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The Saddest Story and Ford's phobias and sicknesses, instable sentimental life and respect toward the military.

The problem between "The Saddest Story" and "The Good Soldier"

The problem with "The Saddest Story" is that, generally, it would be considered simply as the three first chapters of "The Good Soldier." However, we have to think that "The Saddest Story" and "The Good Solider" were published one year apart, 1914 and 1915 respectivelyⁱ. We need to think of "The Saddest Story" as a short story of its own, leaving "The Good Solider" apart. The reason why is that someone who read the story as it was published in the first issue of *Blast*ⁱⁱ, would have read it very differently than someone who knows or reads the whole novel, because that person would have only pondered on the text available, not thinking of what was to come. What we try to do here is understand the story as any reader of *Blast* would have understood, focusing only on the text and not the wholeness of "The Good Soldier."

Introduction and Thesis

By the time Ford Madox Ford published "The Saddest Story," his name still was Ford Madox Huefferⁱⁱⁱ. He changed his name because it sounded too German; in fact, his father was a German^{iv}. Ford Madox Ford, we see, was not a careless man; he took things seriously, giving up on his name to fit in society best. He was in close relationship to a lot of important people, Russian politicians, among them, famous authors such as Wells^v; he was not an average citizen with

average acquaintances. Again, we could say Ford was never a conformist; as we look at his work, we should consider deeply his ideals and the things that happened in his life as part of his works. “The Saddest Story,” therefore, is a reflection of Ford’s agoraphobic crisis and other sicknesses, his instable sentimental life and his respect-critique toward the military.

Ford’s Agoraphobic Crisis and Sickness

In 1904, Ford Madox Ford developed agoraphobia and had a terrible crisis; he was sent to Germany. He says:

“From 1903 to 1906 illness removed me from most activities [...] I suffered from what was diagnosed as agoraphobia and intense depression, [...] I had nothing specific to be depressed about.” “They were lost years.” “But the memory of those years is of one uninterrupted mental agony.”^{vi}

Not only that, Ford suffered from ““He had, at any rate during that stay in London, many phobias.”^{vii} Ford’s mental sickness is not just an anecdote. We can see the influence of his mental sickness in his work. When Ford was suffering those phobias, he was sent to Germany to recover. “The Saddest Story” is mostly settled in a bath house in Nauheim, Germany, where Florence, John Dowell’s wife, is treating her heart condition. Here we see the similitude of Germany as a place for treatment. Furthermore, Ford himself lived in France for a long time due to the roughness of winter in England; he moved to Cap Ferrat in France. In the same way, in “The Saddest Story,” we read:

“Paris, you see, was our home [...] provided yearly winter quarters for us, [...]. You will gather from this statement that one of us had, as the saying is, a “heart "; [...] my wife [...], poor thing, was the sufferer.”^{viii}

Ford’s life and his work “The Saddest Story” are very, related. Focusing on the mental sickness, we find that the story presents a lot of confusion and insecurities in the narration. When using Voyant Tools, we notice the most repeated word in the story is “know.”^{ix} As we go deeper in it, when we analyze the word “know” through the tool “contexts,” we realize it is often used in the sentence “I don’t know.” The narrator is, therefore, unreliable as he speaks of his experience from a blurred vision of insecurity and inaccuracy. We would assume this is the way a person with constant distress and fear due to his phobias would see the world or would remember the past; a past blurred by constant biases induced by irrational thoughts and phobias.

Ford’s Instable Sentimental Life

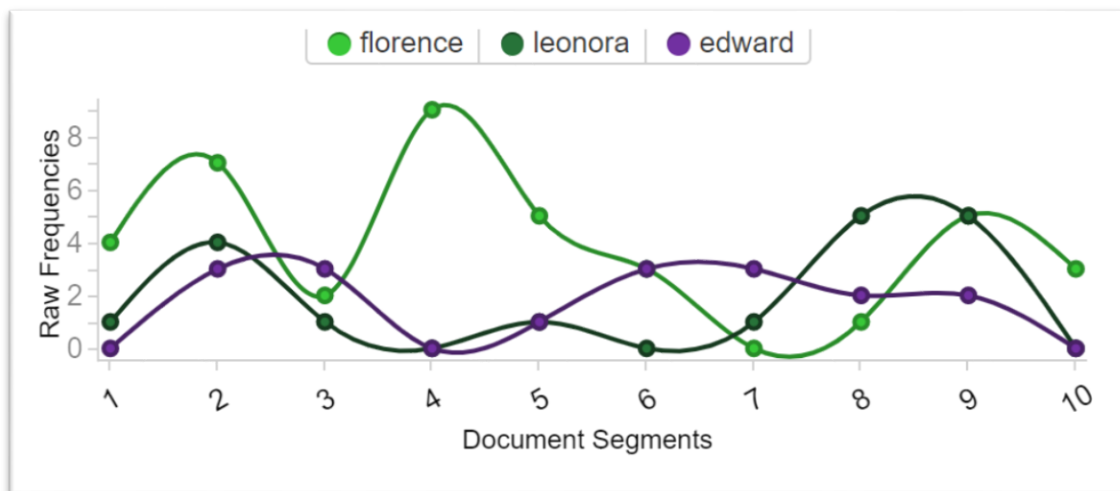
Ford did not have a stable love life; he had affairs with Mary Martindale, his first wife’s sister, and Jean Rhys. He had long term relationships with his wife Elsie Martinlade, Violet Hunt and Stella Bowen.^x This, as far as we know. Sadly, we have to mention something about “The Good Soldier,” of which Ford said it was about the polygamous desires that underline all men. ^{xi} “The Saddest Story” does give us certain hints about this theme. We can see this as we analyze the contexts of Florence, the second most repeated word, and Leonora; they are the female characters of the story. Florence being the narrator’s wife, and Leonora being Edward Ashburnham wife.

As we analyze the contexts of Florence, we find that the author usually refers to her in a sorrowful way, with the expression “poor dear Florence.” The narrator hardly accounts for moments in which he and Florence connected; most of the mentions of the name are related to

what others said she said, Florence in the context of a meeting with other people, explaining what consequences Florence's actions had for him, and questioning why she might have done what she did, or what would have happened if she had chosen something else. With this, we see the narrator did not have a deep connection with his wife; he speaks about her quite distantly, sorry for her life, but not quite sorry he lost her.

However, the narrator, when he refers to Leonora, he speaks in a much more personal way. He mostly talks about how Leonora interacted with him (the words she and to me); he is also quite descriptive about her body traits and body language. Therefore, Leonora, in the mind and the priorities of the narrator, is a character that plays a more consequential role rather than Florence, who plays a more distracting role.

I wanted to contrast all this with another tool, "trends." These are the results of the words Florence, Edward and Leonora:



Here we see a relationship in frequency between Florence and Leonora at the beginning and the end. Edward is rather consistent throughout the story. There is a point right were Florence takes

all the protagonism and the others are barely mentioned. This corresponds to some memories of Philadelphia, where the Ashburnhams were not. This gives us a hint, that the story focuses around the society of the Ashburnhams rather than their/his life in the USA.

These findings make evident the relationship existent between Florence and Leonora, as if the narrator could not think about one without comparing it to the other. Then, in the background, Edward, the good soldier, is presented as probably an obstacle. The negative contexts in which the narrator talks about Florence and the rather positive ones in which he sees Leonora, together with their relationship in the narration, give us a hint about the probable desire to get involved in an affair with Leonora, and how immoral that will be as he will have to deal with a very respected man, Edward.

Ford's Respect-critique for the Military

Ford Madox Ford was in many aspects involved with war. fought in WWI and helped the press management of the war in northern England. Ford defended his country; he even changed his name to make it sound less German and more English.

It is interesting that he chose *Blast* as the magazine where to publish "The Saddest Story." Although *Blast* was the main medium of divulgation for the Vorticist movement, saying that "The Saddest Story" is a Vorticist story would not be quite accurate. Vorticism itself was too young a movement -a independent derivative of Cubism- that developed mainly in visual art and poetry; in terms of a written, Vorticism would more of a revolutionary social movement. "The Saddest Story" comes to be something rather modernist. "The Saddest Story", although not especially Vorticist, fits very well with the tone of the magazine. Both, *Blast* and the story, have constant insights to society's values, the morality of those and how the actions derived of those values affect the individual. *Blast* and "The Saddest Story" have a well pessimistic tone towards the English society,

Blast stands out for -forgive the repetition- Blasting the English society, pointing out several defects of British people. In that sense, “The Saddest Story” goes along with it; the main character is an American living in Europe who meets a British matrimony.

Nevertheless, despite the critique, the narrator, John Dowell, shows a lot of respect for Edward Ashburnham. Edward, Leonora’s husband, has very interesting contexts. The first thing that draws our attention, is that the narrator mostly refers to him with his name and last name; Edward Ashburnham. This is a sign of the respect Dowell shows for him. However, this character is mentioned rather as part of scenes, as part of the interaction with a greater scene; not very often mentioned as the direct subject to an action. Therefore, he is a character in the background while Florence and Leonora get all the attention. Here we see the dichotomy of Ford’s love and support for England, but at the same time his disregard and critique.

Here we have more clear examples. The narrator says: “Edward Ashburnham was the cleanest looking sort of chap; an excellent magistrate, a first-rate soldier, one oi the best landlords, so they said in Hampshire, England.” Then he continues to say: “You would have said that he was just exactly the sort of chap that you could have trusted your wife with. And I trusted mine, and it was madness.” The narrator keeps commenting on the illusion and disillusion of the good soldier, as the blessings and blasts of the magazine to the English society, or as the love-hate relationship Ford would have had with England.

Conclusion

“The Saddest Story” is a short story of its own that should be read separately from “The Good Soldier.” One can draw its own conclusion by reading it. It is a story closely linked to Ford’s life: it makes references to Ford’s agoraphobia and sickness, we see that reflected in the location of the story, the usual residence of the Dowells and the constant claim that he does not know; his instable

sentimental life is also heavily reflected in the story as he talks about Florence and Leonora; and his relationship with the war and respect-critique toward the military is also reflected as we see the way he speaks about the good soldier, Edward Ashburnham and the magazine where he published the story. Thanks to Voyant Tools we have been able to identify certain characteristics of the story we would not have noticed by ourselves.

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