Silver

POEM TEXT

Slowly, silently, now the moon
Walks the night in her silver shoon;
This way, and that, she peers, and sees
Silver fruit upon silver trees;
One by one the casements catch
Her beams beneath the silvery thatch;
Couched in his kennel, like a log,
With paws of silver sleeps the dog;
From their shadowy cote the white breasts peep
Of doves in a silver-feathered sleep;
A harvest mouse goes scampering by,
With silver claws and a silver eye;
And moveless fish in the water gleam,
By silver reeds in a silver stream.

SUMMARY

The moon travels through the night slowly and silently, wearing silver shoes. As she looks around in different directions, she sees silver fruit hanging from silver trees. Under silvery thatched rooftops, each window catches the moonlight in turn. A dog sleeps soundly in his kennel, his paws glinting with silvery moonlight. In their dark little shelter, white-breasted doves sleep, their feathers also bathed in silver light. A harvest mouse scuttles past, its claws and eyes shining like silver. Fish rest in the silvery stream, their scales shining next to silver reeds.

THEMES

THE TRANSFORMATIVE BEAUTY OF NATURE

"Silver" seeks to capture the enchanting beauty of a moonlit night. The speaker marvels at the moon's ability to suffuse the everyday world with wonder, presenting the moon as a kind of benevolent goddess peering into every corner of the world below. The moonlight here is not only beautiful in itself but also a source of transformative power: it makes everything else—even common, everyday objects—appear suddenly beautiful, too.

As the moon "silently" walks the night in her "silver shoon" (or shoes), she casts a lovely, silvery glow on everything she touches. Fruit trees, windows, rooftops, sleeping dogs, sheltering doves, mice, fish—all of these become "silver" in the moonlight. Common objects that might go unnoticed in the daytime become enchanting and wonderful in the quiet of the moonlight.

Such is the strength of this enchantment that it seems to cast a kind of spell over the land, making time stand still in tribute to the moon's power. The dog and the doves remain asleep as the moon moves through the night. Only a little mouse "scampers" across the ground. The fish in the stream, though their scales shine like silver, don't seem to move at all. Almost everything, then, lies suspended in this disarmingly beautiful moment.

The poem thus speaks to the beauty and wonder of nature, and the quiet enchantment of the nighttime in particular. It also, perhaps, subtly asks the reader to appreciate this beauty: to pause and observe the natural world closely.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Slowly, silently, now the moon
Walks the night in her silver shoon;
This way, and that, she peers, and sees
Silver fruit upon silver trees;

"Silver" begins by personifying the moon. The speaker presents it as a kind of female deity (as it is in many ancient myths) suffusing the world with magical silver light. The poem was originally written for children, and capturing a sense of child-like wonder is one of its main aims.

Notice how the first line delays the arrival of the main subject (the moon), instead offering two adverbs upfront: "slowly" and "silently." This little trick makes the opening suspenseful (contrast it with "The moon walks slowly and silently"). These two words, along with the title, also establish the poem's use of sibilance ("slowly, silently"). Whispery /s/ sounds occur throughout "Silver" and add to its hushed atmosphere of enchantment.

The moon walks the night wearing silver footwear ("shoon"), her steps spreading her gentle light. She is like a god surveying her work: the darting caesurae in line 3—"this way, and that, she peers, and sees"—mimic rapid glances and show how she covers the land far and wide. More sibilance, some of it alliterative, occurs in "silver shoon," "This," "she peers," "sees," "Silver," and

"silver trees," capturing the extent of the moon's transformative power. The repetition of "silver"—already mentioned three times—has a spell-like quality, recurring throughout the poem and evoking the moonlight's magical, hypnotic properties.

LINES 5-6

One by one the casements catch
Her beams beneath the silvery thatch;

The moon—and her light—continue their journey across the landscape, now approaching signs of human civilization. The poem presents moonlight as a gradual effect, as though the personified moon works methodically and deliberately to alter the world's appearance.

Here, the moonlight falls on people's windows, which the poem calls "casements." This *could* be a reference to the "magic casements" found in John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"—or just a more poetic word choice! In any case, these "casements" catch the moonlight beneath the "thatch" of rooftops.

Most houses aren't built with thatched roofs anymore (and they were uncommon outside rural areas even in 1913), so this detail situates the poem in a kind of timeless, magical version of the past. At the very least, "Silver" features a notable lack of contemporary objects.

Both lines 5 and 6 feature prominent alliteration: "casements catch" and "beams beneath." These little bits of linguistic sparkle seem to match the moon's gradual transformation of the earth. Every syllable and sonic effect feels meticulously placed, as if in tribute to the moon's impeccable work.

Notice, too, how the enjambment between the lines briefly suspends the sense of the sentence. "Catch" needs a main grammatical object (i.e., they catch *what*?), which is then provided by "Her beams" at the start of line 6. It's as if line 6 *catches* the sentence in mid-air, making sense of what would otherwise feel unfinished.

LINES 7-10

Couched in his kennel, like a log,
With paws of silver sleeps the dog;
From their shadowy cote the white breasts peep
Of doves in a silver-feathered sleep;

In lines 7-10, moonlight casts a silvery spell over the animals of the land. A dog sleeps "like a log" (an old, familiar simile) in "his kennel." Dogs are typically energetic creatures, yet the power of the moon compels this one to lie quietly, as if spellbound.

"Couched [...] kennel" and "like a log" build on the alliteration in the preceding lines; again, the moon seems to cast its transformative sparkle on the language itself. "Silver sleeps" also uses alliteration (and consonance), this time returning to the sibilant hush established in the opening lines. The image of the dog's stillness starts to make this little scene feel frozen in time.

"Doves," nestled in a little shelter ("cote"), sleep soundly as well. Like the thatched roof, the dovecote is an old-fashioned detail. It doesn't necessarily situate the poem in the distant past, but it contributes to an overall atmosphere of timelessness—the moon, after all, has been walking her rounds for millions of years! Doves are also symbols of peace, an association that adds to the peaceful atmosphere (consider how different the poem would be if these were, say, crows).

In lines 9-10, the poem again delays an important grammatical element in order to create suspense:

> From their shadowy cote the white breasts peep
> Of doves in a silver-feathered sleep;

This suspense is in keeping with the poem's hypnotic, dreamy quality. Once again, the poem repeats "silver" and uses sibilant alliteration ("silver-feathered sleep"). Though the moon is no longer directly mentioned, the reader knows by now that she's responsible for this enchanting transformation of the world.

Interestingly, although "Silver" is a kind of sonnet, it doesn't include a *turn* or significant shift in direction. This would normally come at the start of the sestet (the six lines following the opening eight). Perhaps the moon's lulling effect is so pervasive that it nullifies any major changes; everything's caught in a kind of silvery freeze-frame.

LINES 11-14

A harvest mouse goes scampering by,
With silver claws and a silver eye;
And moveless fish in the water gleam,
By silver reeds in a silver stream.

In lines 11-12, a little harvest mouse appears in the poem. This is pretty much the only thing moving in the moonlit scene. Yet it's such a small creature that its movement only emphasizes the general stillness of the night. In fact, it may be noticeable only *because* everything else seems frozen. The mouse, like the rest of the scene, takes on the moon's soft hue, which the poem again captures through sibilance and the word "silver":

> A harvest mouse goes scampering by,
> With silver claws and a silver eye;

Perhaps the harvest mouse's presence suggests that the poem describes a *harvest moon*: the autumnal full moon that used to help farmers gather their crops during the night (before electric lighting). If so, the moon's transformative power could represent nature's general capacity for renewal and growth.

In the last two lines, the poem returns to an image of stasis, a kind of freeze-frame: "moveless fish." The iridescent fish scales, like the windows of the thatched houses, reflect the moonlight. Readers will most likely associate fish with movement, so, as with the sleeping dog, the stillness of these fish emphasizes the

moon's hypnotic power.

The nearby reeds and the stream itself are also cloaked in "silver." Like every other line in the poem, the last two feature sibilance: "moveless fish [...] silver reeds [...] silver stream." With the double mention of "silver" in the last line, the moon's transformation of the landscape seems total. Everything in this scene wears an enchanted glow, as the poem captures the simple yet mysterious joy of a moonlit night.

SYMBOLS

DOVES

Within the overall context of the poem, "doves" are just one kind of creature among many resting under the moon's spell. But doves are also longtime symbols of peace. In fact, this symbolism stretches all the way back to ancient Greece.

In a poem that's already quiet and gentle, the presence of doves—let alone sleeping ones!—makes the atmosphere even more peaceful. All the troubles of waking life seem remote as the moon transforms the land into a scene of placid beauty. The dozing doves add to this effect on a symbolic, as well as literal, level. Just imagine if they were hawks or crows instead!

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "From their shadowy cote the white breasts peep / Of doves in a silver-feathered sleep;"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is an important part of the poem, filling it with beautiful, peaceful music that helps bring the beautiful, peaceful landscape to life for the reader. Much of this alliteration is also sibilance, and this device has its own section in the guide. In general, the /s/ alliteration serves the same function as the other examples: to create a hushed yet charged atmosphere of enchantment and transformation.

Almost every example of alliteration comes as a pair of sounds. This mimics the poem's other notable pairings: the rhymed couplets. Such neat, deliberate patterning helps create a sense of magic, as though the moon casts not only a visual spell on the landscape but also a linguistic spell on the poem. The non-/s/ examples all come together in lines 5-7:

> One by one the casements catch
> Her beams beneath the silvery thatch;
> Couched in his kennel, like a log,

These have an incantatory quality, like a chant. They also highlight the gradual effect of the moon, the way each object in the landscape seems to get switched on—like a light—by the moon's rays. "Casements catch," then, "catches" its alliterative sound just as the moon's light turns the windows silver.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Slowly, silently,"
- **Line 3:** "This," "that"
- **Lines 3-4:** "sees / Silver"
- **Line 4:** "silver"
- **Line 5:** "casements catch"
- **Line 6:** "beams beneath"
- **Line 7:** "Couched," "kennel," "like," "log"
- **Line 8:** "silver sleeps"
- **Line 10:** "silver," "sleep"
- **Line 14:** "silver stream"

CAESURA

Caesura plays a subtle role in the poem, appearing in just three lines. It helps establish a slow but steady pace as the moon and her rays move across the landscape. This effect is most noticeable in the first line, which starts with three adverbs and delays the clause's main subject and verb:

> Slowly, || silently, || now the moon
> Walks the night in her silver shoon;

These caesurae add to the delay, making the poem itself move more "slowly." In this way, they mirror the moon's gentle, methodical transformation of the night. Note, too, that caesura is necessary here because the opening line uses asyndeton: there's no conjunction between those first two adverbs. Had the speaker used a conjunction, this might have made the opening line feel less smooth and delicate ("slowly and silently" vs. "slowly, silently").

The third line, too, helps characterize the personified moon:

> This way, and that, she peers, and sees

These commas are like little shifts in direction, mimicking the moon's gaze as it falls on one object or creature after another. Think how different the line would sound if it said something like, "She looks in different directions."

The final caesura, in line 7, mainly serves a grammatical function. But it does make the line a little slower—which fits with the image of the sleeping dog!

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Slowly, silently, now"

- **Line 3:** "way, and that, she peers, and"
- **Line 7:** "kennel, like"

ENJAMBMENT

Though the poem is formatted as one block of text, it divides neatly into couplets throughout: seven pairs of two lines each. Enjambment helps make this form work, and also creates some moments of tension and release throughout the poem.

Each couplet in the poem could stand alone as a complete sentence, but four out of the seven couplets are enjambed—and wouldn't really make sense without the paired line that follows the enjambment. Here they are, with highlights on the words that fulfill the grammatical tension in each couplet:

> Slowly, silently, now the moon
> Walks the night in her silver shoon;
> This way, and that, she peers, and sees
> Silver fruit upon silver trees;
> One by one the casements catch
> Her beams beneath the silvery thatch [...]
> From their shadowy cote the white breasts peep
> Of doves in a silver-feathered sleep;

It's as if each enjambment leaves a question hanging in the air, which the second half of the couplet answers. What does the moon do? Walks. What does she see? Silver fruit. What do the casements catch? Her beams. Which white breasts? Those of doves.

In other words, these couplets are grammatically suspenseful—making the poem slow and mysterious, like the moon. When the reader finishes the first line of each couplet, they experience a brief, barely perceptible tension as the eye travels to the next line in search of grammatical sense.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "moon / Walks"
- **Lines 3-4:** "sees / Silver"
- **Lines 5-6:** "catch / Her"
- **Lines 7-8:** "log, / With"
- **Lines 9-10:** "peep / Of"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem personifies the moon, casting her as a magical, god-like being. Silently and methodically, she walks through the night, wearing silver shoes and observing her own transformative powers at work. As she passes, the night gains an enchanting beauty; ordinary objects and creatures take on an otherworldly silver hue.

This personification—which could also be read as a *deification* (god-making)—is common in literature and folklore more generally. For example, the ancient Romans imagined the moon as the goddess Selene (sister to Helios, the sun god). And everyone, at one point or another, sees a face in the moon!

Here, personification heightens the poem's sense of magic. A mysterious moon-woman walking the land is much more exciting and strange than the sun's rays bouncing off the lunar surface. Though this poem was written for kids, its personification channels a sense of childlike wonder that's equally appealing to adults.

Finally, personification paints the moon's transformation of the land as a deliberate act. To the poet, this beauty isn't just a product of chaos and chance; it seems to have some agency and design behind it.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Slowly, silently, "
- **Lines 1-2:** "now the moon / Walks the night in her silver shoon"
- **Line 2:** ";"
- **Line 3:** "This way, and that, "
- **Lines 3-4:** "she peers, and sees / Silver fruit upon silver trees;"
- **Line 6:** "Her beams"

DIACOPE

There's a whole lot of silver in this poem! The word "silver" gets repeated ten times (with a couple of minor variations). There are typically just a few small words between each "silver," making all this repetition more specifically an example of the device called diacope ("one by one" in line 5 is also diacope). This diacope does two main things in the poem:

1. The sheer number of "silver[s]" stresses the power and pervasiveness of the moon's light. The moon completely transforms the everyday world, and it's her *silver* that makes this happen. The poem sprinkles the word "silver" throughout to make this transformation seem gradual, as though the moon is bathing one object after another in her glow.
2. The repetition has an incantatory effect, turning the poem into a kind of spell. It's as though the poem sparkles with *linguistic* silver to match the moon's visual alteration of the landscape. Try reading this poem out loud to really notice the repetition working its magic!

Finally, a special mention for the repeated "sleeps"/"sleep" in lines 8 and 10. This repetition contributes to the poem's hushed, hypnotic quality—almost as if the moon is spreading sleepiness along with its light.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "silver"
- **Line 4:** "Silver," "silver"
- **Line 5:** "One," "one"
- **Line 6:** "silvery"
- **Line 8:** "silver," "sleeps"
- **Line 10:** "silver," "sleep"
- **Line 12:** "silver," "silver"
- **Line 14:** "silver," "silver"

SIBILANCE

This poem is *full* of sibilant sounds—in fact, they appear in every line! The opening couplet establishes this pattern immediately:

> Slowly, silently, now the moon
> Walks the night in her silver shoon;

The first line's /s/ sounds—which are also alliterative—make the opening feel extra hushed and slow. "The moon walks silently and slowly" just wouldn't have the same effect. Here, too, the poem draws a strong link between the /s/ sound and the "silver" quality of the moon's rays. That is, the poem establishes a sonic equivalent to the moonlight, then sprinkles it throughout the remaining lines.

As the moon travels across the landscape, the sibilance keeps pace with it. Sometimes it appears as an /sh/ sound (e.g., "fish"), which has an onomatopoeic quality of *shushing*. In other places it appears as more of a /z/ sound (e.g., "trees"). Together, these whispery consonants make the poem sound like a hushed, recited spell—or sound as if it's *under* the moon's spell, like the "dog," "doves," and "fish."

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Slowly, silently,"
- **Line 2:** "Walks," "silver shoon"
- **Line 3:** "This," "she peers," "sees"
- **Line 4:** "Silver," "silver trees"
- **Line 5:** "casements"
- **Line 6:** "beams," "silvery"
- **Line 7:** "his"
- **Line 8:** "paws," "silver sleeps"
- **Line 9:** "shadowy," "breasts"
- **Line 10:** "doves," "silver-feathered sleep"
- **Line 11:** "harvest," " mouse goes scampering"
- **Line 12:** "silver claws," "silver"
- **Line 13:** "moveless fish"
- **Line 14:** "silver reeds," "silver stream"

SIMILE

The poem uses one simile, and it's probably familiar to most readers. Lines 7-8 describe a dog bathed in moonlight, sleeping "like a log." This is a common idiom that means *sleeping deeply*.

This poem was originally written for children, so this simile may look fresher to younger eyes—to adults, it's a cliché. That said, the poem moves on so quickly that the cliché doesn't really stick out. Dogs are typically active creatures, whereas logs are heavy and inanimate, so the simile also presents evidence of the moon's power. (The moon must be seriously sleep-inducing to make a dog look inanimate.)

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "like a log,"

VOCABULARY

Shoon (Line 2) - Shoes.

Casements (Line 5) - Windows, especially the kind that swing outward on hinges.

Thatch (Line 6) - Thatched roofing, which tends to be made out of straw or reeds.

Couched (Line 7) - Lying down.

Cote (Line 9) - A small coop or shelter for birds.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Silver" is a type of sonnet is known as a couplet or Clare sonnet, after the poet John Clare. This means that the poem has 14 lines broken into seven couplets.

Other sonnet types tend to have more elaborate rhyme schemes and traditionally feature a volta (sudden shift in direction) around line 9 or line 13. Here, the apparent *lack* of a volta reflects the poem's atmosphere of peace and serenity. That said, the personified moon does subtly disappear from the poem after line 6, her explicit presence giving way to the effect of her moonbeams. Perhaps this could be characterized as a turn, but if so, it's a very subtle one.

The use of couplets gives the poem a slow, methodical quality that matches the work of the moon. Much as the moon moves across the land, gradually illuminating objects and creatures, the poem moves unhurriedly, rhyme by rhyme, toward its conclusion.

METER

The primary meter in "Silver" is four-beat accentual meter. This means that each line contains four stressed beats, but where those beats fall varies somewhat. You can hear this for yourself if you read the poem aloud and tap a hand or foot each time you

say a strongly stressed syllable. Here's a look at lines 1-2:

> Slowly, silently, now the moon
> Walks the night in her silver shoon;

The rhythm moves around a lot, but the number of stresses per line remains (relatively) constant.

Some lines in the poem also fit the pattern of iambic tetrameter or trochaic tetrameter. This means that they contain either four iambs (metrical feet with alternating unstressed-stressed beats) or four trochees (the opposite: feet with stressed-unstressed beats). Lines 5 and 6 offer examples of trochaic tetrameter and iambic tetrameter, respectively:

> One by | one the | casements | catch
> Her beams | beneath | the sil- | very thatch;

("Silvery" here counts as two syllables, not three; "silv'ry.")

Accentual meter is often found in nursery rhymes and children's verse—like "Silver." As handled by de la Mare, it sounds simple, natural, and beautifully clear.

RHYME SCHEME

"Silver" consists of rhymed couplets. Its overall rhyme scheme is simple:

AABBCCDDEEFFGG

This simplicity suits a poem originally written for children. Each rhyme pair rings out clearly and satisfyingly to the reader's ear: "moon"/"shoon," "sees"/"trees," "catch"/"thatch," "log"/"dog," "peep"/"sleep," "by"/"eye," "gleam"/"stream." These steady, dependable rhymes help portray the moon's work as methodical and deliberate. She walks through the night, touching each object, animal, and feature of the landscape with silvery magic. The rhymes also take on a spell-like quality, adding to the magical atmosphere.

SPEAKER

The speaker doesn't really feature in the poem—"Silver" is all about the moon! The lack of an "I" keeps the focus where the poet wants it: on the enchanting, transformative qualities of moonlight.

The poem feels more magical because the reader seems to be witnessing some kind of secret ritual, upon which no human being—speaker or otherwise—intrudes. That said, the speaker's style of expression *does* contribute to the magic. The speaker mentions "silver" ten times (eleven, counting the title!), as if reciting a chant or spell, and uses sibilant words (e.g., "slowly" and "shadowy") to conjure a hushed nocturnal atmosphere.

SETTING

"Silver" is set on an enchanted moonlit night. In fact, the entire poem is *about* the way the moon creates this sense of enchantment. The poem tracks the moon as she moves across the landscape, suffusing objects and creatures—most of which are pretty ordinary in the daytime—with a special, silvery magic. So enchanting is her spell that the poem feels like a snapshot of a world frozen in moonlight. Here, virtually everything is still, and *everything* is silver.

The poem features a notable lack of contemporary details, even by the standards of 1913. Instead, words like "casements" and "thatch" seem to situate the poem far in the past (not many roofs are made with thatch anymore). This seems to be a rural setting, given the presence of thatched houses—likely cottages—as well as fruit trees, a stream, and a harvest mouse. (Harvest mice tend to live among reeds, long grass, and crops like wheat and oats.) But these details aren't specific to one time or place; they're more evocative of a timeless, magical atmosphere, in keeping with de la Mare's poetry more generally.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) was a British author who wrote across a range of genres: the novel, the short story, drama, and, of course, poetry. Much of his work, including this poem, was written for children. De la Mare admired kids for living "in a world peculiarly their own, so much so that it is doubtful if the adult can do more than very fleetingly reoccupy that far-away consciousness."

"Silver," which appeared in his much-loved 1913 children's collection, *Peacock Pie*, contains a mix of enchantment, mystery, and childlike wonder. It speaks to what de la Mare called the "exquisite," "comprehensive" imagination of childhood "solitude"—the imagination in the years before adulthood has shorn the world of its enchanting qualities. Perhaps no poem captures these qualities better than de la Mare's most famous work, "The Listeners," which Thomas Hardy (a writer whom de la Mare knew and admired) called "possibly the finest poem of the century."

De la Mare is something of a singular figure in the history of English literature. He shares some common ground with British Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and John Keats, particularly in his interest in childhood and the transformative powers of nature and the imagination. But he also possesses a sense of the uncanny that sets him apart. He was anthologized alongside poets like Hillaire Belloc, Robert Graves, and Edward Thomas in a group called the "Georgian poets," yet he doesn't

fit neatly into this group either stylistically or thematically. De la Mare's poetry fell out of fashion after his death, but in recent years, it's begun to find new readers and appreciation.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

De la Mare worked in the statistics department of Standard Oil (a huge oil company) for 18 years, writing on the side when he could. Eventually, he secured a pension that allowed him to write full-time. "Silver," published in the collection *Peacock Pie* (1913), appeared relatively early in de la Mare's writing career. It also appeared early in England's "Georgian era" (1910-1936), named after King George V—and just a year before the start of World War I.

When war broke out, de la Mare was too old for compulsory service. Though he did write some patriotic war poetry (e.g., "How Sleep the Brave"), his work was never dominated by political issues. In fact, his poetry and fiction chiefly aim to *escape* the particulars of historical and social context, preferring to conjure up a more mysterious, timeless world.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Peacock Pie — The full text of the 1913 collection in which "Silver" appeared. (https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3753)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to "Silver" read out loud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IvV_tB_UPyw&ab_channel=RomanStyran)
- More Poems and a Biography — A Poetry Foundation feature on the poet's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walter-de-la-mare)
- Anthony Hecht on Walter de la Mare — A short overview of de la Mare's life and work, by American poet Anthony Hecht. (http://archive.wilsonquarterly.com/essays/walter-de-la-mare)
- More on the Georgians — An overview of the loose group of poets, including de la Mare, who were known as the Georgians. (http://mural.uv.es/tasenfe/georgianpoets)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALTER DE LA MARE POEMS

- The Listeners

HOW TO CITE

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