

**Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*, 1915**

I call this the Saddest Story, rather than "The Ashburnham Tragedy", just because it is so sad, just because there was no current to draw things along to a swift and inevitable end. There is about it none of the elevation that accompanies tragedy; there is about it no nemesis, no destiny. Here were two noble people—for I am convinced that both Edward and Leonora had noble

5 natures—here, then, were two noble natures, drifting down life, like fireships afloat on a lagoon and causing miseries, heart-aches, agony of the mind and death. And they themselves steadily deteriorated. And why? For what purpose? To point what lesson? It is all a darkness.

There is not even any villain in the story—for even Major Basil, the husband of the lady who next, and really, comforted the unfortunate Edward—even Major Basil was not a villain in this

10 piece. He was a slack, loose, shiftless sort of fellow—but he did not do anything to Edward. Whilst they were in the same station in Burma he borrowed a good deal of money—though, really, since Major Basil had no particular vices, it was difficult to know why he wanted it. He collected—different types of horses' bits from the earliest times to the present day—but, since he did not prosecute even this occupation with any vigour, he cannot have needed much money

15 for the acquirement, say, of the bit of Genghis Khan's charger—if Genghis Khan had a charger. And when I say that he borrowed a good deal of money from Edward I do not mean to say that he had more than a thousand pounds from him during the five years that the connection lasted. Edward, of course, did not have a great deal of money; Leonora was seeing to that. Still, he may have had five hundred pounds a year English, for his menus plaisirs—for his regimental

20 subscriptions and for keeping his men smart. Leonora hated that; she would have preferred to buy dresses for herself or to have devoted the money to paying off a mortgage. Still, with her sense of justice, she saw that, since she was managing a property bringing in three thousand a year with a view to re-establishing it as a property of five thousand a year and since the property really, if not legally, belonged to Edward, it was reasonable and just that Edward should get a

25 slice of his own. Of course she had the devil of a job.

I don't know that I have got the financial details exactly right. I am a pretty good head at figures, but my mind, still, sometimes mixes up pounds with dollars and I get a figure wrong. Anyhow, the proposition was something like this: Properly worked and without rebates to the tenants and keeping up schools and things, the Branshaw estate should have brought in about five thousand

30 a year when Edward had it. It brought in actually about four. (I am talking in pounds, not dollars.) Edward's excesses with the Spanish Lady had reduced its value to about three—as the maximum figure, without reductions. Leonora wanted to get it back to five.

She was, of course, very young to be faced with such a proposition—twenty-four is not a very advanced age. So she did things with a youthful vigour that she would, very likely, have made

35 more merciful, if she had known more about life. She got Edward remarkably on the hop. He had to face her in a London hotel, when he crept back from Monte Carlo with his poor tail between his poor legs. As far as I can make out she cut short his first mumblings and his first attempts at affectionate speech with words something like:

"We're on the verge of ruin. Do you intend to let me pull things together? If not I shall retire to

40 Hendon on my jointure." (Hendon represented a convent to which she occasionally went for what is called a "retreat" in Catholic circles.)

And poor dear Edward knew nothing—absolutely nothing. He did not know how much money he had, as he put it, "blued" at the tables. It might have been a quarter of a million for all he remembered. He did not know whether she knew about La Dolciquita or whether she imagined

45 that he had gone off yachting or had stayed at Monte Carlo. He was just dumb and he just wanted to get into a hole and not have to talk. Leonora did not make him talk and she said nothing herself.

I do not know much about English legal procedure—I cannot, I mean, give technical details of how they tied him up. But I know that, two days later, without her having said more than I have reported to you, Leonora and her attorney had become the trustees, as I believe it is called, of all Edward's property, and there was an end of Edward as the good landlord and father of his people. He went out.

Leonora then had three thousand a year at her disposal. She occupied Edward with getting himself transferred to a part of his regiment that was in Burma—if that is the right way to put it. She herself had an interview, lasting a week or so—with Edward's land-steward. She made him understand that the estate would have to yield up to its last penny. Before they left for India she had let Branshaw for seven years at a thousand a year. She sold two Vandykes and a little silver for eleven thousand pounds and she raised, on mortgage, twenty-nine thousand. That went to Edward's money-lending friends in Monte Carlo. So she had to get the twenty-nine thousand back, for she did not regard the Vandykes and the silver as things she would have to replace. They were just frills to the Ashburnham vanity. Edward cried for two days over the disappearance of his ancestors and then she wished she had not done it; but it did not teach her anything and it lessened such esteem as she had for him. She did not also understand that to let Branshaw affected him with a feeling of physical soiling—that it was almost as bad for him as if a woman belonging to him had become a prostitute. That was how it did affect him; but I dare say she felt just as bad about the Spanish dancer.

“Call me Ishmael” – thus starts Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, asserting the arbitrary power of the narrative voice, which can control names and languages. The ability to name things and people indeed seems a prerequisite to story-telling. Yet, Ford Madox Ford’s much less assertive first-person narrator in *The Good Soldier* helps us qualify that assumption. Indeed, in the excerpt under scrutiny, the narrator claims to be telling “the Saddest Story” but simultaneously hints at his inability to do so. The latter seems to stem from both his personal flaws as a story-teller and from the frivolous nature of the events which are recounted in the passage. The passage indeed deals with the way a wealthy English couple – Edward and Leonora Ashburnham – manage their property and the rent from Branshaw, their estate. While the reader can infer that Edward’s love affairs play into the relation between the Ashburnhams, the narrator only pays little heed to the characters’ feelings, focusing on the financial and material transactions instead.

I would therefore argue that this passage works as a deconstruction of the codes and expectations of story-telling, whereby the uneventful depiction of a material society of elites by an unreliable narrator shifts the focus on the poignancy of meaninglessness.

I will first demonstrate that the excerpt provides a depiction of an artificial society revolving around shifting ownership and financial values, before considering how the trajectory of those objects and values overshadow individual trajectories, turning “the Saddest Story” into an anti-story. Lastly, I shall turn to the figure of the narrator as an anti-story-teller, whose unreliable nature questions the very act of conveying meaning.

### **I. a depiction of an artificial society revolving around shifting ownership and financial values**

1. collecting and exchanging goods: “he collected – bits” (vb as absolute → act in and of itself + “bits” as parts, sth insignificant); silvers, Vandykes and “property” being sold or rented (“frills” → ornamental use)
2. shifting values: rent from £5 to 3 back to 5k/ yr -- £/\$ : indeterminacy making sheer numbers meaningless
3. material society where humans are objectified: “Vandykes” (painter → paintings); “a woman belonging to him” (65)

### **II. the trajectory of those objects and values overshadow individual trajectories, turning “the Saddest Story” into an anti-story**

1. the “Saddest Story” as a non-story: global negation (no, none, not...); no plot devices (“villain”, “tragedy”, “nemesis”) (no villain despite alliteration in /s/ which may evoke a snake)
2. stasis, no evolution: “here were”, “there were (ll 3, 4, 8) → existential forms (≠ actions) // “a slack, loose, **shiftless**” (10); “**drifting** down life” (5) = no movement or uncontrolled, no trajectories
3. distorted links: logical > chronological or causal : “**if** Gengis Khan...” (15) → history as hypothetical; “just because” (ll 1 2), “**of course**” (18, 25, 33) → confirmation rather than narration, stating the obvious, going nowhere, just like the characters who are “drifting”, “for what purpose?”

### **III. the narrator as an anti-story-teller, whose unreliable nature questions the very act of conveying meaning**

1. global uncertainty: limited knowledge of facts (“I do not know” 26, 48 + 12 “it was difficult to know”); series of unanswered questions leading to “it is all darkness” (l.7); “I cannot give details” (48) → left to deduce or infer “I dare say she felt” (66)

2. & figures (l. 26): wrong currency, “I get a figure wrong” (27) // “as far as I can **make out**” (37) → values / figures as silhouettes, ill-defined shapes of individuals → questions the narrator’s ability to judge people coherently
3. inability to word things: “if that is the right way to put it.” (54); “I do not mean to say that” (16), “I mean” (48): need to rephrase; “I call this the Saddest Story” (1) = arbitrary choice of wording

➔ The passage conveys very little information in terms of plot, due to both the paucity of the action and the narrator’s flawed understanding. The reader is left with no choice but to accept the value of this meaninglessness, as perceived by the narrator, which shifts the focus onto the “I” of the teller rather than on the story itself. The perception of the events and the apparent trauma to the teller are indicative of an inward gaze. The story-teller is no longer outside or above the story, but is both the object and the subject of its telling. What matters is no longer the content but the seemingly shambolic way it is told, reflecting an individual perception and sensibility. As such, it goes one step further than Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, paving the way for modernism and the ensuing undoing of literary norms.