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# An Na's *A Step from Heaven*: Bleak Realities, A Hopeful Future

*AN NA'S A STEP FROM HEAVEN:  
REALIDADES DESOLADORAS, UN FUTURO  
ESPERANZADOR*

## Resumen

El libro de An Na, *A Step from Heaven* (2002), es una novela de iniciación que relata el crecimiento emocional de su protagonista, Young Ju, tras haber emigrado desde Corea hasta Estados Unidos con cuatro años de edad. A través de la perspectiva de la protagonista, los lectores se ven implicados en las crudas realidades en las que su familia irremediamente se encuentra. Estas condiciones incluyen pobreza, marginalización social, desorientación cultural y violencia en el ámbito doméstico. Sin embargo, la novela no tiene una visión totalmente fatalista, ya que Young Ju será capaz de superar todas estas dificultades para construir un futuro mejor. En el presente trabajo trataré de demostrar que, en nuestro mundo global y multicultural, novelas como *A Step from Heaven* son necesarias para conseguir que los lectores jóvenes comprendan estas complejas y duras realidades sociales. Para cualquier niño o adolescente en condiciones similares, siempre será positivo encontrar libros cuyos protagonistas, como es el caso de Young Ju, les ofrezcan un ejemplo de fortaleza, valentía y optimismo.

**Palabras clave:** novela de iniciación, diáspora, emigración, hibridización, multiculturalismo, violencia de género.

## Abstract

An Na's *A Step from Heaven* (2002) is a coming of age novel that follows the emotional maturation of its protagonist, Young Ju, who migrated from Korea to the United States at the age of four. Through the heroine's perspective, readers become involved in the grim conditions the family is forced to face, such as poverty, social marginalization, cultural dislocation and domestic violence. However, the novel avoids a totally tragic and fatalistic approach to its subject matter, since Young Ju is finally able to overcome all suffering and find the promise of a better future. As will be argued, novels such as *A Step from Heaven* tackle harsh and complex issues- widely present in today's multicultural and globalized world – that need to be understood by young adults for them to grow awareness of these social realities. For children and adolescents in similar conditions, it is always reassuring to read books peopled with individuals who, as in the case of Na's heroine, set a positive example of endurance, courage and optimism.

**Keywords:** coming of age novels, diaspora, hybridity, gender violence, migration, multiculturalism.

## 1. Introduction

An Na's *A Step from Heaven* (2002) is a novel which narrates the story of a Korean girl, Young Ju, who, at the age of four, migrated to the United States with her parents. Stylistically, *A Step from Heaven* is a first person narrative which follows the emotional maturation of this young protagonist, as reflected in her language and personal experiences. Through the use of vignettes, readers have insights into different episodes of Young Ju's life, which are meaningful memory recollections that trace her progress as she grows up from childhood into adolescence and early adulthood.

Through Young Ju's perspective, readers witness the grim realities the girl is exposed to, such as poverty, cultural dislocation, alienation and domestic violence. Moreover, *A Step from Heaven* also exposes the hardships that many immigrant families are forced to confront in a new country. However, the novel avoids a totally tragic, pessimistic and fatalistic approach to its subject matter. More importantly, Young Ju is finally able to overcome all suffering and find the promise of a better future. In this respect, readers sense not only Young Ju's fears, frustrations and anxieties, but also her courage, optimism and endurance in the face of adversity.

In 2002, *A Step from Heaven* received the Michael L. Printz Award for excellence in Young Adult Literature.

## 2. A Young Adult Novel of Migration

One of the main topics in An Na's *A Step from Heaven* regards the experience of migration and diaspora. Novels of migration for adolescents, according to Vázquez (2004), often portray the protagonists' experience of belonging to two different worlds, as well as their personal maturation while they negotiate their family and social spaces. These narratives, Vázquez argues, "are concerned with themes relevant to an adolescent such as leaving home, the assertion of independence and feelings of placelessness" (357). Other popular novels of migration tracing the vicissitudes of growing up in-between two worlds are: Esmeralda Santiago *When I was Puerto Rican* (1994); Julia Álvarez *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991); Geraldine Kaye *Comfort Herself* (1984); Bali Rai *(Un)arranged Marriage* (2001); Rukshana Smith *Sumitra's Story* (1982) and Bich Minh Nguyen *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (2007).

Though she was born in Korea, the author of *A Step from Heaven*, An Na, grew up in San Diego. Because of her life experiences, the writer is sensitive to the positive and negative aspects of living in-between two different cultures. As the writer herself declares,

*A Step from Heaven* grew from a need to express some of the longings and frustrations that I felt as an immigrant growing up in America [...] As with all writing, the novel draws on past emotions, but the story is not my life. What the protagonist and I do share are some of the feelings of yearning, joy, and shame that come with trying to negotiate a foreign culture. (2000)

In her novel, the author describes the slow process of adaptation of a migrant child in a different country. This new space is first depicted as foreign and strange, an alien world where the child is forced to live. As Young Ju grows up, she relates more naturally with her culture of adoption, which will be an essential part of her own identity. As a diasporan individual, the author writes on this subject from a privileged position. In the words of Wisker, "as part of living in two imaginary spaces (at least), at once holding two cultures or more in their minds, memories and histories, diasporan writers

are uniquely placed to negotiate a dialogue between their countries of origin, adoption and return” (2007: 30). In broad terms, diasporan writing tends to rely on the concept of negotiation, which excludes assimilation and fosters dialogue between cultures (Chow, 1993: 25).

### 3. Social Demotion and the Subversion of the “American Dream”

In this section of the paper, I would like to argue that social class is another determinant factor as regards the protagonist's perception of herself and her family in relation to her life as a child being educated in the United States. In this respect, not only does culture establish a difference between these two worlds, but also social class and the marginalization of the protagonist's parents, which makes Young Ju develop feelings of shame towards her family. In this sense, An Na seems to inscribe a critique on the conditions that many immigrants are forced to endure as part of the American underclass.

Traditionally, the West has been too often depicted by the mass media as the land of opportunity and prosperity, while the oppressive realities of a significant number of people remain obscured. In her novel, the author demonstrates how a large amount of immigrants are lured into a false image of the so-called First World. Affected by the ideal of the American Dream, Young Ju's parents joyfully celebrate the possibility to build a better future in the United States. The girl's perspective allows readers to discover how she saw bliss and happiness in her parents' eyes at the very mention of what she misunderstands as “Mi Gook” [America]. In fact, “Mi Gook”, becomes a “magic word” (13) – an imagined place where people can make much money and live in big and beautiful houses. Just arrived in America, little Young Ju remembers how happy her parents were to be in Mi Gook – “many jobs, big houses, good schools, make a living, they say back and forth” (29).

However, immigration to the United States occasionally means social demotion as is the case of Young Ju's family. Unfortunately, for her parents, moving to America meant much more work for much less money. Apa, her father, has no other option but to do gardening work and clean offices. No longer a fisherman, he soon regrets the decision to migrate to the United States, where he is forced to re-adapt himself to a debased position. Moreover, during those first years, he has to overwork to sustain the family. Eventually, the same holds true for Uhmma, the mother, who starts to work after she has given birth to their second child, Joon Ho. Their precarious situation is prolonged through years, even though Apa and Uhmma have had two jobs each. Apa's hands, “rough and peeling from his cleaning job” (42), and Uhmma's “yellowed calluses formed by years of abuse from physical labour” (154) illustrate the excessive toil that they had to go through. In a land of plenty, as poor immigrants, both Uhmma and Apa are relegated to cheap labour force and social marginalization. This phenomenon, according to Pajo (2008), can be too often perceived on a global scale

Contemporary migration involves a dramatic paradox. Much of what is considered international or transnational [...] migration today transforms people of a wide range of social standings [...] into laborers at the bottom social ranks of the countries towards which they migrate. (1)

Despite all their efforts, the family could hardly afford a house of their own in America. Contrary to what they expected, their new life in the United States meant a severe economic decline for the family. When the family moves to the house they have rented, child Young Ju is shocked by what she observes, “old brown paint peeling off. Old brown grass flying away. Crisscross metal fence all

around" (35). In addition, all along her childhood, the idea of owning a new, big house becomes a permanent aspiration never to be fulfilled, which is reminiscent of *The House on Mango Street*, a masterpiece by Chicana author, Sandra Cisneros. In this novel, Esperanza, a small child living in a "barrio", longs for a house she could be proud of:

I knew [...] I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The House on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go. (1984: 5)

In An Na's novel, Young Ju bears the same frustration. In her analysis *A Step from Heaven*, Habegger also remarks how "Young Ju unfortunately felt trapped within both her harsh physical environment and within her restricted social environment" (2004: 36). Her small, crumbling house embodies the child's reduced social sphere. However, the house on the hill, situated in a middle-class neighbourhood, is the place where they "were supposed to live but never got a chance to" (74).

Around her classmates, Young Ju grows awareness of her social class, as she notices how, at the school fair, the other children can drink lemonade or go on all rides, which makes her feel ashamed – "I turn around one last time to look at all the things we could not do because we had only one line of tickets" (50). Her shame is also present when, at the grocer's, her mother gives the clerk hundreds of pennies which, more than once, "have saved the weekly groceries" (77). The small girl, as she sees the clerk snarling, cannot but feel humiliated – "I inch away from Uhmma, pretend I am not that woman's daughter. Not a poor Oriental who saves pennies like gold" (77).

In her teens, Young Ju not only demonstrates to be a hard-working student who achieves high grades, but she is also socially integrated in the American culture. However, she hides aspects of her life from her best friend, Amanda. What is more, Young Ju's self-effacement in front of Amanda's parents may originate from her feelings of embarrassment as regards her family life. When Amanda's parents drive her home from school, Young Ju tells them that she lives in one of the houses on the hill so that they will not see her actual home and neighbourhood.

In this respect, *A Step from Heaven* immerses readers in the harsh realities of many immigrant families, whose expectations become shattered by poverty and deprivations. Moreover, the author brings to light the abusive and oppressive working conditions that a large amount of immigrants have to endure, raising awareness of these grim realities about First World economies. Young Ju herself perceives these stark differences between her own life and the life of her classmates. However, the protagonist, as she matures, does set a positive example in her strong resolution to improve herself and help her family, both affectionately and financially.

#### 4. Inscribing Cultural Difference through Language

The novel's cultural duality, both American and Korean, is effectively displayed through An Na's use of language throughout the story, colouring the narrative with images and perspectives through which Young Ju's Korean identity is articulated. Moreover, language becomes another space of cultural negotiation. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft *et al* (1989) define this stylistic device as "language variance", whereby "language is adopted as a tool and utilized in various ways to express widely differing cultural experiences" (39).

In the novel, Young Ju's first experience of cultural dislocation takes place when she is newly arrived in America. At her aunt Gomo's, readers share the de-familiarising perspective of the child,

who finds herself in a whole new world. As Vázquez convincingly argues, Young Ju's discovery of the toilet and roll paper is presented in such a way that "she gives the reader the idea of the gap between cultures" (360):

This room has a funny seat with pink fur on it. Soft. I wonder what kind of animal in Mi Gook has pink fur. I sit on the fur seat. There is a fat ball of snowy paper on the wall. When I pull on the end, it rolls out like a long tail of smoke (26)

Another example of this de-familiarising perspective for the Western reader relates to the time when Young Ju tries "Ko-Ka Ko-la", which she defines as "dirty black water" (28). When tasting it, the child is disgusted by Coke's flavour and texture – "Ahya! It hurts. This drink bites the inside of my mouth and throat like swallowing tiny fish bones" (28). Everyday examples like this one highlight social differences, thus sensitizing the reader about the slow process of adaptation for any individual who faces such cultural dislocation.

Another aspect to be studied in this section is the learning of a foreign language and how this process is described by the author. Additionally, Na's novel reflects how linguistic alienation is an important obstacle that many immigrants have to overcome. The chapter in which Young Ju is in her first year of school exemplifies the experience of linguistic alienation. The English words that she hears appear as chunks of sound adapted to the phonemic qualities of her Korean language. One of the effects is that readers sense the protagonist's confusion:

"Tee es Yung," the witch teacher says.  
"Wah ko um, Yung," they say (31)

In spite of her initial fear and disorientation, the chapter concludes with a very positive message of personal improvement – "I know little Mi Gook words now. But someday I will know all of them. In the future" (34). As the narrative progresses, she will prove to be successful in her commitment. That is a more complex issue for her parents, who, apart from being older and not being educated in America, spend almost all day labouring. In fact, Young Ju can socialize with other children and be a participant of the "American life". Uhmma and Apa, who, on their arrival in America, had no knowledge of English, put their hopes on Young Ju for her learn the language and teach them – "Apa says the teacher will know everything and I should listen hard because then I have to teach him and Uhmma what I learned" (30).

In her process of learning, the young protagonist will discover how languages encode a set of social practices which are accessed with difficulty by those who are not entirely familiar with a given culture. These intricacies of language, which many native speakers take for granted, are fully and effectively exposed by the author. As a young girl, Young Ju is not yet familiar with all the uses of the verb "to go":

I have found that the dictionary doesn't always explain everything. Like "going". Ever since the beginning of fourth grade, Amanda and some of the girls in my class talk about going with this boy, Jimmy. I pretend to understand, but in the dictionary it says "go" and "going" mean action, moving, and lots of other things like business transactions. None of it makes sense to me. Where would Jimmy go with someone? (54)

Another linguistic experience for the reader concerns the use of Korean words in the novel, which inscribes cultural hybridity in the very texture of the novel. According to Aschcroft *et al*, "uses of

language as untranslated words do have an important function in inscribing difference [...] In this sense they are directly metonymic of that cultural difference which is imputed by linguistic variance" (53). It would be plausible that, in order to render Young Ju's voice more lively and sincere, the author decided to keep certain words untranslated – mainly those which bear a more emotional attachment to the heroine. Many of these relate to her family, such as Uhmma, Apa and Halmoni (the girl's grandmother in Korea). Her mother's song during their journey to the U.S. has a meaning not accessible to most readers, but it remains part of the girl's private realm. Untouched by translation, it is a song with a high sentimental value for the protagonist:

San toki. Toki ya. Uh deer u ga nun yah. Ghang choung. Ghang chou dee men su. Uh deer u ga nun yah. (25)

## 5. Negotiating Identity: Growing up both American and Korean

An Na's *A Step from Heaven* can also be considered a coming of age novel in the sense that it depicts the emotional maturation of its protagonist from childhood into adolescence. This section focuses on how Na's heroine is forced to negotiate her own identity while belonging to two different and sometimes opposing worlds; her American social life and her Korean household. Since she is an immigrant girl, notions of cultural heritage and gender expectations constrain her own personal development.

In this respect, language also becomes another contentious area of everyday life for individuals who, like Young Ju, are caught between two different cultural and linguistic spaces – "I do not understand why I have to speak Korean at home so I will not forget where I come from. Why did we move to America if I am to speak English only at school?" (55). While her parents have acquired little command of English, Young Ju is already fluent in this language. Because of their life experiences, the process of acculturation is not the same for each individual.

As an adolescent, Young Ju realises how the gap between her own life and that of her parents increasingly widens. Despite her father's former desire for Young Ju to fully assimilate into American culture when she was a child, Apa eventually wants her to revert to the supposed qualities of silence and obedience that a Korean girl should have. In this sense, the author dramatises how Apa's notion of Korean identity serves the purpose of legitimising his own sexist beliefs – thus demonstrating how notions such as culture or identity become too frequently mixed with other aspects that relate to patriarchy and gender imperatives. Curiously enough, Apa also believes in the stereotype of what it means to be an American girl: "Supposedly, American girls do not study, they are boy-crazy, and they do not think of anyone but themselves" (105). Defying those prescribed ideas on American or Korean girlhood, neither Amanda nor Young Ju conforms to stereotypes, as they are both preoccupied about their own academic progress and share a long and sincere friendship.

Even though she is not allowed to see Amanda, Young Ju rebels against Apa's authority but has no other option but to tell lies when she is asked where she has been. Though it is not an overt act of rebellion, Young Ju demonstrates her will not to act according to all of Apa's dictates. By not rejecting those cultural traits which Apa considers to be American, Young Ju is not refusing her Korean heritage, but asserting her own need for personal independence. The conflict over being "too American" or "a good Korean girl" amounts to simplistic views on identity which Na's novel undermines. "Hybrid identities", as argued by Herteis, "can also be expressed through personal choice"

(2009: 11). Contrary to essentialist and prescribed ideas, hybrid identities can be considered to be the result of the confluence of myriad cultural traits that defy "fixed, binary notions of identity" (McLeod, 2000: 219). Young Ju is, in this sense, participant in the configuration of her own identity, inevitably both American and Korean because of nurture and culture.

## 6. Sexism, Gender Violence and Resistance against Patriarchy

In this coming of age novel, sexism is another social reality that the heroine has to confront. The birth of her little brother, Joon Ho, marks the first moment in the narrative when Young Ju is socialised into notions of gender difference. When her parents arrive home with the new-born baby, Young Ju's perceptions focalise on Apa. That day, he holds the baby and even changes Joon Ho's diapers. Mesmerized and full of hopes, Apa declares that his son would make him proud in the future. Immediately after, Young Ju tells the family that she can become President one day. Apa laughs at her. According to him, that is no realistic prospect for a girl. Hurt, our protagonist feels that the "cut of Apa's laugh is still open" (41). Curiously enough, this instance of sexist thinking, though belonging to this Korean family, can be extrapolated to the whole nation of the United States, as, for the time being, no woman has in fact been elected President.

As she grows up, Young Ju becomes aware that being a girl or a boy entails "natural" differences that no dictionary can define. As a teenager, the protagonist remarks how Joon Ho has no regular chores at home, chores that she herself had when she was his age. In this respect, Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1972), a touchstone of feminist theory, provides interesting arguments in relation to sexism and patriarchy as cultural facts affecting the emotional development of children:

Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences utterly differ and this is crucial. Implicit in all the gender identity development which takes place through childhood is the sum total of the parents', the peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, status, worth, gesture and expression. Every moment of the child's life is a clue to how he or she must think and behave to attain or satisfy the demands which gender places upon one. (31)

Other episodes of the novel focus on how the father exerts violence on his children. When Apa forbids Young Ju to see her best friend, Amanda, his daughter's reaction is to ask timidly for a reason. Young Ju's question unleashes Apa's violence and fury, as he claims that no good Korean daughter would dare to ask for an explanation. In a different chapter, little Joon Ho is playing Lego in the garden when Apa orders him to clean up and get himself ready to visit aunt Gomo. The child's reaction is to whine and complain. The father, unable to control his own strength and thirst of violence, kicks Joon Ho in the stomach in order to teach him a "lesson". He wants his son to know how to be a "man", since boys must not cry. Just afterwards, when Young Ju accidentally breaks one of his brother's Lego pieces, Joon Ho slaps her hard across the face. The cycle of violence is re-enacted. In fact, many boys have been educated to repress their feelings and resolve their conflicts through violence. For that reason, as Jordan advocates, there is a need of new role models for boys in which plain aggression would be viewed as a cowardly act of violence and not as a sign of masculine power (1995: 81).

Throughout the narrative, it is hinted that Apa's sense of masculinity lies on the figure of the patriarch who must provide for his family, but whose authority is never to be questioned. According to him, women must be subservient and grateful to the head of the family. In the United States,



the family's conditions undermine his power and his own sense of masculinity. After all, Uhmma's work outside home is as needed as his. On the other hand, his little command of English makes him dependent on Young Ju on several occasions, which is a source of anxiety for Apa. However, it must be emphasised that on no account should these circumstances condone gender violence, since it finds its roots in sexist beliefs deeply ingrained in most societies.

The traumatic experience of gender violence is in fact an overarching presence throughout the narrative. *A Step from Heaven* opens with an idyllic episode in Korea, where little Young Ju bathes in the sea with her father, who teaches her how to swim. However, the following chapter shows how this beautiful scenario is desecrated and torn apart by the father's drunkenness and sheer violence. Though the first episode of gender violence takes place in Korea, this situation continues once the family has moved to the United States. Blaming Uhmma for their decision to migrate, Apa feeds his frustration on alcohol and self-imposed isolation, to the extent that he considers it a punishment to spend a whole Sunday morning with his wife and children. He becomes increasingly abusive and threatening.

Needless to say, the most victimised one by Apa's violence and drunkenness is his wife, who has endured brutal physical abuse for long years of silence and enforced submission. The traditional role of wives and mothers is one that fosters self-sacrifice and blind obedience to the patriarch of the family, who must exert his power. In her well-known essay, "If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything At All" (1990), Canadian writer Margaret Atwood is eloquent when she argues that, traditionally, women were expected "to assuage pain, to give blood till they drop, to conciliate, to be selfless, to be helpful" (21). In Na's novel, Uhmma is the main target of Apa's frustration and aggressive behaviour. In his masculine egocentricity, he even believes that it is his own right to beat her up whenever Uhmma speaks up or dares to contradict him.

Fortunately, the close bond that is created between Uhmma and Young Ju is instrumental for them to cope together and eventually defeat Apa's tyrannical behaviour. Regarding Uhmma, her sacrifices will have a clear reward: that of giving Young Ju an education in the United States so that her daughter enjoys the opportunities that she was deprived of. Probably, this belief is what provided her with the strength that she needed in order to endure such long hours of work and her painful relationship with her husband. As concerns Young Ju, it is no coincidence that the young girl's memories tend to focus more on her mother than on any other character. One of the reasons why this is the case might be observed in Uhmma's pride for her daughter's outstanding academic progress, which boosts the protagonist's self-confidence.

Later in the narrative, a more mature Young Ju, terrified at the sight of her mother's large and dark bruises, asks Uhmma why Apa does that to her. Significantly, this is the first instant in which mother and daughter acknowledge together Apa's cruelty and the urgent need to put an end to his violence. Reaching the end of the novel, Apa brutally beats Uhmma up in his usual state of drunkenness. In fear for her mother's life, Young Ju summons up the courage to call the police to protect her. Young Ju's brave action is followed by her father's refusal to go back to his family. Young Ju's mother is saved.

With Apa gone to Korea, a new life starts. In order to adapt to their new circumstances, Uhmma starts to work "three jobs back to back" (142) and both Young Ju and Joon Ho take up part-time jobs to cooperate in the family's economy. The outcome of all their efforts is the possibility to purchase their own house, the one that they can finally call home. Young Ju cannot restrain her happiness when walking into their new house – "I twirl around the empty dining room and think about flying again. Going up, up, up" (148). Her determination to study at college thanks to the



grant she got will also set her apart from the traditional role of a "Korean girl" that Apa tried to inculcate in her.

In a heartfelt and moving epilogue, the daughter expresses her gratitude and love for Uhmma. Young Ju, who will start college, has achieved such fruitful prospects thanks to her mother. In fact, Uhmma's hands— a symbol of strength, abnegation and suffering — "worked hard to make sure our hands would not resemble hers" (154). This recognition goes together with the hopes that the scars of the past will pave the way for a much better future:

I study these lines of history and wish to erase them. Remove the scars, the cuts, fill in the cracks in the skin. I envelop Uhmma's hands in my own tender hands. Close them together. Like a book. A Siamese prayer, I tell her, I wish I would erase these scars for you. (155).

## Concluding Remarks

In our multicultural and globalized world, a novel such as An Na's *A Step from Heaven* sets a positive example of a young Korean girl who, despite facing severe hardships, can manage to construct a promising future for herself. For children and adolescents in similar situations, it is always reassuring to read books peopled with individuals like them — to let them know that they are not alone in their predicaments, that others have experienced the same. In an interview in her website, An Na makes a very interesting remark:

I think books about an experience other than white suburban life are becoming more and more commonplace. When I was growing up, I didn't have access to stories about people who looked like me, or felt like me. Now I can go to the library and there is a choice. You have writers like Jacqueline Woodson, Linda Sue Park, David Levithan, all creating lives and stories that reflect a broader experience. This is so important for young people. *To know that these "other" lives and stories count.* I hope this isn't a trend. *I hope this is about changing our world.* (emphasis added)

In this paper, *A Step from Heaven* has been studied from a number of perspectives that include social marginalization, cultural dislocation, linguistic alienation and gender violence. These are hard and complex issues that are widely present in today's society and need to be understood by young adults, thus promoting sympathy with individuals who, like Young Ju, confront such bleak realities — because, after all, changing minds is also about "changing our world".

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