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On the Edge of Self-discovery:

Water, Spaces and Sense of Belonging in the novel *Weathering* by Lucy Wood

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Abstract

According to ancient Celt mythology, water draws a line between this world and the "otherworld", an alternative reality inhabited by deities, spirits, or the souls of the departed (Monaghan, 2004: 469). Thus, water – and flowing water in particular – becomes an interstitial space that acquires several binomial meanings: life and death, destruction and rebirth, safety, and catastrophe (Arikan, 2014: 213). To inhabit a river is to dwell on the edges, on the borders of two opposite realities that merge within this interstitial fluid space. To reside in this hybrid third space is to be part of both worlds, while at the same time being part of neither. This is precisely the condition experienced by Pearl, one of the three characters enclosed in the pages of Weathering, the first novel published by Cornish author Lucy Wood. After her passing, Pearl remains trapped between the worlds of life and death, and dwells in the flowing waters of a river in an unnamed British town. Indeed, it is on these margins that she first meets her granddaughter, Pepper; and it is by breaking free from these margins and flooding the house where she once lived, that Pearl finally meets again with her daughter Ada. By focusing on the symbolic significance of water and on the meanings associated with the concept of 'house, through Lucy Wood's novel and through hints to her short story Notes from the House Spirits, this paper intends to analyse how margins can become a place of reunion and self-(re)discovery: a third and interstitial space where two worlds physically and emotionally come together into one.

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Introduction

The following work stems from two works by the young Cornish author Lucy Wood. It mainly focuses on her novel *Weathering*, while also referencing one of her short stories *Notes from the House Spirits*. The aim of this paper is to investigate how, in her pages, margins and borders become a place of self-discovery and reunion with oneself and with others. The key issues discussed in this paper concern the changes brought about by time and by water in the life of the characters created by Wood, and it does so by referencing some of the scholarly works addressing these topics. Indeed, after a summary of the novel's plot, the paper centres on the relationship between its characters and how this evolves through time – including the role played by the flowing of water, and the symbolism of water in literature. Furthermore, by drawing from relevant studies, the analysis proceeds onto the concept of house in both of Wood's works, her novel, and the above-mentioned short story, whilst resulting into the discussion of dichotomy space and place, and how a new sense of belonging comes into being as the plot unfolds.

Relations on the Margins: The Destructive and Purifying Power of Water

Change is an inevitable consequence of time which, to use Heraclitus' words, flows just like a river. Indeed, as the word itself suggests, the novel *Weathering* focuses precisely on the flowing of time, or else on the slow flowing of time and the changes it eventually leads to. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the term "weathering" refers to "[t]he action of the atmospheric agencies or elements on substances exposed to its influence; the discoloration, disintegration, etc. resulting from this action"[1]; thus, it identifies those changes brought about by nature and time. Indeed, time and space hold a key role in the novel, and are so important as to become

[1] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "weathering, n., sense 3.a", July 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1136335399>

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actual characters – characters whose actions become evident in the flowing of a river and in the existence of the house where the three main characters live.

First published in 2015, *Weathering* is the first novel by Lucy Wood – already critically acclaimed for her debut work, the collection of short stories *Diving Belles* (2012). The novel is set in an unnamed rural British town, and it focuses on the lives of three generations of women: Pearl, Ada, and Pepper (respectively grandmother, mother and granddaughter). Presented entirely through the voice of a third-person omniscient narrator, the novel immediately dips its readers into the river where Ada and her daughter Pepper find themselves scattering the ashes of the recently departed Pearl. Grandmother and granddaughter have never had a chance to meet one another, and this signals a strong physical and emotional distance between the various characters: most especially a lack of relationship between Ada and Pearl, as later suggested by the way in which Ada relates to the house where she once lived with her mother. And yet, it is precisely thanks to her mother's house that this distance will lessen until it vanishes completely – thus, allowing mother and daughter to finally reunite, and grandmother and granddaughter to eventually meet. The physical and emotional distance between Ada and her mother is tangible from the very first pages, and it can be explicitly read in a sentence that echoes throughout the entire novel: "We won't be here long" (Wood 2015, 14). After bidding her mother farewell and scattering her ashes into a river, Ada intends to refurbish Pearl's house and sell it; thus, tearing the final tie that kept her attached to her mother. Indeed, no matter who she talks to – be it her mother's only friend Luke, or the owner of the local pub Val – Ada insists that her stay in her mother's house, a house she has always wanted to run away from, is only a temporary one. Indeed, thirteen years before Pearl's passing, Ada decides to let go of her past and leave the town where she had spent her childhood and teenage years. Although her daughter's choice leaves Pearl still and speechless, she understands Ada's desperate need to escape from a place she perceives as a trap rather than a home (Wood 2015, 128-129).

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This distance is but the result of years of misunderstandings and silence, since "they started to mishear each other a lot. Table slipped to ladle, flour slipped to fire. Pearl went to the doctors and got them to check her ears – skulking in at fifty-seven, worried about going deaf […]" (Wood 2015, 151). The fear of being trapped in a life she does not perceive as her own, induces Ada to push her mother away, first on an emotional level – talking to her as little as possible – and then on a physical one – moving out before her twenties never to return again, if not after her mother has already passed. Likewise, the fear of not having been a good parent leads Pearl to emotionally drift away from her daughter, enclosing herself in the stillness and silence of her days spent by the river while taking pictures of birds. Abandoned by her husband Frank while Ada was still a baby, Pearl settles in a place she too does not feel her own and where she too has always wished to remain as little as possible. The sentence "We won't be here long" that echoes Ada's desire to run away, was once a sentence that belonged to her mother as well; however, the distance between the two has buried this confession under the inches of snow that covers Pearl's house every winter.

This is why Pearl remains silent while Ada moves out; this is why Pearl remains silent even when "[s]he wanted to say something about how strange the frozen river made her feel – uneasy but also astonished at the colours the ice could make" (Wood 2015, 154). Pearl allows her thoughts and emotions to freeze like the river; but they eventually thaw out and come back to the surface when the river overflows and floods the house where Ada, Pepper and Pearl's spirit find themselves. Indeed, Wood writes:

> Water rushed over her [mother's] skin, turning it murky and thin. Ada could almost see the window through it.
> 'Tell me what birds you see', Ada said. Her legs were so cold.
> 'You don't want to hear about that'.
> 'I do', Ada said. 'I do'.
> 'Well', her mother said. 'There's a pied wigtail […]'. (Wood 2015, 264-265)

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It is in such a moment of climax that mother and daughter open up to one another, annihilating the distance between them and destroying the barriers of time and space, life, and death. Ada wants to learn about her mother, about the sense of belonging she feels towards the river, about her passions for birds and photography; Ada wants to tell Pearl, that that bread she had baked, burned, and then thrown away, she had personally recovered from the rubbish and eaten it. In fact, in a flashback concerning Ada's teenage years readers witness the episode of Pearl's bread baking:

> […] The loaf was black and smoke curled out of it. A deep, dark split in the crust.
> 'You made bread', Ada said.
> And Pearl felt such a fool that she said, 'No, I didn't'. Took the thing out and threw it in the bin, where it smoked for hours. (Wood 2015, 156)

Yet, during the flood, the readers as well as mother and daughter discover:

> ['…] But the bread burned and I threw it in the bin'.
> Ada watched her closely. There was so much water dripping it was hard to keep her in focus. 'I ate it', she said. 'I took it out and I ate it. It was perfect in the middle.' She'd cut the burned crust off and the middle was soft and full of air.
> 'You ate it', her mother said. (Wood 2015, 264)

During this touching confession, the fury of the river invades the house and sweeps Pearl away. As in other cases in literature, water here has a strong metaphorical value. Its penetrating violence annihilates the ghosts and spirits of the past, washes away unsaid words, and breaks the chains that had enveloped the relationship between mother and daughter. The river – of which Pearl is now a part of, being that her ashes have been scattered there – pushes Ada away from the pains of the past, and clears Pearl from her sense of guilt. Now, Pearl can finally let herself go, let go of the rock she is clinging to in the attempt of making up for her errors of the past, and she can eventually flow alongside the river towards the sea: "and when it rained she

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would be back at the beginning, where the river was a trickle in the middle of the moor. Conjuring itself drop by drop" (Wood 2015, 290).

Water has inspired various stories, theories, and beliefs throughout the ages, including – to mention but one example – those discussed by Greek philosopher Thales, who believed water to be the very seed of life since "the seeds of all things have a moist nature, and that water is the origin of the nature of moist things" (Reale 1987, 36). According to more recent philosophers, indeed the founding fathers of psychoanalysis Jung and Freud, water is a metaphor for many things, and in particular change and reincarnation, or a shift from life to death and vice versa (Arikan 2014, 213); and to quote MacLeod (2013): "[i]t is the final outlet of […] rivers that so many cultures entrust with the task of receiving and carrying away the dead. It is the dimension of memory lingering in the wet hearts of everyday objects" (40). Accordingly, the ancient Celts, whose mythology is a milestone in Cornwall, believed water and rivers to be the margins between the world of the living and the "other" world:

> The Celts saw fresh water as sacred, whether it ran in RIVERS and SPRINGS or was still in LAKES and WELLS. This appreciation for a vital part of the ecosystem is appropriate for people to whom NATURE was a source and residence of divinity. Water often appears as a dividing line between this world and the OTHERWORLD […]. (Monaghan 2004, 469)

The Otherworld addressed by Monaghan (2004) refers to an alternative reality, inhabited by spirts, deities and the departed. Yet, unlike Catholic paradise, the Otherworld is not separated from the "real" world. It is near it, and it can be accessed even by the living, although only fortuitously (370-371). Indeed, it is in a fortuitous manner that Pepper bumps into the spirit of Pearl that lies trapped into the waters of the river – waters that, according to Celt mythology, represent the edge between the world of the living and the world of the deceased. Being linked with water, the Otherworld is also a source of knowledge: an occult kind of knowledge limitedly accessible to humans or not accessible at all (O'Rahilly 1946, 318).

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Considering the meaning of life and death associated with water, the strength and the flowing of the river become a source of rebirth, and simultaneously acquire the role of a negative destructive force and the role of a positive regenerative one. The biblical tale of Noah and the Arch is a fitting example of water being contemporarily a catastrophe and a salvation. The regenerative value of water ensures a breaking point in almost every tale in which it appears: it signals the moment that breaks the normal flowing of time, setting a before and an after, and it is also the means through which characters are purified (Arikan 2014, 210; 213). With its destructive force, the river of *Weathering* annihilates the idea of safety generally linked with the house, whilst favouring the possibility of communication between mother and daughter: water does not only allow them to come closer, but it also purifies their relationship from the misunderstandings that have contributed to its deterioration. As O'Rahilly (1946) notes, the river leading to the Otherworld becomes a source of knowledge (138), thus providing the two women with a knowledge so strong as to delete the contrasts of a lifetime only in a few moments (Arikan 2014, 213). Indeed, water may be identified as a source of knowledge because of the "limitless memory" it possesses, being "at once the resting place of every forgotten event and the dwelling place of the dead" (MacLeod 2013, 47).

As a writer, Wood is not new to the use of water invading the space of the house and mining the idea of safety and protection it bears. In her debut work, the collection of short stories *Diving Belles*, readers find such an instance in her work "Notes from the House Spirits". The narrator of this story is a first-person plural "we" – the spirits inhabiting the house, whose job is to protect it and keep it safe – who relates its dream about a "sudden rush of water" (Wood 2013, 135) that completely submerges the house. However, while in *Weathering* the flood is true, and it truly invades the safe and almost 'sacred' environment of the house; in "Notes from the House Spirits", instead, the recurring flood-dream of the spirits signals their fear of failure: a flooded house is an unsafe house, therefore a proof of them failing in their role and

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task. Therefore, in the novel the water washes away the tormenting ghosts of the past and favours rebirth and purification; in the short story, instead, a potential flood exemplifies the destruction of the house and the consequent death of the spirits who not only inhabit the house, but are themselves the house. The water that floods their dream acquires a negative value relatable to death and destruction, and it reflects the fear of inadequacy felt by the spirits. Thus, in this case, Wood uses the symbolism of water as a metaphor for the subconscious and a portrayal of the deep fears that tear the soul of the house spirits (Arikan 2014, 209). In the short story, the house itself speaks out and voices its own fear of being unfit, unsafe and meagre; and it does so by using surreal juxtapositions of the objects inside it, thus implying on the one side "the coincidence of different times and spaces – a feeling heightened by the spirits' own lack of chronological awareness" (March-Russell 2017, 62), while on the other side their fear of their memory being drowned by a watery submersion.

Home Sweet Home? A Comparison between the House in *Weathering* and the House in "Notes from the House Spirits"

Chronologically, Ada should be the joining link between the three generations. However, the true link is Pepper, the youngest of the three. Pepper is presented as a six years old girl who is clumsy (thus, constantly tripping over and hurting herself), incapable of making friends and relating with other people, and unable to focus and concentrate (thus, finding it hard to read and write). For these reasons, she is rejected and not made to feel welcome by her fellow classmates. Despite her oddness, Pepper is the first one to venture into the secrets of the house: she enters its rooms, scrutinises its objects, accepts its weirdness. She retrieves Pearl's old cameras and books on birds, and becomes interested in the same activities that had rooted her grandmother to that house. She ventures towards the river, tries to take a picture of some birds

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as Pearl used to do, and she talks with a strange old lady she sees in the river and whose identity she ignores (Pepper has never personally met her grandmother).

Pepper is responsible for the shift from *Pearl's* house to *her own* house; she is responsible for the shift in appropriation from "[Pearl's] place. […] Her river, her trees, her birds", to *Pepper's* place, river, trees and birds. Refused by various schools because of her social and educational difficulties, Pepper finally develops a sense of belonging in her grandmother's town and begins attending school with enthusiasm. She even befriends a little boy called Petey, learns to write her name and draws a picture that, for the first time in her life, her teachers appreciate so much as to show it to everyone rather than putting it aside:

> One afternoon, they had to draw the house they lived in. Pepper bent over her paper and scratched with a thick pencil. Tried to capture the sprawling bits of the house, the bending trees, a glimpse of the river. Smoke winding up. She worked over break time. Dark, deep pencil lines and lots of crossing-out but she finally finished it. 'Well', the teacher said. She went to get another teacher to look. The picture was pinned up in the corridor for everyone else to see. (Wood 2015, 208)

When discussing the drawings children provide of their own houses, Bachelard states that its execution is linked to the happiness children associate to the house itself. In other words, if children see their house as a happy place, they will draw a welcoming and solidly structured house; if, instead, children view their house as an unhappy one, their drawing will portray the uncomfortable feeling they relate to the house (Bachelard 1994, 72). The fact that Pepper finally feels a sense of belonging towards her grandmother's house, pushes her to concentrate on a task as she had never managed to do before, thus drawing in such a detailed way that her teachers publicly reward her efforts. Through this young character, readers can grasp Bachelard's idea according to which a house is not an empty lifeless box (Bachelard, 1994: 47); indeed, a house is a physical state oozing with intimacy (Bachelard 1994, 72). Pepper's attachment towards an old, worn-out and damp house does not only weigh on the unfolding

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of the story, but it also plays a key role in shaping the little girl's identity, proving how spatiality influences an individual's personal identity (Khademi-Vidra 2014, 109). Perceiving the house as *hers*, Pepper feels she belongs somewhere, and this pushes her to accept the school and social environment she has refused up to that moment. Through the intimate environment of the house, the little girl finds her place in space and this highlights the reciprocity that exists between house and universe, inside and outside, text and co-text, place and space (Whaley 2018, 26).

The concept of the house as an intimate space also appears in the short story "Notes from the House Spirits". The spirits Wood gives a voice to are not a feature of the house, they are the house itself, as made clear in the last lines of the story: "We, the house […]" (Wood 2013, 146). The life of the spirits is so intertwined with the house that they actually ask themselves who has come before, the house or themselves:

> Brick by brick by brick, more houses are being built somewhere nearby. When do we arrive in them [the houses]? We don't know. Were we already there and the house was built around us? We don't know. We don't exist without bricks and slate and glass, and bricks and slate and glass do not exist without us. There is no need to think about it any further, but sometimes we like to think about it a little bit. (Wood 2013, 141-142)

In the story, more explicitly than in the novel, the house stops being a mere setting and becomes a character and narrator itself. The house has its own spirit (or better, spirits) and it observes the dwellers that inhabit it throughout time. They know every corner of the house, which means that the house knows every corner of itself: the sweets on the floor and covered in dust, the layers of steam on the windows on which the inhabitants have written their names, etc. The house/spirits explicitly express their tastes concerning furniture and decorations: they state they no longer like to blue walls, and for this reason they begin to scrape it onto the carpet (Wood 2013, 131). By doing so, they protect the house, its appearance and existence, because

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this is their life task: "An empty house is never silent for long and a house is never empty because we are here" (Wood 2013, 130). Although the spirits and the house can only speak through Lucy Wood's story, they constitute the very memory of the house.

"A Place in Space": Putting Down Roots and Developing a Sense of Belonging

A house is like the memory box of those who live in it. Her own house constantly reminds Pearl about her failed life and disappointed expectations, for she has been abandoned by her husband and rejected by her daughter. Despite this, Pearl never leaves the house and takes extra care in repairing its faults and damages. Its cracks, chinks and faults never induce Pearl to leave; on the contrary, she fixes its every problem as if by doing so she can amend the faults she sees in her own life and the wounds she has in her own soul. Ada, instead, looks at the house as a constant reminder of the emptiness of her mother's life: an emptiness she ardently desires to avoid. All she wants to do is put everything in place as soon as possible, and sell the house: as if by selling it she can rid herself of her memories and of all the memory the house embodies. Finally, for Pepper the house is *hers*, her place in space. Pearl's house becomes Pepper's home, or else a firm centre that allows her to integrate all her experience and gain an understanding of her own world (O'Connor 2017, 14). It is no longer an anonymous geographical space, but a place Pepper knows from top to bottom:

> She wasn't even scared of the house's noises any more: the creaks, the groans, the soft chunterings. […] She knew the best place to watch the road, the best places to hide, the best place to stand if she wanted to listen to conversations. She avoided, without even noticing, the rusty nail sticking out of the third step, and the sharp tile by the door in the kitchen. (Wood 2015, 224)

Her sense of belonging to the house is so strong that Pepper is capable of avoiding potentially dangerous nails or tiles without even realising she is doing it. The house shapes Pepper's

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identity, and by the end of the novel she is no longer the clumsy little girl readers have met in the first pages. Wood in fact writes:

> She licked her front tooth, which was sharp and tender – she had just fallen over and banged it on the front step and there was a tiny chip in the corner. She was riddled with old injuries: at three, had crushed her thumb in a door; at four, had caught a glimpse of a bright bird and fallen out of a window, splintering her collarbone; at five, she'd grabbed a hot light bulb and seared a semicircle onto her palm. Now, at six, she had a chipped tooth […]. (Wood 2015, 24)

Therefore, if initially the house had caused her a chipped tooth, by the end of the book the house causes her no more pain or injuries. Pepper has learned to listen to the house and the geometry of its echo (Bachelard 1994, 60). Citing Yi-Fu Tuan (1979a, b), the space has become a place, shifting from an infinite abstract to delimited intimacy; the house has become a "space in place", therefore a centre of experience since:

> Place implies space, and each home is a place in space. Space is a property of the natural world, but it can be experienced. From the perspective of experience, place differs from space in terms of familiarity and time. A place requires human agency, is something that may take time to know, and a home especially so. (Sack 1997, 16)

A place is, in fact, the incarnation of human desires and aspirations, and it can be interpreted in relation to the experience and perspective of those who have provided that very place with meaning – thus, allowing it to shift from space to place (Tuan 1979b, 387).

Eventually, just like her mother had done in the past and her daughter in the present, even Ada manages to develop a sense of belonging towards the only place she would have never dreamt of. During the very moment she is about to definitely rid herself of the house and sell it, her feelings shift from "We won't be here long" to "I changed my mind" (Wood 2015, 261). Now everything in the house feels "comforting and familiar" (Wood 2015, 255). The way in which she looks at the house and the river is no longer blurred by the ghosts of the past:

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> She had forgotten, or maybe never noticed, the sound the river made when it lapped at the shallow edges, how the drizzly mist clung to the surface like static on fabric. And all the shifting colours. She'd thought of it dull and monotonous, the same old river from one moment to the next. But it changed second by second: now a plunk of feathers tumbling down, now a plunk of wood, now the water riled up around a snapped sapling. (Wood 2015, 283)

In the final pages of the novel, readers learn how much Ada cherishes her new "old" life in that house that once belonged to her mother and is now hers and Pepper's. She enjoys taking her daughter to the river and taking pictures of a heron: the same heron Pearl had tried to take a picture of, before giving up after Ada had forsaken her. According to Celt tradition – from which Wood often takes inspiration (especially in *Diving Belles*), the heron:

> [is a] symbolic animal. Several BIRD species had specific symbolic value in Celtic tradition. One of these was the heron, which as a waterbird existed in several elements (air, land, water), thus becoming an emblem of OTHERWORLD power. […] (Monaghan 2004, 245)

As a symbol of the Otherworld, the heron readers meet at the end of the novel could actually be Pearl. She has abandoned herself to the flowing of the river, therefore she has purified herself and passed from the world of the living to the world of spirits: Pearl is no longer on the margins of two worlds, she is now pure spirt. She is now a large heron tinted with grey and purple, that cries:

> 'Frank', she said. 'Frank, Frank'.
> 'What did you say?', her mother asked.
> 'It's what the heron says', Pepper told her. (Wood 2015, 281)

"Frank" is the name of Ada's father, a man who had run away from home twenty years before, deserting a wife and a baby girl. It so results that neither Pepper nor her mother Ada have ever met Frank, since his fleeing is traced back to the time when Ada was still a baby. Yet, "Frank"

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is the sound the heron makes according to Pepper. Although "she'd given up taking pictures of herons a long time ago" (Wood 2015, 126), Pearl had never lost hope of seeing Frank once again. Her desire to take a picture of a bird crying the name of her runaway husband reflects her desperate need to "capture" in a photograph someone who, instead, had escaped from her life. Indeed, such an attempt resurfaces in the words pronounced by Pepper when talking to her mother.

Conclusions

Taking into account the role of the heron and these final words, as well as the whole unfolding of the narrative, readers can eventually grasp the true meaning of *Weathering*: as time and water change the nature of rocks, likewise time and water have changed the relationship between three generations of women who, until then, had never truly met with one another. Indeed, such a meeting takes place on two types of margins, temporal and spatial. It occurs on the margins between life and death, with Pearl being stuck in the land of the living after her passing; and it also happens on the margins between land and water, and more specifically when the boundaries between the two worlds are broken and overthrown. As a matter of fact, Wood is not new to blurring the lines between apparently opposite realities, and her writing is thus described as the result of "interwav[ing] the folkloric with the mundane so that it becomes difficult to see where one leaves off the other" (March-Russell 2017, 58). Her whole writing, fiction and landscapes are indeed built upon the foundation of uncanny and mysterious liminality. Thus, it is within these liminal spaces and on the ruins of fallen borders that the processes of self-discovery and reunion unfold, allowing all characters to be free of the boundaries that had chained them up until then. It is indeed upon this new third space where the three women, in different ways, acquire their own sense of identity and belonging, and begin to actively embrace their lives and afterlife.

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