

# The good solder: an analysis of ignorance and growth



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In *The Good Soldier*, Ford Madox Ford makes it difficult to distinguish the differences between appearance and reality. By using Dowell's detached and inaccurate narrative and characterizations throughout the book, Ford forces the reader to construct his or her own assumptions about the true intentions of the characters who made this such a tragic story. However, this proves to be a difficult task due to Dowell's seemingly inherent incapability of understanding the reality of another's temperament, as well as how the actions of his acquaintances affect his own life. This is exhibited most clearly with Dowell's interpretation of his wife, Florence. Despite the fact that Dowell's oblivious subjectivity presents a different portrayal of his wife each time she is mentioned throughout the novel, the reader is eventually able to render a clear impression of her cold-hearted arrogance.

Florence as superficial and simple. He says that: " she was bright; and she danced... and my function in life was to keep that bright thing in existence" (8). Rather pathetically, Dowell admits that his life's only purpose was to appease Florence's deceitful illusions by providing her with whatever she desired in order to maintain their illustrious appearance. However, this superficiality also applies to how Dowell managed his own life. Dowell's financial security has allowed him to live a leisurely life in which he is not required to work. As a result, his life is repetitively spanned by a succession of teas, luncheons, and dinners, which only serve to provide him with the appearance of living a normal, modest upper-class lifestyle. For instance, his marriage to Florence acts as another fulfillment of societal expectations for a man in Dowell's position. He describes their meeting as rather trivial: " I just drifted in and wanted Florence. First I had drifted in on Florence at a

Browning tea, or something of the sort.... I don't know why I had gone to the tea" (8). The seemingly random and sporadic way in which Dowell met his wife demonstrates that he is no more driven by purpose than a leaf in the wind. His reaction to her death was equally inconsequential. After his initial shock, " she went completely out of existence, like yesterday's paper" (69) and any recollection of her being was " simply a matter of study, not remembrance" (69). This revelation demonstrates that his marriage to Florence was not based upon love, but utility – as a way to construct himself as a complete and conventional man. " She became for me, as it were, the subject of a bet—the trophy of an athlete's achievement... Of intrinsic value as a wife, I think she had none at all for me" (52). To Dowell, life is solely about appearances, making him just as simple-minded and superficial as his wife. Although Dowell views his wife as somewhat unsophisticated and uncultured, she proves to have a much higher interest in intellectual matters than her husband.

Dowell downplays Florence's desire " to leave the world a little more elevated than she found it" (8) as arrogance and a need to increase her image in the eyes of others. While this may be the case, it shows that Florence places a value on being enlightened in culture and history – which can be seen as she prepares for an excursion to M- by reading an assortment of history books. Even though Dowell compares Florence and Leonora as " a retriever... dashing after a greyhound" (23), implying that Florence will never be able to reach Leonora's level of cultural sophistication, his perception of why she feels the need to flex her intellectuality evades him. Dowell may perceive Florence's pursuit of knowledge as purely a

method to elevate herself in the eyes of others, for he naïvely perceives her extensive conversations with Edward as an attempt to educate him, when, in reality, her intentions are flirtatious in nature. His inability to interpret this slightly more profound side of Florence demonstrates his ignorance and lack of interest in anything outside of his bubble of shallowness. Florence's affair with Edward is meant to serve a singular purpose of granting her a higher status in society. Florence's desire to become "a county lady in the home of her ancestors," (51) which is currently owned by the Ashburnhams is one that is fueled by a rapacity for aggrandizement. Although she would never be able to fully possess Bramshaw Manor, for Edward would never divorce Leonora, Florence could have arranged herself close enough to the manor so that she could still feel like she had attained the status of a "county lady" – an elevation of status that she sought above all else. However, Florence's wish to attain even this compromised version of her dream is thwarted by her own brilliant manipulation of Dowell. Dowell was so thoroughly convinced of Florence's inability to travel that he forbids her to cross the channel to go to Fordingbridge. While this is the only instance in which Dowell takes the initiative to hinder his wife's actions, it "fixed her beautifully" (51), for she was unable to contest his commands without risking the revelation of her deception. In his obliviousness, Dowell acted through the best of intentions in order to uphold his duties as a conventional husband in what appeared to be a conventional marriage. As a result, although inadvertently, he was able to take away "the only main idea of her heart" (51), that being any dreams of becoming Edwards mistress in Bramshaw manor.

Florence's death acts as a catalyst that forces Dowell to perceive past the shallow appearance of his life and open his eyes to the reality of deceit and manipulation that he had suffered at the hands of his wife and closest friends. Dowell does not object to how Florence's infidelity effected their own marriage, because their marriage was not united by love. However, he draws the line in how her actions disrupted Edward and Leonora's relationship, even though it was already in an instable and fragile state. With Florence gone, Dowell is finally granted the ability to reflect upon her role within the Ashburnham's relationship and how that changed his perception of the two of them. He says: " the longer I think about them the more certain I become that Florence was a contaminating influence—she depressed and deteriorated poor Edward; she deteriorated, hopelessly, the miserable Leonora" (105). Prior to the deaths of Florence, Dowell's life reflected the paragon of conventional leisure that he dreamed of. However, this shallow perception of his life is shattered following Florence's death. He realizes the Ashburnham's are no longer the " model couple," and that he can no longer reflect upon the " glowing accounts of [Florence's] virtue and constancy" (52). Although there are many instances in which Dowell's ignorance to his wife's actions seems unimaginable, one must understand that he was living his ideal life, and anything that could potentially take that away from him was processed as nonsense. As a method of controlling the damage that has already been done, he begins to view Florence as the singular cause of all of the Ashburnham's problems, and thus, the destroyer of his blissful ignorance.

Following this revelation, Dowell begins to express a distaste for Florence. However, while his anger is hidden under the facade of her destruction of the

Ashburnham's "happy" marriage, the reality of Dowell's distaste for his wife is that she shattered his illusion of a perfect and stable life – the only thing that Dowell truly cares about. "Permanence? Stability? ...I can't believe that that long, tranquil life, which was just stepping a minuet, vanished in four crashing days at the end of nine years and six weeks" (3). Feelings of such immense emotion is something that is rather foreign to Dowell. His comparison of his life to a minuet denotes the structure, predictability, and fragility of his life before Florence's death. Emotions such as fiery passion and blinding anger did not have a place in ideal 20th Century English high society, and thus, Dowell is incapable of understanding them as they infiltrate his ignorant depiction of life. For example, he says: "if everything is so nebulous about a matter so elementary as the morals of sex, what is there to guide us in the more subtle morality of all other personal contacts, associations, and activities" (6). Dowell claims that he understands something as "elementary" as passion, yet cannot understand that some emotions are so powerful that they break free from the confines of accepted social standards. He is no longer able to believe in the stability of his own life and now that he has become aware of the financial problems and rampant adultery that has prevented the Ashburnham's from ever having a particularly stable life themselves, he is unable to handle the realization of reality's complexity. The abrupt disappearance of predictability in Dowell's life is truly mind-altering for him, because he had previously based his life on conforming to societal norms. With such a shallow and superficial level of understanding of love and passion, it is no wonder that Dowell is so ignorant to his wife's abnormal spousal behaviour, such as their nonexistent sex life, as well as the clear tension between Edward and Leonora Ashburnham.

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Dowell is neither insightful nor perceptive, so that it becomes very difficult to determine the true disposition of certain characters before the novel ends.

While Florence and Dowell both behave in order to achieve what they desire, neither of them were able to attain them. " Florence wanted Branshaw, and it is I who have bought it from Leonora. I didn't really want it; what I wanted mostly was to cease being a nurse-attendant" (137). This wish never comes true for Dowell either, for he ends in the same place that he started - in a relationship with a woman who will never truly care for him, maintaining a similarly shallow appearance of an ideal life, only now Dowell recognizes the folly behind his ignorance and shallowness. Although Dowell may not be consciously responsible for how his life ended up, had it not been for his painful obliviousness he may have never found himself in such a pleasureless situation.