



British Literature and the Supernatural: Ghosts, Prophecy and Fate from Shakespeare to Susan Hill

Dr. Smita K

Associate Professor of English

Government P.G.College, Sector -1, Panchkula

Abstract

This paper explores the role of the supernatural—particularly ghosts, prophecy, and fate—in British literature, tracing its development from Shakespeare’s early modern dramas to Susan Hill’s contemporary gothic fiction. In Shakespeare, the supernatural functions as both spectacle and moral authority: the ghost of King Hamlet demands vengeance, while the witches in *Macbeth* destabilize human agency through ambiguous prophecy, raising enduring questions about free will and predestination. The gothic tradition that follows intensifies these motifs, presenting haunted spaces, uncanny figures, and prophetic warnings as reflections of psychological fear and societal anxieties. In the twentieth century, Susan Hill reconfigures these supernatural elements in novels such as *The Woman in Black*, where ghosts emerge as embodiments of trauma, grief, and social injustice, and fate manifests as an inescapable haunting that binds past to present. By comparing Shakespeare and Hill, this study highlights both continuity and transformation in the supernatural, showing how it dramatizes timeless human struggles with destiny, morality, and the unseen.

Keywords: Ghosts, prophecy, fate, Shakespeare, Susan Hill

Introduction

The supernatural has always held a central place in British literature, functioning as both a mirror of cultural beliefs and a dramatic device that probes the boundaries of human experience. From Shakespeare’s stage, where ghosts, witches, and prophecies shape the destinies of characters in plays such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, to the gothic tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and finally to the chilling ghost stories of contemporary novelist Susan Hill, supernatural elements continue to interrogate the tension between fate, free will, and the human psyche. In Shakespeare,

the ghost of King Hamlet demands revenge and the witches in *Macbeth* speak in riddles that blur prophecy with psychological manipulation, thereby raising profound questions about moral agency and predestination. The gothic novel later reimagined the supernatural as a realm of haunted spaces, uncanny presences, and prophetic warnings, embodying both societal fears and psychological anxieties in works by writers such as Ann Radcliffe and M. R. James. By the time Susan Hill enters the literary scene, the supernatural has shifted from theatrical spectacle to psychological and atmospheric terror; in *The Woman in Black*, the ghost becomes a vengeful force of fate, ensuring that the past irreversibly determines the present. Ghosts, prophecies, and omens in Hill's fiction function less as divine interventions and more as manifestations of trauma, repression, and social injustice, showing the continuity yet transformation of the supernatural across centuries. What unites Shakespeare and Hill, despite their temporal and cultural distance, is the way the supernatural challenges characters' autonomy: it compels them to act or confront truths they would otherwise avoid, whether through spectral apparitions or inevitable hauntings. Thus, tracing the development of supernatural motifs from the Renaissance to the modern gothic reveals not only the persistence of ghosts, prophecy, and fate in British literature but also their evolving meanings—shifting from religious and moral concerns to psychological, social, and existential explorations. In this way, the supernatural emerges as a literary constant that reflects the anxieties of each era while dramatizing timeless human questions about destiny, justice, and the unseen forces that shape human life.

Background of the Study

The supernatural has long been an essential thread in the fabric of British literature, serving as both a reflection of cultural beliefs and a narrative force that shapes character, plot, and theme. From the early modern stage, where Shakespeare employed ghosts and prophecies to dramatize moral dilemmas and the tension between providence and free will, to the Gothic and Victorian fascination with haunted spaces, omens, and uncanny figures, the supernatural has continually evolved in form and meaning. These motifs reflect changing historical and cultural contexts, shifting from theological and moral interpretations to psychological, symbolic, and social ones. In the twentieth century, Susan Hill revitalized the ghost story by blending traditional gothic tropes with modern concerns such as trauma, repression, and social injustice, ensuring that ghosts and fate remained relevant to contemporary readers. Studying this progression reveals how supernatural elements persist across centuries, illuminating enduring human anxieties about death, justice, memory, and destiny.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how the supernatural—particularly ghosts, prophecy, and fate—has been represented and reinterpreted in British literature from the early modern period to the contemporary era, with a focus on Shakespeare and Susan Hill as key figures. By analyzing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, alongside Hill's ghost stories such as *The Woman in Black*, *The Small Hand*, and *The Mist in the Mirror*, the study aims to trace the continuity and transformation of supernatural motifs across time. It seeks to explore how ghosts' function as agents of justice, memory, and guilt; how prophecy challenges or reinforces free will; and how fate is constructed as either divine providence, psychological inevitability, or social consequence. Ultimately, the study intends to demonstrate that the supernatural in British literature is not merely a narrative embellishment but a profound means of engaging with timeless human concerns about morality, destiny, trauma, and the unseen forces shaping life.

Defining the Supernatural in British Literature: Ghosts, Prophecy, and Fate

The supernatural in British literature can be understood as a literary mode that disrupts natural laws and rational explanations, introducing forces or phenomena that exist beyond human comprehension, often to dramatize moral, psychological, or existential concerns. Central to this tradition are three enduring motifs—ghosts, prophecy, and fate—each of which has evolved in meaning across historical and cultural contexts while maintaining its symbolic potency. Ghosts, in works ranging from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*, embody the persistence of the past and the return of what is unresolved, whether as divine messengers demanding justice, as in King Hamlet's apparition, or as embodiments of trauma, guilt, and social exclusion in modern narratives. Prophecy, evident in the cryptic utterances of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, destabilizes the balance between knowledge and ignorance, compelling characters to act in ways that both fulfill and question the inevitability of foretold outcomes. In later literature, prophecy shifts into subtler forms, including omens, visions, and premonitions, which function as psychological warnings or intuitive signals of impending doom. Fate, the most encompassing of these motifs, underscores the tension between determinism and human agency: in early modern literature it was often tied to divine providence, whereas in the Gothic and Victorian periods it became associated with ancestral curses, omens, and the inevitability of death, and in contemporary ghost stories it often reflects social and psychological inevitabilities rather than cosmic order.

Collectively, these supernatural elements reveal literature's enduring engagement with profound human anxieties—about death, justice, memory, and the boundaries of free will—while simultaneously reflecting the cultural and historical contexts of their times. Thus, the supernatural in British literature is not merely about the intrusion of otherworldly forces, but about dramatizing the unseen pressures—moral, psychological, and social—that shape human destiny.

The Rise of Gothic Fiction and the Supernatural

The transition from the Enlightenment into the Romantic and Gothic periods marked a profound shift in the literary treatment of the supernatural, moving from Shakespeare's stage-bound ghosts and prophetic figures toward more atmospheric and psychological manifestations of terror. Gothic fiction, beginning with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), embraced the uncanny through haunted castles, ancestral curses, and spectral apparitions that blended superstition with human fear. Writers such as Ann Radcliffe developed the genre further, employing the "explained supernatural," in which seemingly ghostly events often received rational explanations, thereby dramatizing the tension between imagination, reason, and belief. Simultaneously, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and later Gothic works fully embraced supernatural horrors, presenting ghosts, demonic forces, and prophecies as agents of moral corruption and retribution. The Gothic ghost became less a messenger of divine justice and more a symbol of repression, unresolved guilt, or ancestral sin that lingered in haunted spaces, intertwining fate with human psychology.

Prophecy, Omens, and the Evolution of Fate

As the Gothic tradition flourished into the nineteenth century, particularly in the Victorian era, prophecy and omens took on increasingly psychological and symbolic dimensions. Instead of functioning as divine revelations, they became projections of guilt, anxiety, or foreboding within characters' minds. The emphasis on haunted houses and ghostly visitations reflected a cultural fascination with death, mourning, and the afterlife, especially during the Victorian obsession with spiritualism and séances. Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) epitomizes this transformation, with its spectral visitors serving both as moral guides and prophetic figures whose visions of potential futures hinge upon human choice, thus merging supernatural intervention with a call for personal reform. Similarly, the ghost stories of Sheridan Le Fanu and M. R. James located terror in everyday settings, where omens and apparitions symbolized the persistence of past trauma or hidden sin rather than divine providence. Fate in this context was no longer solely theological but deeply entangled with human psychology, memory, and moral consequence. Dreams, visions, and forewarnings acted less as immutable decrees of destiny and more as manifestations of subconscious dread or indicators of impending doom shaped by personal action. In this way, the supernatural in

the Romantic and Victorian imagination evolved from an external imposition of fate into an inward exploration of human fear, guilt, and desire. This period thus expanded the possibilities of ghosts and prophecy beyond moral theology into the realm of psychological realism, ensuring the supernatural remained a vital and adaptable force in British literature while preparing the ground for modern reinterpretations by twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers such as Susan Hill.

20th Century to Contemporary, with Susan Hill as a Case Study

In the twentieth century, British writers reimagined the supernatural not merely as theatrical spectacle or gothic excess but as a vehicle for psychological, social, and existential exploration. The fascination with ghosts, prophecy, and fate did not disappear with modernity's emphasis on science and rationality; rather, these motifs were transformed, acquiring new depth as metaphors for memory, repression, and trauma. While the Romantic and Victorian writers had already laid the groundwork by linking supernatural encounters to psychology and social anxieties, it is in the modern period that such elements were fully redirected toward inward, human-centered concerns. Writers such as Henry James paved the way with *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), in which the central ambiguity lies in whether the ghostly figures are objective realities or projections of the governess's disturbed mind. James's novella demonstrated how the ghost story could operate on dual levels, both as an eerie tale of supernatural presence and as a psychological case study. This duality—between external haunting and internal disturbance—became a hallmark of twentieth-century supernatural fiction and strongly influenced later writers, including Susan Hill.

Hill's most famous work, *The Woman in Black* (1983), stands as one of the most significant reimaginings of the ghost story in modern British literature. Drawing upon the Victorian ghost-story tradition of Dickens, Le Fanu, and M. R. James, Hill reshapes the familiar tropes of the haunted house, the cursed figure, and the isolated landscape into a novel that resonates with contemporary anxieties. At the heart of the story is Jennet Humfrye, the ghostly "woman in black," whose presence is not limited to eerie manifestations but functions as a force of fate. Those who see her are doomed to suffer the death of a child, a curse that ties her spectral vengeance to the inevitability of tragedy. Unlike the ghost of King Hamlet, who appears as a messenger demanding justice, Jennet is both the victim of social injustice and the agent of unrelenting punishment. Her haunting merges the inevitability of fate with the destructive power of grief, showing how the supernatural can express the enduring weight of loss. The novel's bleak resolution, in which the protagonist Arthur Kipps loses his wife and child in a fatal accident immediately after encountering Jennet, reinforces the idea that the ghost in Hill's fiction does not allow for escape or redemption, but enforces a cruel determinism born out of historical wrongs.

Hill develops her supernatural vision further in *The Small Hand* (2010), where she explores the theme of premonition. The protagonist is haunted not by a visible apparition but by the sensation of a child's invisible hand slipping into his own. This tactile haunting functions as a subtle but insistent omen, entwining his fate with unresolved trauma from the past. The idea of prophecy, which in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* takes the form of riddling predictions from the Weird Sisters, here manifests not through words but through bodily intuition. Hill thus modernizes the notion of supernatural foretelling, suggesting that fate can be intimated through sensation and subconscious dread as much as through explicit prophecy. The protagonist's growing entanglement with the ghostly child's presence becomes a psychological trap, illustrating how prophecy in modern supernatural literature often emerges from within, through haunting memories and unacknowledged guilt.

In *The Mist in the Mirror* (1992), Hill again draws upon traditional gothic devices—haunted mansions, shadowy figures, and disorienting visions—but reshapes them into a narrative where the supernatural becomes a blend of warning and entrapment. The protagonist, Sir James Monmouth, is pursued by ghostly apparitions and an overwhelming sense of foreboding as he investigates his own past. Here, ghosts serve as both omens and manifestations of obsession, blurring the line between fate imposed from outside and psychological inevitability generated from within. The apparitions seem to warn him against continuing his quest, yet his compulsion to pursue the truth reflects how human desire and curiosity can override warnings, leading to self-destruction. In this sense, Hill connects with Shakespearean themes—where prophecies and ghostly commands compel action—but adapts them into narratives that foreground individual psychology and the destructive pull of memory.

Across these works, Hill adapts the tropes of Shakespearean ghosts and prophecies—once external arbiters of justice and destiny—into metaphors for internalized guilt, repression, and social injustice. Jennet Humfrye's curse in *The Woman in Black*, for example, does not merely function as an act of personal revenge but embodies the consequences of societal marginalization. Jennet, as an unmarried mother ostracized by Victorian society, becomes a ghostly symbol of trauma perpetuated across generations, her vengeance representing the silenced anger of women denied voice or agency. By transforming the ghost into a metaphor for social exclusion and unresolved suffering, Hill gives the supernatural a profound ethical and social resonance. Her ghosts remind readers that fate is not only cosmic or divine but can be constructed by human cruelty, neglect, and injustice, which perpetuate suffering long after the original act.

Where Shakespeare's ghosts and witches compelled characters to confront moral dilemmas in a world framed by providence, Hill's apparitions and omens confront modern readers with the

inevitability of memory, trauma, and the lingering weight of the past. The question is no longer whether fate is decreed by the gods or determined by prophecy, but how the traumas and injustices of history return to shape the present. In this way, Hill's fiction transforms supernatural encounters into metaphors for the persistence of memory and the inescapability of loss. Her ghosts are not fleeting apparitions but enduring presences that reveal how the past refuses to remain buried.

Thus, the twentieth-century evolution of the supernatural, as seen in Susan Hill's fiction, demonstrates how traditional motifs of ghosts, prophecy, and fate have been adapted to address modern concerns. The supernatural is no longer merely a matter of theological speculation or gothic entertainment; it becomes a lens through which writers explore psychological disturbance, social critique, and the persistence of human suffering. By preserving the inevitability of fate while grounding it in trauma and repression, Hill shows that the supernatural continues to haunt the literary imagination, not as an outdated relic, but as a vital metaphor for the forces—seen and unseen—that shape human lives. In doing so, she pays homage to the enduring traditions of Shakespeare and the Gothic while ensuring that ghosts, prophecy, and fate remain central to the cultural and ethical concerns of modern readers.

Themes of Fate, Prophecy, and Free Will Across the Period

Across the arc of British literature from Shakespeare to Susan Hill, the intertwined themes of fate, prophecy, and free will emerge as constant yet evolving motifs, shaping how characters understand their place within the larger order of existence. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, prophecy embodies a tension between inevitability and choice: the Weird Sisters predict Macbeth's kingship, but it is his ambition and decisions that bring the prophecy to fulfillment, raising the enduring question of whether he is bound by fate or undone by his own will. Similarly, in *Hamlet*, the ghost's command to avenge his murder creates a sense of predestination, yet Hamlet's vacillation illustrates how prophecy or ghostly mandate does not erase human agency but rather intensifies the burden of decision-making. This tension between supernatural foretelling and individual choice persists into the Gothic and Victorian traditions, where omens and portents often serve as warnings that can either be heeded or ignored, suggesting fate is not always fixed but shaped by human response. By the time we reach Susan Hill, prophecy and fate manifest less as divine decrees and more as inexorable hauntings, such as the curse of Jennet Humfrye in *The Woman in Black*, which brings tragedy regardless of the characters' choices. Here, fate appears inescapable, yet the ghost's vengeance is itself a product of social injustice, implying that human actions in the past determine the inevitabilities of the present. The role of ghosts across these periods further reflects this thematic evolution: in Shakespeare, ghosts are often messengers of moral truth or agents of justice,

compelling characters to confront wrongdoing; in Gothic and Victorian literature, ghosts shift toward being embodiments of repression, guilt, or unacknowledged desire; and in Hill's modern tales, they become metaphors for trauma and the silenced voices of the marginalized, their hauntings less about divine order and more about unresolved human suffering. Thus, the supernatural across British literature dramatizes the perpetual conflict between destiny and autonomy, prophecy and choice, reminding readers that foretelling forces—whether in the form of a ghostly visitation, a cryptic omen, or a chilling curse—both reveal and test the limits of human freedom. Ultimately, fate in these works is neither wholly imposed nor entirely escapable; it is negotiated through the characters' actions, fears, and moral responsibilities, leaving audiences to grapple with the unsettling possibility that while humans may act with agency, they remain haunted by forces beyond their control.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative study of Shakespeare's drama and Susan Hill's ghost fiction reveals both striking continuities and profound transformations in the ways prophecy, fate, and ghostly presence operate across centuries of British literature, with Gothic and Victorian authors providing an important bridge in the evolution of supernatural motifs. In *Hamlet*, the ghost of King Hamlet is central to the narrative, appearing as a messenger from purgatory who demands vengeance for his murder; his spectral presence enforces a moral obligation upon Hamlet, yet simultaneously raises questions about truth, deception, and the afterlife. Similarly, in *Macbeth*, the Weird Sisters' prophecies destabilize human agency, shaping Macbeth's choices in ways that blur the line between free will and predestination, while Banquo's ghost later emerges as a terrifying embodiment of guilt and fate fulfilled. Both plays present supernatural forces as external catalysts that drive the characters into moral crises, where ghosts and prophecies compel action while leaving space for human choice, thus dramatizing the tension between providence and agency in early modern England. By contrast, the Gothic novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries shifted the supernatural from overt agents of divine or cosmic justice to symbols of psychological repression and inherited guilt. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) introduced ancestral curses and uncanny apparitions, while Ann Radcliffe's novels staged seemingly supernatural events often explained by reason, highlighting the conflict between rational Enlightenment thought and irrational fear. Later, M. R. James and Henry James turned the ghost story inward, with M. R. James's antiquarian hauntings emphasizing the persistence of the past and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) dramatizing the ambiguity between real ghosts and psychological disturbance. These intermediate authors prepared the ground for modern reinterpretations, where the supernatural shifted from a

theological and moral framework toward a psychological and existential one. Susan Hill, writing in the late twentieth century, inherits and reshapes these traditions, especially in *The Woman in Black* (1983). The ghost of Jennet Humfrye is not a divine messenger but the vengeful embodiment of trauma and social injustice, her curse marking those who see her for inevitable tragedy, most often the death of a child. Unlike Shakespeare's ghosts, who speak and demand justice, Jennet is silent, her presence itself functioning as a prophecy of doom that cannot be avoided, thus collapsing the space between fate and free will. In *The Small Hand* (2010), Hill adapts the notion of prophecy into the bodily intuition of a child's invisible hand, a subtle omen entwining the protagonist's future with unresolved past trauma, while in *The Mist in the Mirror* (1992), apparitions serve both as warnings and entrapments, blurring the boundary between external fate and internal obsession. Where Shakespeare's supernatural forces compel characters to make choices within a framework of providence, Hill's ghosts enforce the inevitability of memory, repression, and social exclusion, making fate not divine but humanly constructed through injustice and suffering. Yet, despite these differences, continuities remain: both Shakespeare and Hill use the supernatural to dramatize the inescapability of the past, the fragility of human agency, and the weight of moral or social wrongs that reverberate beyond death. The evolution from Shakespeare through Gothic intermediaries to Hill demonstrates a shift from cosmic or theological frameworks of prophecy and fate toward psychological and social ones, but the central function of the supernatural—as a force that reveals hidden truths, confronts characters with forces beyond their control, and dramatizes timeless anxieties about death, justice, and destiny—remains strikingly consistent. Thus, a comparative analysis highlights the adaptability of ghosts and prophecy across time: from Shakespeare's moral messengers, to Gothic figures of uncanny dread, to Hill's metaphors for trauma and exclusion, each stage reflects not only changing cultural contexts but also the enduring human need to explain and dramatize the unseen powers that shape human life.

Literature review

The study of the supernatural in British literature has attracted wide scholarly attention, with critics approaching ghosts, prophecy, fate, and otherworldly forces from historical, cultural, psychological, and literary perspectives, offering a rich body of work that deepens our understanding of how these

motifs function in texts ranging from medieval romances to contemporary ghost stories. Pullara (2019), in her doctoral dissertation, re-evaluates belief formation in early modern drama, arguing that psychological disturbance and supernatural encounter were intertwined in shaping how audiences engaged with plays such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*; her work underscores the idea that ghosts and prophecies were not only dramatic devices but also mirrors of cultural anxieties about faith, providence, and mental disturbance. Similarly, Stevens (2011) in *Spectre Within: Unburying the Dead in Elizabethan Literature* highlights how the dead persist in the literary imagination, showing that ghostly presences embody both cultural memory and the tensions between mortality, justice, and the afterlife in the Elizabethan worldview.

This theme is expanded in Brewster and Thurston's *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story* (2018), which provides a comprehensive overview of the ghost story tradition across centuries, situating ghosts as versatile figures that have shifted from moral messengers in early drama to psychological and social symbols in the modern period, thus establishing continuity and transformation within the supernatural tradition. Usongo (2011), in *Character and the Supernatural in Shakespeare and Achebe*, offers a comparative framework, illustrating how supernatural forces affect character development in different cultural contexts and showing that prophecy and fate serve as universal literary tools to explore human limitation, though shaped by specific cultural traditions. Jephson (2009) addresses the dramaturgical strategies behind supernatural presentation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, noting that Shakespeare gradually prepared his audiences for phenomena beyond the natural order, thereby enhancing credibility and deepening the emotional and thematic resonance of the supernatural, an observation that situates Shakespeare as a craftsman of gradual suspension of disbelief. Hamad (2011) narrows the focus to *Macbeth*, analyzing the witches' role as embodiments of supernatural power, whose prophecies destabilize the natural and political order, compelling Macbeth toward actions that blur the lines between fate and ambition; this study reaffirms the importance of prophecy as a central motif in dramatizing free will versus determinism. Saunders (2010), in *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, provides the historical foundations for understanding how enchantment, omens, and magical interventions in medieval romances influenced later literary treatments, demonstrating that early uses of the supernatural established patterns of fate, divine will, and human struggle that persisted into the Renaissance and beyond.

Lyon (2003), in *The Power of the Supernatural in Four Shakespearean Plays*, consolidates this trajectory by examining *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest*, arguing that supernatural interventions in these works function as catalysts for conflict and resolution while

raising fundamental questions about morality, justice, and human destiny. Taken together, these works demonstrate that the supernatural in British literature has always operated as more than narrative ornament; it reflects profound cultural concerns about death, justice, memory, and guilt. Ghosts persist as embodiments of unresolved pasts, prophecy disrupts the certainty of human choice, and fate hovers as an inexorable force that compels characters to question their agency. The reviewed literature also reveals the adaptability of the supernatural, shifting from the divine or theological frameworks of medieval and early modern texts to the psychological, social, and existential dimensions emphasized in contemporary studies. By bridging historical, cultural, and literary analyses, these scholars collectively underscore the enduring power of the supernatural to dramatize the unseen forces shaping human life, situating it as a central theme in the evolution of British literature.

Conclusion

From Shakespeare to Susan Hill, the supernatural in British literature demonstrates both striking continuities and significant transformations in the portrayal of ghosts, prophecy, and fate. In Shakespeare's plays, ghosts serve as messengers of truth and moral obligation, while prophecy destabilizes human agency by entangling ambition with predestination; in later Gothic and Victorian fiction, these elements shift toward haunting spaces, ominous warnings, and the uncanny as reflections of psychological dread and social anxieties. By the twentieth century, Hill inherits these tropes but reworks them into modern forms, where ghosts embody trauma, repression, and injustice, and fate becomes an inescapable haunting rooted in human suffering rather than divine providence. What continues across all periods is the supernatural's ability to challenge free will, confront characters with forces beyond their control, and blur the line between external destiny and internal guilt. At the same time, what changes is the cultural meaning attached to these elements: from theological and moral frameworks in the Renaissance to psychological, social, and existential dimensions in modern literature. Ultimately, the persistence of ghosts, prophecy, and fate across centuries reveals literature's ongoing preoccupation with death, justice, memory, and the burdens of the past, showing that the supernatural is less about otherworldly forces than about humanity's deepest fears and desires, forever haunting the imagination.

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