

**Narrating the Narration:  
Using Joyce's Molly and Kafka's Gregor to  
Show the Nature of Narrative**

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**Abstract**

*Narrative* refers to a story involving events and characters and the interaction between the two. Generally a narrator expounds the story in whichever way he/she chooses to do. Since the explication of a story is generally the work of a single subject, the narrator is looked at with a critical eye. This notion is backed up all the more because of the reason that the author, who may be dead long ago, represents a biased subjectivity. The purpose of this paper is to counter that notion because Narrative is a capricious form with greater reach than poetry and drama and the authors would take the case of Joyce's Molly Bloom and Kafka's Gregor Samsa to highlight the point. The paper will employ the two-pronged approach to enhance the importance of subjectivity in Narratives: Horizontal and Vertical. The former suggests that Narratives have an ecosystem-like structure. The latter suggests that Narratives show the human trajectory of life, even if that trajectory ends in death. The conclusion would highlight the future scope of the medium of Narration, when it is devoid of the human element.

**Key Words:** Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Narrative, Biased Subjectivity, Structures, Subjectivity, Text, Human Trajectory, Human Element

**Introduction**

Narrative, as defined by M.H. Abrams in its simplest form is "a story, whether told in prose or verse, involving events, characters, and what the characters say and do" (Abrams 173). Generally, used interchangeably with the form of story, narrative in its contemporary sense is technically different. Story refers to *what* is told and Narrative directs us to see *how* it is told.

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Novelists, right from their onset, have been greatly intrigued by the technical aspect of how they should compose their work. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century two main strands appeared on the literary scene, the first being the epistolary method of Richardson and second was the *comic epic* technique of Fielding (Sutherland 28). Dickens, in *Bleak House*, a century later compromised between an omniscient narrator and the first person limited narrator. However, it was only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the publication of Henry James' *Art of Fiction* that the genre of novel became fully self-conscious of the Narrative aspect of writing- *How* became much more important than *What*. Many a time, people limit the scope of books and think of it as small propositions, that is, when one reads a book it represents a kind of alternative to experiencing life, a kind of reality out there creating a neat segregation between the so-called objective life of the world and the subjective life of the book. There is also a persuasive view that books are biased because they have the subjectivity of a particular writer who may be dead now for several centuries and that the dead writers and their works may have an inescapable limitation. The author is bound by the age and the surrounding and hence when the age and surrounding change, the subjectivity increases thereby causing an increase in alienation. Narrative thus becomes an extremely capricious form – a form that has greater reach than probably even poetry and drama.

This paper aims to deal with an overall concept of narrative, taking its references from Joyce's Molly and Kafka's Gregor. It will not only try to conceptualize the nature and the value of Narrative literature but also focus on the idea of words, taken as pockets of *lives* (notice the plural here *lives*).

### **Horizontal Narrative: Reaching Far and Wide**

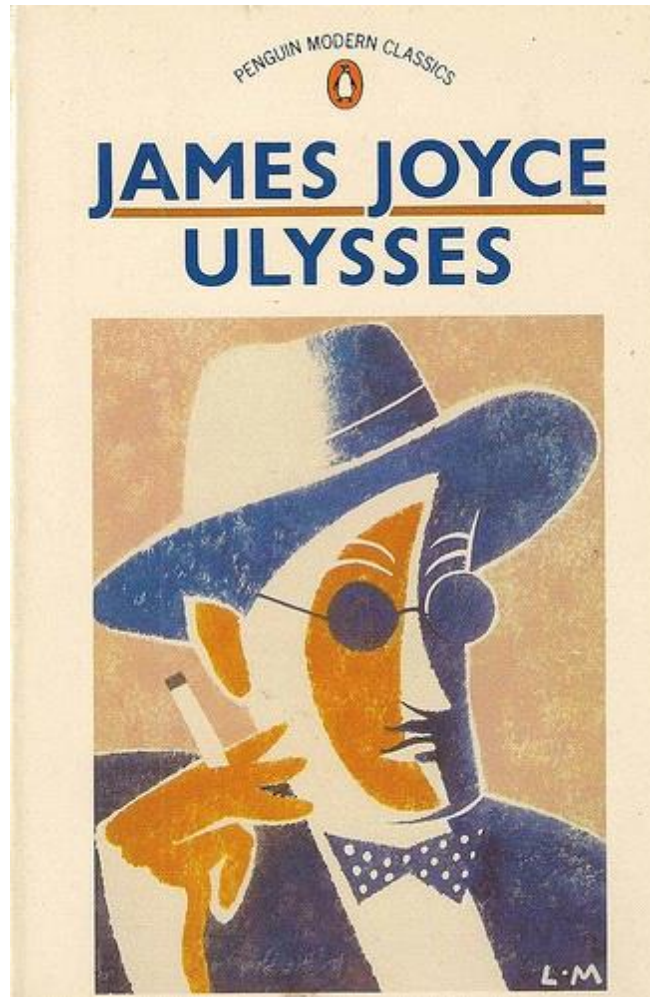
The scope or the reach of Narrative can be conventionally described in two simple ways: Horizontal and Vertical (Richardson 224). It appears as if one is dealing with defining a problem in Geometry, however with each succeeding sentence the argument will gain its strength. One arrives at an obvious question here, which is, if one can talk about Narrative horizontally? How can one say that it moves sideways or in a lateral way? It is to be emphasized here that Narrative functions in some odd ways, like an ecosystem, that it contains many aspects within it. Every story, even the story that seems to be most claustrophobic consists of a single speaking voice and

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they are in fact stories that contextualize that voice. It reflects the conditions and the context of individuals within a situation and also within a framework. There is always a panoramic, global view within a story (Weinstein 4-5).



Courtesy: <http://lithub.com/ulysses-a-history-in-covers/>

At this point, it is pertinent to cite the example of Molly Bloom, one of the main characters in Joyce's novel *Ulysses*. Her presence is strongly felt in the novel only towards the end, but in that last chapter the reader is awestruck with Molly and her response to her situation (Joyce 990). In just a few, yet long, stream of consciousness evoked sentences, the complex personality of Molly Bloom emerges. The significant point to consider here is that readers invariably see more than the characters within the text. The reader has a panoptic overview, unlike the characters in the text. The text highlights the adultery committed by Molly, but it is to

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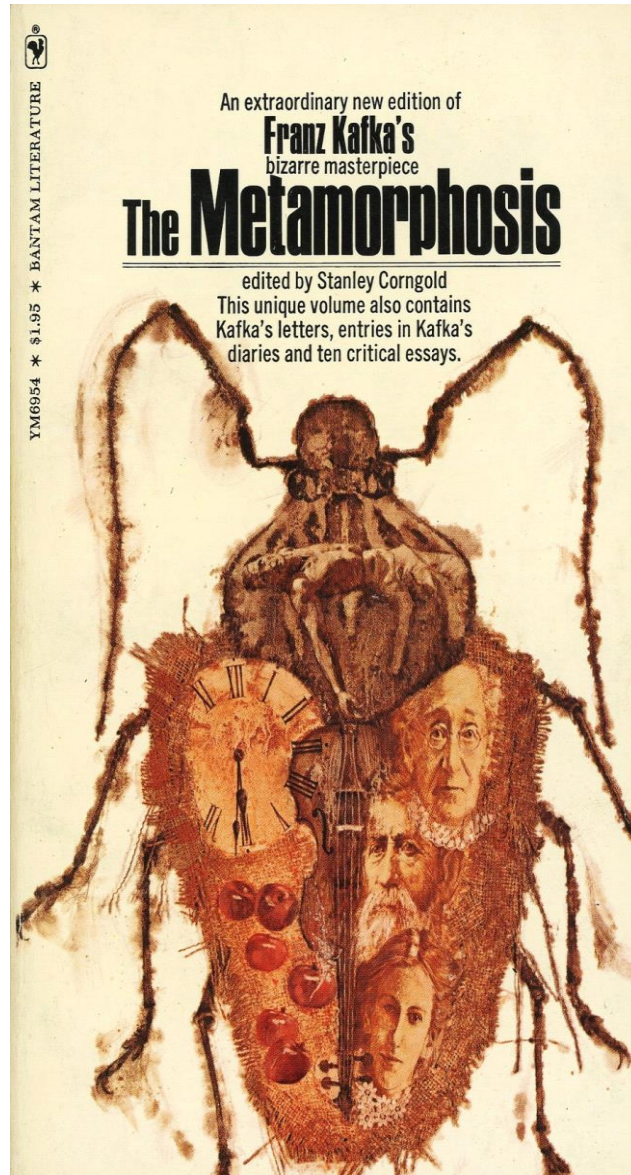
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be noted that the author represents it as an act not so much out of physical desire, but primarily out of psychological desperation. Molly wanted her husband to make love to her but her husband has not satisfied her for a very long time. She engages in physical relationship with another man only to arouse her husband's jealousy so that he can be coaxed into action. Molly yearns to be loved to know that she remains sexually desirable. Lying in bed she plans to get up early, put on her best dress and underwear to excite her husband, Leopold and then go out leaving him to wonder where she is gone, "make him want me that's the only way" (Joyce 994).

For most of us, we can only have the private, eclipsed view that comes with being who we are and not being anybody else (Phelan 169-172). We are privileged to a larger view of things when we read the novel and therefore, it is important to see that no matter how persuasive the voice of a character might be there is more to the fiction than just voice - there is a *context*, there is an *environment*, there is, to use Henry James' term "a figure in the carpet" a pattern that gradually emerges, of which the speaker and the plot are only parts (James 1).

Generally, while reading a narrative, the readers want to be swept away and be very much involved in the speakers of the text and experience the thrill of reading novels; but at the same time one also wants to be able to see the larger picture. The threads of microcosm of the characters should be linked with the overall macrocosm of the novel (Bal 102). And the reason why it is important to tie the knots is because this grasp of the larger picture is extremely special to literature and highly unachievable in most of our experiences.



Courtesy: [https://bayrockbayrock.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/9012566662\\_82f026ba81\\_k.jpg](https://bayrockbayrock.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/9012566662_82f026ba81_k.jpg)

For example, in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* the protagonist, Gregor Samsa is transformed into a giant insect when he wakes up from his sleep (Kafka 114). No background is given to such a shocking event, but as the Narrative pursues its course we begin to see the larger picture that there is more to it than what meets the eye. His transformation or his "metamorphosis" is a kind of symbolic way to expressing that we, humans are becoming more like animals (Bloom 28). Not just any animal, but a useless vermin. Another way to see this transformation is through the Marxist lens that humans, in a capitalistic society, get transformed into an unintelligent animal. Humans in the capitalistic societal system feel a kind of alienation

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which distances them from their identity of being a human (Qureshi 1-2). Psychoanalytical interpretation would go deeper and say that at the deep instinctual level we all are walking animals with the façade of human mask. We tend to hide our animal nature by conforming to the artificial norms constructed by the society and when the core of society is shattered our true, animal-like faces emerge (Freud 7).

Big picture and plurality define Narrative. What generally happens in Narrative is that the authors give bits and pieces here and there and it is the duty of the critical reader to join them coherently. When we read a well-crafted text we alone have the fuller view there. It is true there will be secrets in the text, that the text will finally tell us and we could not guess then. None the less, our position as readers gives us that larger view where we can see, in a sense, fully but correctively.

So, in that light, Narrative always makes us ponder the fit, makes us ponder the collective, ponder the larger global perspective. And it is now relevant to explain this argument from a piece by the Scottish author Thomas Carlyle and it is one of the most potent passages in all of literature. The reason the authors say that it is highly potent is because it clearly gives us the proof of the way in which Narrative also moves horizontally, that Narrative also has a kind of ecosystem-like structure that gives a collective and broadened vision. This essentially calls the blot on our own notion of individualism. It says that the individual is never an integral figure. The individual is never a fully autonomous figure. Whether or not the individual knows it, he or she is always connected, linked somehow positioned within a larger field. The crux of the passage goes like this:

A poor Irish widow, along with her three children, with no resource at all, wanted to solicit help from the haves of the society. From one house to the other she beseeched for help but no one helped. Finally she sank down in typhus fever and died. She did not die alone; she infected the area as well and seventeen other persons died of fever. “Behold I am sinking, bare of help: ye must help me! I am your sister, bone of our bone; one God made us: ye must help me!” she would say. Their answer was “No; impossible: thou are no sister of ours.” But she proves her

sisterhood; her typhus-fever kills them: they actually were her brothers, though actually denying it!” (Black 16).

One can argue that the focus of the passage is on cold-heartedness and evil; however, the interesting aspect lies in focusing on the Anagogical Interpretation, the highest form of interpretation, according to Dante (Leitch 246-248). The essence of the passage is about the failure of vision: ‘I am me, you are you’, ‘You are not my sister, you are not my brother’. That is how generally we see the world. It is the logical view of the world, where we are all living in single bodies that appear to have a beginning and an end. It has a contour and it stops. There is also a distance between all of us which is illusory. We breathe in other people’s breath; in some sense we catch diseases from other people, which is the case in the above cited lines by Carlyle. We also catch their language, their ideas, as Art is always about a kind of sharing. The larger collective Narrative view is always a view of this kind of traffic, of this kind of interaction, the sense in which the individual is found to be porous, enterable, changeable and very often without suspecting it (Weinstein 215-217). Narrative enables us to see at least in its stories, something of the way the individual is both positioned on a larger stage but also conditioned by it, altered by it. The individual turns out to be a player within a larger ecosystem and therefore no longer possessed of the kind of authority and autonomy that most individuals think they have.

### **Vertical Narrative: Diving Deep**

The focus now shifts towards the vertical side of Narrative, a temporal picture of what one is reading. It extends our view of things over time as well as over space. The single basic wonderful plot of all Narrative is to tell a life story, to capture a life in time, to capture a curve of a life. This is the plenitude of existence. So, the great stories by great writers are narrated over time. They all show us something of the trajectory of a human life. And once again the authors come back to the basic starting point that one cannot see that in one’s own life. It is true that one can look at scrap books or look at photographs or read the records of the past but one cannot see the passing of time. It takes time for us to see these things. That is to say we can think back what we were like many years ago, but we can hardly grasp it all with a kind of flowing continuing

shape. Narrative makes that possible. In a small affair of 200 pages one actually has, at least the illusion, of seeing the curve of an entire life. There is something miraculous about that.

Narrative is not only miraculous but it is also fictive. It is fictive in the sense that not only has the author who has constructed it, crafted it and made it for us; but it is probably fictive even when we do it for ourselves. When we go back and remember our past we are not reliving our past; it is gone but somehow re-accessing it and putting it into a framework, it becomes a narrative. Narratives of the past is a part of a larger shape and it is a hard task to go back into the past and see our life- history with a suitable if not correct lens; however it must be added that trying to capture those past moments is a very gratifying thing to do.

Story-telling performs the service of positing for us a beginning, middle and end. Almost all the stories that we read do this. It shows us the formation of a character, it shows us the adventures or trials or stakes and at the end it shows us some kind of maturity; even if that maturity coincides with death (Keen 76-83). When we live we have trouble of knowing exactly what the beginning is, and what the middle and what the ending will be. Narrative has an aching, cleansed sort of clarity, a sort of cleanness to it as it puts the structure on to life. How would one know at what point, say, this is when one's life began, this is when this aspect of the career began. When one looks back, it is all an unbroken continuum. That is the way we live but art performs this service, as the paper has suggested, of taking the bric-a-brac of experience and giving it a pattern of taking all kinds of events and positing a kind of logic between them, a kind of connection, a kind of linkage between them. That is what story-telling is about.

### **Nature of Writing**

A story is fictive and it is fictive in several ways. When an author writes or even when we write, all of us write in time and we also write against time. It is the condition of writing. One writes in time because there is no way on earth to be freed of it. The writer is one day older after each day of writing. The writer is subject to the same kind of mortal scheme that all of us are, but the writer writes against time because of the very nature of the story that the authors are talking about, that story-telling preserves lives. Story-telling gives that shape; it manages the start from

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the beginning and concludes at the end, all within several hundred pages, sometimes even within 100 pages. Story-telling is the salvaging of a life. The author constructs the story in the shape of a kind of harmonious sequence of events. And as the paper has suggested, we cannot go back in our own lives, we can return through memory. But we cannot get *back* the past. The only way we can get it back is through telling stories. That is the only way we could even see the past. Every time we even think back about the past we are probably telling a story (Clune 1-6).

It is a question as Adrienne Rich would say of “diving into the wreck”; even a good life is a wreck in that sense because things are over (Rich 1). The author descends into the wreck and tries to come back with the treasure. There is a very well-known thesis by Marshall McLuhan about the media which fundamentally goes like this: the media is there as a kind of extension of our neurological equipment. They extend the brain power of the human being. So, telephone, radios, automobiles, planes, faxes, email etc. all of these extend our reach. It puts us in places beyond which we can be, physically. It extends our whereabouts in space. It extends our presence and it extends our power (McLuhan 1).

What the paper has been arguing is that Narrative (language) performs the same function, that is, of expanding our scope. Language performs that role of extending our reach. It translates us to ourselves. It makes our own large past somehow recoverable verbally to us and of course it translates and delivers to others as well. It expresses what is on the inside of us that others cannot see. And by doing that it makes those things real for others. It constitutes our reach and our impact on the world. So, that when we read texts, above all when we read texts of the past, we ourselves are invited to go into the minds of people long dead to extend our own reach temporally.

### **Medium is the Message**

This is where reading is different, the authors think, from other media. And this is where the argument is beginning to move into the issue of the idea that words have *lives*. We certainly know that reading differs from other media when we look at what the young do with video, music or film. These are the hot media of our time. These are immediately gratifying. They give

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images that require very little processing. They go directly to the brains of those who watch or hear them. No book has ever done that. A book is an arrangement of letters on a white sheet. What the book always has, (for example, wisdom) requires some amount of human labour. We have to translate those cryptic signs and derive a meaning out of it. It is one reason that reading is arduous in ways that listening to audio or watching video is not. In order to fully grasp the message of the book we have to extend our imagination, our capacity to visualize the print. We have to turn it into image, turn it into story, and turn it into meaning. Some prints may be thousands of years old, but as Melville says we have to take dead letters and make them living letters.

The paper has called such a process a kind of a humanistic labour, because when one opens the texts or the scripts of the past and turns it into experience, the past stops being dead. By doing that one effectively completes a communicative chain. The vital news of human culture continues to be delivered, that the successive generations continue to be linked, and the store of experiences that have preceded us which is enormous in store become magically available to us (Nafisi Introduction, Web). When we read about Molly Bloom and Gregor Samsa, we are somehow magically transported in our imagination to their place and their age. We get to know what and how the conditions of that time were like. If Molly gives us the vision of her family world at the microcosm level, Gregor gives us the vision of his societal world at the macrocosm level. Both are equally important because it is the individuals who, when combined, make up a society.

The authors stated that we write in time and we write against time. We write because we are mortal, we write because writing somehow magically seems to give us the possession of our lives or the possession of other lives. And that has been called by one critic “The discourse of Narrative mortality” (Russell 1). But another very important point that the authors claim is that by reading we open up the past, we enter into the past. The past stops being the past, and lives into the future.

Narrative is also the immortality of discourse. Narrative makes language live forever, at least in so far as people read. Words cannot die, they are not possessed of flesh and blood and so they live. There is a contrast between the authors as a unit and their writings as another unit. We are flesh and blood, words are not. Once we are gone, the words that we have uttered (not written) stop being heard. But the words that we have written, words that authors and great literature contain, those words go round and round. They lie low sometimes for centuries then they are re-discovered and they live anew each time some reader annexes it. So, literary texts are fertile and potent and they are capable of spawning other kinds of texts. They make guest appearances sometimes in the strangest places and much of the pleasure in reading literature consists in seeing these patterns of kinship.

Texts have many lives. They have lives beyond the authorial intentions of the authors. Adrienne Rich in her poem talks about verbal privilege and she talks about it as a kind of threat that the author cannot control the fate of his or her own text. And in terms of one's own power governance, it is a threat (Firmat: 1990). When Joyce's *Ulysses* was initially published it was soon banned because of obscenity but now it is considered to be the best novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Birmingham 2). For example, if one has written something worth meaningful insights there is always a high chance that it gets misinterpreted or it may also get misused by other people. And yet there is also something glorious about it. It is a way of saying once again that the life of the word has a kind of power that nothing can coerce or govern including the author who wrote it. It lives over time.

And that is why the authors have a bone to pick with historical interpretation. Much of the historical interpretation says that we are going to read a text and we are going to find out exactly what this author meant at that time and at that moment. What it is that Joyce meant in *Ulysses*, or what it is that Kafka meant in *The Metamorphosis*? First of all, the authors have doubts about how easily we could understand that or discover that since neither Joyce nor Kafka could tell us that. Secondly, another important aspect is that did Joyce and Kafka know exactly what they wanted to tell us when they wrote those texts. Thirdly, the authors know that we can't get back there and figure it out. That is a long way. We ourselves can't even control the meaning

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of what we say and to try to figure out what these people meant that long ago is truly unattainable. And fourthly and most interestingly, it is not so important what they meant. It is important, but not extremely important because it is not the only important thing. What is equally important is what they mean to us and not what they meant then.

To have such ideas is a kind of heresy in the academy, but nonetheless it is an important point to bear in mind. When we read a book, first of all we inescapably come from the present. One can read a medieval text or an ancient text, but the important thing to note is that one is reading it *now*. What this means is that the reader is bringing to it everything that forms him now. And that is true for historicism and its criticism and it is true for everyday readers. It is also wonderful that one wants to read books from the past now because that is what increases our sense of the past and also of now because of historical hindsight and the author's experience. That is to say you always want to be able to take this material from far away and long ago and to see how it possibly spotlights, illuminates, alters and challenges your own livelihood, your own situation. That is why reading is not an antiquarian experience. When the authors talk about reading today we mean all of these things: The fate of reading today, reading as an endangered species, reading as threatened and not just pass by video, music or film.

Reading is perhaps even more profoundly threatened by the computer with its electronic forms of retrieval and storage. Its electronic forms of information giving versus the manual labour, the kind of humanistic labour that the authors have described that has to go into effect when we open a text and read it and see the language there. Likewise reading today has to do with reading our moment, understanding our moment. There are no cheat-notes for reading. We may read the newspapers but it will hardly tell us about life and the larger picture. When we don't see the larger picture, then we don't have the lights and we don't have the desired ammunitions and the desired equipments to brave the situation.

That is the reason why reading the texts, be it of the same age or of the past is not antiquarian. Being able to read the text and create a visual imagery out of black marks on white pages is nothing short of a miracle. It helps us to improve our concentration and focus; thereby

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helping us to enhance our vision of life. By understanding the condition of Molly Bloom we get to know about the resurgence of women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were now taking risks both at the physical level and also at the psychological level. Similarly when we get to the heart of Gregor Samsa, we realize that outer appearance matters a lot. Gregor was respected in his family when he brought the much needed money, but once he's unable to do that he's transformed from a family provider to a family shame. By reading these characters of the past we are somehow broadening our vision; our sensitivity and sympathy also increase. The process of reading helps to make sure that human subjects are not just treated as a number; he or she is given a proper identity.

Reading the texts of the past does not necessarily symbolize that there is a love affair with the past age, which is a fine thing. There is nothing escapist in going back to the texts of the past. It is because the texts of the pasts are living and it is because of this reason that the texts of the past invariably add to our own repertoire. They show us possibilities of life, of experience. They show us choices made, mistakes made, they show us vistas, and they show us sensibilities that must be different from our own. So reading the past allows us in some sense to acquire that store of imaginative possibility, of imaginative reality and to bring it to the present and it makes our encounter with today far more exciting and vital than it would otherwise be.

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