

# The Creative Launcher

Journal URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com/index.php/tcl>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Issue: Vol. 8 & Issue 5, (October, 2023)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on: 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2023

Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access: Yes

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

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**Article History:** Abstract Received on: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023 | Full Article Received on: 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023 | Revision received on: 9<sup>th</sup> October 2023 | Plagiarism Checked on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023 | Peer Review Completed on: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023 | Article Accepted on: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023 | First Published on: 31<sup>st</sup> October 2023

Research Article



## Demystifying Race and Class as Special Needs in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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 <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2023.8.5.18>

Pages: 189-201

### Abstract

The present research article examines the experiences of characters in *God Help the Child* (2015) within the framework of issues that require mainstreaming such as racism, ethnicity and class and how they amount to special needs. This special need gets its place in literature because the subject matter and themes of literature often derive their appeal from the twist that results when literary representations undermine, contradict, equal, or surpass the real, or at least our sense of it, the reason why mimesis is often achieved in literature through a

figurative portrayal of reality. Literary tropes in other words, help to amplify literary themes within the framework of assumptions that appeal to our definition of reality. Thus, the concept of special needs like any other figurative connotations, serves to expatiate and interrogate issues of racial and class portrayal in the text. Elaborating the concept and idea of special needs/disability to include identity formation rather than the physical or mental characteristics, establishes a case for the “othering” of minority identities who suffer discrimination on the basis of their identities be it racial or class difference.

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**Keywords:** Special needs/Disability, Racism, Class, Limitation, Segregation, Binary, Identity, Discrimination, Demystify, Mainstream

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### **Introduction**

African-American The literature delves into the long-withheld concepts of freedom and equality for Black individuals in the United States. It also addresses various themes such as African-American culture, racism, religion, slavery, the concept of home, segregation, migration, feminism, and more. Through an African-American perspective, this body of literature captures experiences. In the early Republic, African-American literary works served as a platform for free Blacks to navigate their identity within an individualized republic. Despite facing resistance from the white public, they endeavored to exercise political and social autonomy. Their ongoing struggle aimed to overcome the discrimination imposed upon them by American society. This paper seeks to highlight this unjust treatment as unique challenges that require special attention.

The terms special needs and disability have been used interchangeably. Hence, “Special needs” are individuals with a mental, emotional, or physical disability who are termed “persons with disabilities” and according to National Policy on Special Needs Education in Nigeria (2015, p.11-12), special needs “are persons with physical and sensory impairments including albinism, who because of their condition cannot cope with regular school/class methods and processes without formal Special Needs Educational training”. It goes further to expatiate what constitute special needs into different categories and according to their work:

In this category, we have persons with visual Impairment (total, partial sightedness and low vision), Hearing Impairment (mild, moderate, severe/profound hearing Impairment), Physical and Health Impairment (paraplegia, quadriplegia, seizures, orthotoid, cerebral palsy, etc.), Mental Retardation/Intellectual Disability/Intellectual Developmental Disability (educable, trainable, bed ridden), Behavioural Disorders (hyperactivity, hypo activity/the socially maladjusted/emotional disorder), Speech Impairment

(stammering/stuttering, voice disorders, etc.), Learning Disabilities (dyscalculia, dyslexia, auditory processing disorder, visual processing disorder, attention deficit disorders etc.), Multiple Impairment (intellectual with visual impairment), Autism Spectrum Disorders, Albinism (an inherited genetic condition that affects the production of melanin – the pigment responsible for coloration of skin, eyes and hair) (NPSNEN, 2015, p.12).

In this context, all psychological, racial and gender-based limitations created by society result to social exclusion, isolation and lack of opportunity, therefore, creating a disabling environment especially for the less privilege in the society. Over time in literary studies, “special needs” has been a concept seen as in medical perspectives to mean one that is physically, mentally or psychologically incapacitated. However, in the context of this paper, we explore special needs beyond the physical, medical, political and psychological context to a sociological in which individuals are expected to perform. Using Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, the study conceptualizes special needs as restriction which is based on gender, race, and class that amounts to social exclusion, oppression, isolation, discrimination, radicalism and lack of opportunity.

“Special needs” is portrayed through race, class and gender whose place in the American society creates a binary of division that result to discrimination. The term “race” refers to groups of people with differences and similarities in biological traits that society deems socially significant, leading to differential treatment based on these attributes. For instance, while variations in eye color are not socially deemed significant, differences and similarities in skin tone are (Cornell and Hartmann 1998, 26).

### **Theoretical Framework:**

This paper employs the New Historicism as a theoretical framework to demystify the categories of race and class, which are regarded as special needs or disabilities contributing to discrimination and limitations. The New Historicism sees literature as a fundamental piece of history and a declaration of verifiable powers. It compares scholarly investigation to a powerful circle, where the work illuminates us about the encompassing belief system (like subjugation, ladies’ privileges), and the investigation of philosophy illuminates us about the work. There are two main types of new historicism: evaluating the work critically within its historical context and in the context of its creation. Literature “does not exist outside of time and place and cannot be interpreted without reference to the era in which it was written,” according to scholars Kirszner and Mandell (2008). As a hypothetical viewpoint, New Historicism contends that perusers are impacted by their way of life, making objective understanding unthinkable.

Followers of New Historicism accept that pundits ought to consider what their own way of life means for their understanding of the verifiable effects on a work. This unit intends to present the hypothetical precepts of New Historicism. According to the “New Historicist,” a culture’s material conditions underlie all expression. Texts are looked at to see how they show economic and social realities, especially how they make ideologies and show power or subversion. The representations of marginalized or underrepresented groups are particularly important to New Historicism.

Kelly Griffith (2002) asserts that the following concepts are at the heart of New Historicism’s central assumptions: ideology, the self, history, culture, text, and discourse. The New Historicist approach to literature study is based on these ideas and draws from structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language. Culture, as the essential term, is seen regarding human sciences as the all-out lifestyle of a general public, incorporating language, economy, workmanship, religion, and connection to an area. Culture, according to New Historicists, is a collection of shared codes that allow for communication, the creation of artifacts, and action.

New Historicists state that writing is history, unpredictably interlaced with authentic setting. They investigate the author’s intentions, cited events and ideas, reader responses, and the work’s relevance to today when they study literature. They attract from various disciplines to represent writing’s part ever. New Historicists center around writing as a social text, inspecting its relationship with different texts, both scholarly and non-artistic. They look at how people use literary discourse for communication and societal commentary and identify the codes that make up literary discourse. Also, they examine writing’s relationship with cultural power structures, investigating how writing serves, goes against, and changes the cravings of force elites, and the belief systems it upholds or sabotages. Last but not least, a lot of New Historicists see criticism as an “intervention” in society.

### **Race and Class issues as Special Needs in Tony Morrison’s *God Help the Child***

The African American Literature draws its themes from a bunch of issues that border on power-play beyond the ex-slave narration within and even outside the United States of America. The major theme and others also discuss the question of identity difference, as it relates to the dialectics of self and other is sensitive issue that determines who gets what and who does not. “Othering” is one of the tenets of African American literature that informs the binary classifications of race, ethnicity and class. It is also the concern of gender studies that show similar traits. This shows that privilege and oppression are often assigned on the basis of identities which are socially, culturally, or politically constructed.

It means that from the above position that constructs and/or configurations of any sort often constitute major limitations to the individuals and/or groups. These limitations amount to special needs because the Disability People's International (DPI) observes that disability/special needs is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of a community on an equal level with others due to physical and/or social barriers. Tony Morrison's *God Help the Child* (2015) captures this segment of reality as she presents the binary of difference and separation of the minor race (black) and the superior race (white) in her attempt to present the history of the black struggle from the period of slavery to freedom in the novel. This is true of what Kelly Griffith (2002) observes in new historicism (cited in Felix E. et al 2013,108). "thatNew Historicists believe that literature is history. It is "enmeshed" in history. Hence, when New Historicists study literature, they examine such things as how the work was composed, what the author's intentions were, what events and ideas the work refers to..." (Felix E. et al 2013,108).

*God Help the Child (GHTC)* stands as Toni Morrison's most recent novel, released in 2015. The book, on the whole, engages with the central themes recurrent in Morrison's renowned works, including racial prejudice, the significance of black skin color, and relationships between the center and periphery. True to its title, the novel delves into the concept of childhood, exploring the process of confronting past ghosts from one's youth to more effectively reclaim the present and shape the future In *God Help the Child* (2015), Toni Morrison is aware of the historical contexts that shape the text from the Middle Passage, Slavery in America, American Civil War, Jim Crow Law (1877-1960s), Civil Rights Movement, to Inter and Intra Racism (Sara Ramtani, 2017). Booker presents Morrison's concern on these issues when he preoccupies himself with unanswered questions:

Four years ago, as an undergraduate, he'd nibbled courses in several curricula, psychology, political science, humanities, and he'd taken multiple courses in African-American Studies, where the best professors were brilliant at description but could not answer to his satisfaction any question beginning with "Why." He suspected most of the real answers concerning slavery, lynching, forced labor, sharecropping, racism, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, prison labor, migration, civil rights and black revolution movements were all about money. Money withheld, money stolen, money as power, as war. Where was the lecture on how slavery alone catapulted the whole country from agriculture into the industrial age in two decades? White folks' hatred, their violence, was the gasoline that kept the profit motors running (*GHTC*,85).

The oppressive life of Bride who is rejected even from birth due to the colour of her skin, Booker, Rain, Sweet, and Hannah and their experiences speak volume to the racial discrimination which this study sees as special needs.

The narrative centers on Lula Ann Bridewell, Toni Morrison's black protagonist, born to parents with lighter skin tones, Louis and Sweetness. Due to her dark complexion, Lula Ann faces rejection from her father and resentment from her mother. Sweetness is so embarrassed by her daughter's dark skin that she compels her to address her as "Sweetness" instead of mom. She has even attempted to harm Lula Ann by smothering her with a blanket and withholds any form of affection or love. The opening paragraph unveils the challenges associated with being born with unique needs or disabilities, as observed by Lula Ann's mother:

I am not to blame, so holding me responsible is unwarranted. I had no involvement in it and am clueless about how it occurred. It took less than an hour after they delivered her for me to recognize that something was amiss—gravely amiss. Her dark skin frightened me; it was as black as midnight, Sudanese black. I am light-skinned, with what we refer to as "high yellow" and so is Lula Ann's father. Nobody in my family is anywhere near that level of darkness.

It is within this structure of same historical system in America that Lula Ann is deprived of the right of being free to enjoy her childhood and the promising life that lies ahead of her other than being considered having special needs. This is why Lula Ann has no voice even in the face of oppression. She recounts her experience with Rain whose parents treats her bad too. Her mother and father have left her to the cruel world and exposed her to sexual abuse which demonstrates the level of her limitation that subjects her as having special needs. She complains to Bride as to the abuses she endures before she flees from her own home:

"He stuck his pee thing in my mouth and I bit it. So she apologized to him, gave back his twenty-dollar bill and made me stand outside." The berries were bitter, not the wild sweet stuff she expected. "She wouldn't let me back in. I kept pounding on the door. She opened it once to throw me my sweater." Rain spit the last bit of blueberry into the dirt. As Bride imagined the scene her stomach fluttered. How could anybody do that to a child, any child, and one's own? "If you saw your mother again what would you say to her?" Rain grinned. "Nothing. I'd chop her head off." (*GHTC*, p.79)

Rain's condition just like that of Booker and Lula Ann and the black minority is not a warrant for discrimination and exploitation having been placed by society as disabled or having special needs.

Lula Ann's condition as having special needs in this context is tied to her status as a child, as a black racial minority and then as a female. Thus, her voice like every other woman's is deemed as insignificant as her birth. Her condition and others position her psychologically to accept oppression as part of the burden women and the minority race must bear. Her mother as she later discovers who makes her call her "Sweetness" for the shame of bearing to accept her as daughter was aware of the cruel treatment of atrocity and rejection committed by her husband against Lula Ann their daughter, yet like the American society that considers her as having special needs, does nothing to help the poor child. Lula Ann sees this as betrayal which is within the mindset of the powerlessness of a woman in a patriarchal American society. Her mother feels guilty as she confesses and acknowledges her reasons for treating Lula badly due to the special needs associated to her colour:

Oh, yeah, I feel bad sometimes about how I treated Lula Ann when she was little. But you have to understand: I had to protect her. She didn't know the world. There was no point in being tough or sassy even when you were right. Not in a world where you could be sent to a juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school, a world where you'd be the last one hired and the first one fired. She couldn't know any of that or how her black skin would scare white people or make them laugh and trick her (*GHTC*,37).

Lula Ann's decision to change her presumed "local name" to "Bride" in order to fit-in, in a racial environment where class is considered very important for one to succeed. This is another pointer to what this paper considers as special needs:

Wiggling my toes under the silk cushion I couldn't help smiling at the lipstick smile on my wineglass, thinking, "How about that, Lula Ann? Did you ever believe you would grow up to be this hot, or this successful?" Maybe *she* was the woman he wanted. But Lula Ann Bridewell is no longer available and she was never a woman. Lula Ann was a sixteen-year-old-me who dropped that dumb countryfied name as soon as I left high school. I was Ann Bride for two years until interviewed for a sales job at Sylvia, Inc., and, on a hunch, shortened my name to Bride, with nothing anybody needs to say before or after that one memorable syllable (*GHTC*, p.7).

Changing her name to fit-in means saving herself from herself and her backward people who have nothing to offer her, a society filled with special needs people or the disabled society that needs saving. No wonder she makes reference to her name as "countryfied name". This name changing complex displays by Lula Ann shows the binary of opposition, an instance of "othering" or "otherness" on the basis of race and class.

In this sense, Lula Ann's race is a group of black, helpless people who are plagued by "barbarism and primitivism" or lower class (commoners) people that require the support

civilized people like the white race or Louis with superior class to help them stand tall in the face of civilization. Barker and Murray (2013,69) assert that disability (special needs) could be tied into wider patterns of dispossession; the loss of family, home, land, community, employment. Lula Ann, Rain, Booker, Hannah and Brooklyn all have their different experiences as they are growing up from rejection to child molestation of which the thoughts bring fresh memories of vengeance and hatred to the system or society that allows such binary of opposition to exist. All of these characters suffer from a harsh disabling traumatic past that the society allows and makes them people with special needs due to their race or class.

Nevertheless, possessing a black complexion is not Bride's fault or choice; as Booker suggests, blackness is merely a color, a genetic trait, devoid of inherent flaw, curse, blessing, or sin (p. 106). Sweetness, having grown up in a world marked by racism and discrimination under white supremacy, where talking back or fighting in school could lead to juvenile lockup and being the last hired and first fired, cannot foresee the challenges her daughter will face due to her black skin. Despite this, Sweetness is convinced that Lula Ann's "Color is a cross she will always carry" (p. 20). These aspects align with what this study identifies as special needs or disabilities requiring mainstream attention (Sarah Ramtani, 2017).

Additionally, Lula Ann's father rejects her, viewing her not only as a stranger but an enemy. Eventually, he abandons her, suspecting Sweetness of betrayal. Left as an abandoned wife, Sweetness can offer her black child nothing but cruelty and hatred. Unlike typical children, Bride grows poisoned by her mother's neglect—a mother who refuses physical contact with her daughter's black skin, abstaining from hugs and replacing compassion with harsh reactions. Sweetness shouts, screams, and punishes Bride, confining her to her room for minor mistakes like dropping something, unbraiding her hair, or speaking to a stranger. Bride is even deprived of uttering the tender word "Mama," as her mother insists on being addressed as "Sweetness" rather than "Mother" or "Mama."

I told her to call me "Sweetness" instead of "Mother" or "Mama." It was safer. Being that black and having what I think are too-thick lips calling me "Mama" would confuse people. Besides, she has funny colored eyes, crow-black with a blue tint, something witchy about them too. So it was just us two for a long while and I don't have to tell you how hard it is being an abandoned wife...More so when they looked at Lula Ann and back at me—like I was cheating or something (p.13).

*God Help the Child* conveys how the sociocultural dispositions of societies shape the lives of individuals and groups. These sociocultural structures create a dialectic situation that account for the binaries that characterize societies, more often to the advantage of one and to the detriment of the other. Through the experience of Lula Ann, we see how social constructs,



superstition of being black and cultural affinity affect an individual sense of identity. Also prevalent in the novel are differences created by class and race to include these binaries of oppositions in blacks/whites, rich/poor, man/woman, children/adult, pretty/ugly, normal/abnormal, able/disable, healthiness/special needs and so on.

The experience of Lula Ann reveals that individuals having special needs are often a product of a biased and failed system. Lula Ann's experience is quite symbolic in some ways of the black minority who have undergone tragic experiences as a result of racial discrimination and their experiences in slavery. Hannah, Booker, Rain and Lula Ann are exposed to the hardship of the racial American society by virtue of their search for a better life. The mixture of Louis' and the rich white and coloured families around point to the power of oppression assigned to the wealthy by virtue of their status in the society; Louis leaves Lula Ann with her mother due to her colour while Rain is given away to be abused by her parent just to make end meets:

"I used to but my mother lives there."

"So you ran away."

"No I didn't. She threw me out. Said 'Get the fuck out.' So I did." "Why? Why would she do that?" Why would anybody do that to a child? Bride wondered. Even Sweetness, who for years couldn't bear to look at or touch her, never threw her out.

"Because I bit him."

"Bit who?"

"Some guy. A regular. One of the ones she let do it to me (*GHTC*, p.78)

These differences are strong identity markers that determine who gets what in society. The helplessness and silence of Lula Ann, her mother, Rain and Hannah in the face of oppression is the function of the superstitious, social construct and "masculine ethos", and the disillusionment that characterize the society. In spite of their limitation and marginalization these characters are able to rise above the oppressive system to assert their identity by opting for independence even when the society sees them as having special needs. They eventually develop a thick skin against the oppressive system and regain their voice. Lula Ann is quick to highlight her growth in spite her traumatic past experience with this quote:

I'm regional manager now and that's like being a captain so I have to maintain the right relationship with the crew. Our company, Sylvia, Inc., is a small cosmetics business, but it's beginning to blossom and make waves, finally, and shed its frumpy past. It used to be Sylph Corsets for Discriminating Women back in the forties, but changed its name and ownership to Sylvia Apparel, then to Sylvia, Inc., before going flat-out hip with six cool cosmetics lines, one of which is mine. I named it YOU, GIRL: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium. It's

for girls and women of all complexions from ebony to lemonade to milk. And it's mine, all mine—the idea, the brand, the campaign.

Though Sweetness drops the idea of murdering or giving Bride away to an orphanage, the black girl grows imprisoned in her authoritative mother's cage like Maya Angelou's black protagonist's, Marguerite, who was enclosed in the segregating Stamps village under her grandmother's control in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Bride the baby is kept home most of time so as to not frighten people with her black African skin. Moreover, in her school she is forced to bear her mates insults because her mother warns her to not react or reclaim so not to be excluded. She even does not tell anyone when she saw the landlord, where her mother rented, raped a little child otherwise they will be put out of their apartments; all that because she is so black and "needed to learn how to behave and keep her head down and not to make trouble" (14), as Sweetness says justifying her roughness with Bride as her life is being shaped. This is what Bride lives with as special needs all her life because of the colour of her skin and with fear as she recounts her experience after catching the landlord molesting a child of her age but her mother warns her in the following quote: She said, "Don't you say a word regarding it. Not to anyone, you hear me, Lula? Put it off. Not a solitary word." So I was reluctant to tell her the rest — that despite the fact that I didn't utter a sound, I just loomed over the windowsill and stared, something made the man gaze upward. Mr. Leigh was the culprit. While the child was whimpering between his boots, he was unzipping his pants. I was terrified by his expression, but I couldn't move. When he yelled, "Hey, little nigger cunt!," I heard him. Get the hell outta here and shut that window! GHTC, p. 46) In the United States prior to, during, and after the Civil Rights Movement, many children are harmed and neglected by the color black. In *God Help the Youngster*, Pleasantness clarifies that colorism and prejudice are behind her brutality with her dark kid "Yet I might have done a frightful things to my lone kid since I needed to safeguard her, needed to. All as a result of skin privileges" Lula Ann (Bride) is aware that the distance between her and Sweetness stems from her blackness. She supplicates basically to be slapped by her mom to feel her touch:

As we walked down the courthouse steps she held my hand, my hand. She never did that before and it surprised me as much as it pleased me because I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell. Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. Rinse me, actually, after a halfhearted rub with a soapy washcloth. I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch. I made little mistakes deliberately, but she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated—bed without supper, lock me in my room—but her screaming at me was the worst. When fear rules, obedience is the only survival choice (*GHTC*, p.30-31).

The disregard of Pleasantness and all dark guardians bring about a troublesome and horrendous improvement of the youngsters. Lula Ann only succeeded in snatching her mother's love and care when she lied and accused Sofia Huxley, a young black teacher, of child sex abuse in court.

In addition, Lula Ann or Bride clings to white values and garners people's affection and admiration as she struggles to assert her place in society and fit into a system that values class differences.

One more issue of class saw as unique requirements is Downpour's insight. In the road, Downpour, an offspring of six years, defies vagrancy, dejection, starving and dread to that end she moves surprised and takes off when Steve contacts her shoulder asking her name when he initially meets her. Rain talks about the difficulties that come with being homeless and alone:

And she did, her emerald eyes sometimes sparkling wide other times narrowed to dark olive slits as she described the savvy, the perfect memory, the courage needed for street life. You had to find out where the public toilets were, she said; how to avoid children's services, police, how to escape drunks, dope heads. But knowing where sleep was safe was the most important thing. It took time and she had to learn what kinds of people would give you money and what for, and remember the back doors of which food pantries or restaurants had kind and generous servers. The biggest problem was finding food and storing it for later (GHTC,79).

While the black and classless kids of the minor race are subjected to bias and prejudice who are molested and abused living with fear to even talk, the white's children are given decent life and provided with all there is to have in the society.

Brooklyn is a perfect example of the superior race (white) whose childhood is awesome compared to that of Lula Anne, Booker, Rain and Hannah in spite her parents belonging to the middle class but she lacks nothing. Her background and her attitude to life show one in control and without fear. Her experience though related but different from that of the poor black children. From her voice one can assume the complexity of dominance as she tells her story:

Nothing about where she's going or how long she'd be gone. One thing I know for sure she's tracking that guy. I can read her mind like a headline crawling across the bottom of a TV screen. It's a gift I've had since I was a little kid. Like when the land lady stole the money lying on our dining room table and said we were behind in the rent... (GHTC, p.103).

The use of "read of mind", the allusion to "TV screen" and "dining room table" show her class and where she belongs as being white and superior as against the others indicating the binaries

that separate their world from rich/poor, white/black, normal/abnormal and healthiness/special needs.

### Conclusion

This paper has explored the retrospect of special needs in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* within the conceptual framework of social model of disability that explains the context of limitations that account for the marginalized and biased experiences of African Americans in American society facing the tragedy of a system that allows racism to thrive. Through the close look at the subjugating experiences of characters in this text, this paper has shown how the experiences of individuals and groups within the American society relatively and contextually amount or result to special needs and worthy to be mainstreamed to correct the opposition created by the social construct based on the interpretation of the social model of disability. On one hand, the politics of power play in the American society creates binaries through the sociocultural constructions while on another the emphasis on identity and difference create a system that deliberately assigns privilege to some and oppression to "others" as a way of sustaining dominance. Through the multiple narrative voices of Sweetness, Lula Ann (Bride), Booker, Sofia among others, we encounter individuals who are incapacitated by racial discrimination, class difference, poverty among others within the biased American Society that subjects these individuals as people with special needs.

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