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From Obedience to Autonomy: Moral Growth in the Little House Books

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A children's book frequently takes as its subject the moral growth of its protagonist. The Little House books of Laura Ingalls Wilder trace Laura's growth in moral awareness and moral development from early childhood through her first employment, courtship by Almanzo, and marriage. Laura's moral maturation is rich and multi-layered, but at the heart of the Little House books, and shaping their progression as one multi-volumed novel, is the theme of obedience giving way to autonomy, literally moral self-rule.

Laura's progression in moral development throughout the seven books of the original series is hardly an unusual or idiosyncratic one. Indeed, Laura's moral growth closely follows the pattern for moral development laid out in Piaget's ground-breaking The Moral Judgment of the Child, in which deference to rules laid down by others gives way to a growing respect for moral rules as self-legislated: "Autonomy follows upon heteronomy; the rule of a game appears to the child no longer as

an external law, sacred in so far as it has been laid down by adults; but as the outcome of a free decision and worthy of respect in the measure that it has enlisted mutual consent" (65). Laurence Kohlberg could easily map Laura's growth onto his six stages of moral development, where Laura grows from stage-one obedience to the maturity of at least his stage four, where "The right is doing one's duty in society, upholding the social order, and maintaining the welfare of society or the group" (410). What <u>is</u> distinctive about the vision of moral development presented in the Little House books is both how fully and vividly it is realized and how it is shaped to mirror the American political context. For Laura Ingalls Wilder and her collaborator daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, the individual moral agent's growth from obedience to autonomy parallels the American polity's growth from subjection to democracy. At key points in the series, Laura's moral growth toward freedom and independence is linked to the ongoing struggle of Americans to achieve those same values in the political realm.

While Anita Clair Fellman rightly notes the series' stress on the highly individualistic moral and political values of freedom and independence themselves, I am concerned here to make a different point. Whatever values an individual ends up adopting as her own -- whether those tending toward selfishness

or selflessness on the moral spectrum -- it is undeniably important that these values be adopted in some sense freely, rather than in blind conformity to existing moral conventions. Likewise, whatever policies a democratic government enacts -- whether those tending toward individualism or communitarianism on the political spectrum -- it is undeniably important that these policies be implemented through democratic decision-making, that they result from bottom-up choice rather than top-down fiat. Whatever one makes of the particular values Laura ultimately chooses <u>as</u> her own, readers should welcome her emerging ability to make such choices <u>on</u> her own.

The central moral value in <u>Little House in the Big Woods</u> is unquestioning obedience. The dictates of adult authority are to be accepted unconditionally, without further explanation or justification. Disobedience, in itself, without a view toward its consequences, is to be punished severely, and even physically.

Several of Pa's free-standing narratives in the book warn against disobedience. Most notably, in "The Story of Pa and the Voice in the Woods," young Pa disobeys his father and tarries in the woods instead of promptly bringing the cattle home to stable. Although he has already received a bad scare from a menacing screech-owl, Grandpa gives him a good thrashing anyway,

"so that I would remember to mind him after that." Grandpa tells Pa, "There's a good reason for what I tell you to do, . . . and if you'll do as you're told, no harm will come to you" (58). But the reason suggested is only for young Pa to avoid being scared by screech-owls, which was unlikely to have been Grandpa's original reason for his instructions. Thus, Pa's chief fault has really been disobedience pure and simple.

Later, when Ma and Laura encounter a bear, mistaking it for their cow, Ma orders Laura to walk back to the house. When they are safe inside, she tells her, "You were a good girl, Laura, to do exactly as I told you, and to do it quickly, without asking why" (106). While here the possible consequences of disobedience are more clear and compelling, the stress remains on prompt and unquestioning obedience.

In the most memorable incident of the book, Laura's rivalry with Mary culminates in her slapping Mary for boasting that "Golden hair is lots prettier than brown." Pa whips Laura with a strap, not so much for the actual offense of striking Mary but for disobeying Pa's prior command.

> "You remember," Pa said, "I told you girls you must never strike each other."
>
> Laura began, "But Mary said -- "

"That makes no difference," said Pa. "It is what I say that you must mind" (183).

Commands from Ma and Pa are to be obeyed without exception, regardless of context.

The moral world of Big Woods revolves around a literal, legalistic concern with moral rules. The girls work out strict, rule-bound codes for sharing carrots from the churning, cookies with Baby Carrie, and dolls with guests. Laura is so focused on a literal interpretation of moral rules that when Pa refers to her cousin Charlie as a "little liar" for repeatedly faking a cry for help, while she is horrified by Charlie's disobedience of his elders, Laura "didn't understand how Charley could be a liar, when he had not said a word" (211). Moral rules are straightforward and simple, and obedience to them is to be automatic and absolute. Moral rules are imposed externally and obedience to them is motivated largely by the fear of externally imposed sanctions.

In Little House on the Prairie, obedience remains the moral cornerstone, but the consequences of disobedience are more openly stressed: It is not so much that the girls must mind Pa or Ma because of their parental authority, but because of the terrible and life-threatening consequences that could result

from disobedience. It is superior wisdom, beyond sheer parental status and brute physical force, that gives one authority to legislate for one's children.

When Pa loses control of the horses in the family's treacherous crossing of a fast-rising creek, "quick as a flash," Laura and Mary obey Ma's sharp command, "Lie down, girls!" (21). Laura later reflects on what could have been the tragic consequences of their disobedience at that point: " . . . If Laura and Mary had been naughty and bothered [Ma], then they would all have been lost" (24). The same incident, however, contains a hint of Pa's fallibility: Laura begs for Jack, the bulldog, to ride across the river in the wagon with the family; when Jack is feared drowned in the crossing, Pa reproaches himself for his decision to let Jack cross by himself.

In a dramatic incident later in the book, Indians come to the house while Pa is away from home. Before leaving, Pa tells Laura and Mary not to turn Jack loose; but when the Indians enter the house, posing a possible threat to Ma and Baby Carrie, Laura debates disobeying Pa in the light of the altered circumstances.

> "I'm going to let Jack loose," Laura whispered hoarsely. "Jack will kill them."

> "Pa said not to," Mary answered. . . .
>
> "He didn't know Indians would come," Laura said.
>
> "He said not to let Jack loose." Mary was almost crying (136).

When Pa returns he is horrified to hear that Laura even considered disobedience; he explains that if the girls had let Jack loose to attack the Indians, they would have provoked trouble with the Indians; the threat of massacre at the close of the book indicates the seriousness of the danger. Repeatedly, Pa stresses the value of obedience:

> "After this," he said, in a terrible voice, "you girls remember always to do as you're told. Don't you even think of disobeying me. Do you hear? . . . You girls remember this: you do as you're told, no matter what happens. . . Do as you're told . . and no harm will come to you" (146).

Obedience is necessitated by the extreme risks of the pioneer way of life.

Again, the moral rules here are for the most part to be interpreted with straightforward literalness, even by adults. Both Ma and Pa think it a moral disgrace to be beholden to their

neighbor Mr. Edwards for the loan of a few nails, and Pa makes a special trip to Independence, forty miles away, to repay his debt. But for the first time in the series, Laura encounters a moral conflict between her parents, when Pa decides, over Ma's objections, to risk his life going down the unfinished well to rescue Mr. Scott, overcome with the bends. For the first time, not all moral questions have simple answers. And the larger setting of the novel also suggests difficult moral questions, when the Ingalls family is forced from their homestead to make good on the U.S. government's promise to the Indians, raising, at least tangentially, the issue of the justice or injustice of American governmental policies toward Native Americans. That the government is characterized in the novel as blundering in the implementation of these policies indirectly raises the question of whether, if obedience of ruled to ruler is justified by the latter's superior wisdom, an inept government has any justified claim to the allegiance of its citizens.

<u>On the Banks of Plum Creek</u> can be read as a complex exploration of the costs and challenges of obedience and disobedience. It is the last Little House book to treat Laura as completely a child, but even here she is growing toward eventual moral autonomy. The novel is structured around a series of instances of Laura's disobedience to her elders'

instructions, culminating in her ultimate freedom from those instructions and responsibility for making her own moral choices.

1) In the first, Laura goes too deep into the river on a family swim. When Pa ducks her for punishment, Laura responds by begging him to do it again. Physical means of punishing Laura are no longer successful. 2) Later, Laura heads back to the swimming hole alone and stops only because she is frightened by a badger in her path. She could keep the incident secret, but is tormented by a guilty conscience for breaking a promise to her parents not to go to the swimming hole. Laura tells herself that "Breaking a promise was as bad as telling a lie" (33), showing that she now recognizes that one can lie without saying a word. Her punishment is one tailored by Pa to Laura's fault: If she did wrong by breaking her parents' trust, she must be treated as one who can no longer be trusted and must be "watched" for a long, tedious day by Ma. 3) The next incident of disobedience is treated in a purely playful way: Laura (with Mary) persists in sliding down the straw-stack despite Pa's command not to slide any more. She justifies her behavior by invoking the letter rather than the spirit of Pa's command: "We did not slide,
Pa . . . But we did roll down it." Here Laura is relying on a

literal, legalistic interpretation of moral rules, as she did in Big Woods, but she now does so with a bit of tongue-in-cheek, playing on such literalness to her own advantage. Elsewhere in the book, Laura shows both a literal adherence to the moral value of not taking something belonging to another, when she feels the shame of being beholden for a slate pencil and uses her Christmas penny to purchase one; she also explores the limits of a literal interpretation of such rules when she and Ma decide that it was not stealing for her to reclaim her beloved doll Charlotte from little Anna, who has abandoned Charlotte in a mud puddle. Here for the first time Laura participates with a parent in a discussion over the scope and authority of moral rules.

4) In the fourth incident of disobedience, Laura goes outside while Ma and Pa are away, disobeying Mary's instructions to stay in the dugout and so refusing Mary's attempt at surrogate authority over her; while outside, she discovers cattle in the family's hay and succeeds in driving them away. When Pa and Ma return home, "Pa said they had done exactly the right thing. He said, `We knew we could depend on you to take care of everything. Didn't we, Caroline?'" (77-78). It is implicitly conveyed that taking care of everything involves some scope for Laura's own independent judgment; taking care of

everything involves more than a mechanical adherence to others' rules. 5) In the fifth incident, Laura almost drowns playing on the footbridge after a flooding rain; here she has violated no specific rule laid down by Ma -- she is merely "sure Ma would not let her go to play in the creek" (101). No punishment for this is forthcoming; Laura is old enough now to accept the consequences of her own actions without any parental intervention. Ma tells her, "Well, Laura, you have been very naughty, and I think you knew it all the time. But I can't punish you. I can't even scold you. You came near being drowned" (105). Never again in the Little House books is Laura punished by Ma and Pa. 6) In the final episode of disobedience, toward the very end of the book, Laura manages to bring in the entire woodpile before an approaching blizzard, following a discussion with Mary about disobeying Ma's instructions that they must stay in the house during a storm; this discussion closely parallels the discussion in <u>Prairie</u> on turning Jack loose. This time, however, Laura has done the right thing: "They knew they were forgiven for disobeying, because they had been wise to bring in wood, though perhaps not quite so much wood. Sometime soon they would be old enough not to make any mistakes, and then they could always decide what to do. They would not have to obey Pa and Ma any more" (291). Thus the six

episodes of disobedience culminate in Laura's freedom from punishment from Ma and Pa and in her freedom from literal obedience to their commands. Laura must learn how to rule herself.

A gap of several years takes place between Plum Creek and On the Shores of Silver Lake; Laura is now an adolescent, witnessing the full complexities of adult moral codes. In this book, the chief moral drama is for Laura not as participant but as spectator, observing the various nuances of adult moral behavior as her world widens beyond the isolation of her own little house to full-fledged membership in a larger community.

Early in the novel, Laura and her cousin Lena are horrified to hear of a neighboring thirteen-year-old girl who has just been married. While Lena mourns the girl's loss of fun, Laura regrets her premature assumption of an adult's responsibility, remarking, "I don't want to be so responsible. I'd rather let Ma be responsible for a long time yet" (50). The rest of the novel explores what such responsibility, in moral terms, entails for the adults who face it, in a world no longer marked by simple and unambiguous moral values.

As Plum Creek was structured around a series of incidents of Laura's disobedience of moral rules, Silver Lake is structured around a series of portraits of the moral complexity

of the rules themselves. What is stealing? What is lying? The answers for Laura and her family are no longer simple. And the portraits of human character are now more multi-dimensional and complex, with fewer clear lines to draw between heroes and villains. Most of the moral rules held up to scrutiny in the novel are also legal rules, thus suggesting as well that individual citizens must play an active rather than passive role in interpreting and enforcing the laws by which they are governed.

What is stealing? When Laura's Uncle Hi and Aunt Docia leave their position with the railroad, taking wagons full of company goods with them, Ma worries that Pa, as a representative of the company, should have stopped them. Pa replies, "Oh, come, Caroline! It wasn't stealing. Hi hasn't got away with any more than's due him for his work here and at the camp on the Sioux. The company cheated him there, and he's got even here. That's all there is to it" (131). It isn't stealing to take back what another has wrongfully taken from you.

What is lying? Midway through the book Pa uses his official-looking company stationery to forge sheriff's documents in order to help his friend Mr. Boast collect a bad debt. While Pa and Mr. Boast treat the incident basically as a joke, the same point is made: Moral and legal rules may be bent in the

service of securing justice. Once others bend moral rules, we may have to bend them ourselves to see that, in the end, justice is done. Even the moral status of murder comes into question, when Pa endorses vigilante justice following a settler's murder by a claim jumper: "Hanging's too good for him. If we'd only known in time!" (257). Thus, even the gravest moral commandments are not exceptionless, not in a world where others transgress them first. And moral virtues are also qualified in the rough-and-ready world of the West. Pa wants to show the traditional virtues of generosity and hospitality to travelers seeking shelter on their way West; Ma replies that if they open their home to strangers, they must charge them for it, and by doing so, the family raises money for Mary's college education.

Two of the books's most dramatic story lines focus in detail on case studies of moral complexity. The first treats the character of the half-breed Big Jerry -- gambler, rabble-rouser, and horse thief, but nonetheless a kindhearted man who twice intervenes to save Pa from a threat to his life. A basic moral goodness can be compatible with a flagrant flouting of moral rules. In the second, a mob of railway workers storms Pa's office on payday, clamoring for wages they claim were wrongly withheld. With the help of Big Jerry, Pa manages to

send the mob away, but the paymaster at another office gives in to the mob's fury. When Ma and Pa discuss the incident, Laura joins in, expressing her own moral condemnation of what she views as the paymaster's cowardice. The conversation that follows explores the complexity of the moral choice faced, asking what degree of risk one must accept to carry out one's moral duties.

The novel closes with the Ingalls family settled on their homestead claim. There Laura's little sister Grace is feared lost in the Big Slough; as Ma and Pa frantically search for her, Laura debates what she and Carrie should do.

> "Ma told you to stay with Mary," said Laura. "So you'd better stay."
>
> "She told you to look!" Carrie screamed. "Go look! Go look! Grace! Grace!"
>
> "Shut up! Let me think!" Laura screeched. . . . (277)

Laura ends up looking for Grace, and she is the one who finds her, but she looks not because it is what Ma told her to do, but because it is what she decides she should do. Laura has now faced the need for moral choice amid both the human-caused and natural perils of the West and learned that the final choice

must be made by each moral agent alone. It is important to note, however, that this ultimate moral independence need not mean that moral choices are made in isolation. That each of us bears final responsibility for our own moral choices does not mean that these moral choices cannot be informed by the values held by our families, friends, church, and community, as Laura's mature moral choices are very much shaped by all of these.

The Long Winter explicitly introduces the idea that full human development -- particularly in the American context -- involves moral independence, and it plays out this theme by dramatizing a moral choice made by a member of Laura's own generation, her future husband Almanzo. According to the central message of The Long Winter, human beings cannot flourish and achieve their distinctively human excellences by rote obedience to the commands of others -- whether legal, moral, or even divine. Human beings, alone in all creation, must make their own choices and live with the consequences of those choices.

In Chapter 1, Pa sets the theme for the book by explaining to Laura why God, who tells muskrats to build thick-walled houses in anticipation of the hard winter to come, doesn't give human beings the same information. The reason, Pa says, is because "we're not animals. We're humans, and, like it says in

the Declaration of Independence, God created us free. That means we got to take care of ourselves." While muskrats have to build the same kind of house, "A man can build any kind of house he can think of. So if his house don't keep out the weather, that's his look-out; he's free and independent" (13). Here the novel's lesson of moral independence is explicitly set in the context of American political independence.

Subsequent chapters test Laura's understanding of the challenges of independent choice. She has a first negative experience with exercising free choice when she and Carrie head off for an errand together in town, feeling "free and independent and comfortable together" (19, my italics). On the way home, they take a different route through the slough and get themselves lost; Laura concludes, "we've learned a lesson. I guess we'll stay on the road after this" (26). Not all independent choices turn out well. But when Ma tries making a green pumpkin pie, she responds to Laura's surprised reaction, "I never heard of such a thing, Ma," by telling her, "Neither did I. But we wouldn't do much if we didn't do things that nobody ever heard of before" (32). Most notably, in an early blizzard, when Laura's teacher leads the children home from school in a blizzard, Laura stays with the group though she fears they are going the wrong direction; it is Cap Garland,

striking out on his own, who reaches town successfully and alerts the townsfolk to the danger faced by the obedient others.

In the novel's central story, Almanzo Wilder makes a moral choice to risk his life, with Cap Garland, to bring wheat to his near-starving neighbors. Almanzo's moral independence is emphasized from the start. Almanzo bends legal rules by lying about his age to claim his homestead at nineteen, telling the town clerk, "You can put me down as twenty-one" (100). Almanzo recognizes that many men follow the letter of the law but take advantage of legal loopholes to thwart its spirit -- "Everywhere, men were stealing the land and doing it according to all the rules" (99); he violates the letter of the law, but feels that he embodies the ideal of what the law intended a homesteader to be. He makes his decision to set out across the barren, blizzard-ridden prairie to find wheat for the town in the chapter titled "Free and Independent," in which he tells Royal, ". . . This is a free country and I'm free and independent. I do as I please" (258-59). But it is made clear that this freedom is actually freedom to do not as one pleases, but as one judges morally right. Autonomy is equated not with moral anarchy, but with moral self-rule. Nor does autonomy here indicate a disregard of community. Almanzo's independent choice is a choice to risk his life for others, to recognize and act on

what he views as the plain moral necessity that "Somebody's got to go get that wheat that was raised south of town" (257) -- though certainly self-interest plays a role, as part of Almanzo's motivation here is to justify to himself his refusal to sell his own precious seed wheat to his neighbors.

Almanzo's decision to risk his life to bring back the wheat is foreshadowed in two other places in the novel, in which similar questions are raised of when and for what it is worth risking one's life. When Mr. Foster scares off Almanzo's horse, Lady, Almanzo comes to terms with the limits of what he will do to search out and rescue her: "The loss of Lady made him sick at heart, but he did not intend to risk his life for a horse" (205-6) In the following chapter, the Ingalls family engages in a lively moral critique of the railway engineer who refused what he viewed as a suicidal order to ram his locomotive into a formidable snowbank. Mary argues that the engineer should have simply done as he was told, on the grounds that the superintendent must know best; Laura disputes this claim of the superintendent's superior knowledge, but disapproves of the engineer's refusal to find some independent solution to the problem.

The theme of freedom and independence is developed still further in the confrontation between the townspeople and Mr.

Loftus, the shopkeeper who charges an exorbitant price for the wheat brought back by Almanzo and Cap. Pa tells Mr. Loftus that just as he is free to charge what he will for his wheat, so are the townspeople free to take their business elsewhere once the winter is over: "Don't forget every one of us is free and independent, Loftus" (305). Freedom and independence ground not only an individual's own moral autonomy; they also provide the foundation for the social contract, the regulatory framework for human community. This echoes the Lockean model of the state as based on a contract made by free individuals, each endowed by natural law with rights to life, liberty, and property, which so influenced the Founders in their shaping of our own political system.

<u>Little Town on the Prairie</u> prepares Laura's way for the freedom and independence she will exhibit in the final book of the series, <u>These Happy Golden Years</u>. When Laura attends her first Independence Day celebration, she articulates the lesson of <u>The Long Winter</u> for herself in its clearest statement in the series, and in a clearly American context, as she thinks to herself:

> Americans won't obey any king on earth. Americans are free. That means they have to obey their own

consciences. No king bosses Pa; he has to boss himself. Why (she thought), when I'm a little older, Pa and Ma will stop telling me what to do, and there isn't anyone who has a right to give me orders. I will have to make myself be good. . . . This is what it means to be free. . . (76-77).

Note that freedom is not represented as a state of "bosslessness," but as the state in which one bosses oneself. It is not the freedom to be whatever one might choose to be; it is the freedom to choose to make oneself be good.

The novel's central story line shows Laura's encounter with an ostensible authority figure, her new teacher, Miss Wilder, who is shown to be completely morally bankrupt. While Laura chides herself for her thoughtless role in Miss Wilder's ultimate undoing, her real lesson here seems to be that there is no guarantee that adulthood carries with it moral superiority; the novel ends with Laura herself preparing to take on her first adult authority role as a young school teacher.

These Happy Golden Years brings to fruition the lessons of the previous two books, as Laura faces full-fledged adult responsibilities in her first teaching assignment. She must learn to deal with a difficult older student who challenges her

authority at school, and she must endure the miserable and threatening atmosphere of the Brewster home where she boards.

In her encounter with rebellious Clarence, Laura learns that she must not only be free and independent herself, but deal with the freedom and independence of others. Pa tells her that she must learn to manage Clarence rather than simply trying to exert her authority over him: "Brute force can't do much. Everybody's born free, you know, like it says in the Declaration of Independence. . . . Good or bad, nobody but Clarence can ever boss Clarence" (54). As in Pa's encounter with Mr. Loftus in The Long Winter, the freedom and independence of one person in civil society must be reconciled with the freedom and independence of others.

In her encounter with bitter Mrs. Brewster, who stalks her house at night with a knife in her hand, Laura faces a possible risk to her life that parallels the risk Almanzo assumes in The Long Winter: Laura "was terribly frightened. She dared not sleep. Suppose she woke to see Mrs. Brewster standing over her with that knife? Mrs. Brewster did not like her" (66). Laura conceals the incident from Ma and Pa: "She was not exactly lying, but she could not tell them about Mrs. Brewster and the knife. If they knew, they would not let her go back, and she must finish her school" (82). As in The Long Winter, Laura's

self-chosen values here are not self-directed, but other-directed: More than her own life, Laura values the opportunity to provide financial assistance for her sister Mary. Later in the book, Laura also fails to tell Ma and Pa that she has assumed the risk of driving Almanzo's unbroken horse, Barnum: "He is really a gentle horse," she tells Ma, telling herself, "It was not a lie; she had spoken the truth, and she could not tell them how she had driven Barnum. That would worry them, and perhaps they would forbid her to do it again. She intended to drive Barnum" (208). Here Laura is willing to deal in partial truths not to achieve some more highly valued moral objective, but because she is now becoming an adult with a right to make her own judgments. The novel also shows Laura learning the perils of over-honesty, when she brutally blurts out to Almanzo that she is only riding home with him from the Brewsters' to escape her situation there. She immediately regrets her cruel, though honest, words -- and later learns that her supposedly honest words were not even fully honest, for she has not been honest with herself in admitting the depth of her growing feeling for Almanzo.

The climactic moment of <u>These Happy Golden Years</u> comes, not when Laura accepts Almanzo's proposal of marriage, but when she tells him that she is unable to make the traditional vow of

wifely obedience: ". . . I can not make a promise that I will not keep, and, Almanzo, even if I tried, I do not think I could obey anybody against my better judgment" (269-70). This moment is the culmination of the moral development of all the earlier books in the series; Laura's hard-won moral independence must not end with her marriage to Almanzo, but continue and deepen. In a linkage of this moment to the American historical context, Almanzo tells Laura that Reverend Brown does not believe in using the word "obey"; Brown is a cousin of the radical abolitionist John Brown, "and a good deal like him" (270). Thus the freedom and independence that is Laura's crowning moment of adulthood is tied to the moment in American history when America began truly to make good to all citizens the promise of freedom and independence that had so struck Laura on Independence Day.

The series thus ends. Laura has grown from obedience to autonomy, from a rote follower of externally imposed moral rules to someone able to legislate her own internal moral code, and to join in a life partnership on the basis of full equality with someone also capable of moral self-rule, as Americans made a stand for self-governance -- government of the people, by the people, and for the people -- in the American revolution, in the Civil War, and in the westward expansion. This is the enduring moral vision of the Little House books.

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