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Cultural Conflict in Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* through Semiotics

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary British writer Ian McEwan explored various themes as he progressed from his early fiction to his later work, focusing more on personal relationships in the later years and how such relationships were affected by cultural and other issues of the time. He also shows how the macrocosm, which is society, affects the microcosm (human relationships) directly or indirectly. His meticulous writing style is obvious in all of his works. McEwan's careful choice of words and use of similes, metaphors and symbols creates diverse moods and touches the very emotional and psychological core of the reader. *On Chesil Beach* is an excellent example of his craft, as he presents the reader with conflicts at various levels. The protagonists, Edward and Florence, suffer the burden of belonging to different social classes; challenged by the constraints of Victorian-era sexual boundaries while facing the consequences of a lack of proper communication and miscommunication. Edward and Florence, like most of the major characters of McEwan's later novels, are victims of their time and this paper strives to understand, and interpret the signs by using semiotics as a tool to unravel the meaning behind the words.

Keywords: On Chesil Beach, Ian McEwan, sexual boundaries, conflicts, semiotics, Victorian-era

INTRODUCTION

McEwan's fiction has attracted much attention from critics and scholars alike and there is ample literature that has looked closely at his themes and the nature of his literary style. His particular interest in relationships is obvious in most of his works. In an interview with Ryan Roberts, he admits that "we are social creatures, and relationships are where we live, unless our lives are spent tragically alone" (2008, p. 188). He pictures various types of relationships in his works, between

lovers, between parents and children, and among individuals. The portrayals of the relationships are overwhelmed with conflicts that offer a rich source of critical comment and study. This paper focuses particularly on the relationship between Edward and his new bride, Florence and explores the complex nature of the failure of their relationship by looking at the various semiotic signposts that pepper the story.McEwan shifted from "macabre" subjects of murder, incest, paedophilia, and homosexuality, in his early works to more general and social issues such as family matters in his later works. He focused on familial disagreement and dispute, which would almost always end disastrously. He also focused on political and historical issues that directly or indirectly affected people's lives. Zalewski in the *New Yorker* said "McEwan's empirical temperament distinguishes him from his contemporaries such as Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie and Julian Barnes." It has also been commented that McEwan has the ability to narrate the story in slow motion at the moments of highest intensity, a kind of suffering that readers enjoy, but the characters struggle with personal anguish (2009, p. 2).

McEwan's fascination with taboo subjects runs through his fiction. In his book, *Sex and Sexuality in Ian McEwan's Works*, Byrnes (2004) mentions, "McEwan's portrayal of sexuality is to highlight various aspects of relationship, interpersonal communication, closeness, and distance, status and the acting out of erotic fantasy" (p. 5). Cultural conflicts arise as a result of class distinction, among others, and they affect his characters' lives and lead to sexual incompatibility, unhappiness and relationship failures.

On Chesil Beach is a story of failure and incompatible relationship. A young couple gets married in 1962, but despite their deep love for each other, their marriage lasts no more than eight long, confused and unhappy hours. Their relationship is burdened by their class difference, and in the end, it is a social, emotional and psychological chasm that proves too wide to bridge. Florence belongs to upper class society and enjoys a luxurious life style, while Edward hails from the lower middle class. McEwan, through his writing technique creates a picture in the mind's eye and establishes a scene that the reader sees and feels.

Semiotics, as a tool, aids the reader in exploring the effectiveness of McEwan's writing style in *On Chesil Beach* and shows how he succeeds in touching the sensibilities and feelings of the reader. This paper aims to firstly, shed light on the relation between semiotics and literature, and how semiotics enhances our understanding in reading literature. Secondly, it identifies the various conflicts that exist; and thirdly, this paper analyses the various signs, symbols and icons, images, and metaphors that indicate these conflicts and explain their implications.

SEMIOTICS AND LITERATURE

Studying semiotics enables us to become more aware of the role of signs and their importance in our lives. Semiotics is not

only helpful for people who study language, literature and cultural studies, but also generally helps the understanding of all types of signs used and that exist in human culture . Signs surround us in our everyday life and we continually make meaning by interpreting these signals (Johansen, 2002, p. 6). A range of theories and methodological tools are employed in the field of study called semiotics. Umberto Eco (1976), in his book, *A Theory of Semiotics,* states that "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign" (p. 7).

The study of semiotics encompasses both signs in everyday speech and also anything, which denotes something else. It looks at how meaning is constructed and how reality is represented, so that signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects (Chandler, 2007, p. 2). The difference between semiotics and other literary criticism is that semiotics is concerned with how "language and literature convey meanings" while other literary criticism, "asks what texts mean" (Atkins & Morrow, 1989, p. 61).

Umberto Eco developed his theories in the twentieth century. In his article, "Theory of Signs and the Role of the Reader," he argues that literary texts are fields of meaning and they contain meaning more than one can imagine. We can always get new meaning from them "precisely because signs are the starting point of process of interpretation which leads to an infinite series of progressive consequences. Signs are open devices, not stiff armors prescribing a bi-conditional identity" (1981,

p. 44). He also believed that words are "in their dictionary form" when they are outside the text, they convey different meanings therefore context makes the meanings. It shows that text plays a vital role in creating meanings. He asserts, "texts are loci where sense is produced...when signs are isolated and removed from the living texture of a text, they do become spectral and lifeless conventions" (p. 37). Ronald Barthes states, "Semiotics shows how meaning is possible" (as cited in Davis, 1989, p. 253).

Recently, Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs has attracted much research and many scholars. Peirce states, "We think only in signs" (1998, p. 10). Misak, in *The Cambridge Companion to Peirce* (2004), explains that,

> *Thought, for Peirce, is always conceptual, hence, general in content. And he developed this idea in a distinctly contemporary (though also Platonic) way, by identifying thought as internalized discourse. Thought is a species of semiotic behavior, generally but not exclusively verbal, on a par with speech and writing; our capacity to think is dependent on our having learned a language. To conceive of thought as a sign thus presupposes that words and sentences are signs*
> (p. 216).

Contexts play a crucial role in semiotics, since words have different meanings in different contexts. The book, *Contemporary*

Literary Theory, explains the relationship of meaning in semiotics and restores literature to its many contexts. Consequently, semiotics explores the inner structures, questioning meaning as expressed, within specific categories and how they have been organized (1989, p. 61). In semiotics, connotations play a crucial rule. Beyond their literal meaning, words have various other meanings, within society and culture. Thomas Sebeok (2001) maintains that depending on usage and situation, most human signs have the capacity to encode two primary kinds of referents—denotative and connotative (p. 6).

Jonathan D. Culler (2001) in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* says that semiotics introduces a methodology that is lucid and clear that was often disregarded when studying literature and culture (p. xiv & xv). The association between semiotics and culture reveals that signs are meaningful within a particular culture whether the signs are produced by that culture or attributes meaning to signs. In the same trend, Robert Scholes (1977) in *Toward the Semiotics of Literature* explains the relationship between semiotics and the study of literature in the way that generally studying literature must involve semiotics and in particular in production and interpretation of the most important kinds of literature that are ruled by codes of semiotics (p. 15). McEwan's obsession with language is rooted in his family background. He always attempts to write in a "secure and complete" way, employing imagery and visualizing

everything. In *Mother Tongue* (2001), McEwan explains that after he writes he questions himself, "Did it really say what I mean? Did it contain an error or an ambiguity that I could not see?" (para. 12, p...). He has the ability to visualize the brutality of war and its consequences to the reader. McEwan in *Ian McEwan, The Essential Guide* states "You have got to make your reader see and when people accuse me of being too graphic in my depiction of violence, my response is, well… you've got to show it in all its horror" (Reynolds & Noakes, p. 22 - 23). In addition, the preface of the same book emphasizes McEwan's concern with language "… a separate concern is McEwan's interest in language. It's his vehicle certainly. But he also knows that it is one that can be abused, used to deceive, to cheat, to deprave" (p. 8).

Reading On Chesil Beach through semiotics

McEwan's portrayal of character conflict is not so much explicit as implicit. His careful and meticulous choice of words, use of adjectives, metaphors and gestures evoke mental pictures and suggest in the reader's mind, emotional vistas that are the result of his "showing" rather than "telling" of his story. He paints pictures in the mind of the reader through his story-telling technique. This section identifies the semiotic tools that McEwan employs in his story telling to enrich his writing style. The title itself, *On Chesil Beach* is symbolic. McEwan in an audio conversation with Charlie Rose (2007) explains that Chesil Beach is a

place confined between two places, one side is the English Channel and on the other side there is a lagoon. He said his aim for choosing such a location is to create a sort of trap. The narrow place symbolizes the English cultural restrictions of the time. He rationalizes that such a physical location is representative of the two people caught in a societal bind, unable to escape the boundaries that enclose them. The characters' final argument takes place on Chesil Beach*,* a place that foreshadows being trapped in a disastrous circumstance, from which they cannot be freed.

The story begins on the wedding day of Edward and Florence. The bride and groom seem to be happy and spend a lovely time in their luxurious hotel surroundings. "*Superficially* they were in fine spirits. Their wedding at St Mary's, Oxford, had gone well; the service was *decorous,* the reception *jolly*, the send-off from school and college friends *raucous* and *uplifting*" (Italics are mine, p. 3). The signposts are there: "superficially" hints at the hypocrisy of putting on the correct public face befitting the occasion, in the presence of guests, both acquainted and strangers. The propriety and formal correctness that a high society wedding demands is implied by the way the service is "decorous." The "jolly" reception perhaps is the most sincere, and we immediately imagine the couple relaxing and at ease in the company of their respective social peers, while the "raucous" and "uplifting" mood of the send off paints a picture of high-spirited young people, male and female, friends of both

Edward and Florence, having a good time but in retrospect, we will come to realize the word *superficially*, could be cleverly foreshadowing the deep-set incompatibility of the bride and groom, which eventually leads to their breakup.

Edward and Florence are spending their honeymoon. They have their supper in the "tiny" sitting room. While there is "a *four-poster bed,* rather narrow, whose bedcover was pure white and stretched startlingly smooth, as though by no human hand...*" ("Italics," p. 3). The "tiny" sitting room is indicative of the many social, cultural restrictions that hem them in; the four-poster bed, covered with curtains is intimidating, the whole physical atmosphere of the room appears to reflect the deep-set and private feelings of both Edward and Florence that may never be exorcised and must forever be kept secret and hidden.They had so many plans, giddy plans, heaped up before them in the misty future" (p. 5). Their plans are "giddy", lightheaded, and indefinite; their future is at best, "misty", vague, uncertain, and unpredictable.

Cultural restriction towards sexuality in the 1960s

"This was still the era—it would end later in that famous decade—when to be young was a *social encumbrance*, a mark of irrelevance, a *faintly embarrassing condition* for which marriage was the beginning of a cure" (p. 6). In one sentence like the above, McEwan paints a picture of an era merely with the clever choice of words: it is a time when the young have to be tolerated because they

are a 'social encumbrance' and irrelevant in an era when adults reign supreme and to be young is be an embarrassment that can begin to be eliminated on marriage. The socio-cultural message for the era is that acceptance in the society of this era can only come with age and that marriage is the key to social respect and acceptance . Marriage itself is an unknown world for the young, a mysterious frightening puzzle.

The time is 1962 and discussing sexual matters publicly is taboo. To discuss or even think of what the bride and groom are going to do is out of the question. It is just not done. Edward is acutely aware of this and McEwan puts it thus:

> *"[Edward was] proud and protective, the young man watched closely for any gesture or expression that might have seemed critical. He could not have tolerated any sniggering"*
>
> (p . 4).

Deep down he has the feeling of someone who is going to do something shameful; he feels so vulnerable and defensive, before any attack. "The lads" are aware of this and try to be as emotionless as possible. "The lads with bowed backs and *closed faces*, and their manner were *tentative*" ("Italics," p. 4). Obviously, "the lads" are uncomfortable and are afraid of making mistakes to reveal their awareness of the upcoming sex between the newlywed bride and groom. Here, McEwan employs symbolic gestures, which are meaningful taken in the context of the

socio-cultural atmosphere of 1960s Britain when matters pertaining to sex, explicit or implicit, made people uncomfortable.

McEwan shows the cultural attitude of the time that considered marriage as the beginning of adulthood. He describes how it affects the characters and prevents them from doing what actually they like to do even when they are behind closed doors, as shown below:

> *It was, in theory, open to them to abandon their plates, seize the wine bottle by the neck and run down to the shore and kick their shoes off and exult in their liberty… They were adults at last, on holiday, free to do as they chose. In just a few years' time, that would be the kind of thing quite ordinary young people would do. But for now the times held them. Even when Edward and Florence were alone, a thousand unacknowledged rules still applied"*
>
> ("Italics," p. 18).

They are surrounded by the "unacknowledged rules" of their time that are the social do's and don'ts that both of them are aware of, and which control them.

Edward suffers the anguish and troubled feelings in anticipation of his first sexual experience and the reader can literally feel his tension and anxiety as "His trousers or underwear seemed to have shrunk" (p. 19). Edward and Florence are husband and wife but they are described as "strangers"

since they are unable to express their feelings for each other, mostly because of "unacknowledged rules" or familial restriction. "Almost strangers, they stood, strangely together, on a new pinnacle of existence, gleeful that their new status promised to promote them out of their endless youth—Edward and Florence free at last!" (p. 6). Yet, they are and will never be free, inescapably restrained by invisible thoughts and the "unacknowledged" rules of their time; thus, they remain "strangers" even in the apparent privacy of their freedom.

The circumstances being such, Edward and Florence both suffer as they approach their first sexual experience. "Where he merely suffered *conventional* first-night nerves, she experienced a *visceral dread*, a *helpless disgust* as palpable as *sea sickness*" ("Italics," p. 7). Edward's suffering is predictably that of a virgin facing his first sexual encounter; Florence's situation is even worse; her fears make her helpless to overcome her nightmarish feelings of her first sexual encounter. Florence is alone with her anxiety and abhors any sexual relationship. She feels alone, with her problem. "Her mother was too intellectual, too brittle, an *old fashioned blue stocking*" ("Italics," p. 10). Blue stocking refers to the intellectual woman who is interested in books and ideas, and is not able or unwilling to discuss personal intimacies. "Whenever confronted by an intimate problem, she tended to adopt the public manner of the lecture hall, and use longer and longer words, and make references to books she thought everyone should have read" (p. 10).

Not surprisingly, Florence abhors having sex primarily because of the social and religious attitudes of her time compounded by her total ignorance of anything sexual. However, "She did not fear pregnancy; if she could, like the mother of Jesus, arrive at the swollen state by magic" (p. 8). She accepts pregnancy, but prefers to have it "like the mother of Jesus" through an "Immaculate Conception," without having sex, by magic.

There are of course several other examples of McEwan's clever use of words in *On Chesil Beach* which go on to enhance his reputation as a writer who is a master of the (English) language: "This endless wheedling" in reference to Edward's persistent persuasion to Florence to make love. Then there is the talk of *reefers* as McEwan describes: "There was even talk of *reefers*. Edward sometimes took an *experimental stroll* from the History to the English department, hoping to find evidence of *paradise on earth*, but the corridors, the notice boards, and even the women looked no different" ("Italics," p. 40). Reefers are an indexical sign; an implication of the ideal world achievable in a drug-induced state when there can be "*a paradise on earth.*" It is a desired and fantastical state and an avenue of escape from the realities of life—but it is unreal, temporary and soon one is brought back to the reality of the mundane world. McEwan illustrates how powerful the clever association of thought and mental images through the use of language can be.

In the case of Edward, a *wild* woman would have terrified him ("Italics," p. 21).

In the 1960s, women were expected to be ignorant about sexual activity, and it was not usual for them to show their sexual interest or they would be considered wild. Edward admits that he prefers a coy and reserved woman who conceals her feelings. He believes that he must have such tolerance to make Florence ready for sex. Florence states,

> *"...He had come to respect it, even revere it, mistaking it for a form of coyness, a conventional veil for a richly sexual nature..."*
>
> (p. 21)

Conventional veil is a symbolic representation of the cultural attitude that makes women represent themselves as disinterested in sex, and seemingly tolerating it as part of fulfilling their marital duties. "They were alone then, and *theoretically* free to do whatever they wanted, but they went on eating the dinner they had no appetite for" ("Italics," p. 23). Again the word theoretically shows that they are still under the pressure of cultural restriction even in their private domain and there is indeed no real freedom for them.

When McEwan sees the need, he injects action, passion and aggression in one fell swoop, wasting no time and the reader receives a punch right in the face without warning as in this instance when Edward displays a rare outburst:

> *"... Edward came out swinging. He started and said "You don't have the faintest idea how to be with a man. You carry on as if it's eighteen sixty-two. You don't even know how to kiss."*
>
> ("Italics," p. 144).

He refers to the sexual boundaries of eighteen sixty-two and the reader can literally translate the outburst into: You are old fashioned and out of touch.

There are quite a few gestured signs in the story for example, when he said, "There you go indeed; there was *exasperation* in his voice" ("Italics," p. 143). The exasperation shows an annoyance or anger in Edward's voice. In another place "she surprised herself with the *hardness* in her voice" ("Italics," p. 143). The "hardness" signifies the lack of emotion and diminishing friendliness. She could feel how he shifted his weight, "When he shifted his weight, the stones tinkled under his feet" (p. 143). The burden of his affliction on his chest is compared to the punch in his chest with a rough noise of unhappiness. "She imagined she heard him grunt, as though punched in the chest" (p. 144). She could hear the sound of his footfalls on the pebbles, which meant that he would hear hers (p. 142). McEwan provides the auditory and visual senses to enhance the effect of a scene.

"Edward *loosened* his tie and *firmly* set down his knife and fork *in parallel* on his plate" ("Italics," p. 26). Putting his knife and fork "firmly" is a sign of controlled anger or annoyance and placing them "in parallel" indicates a certain determination and a prelude to an impending action. Such fairly simple gestures described with meticulously

planned vocabulary heighten the intensity of the moment and show again McEwan's mastery of his language skills. When this is followed by Edward saying "… we could go downstairs and listen properly" (p. 26) and the description that "He hoped he was being *humorous,* directing his *sarcasm* against them both, but his words emerged with *surprising ferocity*, and Florence *blushed*" ("Italics," p. 26), the mental picture that the author paints is complete and the reader senses, like the characters, the discomfort of the moment. Edward tries to be humorous, appears less serious and to be less offensive. Also, Florence blushing is an indexical sign of her embarrassment. This is a cause and effect sign, which one relates to the other. "Or we could go and lie on the bed, and nervously swiped an invisible hair from her forehead" (p. 27). Going to bed is a dread and nightmarish idea that she had proposed. Swiping an invisible hair is the indexical sign of her personal anguish and mental anxiety. Whenever she is trapped in an intolerable situation, she acts out of her subconscious. In another instance, McEwan's clever use of imagery is remarkably effective: "Rising from his plate, mingling with the sea breeze, was a clammy odour, like the breath of the family dog (p. 19). It is merely the smell of food emanating from a plate but that simple smell is in one sense unpleasant as it feels "clammy" and made more unpleasant by being compared to the freshness of a sea breeze and then equated with the warm, heated feel of a dog's breath. The combination of images creates a sense of discomfort and irritation.

Character conflicts are described or shown by behavioural changes. For example: "…in her nervousness she began to speak faster, though her words were *crisply enunciated*. Like a skater on *thinning ice*, she accelerated to save herself from drowning" ("Italics," p. 154). The word *crisply* shows how she speaks precisely and formally, a deliberate show of formality that indicates the emotional distance between them. McEwan compares Florence's situation to the skater who skates, not on "thin" ice but on "thinning" ice, a deliberate modification of a popular idiom to enhance the critical status of the potential danger; a small, almost unnoticeable linguistic difference but a significant difference in meaning. In building up the "dangerous" situation, McEwan wishes his reader to sense the inevitability of eventual disaster.

"Her back was still turned. She *sensed* he had *drawn* closer, she imagined him right behind her, his hands *hanging loosely* at his side, softly *clenching* and *unclenching* as he considered the possibility of touching her shoulder" ("Italics," p.150). The intensity of the situation is so great that Florence does not need to look to know how Edward is feeling and to anticipate how he behaves. It is this intensity that allows her the ability to know without seeing, to feel with her whole being and then to see through such feeling. *Clenching and unclenching* indicates the emotional confusion and tension that has overwhelmed Edward which he directly and indirectly passes on to Florence. In this particular situation, Edward does not just *move* towards Florence but is *drawn*

towards her and that attraction is so strong that Florence seems to sense it without needing to see it.

On the other hand, McEwan does expect his readers to be well read and well informed to fully grasp the various images, metaphors and symbols that he employs. "She heard herself say smoothly, 'I know failure when I see it.' This was merely the second violin answering the first; a rhetorical parry provoked by the suddenness, the precision of his attack, the sneer she heard in all his repeated "you's" (p. 145). "[…] the second violin answering the first" refers to Florence's admission of her failure and it is merely a mandatory answer to a question, asked or unasked but importantly, it is a response to a question, without the passion and energy of the question, just as the second violin in a musical conversation merely answers the musical query of the first violin, the aggressor who must be answered.

It is to McEwan's credit that he does not require lengthy, wordy passages to convey the deepest of meanings and to conjure images in the reader's mind. All he does is to employ a specific, carefully thought out word or phrase. He indicates social class difference of the characters in several ways.

The familial encounter in the wedding is described. Florence's parents "had not *condescended* to his, as they had feared" ("Italics," p. 3). Edward and his family, aware of their social class, had expected to be patronized by Florence's parents and peers but surprisingly they were not, which begs the question, "Why?" The use of the word "condescended" shows that a class

distinction exists between Edward's parents and Florence's parents, and the reason why the latter did not behave the way they were expected to is a comment on the sensitivity and consideration that Florence's parents have for their daughter's new in-laws, and by implication, a confirmation of true class that considers the feelings of others—even those in the lower classes.

In the following sentence, for example, just the "woody quality" of Edward's scent and the accompanying "reassuring" feeling say more than just three individual words: She liked his scent, "which had a *woody quality* and was reassuring" ("Italics," p. 28). Woody quality implies something rural, laid back, cosy, and perhaps a little peasant-like. It implies a consciousness of class difference that is nevertheless "reassuring" to Florence. More than just that, it is also a semiotic indicator of the love that she has for him despite the social disparity. In another instance, the very use of the word "convent" in referring to Florence's accommodation says it all: "It was as though the young women had entered a convent" (p. 43). There is a sense of restriction, implications of single gender (female) living environment with its implied social inherences. McEwan represents the symbolic representation of social restriction, with the word convent.

In the uncomfortable and incompatible relationship of Edward and Florence, the extent of their differences is insurmountable and McEwan drives this home dramatically and by using the solid massiveness of geography. Their differences are "as solid as a *geographical feature*, a *mountain*, a

headland" ("Italics," p. 139-140). Again, a simple use of physical distance, "a good room's length away" paints a vivid mental picture. Their physical distance is a symbolic representation of their emotional distance, how they break off from each other, and it is visible. His staying away is to be out of reach "He stopped a good *room's length away [...]*" ("Italics," p. 143).

CONCLUSION

When reading *On Chesil Beach,* one is amazed at how meticulous McEwan is in the way he has crafted his writing. There is a wealth of linguistic, emotional and psychological mysteries waiting to be discovered and semiotics is the appropriate tool to unravel these many mysteries. Semiotics is not only helpful for people who study language, literature and cultural studies, but generally helps the understanding of all types of signs used and that exist in human culture. The world is painted by different types of signs, such as verbal, gestural, nonverbal, textual, natural, and artificial. Signs stand for something more than they represent. They tell what is behind their apparent feature. People are surrounded by signs and deal with them in their everyday life, consciously or subconsciously. But to understand all of these signs one needs to decode the meanings and interpret them. The implied or situational context in which these signs take place plays a crucial role in their meaning.

Peirce's category of signs along with Eco's contribution to semiotics provides the opportunity to study the signs of cultural stress. Peirce classifies the signs into three different levels which are iconic, symbolic, and indexical. His classification is according to the relation of the signs to their referents. Signs are idiomatic in the way they stand for something more than what the signs themselves depict.

On Chesil Beach bounds to a certain period of time that is the 1960s, with pictures of how environmental **societal** issues such as cultural restrictions towards sexuality influence society particularly the young. Semiotics as an interpretative tool facilitates our understanding and dives to the depth of the words and unravels the implications within.

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