

The American Dream at Home and Abroad: Notes on an International Cultural Myth

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Most of us in the academe these days, scholars and students alike, know the shortcuts to something to say on a given topic. First, to get the general lay of the land and maybe a few directly relevant sources, we enter a term for a Google search and see what turns up. Then, perhaps to identify a book or two that can bring us straight to the heart of the question, we check out Amazon.com. In the case of the current subject, however, I have found neither of these strategies adequate. Googling “American Dream” returns 64,400,000 hits: one, it would seem, for nearly every articulate person likely to have experience with or an opinion on the matter. Amazon doesn’t offer any clearer path. Fourteen books with the phrase “American Dream” in the title were published in 2005 alone, with more in the pipeline for this year. In short, the starting point for any inquiry into this broadly familiar phenomenon, extending, as my title indicates, beyond the borders of the United States, and as I surmise of special moment here in the Philippines, must lie with definitions and with limitations of focus.

As to definition, first of all, I take what is called the American Dream to be a cultural myth. By “myth” here I mean not something necessarily false or illusory, as the conventional understanding of the term would have it, but rather the anthropological sense of a large, complex imaginative construct widely shared by the members of a given culture without regard to evidence that would either confirm or disprove it. Second, this particular cultural myth is national in scope. Americans from all regions, classes, races, and situations in life subscribe to it—although not universally and at all times, of course (it can be rejected as unscientifically as it can be accepted). This construct, in the words of cultural historian Kenneth Lynn, “permeates the American imagination.” The American Dream is also, and this sets it apart from other U.S. national myths (the myth of the frontier, for example) and gives it direct relevance in a Philippine context, *international* in scope. It finds true believers outside the United States, and indeed it may have been to some extent created, and certainly continues to be shaped, by the perceptions of people living, or arriving in America from, elsewhere.

As to the content of this myth, anything this large and the product of so much history and so many different hopes is bound to have complex and at times contradictory meanings. Very few values and behaviors have not at some point been associated with the American Dream. It’s possible, though, I think, to discern in this web of meanings at least two distinct but related strands. One is political in nature. It derives from the United States having been, as the nineteenth-century French observer Alexis de Tocqueville characterized it, the world’s first national experiment in democracy. The classic reference to this dimension of the myth may be found in Martin Luther King’s speech before the Washington monument in 1963, in which he averred that his “dream” of freedom and justice for African Americans was “deeply rooted in the American dream,” and went on to quote the opening words of the Declaration of Independence. The second strand, the one more familiarly taken to be the main one—and the only one that I’ll be dealing with directly today—is associated less with the words “all men are created equal” than with phrases like “rags to riches” and “streets paved with gold.” This is the dream of economic opportunity, of success, making it: a dream fitted to an America not so much the laboratory of democracy as (in the view of observers like the German sociologist Max Weber) the capital of capitalism.

What about the value of this mythic content? Is the American Dream a worthy one, from the point of view of morality and human potential? Or does it rather deserve to be considered, as Malcolm X charged in response to Dr. King's speech, a "nightmare"? Here, too, even if we confine ourselves to the economic strand, the success myth per se, the construct is so large and pervasive, and experiences relating to it so varied, that almost any judgment is possible. On the one hand, the proposition that any person can rise above his or her present circumstances is tantamount to the proposition that all are created equal; it is a deeply democratic belief. That same belief, harnessed to an open, competitive economic system, can be a great engine of innovation and productivity. And at its best, the ambition fired by this dream is not about money or status so essentially as it is about the power of individual self-transformation. On the other hand, the promise of going from rags to riches might prove a cruel illusion for those ill-equipped or poorly positioned or just not lucky enough to excel; and it could amount to a sucker's bet within an economic system whose relatively few winners depend on the freely contributed energies of the relatively numerous also-rans. Further, even at its best, when the ambition pursuing the dream does not short-circuit into materialism or overstretch into power-tripping or unethical or criminal behavior, it is still focused, some would argue, too exclusively on the self as opposed to the good of others or the society as a whole.

One more preliminary is in order, before getting down to cases. This is to specify a disciplinary focus. Given that my own training is in English and American Studies, it will come as no surprise that the cases to be examined here are drawn from literature and popular culture. What I would like to do, first of all, is trace the arc of the American Dream's trajectory through the country's traditions of literary and popular narrative, suggesting the role that the myth has played in shaping these traditions and, going the other way, the role that individual works of literature, pulp fiction, and film have played in articulating, spreading, and challenging the larger cultural construct. This I'll do very briefly—in what amounts to little more than what the sports channels call a "highlights tape," from over 200 years of history. Then I'll take a little more time to look at some "applications" from the international quarter, representations, again in literature and film, of immigrant (including Filipino-American) encounters with the diverse potentials of the American Dream.

Starting, then, on the (U.S.) national side, it seems only fitting that the man who has been called the first American, writing what is arguably the first work of American literature, should have articulated the prototypical story of the American Dream of success. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, which told the tale of an ascent, as he famously put it, from the "Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a State of Affluence & some Degree of Reputation in the World," presented a model for the new nation of the self-made man. The model came with instructions: a list of virtues such as industry, thrift, honesty, self-education (with a little attention to the careful management of appearances); and sample schedules for apportioning self-improving activities throughout the day. Franklin's account, often paired with his pamphlet *The Way to Wealth: Advice to a Young Tradesman*, which codified the how-to aspects of the autobiography, became something like required reading for ambitious young men born in the first half of the nineteenth century.

One of those who fulfilled the requirement most eagerly was Horatio Alger, whose 1867 novel *Ragged Dick*, embedded both the example of Franklin's life and his advice in the story of a young boy finding himself mired in "poverty and obscurity," as a homeless bootblack on the streets of New York City. Now this Dick, although the shabby castoff clothes we find him in at the outset of the novel probably inspired the first term in the phrase "rags to riches," does not in fact achieve the second. Rather, what he seeks throughout is what he calls "spectability" (read respectability), and in the end he reaches it, in the form of a junior clerk's position in a counting house, together with a new suit of clothes, provided by his employer, Mr. Rockwell. What Dick

accomplishes, then, is not a dizzying ride to the top of the economic pyramid but a transfer, in terms of occupation and status, from the social class of his origin to the one next higher. Indeed, this was essentially what Franklin achieved as well, and it constitutes, whether in life or in fiction, no mean feat. Dick makes this transfer, as I've already indicated, by means very similar to those of his historical predecessor. Working hard, saving what he earns, putting together the scraps of an education, and being scrupulously honest (amazingly so for a kid surviving on his own on the streets), all help to get him ready for a new station in life. In addition, changes in dress and manner, especially proper speech, play a somewhat larger role in this story than in the *Autobiography*. So does luck. This bootblack-on-the-make would not have had any kind of shot at the counting-house job without the extraordinary offer of an interview from Mr. Rockwell, who extends the offer in gratitude for Dick's having saved his small son from drowning. Still, while the young aspirant owes the interview to his having been in the right place at the right time, he owes his successful showing in that interview to his own prior regimen of skills building and attitude makeover. When his prospective new boss, as one final test of his qualifications for a clerk's position, asks him to sign his name, Dick writes "Richard Hunter, Esq.," in a bold, flowing hand—the last in a series of name changes he has undertaken (from "Ragged Dick") over the course of the novel, and an apt symbol of a genuinely changed personal and social identity.

I have gone into Dick's story in some detail because he and his fictional successors would become the new avatar of the success myth. Between 1867 and his death in 1899, Alger would repeat essentially the same plot in a hundred novels. The novels, issued in cheap, mass-market editions, would sell ten million copies, making their author the best-selling novelist in the world at that time. The "Horatio Alger" or "rags-to-riches" story, as it came to be known (in spite of the more modest ambitions of its heroes), would become a pulp fiction formula. Such a formula—however rightly despised by serious writers and critics—functions as the right arm of cultural myth. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century constituted the period of maximum "permeation" of the national consciousness by the economic version of the American Dream. And nowhere did the imaginative possibilities of success sink in more deeply than in the sensibilities of American writers born during that period, many of whom cut their literary milk teeth on the Horatio Alger novels.

However, in their handling of the theme in their mature work, these writers had to reckon with a number of developments outside the realms of literature and myth. To put matters (far too) simply, between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the Great Depression, American capitalism grew up. On the one hand, this meant that true "riches," fabulous fortunes, could be gained by individuals starting out from modest backgrounds, as the real-life careers of Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Henry Ford and others demonstrated. On the other hand, the name popularly applied to these high achievers, "robber barons," suggests widespread doubt over whether their methods of self-advancement were as scrupulously honest as Ragged Dick's. Then, too, as these winners in the economic race became more conspicuous, so did the losers: the business and farm failures, the swelling ranks of an industrial proletariat. The simple formula of hard work plus decency plus a little luck equals success came to sit increasingly uneasily on top of these complicated facts of economic life.

This tension between myth and reality proved, nonetheless, a creative one. It underlies two of the greatest literary works produced in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Both are animated directly by the American Dream, and in both the myth serves as the basis for tragedy.

When we first meet him, Jay Gatsby, the title character of F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous novel, does indeed seem "great": fabulously wealthy, charismatic, the toast of the toniest suburb

New York City in the middle of the roaring 1920s. We eventually learn, though, that he began life as Jimmy Gatz, the son of a poor farmer in the hinterlands of North Dakota. The name change, which links Gatsby to heroes in the Alger tradition, also signals a fatal departure. While they seek self-transformation and grow into their real names, Fitzgerald's character wants to be someone else and assumes a fittingly contrived identity. Dazzled by an ideal of success that had grown many times larger than life by this time, and also by a high-society love interest he feels he can only woo if he attains her economic level, the young man abandons his patient, Franklinesque efforts toward self-improvement (complete with daily schedules) and takes a short cut through shady dealings—in fact, criminal activities—to the realization of his ambitions. In the end, it all crumbles to ashes for him. His friend, the novel's narrator, Nick Carraway, reflects on Gatz/Gatsby's fate and the dream that either betrayed him or he betrayed, in one of the most memorable passages in all of American literature:

...I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

In the second of the two classic texts from this period, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, protagonist Willy Loman never makes it to the dizzying heights at least temporarily occupied by Gatsby. Stuck at the lowest level of the company whose wares he peddles, Willy compulsively fantasizes pulling off big deals and being not just liked but "well liked" by business associates. The dream of success is so vivid it blinds him to the fact that he has neither the skills nor the personality to thrive as a salesman. It also blinds him to his real aptitude, for manual labor ("He was a happy man with a batch of cement," his neighbor observes) and to his genuine accomplishments, such as paying off the house mortgage and keeping the love of a good woman. In *Death of a Salesman*, the American Dream figures as a dangerous illusion, and the pathetically misguided Willy's only grandeur lies in clinging to it until the end—at least as a hope to be realized by his sons—with an inflexibility of character the equal of the great tragic heroes.

Now, what has happened since, that is, in the wake of these two tragic handlings of the success myth, and down to the present? Not surprisingly, representations in literature and the popular arts seem to have been increasingly diverse, like the country itself. I only have time for the briefest mention of some of these. For one, the Horatio Alger formula has reasserted itself in, among other things, the 1988 film *Working Girl*, which updates with almost eerie exactness even while it feminizes the plot of *Ragged Dick*. Mike Nichols' heroine, Wall Street secretary Tess McGill, uses her determination to succeed, her pluck, luck, and ability to morph a gum-chewing look and manner of speaking into something more sophisticated, to win an entry-level stock broker position and a chance for middle-class status. Just as an aside, a film from a few years later that bears comparison to *Working Girl* is the enormously popular *Pretty Woman*, although as the difference in title perhaps suggests, the plot of the latter film derives more essentially from the fairy tale of Cinderella than the success story.

To continue for just a moment this survey of recent diversity, the nation's long-established minority groups have also entered the contested ground of the myth. Malcolm X, whom I quoted earlier mocking Martin Luther King's embrace of American political ideals, also wrote an autobiography that traces, as surely as Franklin's, an ascent from "poverty and obscurity"—and in Malcolm's case, jail—to "respectability," modest affluence, and "some degree of reputation in the world." A documentary film from the mid-1990s, *Hoop Dreams*, provides a fascinating look at the struggles of two African-American youngsters trying to climb the inviting but slippery ladder up from the ghetto to the glittering world of big-time sports.

Finally, for a Hispanic-American version of the success story, we need look no further than *Selena*, a movie based on the rise toward the top of the charts of an actual Texas-born pop singer of Mexican descent, whose progress—and whose life—is tragically cut short by the jealousy of a close associate.

Now, with this “highlights tape” of how the myth has played out on “native grounds” complete, I want to turn to another source of contributions to the discourse on the American Dream: the immigrant experience. I mentioned at the outset the role that people from other countries have played in creating what is in reality an international cultural myth, and certainly narratives such as the Russian-Jewish Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*, from the 1920s, and *The Godfather* saga from the 70s—a criminal variation, perhaps a perversion of the success story which nonetheless has enjoyed great appeal—have regularly added to the store of the myth. Today is a new era of immigration, however, with the influx stemming primarily from Latin America and Asia, and fresh stories are being told. Let me take up what are for me two of the most compelling of these.

The first is the 1984 Guatemalan film *El Norte*. In this movie Enrique and Rosa are brother and sister, motivated, respectively, by a desire to escape political persecution and by a vision of a materially better life, to cast their fortunes illegally in “El Norte.” (This phrase translates literally to “the north” and figuratively to the American Dream, as seen from a Central American vantage point). Ironically, it is Enrique, the political refugee, who shortly after arrival begins to follow in the footsteps of Ragged Dick. He rises through hard work, education, and gradual changes in appearance, language, and name, from his first Stateside job as a busboy to the threshold of a big break, a foreman’s position dangled before him by a wealthy American employer. However, he turns down that opportunity, after an agonizing struggle of conscience, to come to the hospital bedside of his suddenly ill sister. (Family matters have a way of complicating immigrant pursuits of the Dream.) Ironically, also, it is Rosa, the economic migrant, who now turns her back on this aspect of “El Norte,” despairing of finding any real opportunity, or social acceptance, in the new land. Enrique counters with a ringing affirmation of the dream. “We’ll work hard,” he says, “get lucky, and when we return to visit our village, we’ll walk with our heads high”—unaware that as he is offering this exhortation, Rosa is passing away. The following morning he is back to square one, or square zero, accepting work as a day laborer very little different from what he had been doing back in Guatemala. The question which the film leaves open is whether Enrique picks up his shovel that next day in a state of mind closer to Rosa’s despair or his own hope from the night before. The answer determines whether this immigrant story be read as a tragic or optimistic sounding of the possibilities of El Norte, a.k.a. the American Dream.

The second narrative of this type that I have found compelling is Filipino-American Brian Ascalon Roley’s novel, *American Son*, published in 2001. I’m going to enter into this novel in somewhat greater depth than the preceding examples, first because I imagine it may be of special interest to audiences in the Philippines, and second because its handling of the American Dream theme is notably complex.

Before starting with the analysis, though, allow me to offer a brief plug. Roley is a young author who has learned well the writing teacher’s lesson (although he may have been his own instructor on this point) of providing concrete detail. The novel is one of the most concretely—and freshly, unexpectedly—detailed I have read. True, all that attention to particulars slows the pace, sometimes considerably, but there are action sequences, too, and when these come on the page they are so physically graphic and emotionally painful they make you long to be back at the slow, safe pace. Then there is the imagery, especially the imagery of sunlight and its antagonists—darkness, shadow, smog, mist—that play like a visual fugue of

shifting moral tones accompanying the developing plot, and that give the novel claim to a significant revisioning of the literary landscape of Los Angeles. One example may suffice: “With sunlight coming through the dusty overhanging branches, the street resembles an ocean bottom beneath a sunny kelp bed.” Finally, there is truth in this fiction: truth in the details, truth in the setting, truth in the moment-by-moment reactions of the characters and in the (often untruthful) things they think to say. The only exception to this truthfulness, I think, occurs late on. But it’s a big one, and we’ll get to it presently.

In any case, the theme of the American Dream is explicitly voiced in the novel by the character of Aunt Jessica, the white American sister-in-law of a woman we know mainly as “Mom,” a Filipina who has married an American serviceman and has come to the U.S. to live and raise her two sons. “Your mother had hopes when she came to this country,” Aunt Jessica tells Gabe, one of those two sons. “In America you can become successful. You can rise above. You can get education.” Adding that it’s too late now for the mother (who has been abandoned by her husband and is working a dead-end job in L.A.) to realize these hopes for herself, Aunt J., like Willy Loman, lays the burden of achievement squarely on the shoulders of the new generation: “She hopes everything for you...She came to this country in the first place...because she had dreams that her kids could have a better life than [in] that caste-driven slum you come from.”

Now that’s the American Dream, all right, but one of the interesting complexities of this novel is that the “caste-driven slum” (i.e., the Philippine homeland) gets to speak back, through the letters of Tito Betino, Mom’s brother who has remained in the Philippines. He’s not only remained, he’s done well, although the novel is never clear about how he has succeeded or what his sources of income are. He lives in a mansion in Forbes Park and has sent his two daughters through the Ateneo [I apologize to my U.P. students and colleagues for this unfortunate choice in schools] and one on to Harvard for a master’s degree. In austere, condescending tones, Betino derides the lax moral climate of the United States (and the pernicious influence of so many “poor Mexicans” in Los Angeles), and urges Ika (Mom’s family pet name) to send her sons back to the Philippines. There, under their Tito’s firm hand and making use of his connections, he is convinced they will “fare well.” It is clear, however, that he is holding out the offer of personal patronage, not a rival dream of broad opportunity. In a subsequent letter, Betino acknowledges that “our country must have seemed a sad an unpromising place to raise children then [at the time Ika left], and for most Filipinos it is even worse now, but *my* circumstances have improved [emphasis added].”

It’s not certain how the boys would respond to Tito Betino’s proposition, which they never learn of directly. Certainly the older brother, Tomas, does not appear to be thriving in the U.S. Making a living training and selling vicious guard dogs, with some side action in stolen stereos, he replies to his mom’s appeal to appreciate her sacrifice in emigrating “so you could become an American” with a terse, “Thanks a lot.” On the other hand, Tomas does have some things going for him. He’s skilled and conscientious with his dogs, and mostly savvy in marketing them; even his Tito credits him with showing unusual ambition at an early age; and his business brings him into contact with wealthy celebrities, setting him up for a possible Ragged-Dick or Enrique-style breakthrough into a more respectable and remunerative way of getting a living. In fact, though, the Dream is a path not taken for Tomas. The pull of L.A. street culture, or of his own impulses, or perhaps of his absent American father, proves too strong, and he descends into a lifestyle of crime and brutal, amoral violence. He becomes openly contemptuous of his mother’s hopes for him. To cover for time spent mauling, with the aid of one of the attack dogs, a rival who has crossed him in a minor drug deal, Tomas comes up with a story about being invited to lunch by a well-wishing client: “Mom loves it when we do

education and work kind of shit,” he sniggers to Gabe. Nor does there seem to be any promise of a Don Corleone, a budding kingpin, builder of a criminal empire, in this young man. Tomas appears to be into toughness and vengeance for their own sake, and to be headed for a likely short career as a small-time thug—although it is possible to entertain a hope for a higher, if not nobler, end for him.

In any event, for the hope of realizing the mother’s conventional dreams of making good, that leaves the younger son, Gabe. He appears to be a more promising bet. Shy and polite, he is a naturally good student (unlike Tomas, who only fakes it, Gabe knows Spanish and uses it to help his brother out of a jam). He also has ambitions. It is he who is most intent on seeing the homes of his brother’s celebrity clients. Tomas taunts him at one point as “Mr. Stockbroker,” and at another for wanting to “work so many hours in [a] suit behind an important desk.” Seated at a sidewalk café for a special treat with his mom, he eyes every move of a casually elegant middle-class professional, imagining himself in the man’s shoes with an intensity worthy of a young Jimmy Gatz. As a practical step, he allows Aunt Jessica to try to enroll him in an elite private school.

The big obstacle looming in Gabe’s path to respectability, though, is brother Tomas. While he seems to see full well where the older boy’s reckless destructiveness is heading—and has at one point run away from home in order to get revenge for ill treatment suffered at his hands—he cannot shake loose of his brother’s abusive control. Tomas forces Gabe to accompany him on his criminal forays, to participate in and even initiate violence against his presumed enemies. As a result, Gabe’s grades begin to fail, and he loses his chance to transfer to the elite school. Finally, in a particularly vicious and despicable attack on a younger white boy whose well-to-do mother has given theirs a hard time over a minor traffic accident, Gabe seems to come all the way over to Tomas’ side. “Are you game?” Tomas asks, when he’s made the nature of their mission clear. “Yeah,” Gabe replies. Later, he exults in the fear—of him, not of Tomas—showing in the victim’s eyes, and he feels a rush of “confidence” that the boy, whom he now recalls had laughed at him in the past, is “respectful” of his toughness. Actually, there are indications of ambivalence in his feelings immediately following this incident, but it’s also evident, as the novel closes, that he is intent on keeping those feelings hidden from his brother.

So, chalk up this immigrant handling of the American Dream motif even more completely than *El Norte* in the tragedy column? Maybe. The problem with this outcome of *American Son* is that it’s not entirely believable, at least to me. It’s not that we don’t know enough about the complicated dealings of brothers, or about the influence of older over younger males in perpetrating criminal behavior (witness the sniper pair who terrorized the Washington, D.C., area several years back), or about the identification of abused with abuser in pathological relationships, to credit Gabe’s going over to Tomas’ ways. But the enthusiasm of the “Yeah,” given what he has seen at first hand of his brother’s nihilism, and his sudden recollection of the younger boy’s earlier mockery, are hard to swallow. So is the appearance, and demeanor, of the boy’s mother. In a novel in which every other character, male and female, rich and poor, Filipino or American or somewhere in between, manifests some unpredictable and refreshingly realistic complexity, she is the “yoga mom,” as Gabe thinks of her, from hell. She gets out of her Land Cruiser shortly after being bumped from behind by Gabe’s mom’s Tercel, “Starbuck’s iced drink” still in hand, and mercilessly berates the apologetic Filipina. The berating continues as she calls house to demand \$800 in damage payment, forcing Ika to take an additional job and eventually giving Tomas, and Gabe, a pretext for undertaking their revenge mission. Her function in the plot is very like that of the *deus ex machina* in Greek drama, whirling in from offstage to whack the action toward a resolution. Having been utterly faithful to its own truth for nearly the length of its unfolding, the novel appears to be moved, at the end, by considerations outside itself.

Now, what those considerations might be we may well wish to speculate, in discussion following, but right now they would carry away from the main thread. Suffice it to say, with respect to that main thread, the theme of the American Dream, that while I do not accept the authenticity of the ending of *American Son*, I do acknowledge its cultural significance. Another Filipino-American novel, published at close to the same time as Roley's, Han Ong's *Fixer Chao*, likewise features an act of resentful vengeance on the part of an immigrant protagonist against well-to-do native-born Americans, whose success is seen as unearned and whose attitudes toward brown-skinned newcomers are portrayed as haughty and demeaning. What's more, in the larger culture, the American Dream has come in for a large measure of skepticism and even contempt. Books published since about 2001 have been running pretty distinctly against the myth, with titles such as *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream, Is the American Dream Killing You?* and *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future Is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream*, setting the tone. It may be that there is a cycle in this type of thing, and that the Dream will soon enough be reinvested with trust and riding high again. It's also true that books of all kinds reflect first and foremost the views of a literati class, and not necessarily those of the vast mass of ordinary citizens, and immigrants. But it appears that *American Son* is in ample present company in refusing to allow its characters to escape their circumstances by following the route of the American Dream, and even to some extent setting those characters against the Dream and its previous beneficiaries.

Still, if this cultural myth has been subject more to criticism than celebration of late, it is evident that it has remained highly visible, a point of reference for the aspirations of a variety of different groups. It seems fair to say that it continues to "permeate" the American and beckon to the international imagination. The American Dream, with its political and economic dimensions, and the optimistic and tragic potentials inherent in it, appears destined to shape literatures, cultures, and lives in the future as it has in the past.

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