

# The good soldier



The distinction between perception and representation is one of the most important themes of the novel. No one in *The Good Soldier* is really who they seem to be, or who John Dowell thinks them to be. Edward is not a sincere, honourable “good soldier”, Florence is not a reserved and loyal wife and Leonora is not a decent, “normal” woman devoid of passion or emotion.

The novel traces Dowell's realisation that appearances are not reality, that the four are not really “good people.” Dowell's slow comprehension, however, is trumped by the fact that the idea of “good people” seems to lose its very definition as the novel develops. If this well-born and well-mannered English couple is not “good,” and if his own wife is deceiving him, then he feels he has nothing to believe in.

In the absence of these representations, Dowell is left only with madness, a skewed perception of reality. Ultimately, as the novel's first-person narration shows, personal perception is all one can ever have. “Reality” is merely one individual's version of the truth. Dowell's inability to understand the events that are about to happen create an amount of dramatic irony, for example, the difference between how Dowell represents himself and the reader's perception of him. For example, in part 1, chapter 3, Dowell considers himself extremely perceptive and insightful and he reasons that he must be a faithful narrator. His attention, he explains, was entirely focused on the world around him such as the decorations in the dining room, the plan of their hotel, and the flirtatious actions of Florence. But as he relates the story of their day at Nauheim, Dowell is the opposite of insightful.

He is so focused in seeing things as they appear to be and in trusting “ good people,” that he is incapable of perceiving the reality of the beginning of a romance between Florence and Edward. Even when Leonora desperately attempts to point out the truth to him, Dowell does not understand. Dowell can only recognise details which have little bearing and no importance. His wifes betrayal and Leonoras horror remain utterly invisible to himDowells reference to “ good people” is an important recurring term in the novel when considering representation and perception.

In part 3, chapter 4, Dowell explores the backgrounds, secrets, and desires of two of the “ good people???, Edward and Leonora Ashburnham. By “ good,” Dowell does not refer to their charity or kindness, but to their position in society. The Ashburnham??™s are represented as well- dressed, well-groomed, and well-mannered, and so they are assumed to be “ safe???, he is satisfied, knowing very little about them, to take it for granted that the Ashburnham??™s are upright and trustworthy. Dowells misperception of who are “ good people” is his ultimate mistake. By trusting people based on first impressions, Dowell places too much weight on his poor insight into others. “ Good people” are the very ones who betray, deceive, and make a fool of him.

He is wrong to necessarily link good appearances with good people. Edward considers himself good as long as his affairs are backed by passion and affection. In contrast, Leonora cannot consider herself to be good unless she is living a holy and upright life.

As such, these differences in perceptions of goodness accounts for much of the marital conflict in the novel.