Essay on Ford Madox Ford’s The Good Solidier

By Jeffrey Mays

Tipped off by the introduction by Mark Schorer, one understandable first thought about the book is to question the reliability of the narrator John Dowell. In the opening chapters the reader has a looming sense that the eminently upper-class British propriety of Edward and Lenora, and the just-as-polished upper-class manners of their American friends John and Florence, is hiding some truth. The narrator jumps from relating the delightfulness of the Ashburnhams, how they were good people, their pleasure of their friendship, their travels, the “minuet” that their intimacy was, to shrieking “No, by God, it is false! It wasn’t a minuet that we stepped; it was a prison – a prison full of screaming hysterics,” and then immediately back to “And yet I swear by the sacred name of my creator that it was true. It was true sunshine, the true music, the true plash of fountains from the mouth of stone dolphins.” The reader gets the distinct sense that beneath the reserved and formal exterior lies a freak show, and narrator John Dowell himself is suspect in the truthfulness of his tale.

But the second question that might occur to the reader, multiple times over the next two hundred pages, is “Can this possibly be real? Can there be any resemblance between this story and the high culture of turn of the century British?” When literary critics relate that Ford saw novelists as a historians of their own time, we must conclude that betrayal, fornications, blackmails, and hatred must have been pervasive in the time Ford was writing, to say nothing of today.

There are many themes that can be explored in The Good Soldier: the number of characters who have heart problems. Edward Ashburnham, Florence Dowell, Maisie Maiden and Florence’s Uncle Hurlbird all had heart trouble. Also, how August 4th was the significant day for many events in Florence’s life. How the completeness of each character’s social programming rendered them, with the exception of Leonora thanks to her Catholic upbringing, shockingly oblivious to their own culpability. It is truly staggering how oblivious Edward is to his own actions, his torture of Leonora, and his serial infidelity, his complete self-deception that it was often all an Uncle or patron’s desire to aid and comfort a needy soul. Edward’s sentimentality is perhaps the main theme, and the namesake of the book, titled by Ford himself “The Saddest Story” and then ironically renamed The Good Solider.

Ford’s original title, The Saddest Story, is taken from the narrators repeated statement that this was the saddest story he ever heard. Some suggestion is made that the narrator is referring, in his own emotionally confused way, to the plight of Edward, whom he never charges with guilt, but strenuously defends with explanations as to his upbringing, nature and good intentions. But to me, the bitterest sadness of the story was Leonora’s attitude toward Edward – the naïve hope that he would return to her and love her after one more fling, and that she will be triumphant, showing that her silence and patience and even facilitation of the affairs won the day, and also that in her, the Catholic Church would be triumphant.

This book was one of the easiest books to read, though I am not sure why. The slow pacing of the book, and the limitation of having only the narrator’s point of view might have made it tiresome. But I enjoyed the book immensely for many reasons: the sympathetic though unreliable narrator keeps the reader in a constant state of scrutiny as to the reality of what he’s relating; the sheer newness of the idea to me of the putrefaction underlying the gentle manners, patience and understatedness of the British aristocracy; and perhaps most of all, the clarity and intimacy with which the reader comes to know the characters – this makes the whole book feel like an excursion into depths of human brokenness, and even more to the point, that the story successfully tells us something true about human nature and community.