

ART AS ANARCHISM: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DISSENT THROUGH PLAYWRITING  
IN URSULA K. LE GUIN'S *THE DISPOSSESSED*

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## ABSTRACT

In my project I focus on the use of art by anarchists to challenge authority structures in Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*. Basing her novel in the science fiction genre enabled Le Guin the freedom to create her own worlds while exploring whether an anarchist utopia can successfully operate without the interference of government and authoritative control. In order to determine the viability of an anarchist utopia, Le Guin created two planets with competing ideologies: the capitalist planet Urras and the revolutionary anarchist planet of Anarres. In addition to these planets, Le Guin explores anarchism through two main characters who identify as anarchists, Shevek and Tirin. They are both influenced by the nature of their chosen craft, with Shevek thinking within the rigid formalities of physics and Tirin exploring the world through the limitless potential of his art as a playwright. I argue that as a playwright Tirin is the anarchist of the novel and that the creativity of his art makes him the only character able to live outside the confines of government and social coercion. My project's insights are significant because they establish that art and playwriting are the unregulated dissenting vehicles of anarchism in *The Dispossessed*.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my best friend and father, Graham, and to the strongest person I know, my mother, Kate.

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Art as Anarchism: Political and Social Dissent through Playwriting in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

The novel *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin is a reading of various anarchist institutions and anarchist personalities. What becomes of rebels who fight against the political systems they are unwilling to participate in? How do they choose to express themselves while not adhering to restrictions of community and self? What is the purpose of this expression? These questions surround anarchism and anarchists, and shape the central political and social structures in *The Dispossessed*. The society of Anarres exists in the utopian environment created by Le Guin and is structured around the façade of personal freedoms for all citizens. Urras is a society based on capitalism and personal wealth and acts in direct opposition to Anarres. By contrasting these two societies Le Guin emphasizes the founding principles of the philosopher Odo. Odonians believe in the abolishment of governmental structures and in the absolute freedom of the individual, absolute freedom that can only be achieved without authoritative systems of control. In order to avoid these oppressive systems, the Odonians place a high value on the individual's contribution to the community and disapprove of the accumulation of personal property and other luxuries that do not contribute to society. The citizens of Anarres believe that the pursuit of personal wealth leads to "profiteering" and placing value on material objects instead of on one's fellows. When such values dominate a community an anarchist society cannot exist, as the pursuit of personal gain inevitably leads to the distribution of power and wealth, which creates inequality and oppressive power structures within a society. The manipulation of personal freedoms experienced on Anarres is challenged by the character Tirin and his dramatic playwriting. Playwriting is an ideal method of anarchist expression, particularly when the anarchist is a part of a system that shuns dissent, because it affords the artist the ability to express themselves free of social and political regulations. The argument put forward in this essay is that because it is unregulated, playwriting and theatrical art act as the dissenting vehicles of anarchism in *The Dispossessed* and that through playwriting the political systems established in the text are questioned and contested by Tirin. This apparently secondary character is the novel's anarchist.

## Framework of Anarchism in *The Dispossessed*

When preparing to write *The Dispossessed*, Ursula K Le Guin cited Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* as a significant influence on the social, political, and anarchist structures of the novel. By contrasting Mutual Aid with Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution, Kropotkin provides a convincing argument that the successful members of a species are those that work together instead of engaging in constant competition. Kropotkin articulates the evolution of mutual aid and expresses how modern society continues to rely on solidarity among human beings to function successfully. *Mutual Aid* begins by examining how animals work together to survive, progresses to the evolution of humanity from small tribal groups to functional modern cities, and finishes with the pitfalls of individuals abusing authority over their communities. From ants sharing food with starving comrades to village communities resolving legal issues with unbiased elected officials, Kropotkin proves that the success of a species is built upon non-violent mutual aid. The understanding of how society has been framed by individuals cooperating within a community is articulated in the statement "in the practice of mutual aid, which we can retrace to the earliest beginnings of evolution, we thus find the positive and undoubted origin of our ethical conceptions; and we can affirm that in the ethical progress of man, mutual support not mutual struggle, has had the leading part" (Kropotkin 1). Kropotkin argues that it is in man's nature to help one another and to provide assistance to an individual regardless of immediate personal benefit. The political and social systems that act against this natural inclination are harmful for both society and individual citizens and lead to the unequal distribution of material wealth. Both of these evolutionary theories, Mutual Aid and Competition, are seen in *The Dispossessed*. Anarres is a society that is framed around the theory of Mutual Aid and can be closely compared to Anarchist Communist communities; it is a society that believes in sacrificing for the whole and ensuring that an individual in need is provided for regardless of their social status. In contrast to Anarres the society of Urras closely resembles modern day capitalism and is based around competition. The capitalist ideals promoted in Urras lead to the accumulation of individual wealth and the creation of extreme poverty for many citizens. It is the core principles of mutual aid that establish a contrast between the dominant ideologies in the novel and build the framework of anarchism in Anarres.

Whereas Kropotkin provides a detailed history of how mutual aid is beneficial to the

survival of a species and how modern societies are shaped by this theory, Mikhail Bakunin focuses on the evolution of authority and its effects on the individual citizen. The argument put forward in Bakunin's *God and the State* is that although human beings are "the highest manifestation of animality" (Bakunin 10) the formation of ideals, intellectual thought, and moral convictions is what separates mankind from other species. It is the ability to further the cause of one's fellow man and create an environment where all men can flourish that Bakunin believes separates people from other animals. Furthering this argument Bakunin states that as a species these differentiating factors are corrupted by individuals who seek to hold power and authority. Intellectual debate and individual freedom cannot exist in the same space as absolute power and abusive authority because each requires an environment free of corruption to be successful. Over generations the authority and corruption of the Church and State has been so deeply engrained in the poor/working man that the power given to individuals that represent these systems, such as Bishops and Cardinals, is accepted as absolute. The construction of Anarres is an attempt to avoid these corrupting influences. Anarres is a society created on the ideals of equality, where authority is viewed with distrust and personal wealth is severely frowned upon. The anarchist principles of Anarres are built upon a combination of Kropotkin and Bakunin's ideas. Anarres is a society where man is taught to engage in mutual aid and work together for the survival and benefit of the community, while simultaneously avoiding the abusive authority seen on Urras through the abolition of corrupting authority structures. These are the founding ideals that Anarres seeks to epitomize and are what lend its citizens to label Anarres as an anarchist society.

The citizens of Anarres refer to their community as an anarchist society, but the political tree of anarchism consists of more than one branch. The two different types of anarchism that are most prevalent in *The Dispossessed* are Anarcho-Communism and Anarcho-Syndicalism. Various aspects of each of these anarchist systems combine to form the principles established by the Urrasti philosopher Odo and her followers, the original founders of Anarres, the Odonians. The philosophy of Odo stresses individual freedom and the construction of successful societies around the principles of mutual cooperation and community development, not the unequal distribution of wealth and power. Odo's philosophical teachings inspired a large enough anarchist political movement that the authorities of Urras viewed it as dangerous. As a result of threatening the powerful status quo the Odonians were granted the right to leave the planet and

start their own colony free of social and political constraints. Anarcho-Communism is a system of anarchism that lends itself well to the teachings of Odo because it promotes freedom from governmental power and the deconstruction of state run institutions; emphasis is put on common ownership within the community which avoids a dependence on private property. These cornerstones of Anarcho-Communism can be seen in the Anarresti's view of personal property as each citizen lives a minimalist lifestyle and views the accumulation of extensive personal property as wasteful. Personal property is accepted to the extent that it does not promote inequality between citizens, with private ownership of property being considered detrimental to the unity of the community as a whole. The citizens of Anarres view the extravagant accumulation of private property as morally wrong and refer to those who value commodities over their fellow man as egotists and "propertarians." In Anarres, the individual is expected to contribute to the greater good of the community by volunteering in community systems that contribute to the common production of goods and capital, goods and capital that are used to support the planet as a whole. This type of contribution, from the individual to the community, is a founding principle of Anarcho-Communism. The goal of Anarcho-Communism is to bridge the gap between the individual and their society through the contribution of every citizen. The individual is responsible for building and maintaining the system they are a part of and feels a sense of accountability when the system succeeds, as well as a sense of failure when the system fails. This feeling of responsibility is present in the citizens of Anarres, and is needed in order for Anarcho-Communism to be successful.

The second type of anarchism that frames the political structure of Anarres is Anarcho-Syndicalism. Anarcho-Syndicalism involves the working class of capitalist systems revolting against the power structures that control the distribution of capital, and then using these systems to facilitate change in their communities. The aspects of Anarcho-Syndicalism that are seen in Anarres include the solidarity of the working man against controlling power structures and the abolition of capitalist systems for the greater good of society. By moving their entire civilization to a separate planet the Odonians were able to completely abolish the capitalist systems that were controlling their personal freedoms. Replacing these systems were the principles of Odo, which stress that community comes before the individual and that the individual *must* contribute to the production of labor and goods. On Anarres, work rotations are mandatory for every individual, which means that the class system that is usually present should not be used as a discriminating

force and should be effectively abolished. Anarcho-Syndicalism views the wage system as oppressive and corrupt, with those in positions of power inevitably working in their own interest as opposed to the interests of their fellow man. With the hoarding of wealth and the creation of power structures comes the establishment of authority figures and with these authority figures comes unequal distribution of goods, capital, and personal freedoms. Anarres borrows from both Anarcho-Communism and Anarcho-Syndicalism in an attempt to achieve its goal, to live free of authoritative restrictions and function within a utopian anarchist society.

By creating a society that borrows from both Anarcho-Communism and Anarcho-Syndicalism Le Guin changes how anarchism can be viewed and establishes that an anarchist utopian society may be possible. In his article “Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin.” Lewis Call argues that despite using Kropotkin and Bakunin’s theories on mutual aid and the corrupting influence of authority Le Guin is able to “[transgress] the boundaries of conventional anarchist thinking to create new forms of anarchism that are entirely relevant to life in the postmodern condition” (Call 3). The shining gift of *The Dispossessed* is its ability to express how a society can flourish without authority structures; by building upon anarchist principles that are already present in modern society and combining aspects of anarchism that would normally not be seen together, Le Guin creates a new form of anarchism that is unique and successful in Anarres. Through the creation of a separate “explicitly anarchist” (Call 3) society Le Guin develops a social experiment in her novel, a social experiment that contests the traditional interpretations of anarchism.

To explore individual resistance and structures of authority one must have a firm grasp of the perspective taken by Le Guin when creating Anarres and Urras. Susan Benfield articulates the importance of personal freedom established by Le Guin in the article “The Interplanetary Dialectical Freedom and Equality in Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*”: “Le Guin begins from the premise that the most important goal of governments and societies is to enable human beings to be as free as possible.” (128). By establishing personal freedom as a fundamental human right, Le Guin has set the stage for *The Dispossessed* to be viewed through an anarchist lens; Anarres is the anarchist solution to the problems seen on Urras and any action taken by an authority that adversely affects individual freedom is acting against the fundamental framework of Anarres and should be opposed. The emphasis on individual freedom creates an environment

where the individual must work in solidarity with their fellow man while defending their personal rights from corruption. This is a perfect setting for the creation of individual anarchists.

Anarchists are naturally inclined to rebel against systems that inhibit their individual freedom. In the introduction to the anthology *Anarchism and Utopianism*, Laurence Davis notes that questioning social structures is crucial to an anarchist society and that opposition to the status quo is needed for a society to remain free of corrupting influences. Davis states that “Anarchism is the only logically complete doctrine of freedom, because it denies all external authority, all domination of man by man. It proclaims the sufficiency of the individual human mind and spirit” (Davis 21). By stressing that the individual can suffice without outside influence Davis articulates that a society does not require an external authority and that a completely anarchist society is possible. This is important in relation to Anarres because it shows that if the principles founded by Odo are followed correctly Anarres can exist free of corruption. It is the pursuit of individual power by characters such as Sabul, not the social structure of the community that risks corrupting Anarres. Daniel P. Jaeckle states that Anarres has the potential to be an anarchist society free of social and political constraints in the article “Interpersonal Ethics in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*”:

Upon their arrival on Anarres the settlers fashioned a society which at least in theory had no established government and no coercion within the economic sphere. As a result, the creation of Anarresti society within the novel becomes a thought-experiment on the viability of anarchism and the need for permanent revolution to counter such threats as an incipient bureaucracy and a tendency toward dominance games. (Jaeckle 61).

Jaeckle is speaking to the fact that the founders of Anarres established their society with the intention of living without the intrusion of governmental bodies and that to remain an anarchist society authoritative intrusion should not be present. The creation of an anarchist utopia and the establishment of a separate society on a completely different planet clarify the viewpoint held by the Anarresti: that their society is a separate and free anarchist society, and that the corruption on Urras is not possible on their reformed planet. Anarchist societies renounce the state and state authority, but their core value of individual freedom must always be defended by some kind of permanent revolution. Anarchist freedom is not a single achievement that can last without renewal but is an ongoing process.

## Setting the Stage: Anarres and Urras

It is important to discover the true anarchist of *The Dispossessed* because through the individual anarchist we can discover the limits of an anarchist society and the benefit of social and political rebellion, particularly when it comes to art and playwriting as a dissenting political tool. To determine who the anarchist of the novel is it is essential to further examine the social structures of both Urras and Anarres to determine how external authority is opposed and how anarchism fits within each society. Urras, the home planet, consists of several different political states, the two largest being A-lo and Thu. A-lo is run by a patriarchal system based on a capitalist economy, with a large discrepancy between the wealthy and the poor. A-lo's social system is described in Shevek's account of rebellion on Urras: "Here on Urras, [the] act of rebellion was a luxury, a self-indulgence. To be a physicist in A-lo was to serve not society, not mankind, not the truth, but the State" (272). In contrast to this system, Thu is run by a government that shares similarities with Communist political ideologies on Earth. Thu's system is summarized by a Thuvian politician: "The State of Thu is even more centralized than the State of A-lo. One power structure controls all, the government, administration, police, army, education, laws, trades, manufacturers" (136). It is entirely possible that Le Guin created Thu in order to provide balance by creating a contrast between capitalist and communist ideologies. The combination of a governmental structure that promotes consumerism and the continued unequal distribution of wealth fosters an environment that promotes civil unrest in A-lo. The civil unrest that is a by-product of Urrasti political systems is evident in the disdain felt towards the government by the Urrasti citizen Oiie. Oiie voices his disapproval of the Urrasti political system in his conversation with Shevek: "Because low pay is better than no pay,' Oiie said, and the bitterness in his voice was quite clear... 'My grandfather was a janitor. Scrubbed floors and changed dirty sheets in a hotel for fifty years. Ten hours a day, six days a week. He did it so that he and his family could eat'" (151). Due to the civil unrest felt by citizens of Urras, such as Oiie, the wealthy and powerful elite cannot appear weak or unable to control their own population. This social and political control is important when explaining anarchism in the text because these oppressive political structures are what inspired Odo and the founders of Anarres.

Anarres does succeed as an anarchist society in various ways. The accumulation of wealth and power is hindered by work placements benefiting the group rather than the

individual, homeownership is nonexistent, and personal relationships are gender fluid with restrictions surrounding sex completely absent. The work placements are chosen based on an individual's skills and education; they are strategically used to benefit society as a whole and do not serve individuals financially. The individual is free to refuse a work placement and can also refuse to work altogether. Working without the expectation of financial gain eliminates the concept of homeownership. With no homes to own an accumulation of wealth is viewed as unnecessary and wasteful. Instead of owning a home individuals are free to inhabit living spaces that are owned communally; locations are assigned based on need and availability. Without the hindrance of homeownership the priorities of the citizens of Anarres change from the accumulation of wealth to the prioritization of social impact and personal experience. These principles are the foundation of anarchism and contribute to the fluid nature of gender and sex on Anarres. Odonians are free to have relationships without social judgement and are offered partnered living regardless of gender. Odonians believe that "Partnership was a voluntarily constituted federation like any other. So long as it worked, it worked, and if it didn't work it stopped being. It was not an institution but a function. It had no sanction but that of private conscience" (244). These are the anarchist principles that built the foundation of Anarres and are what contribute to it being an anarchist society. It is important to recognize the successes of Anarres as an anarchist community because these principles are what inspire Tirin and other artists to freely express themselves. Without the ability to express oneself a person cannot contribute to the formation of ideals, intellectual thought, and moral convictions.

Anarres is not a completely free anarchist society, however: in place of the oppressive authority experienced on Urras the authoritative structure behind Anarres is the threat of social stigmatization. Through the unspoken threat of social ostracization, individuals are coerced into obeying the status quo, which results in a system of control that enables the politically powerful to deny accountability for the subjection of dissenters. Shevek speaks to this social control as he analyses the obligation he feels to accept certain work placements:

"I'm a free man, I didn't have to come here!...We always think it, and say it, but we don't do it. We keep our initiative tucked away safe in our mind, like in a room where we can come and say, 'I don't have to do anything, I make my own choices I'm free.' And then we leave the little room in our mind and go where PDC posts us" (329).

The social coercion felt by Shevek highlights that the work of Le Guin very rarely deals in absolutes and that even on Anarres there are systems of authority. Authority itself is regarded as subversive by Odonians because it is not supposed to exist on Anarres and must assert control outside of the public eye. To what extent does the presence of subversive authority adversely affect individual freedom in Anarres? Are the authority figures/systems in both societies opposed by the anarchists of the novel? Individuals who realize that their rights are being infringed and act against these restrictions help to identify these corrupting influences.

Authoritative structures, such as the states seen in Urras and the controlling social coercion of Anarres, must have supreme dominance over the individual or they would cease to exist. How authority exerts dominance is one of the issues tackled by Le Guin through the exploration of the power structures of Anarres and Urras. Urras is seen to openly dominate the individual through the use of financial control and physical violence, whereas individuals in positions of authority on Anarres rely on social manipulation and behavioral regulation to control the citizens of their society. Although Anarres does not have an official state the same oppressive strategies of control used by government institutions on Urras are used to oppress individuals through social corruption on Anarres.

### **Shevek and Anarchism**

That the individual is seen as the destroyer of authoritative bodies is witnessed in the actions of Shevek as the self-titled “anarchist” of Anarres. When Shevek becomes aware that Anarres has strayed from the principles it was founded upon he rebels and engages in a personal voyage to Urras. His personal voyage is not taken lightly; Shevek is putting himself in danger both physically and professionally to fulfill the obligation he feels as an anarchist. This is witnessed when Shevek is attacked by a violent mob for leaving Anarres and by his ostracization from the physics community due to working with scientists in Urras. Shevek’s actions as an individual are in direct opposition to those in positions of authority and express his individual anarchism and his desire to see Odonian principles survive uncorrupted. Shevek’s personal voyage against the oppressive structures and individuals of Anarres portrays him in many ways as an anarchist figure.

As a young man Shevek is convinced of the virtue of Anarres and defends the principles on which his home planet was founded. When confronted by his peers on personal freedoms Shevek states:

“Order is not ‘orders’. We don’t leave Anarres, because we *are* Anarres. Being Tirin, you can’t leave Tirin’s skin. You might like to try being somebody else to see what it’s like, but you can’t. But are you kept from it by force? Are we kept here by force? What force- what laws, governments, police? None. Simply our own being, our nature as Odonians. It’s your nature to be Tirin, and my nature to be Shevek, and our common nature to be Odonians, responsible to one another. And that responsibility is our freedom, to avoid it, would be to lose our freedom. Would you really like to live in a society where you had no responsibility and no freedom, no choice, only the false option of obedience to the law, or disobedience followed by punishment? Would you really want to go to live in a prison?” (45)

Shevek has captured the very essence of what it means to be a citizen of Anarres. He attempts to convince his companions that Anarres is not a society built by a government or state but instead lives in every citizen and *is* every citizen. This is significant because it offers insight into the moral and social principles he is rebelling against later in life; as a young man he is the ideal Odonian, a fact that makes his decision to leave Anarres more difficult. It is only over time that he begins to doubt his views, realizing that there are power structures on Anarres that inhibit his own, and others’, personal freedoms.

His friend Dap attempts to explain to Shevek that reputable Anarresti have established a code of acceptable political and social behavior that controls the community. These powerful citizens assert an unspoken authority in a system that is supposed to be free of authoritative control. This control is unacceptable to Shevek as a loyal Odonian, and eventually he is led to rebel. Before Shevek has come to terms with the reality that Anarres is not the society he believes it to be Dap highlights the underlying power structures that are corrupting their home planet. The issue is Shevek’s physics mentor, Sabul:

“What are you talking about, Dap? We have no power structure.”

“No? What makes Sabul so strong?”

“Not a power structure, a government. This isn’t Urras, after all!”

“No. We have no government, no laws, all right. But as far as I can see, ideas never were controlled by laws and governments, even on Urras. If they had been, how would Odo have worked out hers? How would Odonianism have become a world movement? The anarchists tried to stamp it out by force, and failed. You can’t crush ideas by suppressing them. You can only crush them by ignoring them. By refusing to think, refusing to change. And that’s precisely what our society is doing! Sabul uses you where he can, and where he can’t, he prevents you from publishing, from teaching, even from working. Right? In other words, he has power over you. Where does he get it from? Not from vested authority, there isn’t any. Not from intellectual excellence, he hasn’t any. He gets it from the innate cowardice of the average human mind. Public opinion! That’s the power structure he’s part of, and knows how to use. The unadmitted, inadmissible government that rules the Odonian society by stifling the individual mind.”  
(165)

This dialogue is important because it articulates the political corruption that has begun to taint Anarres as well as the progression of Shevek as a character. Over time these are the issues that lead to his eventual rebellion. Sabul is an example of how the educational system of Anarres has become institutionalized, and how this institutionalization has led to individuals assuming positions of authority, an imbalance in power that should not exist in a utopian anarchist society. That Sabul can manipulate the social systems of Anarres to meet his own political goals is unacceptable to Shevek and clearly indicates that Anarres is an imperfect example of a free anarchist utopia.

Shevek’s acts of rebellion, such as leaving the planet on a personal mission to Urras, are presented seriously but fall short of proving he is the dominant anarchist in the novel. Despite his rebellion he preserves an innate sense of responsibility for his home world and a linear method of thinking that has developed as a result of his self-expression through math and physics. Shevek is a rebel, but not an anarchist.

The sense of responsibility Shevek feels towards his community is seen in his inability to acknowledge the suffering caused by oppressive authority structures on Anarres. Shevek admits that due to the restrictions placed upon him by Sabul and the PDC he feels like “nothing he [does is] meaningful” (161), but even with this lack of fulfillment he is unable to correctly identify that his society is restricting in a way that should not be admissible in an anarchist utopia. Dap again

attempts to bring his attention to this suffering and Shevek's resulting abandonment of anarchist identity:

"The PDC is, by now, basically an archistic bureaucracy."

After a moment, Shevek laughed, not quite naturally, and said, "Well, come on, Dap, this is amusing, but it's a bit diseased, isn't it?"

"Shev, did you ever think that what the analogic mode calls 'disease,' social disaffection, discontent, alienation, that this might analogically also be called pain- what you meant when you talked about pain, suffering? And that, like pain, it serves a function in the organism?"

"No!": Shevek said, violently. (166)

Shevek's violent denial of even the *potential* for Anarresti society to be corrupt and for the suffering of an individual to be the result of this corruption shows that although Shevek identifies as an anarchist, he is unable to overcome the boundaries of his established thinking and indoctrinated loyalty to Anarresti society. Although Shevek grows as an individual it is his inability to separate himself from his previously established pattern of thinking that limits him as an anarchist. The inability to fully recognize the deeply flawed aspects of his society identifies Shevek as less an anarchist and more a byproduct, or slave, of his environment.

Shevek's fierce loyalty to the principles that frame Anarres is witnessed in how he speaks of his home planet. Shevek describes Anarres as "an attempt to *reach* it (morality). To throw out the moralizing, yes- the rules, the laws, the punishments- so that men can see good and evil and choose between them" (219). These moralistic principles are what Shevek has used to build his own morality and are why his self-identification as an anarchist must be questioned.

That Shevek is incorrectly identifying as an anarchist is evident in Le Guin's rendering of his sentiments: "He could not rebel against his society, because his society, properly conceived, was a revolution, a permanent one, an ongoing process" (176). The implication is that it is impossible to rebel against Anarres because it is in a permanent state of revolution. But Anarres is not in a state of permanent revolution, as social manipulation and coercive methods of authoritative control have corrupted the guiding principles of Odo, changing Anarres from a society founded on rebellion to a place of hidden authority. Shevek is unable to see this change because he has convinced himself that this reality is not possible. How can Shevek represent anarchist practice when he refuses to admit that the principles of his anarchist society have been

compromised? He has been indoctrinated by the expectations placed upon him by his social superiors and acts in a way that runs contrary to the behavior of an anarchist. Due to the structured method of his thinking and refusal to see the subtle changes taking place on his home planet it is clear that Shevek is not an anarchist.

The governing rules of Shevek's chosen craft of physics, mathematics, and science directly interfere with his ability to function outside of these systems. Both mathematics and physics are structured by solid, factual rules; they follow a predictable, patterned, and compulsory methodology. Shevek is accustomed to framing his thinking around the tangible, verifiable facts of physics and finds it difficult to think outside these parameters. When discussing the wonders of art and artistic expression Shevek is still only able to relate his experience to mathematics; his only artistic joy is found in the mathematical fractions associated with timing in music. He has been prepped by individuals such as Sabul and members of the PDC to think in relation to his craft and experiences life through the lens of physics and mathematics. Physics is defined as "the fundamental laws of the material universe" (Oxford English Dictionary); Shevek lives within the confines of these fundamental laws and because of this finds it difficult to challenge authority with creative thinking. This inability to challenge the rules and restrictions placed upon him is seen in his acceptance of authoritative groups and individuals. His acceptance of abusive authority is witnessed in the insinuation of Sabul as Shevek's co-author despite his minimal contribution to the completion of Shevek's book. In addition to Sabul's continued insistence that he receive credit for Shevek's work, an authoritative intrusion that would not be present in a perfectly anarchist society, is the coercive influence of the PDC. Sabul tells Shevek: "you don't think everybody in PDC approves of our trading ideas with Urras like this, do you? Defense insists that every word that leaves here on those freighters be passed by a PDC-approved expert" (115). Sabul says this to threaten Shevek into following his directions and to not question what may or may not be in his own personal best interest. Shevek cannot be said to be the anarchist figure of the novel because he accepts the limiting of his personal freedoms by individuals in positions of authority, positions of authority that should not exist on Anarres. This raises the question: who, or what, represents anarchism on Anarres? The answer to this question is not found in Shevek's practice of physics and acceptance of authority, but is instead located in the creativity of playwriting and the expression of individual freedoms through art and self-expression.

## **Tirin: The Anarchist of Anarres**

In contrast to Shevek, Tirin exists in a state of permanent revolution due to the nature of his art and can be considered not only a rebel but the anarchist of Anarres. Tirin is an example of an artist freely expressing himself in Anarres. He lives within the limitless potential of art, art that is promoted in Anarresti culture:

“Learning centers taught all the skills that prepare for the practice of art: training in singing, metrics, dance, the use of brush, chisel, knife, lathe, and so on. It was all pragmatic: the children learned to see, speak, hear, move, handle. No distinction was drawn between the arts and the crafts; art was not considered as having a place in life, but as being a basic technique of life, like speech. Thus architecture had developed, early and freely, a consistent style, pure and plain, subtle in proportion. Painting and sculpture served largely as elements of architecture and town planning. As for the arts of words, poetry and storytelling tended to be ephemeral, to be linked with song and dancing; only the theater stood wholly alone, and only the theater was ever called ‘the Art’ - a thing complete in itself. There were many regional and travelling troupes of actors and dancers, repertory companies, very often with playwright attached. They performed tragedies, semi-improvised comedies, mimes. They were as welcome as rain in the lonely desert towns, they were the glory of the year wherever they came. Rising out of and embodying the isolation and communality of the Anarresti spirit, the drama had attained extraordinary power and brilliance.” (156-157)

Tirin lives his life by these principles and as a young man fully adopted drama and playwriting as his sole means of expression. As a citizen of Anarres he should have been free to pursue his life’s ambition and be a playwright without intrusion. However, when Tirin’s art began to question the powerful structures of authority in Anarres he was immediately punished and removed from the public eye. These systems of control should not have been present on Anarres and as a loyal Odonian Tirin felt compelled to try and bring their existence to the public’s attention. Tirin was born an artist, but through the abuse of authority by social and political authority, was made an anarchist.

That Tirin is capable of thinking outside the parameters of societal rules and creating his own forms of expression is evident early in his childhood through the prison experiment. The very concept of prison is in direct opposition to the teachings of Odo as it involves the application of authority over another individual. For there to be a jail there must be a moral authority establishing that an individual has acted outside of acceptable behavior, as well as a jailer who asserts their dominance over another member of society. Neither of these applications of authority fits within the social framework of Anarres, and each deserves further exploration.

Tirin is a creative anomaly when compared to his peers. This is witnessed in the fact that as children the creation of the prison was initially his idea. Despite creating this social experiment Tirin initially resists the role he must play as jailer: "Making the prison had been his idea, and it sufficed him; he never realized imagination does not suffice some people, they must get into the cell, they must try to open the unopenable door" (36). As a playwright it is in Tirin's nature to be motivated by the creation of art: he does not feel the same desire as others to physically engage in the spectacle he has created, but is instead content with the *act* of creation. Tirin is a true artist whose creativity evolves from unashamedly challenging the morals of his society with the prison experiment to publicly critiquing the authoritative structures of Anarres with his play. As an Anarresti, Tirin does not believe in incarceration and has no concept of the consequences of locking a person in a room without light for thirty hours. He is unable to anticipate the consequences of his actions, and is reluctant to engage in cruel behavior that is outside his personal morals. A second result of the experiment is that the children bond over their shared sense of purpose against the prisoner and create a group mentality that further encourages Tirin to act in his aggressive role as jailer. The children have created a social Other in the form of a prisoner, and use this Othering to justify their acts of violence as a group. This shift in morals is quickly seen in Tirin after he adopts the role of jailer. Through this role he is able to create a new form of expressive art: the art of the performance. When performing the role of jailer Tirin is uncharacteristically cruel and is fully immersed in his artistic performance and does not concern himself with the moral teachings of his community. "You're a prisoner," he tells the jailed victim. "You don't talk back. Understand? Turn around. Put your hands on your head...You can't ask why. Because if you do we can beat you, and you have to just take it, and nobody will help you. Because we can kick you in the balls and you can't kick back. Because you are *not free*" (37). Tirin completely adopts a role that is in direct opposition to his

actual character as a person. In the prison experiment it is through his art that Tirin exemplifies the behavior of a true anarchist as he is able to engage in self-expression and separate himself from the teachings of Anarres and simultaneously question the rules and regulations of his society.

The prison experiment also shows that at an early age Tirin can be identified as an anarchistic figure who questions the power structures that frame his community. These aspects of his character are expressed in the exchange between him and other children in regards to the images and films promoted by the educational systems of Anarres. Tirin is aware that as an individual he does not produce these images and because of this an authoritative body must be responsible for promoting the violent and aggressive images associated with Urras. As an anarchist Tirin does not trust this authoritative influence and views the manipulation of personal opinions/freedoms as an infringement of his rights. Tirin questions the production of these images:

“How old are those films?” said Tirin. “Are they from before the settlement, or are they contemporary? They never say.”

“What does it matter” Kvetur said...”they’re still at it”

“How do we know they are?” [Tirin]

“If those pictures are a hundred and fifty years old things could be entirely different now on Urras. I don’t say they are, but if they were, how would we know it? We don’t go there, we don’t talk, there’s no communication. We really have no idea what life’s like on Urras now.” ...“That’s just it”, said Tirin with the glee of one following logic. “All the material on Urras available to students is the same. Disgusting, immoral, excremental. But look. If it was that bad when the Settlers left, how has it kept on going for a hundred and fifty years? If they were so sick, why aren’t they dead? Why haven’t their propertarian societies collapsed? What are we so afraid of?”

“Infection,” said Bedap.

“Are we so feeble we can’t withstand a little exposure? Anyhow, they can’t *all* be sick. No matter what their society’s like, some of them must be decent. People vary here, don’t they? Are we all perfect Odonians? Look at that snotball Pesus!” ...“No I said we only know what we’re told. And do you know what we’re told?” Tirin’s dark, snub-nosed face, clear in the bright bluish moonlight, turned to them. “Kvet said it, a minute

ago. He's got the message. You heard it: detest Urras, hate Urras, fear Urras."... "If were better than any human society," said Tirin, "then we ought to be helping them but we're *forbidden* to." (42)

Tirin is highlighting how due to the manipulation of information on the part of the Anarres educational system each citizen must question the power structures of their environment, and that as a society these power structures *should* be questioned for Anarres to remain an anarchist community. Tirin is able to see that his ideals may one day be at odds with the same authoritative structures that promote the propaganda shown in the schools of Anarres and that his freedom and ability to grow as an artist may one day be in jeopardy. He is aware that if the education system is able to be manipulated by authoritative social structures then as an individual he could one day be subject to the same treatment.

Tirin uses the art of performance to articulate his personal opinions on Anarresti and Urrasi society. Whereas those around him have been indoctrinated to the point of servitude, Tirin sees behind the veil of individual freedom in both societies and undermines the systems that are acting in conflict with Odonian principles. While at a party surrounded by his peers Tirin performs the role of the Beggarman, a word that all citizens of Anarres learn in history lessons, and openly mocks the capitalist institutions of Urras. Tirin plays the role of Beggarman to emphasize the irrational nature of capitalism and to articulate how he shares in the Odonian principles of communal profit sharing and individual freedom. Tirin drunkenly proclaims: 'Give me *money*,' he whined shaking his hand under their noses. '*Money! Money!* Why don't you give me any *money*? You haven't got any? Liars! Filthy Propertarians! Profiteers! Look at all that food, how did you get it if you haven't got any *money*?' He then offered himself for sale. 'Bay me, bay me, for just a little *money*.' He wheedled. (59)

Tirin believes that money distracts the individual from their purpose and makes the individual a slave, and that through relying on money a person loses touch with what it means to be free. These viewpoints run in direct correlation with the founding principles of Anarres and in theory should be celebrated as opposed to stifled. That Tirin views money as an unhealthy crutch used by oppressive authorities to control individual citizens is witnessed in his performance of the Beggarman through his shift from asking for money to offering his own body as payment. Tirin is mocking commodity culture and how it undermines the individual's freewill: people are pushed to the extent that they are willing to give up the one thing they should

have complete control over, their physical body. Through his performance Tirin is able to quickly and effectively articulate his own personal opinions on Urrasti society, as well as offer the perspective that Anarresti culture should be above aspects of capitalism such as “profiteering” and egotism. His performance is met with enthusiasm by his peers because the Beggarman and Urrasian consumerism are viewed with disdain by the majority of Anarresti citizens. Tirin is able to engage in his chosen form of anarchism as long as it adheres to the principles of those around him; it is when he shifts the focus of his art from Urras to Anarres that he is met with resistance. At this moment Tirin becomes the anarchist of the text because he is acting in direct opposition to the authoritative systems that should not exist in Anarres society, and is acting with absolute freedom as an individual.

Tirin’s instinct that he could one day be subject to maltreatment by the authorities is not unfounded as later he is punished for the content of his satirical play. Tirin’s play is a direct expression of his personal feelings about Urras. The target of his satire is Urras and the profiteering culture that Tirin views as detrimental to both individuals and society. Tirin and his play are described by Takver as:

“Witty- Tirin was witty. But silly. It was about an Urrasti, that’s right. This Urrasti hides himself in a hydroponics tank on the Moon freighter, and breathes through a straw, and eats the plant roots. I told you it was silly! And so he gets himself smuggled onto Anarres. And then he runs around trying to buy things at depots, and trying to sell things to people, and saving gold nuggets till he’s holding so many he can’t move. So he has to sit where he is, and he builds a palace, and calls himself the Owner of Anarres. And there was an awfully funny scene where he and this woman want to copulate, and she’s just wide open and ready, but he can’t do it until he’s given her his gold nuggets first, to pay her. And she didn’t want them. That was funny, with her flopping down and waving her legs, and him launching himself onto her, and then he’d leap up like he’d been bitten, saying, ‘I must not! It is not moral! It is not good business!’ Poor Tirin! He was so funny, and so alive.” (327)

In theory the citizens and authority figures of Anarres should not object to the content of the play because the satire is intended to critique, and indeed mock, Urras. The aspects of consumer society that are deemed irrevocably wasteful by the Anarresti are at the forefront of the play and are depicted as worthy of mockery. Tirin is still punished for the form and content of his play,

however, which leads the reader to the inevitable question: why are the authority figures in Anarres provoked to the point of retribution by the mocking of their official enemy? The answer to this question is that Anarres is not living up to its founding principles and has been silently corrupted not only by Urras but also by the need for power and profit. If Tirin's play was allowed to exist free of restrictions people might realize the similarities that have arisen between the two societies and start asking questions as to why this has occurred. To avoid this inevitability Tirin and his play are silenced and labelled as insane. Tirin and his art are twisted by his compatriots to be seen as an insult to Anarresti institutions, and are dismissed by authority that should not exist in a truly anarchist society. In a cruel example of irony Tirin is locked in an asylum that can be closely compared to his original Jail Experiment, a fate that is deployed by Le Guin to articulate how far Anarres has fallen from its founding principles. By removing Tirin and silencing the satire of his play those in power can assure that the connection between Urras and Anarres goes unnoticed and that the potential repercussions of Tirin's artistic rebellion can be avoided.

Playwriting is Tirin's chosen method of expression and is a critical tool in critiquing Anarres and Urras. Tirin's choice of drama as a dissenting vehicle is not coincidental: it is a social form of artistic expression that can be easily used to highlight the issues that he is concerned with bringing to the public's attention. Had Tirin engaged in a different form of artistic dissent, such as being a solitary lyrical poet, he would not have connected with the public in the same way. This public connection is crucial to his identity as an artist because of the love he has for his community and for his people; his art is a critique of *their* society for *their* benefit, and as such should be shared and publicly discussed. This is the hope Tirin has for his art and is a central aspect of his rebellion against the authority structures he views as toxic. An artist would likely find themselves at odds with the imperfect anarchist society of Anarres because their concern is for the expression of creativity and not the stifling of dissent. To pursue creative art to the utmost of its potential an artist must be free of domineering, or threatening, influences. Satirical drama should be embraced by a society that promotes the rights of the individual and freedom from authority, but instead of this acceptance Tirin is punished for the content of his play. Tirin initially believes that Anarres is a society concerned with the expression of individualist freedoms and is unafraid to display his art publicly, an attitude that quickly changes when he is forced into a mental institution. Tirin becomes a broken man from the treatment he

receives in the institution and is no longer able to engage in social or political dissent. He is consumed by his society's inability to recognize its own decline and reaches a point where all he can do is repeatedly perform his play to anyone within earshot, repeating himself like a broken record for the rest of his life. This extreme punishment of artistic expression is also witnessed in the treatment of other characters, and should be explored to uncover how, and why, art is severely punished as a form of social and political dissent in Anarres.

The punishment of Tirin by these authority structures is also seen in the treatment of the musical composer Salas, whose treatment is an indication of the subversive authority exercised in Anarres. After serving “six or eight years at the Music Syndicate conservatory” (174) Salas applies for a work posting teaching music but is denied the opportunity because the educational authorities do not approve of his musical compositions. Salas tells Shevek that “the Music syndics don't like my compositions” (174) and that he is unqualified to teach music despite his extensive experience. The use of external authority to subject artists and their chosen forms of art goes against the central anarchist principles of complete freedom for the individual. Salas's non-representational art and Tirin's dramatic art are treated with the same unease and suspicion, and are eventually punished in similar fashions. Whereas Salas's art is a less obvious form of dissent compared to the playwriting of Tirin it is still viewed as dangerous. He writes chamber music instead of wide-harmony pieces and is ostracized from the musical community; his refusal to adhere to social norms and the expectations of those in positions of authority makes Salas an Other, and as an Other he is dismissed and moved aside. This is an especially gripping example of tyranny because music is a non-representational form of expression: no one can object to music's *content* as one might object to the satirical content of a play or novel. Salas's unorthodox music is repressed purely on aesthetic grounds. Again, the same behavior of ostracizing a single member of the group expressed by the children in the prison experiment is used against Salas, which is an act of foreshadowing utilized by Le Guin to exemplify the connection between Anarres's past and present. When discussing the options in regards to his work placement Salas says, “They'd give it a hearing, but they'd turn it down for taping or regional performance. It's not in the organic style” (175). This statement highlights two issues previously discussed in this essay: the façade of equality among citizens and the presence of authority in Anarres. The pretense of a fair hearing with no intention of allowing Salas to perform his music is proof that the systems of authority in Anarres are using the established

moral and social code of the Odonians to their own benefit. If a trial is held “they” can say that due process was followed and the rules of Anarres are still being adhered to, while simultaneously assuring that Salas’s chosen form of expression stays comfortably hidden from the public. The second issue discussed in Salas’s statement is the presence of “they” and “them.” These nameless individuals and systems are the authorities of Anarres and are the unspoken presence that controls Odonian citizens. Bedap speaks to the power held by these individuals and systems when referring to Salas’s music:

“They can justify it because music isn’t useful. Canal digging is important, you know; music’s mere decoration. The circle has come right back around to the most vile kind of profiteering utilitarianism. The complexity, the vitality, the freedom of invention and initiative that was the center of the Odonian ideal, we’ve thrown it all away/ We’ve gone right back to barbarianism.” (175-176)

Freedom for the individual is forfeit to “them”; “they” are the unspoken authority whispered about throughout the novel and are who control Tirin and Salas’s dissenting art. “They” determine what is meaningful and useful, and how the individual citizen should behave and act. The treatment of Salas by “them” is a moment of foreshadowing in the novel, as the same power structures that oppress his expression of music are responsible for the inevitable treatment of Tirin. Like Salas, Tirin’s art is stifled by an authority that is not supposed to exist in Anarres. Unlike Salas, Tirin is unable to accept this treatment and is eventually driven to the point of insanity with the realization that the society he loves is suffering from the slow decay of political and authoritative corruption. The rights of the individual are being sacrificed for those in power, which is a fact that Tirin is unable to accept.

Tirin and Salas question authoritative power structures such as the education and work placement systems through their art. Their art is an attempt to abandon the restrictions of Anarresti society and engage in the infinite creativity of their chosen crafts. Tirin is not free from a moral compulsion to his community and wants to believe that Anarresti adhere to anarchist principles. If Anarres is to be considered an anarchist society Tirin’s use of art as a social and political tool should be met with enthusiasm, not shunned and punished. Tirin is the epitome of Odonian teachings as a playwright. His thinking and structure of self are unmitigated by rules or laws and he does not adhere to any structured ideology. Due to this he should be accepted by his community, but is instead met with disdain. Unlike Shevek he engages in his

own personal pursuits while adhering to only one form of law, the law of the individual, and is punished for this behavior.

A pivotal aspect of the individual freedom that should be present in Anarres is that its citizens should be free to engage in political and social protest. Tirin uses his art as a way to exercise these rights, shifting his focus from the capitalist states of Urras and the Beggarman to the institutions of his own home planet. When his art shifts from criticizing the “profiteering” nature of Urras to potentially criticizing the authoritative power structures that should not be present in Anarres he is punished. Even the indication that Anarres is not the anarchist utopia its citizens believe it to be is met with extreme reprisal. Tirin cannot process this punishment because as an idealist who loves his home planet he never thought the principles that frame Anarresti culture could erode to the point of corruption. Bedap speaks of Tirin’s plight:

‘Tirin wrote a play and put it on...it could seem anti-Odonian, if you were stupid. A lot of people are stupid. There was a fuss. He got reprimanded. Public reprimand. I never saw one before. Everybody comes to your syndicate meeting and tells you off. It used to be how they cut a bossy gang foreman or manager down to size. Now they only use it to tell an individual to stop thinking for himself. It was bad.’ (170).

That the punishment previously reserved for those acting in contradiction to the founding principles of Anarres is now used against individuals engaging in political dissent is an indication that Anarres has changed and no longer epitomizes the ideals it once stood for. This shift in understanding is enough to drive Tirin insane, and makes him obsessed with the one thing that he feels he can control, his playwriting.

The fate of Tirin as the novel’s anarchist can be viewed in direct relation to the fate of his art. Tirin acts within his nature as an anarchist and creates art to protest the changes he witnesses in Anarresti society. His art is stifled by these authoritative systems and his play is discreetly disposed of, a fate that Tirin himself later suffers. Tirin “qualified as a math instructor” (170) but was removed from society and given physically demanding work placements. After being forced from his desired profession Tirin began to view his society differently, and felt that, as Bedap puts it, “everybody was against him...He started talking too much - bitter talk. Not irrational, but always critical, always bitter” (170). This statement is an indication of how Tirin internalized his treatment and was unable to move past the subjection of his creativity. The lack of freedom and grueling work placements were used as punishment for speaking out as an

anarchist and were designed to stifle Tirin's work as a natural artist. Those in positions of authority who viewed Tirin as a danger to their power hoped that by forcing Tirin to work in desolate, physically demanding positions his will would be broken and he would no longer be able to participate in acts of artistic rebellion. The work placements are too much for Tirin to handle, and as previously stated after being given few other options he is admitted to an insane asylum in Segovina. It is clear that Tirin does not willingly choose to be admitted into the asylum; as Shevek puts it, "Bedap always thought [Tirin] was forced to go to Segovina, that he was bullied into asking for therapy...When I saw him several years after therapy, he was a destroyed person" (328). While in the asylum Tirin continuously reenacts his play and becomes consumed by the need to share his art with others. Tirin's goal is not simply to show his play to others, but to illustrate that because of the treatment of himself and his art Anarres cannot be considered an anarchist utopia. He is attempting to show those around him what he has learned, and that "in a sick organism, even a healthy cell is doomed" (43). Tirin is a healthy member of his society acting within his rights as a free individual, but is doomed to his fate because Anarres has strayed from its founding principles and is dominated by structural authority. Tirin is desperate to communicate his message through his art and is inevitably driven insane by his inability to do so. His art is the dissenting vehicle against the individuals and systems that have corrupted Anarres.

The questions still remain, however: what becomes of rebels who fight against the political systems they are unwilling to participate in? How do they choose to express themselves while not adhering to restrictions of community and self? What is the purpose of this expression? As a representation of what befalls anarchist individuals who rebel against authority the fate of Tirin answers these questions. Those who rebel against authoritative power structures through the use of their chosen passion, in Tirin's case his playwriting, are punished by power structures that have the backing of powerful systems and individuals. Individuals use the institutions available to them, such as the education system or insane asylums, to exert their authority and punish acts of dissent. Tirin is aware that by engaging in the creativity of his art he is rebelling against the authoritative restrictions of community and self, but views it as his duty to do so regardless of this possibility. By identifying themselves as outside the dominion of authority anarchists are putting themselves at risk of prosecution and are willing to sacrifice their own personal freedoms for the betterment of their communities. The purpose of their chosen

expression is to articulate the corrupt nature of government, political, and social authority in the hopes that these systems can be dismantled.

*The Dispossessed* revolves around the corruption of the anarchist utopia Anarres, while simultaneously exploring the reaction by Tirin, the anarchist of the novel, to this social and political shift. Shevek realizes these issues but has been indoctrinated to the point that he is unable to effectively challenge his corrupt community; his expression of self, mathematics and physics, is a reflection of his inflexible and intensely structured thinking. As a result of this indoctrination and highly structured thinking Shevek cannot be said to be an anarchist. In contrast to Shevek, Tirin is the epitome of anarchism. Tirin is the anarchist of the text and expresses his anarchism through his art. As a playwright his thinking is not structured, but is free-flowing and unlimited in its creative spontaneity. That Tirin is the anarchist of Anarres is evident from the reaction of Anarresti authoritative power structures to his political dissent. Although subtle, the abuse of authority in Anarres is blatantly clear when Tirin is forced to do work postings outside of his chosen field and is eventually forced into an insane asylum. The social ostracization Tirin experiences forces him to realize that his community does not function under its founding ideals, a realization that Tirin is unable to accept due to his love of his community. To combat the systems that oppress both himself and his society Tirin engages in anarchism revolving around self-expression. For these reasons Tirin is the anarchist of the text; he sacrifices his own well-being and personal safety to engage in an act that he believes has the potential to help his fellows. Shevek is not able to combat the systems he is a part of and for this reason, although he identifies as an anarchist, he cannot be said to engage in anarchism. Le Guin creates an environment where the ideal utopia is challenged by corruption, and where the façade of personal freedom is challenged by the creativity of playwriting and art. Art acts as the unregulated dissenting vehicle of anarchism in *The Dispossessed*, and through art the political and social systems established in the anarchist utopia of Anarres are questioned and contested by Tirin and his pursuit of individual freedom.

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