



Self-Realisation at the Risk of Tranquillity in a Carceral Social Environment: A Critique of ARABY by James Joyce

EA Gamini Fonseka, BA, MA, PhD, FRSA

Professor Emeritus of English, Department of English & Linguistics, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka.

Abstract

James Joyce's collection of short stories under the title Dubliners is a landmark contribution to Irish literature that reveals the frustration of the Irish people of his time. While many of the short stories there deal with men and women, old and young, "Araby" specifically concentrates on a juvenile. The carceral social atmosphere prevailing in the environment limits his space to the nearest possibilities of pleasure and drives him in a direction determined by his libidinal energy. Unfortunately, a young woman much older than him becomes the centre of his interest and later the target of his love. Urged by his desire for the woman's company, he makes a trip to an oriental bazaar amidst so much chaos to purchase a token of love for his dream sweetheart. His escapade from the beginning to the end of his trip is full of discouraging incidents, but he finds his way to the stalls. Ultimately, he gets alarmed and frightened before a police interrogation that goes on at a stall. The dormant carcerality engineered by a panopticon in the vicinity of his house shows its true nature at the bazaar. That puts an end to the project he has embarked on in his mission to win the young woman's love. Covering the entire scenario, the paper treats the story as a report on juvenile delinquency in a carceral environment.

Keywords: Adolescence, Carcerality, Suppression, Panopticon, Frustration, Voyeurism, Romance, Disillusionment, Juvenile Delinquency, Love

INTRODUCTION

This paper studies James Joyce's short story *Araby* from the perspective of juvenile psychology. A teenage boy living under suppression within a carceral social environment finds a way out of his frustration through a good-looking young woman much older than him, the sister of a peer. He makes a rigorous trip to an exotic oriental bazaar to buy her a token of love and gets put off by a threatening police interrogation a shopkeeper undergoes. The paper analyses Joyce's treatment of this scenario under the ten subtopics: 1) Life in a Carceral Environment; 2) Mangan's Sister the Epiphanous; 3) Obsession with Love; 4) A Romantic Breakthrough; 5) Between Unease and Impatience; 6) Heroic Journey to the Bazaar; 7) Alarm Instead of Entertainment; 8) Disillusionment with Own Limitations; 9) Joyce's Application of Symbolism; and 10) Joyce's Attainments in the Story. Overall, it attempts to demonstrate how the evils of carceral social settings affect the psychological behaviour of the juveniles in the environment by limiting their space and suffocating their freedom to move about.

Life in a Carceral Environment

In James Joyce's short story *ARABY*, the hero's house located in North Richmond Street plays a crucial role. The most salient features of this street foregrounded in the first paragraph are silence, darkness, blindness, and indifference enforced through suppression. The "uninhabited house of

two stories" standing "at the blind end, detached from its neighbours, in a square ground" seems to inculcate fear in all the other houses in the surroundings. This seems to be a house occupied by spies checking on the political feelings prevalent in the neighbourhood. With curtains drawn down, these houses that are personified through their quality of being "conscious of the decent lives within them" and their action of gazing "at one another with brown imperturbable faces" remain blind to anything that happens in the street. Blindness projected through the houses in this way applies to the common people and the narrator himself. Joyce semiotically portrays through the impact the dominant existence of the two-storied house in the middle has on the timid behaviour of the single-floor houses around it, how Foucault's carceral continuum functions under the panoptical condition of governmentality (Felluga, 2014) operates to suit the contemporary political situation.

"The carceral system combines in a single figure, discourses and architectures, coercive regulations and scientific propositions, real social effects and invincible utopias, programmes for correcting delinquents and mechanisms that reinforce delinquency... If the prison institution has survived for so long, with such immobility, if the principle of penal detention has never seriously been questioned, it is no doubt because this carceral system was deeply rooted and carried out certain very precise functions" (Foucault, 1977: 271).

With suggestions of silence, indifference, blindness, and suppression an image of suspicion towers over the environment. Joyce uses this suspicious behaviour of the houses in the street to depict the unfavourable social and political situation developed in Ireland as a whole. The ghostly atmosphere that constantly prevails in the environment changes for a moment and re-materialises after the noise and movement of the boys coming from the Christian Brothers School have subsided.

The second paragraph is devoted to a scene of decay that highlights the belongings of the former tenant of the house where the hero lives with his uncle and aunt. The "Air, musty from having been so long enclosed," "the useless papers," "a few paper-covered books, the pages of which were curled and damp," "the wild garden" with "a central apple tree and a few straggling bushes," and "the late tenant's rusty bicycle-pump" all suggest decay followed by his death. The stale decomposed atmosphere projected through these decaying personal effects of a dead Christian priest suggests the bleak mental disposition of the people living in the social and political situation depicted in the former paragraph. The logic behind this can be realised under Auchter's (2017) argument that "decay is the physical and material manifestation of the existential anxiety of mortality" which "itself is a form of anxiety over our very ontologies, over who we are and how we are materially constituted as bodies". Joyce sounds ironic and sarcastic in his comment on the priest's charity demonstrated through "his will" in which "he had left all his money to institutions and the furniture of his house to his sister."

The wintry weather suggested in the third paragraph contributes further to the gloomy mood portrayed in the previous paragraphs. The short days, the dusky street, the sombre houses, the "ever-changing violet" sky, the "feeble lanterns", "the dark muddy lanes behind the houses," and "the back doors of the dark dripping odorous stables," as a whole challenge the cheerfulness of the children at play. Joyce states this in a very powerful sentence, suggesting the struggle the children have in surviving the mental, physical, social, and cultural challenges posed by this situation, "The cold air stung us, and we played till our bodies glowed." The description supports the premise that "[nature] is often used as a parable in metaphors" (Widiana & Yustisiana, 2016). Joyce's hero shows fear of his uncle by hiding with his friends in the shadow, drawing attention to another aspect of this environment, the suppressive nature of the personal relationships between adults and children. Thus, the short story develops in a gloomy atmosphere where the hero who is still a teenager does not enjoy so much independence in defining and organising his life. The semiotic structure rising through the combination of all the social, political, cultural, and psychological signifiers developed from the landscape, the atmosphere, and the suppressed emotional condition of the people prepares the ground for a gloomy theme to materialise through the story.

Mangan's Sister the Epiphanous

Mangan's sister who plays a major role in the hero's character development in the story acquires a special value for her character and personality through the visual effects caused by the light reflected solely upon her while everything is in the dark:

"We watched her from our shadow peer up and down the street... She was waiting for us, her figure defined by the light of the half-opened door... Her dress swung as she moved her body and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side" (Joyce, 1914)

In this dark atmosphere, Mangan's sister appearing in the middle of a beam of light projects an epiphany in the hero's mind, in which he gets wrapped up and dwells most of his time. "Epiphany" derives from the Greek verb *phaine* meaning "to reveal" or "to bring to light" denotes a moment of great revelation. According to the religious atmosphere of the setting, it can be surmised that the narrator's epiphany may be inspired by a serene image of the Virgin Mary or some female deity in a professional church artwork ingrained in his memory (Longhurst, 2019).

Under the influence of the amorous feelings he harbours towards this young woman, the teenage hero leads a secret life, fancying the way he would adore her if a romantic relationship developed between the two. His arduous morning rituals aimed at having a glance at her and exchanging a casual word with her, indicate the libidinal pressures mounted upon him by his physical and mental growth as an adolescent.

Joyce illustrates this development through the boy's confessions:

"And yet her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood... Her image accompanied me even in places the most hostile to romance... But my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires" (Joyce, 1914).

These confessions show that the boy surrenders himself fully to the love of Mangan's sister who seems to be somewhat older than him as his equal Mangan has to obey her commands. The difficulty he finds in communicating his love to her is apparently due to the age gap between him and her. By deliberate avoidance of her name, the gap between the two is made clear as it implies that she is no equal to him.

"I did not know whether I would ever speak to her or not or, if I spoke to her, how I could tell her of my caused adoration" (Joyce, 1914).

He is conscious enough that a younger male or a teenager proposing love to an older female, or a grown-up young woman is not common. So, the boy always remains in a dilemma.

"Having sexual desire during adolescence is a natural part of human development that every human being has to go through. Teenagers go through hormonal changes; they experience newly found attraction towards the opposite sex. They develop a curiosity about sex and romantic relationships. It is essential to know that these feelings are completely normal and are experienced by every teenager worldwide" (Psychologs.com).

Accordingly, the narrator of the story is a healthy adolescent, and it is normal for him to be affected by the presence of a grown-up young woman in the neighbourhood.

Obsession with Love

Obsessed with the love of Mangan's sister, he starts enjoying loneliness, stillness, and darkness which could allow him to dwell on his blooming fancies. The dark rainy evening he spends all by himself in the back drawing-room where the former tenant died suggests that he treasures the romantic feelings he develops as a result of his infatuation with Mangan's sister. Joyce depicts vividly the faint sound of the rain produced by "an incessant needle of water playing in the sodden beds" and the dim light emanating from a distant lamp or a lighted window as the only external accompaniments to the boy's feelings bulging inside him.

"I was thankful that I could see so little. All my senses seemed to desire to veil themselves and, feeling that I was about to slip from them, I pressed the palms of my hands together until they trembled, murmuring, 'O love! O love!' many times" (Joyce, 1914).

The portrait of the teenage boy behaving in this type of atmosphere wrapped up in the love of a grown-up young woman is classic. A psychological explanation of his condition as an adolescent can appear as follows:

Adolescence is the period during which an individual's thought perception as well as response gets coloured sexually. Adolescence is the age to explore and understand sexuality. Sexual curiosity in adolescence leads to exposure to pornography, indulgence in sexual activities, and increased vulnerability to sexual abuse (Kar et al, 2015).

Joyce analyses the psychological condition of the boy through his mental and physical response to the beauty of the young woman he loves and his attraction to darkness where he can rejoice in the visualisation of her figure.

A Romantic Breakthrough

The first conversation the hero has with his dream sweetheart Mangan's sister is not related to love or romance. In his infatuation with her beauty, he takes very seriously her casual suggestion about Araby, "a splendid bazaar ... she would love to go." The irony in the Araby affair is that she cannot go there because "there would be a retreat that week in her convent." She recommends a visit to Araby in her

claim, "It's well for you." The boy just manages to express his interest in her in a plain innocent-sounding promise, "If I go ... I will bring you something." His offer to bring a gift to her can be interpreted as a strategy one applies "to signal one's commitment to the relationship during a courtship period" (Komiya et al, 2019). Even this is a great achievement for him as it is good enough to start a long relationship with the young woman revealing his soft corner for her.

But, if Mangan's sister still takes him for a younger brother who is just faithful to her, it will not satisfy the boy. He wants a seriously romantic man-woman relationship with her. This is suggested very clearly through the admiring eyes of the boy who is here observant about "her wrist" being turned round and round with a "silver bracelet." He enjoys being alone with her at the railings while she holds "one of the spikes, bowing her head towards" him. He feeds his eyes on "the white curve of her neck," "her hair that rested there," and "her hand upon the railing" that shone in the light from the lamp in the opposite direction. "It fell over one side of her dress and caught the white border of a petticoat, just visible as she stood at ease." His careful observation of the young woman's appearance has a clear psychological basis:

"Physical appearance defined as the outward aspects of the opposite sex, encompassing external features, hairstyle, clothing, and implied financial status, would modify the degree of attraction between members of the opposite sex; specifically, the higher the degree of attractiveness, the higher the level of appeal between the two sexes" (Perry, 1998).

The boy's excitement depicted through his vigil on the young woman's figure and body movements is natural to a teenager just trying to realise the age-related physical and mental changes he undergoes.

Between Unease and Impatience

The psychological contraction the hero undergoes is suggested through the "innumerable follies" he commits amidst his "waking and sleeping thoughts" about Mangan's sister. The tediousness he feels while passing the "intervening days," the negligence he betrays while carrying out the school work, the interference of "her image" in his day and night readings, the magical influence of the syllables of the word "Araby" that continues to cast over him "an Eastern enchantment" and his tendency to consider "the serious work of life" "monotonous child play" suggest his impatience to go to the bazaar not to enjoy the trip but to bring a token of love to cheer up his dream sweetheart.

"This situation can be interpreted in terms of borderline personality disorder that co-occurs with obsessive love disorder which impacts how one thinks and feels about oneself and others and causes problems functioning in everyday life. It includes self-image issues, difficulty managing emotions and behaviours, and unstable relationships" (Integrative Life Centre, 2014).

His impatience turns into unease when the other people interact with him unfavourably, ignoring the operations in his mind. His aunt's surprise and suspicion of his planned visit to the bazaar as "a freemason affair;" his "master's" stern remarks about his schoolwork consequent of "idleness", and his uncle's apathy about his wish to go to the bazaar cause him great frustration. He feels uneasy at his uncle's presence in the front parlour as that restricts his voyeur fun.

"As he was in the hall I could not go into the front parlour and lie at the window. I felt the house in bad humour and walked slowly towards the school. The air was pitilessly raw and already my heart misgave me" (Joyce, 1914)

Unable to find a sympathetic person to declare the workings in his mind he feels psychologically affected. He gets overwhelmed by a mixed effect of impatience and unease towards evening. His frustration goes up in degrees when he is destined to wait for his uncle.

Joyce depicts his mental disposition at this time through the irritation he suffers from the clock; his liking for being isolated in the "high, cold, empty, gloomy rooms" upstairs; the separation he feels from his friends; through the visualisation of Mangan's sister in the position he saw her last; through his cold indifference to the garrulous Mrs. Mercer who takes more than an hour of his aunt's time; through his "walk up and down the room clenching" his fist; and through his minute attention to his uncle's movements in his room. Helpless in his uncle's dominant presence, he develops a sense of insecurity:

One's confidence fluctuates throughout the day, depending on what one is doing, where one is, and who one is around. If one happens to be around someone who makes one uncomfortable (either because they lack confidence themselves and are judging one, or because one simply *perceives* them to be judging one), there's a good chance that one's confidence will wane. (Wapnick, 2024)

His frustration is added by the delay of his uncle, who is the lawmaker and money giver in the house, and his aunt's suggestion that he may put off the "bazaar" for that night. Even when his uncle comes home, he does not pay attention to the boy's bazaar trip out of forgetfulness. When the subject of the trip is staged, he cracks a joke out of it with allusions from "the old saying; All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" and "the piece" of poetry "The Arab's Farewell to his Steed" amidst his aunt's protests. From all these psychological pangs he becomes badly affected before the journey. When he leaves home it is past nine in the night.

Heroic Journey to the Bazaar

His frustration, with which he leaves home, continues during the journey to the bazaar. A great lack of pertinence is suggested in his confession, "The sight of the streets thronged with buyers and glaring with gas recalled to me the

purpose of my journey." Late at night, he is destined to spend his time "seated in a third-class carriage of a deserted train"; to suffer "an intolerable delay" of the train; and to view from it while moving "ruinous houses ... over the twinkling". Loneliness aggravates his frustration, "I remained alone in the bare carriage." All his movements on arrival at the bazaar suggest his aimlessness. The time is "ten minutes to ten." He must hurry. He is afraid the "bazaar would be closed." Unable to find a "six penny entrance" he spends "a shilling" to seek admittance. But there is no room for fun. "Nearly all the stalls were closed, and the greater part of the hall was in darkness" dominated by "a silence like that which pervades a church after a service." Joyce captures the mood of a marketplace at the closing time through the "two men ... counting money on a salver ..." and the hero's listening "to the fall of the coins." His impertinence surfaces again in his difficulty to remember why he has come to the bazaar after all. Joyce's treatment of his hero's ambiguous aimless mood leaves one to assess the scenario in terms of de Beauvoir's (1962) existentialist ethics which is neither essentialist (that concerns how one should treat others) nor nihilist (that does not concern how one should treat others) but boils down to the question of how and why one should still take others into concern in one's endeavours if there are no universal, ethical principles and one is free to determine one's own life's path (Gusman, 2023). Accordingly, Joyce highlights here the immaturity of his hero with his inability to decide for himself.

Alarm Instead of Entertainment

After so much struggle and waiting, Joyce's hero manages to find a place where he can buy a token of love for Mangan's sister. He cannot afford to buy anything there because of his poverty. However, while examining "the porcelain vases and flowered tea sets" (most probably from China) he happens to hear a conversation in the stall. Two gentlemen speak with English accents to a young lady. The following exchanges between them represent the most crucial part of the conversation.

'O, I never said such a thing!'

'O, but you did!'

'O, but I didn't!'

'Didn't she say that?'

'Yes. I heard her.'

'O, there's a... fib!' (Joyce, 1914)

It is an accusation of the young lady of saying something dangerous. The young lady is being pinned down by the two gentlemen for a charge. But she persistently denies having said anything of the sort the two gentlemen have already claimed. While talking they laugh. Laughter camouflages the horror of the charge they are making against the young lady, yet the boy gets overwhelmed by fear and alarm. Joyce suggests through this situation the political unrest that

prevails over the society of the time which is entangled in a carceral state situation whose structural behaviour depicted at the onset is now in function:

As Ruby Tapia (2018) argues, the reach of carcerality extends far beyond formal incarceration itself, which includes but is not limited to state and federal prisons, local jails, immigrant and juvenile detention centres, military prisons, and carceral programs of probation and parole. The concept of carcerality captures the many ways in which the carceral state shapes and organizes society and culture through policies and logic of control, surveillance, criminalization, and un-freedom. Tapia calls these “punitive orientations” that revolve around the “promise and threat of criminalization” and the “possibility/solution of incarceration” (French et al, 2018).

The young lady offers to help the boy in her capacity as the stall-keeper. “The tone of her voice was not encouraging; she seemed to have spoken to me out of a sense of duty.” This suggests the young lady’s effort to cover up the predicament she is in at this moment. However, she does not seem to have a release from the two gentlemen at all. They may be two English police officers interrogating her on a tip about her involvement with an anti-government revolutionary movement or most probably with the Irish Revolutionary Army (IRA) that Joyce has illustrated in several of his other works. Joyce’s engagement in exposing the Irish republican’s frustration is acknowledged in many places.

“Marginalized Irish republicans, disillusioned by the new Ireland, found solace and inspiration in Joyce’s work. “He was their writer,” according to James T. Farrell, writing after a visit to Dublin in 1938. “They saw in Joyce a man of lower-middle-class origins like themselves, whose feelings and responses to all sorts of things were like theirs.” He was a man of vision, but their political revolution had been no less an act of daring creativity” (Coleman,2023).

The “great jars that stood like eastern guards at either side of the dark entrance to the stall” and the boy’s “humble” look at them signify his loss of confidence and his diminution as a result of this scary encounter with the English-speaking interrogators. ‘No, thank you,’ he says implying the futility of his struggle to visit the place.

“They began to talk of the same subject. Once or twice the young lady glanced at me over her shoulder. ... I lingered before her stall, though I knew my stay was useless, to make my interest in her wares seem the more real” (Joyce, 1914).

Real anticlimax figures in the timid and moody behaviour of the boy while moving in the darkness reflecting his helplessness. He is alarmed by the interrogation which is still going on.

Disillusionment with Own Limitations

Soon the boy gives up his hope of cheering up Mangan’s sister with a token of love and decides to leave the bazaar, obeying the circumstances that transpire in the surroundings. The boy’s petrified reaction to the embarrassment of the young lady is suggestive of his silent departure from the bazaar. Without buying any token of love as he has promised to Mangan’s sister due to his poor financial situation he leaves the place following the warning about switching off the lights. “The upper part of the hall was now completely dark.” The final paragraph is psychoanalytical about the boy’s disillusionment with himself. “Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity, and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.” Stranded in utter darkness he realises his vanity and starts analysing the behaviour of his mind. He starts becoming self-critical. He realises that the cause of his anger and anguish is his vanity which makes him indulge himself in a hopeless journey like this aimed at pleasing a young woman who needs a man far more mature than he is. Yet the enlightenment he achieves through his disillusionment serves him in his self-realisation which is crucial for his growth as a teenager. His absurd behaviour can be attributed to the carceral atmosphere which limits the citizens’ space for recreation and drives them to cling to the nearest sources of pleasure, irrespective of their unattainability. As the boy has no space to flex his muscles, he does not have any activity to exert his energies on. Therefore, he is overrun by all that his libido can generate. Metaphorically, the visit to Araby is a turning point in the boy’s life as it helps him realise his limitations.

The journey of discoveries cannot be limited to travelling to different places at far and near distances. Referring to the famous question, “Who am I?”, this journey takes place for those individuals interested in deeper meanings, values and intentions in their life besides considering it just as a new experience. The first and the most significant place for discoveries is the interior part of the human mind. It is an internal journey for speaking to the spirit, touching the soul, and certainly knowing oneself. (Esfidvajani, 2011)

In conclusion, Joyce draws attention to a deep truth about life through the boy’s run after a mirage at the expense of his tranquillity.

Joyce’s Application of Symbolism

An aesthetic approach to Joyce’s poetics in the narration, reveals how he treats all entities at his disposal by turning them into rich materials in the formation of his imagery. Darkness is always of great symbolic value suggested through the brown-colour houses, the black doors of the stables, the blinds drawn down, the short wintry days, the ever-changing violet evening skies, and the shadow in which the boys hide themselves has a great impact on the portrait of the psychological condition of the hero, which is fundamentally

hued by “vanity.” The effect of darkness contrasts with the eye imagery formulated through the houses that, “conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces,” and through the hero’s desire for darkness “I was thankful that I could see so little” and through his sight suggested to have been directed inwards in the penultimate line “Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity, and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.”

The image of Mangan’s sister whose “figure is defined by the light from the half-opened door” during her appearance through a beam of light in this way suggests an epiphany to the boy. This is clear in the confessions he makes “I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes” and “Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand.” Through these confessions, Mangan’s sister appears, according to Zyngier (1988: 25), as the Virgin Mary who is unattainable. In fact, in pursuit of this grown-up young woman’s love with the belief that he can please her as her lover the teenage boy realises his vanity. So, the epiphany in the young woman’s appearance materialises well to the boy when he achieves enlightenment after a troublesome journey that ends in “anguish and anger.”

The journey to Araby itself is a symbol. Life is a journey in a universal context. Any type of pursuit is thus a journey. The boy makes a horrible train journey that subjects him to loneliness, frustration, lethargy, insecurity, and impertinence. To the boy the exotic bazaar Araby is suggestive of some Eastern enchantment. So this is a journey in search of enchantment. But the boy ends up in a tricky situation where a young lady is being interrogated by two English-speaking police officers. After all he has arrived in the bazaar to witness this alarming episode of the English espionage where the young lady strives on the denial of a statement she is charged to have made. This anticlimax fits very well into the aesthetic framework Joyce develops in projecting the theme of disillusionment.

Suppression exercised on the Irish populace by the English regime is symbolised through the “uninhabited house of two stories ... at the blind end detached from its neighbours in a square ground” and the “central apple tree” amidst “a few struggling bushes” while is directly depicted through the interrogation scenario in the bazaar stall. The houses gazing “at each other with imperturbable faces” also add to the theme of suppression. The gloomy social atmosphere coloured by suppression is the result of the political strife between the Irish and the English where the ordinary Irish people are always the victims.

CONCLUSION: JOYCE’S ATTAINMENTS IN THE STORY

Through a systematically developed semiotic structure where a network of symbols remains strongly knitted

together Joyce manages to develop several themes of social awareness. To enumerate a few, suppression exercised by the English regime on the Irish populace; juvenile love based on the infatuation with matured beauty; adult indifference to child needs; sacrifices for the sake of love; and enlightenment and self-awareness achieved through rigorous pursuit. All these themes are cleverly projected through a first-person participatory narrative with a time frame of about a week in a text produced in less than 2500 words. Joyce’s precision is remarkable. The simplicity of the language serves as a major requirement in the narration as the hero of the story, who is the narrator himself, is a simple young boy struggling to achieve some self-realisation through the hard way. The boy’s character stands unique through his submissive and unobtrusive quality suggested in his behaviour in the company of Mangan’s sister; in the interaction with his uncle and aunt; during the train journey; at the gate to the Araby bazaar; and at the stall where he finds a young lady being interrogated by two English policemen. The only reaction he makes after all these situations is to look inward “with anguish and anger” which makes no impact on the others but helps him dispel his vanity. Joyce depicts in simple terms the boy’s achievement of maturity after a series of psychological and physical struggles which all have a didactic element. In the context of the carceral situation he is destined to live as a juvenile, he provides the best model to follow, after a long battle within himself.

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