

A Modern Masterpiece: “The Good Soldier” one hundred years on

By Mike Peters

In spite of its title and its British and American 1915 date of publication - just as the destruction of the First War really gets going - guns and trenches don't make much of an appearance in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. Even the good soldier himself is never seen doing much fighting.

Instead affairs of the heart - the latter, a key word in the book - dominate, contributing to multiple deceptions, betrayals and suicides amongst a small set of privileged figures, whose lives are tightly bound by the conventional Edwardian world of country houses and expensive hotels, they inhabit.

Ford, unlike his unfortunate narrator, certainly knows the world he is writing about well, although his own milieu was rather more culturally bohemian than that of his main protagonists - the Ashburnhams and the Dowells. He also knows something about extra-marital relationships, having left his first wife, Elsie, to live with a string of other women, including Jean Rhys, during his subsequent romantic career. The question of whether he did, or did not, commit bigamy is an open one but there is no doubt that, like several of his characters, he didn't find monogamy an easy state to maintain.

Yet, it isn't so much the intimate knowledge that Ford shows of his characters' infidelities that arguably makes *The Good Soldier* one of the most modern novels in the modernist canon. For, in spite of its old-fashioned setting and its two couples' old-fashioned preoccupations with propriety and respectability, it retains the power, unlike some other texts of the same time, to continue to speak to contemporary readers and influence contemporary writers; Ian McEwan, for example, unconsciously named two key protagonists of his 2007 novella, *On Chesil Beach* - Edward and Florence - after the protagonists of *The Good Soldier*. With its closely focused portrait of three characters intent on pursuing their own sexual and

material interests irrespective of the costs - both financial and emotional - and its intricately threaded plot of lust, love and suicide, the novel continues to engage, and even shock, readers today.

A major source of this capacity is Ford's graphic presentation of a society that only functions due to the sharp separation that exists between individuals' private and public selves. Within the former realm, the Dowells and Ashburnhams commit their various treacheries and acts of exploitation, with a ruthless and destructive sense of entitlement and force of will - claiming, for example, a medical condition to avoid sex with a spouse or arranging for a husband's mistress to travel half-way around the world in order to satisfy his desires. And even when, finally and possibly nobly, Edward Ashburnham does everything he can to resist his passion for his young ward, Nancy Rufford, by sending her away, the outcome is her madness and his suicide.

There is then no way of beating the odds. Yet, no-one looking in at this world from the outside would guess at what miseries and corruptions lie beneath the surface. Nothing - not jealousy or death - is allowed to interfere with the vital business of keeping up appearances. An ordered and seemingly civilized surface - based on strict moral and social codes, and most tellingly caught by Ford in the image of the 'minuet' - is everything. Such is Ford's uncompromising vision of human society - a vision that is unmistakably modern in its bleak pessimism.

The continuing power of *The Good Soldier* is also closely related to the way it is written. Constructed non-chronologically, the narrative structure constantly teases us with what we don't know, meaning that only gradually and bit-by-bit, as each piece of the jig-saw is slotted into place, do we start to get a sense of what is going on and its significance. Furthermore, the reader's feeling that they are lost in the midst of a psychological and emotional labyrinth, is compounded by the figurative blindness of the American narrator, John Dowell - both an outsider to this English world by virtue of his nationality and a victimised participant by virtue of his naive innocence.

A dispensable pawn in his wife's adulterous games, Ford creates in Dowell a figure, whose struggles to read the complicated and bewildering intrigues around him, are also the struggles of the reader. As the narrator refers to each odd occurrence or secret - Florence, for example, locking her bedroom door against her husband or Leonora exploding with rage at her friend touching Ashburnham's wrist - and as he pursues each seeming digression - anxiety and suspense build. We don't just witness the various manoeuvrings and deceptions that the novel presents, we are made to experience them. Little wonder then, that *The Good Soldier*, in spite of its obscurities and confusions, can still hold the read in its visceral grip.

Only towards the close, as Dowell tries to take the measure of Ashburnham's actions, is the full scale of what is at stake revealed. Building a newly imagined romantic impression of him as heroic victim prepared to sacrifice himself in order to avoid entering a sexual relationship with his ward, the narrator exposes, for the first time in the novel, the real costs of following conventional rules rather than the claims of the heart. Grudgingly accepting that 'Society must go on', Dowell's openly declared 'love' for Edward Ashburnham, nevertheless leaves the reader wondering whether his friend - one of those 'passionate', 'headstrong' and 'too-truthful' individuals who are destined to be crushed, even tortured (given some of the imagery of flaying and bleeding used on occasions) by the social machine - really deserves his fate. Can keeping to the rules, Ford asks implicitly - for he doesn't see it as his role to offer moral judgements - however oppressive and absurd they are, sometimes be the right, or at least, the best thing to do? Perhaps 'normality', in the form of practical Leonora, who survives to marry again - albeit to another adulterer - and have a child, is preferable?

Confronting us with questions such as these -and there are others -*The Good Soldier* offers only uncertainty rather than easy answers. But uncertainty is not the same as unfamiliarity, and isn't there something recognisable to contemporary readers about the Edwardian society that Ford depicts - a society in which a sophisticated and privileged surface hides various forms of corrupt practice? Don't we too have our Florence Dowells and Ashburnhams, intent on pursuing their questionable activities behind closed doors, with little,

Writing Raw

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or no, thought for the harm done to others?

The End

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