

“This vague feeling of their difference”:
Race, Gender, and the Ordinary
Impetus in Conrad’s “*Almayer’s Folly*”

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ALMAYER’S FOLLY: *A Story of an Eastern River* is a curious text. It is Conrad’s first novel, and its subject-matter obviously intrigued the author, for he duplicated it in his second work, *An Outcast of the Islands*. Yet, although *An Outcast of the Islands* was written after *Almayer’s Folly*, the events within it take place before those of *Almayer’s Folly* begin. *An Outcast of the Islands*, consequently, returns to the origin of the first book. In a similar fashion, *A Personal Record*, Conrad’s autobiographical account of the beginnings of his writing career, also focuses on the conception of the initial novel. The locus of Conrad’s writing, then, points to a desire to return to the beginning, or the origin, and this movement is mirrored in the motivations of the characters in *Almayer’s Folly*. Within the novel, Almayer seeks to return to Europe, which he perceives as his origin; Mrs. Almayer seeks to return to a pre-colonial Sambir; and Nina, their daughter, seemingly chooses to return to her Malay roots. The precedent, therefore, assumes an inordinate importance in this text, which overtly privileges that which has gone before.

The desire to re-establish the/a beginning is not as innocent an activity as it may at first appear, however, as Almayer and Mrs. Almayer demonstrate. The Almayers’ intentions are to recuperate and to re-project what they interpret as the “past” onto the “present” that confronts them (as these terms function in relation to the time span of the novel). Daniel Schwarz comments upon this desire and contends that it is in keeping with Conrad’s own motivation:

Upon the anarchical and primordial Sambir, man seeks to impose his order. Lacking wife and parents, and bereft in England of any family

ties, Conrad proposes family and personal relationships as an alternative to the greed and hypocrisy that dominate Sambir life. (4)

Schwarz's observation that Sambir performs as the disordered site in *Almayer's Folly* points to the Western framework out of which the novel operates. It is not inconsequential that it is the Eastern country that comprises the chaos that requires ordering. Sambir's current disorder may result from the imperialist endeavour—and certainly Conrad is critical of imperialist practice—yet, even so, the novelistic effort to impose a privileged order upon a perceived chaos (with all of the implicit value judgements these terms connote) is fraught with tension.

In *Almayer's Folly*, the return to beginnings constitutes a fictive attempt to order disorder by separating the two dominant cultures of Sambir (White and Malay).¹ Returning Sambir to its "originary state" thus would "right" an imperialist "wrong." Such a move would be in accord with Conrad's moral bent, as Schwarz suggests in the quotation above; but the movement is more complicated than it might seem. Edward Said argues that Conrad's metaphysical vision is predicated on the impossibility of ordering, since, for the author, the beginning is also the moment of disruption. Said contends (appropriately enough) in *Beginnings: Intention and Method* that conception is the point at which the subversion of order occurs. The originary moment is a moment of chaos:

Man is never the author, never the beginning, of what he does, no matter how willfully intended his program may be. . . . Every beginning, every record meticulously kept, every intention maintained is by definition secondary because antedated by a process that has no respect for man and his rationale. . . . It is indeed possible to feel, as one reads the novel [*Nostromo*], the war going on between Conrad and his fiction. (133-34)

Said proposes that, for Conrad, to return to the beginning is to recuperate order, but that the beginning concomitantly nullifies the ordering impetus. In Conrad's fiction, the origin is projected both as the ideal and as the point of failure.

The very desire for origin, however, draws upon a particular power dynamic. Judith Roof, in *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory*, postulates that "the quest for origins" is

[a] version of the desire for desire . . . [and] reflects the urge to have what one cannot have that sustains desire in a tension between the threat of lack represented by no more desire and the specter of power promised by its fulfilment. (127-28)

While Roof's assertion is made in reference to the maintenance of heterosexual gender binaries, her analysis sheds light on the ordering/disordering binary apparent in *Almayer's Folly*, for the "war" that Said foregrounds between Conrad and his fiction is located in the desire to return to origins and the inability to do so. If the impulse to return to origins serves as a means of ordering a perceived disorder, it points to the tension Roof highlights between the desire for fulfilment and its lack. The longed-for order is also the order that is absent, and it is the absence of the order that generates the desire *for* the order; this is a dynamic of power, whether its consummation or its lack.

The ordering/disordering binary in Conrad's fiction derives from the author's conception of order and its absence, as Said has intimated. Yet the binary effected posits "chaos" in opposition to the "order" that is discursively privileged. Rather than an interpretable signifier in itself, chaos is constructed as the lack of order, or the blankness upon which the order can or cannot be restored. As a result, the power dynamic spotlighted by Roof and apparent in Conrad's writing is complicated further, for it becomes an extension of the colonizing endeavour, which, Gayatri Spivak argues, is predicated on the "assumption that when the colonizers come to a world, they encounter it as un-inscribed earth upon which they write their inscriptions" (129). The solution to separate the White and Malay cultures, posited in the novel as an imperialist "corrective," therefore, itself replicates the imperialist impetus. The effort to return to origins constitutes an attempt to erase the "present" and to impose an originary moment on a "text" that has been inscribed—if inscribed in a fashion that is discomfiting to the author. As Spivak suggests, blankness, too, is an interpretation. And to impose a "text" upon that blankness, even a text that tries to re-produce the perceived "originary" moment, is nonetheless to impose a text upon a page that, in effect, already has been written. Hence, on one level, Conrad's novel re-enacts the power dynamic of imperialism that it also seeks to critique.

Almayer's Folly dramatizes both the need and the inability to order. In the narrative, one culture is posited against an/Other—the ordered European world against the disordered Malay world—and the two cultures are represented in the characters of Almayer and Mrs. Almayer. *Almayer's Folly*, largely, is an explication of searches for beginnings by displaced characters who are figuratively in the process of formulating “texts” as they create (or attempt to create) their desired existences. Thus the novel self-reflexively points to its own process of creation, since the characters within it perform as writers or creators themselves. These characters are attempting, figuratively, to impose the “texts” (or the interpretations they favour) on to the construction of Sambir that confronts them: Almayer is attempting to create the text that will return him to his origins and will displace for him his location in Sambir; Mrs. Almayer wants to return to her Malay origins and to create a new/old text that will over-write the presence of the colonizers. However, neither character reads the text at hand in the Sambir that lies before him/her, for each ignores the history that has altered the original for which s/he longs. Both characters are attempting to inscribe their own texts on the page of Sambir, which they interpret as a blankness.

Almayer and Mrs. Almayer fail to see that the blankness they perceive is an interpretative construct, since there is an extant text that each ignores. The Almayers's efforts constitute an imperialist and a neo-imperialist practice, since the characters are involved in an attempt to enforce their own texts on what they see; neither acknowledges that there is already a text in existence that must be taken into account. Almayer and Mrs. Almayer never learn how to “read” the text at hand; hence both, in a sense, are colonizers, if in diametrically opposed positions. What confronts them in Sambir is not a blankness, and to erase it is to become complicit with the practice that generated the chaos in the “first” place.

Paradoxically, then, there are similarities between the opposing cultures, since they represent two poles that function as antithetical binaries. While the two characters' intentions may differ, their process is the same—each is attempting to posit

his/her own culture and to subordinate and/or erase the presence of the other. The similarities between the Almayers are evident in the ways in which they treat their daughter, Nina. Both try to incorporate Nina into their own texts and to undercut each other's influences. Almayer and Mrs. Almayer attempt to claim their daughter, but their very process of positing originary ownership constitutes a colonizing endeavour, which replicates the search for the originary moment effected through the motivational impetus of the novel. What is surprising about *Almayer's Folly*, however, is not that it is an imperialist text, and not that it incorporates all of the problems inherent in its Western perspective, but rather that it also points to a way out of the ideological impasse it depicts (and generates). The point of departure is illustrated through the characterization of Nina.

Nina represents the text of Sambir-present, in that she reflects the country's dominant White and Malay cultures. As the product of an interracial marriage, she is the amalgamation of two worlds, and she is an interesting figure precisely because she is neither one nor the other. In her figure, both of her parents' origins are combined, just as they are, at this point, in the culture. Nina's parents attempt to repossess her, to claim her as the product of their own origins, but she is different from them, since she is both colonized and colonizer. Through her figure, the novel posits an alternative to the ordering/disordering impulse and thus points to a creative process resistant to the colonizing impetus that generates it and is generated through it. Nina's character points to a means of creation that disrupts that of Almayer and Mrs. Almayer, for she does not attempt to order but to re-interpret and to co-create.

Nina "reads" the texts of the past in the figures of her parents and she creates a different text. Yet she rewrites rather than writes this text, since she acknowledges the presence of a text that precedes her. To extrapolate from Spivak, if one does not read the text at hand, one cannot rewrite it, but can only involve oneself in the creation of a new text, which is then imposed upon the old. Nina, because she is not trying to enforce a perceived original, engages with what is before her and is able to participate in the co-production of the Malay text. She reads and she creates,

but she does not seek to order and to assert. What she ultimately produces is beyond the scope of the novel, yet *Almayer's Folly* does, through Nina's un-represented text, point to an epistemological process that breaks down imperialist structures.²

The novel "begins" with the colonizing endeavour of Captain Lingard, who functions as a paradigm for Almayer. Lingard is the patriarchal "father" of Sambir and provides an example for Almayer, who aspires to become what he is. Not surprisingly, therefore, Lingard loves to tell tales about the past:

Often pacing the deck with Almayer, when the faint night breeze, heavy with aromatic exhalations of the islands, shoved the brig gently along under the peaceful and sparkling sky, did the old seaman open his heart to his entranced listener. He spoke of his past life, of escaped dangers, of big profits in his trade, of new combinations that were in the future to bring profits bigger still. (9)

Lingard believes that his past will generate a richer future, but he does not read the text of Sambir that his capitalism is creating.

Like his mentor, Almayer spends his life attempting to return to Europe, and, to this end, he perceives Sambir as a commodity. He learns from Lingard how to exploit his setting and believes that the riches he will glean from it will help him to recover his origins:

The consideration, the indolent ease of life—for which he felt himself so well fitted—his ships, his warehouses, his merchandise (old Lingard would not live forever), and crowning all, in the far future gleamed like a fairy palace the big mansion in Amsterdam, that earthly paradise of his dreams, where made king amongst men by old Lingard's money, he would pass the evening of his days in inexpressible splendour. (10)

Although Almayer values Sambir as a means to attain a return to his beginnings, his beginnings are displaced. Almayer, born in Java, only perceives Europe as his origin, and his vision of his return comprises an improvement over his past life. Sambir's existence will ensure a better future for Almayer, but its existence as something that is not an extension of his own desires has no meaning for him.

Almayer's oversight is also evident in Mrs. Almayer. Her text differs from Lingard's and Almayer's in that it revolves around

the glories of Sambir past, a past that she wishes to enforce on the present:

Mrs. Almayer's thoughts . . . were usually turned into a channel of childhood reminiscences, and she gave them utterance in a kind of monotonous recitative—slightly disconnected, but generally describing the glories of the Sultan of Sulu, his great splendour, his power, his great prowess, the fear which benumbed the hearts of white men at the sight of his swift piratical praus. And these muttered statements of her grandfather's might were mixed up with bits of later recollections, where the great fight with the "White Devil's" brig and the convent life in Samarang occupied the principal place.

(41)

Like her male counterparts, Mrs. Almayer wants to erase the text at hand in Sambir in order to project the past she has chosen on to its future. She prefers to ignore the text that is before her. While readers may sympathize with Mrs. Almayer's endeavour, Sambir, as a colonized country, exists as a historical reality within the novel. Mrs. Almayer dramatizes how one is unable to ignore the present, or the history that has moulded it.

Although Mrs. Almayer's "original" differs from those of her White and male counterparts, she is involved in a process similar to theirs. She, too, wishes to destroy the text of Sambir with which she is faced: "she was burning the furniture, and tearing down the pretty curtains in her unreasoning hate of those signs of civilization" (26). Where Almayer builds the Folly to ensure the future that will displace for him the present of Sambir, Mrs. Almayer longs to destroy the trappings of White civilization to ensure the future she desires.

The similarities between Almayer's and Mrs. Almayer's approaches to Sambir are reflected in their treatment of Nina. Almayer tries to save Nina from the Malayan origins he finds so distasteful and to "whitewash" her. To this end, he removes her from Sambir and educates her in Singapore because he fears that she will be contaminated by her Malayan mother. As a result of her schooling, he believes that Nina has been purified by and for White civilization:

Almayer thought with dismay of the meeting of his wife and daughter, of what this grave girl in European clothes would think of her betel-nut chewing mother, squatting in a dark hut, disorderly, half

naked, and sulky. He also feared an outbreak of temper on the part of that pest of a woman he had hitherto managed to keep tolerably quiet, thereby saving the remnants of his dilapidated furniture.

(29-30)

Nina's mother and father do not differ substantially from each other. Mrs. Almayer attempts to interpellate Nina into the text she writes of her Malayan past by intriguing her daughter with stories of that which has gone before:

And listening to the recital of those savage glories, those barbarous fights and savage feasting, to the story of deeds valorous, albeit somewhat bloodthirsty, where men of her mother's race shone far above the Orang Blanda, she felt herself irresistibly fascinated, and saw with vague surprise the narrow mantle of civilized morality, in which good-meaning people had wrapped her young soul, fall away and leave her shivering and helpless as if on the edge of some deep and unknown abyss. (42)

Nina, as this quotation indicates, finds her mother's tales attractive and, according to Stephen K. Land, "[f]rom the time of her return to Sambir Nina, whose life in Singapore had been generally unpleasant, turns increasingly to her mother's world, which finds expression chiefly in tales of native warrior heroes" (18). Yet Nina also rejects both Almayer's and Mrs. Almayer's oppositional texts because of their exclusivity. Almayer's is the more obviously limited of the two, since he represents a world from which Nina is forever barred because of the colour of her skin—as she points out to him, "I have been rejected with scorn by the white people, and now I am a Malay!" (180). Hence her origins prohibit her from partaking of the origin Almayer desires to establish for her. Her origins even exclude her from Almayer's own text, for, as Nina argues, Almayer's rejection of her mother reflects on her:

Between you and my mother there never was any love. When I returned to Sambir I found the place which I thought would be a peaceful refuge for my heart, filled with weariness and hatred—and mutual contempt. I have listened to your voice and to her voice. Then I saw that you could not understand me; for was I not part of that woman? Of her who was the regret and shame of your life? I had to choose—I hesitated. Why were you so blind? Did you not see me struggling before your eyes? (191)

Mrs. Almayer's world, the world that would supplant the White culture, which itself displaced the Malayan, similarly repudiates Nina because it has to repudiate her—she is a part of White culture despite White culture's rejection of her. Just as Almayer's scorn for Mrs. Almayer reflects on Nina, so Mrs. Almayer's hatred of Almayer must necessarily also be directed at her daughter. Nina, therefore, is outside of both of her parents' texts. Her origins exclude her, for she embodies the colonized Sambir, a country that now partakes of its dominant White and Malay cultures.

Mr. and Mrs. Almayer clearly are uneasy with their daughter's existence and attempt to erase her because they cannot claim her. Mrs. Almayer sells Nina in an effort to remove her presence and ultimately becomes preoccupied with the gold for which she has traded her daughter. Despite her rejection of White culture, she becomes caught within its commodity-use pattern, as her behaviour indicates. Indeed, her actions only serve to confirm that one cannot ignore the "present" in order to return to the "past."

Conversely, Almayer realizes the inefficacy of his treatment of Sambir as a commodity. Near the conclusion of the novel, he re-examines the account books that recorded his effort to colonize Sambir and recognizes their uselessness:

Books open with torn pages bestrewed the floor; other books lay about grimy and black, looking as if they had never been opened. Account books. In those books, he had intended to keep day by day a record of his rising fortunes. Long time ago. A very long time. For many years there had been no record to keep on the blue and red ruled pages! (199)

Symbolically, Almayer realizes that he cannot subject Sambir to the paradigm he desires, and his defeat is indicated through his silence. In the final pages of the novel, Almayer's voice changes and he speaks only in a whisper: "This was the last time in his life that he was heard to raise his voice. Henceforth he spoke always in a monotonous whisper like an instrument of which all the strings but one are broken in a last ringing clamour under a heavy blow" (192-93).

Almayer opts for silence because the discourse of ordering that he speaks fails him. Yet, while he recognizes the worthless-

ness of his discursive practice, he remains trapped within it. When Nina tries to reconcile with him by inviting him to read her rewritten text, he is unable to do so:

“You told me yesterday [said Nina] that I could not understand or see your love for me: it is so. How can I? No two human beings understand each other. They can understand but their own voices. You wanted me to dream your dreams, to see your own visions—the visions of life amongst the white faces of those who cast me out from their midst in angry contempt. But while you spoke I listened to the voice of my own self; then this man came, and all was still; there was only the murmur of his love. You call him a savage! What do you call my mother, your wife?”

“Nina!” cried Almayer, “take your eyes off my face.” (179)

Almayer refuses to read the text that Nina offers him. Like Mrs. Almayer, he prefers to reject his daughter and attempts to obliterate her from his memory. He goes about the “business” of forgetting her by erasing all vestiges of her presence:

Now she was gone his business was to forget, and he had a strange notion that it should be done *systematically and in order*. To Ali’s great dismay he fell on his hands and knees, and, creeping along the sand, erased carefully with his hand all traces of Nina’s footsteps. He piled up small heaps of sand, leaving behind him a line of miniature graves right down to the water. After burying the last slight imprint of Nina’s slipper he stood up. (195-96; emphasis added)

Nina’s footprints here function as signs, signs that Almayer attempts to eliminate because he cannot “account” for them. In turn, when the Folly burns, it suggests to Almayer that Nina’s presence has been destroyed: “Every vestige of Nina’s existence had been destroyed; and now with every sunrise he asked himself whether the longed for oblivion would come before sunset, whether it would come before he died?” (201).

When Nina does leave her father, she leaves him with words that haunt him and disrupt the ordering process he continues to favour: “‘You speak so because you love me.’ Almayer shook his head. ‘Yes, you do,’ she insisted softly; then after a short pause she added, ‘and you will never forget me’” (193). Further, he cannot forget her while alive; the novel indicates that it is Almayer’s *dead* face that “testified silently before the cloudless heaven that the man lying there under the gaze of indifferent eyes had

been permitted to forget before he died" (208). Yet, while Almayer dies and is himself erased from the text of *Almayer's Folly*, Nina's presence continues to resonate within it. Her presence serves as a reminder that one cannot return to one's origins and thus effect order.

Nina's Otherness from her parents is signalled in the novel through a juxtaposition of silence and speech. Reynold Humphries argues that the Malays, and particularly Malay women, are depicted by Conrad as chattering and shrill, signalling their "primitive" status:

"Chatter" is used in the context of women: on two occasions it refers to the servants (Chapter 2, p. 28; Chapter 5, p. 54) and the other reference is to "feminine chatter" (Chapter 6, p. 65). We also read of the "warbling of soft, feminine voices" (Chapter 7, p. 77). . . . This constant assimilation of Eastern women to birds and animals is certainly not innocent and is part and parcel of a long-standing racial prejudice that "primitive peoples" can only speak "primitive languages," a concept definitively disproved by linguists and anthropologists. (126)

As Humphries points out, *Almayer's Folly* overtly encodes women as loud, disruptive creatures. Indeed, the opening sentences of the novel work to instill a negative readerly response to Mrs. Almayer: "Kaspar! Makan!' The well-known shrill voice startled Almayer" (3). Mrs. Almayer, the owner of the "shrill" voice, is characterized as a slatternly shrew, and her portrayal is a prime example of the female Malayan representations of which Humphries speaks, for example,

in her extreme desire to persuade her husband into an alliance with Lakamba, [Mrs. Almayer] played upon the whole gamut of passion. With her soiled robe wound tightly under the armpits across her lean bosom, her scant greyish hair tumbled in disorder over her projecting cheek-bones, in suppliant attitude, she depicted with shrill volubility the advantages of close union with a man so good and so fair dealing. (39)

Nina, however, is depicted as outside of this paradigm, and her Otherness is signalled through her silence: "With her heart deeply moved by the sight of Almayer's misery, knowing it in her power to end it with a word, longing to bring peace to that troubled heart, she heard with terror the voice of her overpower-

ing love commanding her to be silent" (103). Interestingly, while this quotation indicates that it is Nina's love for Dain Maroola (the Malayan prince whom she ultimately marries) that silences her, she is also silenced by the White world: "Nina nodded to him with an uncertain smile, and was going to speak, when a short report from the gun mounted in the bow of the steam launch that was just then coming into view arrested the words on her parted lips" (106). Nina's origins—White and Malay—move to decentre her existence, for each tries to supplant the other. Together, they work to silence her and to muffle her voice.

Nina's presence constitutes a sort of absence, in that if she connotes anything it is difference; yet the possibilities she offers go undefined.³ It is clear that her methodology diverges from that of her parents, but readers only know that it is at odds with what is present within the novel. Given the textual dominance of *Almayer* and Mrs. Almayer, the system overtly encoded in *Almayer's Folly* is theirs. Their system breaks down, however, and is shown to be ineffectual. The Almayers cannot return to their origins because the text of Sambir-present blocks their departure from it. The return to origins, the attempt to order and to define the present in terms of what has gone before, therefore, is shown to be impossible.

It might be argued that Nina returns to her beginnings when she marries Dain, thus turning her back on her father's world. However, a Malayan existence is not a return to origin for Nina, since her origins also derive from White culture. Her choice, then, does not conform with her parents' desire to recover what came before, and she remains outside of their discursive paradigm. Nina's decision to marry Dain constitutes her effort to revise the texts of her parents, and she stands in opposition to their desire for origins. She is joined in her endeavour by Dain, who refuses to align himself with the Almayers's efforts to confine her. Dain accepts Nina, but he accepts her by acknowledging her difference, as she does his. This in itself constitutes a substantial departure from the efforts of Almayer and Mrs. Almayer, who seek to incorporate, and, failing that, to silence.

Dain, the Malayan representative of the rewritten text he and Nina co-create, reads the existence of Sambir-present in Nina

and attempts to decentre the exclusivity of the other texts he encounters. He realizes that he cannot fully understand Nina, and he turns to Almayer for help:

"She is crying," murmured Dain, softly.

"She is crying! Why?" asked Almayer, indifferently.

"I came to ask you. My Ranee smiles when looking at the man she loves. It is the white woman that is crying now. You would know."
(188)

Not only does Dain open his text to include Almayer's presence but he also refuses to impose his interpretation on Almayer and Nina; instead, he reads the text at hand: "He felt something invisible that stood between them, something that would let him approach her so far, but no farther. No desire, no longing, no effort of will or length of life could destroy this vague feeling of their difference" (187). Dain sees Nina's Otherness, her Whiteness, her femininity, and, while he cannot comprehend it, he does not try to define or claim it.

Nina, like Dain, attempts to open the text of her parents' Sambir to include the characters and the cultures that excluded her. And her text resonates beyond the pages of the novel. Nina may be absent from the conclusion of the narrative, but she continues to signify within it, since "news from Bali" indicates that a "grandson is born to the old Rajah, and there is great rejoicing" (206). Nina's difference engenders a new "text," which remains unwritten in Conrad's novel, but points beyond it. The rewritten text that Nina and Dain co-produce offers the potential of a different and collaborative interpretative procedure.

Consequently, *Almayer's Folly* both emphasizes the desirability of positing origins, through the characterizations of Almayer and Mrs. Almayer, and signals the impossibility of that originary enterprise. While the novel may both counter and re-inscribe the colonizing endeavour in its attempt to separate the White and Malay cultures, it also breaks with the imperialist thrust and hints at a divergent epistemological practice. Hence, although the move to posit an originary moment may fail in *Almayer's Folly*, the novel does succeed in outlining an alternative to the power dynamic it "originarily" sought to redress. In so doing, Conrad's

novel fulfils the desire that generated its creation, for it covertly provides a systemic critique of imperialist practice.

NOTES

- ¹ It should be noted that other ethnic groups appear in *Almayer's Folly*. I have chosen to focus on Whites and Malays because these are the two dominant groups in Sambir. For an analysis of the treatment of Arabs in the text, see Humphries.
- ² I am indebted to P. Marc Bousquet for helping to clarify my perception of this co-creative epistemic process.
- ³ Nina is not presented unproblematically, however, for on one level the text works to homogenize and universalize her and thus to determine her presence:
- She drew back her head and fastened her eyes on his in one of those long looks that are a woman's most terrible weapon; a look that is more stirring than the closest touch, and more dangerous than the thrust of a dagger, because it also whips the soul out of the body, but leaves the body alive and helpless, to be swayed here and there by the capricious tempests of passion and desire; a look that enwraps the whole body, and that penetrates into the innermost recesses of the being, bringing terrible defeat in the delirious uplifting of accomplished conquest. (171)

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