn't start writing for him until the fourth season, just before

he got his chip. In *The Harsh Light of Day* (4003), while Spike isn't yet chipped, she shows the heartbreak of Buffy, Anya, and Harmony, all grossly mistreated by the men they care about. We see Spike at his most vulnerable yet in *Pangs* (4008): hungry, miserable, and neutered, Spike watches a vampire "family" prepare to share a meal and then shows up at Giles' apartment in the daytime, begging Buffy and the other Scoobies for help as his skin smokes from the sunlight. This sympathetic portrayal, as well as Spike's subsequent humor, begins to endear him to the audience, though not necessarily to the Scoobies, yet. However, fans must accept that Spike will now be a regular, and though he is not yet repentant, we begin to see his layers, and his smartass remarks are the start of this. D.W. Winnicott observes that laughter is central to our humanity (Horton 5); so when Spike declares, "I'm saying that Spike has a little trip to the vet and now he doesn't chase the other puppies anymore," and we laugh, we begin to accept him as a person, as someone who makes us laugh, and as perhaps even someone with whom we might identify, someday.

[14] In a different spin on Espenson's doppelganger approach--appropriate, since it occurred on a different show--as well as an episode championing the underdog is *Guise Will Be Guise* (A2006). Wesley is forced to take on the role of Angel and, despite the awkwardness of trying to pretend he's a vampire, he gains a lot of confidence from his stint as leader (helped, surely, in no small part by the fact that he also has sex with the beautiful and intelligent Virginia Bryce). While at first glance this episode could be construed as similar to *Superstar*, with a wanna-be taking control of things, there is an important difference. Even after Angel returns to resume his role, Wesley retains command of the Angel Investigations team, making plans that Angel changes only slightly and somewhat uncertainly. In another similarity to *Superstar*, even the formal traits of *Angel* seem to view Wesley as the leader--he strides in to save Virginia and says, "Release her or die," and Angel's protesting "Don't I say that?" occurs off-camera. (Also, Wesley's role as "boss" foreshadows the fact that he will take on this role for real later in the season.) Wesley's strength is revealed here, even though he is a human, very weak compared to a vampire. Espenson also makes good use of slapstick in this episode, particularly at the beginning of the episode. This is fitting because Wesley, classically a slapsticky character, begins to get in touch with his darker side later in the season. Espenson underscores Wesley's clownishness in the opening scene, in which he drops things, bangs his head, and falls down (as he says, upon Cordelia's inquiry as to what he's doing: "Knocking things over, driving away business--you know, the usual"). When he first assumes the role of Angel, Espenson highlights the difficulty he experiences by having him almost slip and fall--but she also shows that he is beginning to grow into his powers as he catches himself. And though there are other awkward and silly moments as Wesley is forced to hide the fact that he's not a vampire, by the end of the episode, he's coolly in command and has no trouble orchestrating Virginia's rescue.

[15] Impressively, Espenson also manages to make Cordelia vulnerable--no mean feat--in her other *Angel* episode, *Rm w/A Vu* (A1005). Here we see Espenson's theme of revealing the strength in characters through underscoring their weakness. In the episode, Cordelia is almost driven to suicide by one of the ghosts that haunt her apartment. "You're worthless," it tells her. "You've never been kind. You've never been smart. You're a user." But when it calls her a bitch, Cordelia remembers. "I'm the nastiest girl in Sunnydale history. I take crap from no one" (Espenson). As Espenson says in her commentary on this episode,

"She's found her inner bitch, as we described it when we were breaking the episode. It's a wonderful moment for her. She's a very strong character, and you forget that sometimes...we really broke her down in this episode, we had her giving up, and it's always a wonderful triumph when after a moment like that someone gets to come back."

This is an interesting episode for Espenson to have written, since she normally eschews the kind of nasty, sarcastic humor used by Cordelia. It's made clear in *Rm w/ A Vu* that though she values it, at least in Cordelia, she doesn't generally write it as an end unto itself, but rather as a means to a different end.

[16] *Earshot* (3018) is the ultimate underdog episode. Though there was noise about it being delayed after the Columbine massacre--and rightly so, though it's important to note that no school shooting did or was ever going to take place--it deals sensitively and perceptively with the loneliness and isolation often felt in high school, and with the possible motivation of the Columbine shooters. While it was Joss Whedon who wrote the moving clock tower scene, Espenson shows her strength as a collaborator by setting up the themes of the episode. (Espenson, indeed, is a very strong collaborator--she shares the writing credit in eight of her twenty-five Buffyverse episodes, and probably collaborated on more than those. Collaboration is also something that is valued within the series itself--over and over it's emphasized that Buffy needs her friends.)

"Here's sort of the darker side of high school, where [Buffy's] hearing all the loneliness and depression and isolation and self-hatred and all those things people think about in high school." (Espenson on one scene in her commentary)

And she sets up Jonathan's state of mind perfectly in only a couple lines of his thoughts: "She doesn't even know I exist," he thinks of Buffy; and then, "She touched me!" when Buffy grabs him, trying to determine the source of the threat she overheard.

[17] Jane Espenson says in an interview that in the four-arc *Conversations With Dead People* (7007), she wrote the Dawn storyline.

"Goddard wrote Jonathan/Andrew...I'm not sure why I was assigned Dawn...I would've expected Drew and I to be assigned the other way round." (Kaveney interview 115)

It is a surprising choice, considering Espenson's love of the Trio, but it's not so surprising when one considers how well she writes for Dawn. As a viewer who has always pretty much despised Dawn (and I know I'm not alone in this opinion), I always find Espenson's treatment of her impressive. In many of her episodes, I find Dawn at least tolerable, and sometimes even likeable. The first instance that stands out occurs in *Triangle* (5011), when she discusses Riley's leaving with Buffy:

Dawn: "I was just starting to kinda like the guy, and then...gone. So fast."
Buffy: "It wasn't really so fast. Him leaving. According to everyone who isn't me, it was kind of gradual."

Dawn: "Oh. Does that make it any better?"

Buffy: "No."

Dawn: "Because you should have noticed earlier?"

Buffy: "Stop being insightful. It's creepy." (Espenson)

And it *is* creepy, because, like Buffy, the audience is used to Dawn as the annoying younger sister. She is treated, and often acts, far below her age of fourteen (just a year younger than Buffy was when she became the Slayer, and by season six she is the same age, but this is never acknowledged by the writers or by the characters). In season seven's *Same Time, Same Place* (7003), Dawn appears to actually be a sixteen year old girl on her way to adulthood as she helps Buffy and Xander research a skin-eating demon. And when they can't find Willow, Dawn, in another moment of surprising insight, says, "So Giles is blaming Giles, and we're blaming us. Is anyone going to blame Willow?...I mean, will anyone around here start asking for help when they need it?" (Espenson). And finally, in *Conversations With Dead People*, Dawn shows reserves of strength never dreamed of. Not so much when she plays with Buffy's weapons or spills on her clothes--there she's pretty much your typical idiot little sister/teenager--or even when she starts smashing electronics with an axe. I'm referring to when, despite her obvious terror, she does her best to fight the demon she believes is hurting her mother. She's even given an opportunity to leave the house, but says, "No! She's my mother. I'm staying" (Espenson). In the next scene she attempts to cast a spell to banish the demon, continuing even as she is slammed backwards against a wall, her face slashed, and the living room windows explode inwards, showering her and everything in the room with glass.

[18] Espenson's use of doppelgangers and intertextual references challenge the audience to balance two frames of reference, repeatedly requiring them to be active viewers. She uses humor to encourage viewers to accept outsiders like Spike, Jonathan and Dawn. Espenson also uses comic failure--with Jonathan in *Superstar*, with Spike in *Pangs*, with Wesley in *Guise Will Be Guise*, and with Cordelia in *Rm w/ a Vu*--to model for viewers how risky and how vital vulnerability is for genuine growth and eventual strength. She also acknowledges the importance of collaboration, by both the show's writers and its fans. Just as Buffy needs her friends in the series to survive and thrive, Joss Whedon needed friends like Espenson to create it.

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Footnotes

{1} *Intervention* (5018) is also a "fan-ficcy" episode, featuring some parody of both the so-called "Spuffy" relationship (Buffybot: "I wanna hurt you, but I can't resist the sinister attraction of your cold and muscular body") and even a bit of implied slash when Buffy's friends believe it's her sleeping with Spike:

Buffy: "I am not having sex with Spike!"[...]

Xander: "No one is judging you. It's understandable. Spike is strong and mysterious and sort of compact but well-muscled."

Buffy: "I am not having sex with Spike! But I'm starting to think that you might be!" (Espenson)

{2} The first episode featuring one of Warren's robots, *I Was Made To Love You* (5015), also written by Jane Espenson, has instances that are emblematic of Kant's notion of absurdity: laughter as "an affection arising from the sudden transformation of strained expectation into nothing" (King 14). It happens twice upon the revelation of April's robotic nature: the first is

lesser (though still amusing) with the Scoobies immediately agreeing she's a robot. This is funny mostly because there is a complete lack of the hours of speculating and research that are usually an integral part of the show. The second example, however--Warren's attempted shocking disclosure--is far funnier:

Warren: "There's something you need to know about [April]." (*Ominous music begins.*)

Buffy: "I know."

Warren: "No, wait, this is important."

Buffy: "Believe me, I, I worked it out."

Warren: "No, this is something that you can't possibly know." (*A dramatic zoom in on Warren; a swelling of score.*) "She's a robot."

Buffy: (*entirely unsurprised*) "Uh-huh." (Espenson)

{3}As an interesting and perhaps somewhat contradictory (though certainly testament to Espenson's writing skills) side note, *Superstar* was one of the first episodes of *Buffy* I ever saw, and though I knew nothing about Jonathan, I could tell something was wrong, and found the episode extremely enjoyable--though not, admittedly, so much as later, when I was more familiar with the series.

Appendix - Episodes by Jane Espenson

Buffy the Vampire Slayer:

Season 3:

Band Candy

Gingerbread (with Thania St. John)

Earshot

Season 4:

The Harsh Light of Day

Pangs

Doomed (with Marti Noxen and David Fury)

A New Man

Superstar

Season 5:

The Replacement

Triangle

Checkpoint (with Doug Petrie)

I Was Made To Love You

Intervention

Season 6:

Afterlife

Flooded (with Doug Petrie)

Life Serial (with David Fury)

Doublemeat Palace

Season 7:

Same Time, Same Place

Conversations With Dead People (with Drew Goddard)

Sleeper (with David Fury)

First Date

Storyteller

End of Days (with Doug Petrie)

Angel:

Season 1:

Rm w/ A Vu

Season 2:

Guise Will Be Guise

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