Parallels between dowell’s relationships and narrative style

Narration is a critical aspect of Ford’s The Good Soldier. Since the narrator also serves as one of the main characters, his narrative perspective becomes even more interesting to the reader. One of the most fascinating aspects of Dowell’s narration is that it is inconsistent, often incorrect, and at times somewhat passive. His perspectives and the way he views himself in his relationships create parallels to his narrative style, and indeed become shaping factors in his narration. John Dowell’s relationships with women lack passion or sexual desire. He “ has displayed not even the mildest tremors of sexual desire” (Levenson 378). His relationships with Florence and Nancy, which should have had the potential to be conventionally categorized as “ romantic,” are anything but. To even begin to interpret Dowell’s relationships, it becomes necessary to first look at his overall view on love. He makes it clear that he does not believe in the “ permanence of man’s or woman’s love… [or] permanence of any early passion” (Ford 96). He also states that “ there is no man who loves a woman that does not desire to come to her for the renewal of his courage” (Ford 97) and that this, not a sexual passion, causes a man’s desire for a woman. Dowell’s views, applied to his own life, show that the entire idea of his relationship to Florence comes undone. Florence in no way renews his courage; if anything, she aids in making him weaker and more oblivious as time progresses. Dowell’s role in his relationship with Florence is, like his narration, full of “ inconsistency… passivity… [and] sexual abstention” (Levenson 378). The reader is still left somewhat in the dark in regards to Dowell’s relationship with his wife Florence, even after a near three hundred pages of text. Love and passion aside, Dowell and Florence lack even a steady line of communication. He doesn’t come to realize the true essence of their relationship until it doesn’t

even matter anymore after Florence’s death. Dowell makes it clear that he doesn’t know his own story and is essentially inactive in his own relationships, just complying with whatever decisions his wife makes. He shows awareness of the fact that his inability to view situations and people clearly is negative, saying “ the damnable nuisance of the whole thing is… you never really get an inch deeper than the things I have catalogued” (Ford 37). Dowell’s ignorance is perhaps the most prominent manifestation of his innocence. In fact, Dowell’s narration is guided more by his perceptions than by “ the evidence around him” (Hoffman 45). If the loss of innocence is the realization that one has a choice, then Dowell remains innocent throughout the novel. Yes, he hints at the fact that he remains with Florence to serve as her nurse, perhaps subconsciously implying that there remains another option by mentioning that he remains only to serve a specific purpose, but it does not seem that he ever actually realizes that he can divorce her. What is made clear to the reader, however, is that Dowell does not love or even like his wife. Early on there is no evidence of any fondness toward Florence. In fact, his disdain for her shows subtly when he observes that during conversation “ Leonora would just nod her head in a way that quite pleasantly rattled my poor wife” (Ford 38). Although Dowell could not convincingly be described as a malicious man, he clearly gets at least a small amount of pleasure from his wife’s annoyance and discomfort. One of the most important aspects of Dowell’s relationship with Florence is the distance between the two of them that is maintained by both characters. Florence betrays and lies to Dowell, and Dowell always remains detached from Florence. He has no desire to even change the dynamics of his relationship, which is apparent when Florence’s doctor says that the couple

should “ refrain from manifestations of affection” (Ford 74) and Dowell inwardly responds with “ I was ready enough” (Ford 74). There is no talk of his sexuality any further, in terms of women, men, or himself. He remains ambiguous not only in his narration, but also in his sexuality. His descriptions of the women around him are more telling of his own personality than about the reality of his perceptions of the women. That is to say, his interactions and reactions with the women around him show his personality and thoughts more than they show the truth of the women that surround him, in part because he is such an unreliable narrator and the reader is almost forced to discount many of the things he says. He describes women as he sees fit, in terms of his relationship with them and how they fit into the structure of gender in the society he regards as good. Dowell “ tries to preserve his idea of proper womanhood by constructing women such as Maisie Maiden and Nancy as ‘ submissive’ and innocent” (Hoffman 42). The aforementioned description is in tension with his description of “ Leonora as transgressive and threatening” (Hoffman 42) when he feels fear or inadequacy toward her. Although Leonora has many differences with Nancy and Maisie, the true differences lie in the different ways Dowell represents them within his narrative. This sexual ambiguity leads to the discussion of Dowell’s relationship with Edward. Dowell regards Edward as the epitome of an English man and a societal norm. In other words, “ Dowell focuses on Edward as the pinnacle of stability” (Hoffman 35) amidst his gender confusion. In fact, Dowell even uses his narration as “ the autobiographical act to identify himself fully with Edward… […] narration becomes for Dowell a means for enacting imperialistic crossings of identity borders” (Hoffman 46). His introspection regarding masculinity shows through at its fullest when his

narration is about Edward, because Dowell uses Edward as a basis for comparison and definition of gender. In both subtle and explicit ways, Dowell implies that he regards Edward as the definitive male. In describing Edward, Dowell states that the brick pink of his complexion, running perfectly level to the brick pink of his inner eyelids, gave them a curious, sinister expression… And that chap, coming into a room, snapped up the gaze of every woman in it, as dexterously as a conjuror pockets billiard balls. It was most amazing (Ford 30-31). This description, one of many, implies a certain perfection within Edward that Dowell regards as being epitomical of a male. Dowell’s perceived role in his relationships with the people around him and with himself shapes his narration. Furthermore, Dowell’s roles in his relationships are parallel to his narrative style. His relationships are full of doubts, fallacies and distance. These three qualities are rampant in Dowell’s narration, right from the beginning. Dowell begins his tale by stating “ This is the saddest story I have ever heard” (Ford 13) instead of stating it is the saddest story he has ever been involved in, perhaps, since he is one of the main characters in it. He chooses to distance himself from the people in his life in relationships and consequently chooses to distance himself from the story in the way he narrates it. In her article, Karen Hoffman writes that “ Ford [emphasizes] narrative as a means of negotiating anxiety and ambivalence about identity” (Hoffman 31). He explores his masculinity through narration by exploring his relation to Edward’s masculinity, and his “ anxiety about these positions propels him to utilize his autobiographical act to redefine himself in more masculine terms” (Hoffman 39). Not only does Dowell use narration as a means of conveying others, but he uses his perception of others and his relation to them to shape his own understanding of his identity, or at least

that which he would like to show the reader. The fact that Dowell’s narration is full of “ inversions, postponements, repetitions, reversals” (Levenson 374) is symbolic of his gender and identity crisis, and thus symbolic of the role he takes in relationships. He constantly sizes people up by comparing them to what he views as social norms or oddities, and in turn relates himself to the other characters to define himself. This tactic often proves inefficient for the simple fact that the reality of the situation and what Dowell reveals to the reader are often very different things. The same detachment present in his relationships is seen in the way he narrates the story, constantly correcting himself and admitting to the reader that he does not know all the details.