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EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES AND CARE DISCOURSE IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN-CENTRED POPULAR FICTION: THE CASE OF SOPHIE TAL MEN

ЕМОЦІЙНІ НАРАТИВИ ТА ДИСКУРС ТУРБОТИ В СУЧАСНІЙ ЖІНОЦЕНТРИЧНІЙ ПОПУЛЯРНІЙ ПРОЗІ (НА МАТЕРІАЛІ ТВОРЧОСТІ СОФІ ТАЛЬ МЕН)

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The article examines how emotional experience and care are represented in contemporary women-centred popular fiction on the material of four novels by the French writer Sophie Tal Men. The analysis starts from the observation that emotions and care in these texts are rarely named directly. Instead, they are woven into everyday situations, character interaction and narrative perspective. Emotional meaning is not explained to the reader but gradually emerges through perception, hesitation, bodily reaction and small acts of attention.

The study is based on an author-specific corpus of four novels published between 2018 and 2024. The analysis combines close reading with corpus-assisted observation of frequent lexical items and verbs occurring in emotionally marked contexts. Particular attention is paid to verbs of perception and internal response (*sentir, sembler, hésiter*), which frame emotion as unstable and processual rather than fixed. These verbal choices position emotional experience within the character's perspective and leave space for interpretation rather than emotional closure.

The article also shows that care in the analysed novels is not presented as an abstract value or as an explicitly stated emotion. It is realised through repeated actions and forms of presence expressed by verbs such as *rester, aider, écouter, veiller*. Care appears in moments of silence, waiting, and practical involvement, often without verbal reassurance. In this way, emotional narratives and care discourse are closely connected: care provides a practical and ethical framework within which emotional experience unfolds. The findings suggest that women-centred popular fiction relies on indirect verbalisation and relational practices to represent both emotion and care, grounding them in ordinary interaction rather than in expressive emotional language.

Key words: women-centred popular fiction; emotional experience; care discourse; corpus-assisted analysis; narratology; Sophie Tal Men.

У статті розглядається репрезентація емоційного досвіду та дискурсу турботи в сучасній жінкоцентричній популярній прозі на матеріалі чотирьох романів французької письменниці Софі Таль Мен. Аналіз ґрунтується на спостереженні, що емоції та турбота в цих текстах рідко називаються безпосередньо. Натомість вони вплетені в повсякденні ситуації, міжперсонажну взаємодію та наративну перспективу. Емоційний зміст не пояснюється читачеві прямо, а поступово формується через сприйняття, вагання, тілесні реакції та незначні акти уваги.

Дослідження базується на корпусі чотирьох романів, опублікованих у 2018–2024 роках. Аналіз поєднує інтерпретацію художнього тексту з корпусним аналізом частотних лексичних одиниць і дієслів, що функціонують в емоційно маркованих контекстах. Особливу увагу приділено дієсловам сприйняття та внутрішньої реакції (*sentir, sembler, hésiter*), які репрезентують емоцію як нестабільний, процесуальний стан, а не як фіксовану категорію. Такий дієслівний вибір розміщує емоційний досвід у межах перспективи персонажа й залишає простір для інтерпретації замість емоційного «закриття».

У статті також показано, що турбота в аналізованих романах не подається як абстрактна цінність або прямо названа емоція. Вона реалізується через повторювані дії та форми присутності, виражені дієсловами *rester, aider, écouter, veiller*. Турбота проявляється в моментах мовчання, очікування та практичної залученості, часто без словесного заспокоєння. У такий спосіб емоційні наративи та дискурс турботи виявляються тісно пов'язаними: турбота формує практичну й етичну рамку, в межах якої розгортається емоційний досвід. Отримані результати свідчать про те, що жінкоцентрична популярна проза спирається на непряму вербалізацію та реляційні практики для репрезентації як емоцій, так і турботи, закорінюючи їх у повсякденній взаємодії, а не в експресивній емоційній лексиці.

Ключові слова: жінкоцентрична популярна проза; емоційний досвід; дискурс турботи; корпусно-асистований аналіз; наратологія; Софі Таль Мен.

Introduction. Popular fiction constitutes a considerable part of contemporary literary production and therefore represents a relevant source for analysing social values and emotional norms reflected in narrative form. In the framework of women-centred popular fiction, particular attention is paid to interpersonal relationships, emotional experience and everyday ethical choices, which are presented not through experimental narrative techniques but through relatively simple narrative organisation and accessible language. This type of prose relies on ordinary situations and familiar communicative practices, allowing emotional meaning to be conveyed implicitly rather than through explicit authorial commentary.

Research devoted to women's popular fiction, including studies of chick lit and postfeminist writing, has repeatedly emphasised the importance of emotions, relationships and care in shaping narrative content [2; 5]. At the same time, the concept of chick lit does not fully account for the variety of contemporary women-oriented popular prose. A number of texts focus primarily on emotional recovery, responsibility for others and ethical attentiveness, while avoiding irony, consumerist imagery or explicit postfeminist rhetoric. In this respect, the broader notion of women-centred popular fiction appears more appropriate, as it makes it possible to analyse narratives in which emotional experience and care function as central organising principles.

From the perspective of narratology, emotions in fiction are treated as an integral component of meaning construction rather than as an additional thematic layer. Emotional experience is structured through focalisation, narrative perspective and evaluative language, which shape the reader's interpretation of events and characters' actions [3]. Further development of these ideas within affective narratology demonstrates that emotions play a key role in organising narrative progression and guiding interpretative processes [7]. Reader involvement in such texts is closely connected with empathy, which is generated through recurrent linguistic and narrative patterns rather than through isolated emotional episodes [8].

An additional analytical perspective is provided by the concept of care. Feminist scholarship has shown that care should be understood not merely as a private emotional response but as a specific mode of ethical reasoning based on responsibility, attentiveness and relational thinking [4; 6]. In literary texts, care is realised through patterns of interaction, emotional evaluation and the verbalisation of support, vulnerability and obligation. These elements form a

distinct discourse that can be examined at the level of narrative structure and language use.

Within this theoretical framework, the prose of the contemporary French writer Sophie Tal Men is used in the present article as illustrative material for the analysis of emotional narratives and care discourse in women-centred popular fiction. Her novels have gained wide readership and visibility in contemporary French literary culture and are frequently discussed in media discourse as representative of popular prose oriented towards emotional experience and interpersonal relations [1]. **The aim** of the analysis is to identify recurrent narrative and discursive features that can be observed in women-centred popular fiction, in particular, in novels by Sophie Tal Men: *De battre la chamade* (2018) [13], *Là où le bonheur se respire* (2021) [14], *La promesse d'une île* (2023) [15], and *La tendresse des autres* (2024) [16].

Literature review. Women-centred popular fiction has been approached in scholarship primarily through the framework of women's popular writing in late modernity, where everyday experience, relationships and emotional self-management become central narrative topics. Within this field, chick lit has been described as a recognisable cultural and literary formation that foregrounds women's voices and everyday concerns, while also reflecting broader socio-cultural processes such as consumption, lifestyle ideology and postfeminist sensibilities [2; 11]. At the same time, later studies have demonstrated that the genre label is not fully sufficient for describing the diversity of women-oriented popular prose, since many texts operate without irony, explicit postfeminist rhetoric, or consumer culture as a dominant narrative axis [5]. For this reason, the broader analytical category of women-centred popular fiction remains methodologically useful, as it allows the researcher to focus on recurrent narrative priorities (emotional experience, relational ethics, recovery) rather than on a relatively narrow set of genre conventions.

The study of emotional narratives requires a theoretical basis in narratology, as emotions in fiction are structured not only thematically but also through narrative form. Classical narratological approaches highlight that narrative meaning is organised via focalisation, perspective and the distribution of evaluative language, which shapes how characters and events are interpreted [3]. This line of argument is developed further in affective narratology, where emotions are treated as a core organising mechanism of stories: emotional dynamics guide narrative progression and influence the reader's interpretative choices, especially in texts oriented towards psychological immediacy and reader involvement

[7]. From this viewpoint, emotional narratives are not simply narratives “about feelings”; they are narratives in which affective evaluation and the management of emotional tension perform an important structuring function.

A closely connected notion is empathy as a key mechanism of reader engagement. Empathy has been conceptualised as a readerly response generated by narrative cues and by the representation of consciousness, vulnerability and moral choice, rather than by isolated emotionally marked episodes [8]. This perspective is particularly relevant for women-centred popular fiction, where plot development often depends on interpersonal understanding, emotional negotiation and gradual transformation. In such texts, the reader’s involvement is frequently achieved through stable focalisation patterns and recurring evaluative structures that position care, responsibility and emotional attentiveness as meaningful actions rather than as background “sentiment”.

The ethical content of women-centred popular fiction can be productively examined through the concept of care. Feminist scholarship has shown that care is not limited to private emotion; it constitutes a mode of moral reasoning grounded in relational responsibility and attentiveness to others [4; 6]. For literary analysis, this is important because care may function not only as a theme but also as a discourse. It is realised through patterns of interaction, the verbalisation of support and obligation, and the recurrent framing of vulnerability and responsibility as socially significant. Therefore, “care discourse” can be traced in narrative choices and in language use, allowing the researcher to connect ethical reasoning with textual structure.

In recent decades, the study of popular fiction has also benefited from corpus-based and corpus-assisted approaches. Corpus stylistics demonstrates that quantitative methods may reveal stable patterns of lexical and phraseological choice which remain difficult to observe through impressionistic reading, particularly in large or systematically organised textual material [12; 9]. Later methodological work has further clarified how corpus stylistics can be used in a theoretically informed manner, combining frequency-based observations with interpretative analysis and stylistic explanation [10]. This methodological direction is relevant for the present research because care discourse and emotional narratives tend to be encoded in recurrent lexical choices, evaluative patterns and collocational behaviour, which may be examined systematically across a corpus of novels.

Against this theoretical background, Sophie Tal Men’s novels may be treated as illustrative material

for exploring emotional narratives and care discourse within contemporary women-centred popular fiction. Tal Men’s public visibility and media positioning indicate that her writing is perceived as representative of accessible popular prose focused on interpersonal relations and emotional experience [1]. However, in analytical terms, the main value of her novels lies in the possibility of tracing how emotional experience and care are structured narratively and linguistically across a coherent set of texts.

Methodology and material. The study combines qualitative literary analysis with corpus-assisted methods in order to examine emotional narratives and care discourse in contemporary women-centred popular fiction. The material comprises four novels by Sophie Tal Men: *De battre la chamade* (2018) [13], *Là où le bonheur se respire* (2021) [14], *La promesse d’une île* (2023) [16], and *La tendresse des autres* (2024) [16]. The novels were selected due to their thematic and narrative coherence, as all four texts foreground interpersonal relationships, emotional experience and everyday practices of care, as they form a closed author-specific corpus that allows for the identification of recurrent narrative and discursive features.

The corpus-assisted analysis focuses on lexical and evaluative patterns related to emotion, interpersonal interaction and care, including lexemes denoting emotional states, relational actions and responsibility. Quantitative observations are used as a starting point for qualitative interpretation rather than as independent results. In parallel, narratological analysis is applied to examine focalisation, narrative perspective and evaluative language through which emotional experience and care are structured. This combined approach makes it possible to trace stable linguistic and narrative tendencies while preserving the interpretative depth required for literary analysis.

The corpus-assisted part of the analysis was conducted with the help of the Sketch Engine platform. The author-specific corpus consists of four novels by Sophie Tal Men and contains 297,610 tokens, 250,896 words and 20,621 sentences. French Web 2023 (frTenTen23) was used as the reference corpus, which made it possible to distinguish text-specific features from general language tendencies.

Results and discussion. The discussion proceeds from general lexical distribution to verbal patterns of emotion and, finally, to the discourse of care as a structuring ethical principle. Sophie Tal Men (pseudonym of Sophie Ory) is a French novelist and neurologist. Her literary style is defined by a blend of emotional realism and human resilience in everyday contexts. The author practises neurology in Brittany,

so she often uses her medical background to create narratives where her characters are described through health issues, healing, personal transformation.

This section presents the results of the corpus-assisted analysis of four novels by Sophie Tal Men and discusses their relevance for the study of emotional narratives and care discourse in women-centred popular fiction. The analysis proceeds from general lexical patterns to more specific verbal tendencies, moving from the distribution of the most frequent content words to the examination of verbs associated with emotional experience and care-related interaction. Quantitative observations serve as a basis for qualitative interpretation of narrative strategies and ethical orientations reflected in the texts.

Most frequent lexical items. An analysis of the hundred most frequent content words in the corpus of four novels shows that the lexical core is overwhelmingly dominated by proper names. More than half of the items in the top-100 list are anthroponyms referring to characters (e.g. *Clarisse, Thibault, Olivia, Yann, Mickaël, Alexis, Valentine*), while toponyms and place-related names (*Brest, Groix, Ouessant, Port-Tudy, Moulin-Blanc*) form a smaller but stable subgroup. This distribution indicates that the narrative organisation of the novels is strongly character-centred and spatially grounded: emotional experience is constructed through named individuals situated in recognisable social and geographic settings rather than through abstract or generalised reference.

Alongside proper names, the frequency list contains a recurrent group of lexemes referring to bodily reaction and minor physical or emotional responses, such as *grimace, soupirer, gémir, gloussement, demi-sourire, hochement*. Although these items are less frequent than personal names, their presence among the most common content words is significant. It suggests that emotional states are routinely conveyed through small-scale bodily signals and understated reactions. Rather than being verbalised through explicit emotion terms, emotional

experience is distributed across brief gestures, facial expressions and minimal movements that function as indirect indicators of affect.

A third quantitatively visible group consists of medical and health-related vocabulary, including *neurologie, rééducation, convalescent, patientèle, béquille, urgentiste, internat, kinésithérapie*. Approximately ten to twelve items of this type appear within the top-100 list, which is a notable proportion for a corpus of popular fiction. Their frequency reflects the narrative importance of illness, recovery and professional care contexts in the novels. These lexemes do not operate as specialised terminology but situate emotional and interpersonal experience within everyday practices of treatment, vulnerability and responsibility. The frequency distribution of proper names, bodily reaction terms and medical vocabulary confirms that emotional narratives in the analysed novels are grounded in concrete characters, embodied experience and care-related situations rather than in abstract emotional lexicons. This indirect and process-oriented representation of emotion provides the narrative ground on which care is subsequently articulated through action, presence and responsibility.

Verbal patterns of emotional experience. The verb frequency list has been compiled from a corpus of four novels, enabling the identification of different groups of verbs in the text. Among them, there are verbs which regularly occur in emotionally marked contexts and are associated with the verbalisation of emotional experience. High-frequency grammatical verbs have been proven to be the most frequent, but they do not carry independent analytical value. However, particular attention is drawn to verbs such as *sentir, ressentir, sembler, hésiter, espérer, and inquiéter*. These verbs refer to perception and internal reaction and are used in emotionally marked passages. This can be illustrated by contexts in which emotional tension is rendered through bodily sensation rather than explicit emotional naming, for ins-

Lemma	Lemma	Lemma	Lemma	Lemma
1 evann	11 farah	21 sambello	31 méhan	41 moulin-blanc
2 marie-lou	12 olivia	22 kinésithérapie	32 glousser	42 marielou
3 clarisse	13 alexis	23 bredouiller	33 neurologie	43 pistaches-cacahouètes
4 thibault	14 matthieu	24 kenzo	34 tchumpôt	44 jetée
5 nilch	15 yann	25 daguain	35 peupé	45 marido
6 mickaël	16 jo	26 mamig	36 eduardo	46 convalescent
7 cruc	17 madec	27 écume	37 valentine	47 doc
8 gobe-mouches	18 prozac	28 koslas	38 tibo	48 malo
9 lily	19 ouessant	29 moue	39 sarfati	49 acquiescer
10 groix	20 yvonne	30 grimacer	40 giagiá	50 mafate

Fig. 1. Most frequent lexical items in the corpus of four novels by Sophie Tal Men

tance Cette vague d'amour qui vous hérisse les poils et qui vous donne envie de pleurer, de rire à la fois [15, p. 32].

The verbs *sembler* and *hésiter* are especially frequent in passages describing emotional situations. Within this group, verbs expressing uncertainty and tentative evaluation play a particularly prominent role in the representation of emotional experience. Ça me semblait si évident... Jusqu'à ce jour fatidique, où tout a basculé [16, p. 193].

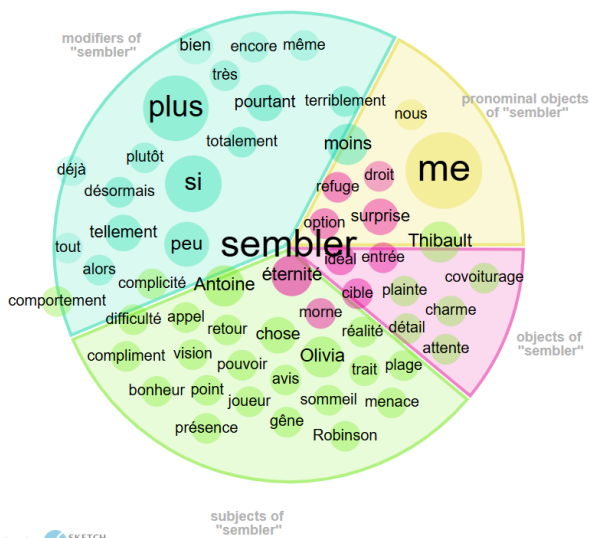


Fig. 2. Collocational profile of the verb *sembler*

The word sketch of the verb *sembler* provides additional evidence for the indirect verbalisation of emotional experience in the analysed novels.

The modifier zone is dominated by degree and scalar adverbs such as *plus*, *moins*, *très*, *si*, *peu*, *encore*, and *déjà*, which frame emotional states as relative, adjustable and subject to comparison rather than as fixed conditions. This pattern reinforces the interpretation of emotional experience as unstable and evolving, since *sembler* is rarely used without modification and is instead embedded in constructions that express gradation, hesitation or partial evaluation.

The subject and object zones further support this tendency. Subjects associated with *sembler* frequently refer to abstract notions (*chose*, *réalité*, *détail*, *point*, *avis*) as well as to named characters, indicating that emotional assessment is distributed between internal perception and external circumstances. Objects of *sembler* include evaluative and affectively loaded nouns such as *surprise*, *attente*, *charme* and *menace*, suggesting that the verb functions as a mediating device between perception and emotional interpretation.

The presence of the pronominal form *me* in the object slot highlights the reflexive dimension of emotional experience, where assessment is explicitly anchored in the experiencing subject. These collocational patterns confirm that *sembler* operates as a key verbal resource for articulating emotional uncertainty and ongoing evaluation rather than emotional finality.

In some cases, emotion is conveyed as uncertain and incomplete, reflecting an ongoing process of internal assessment. Emotional experience is registered through perception and reaction, not always directly. This pattern can be illustrated by the following passage, where emotional experience is registered through perception without explicit emotional categorisation. Parti depuis quelques heures, et déjà le manque. Une pression sur le diaphragme qui me coupe la respiration. Une pensée lancinante qui m'assombrit l'esprit [13, p. 9]. Je me sens différente aujourd'hui. Plus sûre de moi, plus femme, plus indépendante. [...] Suis-je vraiment si indépendante ? [13, p. 8–9]. Here, emotional self-perception is followed by doubt, which is expressed through a self-addressed question. Although the verb *sembler* is not used explicitly, the passage reflects emotional experience, which created as provisional and unstable. This pattern corresponds to the recurrent use of verbs of hesitation and uncertainty observed in the corpus.

The analysed examples show that emotional experience in the novels under study is organised in a consistent and recognisable way. Emotions tend to emerge through perception, hesitation, restrained bodily reaction, and moments of reflection. This manner of representation presents emotion as something that develops over time. It remains embedded in the narrative perspective. Emotional meaning is unfolds gradually, one step after another, demonstrating how characters live through emotionally charged situations. The recurrence of these verbal patterns across different narrative contexts proves that they are part of a stable narrative characteristic of women-centred popular fiction, where emotional significance arises through indirect cues and interpretative processes rather than through overt affective terminology.

Verbalisation of care and responsibility. The representation of care is given in the same mode and style in the analysed novels. Care becomes visible through recurrent verbal patterns that depict interaction between characters. These verbal patterns mirror emotionally sensitive situations. Corpus evidence shows that care in the analysed novels is expressed above all through action and interaction. Care is shown in what characters do for one another,

which reflects the broader restraint in emotional expression and the preference for conveying affect through everyday practice.

Care is realised through verbs that refer to presence, support, and practical involvement, such as *aider*, *rester*, *accompagner*, *écouter*, *rassurer*, *veiller*, and *prendre soin*. These verbs mostly tend to appear in situations where emotional tension is already present, yet they do not heighten this tension through expressive or evaluative language. Instead, they present care as something carried out in everyday interaction, often through small and quiet actions. Their recurrent use shows that care is represented primarily as something that is done rather than felt, with emotional meaning emerging from repeated patterns of behaviour rather than from explicit emotional statements.

The frequent use of the verb *rester*, expressing presence and continuity, is in care-related contexts as well as constructions referring to physical or emotional availability. In such passages, care is shown through staying, waiting, or accompanying, often in the absence of verbal reassurance or emotional explanation. As it is illustrated, presence itself becomes meaningful: *Pendant de longues minutes, il resta sans bouger. Elle sentit sa présence, son souffle aux effluves de café...* [14, p. 27]. In another episode, care is conveyed in the same restrained manner: *Je suis là, dit-il simplement. Et il resta près d'elle, sans chercher à remplir le silence* [14, p. 31]. In these moments, responsibility is expressed through simple presence rather than through words. Instead of naming emotions, the narrative allows emotional meaning to arise from the situation and the relationship between the characters.

Care in these novels is often expressed through silence and small actions rather than through speech. Verbs such as *écouter* and *regarder* regularly appear in moments of emotional tension, together with references to pauses, stillness and brief gestures. In such scenes, care does not take the form of advice or reassurance. It is shown through attention and physical presence. Characters listen, wait, or remain nearby, and the text does not explain what these actions “mean” emotionally. One such moment is described as follows: *Je prends place sur le fauteuil face à lui et j'attends qu'il sorte de sa bulle* [16, p. 11].

Care is also closely connected with situations in which characters perceive vulnerability without fully understanding it. Acts of support tend to accompany moments of uncertainty and internal reflection. Rather than naming emotions or drawing conclusions, characters respond by adjusting their behaviour to the situation. Care, in this sense, is not

presented as a complete emotional response but as a practical decision made in context. This is evident when the narrator explicitly takes responsibility for another person by speaking on their behalf: *Je décide d'être sa voix* [16, p. 23].

In the analysed novels, care is not a marginal element but part of the way the narrative works. It shapes how characters relate to one another and how emotionally sensitive situations are handled. Care is not introduced as a theme that needs to be explained; instead, it is built into everyday interaction and into the choices characters make when they respond to others. Through repeated scenes of presence, support and responsibility, care becomes a practical framework within which emotional experience takes place.

Corpus evidence shows that this framework is realised through a limited and recurring set of verbs that emphasise staying, listening and acting for others. These patterns give priority to presence and responsibility rather than to emotional declaration. In this sense, care does not appear as a named value or an explicitly stated emotion. It emerges through repeated forms of interaction that organise both emotional meaning and narrative development, and it remains closely connected to the restrained way emotions are verbalised throughout the novels.

Conclusion. The present study examines emotional narratives and care discourse in contemporary women-centred popular fiction, using four novels by Sophie Tal Men as illustrative material. Combining corpus-assisted analysis with narratological and ethical perspectives, the article has shown that emotional experience in the analysed texts is rarely verbalised through explicit emotional labels. Instead, it is constructed through perception, hesitation, bodily reaction and gradual cognitive processing.

The analysis of frequent lexical items and verbal patterns demonstrates that emotional meaning is anchored in character-centred narration and everyday interaction. Proper names, bodily reaction terms and medical vocabulary form a stable lexical core that situates emotional experience within concrete contexts of vulnerability, recovery and interpersonal responsibility. Within this framework, care is articulated not as an abstract value but as a recurrent practice realised through presence, attentiveness and supportive action.

By treating Sophie Tal Men's novels not as isolated stylistic phenomena but as a corpus representative of broader tendencies in women-centred popular fiction, the study highlights the narrative and ethical significance of indirect emotional representation. The findings suggest that emotional narratives and care

discourse are closely intertwined and that their interaction can be productively explored through corpus-assisted approaches, which allow recurrent linguistic patterns to be linked to narrative structure and ethical orientation.

Further research may be expanded through comparative corpus-based studies of emotional and care-related discourse in women-centered popular prose by different English and French contemporary authors.

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