

Coyote: The Avatar of Irony in Christopher Moore's Coyote Blue

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In his self-promotional website, Christopher Moore says of the Native American trickster Coyote, "The idea of a god that specifically exists as an avatar of irony intrigued me." Moore further writes that when he began research for his humorous fantasy-novel *Coyote Blue*, "I set out to find an Indian tribe that was still vital enough to provide the background for my book." The tribe Moore found "vital enough" to serve his purposes lived on a Crow reserve in Montana. There, he had a conversation with an "old Crow guy" who happened to be a shaman. Moore gave the shaman a package of cigarettes, and upon receiving the sacred gift of tobacco, the shaman performed a "sweat" for Moore. During the sweat, the shaman told Moore a story about a sacred arrow bundle that could "bring the dead back to life." Thus, Moore claims that he found his "holy grail," or the key to the plot of *Coyote Blue* ("Christopher").

While the arrow bundle does not actually play as central a role in *Coyote Blue* as Moore implies, the idea of rebirth that is associated with the arrow bundle allows Moore to entwine pieces of Native American folklore into a very familiar plot: the heroic journey formula famously described in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. That is, Moore's novel is separated into three main sections titled, "Epiphany," "The Call to Action," and "Home," and events echo Campbell's description of the heroic journey: the "separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (35). The main character of *Coyote Blue*, Samson Hunts Alone, a.k.a. Samuel Hunter, is a Crow Indian forced by circumstances to leave the reserve and live in urban society as a white man. In his white persona, Sam leads a disconnected and false existence even though he is monetarily well-off. The trickster Coyote serves not only to disrupt Sam's unfulfilling existence but also as Sam's guide in various adventures that culminate in a descent into the underworld via the magic power of the arrow bundle. Ultimately, Sam's trials allow him to return home to the reserve with a mature sense of self that enables him to acknowledge his trickster human nature and to live a fulfilling life with his tribe. The unrepressed presence of the trickster, as well as Moore's well-developed sense of humor, infuses the narrative with an exuberance that makes the novel a trickster text that is quite as funny as any of the original Coyote tales yet serves as well to highlight serious issues of American social identity.

What may galling critics concerned with issues of 'political correctness' the most is that Moore, a "white man," traveled to the remnants of a marginalized indigenous society to find a story that he could use for personal commercial gain. The implication is that Native American reserves continue to exist merely as a convenient resource for the offspring of the original European invaders. Yet, the resulting trickster narrative cannot be treated so simplistically. And compared to Moore's other fantasy/humor novels—such as *Practical Demonkeeping*, *Bloodsucking Fiends: A Love Story*, *Island of the Sequined Love Nun*, and *The Lust Lizard of Melancholy Cove*—*Coyote Blue* not only stands out but also taps into an unfolding mythology that reveals a great deal about the ever-evolving culture in North America.

It should first be mentioned that, with *Coyote Blue*, it is doubtful Moore strove to write anything more than a novel meant for popular consumption. On his website, Moore himself categorizes his novels as "goofy." And Moore presents the trickster narrative with a slap-stick, obstreperous humor that dwells on Coyote's sexual antics more for their entertainment value than for any profound literary reason. In Native American folklore, Coyote's sexual athleticism is legendary, and Moore portrays Coyote's eclectic sexual habits to good comic effect. For example, Coyote forms sexual liaisons not only with Sam's leather couch but also with Sam's neighbor's Persian cat—right before he eats the poor cat as a snack. Yet, Moore's only real departure from popular conceptions regarding a genre novel is that he includes several Coyote stories, which are modeled on Native American trickster tales, as separate chapters.

Moore is nothing if not entertaining. However, he also tends to perpetuate a strong American tendency to sentimentalize Native American cultures. In the novel, the narrator comments, "There is a saying that goes back to the buffalo days: there are no orphans among the Crow. Even today, if someone stays for a time on the reserve, he will be adopted by a Crow family, regardless of his race" (301). Clearly, the line embodies a fantasy for certain individuals who would like to be welcomed into a culture that they perceive to be exotic and exclusive. The line further allows a character called Calliope to become Sam's "white wife" without excluding her white son from the tribe. But it is fantastic optimism indeed when Uncle Pokey welcomes Calliope by saying, "There ain't enough blond Indians, if you ask me" (301).

While it is doubtful that the Crow are any more, or less, altruistic than people of other cultures, Moore's attitude certainly underscores the ambiguous value of the contemporary fascination with Native American cultures. As Louis Owens points out in *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* "the Indian in today's world consciousness is a product of literature, history, and art, and a product that, as an invention, often bears little resemblance to actual, living Native Americans" (4). It must be kept in mind that, despite the fact Moore visited a reserve and talked with a Crow shaman, his novel is a fantasy in every sense of the word. The real value in the novel lies not in any profound insights into Native American culture but in what the novel reveals about Moore's culture, which is contemporary American society. *Coyote Blue* depicts current cultural assumptions regarding what being a Native American means and reveals what impels American authors in particular to incorporate what they know or think they understand about Native American societies into contemporary narrative.

For one thing, in “The Incredible Survival of Coyote,” the poet and essayist Gary Snyder argues that developing “a sense of place” is a crucial aspect in “the old American quest” to build a sense of “identity” (78-79). Snyder further asserts that

when we look at a little bit of American Indian folklore, myth, read a tale, we’re catching just the tip of an iceberg of forty or fifty thousand years of human experience, on this continent, in this place. It takes a great effort of imagination to enter into that, to draw from it, but there is something powerfully there. (80)

Clearly, Moore’s portrayal of a main character who is Native American is an attempt to connect with a culture that has existed in North America for thousands of years. Perhaps despite himself, Moore has written a quintessential trickster tale. The story does not take itself seriously and usually presents itself as ribald entertainment. At the same time, the story addresses serious social issues, a dichotomy characteristic of trickster narratives both ancient and modern. In Moore’s case, *Coyote Blue* addresses issues of racism—albeit in a somewhat naive fashion—that seem to have become entangled with the ongoing American quest for a sense of place and identity.

Therefore, the idea that “There are No Orphans Among the Crow,” which Moore considers important enough to make a chapter title, may be an insensitive observation considering that white North American settlers made so many Crow children orphans; however, the reason the idea is so attractive also seems apparent. The current mythology regarding Native Americans is that they are somehow more connected to, more rooted in the continent than are any other people born in North America. Thus, poets and writers keep looking to the Native American people for guidance. To put it crudely, some Americans want to be adopted so that they can feel legitimately at home in the place that they now live. And, according to Snyder, looking to Native American mythology and Native American culture makes a certain sort of sense. Again, Snyder has said that Native Americans have “forty or fifty thousand years of human experience, on this continent” (80). Whom better to look to for instruction?

Intriguingly, Louis Owens writes of American Indian literature (and by this, he means literature written by authors who identify themselves as American Indian) that “the problem of identity comprehends centuries of colonial and postcolonial displacement, often brutally enforced peripherality, cultural denigration—including especially a harsh privileging of English over tribal language” (4). Then, echoing Snyder, Owens says that “recovering or rearticulation of an identity, a process dependent upon a rediscovered sense of place as well as community, becomes in the face of such obstacles a truly enormous undertaking.” Owens claims that this search for a sense of identity, a search eerily similar to that described by Snyder for all inhabitants of the North American continent, is “the center of American Indian fiction” (5).

In short, Moore, who is not Native American, has written a novel that illustrates the very quest that Owens describes as occupying the energies and imaginations of real Native American writers. Further, while Moore exploits rather clichéd themes to drive his narrative, his work also embodies the search for connection that occupies a great

many contemporary writers, regardless of their ethnicity. And Moore illustrates as well an envy that pervades American society for those who are perceived as being of or belonging to a certain geographic area. Owens argues that "at the heart of America's history of Indian hating is an unmistakable yearning to be Indian—romantically and from a distance made hazy through fear and guilt" (4). Thus, the issue of cultural identity and the search for a sense of place becomes very tricky indeed—especially since whites in particular may feel that Native Americans have a right to the North American continent that supersedes their own, very problematic, rights. Therefore, the need to feel at home in the place they live may be a need that sensitive whites feel quite guilty expressing or even acknowledging; after all, historically, whites have been the oppressors, have comprised the dominant culture in North America, and, realistically speaking, have little about which they can ethically complain. Overall, the fact that Moore uses a trickster character to drive what is an astoundingly politically controversial narrative is very fitting. Coyote is, as Moore asserts, the avatar of irony, and his shape-shifting nature represents continual shifts in identity that vex contemporary people of every race, color, and gender in American society.

Thus, *Coyote Blue*'s overriding tricksterish characteristic is the fact that even though Moore seems to perpetuate stereotypes about Native American lives, he captures as well the essence of an ongoing struggle in American culture—the struggle for feelings of connectedness and belonging in what is so often described as an alienated society. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Moore's trickster narrative is that the comic elements of the novel, which are in no way degrading to Native Americans but which seem quite faithful to the spirit of Native American trickster tales, undoubtedly make the novel seem less threatening to those who might otherwise find an "Indian" novel written by a "white guy" terribly offensive. In other words, because *Coyote Blue* is amusing in a way that does not denigrate the ethnic backgrounds of any of the characters (except perhaps the evil white bikers), readers are less likely to become uneasy regarding the fact that a white has written a novel whose main character is Crow. In this way, Moore's trickster tale reflects the manner in which tricksters throughout world literatures introduce the element of humor necessary to deflect outrage from otherwise socially unacceptable ideas.

What may seem less than surprising, then, is that the main theme of *Coyote Blue* perpetuates images of Native Americans that writers such as Thomas King, who is part Cherokee, seem to find both somewhat true and extremely troubling. In his own trickster novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, King describes one of the more usual themes of movies and stories that involve Native Americans: "It was a common enough theme in novels and movies. Indian leaves the traditional world of the reserve, goes to the city, and is destroyed." In the passage that includes the description of the stereotypical theme, a theme with which King himself struggles, King repeats the line, "The Indian who couldn't go home," both before and after the theme description (317). The line draws attention to itself not only due to its repetition but also because it represents stark sentiment in a book that rejoices in satire.

Yet, in King's novel, a character named Lionel does manage to go home even though home is a place that Lionel must rebuild—both literally and figuratively. On the Blackfoot reserve, Lionel's Uncle Eli has a cabin that is demolished when a dam built by whites collapses, a catastrophe that is attributed to the trickster Coyote, whose

singing and dancing often leads to disaster. In the final chapters, Lionel and his family begin to rebuild the cabin and, thus, figuratively recreate their home. Since Lionel and his family gather the scattered logs of the original cabin to use in the new construction the scene leaves readers both with a sense of loss at the destruction of the old as well as with a sense of replenishment at the creation of something new. And since Lionel's new home is built from the scattered materials of the family's old home, King shows that while the past cannot be recaptured, it can serve as the foundation of a present-day sense of identity and pride.

Notably, Moore's trickster novel echoes a theme reflective not only of Campbell's heroic cycle but also of that which King predicts for all "Indian novels." The themes are quite similar, involving a disruption in identity that follows a loss of place. In *Coyote Blue*, Sam flees the reserve because he believes that he has killed "Enos Windtree, a fat meanspirited half-breed BIA cop"—although, later in the novel, readers find out that Windtree has survived the altercation (101). As Sam travels farther and farther from the world of the reserve, he becomes more and more like a white man. In fact, it only takes six weeks before Sam becomes "white for the first time. He expected, from listening to Pokey [Sam's uncle] all those years, that upon turning white he would immediately have the urge to go out and find some Indians and take their land, but the urge didn't come" (114). And so, the stereotypical theme King outlines in his novel is played out in Moore's fantasy, and the humor helps to deflect outrage at the fact that a white author has appropriated the persona of a Native American. When Sam renames himself Samuel Hunter, the Crow character Samson Hunts Alone ceases to exist. However, Sam's comic mystification that his new whiteness does not manifest in the urge to steal Native American land is an acknowledgment of white ancestral culpability that readers can accept either as a reprimand or as a decidedly twisted joke. Moore undoubtedly means the line to be both.

Indeed, much of the humor of the novel is quite self-deprecating—in a twisted sort of way. Readers must first remember that Sam spends most of the novel in the white world as a white man—the role with which Moore is the most intimately familiar. In other words, the scenes where Moore can employ his own experiences are much more confidently drawn than the ones where Moore must imagine his character on a reserve. And although Sam certainly is the hero of the journey, he does not exactly possess the personality of Odysseus. Even while Sam supposedly is a steely-eyed life insurance salesman, the sections told from Sam's point of view reveal him to be a kind-hearted bumbler. For example, in one comical scene, Sam feels that he must save his secretary Gabriella Snow, from being sexually molested by Coyote—even though, from the "monkey noises" she is making, his secretary seems to have no real objections to the experience (87). Nonetheless, Sam grabs Coyote around the neck, pulls him away from Gabriella, and drags the excited trickster into another office—only to realize that "unless things turned quickly to his [Sam's] advantage he was in serious danger of being humped" (88). Sam panics at the very idea, knocks the trickster unconscious, and immediately is terrified that he has killed the man. Samuel Hunter is something less than grace personified. In fact, the depiction of Sam in his white persona, along with the many quips and denigrating remarks made regarding the white world, makes one begin to wonder whether it is the character or the author who is having an identity crisis. Not surprisingly, once Sam reestablishes his mature Crow identity, any hint of his bumbling nature disappears.

Coyote Blue is a trickster novel, meaning that elements associated with the trickster disrupt and redefine simple analyses. Therefore, to say that Sam's "destruction" merely perpetuates the stereotype described by King would be to miss the fact that Sam's transformation underscores the novel's trickster theme—the search for a real sense of identity—as well as the novel's underlying social messages. A fundamental characteristic of most tricksters is the ability to shift shape, and Moore's novel opens with Sam already in his white role, which is the "right persona" to deal with his situation (15). The narrator remarks that "the apparent ease with which Sam mastered his environment was the single disturbing quality people noticed in him. How was it that a guy could play so many roles so well, and never seem uncomfortable or out of place?" (16). Moore thus associates Sam with the trickster. Like the trickster, Sam retains the ability to shift shape in a way that is recognized by other people. He presents himself as white, and people believe that he is white. By associating his protagonist with the trickster, Moore reflects the tendency of most contemporary authors to make clear that the trickster represents an aspect of human nature. More importantly, however, the trickster theme highlights the idea that self-perception is fluid and recursive. Other people see Sam as "white," so Sam presents himself as "white," and vice versa. Sam begins to live the life of a "white" man not because he becomes white in any magical way but because he chooses to reinforce society's impression that he is white.

That Sam's mutable personality is not a feature unique to Sam but instead is a characteristic intrinsic to humans in general is suggested by the fact that Sam is not the only human in *Coyote Blue* with traits associated with the trickster. All the characters in the novel shift personalities to deal with their individual situations, a reality Moore underscores by revealing that none of the main characters uses his or her "real" name. Sam's business partner in the white world is an insurance salesman named Aaron Aaron. Sam notes, "Aaron Aaron wasn't Aaron's real name: he had changed it so his insurance firm would be the first listed in the yellow pages" (33). Furthermore, Sam's love interest in the novel is Calliope Kincaid, who announces, "My name wasn't always Calliope." An old boyfriend started calling her after the "Greek muse of epic poetry" because she "inspired men to art and madness," and since Calliope apparently liked the idea of inspiring men to art and madness, she kept the name (64). A third character who does not go by his real name is an African-American who works as a security guard in Las Vegas—otherwise known as Trickster Town. Although the man introduces himself as M. F., the narrator explains that the poor man's given name is Minty Fresh. While it is apparent why Minty might not want his given name known, it only takes a few encounters with the life-altering Coyote before M. F. is proud to announce, "The name is Minty Fresh" (257).

The name changes, as well as the fact that Minty, Sam, and Coyote all share the same gold eye color, suggest that the trickster in *Coyote Blue* is more an expression of inner chaos and the inherent possibilities for change within humans than he is a manifestation of a minor god responsible for the ultimate outcome of the novel. As Gary Snyder says, "Coyote [. . .] refers to something in ourselves, which is creative, unpredictable, contradictory: trickster human nature" (74-75). A minor character in *Coyote Blue*, Frank Cochran, echoes Snyder's thinking: "The human factor was his name for the variable of unpredictability that was added to the equation of life by human beings" (164). The trickster represents the paradoxical characteristics of human

nature and may even represent the aspects humans like best—the part able to laugh and be irreverent, the part that enjoys trouble. The beauty of the trickster is that the figure defies static definitions, shifting to encompass people of many cultures yet, at the same time, almost inexplicably representing a commonality that suggests that “native” and “non-Native” peoples may be searching for the very same thing.

In fact, the tricksterish name changes in Moore’s novel suggest transformations both personal and social. Calliope mentions that “Indians used to change their names as they grew up and their personalities changed or when they did certain things, like Walks Across the Desert and stuff like that” (64). Regardless of race or gender, as the characters mature, or as they “grow up,” the characters relabel themselves. Notably, Calliope already has chosen her name when she meets Samuel Hunter, a detail that implies she has established a secure sense of identity already. Her honesty about herself, in fact, makes Sam uncomfortable. To initiate their first sexual encounter, which occurs during their first date, the straightforward Calliope steps out of her dress gets under a blanket, and says to Sam, “Okay.” Sam, who is still dressed and sitting in a chair, is “stunned” and wonders, “Where was the hunt, the cat and mouse game?” He decides, “*This is entirely too honest*” (132, author emphasis).

Although Moore represents Calliope as searching for stability and love, her role is subordinate to Sam’s quest to establish a sense of identity. And, from the reader’s point of view, Calliope and Coyote appear simultaneously in Sam’s life, indicating how closely the two characters’ roles are related. Sam catches sight of Calliope and is “poleaxed by desire.” At that moment, Coyote appears as a “young Indian man dressed in black buckskins fringed with red feathers,” who asks Sam, “You want her?” (16). Sam does want Calliope, and it is this desire, which is later expressed as love, that leads Sam back to the reserve, down into the underworld, and finally, into an acknowledgment of his “real” identity, his sense of himself as a mature, honest, and worthwhile person.

Both Calliope and Coyote play necessary roles in Sam’s journey into a mature sense of identity and place. But Coyote facilitates Sam’s journey in the way one would imagine of a trickster—by making trouble. Like many other tricksters, Moore’s Coyote represents the element of chaos that facilitates change, and, in a less than methodic fashion, Coyote destroys the “controlled status quo” of the life Sam has built in the white culture (135). Coyote interferes with Sam’s business, practically destroys Sam’s townhouse, and ensures Sam’s involvement with Calliope, who is the most disruptive element of all. Calliope keeps repeating a slightly revised version of Coyote’s question, “What do you want?” until Sam finally acknowledges that he does “want.” Admitting that all his needs have not been fulfilled is Sam’s first step toward maturity and self-fulfillment.

Sam has trouble acknowledging his need for emotional connection, and he also has trouble understanding that commercial success does not guarantee feelings of self-worth. That money does not buy happiness may be a cliché, but the point is that, in his trickster transformation into a white man, Sam begins to live the American dream, and it is generally understood in the United States. Sam, with his trickster personality, is a very successful salesperson. He owns a condo in Santa Barbara, he is a partner at Aaron’s life insurance company, and he has no trouble finding women to sleep with

because “the same protean guile that served him as a salesman served him also as a seducer” (27). His success at obtaining material rewards disguises the lack of emotional connections in his life, a common concern in many contemporary works of literature. Sam only takes a step toward maturity, honesty, and pride when he risks establishing a bond with Calliope—from whom he has concealed his true name and ethnicity—by revealing the truth about his life:

I'm a full-blooded Crow Indian. I was raised on a reservation in Montana. When I was fifteen I killed a man and I ran away and I've spent my life pretending to be someone I'm not. I've never been married and I've never been in love and that's not something I know how to pretend. I'm not even sure why I'm here, except that you woke something up in me and it seemed to make sense to run after something instead of away for a change. If that's the horrible act of wanting, then so be it. And by the way, you are sitting on the lap of an ancient Indian god. (244)

It is significant that Calliope is sitting in Coyote's lap (while the god pretends to sleep) when Sam admits the truth about himself. Although it is the trickster who interferes with Sam's life, it is “the horrible act of wanting,” or Sam's desire for Calliope and her mind-boggling honesty, that propels Sam through the story. Desire is the true trickster force that alters Sam's life for the better.

Yet, there is a larger context to Moore's trickster story. When Sam decides he must run away from the reserve, he says to his friend Billy Two Irons, “I don't know how to be white.” And Billy replies, “How hard can it be?” (111). And, of course, it is not hard being white in a society that has privileged whites for generations. In fact, Sam does not find being white difficult at all. He is successful in every plan he undertakes in the white world. Yet, “Something [is] missing” (15). He misses his connections with his family and with the people who know him by his original name. Sam's entrance into the urban world and his subsequent dissatisfaction despite monetary success thus reflect the present mythology that the commercialism of today's “white world” promotes feelings of alienation. Moore certainly exploits a stereotypical “Indian” theme in *Coyote Blue*, but he also expresses the universal wish to feel connected, to feel as an essential part of something larger than oneself.

In other words, Moore really has done nothing less than imagine the shape of a character, one who is Native American and who searches for the same sense of identity and sense of place that many Americans seek. The only problem might be that Moore imagines that going home for Sam is simpler than for other people. Yet, in the same way King implies in *Green Grass, Running Water* that a sense of place and a sense of identity is something that must be created through a willful act of the imagination, Moore also displays an awareness that Sam, too, must invent a sense of place for himself. In the final chapter, Sam does not simply go home and revert to some essential “Crownness” that makes him happy. Moore explains,

And even as he [Sam] left his old name behind with his old life, Sam maintained his shape-shifter ways, putting on each face as it was needed. Sometimes he was quick and clever, and other times he was

simple, when simple served his purpose. When he spoke for the Crow to the government, he wore traditional tribal dress and an eagle feather in his hair. But when he reported to his own people, he dug out one of his Armani suits and the Rolex. (301)

Sam is a complex character, as full of contradictions as any trickster, or any human being. He does not revert to an unrealistic primitive ideal. Rather, Sam acknowledges his own complexities, makes connections with people he loves, and uses his trickster nature to deal with life's endless array of problems. Samson Hunts Alone/Samuel Hunter is not a simple stereotype perpetuated. Sam represents trickster human nature in all its troublesome potential.

In the end, Moore's *Coyote Blue* expresses the endless versatility of trickster characters. Moore may have thought of the arrow bundle as the key to the novel, but the search for the "arrow bundle" is perfunctory, to say the least. What really drives the narrative is Sam's quest to establish an honest sense of identity and a stable sense of place. And, significantly, Sam's quest ends not in a static sense of identity but in a conscious malleability. Sam retains the trickster ability to don the masks that allow him to function in both the old and new worlds, a survival strategy that does not trouble him but, instead, is an ability in which he revels.

The key to an appreciation of Moore's novel, then, is to realize that, as Barry Lopez asserts in *Giving Birth to Thunder, Sleeping with His Daughter: Coyote Builds North America*, "Coyote is a creature of oral literature and mutable. There are no sacred texts" (xvi). Owens agrees. In his analysis of Gerald Vizenor's trickster texts, Owens notes, "In the oral tradition a people define themselves and their place within an imagined order, a definition necessarily dynamic and requiring constantly changing stories" (238). Moore has appropriated a Native American folk hero to further his own sense of story and culture, but he is not blind to the political implications of doing so. When Coyote is dying in *Coyote Blue*, Sam asks Coyote, "What can I do?" And Coyote replies, "Tell the stories" (297). The scene is silly and sentimental, yet the truth is that there is no real reason not to tell, retell, or even revise Coyote stories. In fact, there are any number of reasons that authors should perpetuate Coyote myths. The trickster provides a connection to past mythologies and past ways of dealing with both personal and social change. As trickster tales so often suggest, sometimes taboos—such as the onus to be politically correct—must be broken in order to further cultural development.

After all, Lopez has argued that perpetuating trickster tales renews "a sense of tribal identity" for both the story-teller and the audience (xvii). To tell a trickster story, then, is to realize the value of Native American cultures and to revitalize a sense of identity and place that often seems to be missing from American society. Moore's *Coyote Blue* pokes fun at the dominant culture and introduces readers to an engagingly irreverent attitude toward current social dictates. The novel further suggests that despite a bloodthirsty past, today's people retain the ability to laugh with one another even while, through aggressive acts of the imagination, they build a so-called tribe that includes the best aspects of all cultures. As Moore quips in the final lines of his novel, "Coyote medicine will do them white folks some good" (303). For that optimistic outcome, so typical of trickster texts, one can only hope.

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