

# “The Other” and “Othering” in Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*: A Psychological Study

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**Abstract**—The Other and Otherness (Othering) or Us and Them are one of the most contemporary complex topics which relate to organizing the kind and nature of human relationship besides involving many dangers which could represent a real threat to man's existence. This paper tries to shed some light on this flagrant and shameful literary work of Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* which deals with how discrimination is spread among human beings. At the beginning, a theoretical literary review will establish the fundamental bases of this study, including the psychological and post-colonial concepts. Then, it will study Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* as a realistic model of embodying such racial discrimination and introducing a huge abhorrent image between superior and inferior relationship and the consequences as estrangement, alienation, un-belonging feelings, etc. Finally, the study ends up with the main findings as well as suggesting a piece of advice and solution for eliminating such humiliating inferior look into the other different human being.

**Index Terms**— Confessions, De Quincey, Opium-Eater, Other, Othering, Otherness, Psychology, Post-Colonial.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Jean-Francois Staszak (2008) pinpoints the exact meanings for Other and Otherness in addition to his attempt of distinguishing their function as well. He categorized humans into in-group and out-group ones. He argues that, the in-group or Otherness are selfish, dominant usually and can be described by (Us, the self). While, The Other is allotted for “one or many dominated out-groups which are called as (“Them,” Other)” (p. 2). This hypothesis determines the master-slave relationship besides the superior and inferior outlook. Then, he moves to generalize these terms by claiming that, creating of otherness or othering demands categorizing individuals “into two hierarchical groups: them and us” The out-group “Other” usually “lack identity” and always is “coherent” to in-group (p. 2). In relation of power, almost is in the hand of otherness while other has nothing. This claim according to Jean-Francois Staszak creates a major problem which is “... if the Other of Man is Woman, and if the Other of the White Man is the Black Man, the

Opposite is not true (p.2).” This approximately makes no distinction among humans based on their skins' colours, or on their ethnic group, class and religion.

Afaf Ahmed Hasan Al-Saidi (2014) elucidates the concept of self and other from the post-colonial perspective through dichotomization of these two words (Other and Othering) into two different realms of knowledge, existence and even gender along with all its racial discrimination it involves within as it is seen in the following: “ “The concept of Otherness sees the world "as divided into mutually excluding opposites: if the Self is ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the other is chaotic, irrational, feminine, and evil".(p. 96)” She delineates the nature of this from the post-colonial corner as she argues “Post-colonialism is continually described as a term that portrays not a "we" talking about or to "them", but a "them" talking back to an "us". This implies that post- colonial literature in one way or another is about categorization of center and margin. ... the paradoxical nature and ambivalent nature of the colonizer\ colonized relationship has been a focus for post-colonial theory”(p. 96). These types of the humiliating outlook between superior and inferior, rational and irrational are going to impose the exigency for identity question.

On the other hand, the question of identity remains a central issue in determining the relationship between Other and Otherness or Them and Us. The self-other binarism is better understood in terms of identity and history. One's self is formed through his/her historical background which determines their relationship with others. In this respect, Sabah Atallah Diyai and Hasan Mohammed Saleh (2013) describe the relationship between identity and history, quoting Stuart Hall, "unspeakable" stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture" (p. 46). Therefore, “Psychologically viewed, identity refers to personal and group identifications. Additionally, identity is concerned with self-definition, and the self is conceptualized as a fairly stable, internal entity that is rarely modified to fit the context. In fact, “the self is a core sense of who one is. That is, you are who you are; shifting is indicative of a problematic, deficient or disengaged identity” ( qtd. in Diyai and Saleh, 2013, p. 46).

The concept of "The Other" means an individual who does not belong to a specific group just because he/she is different in race, nationality, religion, social class, color, etc. The group becomes the judge of the strangers in which they call them "Others" and do not conform to its norms. The group treats the Other as inferior or less important because he/she lacks the essential characteristics of that group. In any country occupied by the imperialistic powers, the natives are portrayed as the Others. The normal consequence for such behaviors is obliging the person to be alienated, feeling strange from his surroundings and trying to escape such unhealthy situations of life. Moreover, man in his patriarchal outlook to women, he considers and even treats them as the Other. So, the concept "The Other" comes from the perspective of making "Différance." It is used in sociological perspective of Saussure's theory in linguistics of human beings ability to create words because the ability of understanding the difference between sounds. Cultural studies theorists used the concept "Différance" and then changed it to be "difference." They mean are always creating sets of differences, through the use of skin colour, sexuality, income levels, height, urban/rural, modern/traditional, to categorize ourselves as 'us' but only by differentiating ourselves from 'them' or 'the Other' (Koerner, 1965, pp. 109-289).

The Other is always used as a negative term. Modernity is on contradiction with Liberal Democratic culture which is based on political, social, religious and economic interests of Colonial Imperialism to generate entirely new sets of Us/The Other categorizations. Such as the rational and emotional forms of thinking and acting, traditional and enlightened cultures, public and domestic spheres of social life, universalism and particularism of political principles; a political system which call for freedom and liberty of all human beings without any distinction. This contradiction was resolved by generating further sets of 'Othering': white middle class property owning men defined themselves as the only rational, mature adults entitled to freedom, especially free participation in the political and economic spheres of life. Whilst a whole set of 'Others': women, all black people, all indigenous people, non-property owning people were 'Othered' as non-rational and immature, emotional, childlike incapable of acting in the public spheres of politics and economic ownership.

Respectively, the 19th and mid-20th centuries witnessed successful deconstructive features relating these hideous powerful categorizations of racial discrimination including "Others." Majority studies of this issue concentrated on cultural and political levels. The cultural level includes class, gender, ethnicity, racism studies which are established on 'Deconstruction' theory that reveals the contradictions of the 'Othering' constructions. On the other hand, the political level reaffirms the political and economic inequality principles which doom the nature and type of relationship between the working class, black people, and even the Feminist groups which had some successes in challenging the practical consequences of these 'Othering'. The women have become able to vote and earn their loaves as men do. They successfully escaped the category of being the "Others" who belong to a domestic sphere of life as "housewives" no more. Today as well, after putting an end to "The Other" concept new terms are in use. The new terms are "US" and "Them". These are as an outcome of globalization that is swerving the whole world and invades all the nations

("Gender Inequality", (2009, pp.7-15) and (Ray et al. , 2010, pp. 197-8)).

The consequences of cultural, political, economic and social discriminations will lead to ultimate psychological and disastrous results such as alienation, estrangement, loneliness, and un-belonging.

## II. THE HIDDEN REALMS OF ALIENATION AND ESTRANGEMENT IN *CONFESSIONS OF AN ENGLISH OPIUM EATER*

Alienation and estrangement are one of the most ancient subjects which were differently handled by Hegel and Marx. In their early appearance they came to refer to insane people and later to mean estrangement from society and self (Wiener, 1968, pp. 34-36). Man creates his own alienation. Through the sense of "not-belonging"(Pappenheim, 1959," Social Structure and Alienation", para 54) or "homelessness" ("The Mood of Our Age: Awareness of Man's Alienation", para, 29), man becomes "hostile" towards world and society as well ("Social Structure and Alienation", Para,36). Humans start to feel themselves isolated, estranged, alone, dehumanized, losing their dignity as well as become aware of their fate as a result of many reasons including racism, and colonialism. Jean Paul Sartre (1970) elucidates alienation besides his attempt to confirm a solution to its dilemma. He argues:

we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone, without excuse ....man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does.... In the present one is forsaken. ( pp. 34-35)

In the part of "Introduction to the Pains of Opium," de Quincey (2009) brings to his reader a girl as an example of eradicated or alienated element of serfdom picture devoid of humanity. He affirms how the girl is divested of all the original traditions including her original folk clothes and to consider her as a piece of furniture or something of the personal belongings which could be bought or sold. He shows these racial alienating actions through the following words:

The servant who opened the door to him was a young girl, born and bred amongst the mountains, who had never seen an Asiatic dress of any sort; his turban therefore confounded her not a little; and as it turned out that his attainments in English were exactly of the same extent as hers in the Malay, there seemed to be an impassable gulf fixed between all communication of ideas, if either party had happened to possess any. In this dilemma, the girl, recollecting the reputed learning of her master (and doubtless giving me credit for a knowledge of all the languages of the earth besides perhaps a few of the lunar ones), came and gave me to understand that there was a sort of demon below, whom she clearly imagined that my art could exorcise from the house. (De Quincey, 2009, p. 107)

This induces to find yourself in absurd conditions as outcome of existence in an unfamiliar, hostile world, a world of scattered beliefs which results in a nightmarish and meaningless life. Albert Camus (1975) in *The Myth of Sisyphus* states that: A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (p. 13)

Estrangement usually passes three stages of development which are:

The first stage is ... self-identical, is viewed in the second stage as “self-estranged” or “externalized”, its identity being comprised by the totality of relations into which it enters. The third stage abrogates this estrangement and restores identity, in a larger, mediated, and universal sense. (Payne and Barbera, 2010, p. 241)

Again, De Quincey (2009) in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Related Writings* adds another racial feature which assures or confirms the estrangement and non-belonging of The Malay and the girl with their surroundings. The writer is making fun of their skins’ colors and ridiculing their work to be servants and submissive only. He describes the humble resident of the two Asians (Malay and the girl). To organize people according to the color of their skins is regarded as the top of inhumanity. He goes on to say:

In a cottage kitchen, but panelled on the wall with dark wood that from age and rubbing resembled oak, and looking more like a rustic hall of entrance than a kitchen, stood the Malay — his turban and loose trousers of dingy white relieved upon the dark panelling. He had placed himself nearer to the girl than she seemed to relish, though her native spirit of mountain intrepidity contended with the feeling of simple awe which her countenance expressed as she gazed upon the tiger-cat before her. And a more striking picture there could not be imagined than the beautiful English face of the girl, and its exquisite fairness, together with her erect and independent attitude, contrasted with the sallow and bilious skin of the Malay, enameled or veneered with mahogany by marine air, his small, fierce, restless eyes, thin lips, slavish gestures and adorations. Half-hidden by the ferocious-looking Malay was a little child from a neighbouring cottage who had crept in after him, and was now in the act of reverting its head and gazing upwards at the turban and the fiery eyes beneath it, whilst with one hand he caught at the dress of the young woman for protection. (p. 107)

Friz Pappenheim (1959) sheds light on the crises of failing to distinguish one’s identity as “This loss of identity leads to a state of anonymity,... When this identity fails to appear, the estrangement between individuals and their representatives is not fundamental but only temporary” (Ch.1, "The Mood of Our

Age: Awareness of Man’s Alienation”, para. 35). Then Marx, Hegel and Kierkegaard carry various contradictory tendencies of depicting alienation either as a “Spirit estranged from itself,” or as a “lunatic postulate” and even as “my real human existence [is] my philosophical existence.”(Ch.4,"Social Structure and Alienation", para. 35).

De Quincey (2009) in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Related Writings* intends to use the discrimination to include the value of opium to the source of its production as it is stated in these lines from the part of “The Pleasures of Opium:”

Thus it has been repeatedly affirmed by the learned that opium is a dusky brown in colour; and this, take notice, I grant. Secondly, that it is rather dear, which also I grant, for in my time East Indian opium has been three guineas a pound, and Turkey eight. And thirdly, that if you eat a good deal of it, most probably you must — do what is particularly disagreeable to any man of regular habits, viz., die. (p. 90)

Thomas De Quincy's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (2009) sheds light on the Malay's incident who knocked his door one night. It begins with so many moments of rapture and ecstasy that opium gives feelings of immortality or god-like to its addicts. Such irresponsible moments dominated unbridled behavior of the addicted person. De Quincey tries to use opium as an excuse to escape his irrelevant and inhuman conduct with the Malay. These indescribable moments of pleasure take him to far worlds and to endless dreams. These dreams are mingled with enjoyment and pains. De Quincey compares the end of spring with the end of youth because both stand for perfection and beauty but during this biological transformation they lose their power. His brain is powerful and healthy just because of the drug or opium he has just taken. He mentions works of Immanuel Kant the German philosopher and his feelings of pleasure which lead him to confront Oxford and Cambridge men. Such negative opinions toward the Malay while dealing with racial point of view fits with Kant’s words “For Kant, intoxication is both narcotic and stimulus to the imagination, which is for him at once the most profound and most troubling aspect of Reason (p. 40)”.

According to Kant, all experienced objects are either a cause or an effect because human beings usually know before experiencing things due to the mind method of causal thinking but sometimes the mind is disable of thinking in applying objects that are outside the experience (as qtd from Burnham, *Immanuel Kant: Aesthetics*, Ch. 3, para. 1). This opium transmits the feelings of superiority and self-confidence besides lifting him highly into the Oriental realms of perfection and fulfilling the colorful dreams, living the mixed feelings of pleasure experiences and enjoyment with pain and sorrow. In fact, any man should suffer from pain as a payment of his enjoyment and sometimes these pains are actually the real pleasure itself. De Quincey (2009) in the part of “Pains of Opium” declares his opinions about the Asians represented by the Malay's characteristics:

The Malay has been a fearful enemy for months. I have been

every night, through his means, transported into Asiatic scenes. I know not whether others share in my feelings on this point; but I have often thought that if I were compelled to forego England, and to live in China, and among Chinese manners and modes of life and scenery, I should go mad. The causes of my horror lie deep, and some of them must be common to others. Southern Asia in general is the seat of awful images and associations. As the cradle of the human race, it would alone have a dim and reverential feeling connected with it. (p. 124)

### III. THE WHITE MASTER : DE QUINCEY AND THE COLOURED OTHERS: THE MALAY AND THE WOMAN

In his well-known book *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) depicts the character of the Malaysian visitor to De Quincey's English home as an excellent example of the Orientalist Othering. Said also categorizes humans according to their skin colour which is a most hateful feature and shameful way in differentiating humans from their skins' smells, colours, etc. This racial narrow look into others is epitomized in the following words: "the scent of her skin, which was dripping with sandalwood"(p.187). The Other is not only demonized and alienated but he is constantly held in contrast to the Western feminine beauty of the servant girl:

A more striking picture there could not be imagined, than the beautiful English face of the girl, and its exquisite fairness, together with her erect and independent attitude, contrasted with the sallow and bilious skin of the Malay, enameled or veneered with mahogany, by marine air, his small, fierce, restless eyes, thin lips, slavish gestures and adorations. (Greenblatt, Volume 2, 2006, p.241)

This is not so a racist overtone of the prose but creating the feminine grace of the white European girl and the mute primitiveness of the Malaysian sailor. Also here, as in many other passages in Victorian literature, the concept of the Far Eastern Other is twinned with criminality and moral turpitude. The Malaysian's moral character is not only presented through his dress and state of personal hygiene but through his ability to eat vast quantities of opium "enough to kill three dragoons and their horses"(De Quincey, 2009, p. 27), a fact that allows the narrator to reduce his guilt through the drug use.

De Quincey is celebrating England's triumph and he as a patriotic man declares the superiority of his country above all the other nations. This military victory is incomplete because there are women victims. In order to participate in that triumph there should be scarified by "the young girl". He uses gothic elements to formulate his experiences. *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* are considered as a Gothic autobiography of self-representation. De Quincey manipulates Gothic narrative as a useful way to represent the struggles of the self as well as the pains and triumphs of the English nation. Gothic combines de Quincey's nation fate to his addiction of opium. Opium become a relief and torture at the same time for him. De Quincey is afraid of the catastrophic past which holds misfortune and suffering of infants tragedies and dismissing the aboriginal people as well the future just has despair and the present brings dismay. De Quincey's interest and significant kinship to the Gothic is found in the formal structure of inside

and outside, but for the promise of a crazy narrative involving unjust and inexorable persecution.

De Quincey justifies his opium addiction and elucidates his sleeping and waking visions. Geographically he is tracing his locations from home and family, to Manchester Grammar School, to Wales, to London, to Oxford, and, ultimately, to the drug that constitutes its own peculiar landscape, opium. The organization of *Confessions* is medicalized to join the geographical location with stomach illness that leads to the need of opium and then to addiction and dreams.

The mixing of opera and Greek tragedy is explicitly established in the *Confessions* during the interlude with the Malay traveler. The Opium-eater is called by one of his servants to converse with a travelling Malay who has introduced himself at the Opium-eater's cottage. When the Opium-eater comes upon the scene, the confrontation between the Malay, who is reduced to an example of "Asiatic dress", and the young working class woman, is compared to a specific moment of operatic performance: "the group which presented itself, arranged as it was by accident, though not very elaborate, took hold of my fancy and my eye in a way that none of the statuesque attitudes exhibited in the ballets at the Opera House, though so ostentatiously complex, had ever done".(De Quincey, 2009, p.107).

Therefore, "Statuesque attitudes" is the precise phrase De Quincey uses to describe the Greek tragedy ruptures as one of the temporal continuum which delineates the main figures of the Athenian audience in the form of platitudinous one being, and here it is being applied to the purpose of operatic performance. In the opera, the audience is a witness to the petrification of a historical moment, and the "thingness" of that moment is disclosed in a fashion that bonds, purifies, and orients the viewers. Unlikely the scene in the Opium-eater's cottage unfolds differently in that the Opium-eater decides to address the Malay "in some lines from the Iliad; considering that, of such languages as I possessed, Greek in point of longitude, came geographically nearest to an Oriental one"(David Hopkin and et.al.,2015, p. 152). The invocation of the Iliad and the Opera House at this point can't help but it sends the reader back to the scene of Andromache weeping over the tomb of Hector. The narration of the Malay confronts allowing a completely different fantasy of discovering supremacy of violent assertion which combine pleasures of opera and opium.

Again, when De Quincey (2009) met the Malay, this autobiographer is seen as triumphant not victim. He finds his servant, Barbara Lewthwaite, and a neighborhood child confronting a Malay. The present is a potential victimization of a woman because of the contrast between Barbara Lewthwaite's "exquisite fairness"(p. 58) and the Malay's "mahogany"(p.58) skin and "fierce, restless eyes"(p. 58) seems very incitement, and the presence of an English child adds more tension to this scene. On other side, De Quincey has this potentiality firmly in hand. His noticeable presentation of the confrontation asserts its forwardness and reassures his distance control over events. The autobiographer's narration deviates to suddenly come to moments of mixing interest and fear through making the oceanic distances between England and the Orient have suddenly collapsed. De Quincey sees existence of the Malay upon the national boundaries as a rape. De Quincey calms the horrible possibility of victimization through his turning to

language. He pretends to be fluent in eastern tongues and he tries to be over both Malay and servant:

I addressed him in some lines from the Iliad. . . He worshipped me in the most devout manner, and replied in what I suppose was Malay. In this way I saved my reputation with my neighbors: for the Malay had no means of betraying the secret. (Cannon Schmitt, 2002, p. 76.)

These unbearable human pains provide the opportunity to indicate the Opium Eater domination over the Malay, who is his servant, and his neighbor too. This inability of explaining oneself is similar to the overcoming of the Babylon's on their dilemma of misunderstanding each other language. Similarly, the English and the Malay, and the Homeric Greek are put into an occasion for the triumph of humanity away from the selfishness but such invitation is full of malice and hatred toward the Malay. He speaks about his invitation of Malay to opium and how he gives this poison to that man "in a golden cup". Really death is admitted on golden tray. The image of "golden cup" stands for the Orient and such images are seen in Arabian Nights which shows extravagant Arabs life and imaginative Nights of East. The Malay represents East and its venture. The east mingles both risk, adventures and pleasures. De Quincey sees himself superior to that man. He is surprised by his knocking on the door. He finds the Malay as inferior, stranger, low ranked person, and has nothing to do in England. But he just knows that the Malay is a seaman and maybe is on voyage. Thomas Burke, the author of *East End Opium Tales*, states that "As the drug is of Oriental earth, so it works upon brain and eye in Oriental imagery" (Marty Roth, 2002, p.88).

The Opium-eater is attempting to elucidate the opium experience to a mere philosophical subject more important than the subject of narration in the Malay passage incident itself. The shift from the passivity of the opera and opium pleasures is taken away to a far active intervention of giving enough opium to the Malay with an intention of killing or enslaving him. By means of the Malay killing, the Opium-eater will be able to achieve his narrow ethnocentric supremacy. In this matter O'Quinn (2004) in his article entitled "Ravishment Twice Weekly: De Quincey's Opera Pleasures" states that: "Significantly, this shift involves a cancellation of the sexual violence of the operatic fantasies in favour of murderous acts whose force are tied to the temporal unfolding of narrative itself (Para.30)".

The implementation of opera is to give pleasure to the audience who are sharing the desires of the erotic, eccentric and national triumph in the fleeting moment of performance. The Malay scene, through its on-going narrative performance, constructs a community of imperial subjects from the audience of the *Confessions* itself. Narrative insists on the compulsory repetition of the supremacist fantasies of the nation and empire, for it not only realizes the desire for repetition that comes with performance, but also realizes a desire that remained unfulfilled in performance. This recent type of "supremacist fantasy" substitutes the sexual crime with genocide. O'Quinn argues:

"This replacement secures the Opium-eater's sexual and imperial identity in a fashion that requires not the repetition the mutual pleasures of opera and opium, but

rather demands the repetition of the narration of the Malay's enigmatic demise from) the text". (Nov. 11, 2004, Para.30)

The Opium-eater is haunted by the vividly depicted image of the Malay and therefore, it was necessary for De Quincey to repeat writing the genocidal narrative events that happened in the specified scene of the Malay with an ever precedent gigantic ways. So, The relations of Britain and far East introduced with an abhorrent gloomy method in order to document those bleak dreams in gothic way by the return of rituals of victimization. These dreams portray De Quincey as the victim and the Orient as a persecutor. (O'Quinn, 2004, Paras.26-28).

The triumphant self is reconstituted as the persecuted self. The Malay is not just an Oriental naïve but also stands for repeated and dizzying Orientalist nightmares. "This Malay . . . fastened afterwards upon my dreams, and brought other Malays with him worse than himself, that 'ran a-muck' at me, and led me into a world of troubles". (De Quincey, 1995, p.51).

De Quincey considers himself victim and not persecutor. He disavows his power and his responsibility of addiction by means of his dream. He describes this Malay who was lost in England as a threatening and terrifying vision in addition to printing in mind the idea of this Malay image as someone who "brought other Malays with him worse than himself, that 'ran a-muck' at me, and led me into a world of troubles". The meaning of "ran a-muck," (Thomas De Quincey, 1995, p. 78) is "to run viciously, mad, frenzied for blood. It is similar to " a raging Indian he runs a muck and stabbing every man he meets"(John Dryden, 1969, p. 454). This become for British as a concept of Orientalist cliché.

The imperialists' powers always show them as superior to others and even do not look at other people from other nations as inferior. The westerners call those people as the Others. Even as it is clear in this extract, there is race, sex, religious, political and military distinction between the powerful colonialist and the Others colonized people. The colonialists kill people in East with cold blood. The women, even in West are nothing just housewives no more. The West people look at Easterners as dirty, without any benefit.

## CONCLUSION

It seems that man is a victim of unjust, unequalled barbaric oppression upon the hands of other men who saw him/her weaker than them. The Other should not be scared or terrified as he/she still a human being. Othering have to seize their arrogance in the right of men and women whatever their colours, beliefs, attitudes, opinions, genders are. Sometimes, justifications are prepared in advance to cover their vile non-humanistic deeds.

De Quincey may have succeeded in his choice of two words which are "Confessions" and "Opium" to hide his action and misestimated humiliating look to the Asians as inferior from the Europeans during that time. The poet maybe is trying to confess that guilt or wrong doing set toward another man. Also, being under the influence of opium could be an excuse or plea of not considering him as a racist. Although, his use of such terms, but the poet is morally responsible as any other person to dignify

the holiness of humans entity.

Finally, this study concludes that whatever the man is, he/she is careful in treating people from other countries, religions, beliefs, and genders, even if they are different in their attitude or faith. Humans are created free and equal and should continue enjoying these rights till the end.

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