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Study Guide

for

To Kill a Mockingbird

by Harper Lee



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Meet Harper Lee



[A writer] should write about what he knows and write truthfully.

—Harper Lee

Harper Lee has followed her own advice in writing about what she knows. In fact, critics have noted many parallels between the novel and Lee's early life. Maycomb, the setting for the novel, bears a striking resemblance to the small town of Monroeville, Alabama, where Lee grew up in the 1930s. Like Scout, the narrator of the novel, Lee's family has deep roots in Alabama. Her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, was a descendant of General Robert E. Lee. A lawyer and state legislator, Lee's father likely served as the model for Atticus Finch, Scout's father in the novel.

The author was born on April 28, 1926, as Nelle Harper Lee. During her childhood, Lee read avidly. By the time she was a teenager, she had begun to set her sights on a writing career—a goal she shared with her childhood friend, well-known author Truman Capote.

At the University of Alabama, Lee wrote reviews, editorials, and satires for college publications. After graduating, she pursued a law degree

at the same university. In 1949, however, she withdrew and moved to New York City with the goal of becoming a writer.

While working at other jobs, Lee submitted stories and essays to publishers. All were rejected. An agent, however, took an interest in one of her short stories and suggested she expand it into a novel. By 1957 she had finished a draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A publisher to whom she sent the novel saw its potential but thought it needed reworking. With her editor, Lee spent two and a half more years revising the manuscript. By 1960 the novel was published. In a 1961 interview with *Newsweek* magazine, Lee commented:

*Writing is the hardest thing in the world,
. . . but writing is the only thing that has
made me completely happy.*

To Kill a Mockingbird was an immediate and widespread success. Within a year, the novel sold half a million copies and received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Within two years, it was turned into a highly acclaimed film.

Readers admire the novel's sensitive and probing treatment of race relations. But, equally, they enjoy its vivid account of childhood in a small rural town. Summing up the novel's enduring impact in a 1974 review, R. A. Dave called *To Kill a Mockingbird*

*. . . a movingly human drama of the
jostling worlds—of children and adults, of
innocence and experience, of kindness and
cruelty, of love and hatred, of humor and
pathos, and above all of appearance and
reality—all taking the reader to the root of
human behavior.*

For almost four decades, Harper Lee has declined to comment on her popular—and only—novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, preferring instead to let the novel speak for itself. Today, the novel continues to delight and inspire millions of readers.

Introducing the Novel

Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.

—*To Kill a Mockingbird*

In 1991 the Library of Congress conducted a survey of book readers. Readers were asked to cite books that had made a difference in their lives. One of the books most often cited was Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The only book ranked higher by readers was the Bible.

Harper Lee's novel, originally published in 1960, opens with an adult Scout Finch reminiscing about her childhood. Through Scout's memories, the reader is transported into the world of a small southern town in the 1930s. Using a literary technique called flashback, Lee interrupts Scout's chronological narrative to reach back in time and enhance and amplify the story with prior events.

Throughout her childhood, Scout develops and expands her values and ideas as she encounters characters who come from all levels of Maycomb's society. While other novels have explored similar themes as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, few have done so in such a rich and enduring way. Scout learns about justice and injustice by watching the trial of an African American man. She witnesses the divisions of class and race in her small town. She discovers courage, both in herself and in those around her, and she comes to respect the diversity of the people in her community, people such as Tom Robinson and Boo Radley. There is rarely a situation in which Scout does not learn something new about education, superstition, bravery, or cowardice.

The story Lee tells evolves in a world where children lose their innocence as they grow up and encounter the harsh realities of adult life. Yet Lee's story is also about accepting people for who they are, whether they have a different skin color, like Tom Robinson, or are eccentric, like Boo Radley.

In a review of the novel for the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, Richard Sullivan praised Lee's ability to tell a story. He wrote:

There is a wit, grace, and skill in the telling. . . . [Each character] contributes to the quiet, sustained humor, the occasionally intense drama, the often taut suspense which all rise out of this rich and [diverse] complex of human relationships.

Today, the novel is as widely read as it was in 1960. But it is more than a best-seller. It is a book that continues to influence its readers through its insightful depiction of human weaknesses and strengths in an imperfect society. Keith Waterhouse in his 1960 review of the novel said:

Miss Lee does well what so many American writers do appallingly: she paints a true and lively picture of life in an American small town.

The Time and Place

To Kill a Mockingbird is set in a small town in rural Alabama in the early 1930s. Harper Lee, who was born in Monroeville, Alabama, would have been about the same age as Scout Finch at the time the story takes place. Many of the events that Lee experienced as a child were incorporated into the story that she wrote more than thirty years later.

The novel is set during the Great Depression, at a time in which millions of Americans lost their jobs. Many people also lost their homes, their land, and their dignity. They lived in flimsy shacks and stood in bread lines to receive government handouts of food. Some “rode the rails” to look for work in other towns, but the situation was dismal everywhere.

At the start of the Great Depression, about half of the African American population lived in the South. With few jobs available, blacks often found themselves edged out by whites, even for the poorest paying jobs. Racial tensions, which had existed since the end of the Civil War, increased. Mob actions by whites that led to the

hanging of African Americans and of those who sympathized with them continued throughout the South.

In Alabama, as in other southern states, segregation was a way of life in the 1930s. Schools, restaurants, churches, courtrooms, hospitals, and

all other public places had separate facilities for African Americans. In some courts, African Americans were even required to swear on separate Bibles. The Ku Klux Klan, a southern terrorist group, preached white superiority and engaged in violence against African Americans.

Did You Know?

By the time Harper Lee was old enough to read a newspaper, the notorious Scottsboro Trials had been in the news for several years. The Alabama trial, which made national headlines, served as an ugly reminder of racial bigotry in the 1930s.

In March 1931, nine African American youths were arrested and charged with raping two white women. Over the next five years, a series of trials was held. The first trial began just twelve days after the arrest and lasted only three days. In spite of evidence of the men's innocence, eight of the nine men were found guilty and sentenced to death. The extreme sentences and hasty trial left many observers outraged. The case was appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, and several sets of new trials were held. By 1937 four of

the defendants were freed, while the others were sentenced to long prison terms.

The Scottsboro Trials share several similarities with the fictional trial of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Like the Scottsboro defendants, Tom is charged with raping a white woman. There is also a parallel between Atticus Finch and Judge James E. Horton. Both acted in the interest of justice when an African American was wrongfully accused. In a 1933 trial of one of the Scottsboro defendants, Judge Horton set aside the jury's guilty verdict because he believed the jurors had ignored the evidence. Both the fictional and real trials had all-white juries. In the South of the 1930s, African American citizens were commonly excluded from serving on juries.

Before You Read

To Kill a Mockingbird, One through Eleven

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What do you think characterizes a person who has courage? What kinds of situations might call for courage?

Web It

Create a concept web for the word *courage*. Draw lines extending from the word, then on each line, list qualities that you associate with someone who shows courage. Discuss real-life situations you know of in which people have acted courageously.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what Scout and Jem learn about the meaning of courage.

BACKGROUND

Time and Place

The town of Maycomb, Alabama, the setting for the novel, is typical of southern towns in the 1930s. Its society reflects the strong class distinctions that were present in the Old South before the Civil War. Whites and blacks did not socialize, but there were different levels within black and white society. At the top, for example, were large landowners or educated professionals. The Finch family, for example, has connections to the land that go back more than a hundred years. Then there are middle-class citizens, such as Sheriff Tate and Mr. Underwood, the editor of the newspaper. Poor whites are represented by Scout's classmate Walter Cunningham and the Ewell family. Equally poor is Tom Robinson, the farm worker who goes on trial. Yet another level of black society is represented by Calpurnia, the Finches' maid, who has more formal education than many others. As you read, notice the social status of the characters. In particular, think about whether Atticus Finch exhibits attitudes that are typical or atypical of members of his social class as they are portrayed in the novel.

First-Person Point of View

To Kill a Mockingbird is told from a first-person point of view—that is, the narrator uses “I” and “me” to describe events in the novel. Although the narrator is an adult Scout Finch looking back at her childhood, the perspective is limited to what she saw and felt at that time. Scout the 6-year-old often does not understand the full meaning of what she observes, and her childlike perceptions are frequently a source of humor, as when she says of her father, “Atticus was feeble. He was nearly fifty.” Yet even in this instance, the narrator does not confine her vocabulary to that of a child. Here is another example of how the narrator recalls childhood events with an adult vocabulary: “I wasn’t sure what Jem resented most, but I took umbrage at Mrs. Dubose’s assessment of the family’s mental hygiene.”

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

cantankerous [kan tang'ker əs] *adj.* irritable; difficult to deal with

compel [kəm pel'] *v.* to force; to require

conscience [kon'shəns] *n.* inner sense of right and wrong

feeble [fē'bəl] *adj.* lacking strength

harbor [här'bər] *v.* to hold in the mind

irk [urk] *v.* to annoy

perplexed [pər plekst'] *adj.* puzzled; confused

tranquil [trang'kwəl] *adj.* peaceful; at ease

Active Reading

To Kill a Mockingbird, One through Eleven

Chapters one through eleven introduce most of the characters in the novel. As you read this section, focus on the actions and words of each character. Write their names below. Then jot down in the chart two or three personal qualities that are revealed by each character's actions and words.

Dill: Scout and Jem's best friend; visits in summer Qualities: wild imagination, clownish funny	

Responding

To Kill a Mockingbird, One through Eleven

Personal Response

What memories of your own childhood come to mind as you read about Scout's experiences?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. In relation to Boo Radley and his house, how do Scout, Jem, and Dill try to test their courage? What feelings do they have about Boo?

2. What do Scout and Jem find in the knothole of the Radley tree? What other signs suggest that Boo may not be the monster the children imagine him to be?

3. Why does Scout get into fights with Cecil Jacobs and her cousin Francis? What do their comments suggest about Maycomb as a community? What does Scout's response reveal about her?

Responding

To Kill a Mockingbird, One through Eleven

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. What connection might there be between what is required of Atticus to shoot the mad dog and what is required of him to defend Tom Robinson?

5. How would you describe Atticus Finch as a parent? How does he treat his children? What kinds of things does he want to teach them?

Literature and Writing

Character Analysis

Atticus says that courage is “when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what.” Write a few paragraphs analyzing the character of Atticus, focusing on how his definition of courage is displayed through his actions and behavior. You may wish to go back to your notes in the **Active Reading** chart.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

The tone of this first section of the novel is often humorous. In your group, assign one or two chapters to each person. Then skim to find scenes, situations, and statements that made you smile or chuckle. Take turns reading the funny passages out loud. Then discuss what makes them humorous. How do these passages affect the novel as a whole?

Art Connection

Make several drawings that convey how you visualize the small-town setting of the novel. First, skim chapters one through eleven to locate important visual details. List descriptive phrases about houses, buildings, and other physical features. Refer to this list as you sketch what you envision. Post the drawings on a bulletin board for sharing and discussion.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

To Kill a Mockingbird, Twelve through Twenty-one

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What do you think is involved in making a fair judgment about a person or situation? Explain.

Quickwrite

Describe on paper an everyday situation in which one person might judge another incorrectly. What things can interfere with making a fair judgment?

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how the jury in Maycomb judges Tom Robinson.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

Chapters twelve through twenty-one focus mainly on Tom Robinson's dramatic courtroom trial. Trials are a cornerstone of the criminal justice system in the United States. Any citizen accused of a crime has the right to a trial by an impartial (unbiased) jury. This right is guaranteed in Article 6 of the Bill of Rights. An important principle of the justice system is that a person accused of a crime is presumed innocent until proven guilty. This assumption requires the prosecution (the side arguing that the accused is guilty) to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the accused person committed the crime. If this is not proven, and the jury members are left with doubts about the person's guilt, they must find the accused innocent.

Conflict

At the heart of every novel is conflict, the struggle between two opposing forces. In an external conflict, a character struggles against some outside force, such as another person, nature, society, or fate. An internal conflict is a struggle between two opposing thoughts or desires within the mind of a character. As you read chapters twelve through twenty-one, notice how the external and internal conflicts introduced in the first section intensify.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

antagonize [an tag'ə nīz'] v. to stir up anger; to oppose

contradict [kon'trə dikt'] v. to assert the contrary or opposite of

convict [kən vikt'] v. to prove or declare guilty

reluctantly [ri luk'tənt lē] adv. unwillingly

sullen [sul'ən] adj. silently gloomy or unfriendly

testimony [tes'tə mō'nē] n. evidence given in court

verdict [vur'dikt] n. judgment by a jury

Active Reading

To Kill a Mockingbird, Twelve through Twenty-one

During the trial, Atticus questions four witnesses. As you read, complete the chart below by noting the key information given by each witness during questioning. Also note how each witness behaves on the stand, commenting on the general impression the witness makes.

Sheriff Tate: No doctor was called to the scene. Mayella had bruises on the right side of her face.	businesslike, straightforward
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Responding

To Kill a Mockingbird, Twelve through Twenty-one

Personal Response

As you followed the action in the courtroom, which character did you empathize with most? least? Explain.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What tense situation occurs at the county jail? How does Scout help her father in this scene?

2. How does Atticus show that Tom Robinson could not have committed the crime he is accused of?

3. According to Atticus, what is Mayella's motive for accusing Tom? What assumption does Atticus fear the jury will make?

Responding

To Kill a Mockingbird, Twelve through Twenty-one

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. What strategies does the author use to make sure readers will feel some sympathy for Mayella Ewell?

5. Do you think a jury today, presented with the same evidence, would have found Tom Robinson guilty? Explain.

Literature and Writing

News Story

Write an objective news report of Tom Robinson's trial. Keep the five *Ws* in mind: *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *why*. Describe the trial thoroughly, accurately, and objectively. At the same time, use descriptive details to try to make your readers feel they are part of the scene.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

In his summary to the jury, Atticus says:

[T]here is one way in this country in which all men are created equal—there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution . . . is the court.

Review your Quickwrite from the **Focus Activity**. Then debate the truth of the statement above, citing evidence from the novel as well as from real-life situations.

Internet Connection

Discuss *To Kill a Mockingbird* with other students on the Internet. One Web site that offers a discussion group is presented by the Prince William County Public Schools. (Click on "Discussion Groups" at <http://library.advanced.org/12111/index.html>.) This site was established in honor of the thirty-fifth anniversary of the film based on the novel. It also features historical background on the novel and links to sites with information about the making of the movie. To prepare for the online discussion, get together with a partner and brainstorm a few questions about the novel, the setting, or the movie that you would like answered. Present to your class, an oral report featuring interesting information you discover.

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Before You Read

To Kill a Mockingbird, Twenty-two through Thirty-one

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What does it mean to “put yourself in another person’s shoes”? What personal qualities are necessary to be able to see things as someone else does?

Sharing Experiences

In a small group, discuss different situations in which you learned something by putting yourself in another person’s shoes. What made it possible to adopt a different perspective? What was difficult about the experience?

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what Scout learns about different perspectives and about justice in the concluding section of the novel.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

Many people, including Harper Lee, consider the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* to be highly faithful to the novel. In fact, after seeing the film, many think that the dialogue was taken word for word from the novel. “This is simply not so,” says the novel’s author, commenting on the screenplay by Horton Foote. “Scenes humorous, scenes tender, scenes terrifying, each with a definite purpose and value, blended so delicately with the original, created the illusion that these were Harper Lee’s words.” In further praise of the screenplay, Lee says, “For me, Maycomb is there, its people are there: in two short hours one lives a childhood and lives it with Atticus Finch, whose view of life was the heart of the novel.” The 1962 film won three Academy Awards.

Climax

Although the trial contains many suspenseful moments, the novel actually reaches its highest dramatic point in this last portion of the book. This high point is called the climax. All of the preceding events in the plot lead up to this point of highest tension. This last section also joins two seemingly separate strands of the plot: the trial of Tom Robinson and the mystery of Boo Radley. As you read the conclusion of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, note how the final events bring these two stories together.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

aggravate [ag’rə vāt’] *v.* to make worse

apprehension [ap’ri hen’shən] *n.* fear about a future event

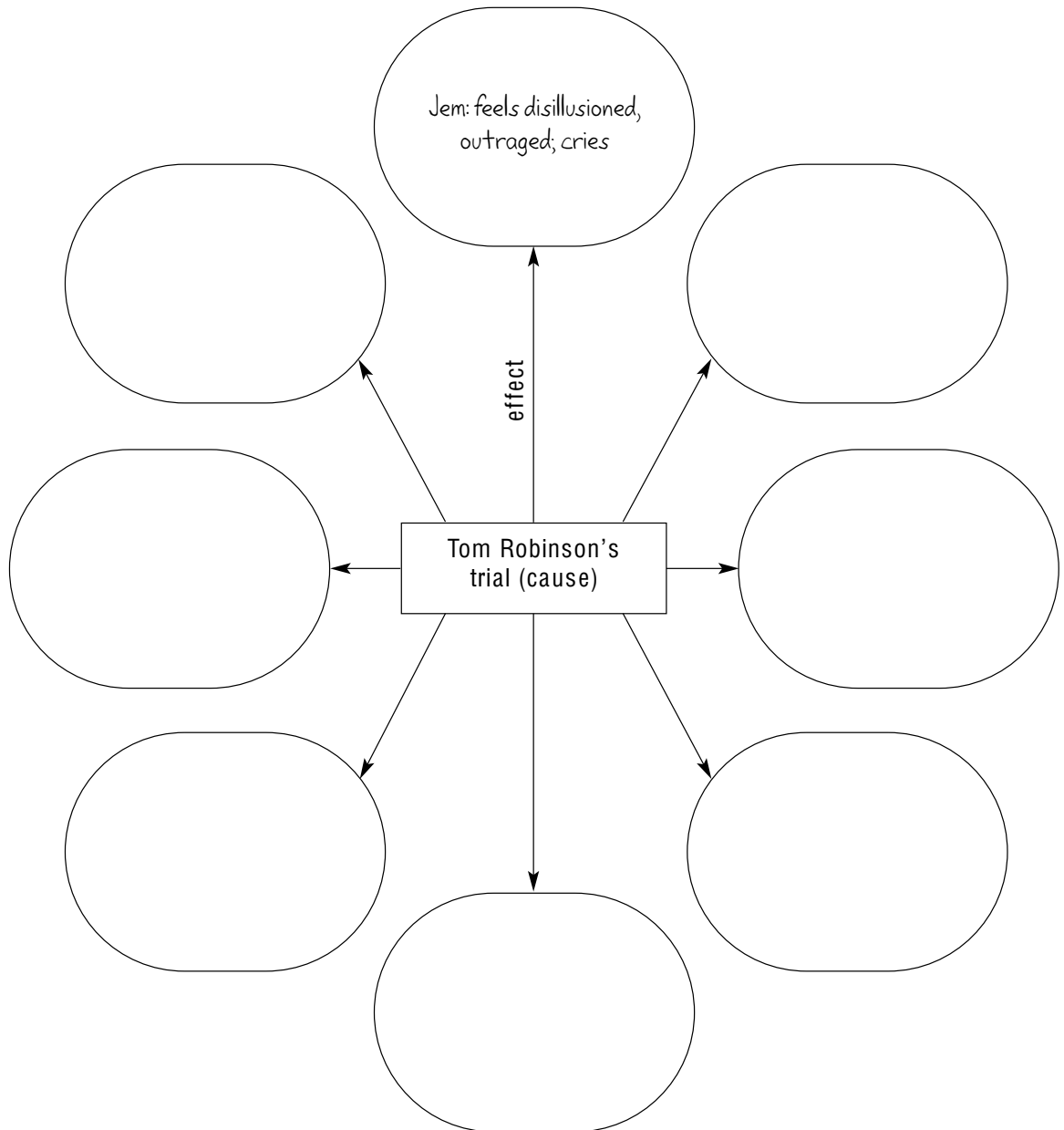
impertinence [im purt’ən əns] *n.* rudeness; improper behavior

inevitable [i nev’ə tə bəl] *adj.* impossible to avoid

Active Reading

To Kill a Mockingbird, Twenty-two through Thirty-one

The outcome of the trial affects many of the characters in the novel. For some, it triggers strong feelings or thoughtful reflections. For others, it leads to action. As you read, think about the effect of the trial's outcome on different characters. Use the chart to identify each character and describe the effect that the trial's outcome has on each. Use as many ovals as you need.



Responding

To Kill a Mockingbird, Twenty-two through Thirty-one

Personal Response

Did the ending of the novel surprise you? If you were the author, would you have ended the story differently? Explain.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. After the trial, how do the children and Atticus respond to Bob Ewell's threats?

2. What happens to Scout and Jem on the way home from the school pageant? What does the incident reveal about Boo Radley?

3. How does Scout treat Boo after the incident? How have her feelings about Boo changed?

Responding

To Kill a Mockingbird, Twenty-two through Thirty-one

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Do you believe that Sheriff Tate and Atticus made the best decision about how to report Bob Ewell's death? Why or why not?

5. Because of Atticus, the white jury took much longer than expected to reach its decision in Tom's case. Miss Maudie sees this as a "baby step" forward for the community. Do you think the cause of justice is best advanced through such "baby steps"? Explain.

Literature and Writing

Personal Letter

What do you think Scout and Jem learn about perspective and justice from witnessing the trial and their father's role in it? What do they learn from their experiences with Bob Ewell and Boo Radley? Imagine that you are Scout or Jem as an adult. Write a letter to a friend in which you reflect on these experiences and what they taught you about life.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

In the final section of the novel, two characters are compared to the mockingbird. In your group, find and reread the passages (in chapters twenty-five and thirty) that identify the two characters. Then discuss these questions, as well as others that come to mind: Why is the mockingbird an appropriate symbol for these two characters? In what ways are the two characters similar? In what ways are they different? Be sure to cite evidence from the novel in your discussion.

Music Connection

Put yourself in Boo Radley's shoes. Think back to the **Focus Activity** and try to imagine yourself in Boo's life and mind. Then, create lyrics for a song that captures what it might be like to have experienced life as Boo Radley did. For inspiration, you might listen to the song by the Beatles called "Nowhere Man."



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