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# "IT SEEMED A VERY QUIET HOUSE":

## Chronotopic Analysis of Algernon Blackwood's "A Case of Eavesdropping"

*Manuel Aguirre*

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# "IT SEEMED A VERY QUIET HOUSE":

## Chronotopic Analysis of Algernon Blackwood's "A Case of Eavesdropping"

Manuel Aguirre

### 1. Introduction.

This article is part of a project aimed at the construction of a model for the study of the Victorian haunted house short story.[1] No attempt is made at covering narratives of haunting from other historical periods, partly for reasons of economy and focus, partly because there are grounds for assuming that different periods have produced distinctly different brands of haunted house tales (Aguirre 1990). The term 'haunted house' is read here as denoting a building—or a room or some other section thereof—regularly visited by a numinous power—typically a ghost. The initial corpus this project builds on is the anthology *The Mammoth Book of Haunted House Stories*, specifically the nine tales in it published in Victorian times.[2]

The general goal of this article is to offer an analysis beyond the emotional, the thematic or the ideological, one that addresses the very *forms* of the genre, in the conviction that these, together with a historical slant, are a precondition for elucidating its meanings. Bakhtin's concept of the *chronotope of the threshold* offers a convenient, if not quite supple, instrument for this kind of analysis. The specific goal of the article is to examine one Victorian haunted house story and show how precisely the concept of the chronotope of the threshold constitutes a capital tool to understand it.[3]

[1] 'The Victorian Haunted House Short Story project' (HHSS) is itself part of a broader undertaking; see my 'Forms of the Threshold Chronotope.'

[2] See Haining, ed. (2005). For the purposes of this investigation, the period is defined by the dates of Queen Victoria's reign, 1837-1901. There will be time for more nuanced assessments of it in subsequent research.

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A threshold (Latin *limen*) is technically the line under the door that separates and connects two rooms or spaces; figuratively, any site may have a threshold function if viewed as a nexus between two other sites. The same can be said of time, with a given temporal stretch functioning as a threshold between two other periods. The width and complexity of a liminal site, like the duration and complexity of a liminal period, cannot be determined in advance.

Liminality is not an absolute category, it can only be assessed relative to something else. It is the condition of whatever occurs on, or occupies, a threshold. Liminal persons or events exhibit an in-between status, exist in transition, are neither here nor there, or are both here and there: they straddle the line, occupy it, or else fall in the interstice. They are characterized by an abrogation of the traits that we associate with ordinary space and time; conversely, they may enjoy a surplus of some trait found in ordinary space and time. Among the attributes that define what Victor Turner called 'liminal *personae*' we find existence in an unstructured or undifferentiated *communitas*, anonymity, lack of property, status or rank, degrees of nakedness or of sexlessness, and so on (Turner 1969: 96, 106); in other words, they are defined by some fundamental deprivation. Conversely, other traits—e.g., sacredness as opposed to ordinary secularity, liberation from social structure and status—gain in intensity vis-à-vis what the social norm allows. Another key quality of liminal things is instability: they are (or they are treated as though they were) ambiguous, contradictory, paradoxical, inconsistent. In the Rees-Turner formulation, the limen is 'a place that is not a place, and a time that is not a time' (Turner (1974: 239). It may be an interface that shares in the nature of two things, or else a gap that partakes of neither.

## 2. The threshold chronotope.

Mikhail Bakhtin's coinage 'chronotope' designates the traditional settings of space and time but unifies them into spatiotemporal configurations that, he claims, constitute the heart of all fiction, 'the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel' (Bakhtin 1981: 84-258, 250). Each genre, he claims is governed by its own type of chronotope, although each text may accommodate other chronotopes at different points and in various degrees (Bakhtin 1981: 252). This spatiotemporal framework behaves in specific ways that condition plot, character, atmosphere and other aspects of the narrative. A *chronotope of the threshold* is for Bakhtin that specific configuration of space and time that prevails in staircases, corridors, vestibules, streets or squares (Bakhtin 1981: 248). These, he states, are threshold sites where moments or periods of crisis take place, where characters face major decisions, where narrative turning points are reached.

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[3] A draft of this article was discussed in a session of the HHSS Seminar on 29 January 2026. I am grateful to the members of the LIMEN Research Group for their feedback.

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The concept of a threshold chronotope is the object of a reassessment within the frame project.[4] In this article, the threshold chronotope will be viewed as that spacetime arrangement that prevails in liminal environments, whether or not these are included in Bakhtin's list, and regardless of duration or spatial extent. One characteristic example is found in the labyrinth, a three-dimensional construct designed for transit rather than habitation, but one that suspends directionality and the means of orientating oneself, and does not permit a simple crossover; on the contrary, it imposes on the subject a lengthy negotiation of its convoluted paths. As the transition process risks becoming permanent, the labyrinth is apt to inspire in its traveller emotional reactions ranging from exhilaration, unease or impatience to panic or sheer terror.[5]

Robinson Crusoe's island constitutes another threshold spacetime insofar as it lacks the features (human society, modern tools, order, a market economy, and a time regimented by social uses) that Robinson was accustomed to both in England and in his Brazilian plantation; instead, it is invested with the overwhelming presence of undomesticated, wild nature, rife with dangers (and, at one point, deadly enemies), subject only to the rhythms of the sun and the seasons. Such an island is indeed 'a place that is not a place, and a time that is not a time,' a labyrinthine, unreliable territory beyond his human control, a mere gap in the civilised order of things the character is familiar with. His twenty-eight years on it are a hiatus in Robinson's life, one governed by nature's, not civilisation's time, a veritably liminal period that has become permanent—permanent, that is, until he gradually tames and *politicises* the island: towards the end of his sojourn there he proudly refers to it as a 'colony,' to himself as its 'governor': at length he has been able to assimilate his island to ordinary space and time and therefore to impose the English chronotope upon liminal territory. If the threshold chronotope is one of crisis, then Robinson can be said to have undergone a twenty-eight-year crisis.

A haunted house, too, deserves the label 'liminal' insofar as it is a building paradoxically unfit for the purpose of habitation, subject to unruly, untameable forces the existence of which our culture strenuously denies. It is therefore a place of contradiction that occupies a position at the boundary of ordinary spacetime; extra-ordinary things are apt to happen there, often eliciting terror from its visitors. Such a house shapes a void in the cultural order, one in which the predictability of architectural and temporal structures is compromised, a threshold chronotope suitable for a crisis.

[4] A first approach at integrating the chronotope of the threshold in a complex of critical terms was proposed in Frejo & al. (2025).

[5] See García de Polavieja (underway).

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### 3. Summary of 'A Case of Eavesdropping.'[6]

The early life of Jim Shorthouse is 'a mess' (a word used seven times in the first paragraph); he is socially maladjusted, but, like so many unpromising heroes, he is also 'sensitive' (66); 'somewhere latent behind his disarranged nervous system there lay psychic perceptions of an uncommon order' (54). Out of money, and anxious to hold onto his new-found job, he rents a cheap attic room in an unnamed American city, and is dismayed on hearing, at about two o'clock in the morning, heavy steps tramping up the stairs, followed by a knock on the door of the adjoining chamber (though at first he believes it is on his own door), noises of furniture, and a loud and harsh conversation in German. 'The two rooms, the landlady had told him, were originally one. She had put up a thin partition—just a row of boards—to increase her income' (57). One of the Germans addresses the other as his son, and violently urges him to 'borrow' his newly-wed wife's jewels in order to save their family firm, compromised by 'misuse of trust moneys' (58) (it is made clear that the older man is responsible for embezzlement). The young man angrily refuses. When Shorthouse knocks on their door to ask for quiet, total silence ensues. Three nights later, however, during a terrible storm, the discussion is resumed; as the son expresses his outrage that his father has stolen his wife's jewels, a thud is heard 'followed by a groan and the crash of a heavy body […] against the partition that separated the rooms […] The lower portion of the partition bulged unnaturally into his own room' (64). Straight after this, Shorthouse sees a thin dark stream seeping from under the swelling boards: on touching it, he finds it is blood. He rushes out and breaks down the neighbours' door, only to discover that the room is dark, cold and empty. The landlady now appears and demands an explanation for his reckless conduct; when Shorthouse presents to her the evidence of his blood-stained fingers, he realises there is no blood on them; there is no blood on the floor of his room either, and no bulge on the partition. She then tells him the story of the Germans' bankruptcy twenty years before, the presumed murder of the son, and the father's death in prison. The story ends with Shorthouse quitting the house, later obtaining confirmation of these events through perusal of old newspapers.

### 4. The traits.

The threshold chronotope that prevails in haunted houses is characterised by an instability of time often accompanied by a precariousness of space. Our story can be summed up in the following proposition: *two different times are superimposed onto one and the same site*, and this arrangement generates every major dimension of the text. I will consider aspects of the plot, setting, atmosphere, characterisation, and language.

To begin with, it is important to recall that at the time when the murder took place, twenty years earlier, the two rooms were actually one; the partition was put up much later. This

[6] Though Blackwood was actively writing until the nineteen-forties, this particular story was published in 1900, and is to be read as a late but actually rather 'conservative' Victorian horror tale.

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explains how Shorthouse's bed is actually shaken by the collapse of a body against the dividing boards, why the latter visibly swell under the impact, why blood can be seen seeping into Shorthouse's room: incidents on one side can be heard, seen and felt from the other side because, after all, this room is *part of* the original chamber where the crime was committed. This simple datum is in turn responsible for the equivocal nature of events and experiences in it: voices are heard from the room next door, but it turns out to be empty; a falling body cracks the wallpaper and nearly breaks the partition, but ten minutes later there is no mark of this having happened; blood appears to the senses of sight and touch, but subsequently there is no trace of it.

Time past seeps into the present moment so that things from long ago are seen and heard in the here-and-now.[7] As a result, space becomes not-quite-here space, shorn of some of the essential traits that make up ordinary sites. The Germans' room, as Shorthouse discovers on breaking into it, is unnaturally wanting:

> a room that was pitch dark and very cold. […] Not a sound, not a movement. Not even the sense of a presence. It was empty, miserably empty! […] the room was empty, appallingly empty; and so still. […] absolutely empty, carpetless, and without a stick of furniture, or even a window-blind (65).

The word 'empty' occurs six times on this one page. Together with the utter darkness, the total stillness, and the awful cold, this is an overwhelming mark of that deprivation which is a key aspect of liminal space, affecting the room itself and those who enter it.

The atmosphere, too, resonates to the chronotope of two clashing realities, a familiar present and an encroaching past: 'outside the wind howled dismally and drove the rain with repeated assaults against the rattling windows' (61). Is this the worn-out cliché of the storm at the climax of the story? Assuredly, but the image physically replicates the interference of the past: a hostile force embattles the familiar reality from the outside, seeking entry and disturbing it.

As time past is superimposed onto time present in one space, an in-between setting is created which accounts for the character's wavering grasp of the evidence before him. The story is told (by a mostly extra-diegetic narrator)[8] through Shorthouse's consciousness, often

[7] In Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Green Tea,' Dr. Hesselius tries to explain to Reverend Jennings the nature of the spirit that torments him: 'we are all alike environed. It is only that, in your case, the "*paries*," the veil of the flesh, the screen, is a little out of repair, and sights and sounds are transmitted' (200-201). In Arthur Machen's 'The Great God Pan,' a surgeon performs an experimental operation on the girl Mary by which the knife 'will level utterly the solid wall of sense, and probably, for the first time since man was made, a spirit will gaze on the spirit world. […] Mary will see the god Pan!' (240). In Le Fanu's and Machen's stories a figurative wall divides the spiritual from the material; in Blackwood's, a physical wall sunders the present from the past; but neither works well enough.

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lapsing into free indirect style; we see what the young man sees. His experiences, furthermore, come to us through confused perception ('the sound was still too indistinct to enable him to arrive at any definite conclusion,' 61) or vague subliminal reflections ('that sudden silence […] put strange thoughts in his brain—thoughts he did not like or approve,' 59). Predictably in a liminal environment, intermittence adds to his perplexity: it is 'between the gusts of wind and rain' that he confusedly hears the sound of the old man's steps tramping upstairs on the fateful night, and this happens while his consciousness is 'hovering on the borderland between sleep and waking' (60); such a 'borderland' is an apt liminalist image for the equivocal zone Shorthouse inhabits at this point. Another mark of this in-between experience is dispossession or deficiency: while listening to the steps, he 'was trembling all over, and felt as cold as though he were in a freezing atmosphere':

> he was conscious of a curious sense of malaise and trepidation, such as even the most vigorous men have been known to experience when in the grip of some horrible and deadly disease. As the footsteps approached this feeling of weakness increased. He felt a strange lassitude creeping over him, a sort of exhaustion, accompanied by a growing numbness in the extremities, and a sensation of dreaminess in the head […] (62).

The language is eloquent: 'malaise,' 'weakness,' 'lassitude,' 'exhaustion,' 'numbness,' 'dreaminess'—these terms identify conditions that place the individual below a required magnitude of clear-mindedness, energy and well-being. Put succinctly, *he is not quite himself*. His perceptions, physical sensations and mental processes are below par, as it were, and the use of free indirect style ('curious,' 'strange,' 'a sort of') contributes to our receiving all through the instability of his consciousness. His understanding and volition struggle between what seems to be the case and what he and the reader vaguely know should be. He is in two minds. Though not physically ill, he lacks health, clear thinking, and the power to act—he is, in fact, paralysed: though needing to put a stop to the Germans' conversation, 'somehow or other, his will was not equal to the task' (62). In this condition of fundamental dearth—the freezing cold, a conflicted state of mind, a sluggishness of the will, the figurative 'unholy spell' (64) that immobilises him—perception and consciousness are affected, and the subject wavers between incompatible understandings of the evidence. Not just deprivation but disorientation, numbness, a feeling of unreality are all concomitant with the character's entrance into the limen chronotope.

This leads me to two additional points: of characterisation, of language. Aside from the ghosts only one other character, the landlady, plays a major role in the story. As she herself says with supreme indifference, 'Waal, it aren't my show' (67), 'I've heard the steps and voices lots of times. They don't pheaze me any. I'd just as lief hear so many dogs barkin' ' (68). Obviously she is not disturbed by the supernatural manifestations; she is a down-to-earth woman much more concerned with extracting some profit from the house, her one

[8] The narrator at two points acknowledges that he was told of the events by Shorthouse himself.

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possession, in contrast to Shorthouse, who is in as much need but lacks her thoroughly practical sense. The disparity highlights his helplessness. Another character is mentioned by the landlady:

> '[…] the man who had that room last was found one morning in bed—'
> 'In bed?'
> 'He was dead. He was the one before you' (67).

Her implication is that he, too, heard the ghostly argument and died of fright. Characters are therefore affected differently by the ghostly tragedy. Between the landlady's callous indifference and the former tenant's lethal terror, Shorthouse—the psychic—is able to navigate the perils of the haunted room and come out unscathed.[9] The upshot of the murder episode accordingly varies: it unleashes a crisis in the lives of most witnesses—once with fatal results—but not in that of the cold-blooded American landlady.[10] This point brings out a distinct property of limina, their relativity: to her, the house is her turf, nothing more; it has simply developed a spot of trouble, or else the inconvenience was already there when she acquired the building. To Shorthouse, on the other hand, those three nights in his attic room configure a threshold chronotope: they are liminal for him, but not for her.

The very language of the text contributes to defining the setting's liminal status for our young man. After the phantom murder has been reenacted, 'all was still but the howl of the wind' (64). This is one of those *topoi* writers draw on again and again in a myriad ways, to good or poor effect, essentially to convey not so much atmospherics as an incongruity: silence and loud sound can occur together in the liminal realm.[11] Another instance of the same phenomenon is the hackneyed emotional contradiction: 'he looked behind him and about him, hoping, and yet fearing, that something would break the stillness' (59). These are more than just rhetorical commonplaces in fiction, they are linguistic signals that the subject occupies a zone of ambivalence. The repeated recourse, during the climax pages, to 'indistinct' (59), 'inarticulate,' 'shadowy,' 'indistinctly' (60), 'indistinct' (61), serves to highlight his confused perception. Needless to say, the regular use of free indirect style obeys the same directive, to convey the hesitation in the character's mind: '*Probably* everybody was asleep' (56); 'the knocking, *after all,* had not been on his own door, but on that of the adjoining chamber' (57); '*Was that a figure* sitting on the stairs peering up obliquely at him

[9] In fact, he is to become a visitor of three other haunted houses in Blackwood's fiction: 'The Strange Adventures of a New York Secretary,' 'The Empty House,' and 'With Intent to Steal.'

[10] Perhaps Blackwood was taking the mickey out of this earthy American character: it is curious that both the Germans and Shorthouse are expatriates living in the States.

[11] Cf. this fragment from Peter Teuthold's *The Necromancer* (1794): 'nothing was heard save the violent palpitations of the heart, the chattering of our poor landlord's teeth, and the knocking together of his trembling knees.' A bit of a clamorous silence.

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out of hideous eyes?' (59), '*Was it a nightmare*? *Had he been dreaming* evil dreams […]?' (61).

The persistent use of 'seem' ('nobody seemed to be disturbed,' 56; 'one of them, who seemed to be the father,' 57; 'a hundred shadowy forms seemed to dart swiftly,' 59) creates a similar effect. The sentence I have chosen for my title illustrates this well: 'It seemed a very quiet house' (56). It is of course in free indirect style, conveying in the narrator's language (use of past tense) what to the character appears to be the case. But the sentence does more. For Shorthouse, the quiet is just something he takes for granted; for the narrator, and for the reader, the verb 'seem' establishes a discrepancy between appearance and reality, one which Shorthouse is unable to detect: it suggests that he is unaware of data that—we know—will transpire in the course of the narrative and that will contradict his first impression. In other words, two avatars of the house, corresponding to the two temporal stretches that occupy it, coexist in conflict.

But then, we have to remember that he is said to be 'psychic' (54) by the narrator, 'sensitive' (66) by the landlady; whereas he is not practical enough to see beyond appearances, he has the capacity to glimpse *another* reality. This potential might not amount to anything much in ordinary life (beyond, as the first paragraph makes clear, 'messing' it up); but in this house, charged as it is with the presence of spirits from the past, Shorthouse's latent talent is awakened; the threshold chronotope he enters triggers his sensitiveness. And this makes him special. Others have eavesdropped on the tragedy unfolding there—one man has died, the landlady has all but ignored it—but Shorthouse is different from either, unique. The spectral voices impinge specifically upon him: he is singled out by his own susceptible nature. This is a distinctive trait of Victorian hauntings, their insistence on troubling one given individual who evinces a capacity to respond to them; a predisposition, an *affinity* for the Numinous makes him or her especially receptive to ghostly manifestations.[12]

The past, I said, infiltrates the present, but it does not flow as ordinary time does. In a narrative which briefly covers years, eight out of fifteen pages (60-68, just over half the story) are devoted to detailing what happened one night between two and three in the morning: narrative time slows down and dilates here. Nor is time accounted for in a fluid manner: events have a way of bursting upon the reader. For five pages (61-65, the murder episode), adverbial expressions of sudden occurrence rule: 'The next minute he awoke,' 'almost immediately afterwards,' 'Instantly,' 'instantly,' 'for the space of ten seconds there was a living silence, then,' 'followed immediately by,' 'a second later,' 'in less than a second,' 'a second more, and Shorthouse was out,' 'in a moment,' 'suddenly,' 'quickly,' 'instantly.' A frantic pace counterpoints the leisurely advance of the plot. This contrast between slowed-down time and staccato occurrences contributes to destabilization.

[12] Blackwood is being conservative here; other Victorian writers will have the ghost *walk*, as we say, and follow its chosen individual wherever he or she may go. Victorian horror tends to handle the haunted-site theme in terms of the psychology of characters rather than simply in spatial terms. See my *The Closed Space*, 116.

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A peculiarity of time past in this text is that it does not flow forward: rather, it recurs. As the old landlady points out, 'I reckon you've only seen and heard what the others did' (66): earlier guests did confront the same manifestations. 'It never comes back, […] that is, not after he's killed' (67): she knows the story by heart. 'I've heard the steps and voices lots of times' (68): in the best of traditions, the spectral events have a way of repeating themselves; the same incident is reenacted again and again, almost like a piece of dramatic performance, in the eternal present of the lost.

Why do characters so often run out of the haunted house if given half a chance? Fear, dread, yes; but dread of what, precisely? Our text just about tells us—in free indirect style—towards the end:

> There was no sign of blood. No amount of staring could bring it back. Had he gone out of his mind? Had his eyes and ears played such tricks with him? Had his senses become false and perverted? (66)

As the blood that was there turns out not to be there, Shorthouse wonders whether he has taken leave of his senses. 'Had he gone out of his mind?' In this double vision lurks madness, or else the danger that one may come, purposely or accidentally or forcibly, to side with the second reality and be lost in it. 'That night he slept in a hotel, and the following day sought new quarters' (68).

## 5. Conclusion.

This article has tried to delineate the nature and operations of the chronotope of the threshold in a haunted house story. The haunting appears to consist in this: time past seeps into time present within the same physical space. The destabilisation this causes 'contaminates' the space in question and turns a linear plot segment into a loop; reinforced by atmospheric effects (the empty, silent staircase and upper floor, the darkness of night, the stormy weather), this affects the character's perceptions and feelings, his mental powers, his ability to react; and extends to the language itself of the text.

Much of this is overly familiar to readers acquainted with the genre. My purpose was to show that the accelerations, decelerations or stiffenings of time, its cyclic motions, the equivocalness of space, the character's hesitations and paralysis, even the language employed by the narrator, are not simply tired *topoi* of a predictable genre but techniques that respond to a stringent 'law' of haunted house stories: within a single spatial environment, a past temporal sequence infiltrates the forward flow of present time. The resulting overlap generates an interface that distorts both: the past becomes cyclical, the present behaves erratically. The physical room itself becomes conflicted, a zone of turbulence where two temporalities meld so that it may, impossibly, expand or contract (the altering shape of the

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partition, the blood that stains the carpet and then vanishes), relinquish qualities that we expected to find in it (furnishings, light, sound, warmth, comfort), exhibit an excess (of violence, as of iterative events), or become contradictory (disclosing people, voices, objects and actions that are not there). It is uninhabitable, or, to paraphrase the Rees-Turner formulation, *a room that is not a room*. On the evidence of this analysis of the tale, a very provisional breakdown of the theme would look as follows:

> *This haunted house is 1) a site in which a past sequence of events has seeped into the present. This transforms the place into 2) a threshold site characterised by 3) an unstable, in-between spacetime organisation—a chronotope of the threshold. In this chronotope, 4) two temporal lines coexist and interfere with one another, thereby 5) rendering the ordinary linearity of time cyclical, and 6) weakening the materiality and consistency of the physical site. This chronotope is marked by 7) deprivation (of warmth, light, objects), 8) intensity (a decontextualised episode of raw violence and naked greed), and 9) relativity vis-à-vis viewpoint (Shorthouse's, the landlady's) and moment (real events and effects cease to exist a few minutes later). 10) Some manner of affinity emerges between the site and specific individuals who are 11) distinguished by special traits or abilities. Their confrontation with the site 12) generates a terror associated with 13) a challenge to the characters' identity, and 14) unleashes a crisis that 15) may have tragic consequences for them.*

The findings above are speculative, building as they do on analysis of one single text. A corpus of such texts needs to be studied before the present conclusions can be generalised. In particular, we shall need to correlate this story with others by Blackwood on the same subject, as well as with similar stories by contemporary writers. The overall goal should be a set of reliable statements on the nature of the Victorian haunted house short story and on whether or how it differs from haunted house stories in other traditions, including: folklore, Classical, medieval and Elizabethan writings, Gothic and post-Victorian horror narratives.

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