

The Good Soldier



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FORD MADOX FORD

Ford was born to a German father and an English mother and was raised in London. Ford's father died when he was a teenager, so he was sent to live with his grandfather in 1889. Ford's grandfather also lived in London, and while living with him, Ford studied at the University College School. In 1894, Ford married Elsie Martindale and in 1901, the two of them moved to Winchelsea. At the time, Winchelsea was home to many famous writers, including Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, and H. G. Wells. Ford was already writing himself at this point, although he wouldn't publish any notable works for quite some time. In 1908, Ford founded *The English Review*, where he published many famous modernist writers, including Joseph Conrad, William Butler Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, and Ezra Pound. One year later, after many unhappy years of marriage, Ford left his wife to be with Isobel Violet Hunt, the co-founder of *The English Review*. By this time, Ford had published several notable books including *The Inheritors* (1901) and *Romance* (1903), both of which were coauthored with Joseph Conrad. However, it took until 1915 for Ford to publish his first classic: *The Good Soldier*. Although Ford would go on to publish other notable literary works after *The Good Soldier*, it is undeniably the work that cemented his literary legacy. It is regularly listed as one of the greatest books in all of English literature by critics and it remains his most read novel by a large margin. After *The Good Soldier*, Ford's most famous works *Some Do Not...* (1924), *No More Parades* (1925), and *A Man Could Stand Up* (1926), and *Last Post* (1928). Collectively, these four books make up the *Parade's End* tetralogy. In addition to novels, Ford also wrote essays, memoirs, biographies, poetry, and literary criticism. Ford spent the final years of his teaching at Olivet College in Michigan before falling ill in 1939. He died on June 26, 1939, at the age of 65.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events of *The Good Soldier* take place between 1904–1913, just before the start of World War I. The first decades of the 20th century in England are notable for their sense of moral panic and confusion. The Victorian era—known for its moral rigidity and sexual repression—ended in 1901, following the death of Queen Victoria. In the wake of Queen's death, attitudes toward religion and sex began to change. Both topics began to be spoken and written about more frequently and with less self-censorship. In the early 20th century, the English began to break away from the mores of the Victorian era to establish a sensibility that was decidedly more modern.

However, as with any major cultural shift, this change in attitude caused a great amount of moral confusion and backlash. *The Good Soldier* is a direct product of this historical context, as John Dowell, the narrator, goes on several tangents discussing the breakdown of traditionally morality. However, because John Dowell is an unreliable narrator, it is difficult to determine where the novel comes down on the social issues it addresses.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Good Soldier is a work of literary modernism, as well as a book about adultery. Sex—especially sex outside of marriage—was a taboo topic in Victorian literature, but things changed around the turn of the 20th century. Many of the most famous modernist works centered around the topic of infidelity including Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* (1904), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920), and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). Although all of these books, including *The Good Soldier*, faced their share of controversy, they were allowed to be published and they helped usher in an era of writers who were not afraid to write openly about taboo subjects. *The Good Soldier* is also a book that features an unreliable narrator. The unreliable narrator is a literary device that was popularized in modernist literature and is still used today. Other famous novels that include unreliable narrators are Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Good Soldier
- **When Written:** 1915
- **Where Written:** Winchelsea, England
- **When Published:** March 1915
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** The French Countryside and Fordingbridge, England
- **Climax:** Edward receives a letter from Nancy while alone in the stables with John. After reading the letter and seeing that Nancy is safe, Edward pulls out a knife and slits his own throat.
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

What's In a Name? Ford Madox Ford was named after the Pre-Raphaelite painter Ford Madox Brown. Later in life, Ford wrote

a biography of Brown.

The Saddest Story. *The Good Soldier* was initially titled “The Saddest Story.” However, Ford’s publishers asked him to come up with a new title that would help them sell copies because World War I had just begun, and they didn’t think “The Saddest Story” would work. Sarcastically, Ford suggested *The Good Soldier*.



PLOT SUMMARY

John Dowell, the narrator, promises to tell the saddest story he knows, which revolves around John, his wife Florence, and their friends Edward and Leonora Ashburnham. Both Florence and Edward have **heart conditions**, so they always spend part of their year in Nauheim, Germany for rest and relaxation. John, Florence, Edward, and Leonora first meet one another while in Nauheim and they quickly become friends. However, before long, Florence and Edward start having an affair. Leonora quickly realizes what is going on, but she does not tell John because he is oblivious, and she doesn’t want to hurt him. Although the affair is hurtful to Leonora, it is not a surprise because Edward has had multiple affairs in the past.

Most recently, Edward attempted to pursue a girl name Maisie Maiden. Maisie is a friend of the Ashburnhams who traveled with them to Nauheim. Leonora knows that Edward is interested in Maisie, but she allows him to pursue her anyway. Leonora is content with this dynamic because she thinks it unlikely that Maisie will give in to Edward. Additionally, even if she does give in, Leonora doesn’t think Maisie will cause problems like Edward’s previous lovers (in the past, Edward got himself involved in several affairs that caused the Ashburnhams legal, social, and financial problems). However, Edward’s pursuit of Maisie comes to a swift end when Maisie discovers that the Ashburnhams brought her to Nauheim so that she could act as Edward’s mistress and is horrified. While packing her suitcase to leave Nauheim, Maisie suffers a heart attack and dies.

John often pauses his narration to think about how cleverly everyone manipulated him, especially Florence. Although the novel takes place in Europe, John and Florence are Americans who married in the U.S. before traveling abroad to Europe. Florence only told John about her heart condition after the two of them were married. According to Florence and her doctors, Florence and John cannot have sex because it would be too much for Florence’s heart. John dutifully obeys the doctor’s orders, only to discover later that Florence faked her heart condition. In retrospect, John spends much of his time coming to terms with the fact that his entire relationship with Florence was a lie.

Florence and Edward continued their affair for some time.

However, things get complicated once Edward takes an interest in Nancy Rufford. Nancy is a young woman whom the Ashburnhams practically raised. Now that she is of age, Edward displays a romantic interest in her, much to the chagrin of Leonora. When Florence discovers Edward’s romantic pursuit of Nancy, she commits suicide by poisoning herself. John is the first one to discover her body.

After Florence’s death, John returns to America to settle her estate. Coincidentally, Florence’s Uncle John died just a few days before Florence herself, leaving John a large fortune. After John ties up his financial affairs, he sails to England to visit the Ashburnhams in their manor home. John, too, is romantically interested in Nancy and hopes to ask her for her hand in marriage. Once in England, John discovers that the Ashburnhams’ relationship has continued to devolve. Both Leonora and Edward are physically and mentally ill. Although Edward has stopped pursuing Nancy, he is tortured by the fact that he cannot be with her. Meanwhile, Leonora cannot stand the fact that Edward loves Nancy more than her. Because Edward’s love for Nancy is literally killing him, Leonora goes to Nancy and begs her to be Edward’s mistress. Nancy declines and then leaves for India, not wanting to cause more problems.

On the way to India, Nancy sends the Ashburnhams a letter, letting them know she is safe and sound. Edward reads the letter while alone with John in the Ashburnham’s stables. After reading the letter, Edward pulls out a penknife and slits his own throat. John watches him commit the act and does nothing to try to stop him. After Nancy finds out what Edward did, she is racked with guilt and has a mental breakdown. Because Leonora cannot bear to see Nancy, she asks John to go to her. John does as Leonora asks and travels to India. There, he finds Nancy completely broken down. She is unable to speak or function normally. John thinks it is a bitter irony that, in the end, he is once again acting as a nurse to a woman whom he loves but does not love him back.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John Dowell – John Dowell is the first-person narrator of *The Good Soldier*. He is married to Florence Dowell and friends with Edward and Leonora Ashburnham. Because John is the narrator, everything the reader learns about the other characters comes from his perspective. Not only that, but he is notoriously unreliable and, depending on how one interprets the book, he can be seen either as a victim or a diabolical villain. According to John, he and Florence never consummated their marriage because Florence claimed to have a **weak heart**. He describes himself as a loyal servant to Florence; he waits on her hand and foot, and he always assumes she has the best intentions. However, their relationship comes to a dramatic end

after Florence's death. Depending on whether the reader believes John, Florence's death can be interpreted one of two ways. Florence dies right after discovering Edward is romantically pursuing Nancy Rufford. As such, her death could be viewed as a suicide, just as the surface of the novel suggests. However, Florence also dies immediately after John discovers her infidelity. Because John is the first person to discover her body, there is an implication that he may have murdered her. Additionally, only a few days before her death, Florence inherited a large fortune from her Uncle John, which could provide additional motivation for murder. The same ambiguity applies to Edward's death later in the novel. Once again, John is the only person present when Edward dies, and he claims the death is a suicide. However, if one assumes John is capable of murdering Florence for her infidelity, it is not a stretch to figure that he could have killed Edward as well. Although John presents all of the other characters in the novel as flawed, he depicts himself as almost perfect. His only flaws are that he is too giving and too naïve. Whether his opinions and perspective can be trusted is something each reader must determine for themselves.

Florence Dowell – Florence Dowell is John Dowell's wife and Edward Ashburnham's mistress. She comes from a notable Pennsylvania family with a significant fortune. For reasons that are not entirely clear, Florence's aunts and uncles did not want Florence to marry John. However, Florence's desire to travel to England—where her family is from—leads her to accept John's hand in marriage. Although innocent on the surface, Florence can be duplicitous and cruel. She fakes a **heart condition** so that she does not have to have sex with John and then carries out multiple affairs, the most notable of which is with Edward. Though intelligent and knowledgeable about history, Florence is intellectually inferior to Leonora, which bothers her deeply. She regularly tries to outdo Leonora by acting as a tour guide for the group, but Leonora always knows more. However, Florence feels superior to Leonora in two ways; first, she is Protestant, and second, she is having sex with Edward. Although she can be cruel, Florence is genuinely in love with Edward. Unfortunately, Edward views Florence just another checkmark on his long list of affairs. Eventually, he grows sick of Florence and pursues Nancy Rufford instead. When Florence discovers Edward's interest in Nancy, she takes her own life.

Edward Ashburnham – Edward Ashburnham is Leonora Ashburnham's husband. He comes from an upper-class background and commands great respect. John regularly insists that Edward is fundamentally a good person and a sentimentalist. However, Edward's fatal flaw is that he cannot stop being unfaithful to Leonora. Over the course of the novel, John relates several of Edward's affairs—including one with Florence—all of which end in disaster. In addition to the emotional strain Edward puts on his relationship, he also loses a lot of money, making his tracks impossible to hide. Although

Edward tries to obscure his actions from Leonora, she is always on to him. Edward acts as though he is ashamed of himself every time he is caught, but as soon as one affair ends, another one begins. His worst transgression comes when he begins to romantically pursue Nancy Rufford, a young woman whom he practically raised. His pursuit of Nancy ruins his relationship with Leonora and Nancy herself. In the end, he is ashamed of himself and doesn't feel as though he can salvage his remaining relationships. This realization leads him to suicide.

Leonora Ashburnham – Leonora Ashburnham is Edward Ashburnham's wife. She comes from a poverty-stricken background, even though her family name is well known. Her father arranged her marriage to Edward, and she does her best to make it work. Although her marriage to Edward is difficult, Leonora loves him and supports him however she can. She puts up with Edward's various affairs and handles the emotional and financial tolls that come with them. However, eventually, Leonora's relationship with Edward becomes too much of an emotional burden, and her health begins to decline. With nowhere else to turn, Leonora begs Nancy Rufford to serve as Edward's mistress, an act she believes is shameful but necessary. In the aftermath of Edward's death, Leonora marries Rodney Bayham, a man whom she considered having an affair with while still married to Edward.

Nancy Rufford – Nancy Rufford is a young woman whom the Ashburnham's practically raise. She is an innocent girl who, for most of the novel, is unaware of the actions of the adults around her. In particular, she is ignorant of the fact that Edward becomes romantically interested in her once she comes of age (she mistakes his flirtations for fatherly love). Eventually, Nancy learns the truth because Leonora begs her to act as Edward's mistress. Not wanting to drive more of a wedge through the Ashburnham's marriage, Nancy leaves them to live with her father in India. After Nancy learns of Edward's suicide, she is wracked with guilt and eventually becomes catatonic.

Maisie Maiden – Maisie Maiden is a young, beautiful woman who is married to a deployed soldier. Edward is romantically interested in her, although she doesn't know that. Leonora allows Edward to invite Maisie to Nauheim, even though she knows her husband's intentions. When Maisie discovers the truth about Edward and Leonora inviting her to Nauheim to serve as Edward's mistress, she immediately decides to leave Nauheim. However, while packing her suitcase, she has a heart attack and dies.

La Dolciquita – La Dolciquita is the mistress of the Russian Grand Duke. She has sex with Edward when the Ashburnhams are in Monte Carlo. After their night together, La Dolciquita tells Edward that he must pay her if he wants to continue seeing her. Edward agrees and ends up spending 20,000 pounds in a week.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Uncle John – Uncle John is Florence’s uncle. He is a hardworking man who saved up a fortune over his lifetime. He dies just a few days before Florence, allowing John to inherit his money.

Mrs. Basil – Mrs. Basil is Major Basil’s wife. She has an affair with Edward while the Ashburnhams are in Burma.

Major Basil – Major Basil is Mrs. Basil’s husband. He blackmails Edward after discovering that Edward and Mrs. Basil are having an affair.

Rodney Bayham – Rodney Bayham is a casual acquaintance of Leonora’s whom she considers having an affair with while married to Edward. Leonora marries Rodney after Edward’s death.

Jimmy – Jimmy is a lower-class man who works for Florence’s family. Florence has an affair with him in Paris.

Julius – Julius is John’s African American servant. John beats him brutally after he drops a suitcase that supposedly contains Florence’s heart medication.

Bagshawe – Bagshawe is a man John randomly talks to while in a hotel lobby. He accidentally tells John that Florence is having an affair because he doesn’t know that Florence is John’s wife.

Colonel Powys – Colonel Powys is Leonora’s father. He is friends with Colonel Ashburnham.

Colonel Ashburnham – Colonel Ashburnham is Edward’s father. He is friends with Colonel Powys.

his previous experience was. For instance, after his initial and relatively innocent incident with a servant girl in the back of a carriage, Edward immediately moves on to an affair with La Dolciquita. La Dolciquita is the mistress of a Grand Duke who sleeps with Edward once and then tells him he must pay her great sums of money if he wants to continue the affair. Edward accepts the offer and carries on the affair for another week before becoming bored. This pattern repeats itself throughout the novel; Edward starts an affair, grows bored, ends the affair, and then begins another.

It is only at the end of their lives that Edward and Florence discover the value of prolonged intimacy between two people and only two people. For Florence, this realization occurs during her affair with Edward. She finds herself in love with Edward and cannot stand the fact that he is courting yet another woman. As a result of Edward’s philandering, she ends her life. Later in the novel, Edward finds himself in a similar situation. He loves Nancy Rufford but knows he cannot be with her. As a result of his tragic circumstances, Edward also ends his life.

However, although it does not endorse Edward and Florence’s infidelities, the novel doesn’t praise traditional marriage, either. After all, Edward and Florence only found people who they truly loved by ignoring the rules set down by marriage. Additionally, those who do not violate the boundaries of marriage are also symbolically punished in the story. Nancy’s fate is especially cruel, as she did everything she could to avoid ruining a marriage but suffers a mental breakdown as a direct result. Ultimately, then, the novel does not provide a definitive moral statement on marriage and infidelity. Rather, it examines the state of male/female relationships and questions whether marriage is still a worthwhile institution at the beginning of the 20th century.



THE MANIPULATION OF REALITY

The Good Soldier is a completely different book depending on how one chooses to interpret it. If one takes John Dowell at his word, he is the victim whose life is full of tragedy. If one assumes that John’s narration is unreliable, he can be read as a murderer who swindled Florence and her family out of a great deal of money. Furthermore, in addition to these two options, there are many interpretations of the novel that could fall somewhere in between.

Regardless of how one looks at the story, it is clear that manipulation is omnipresent. If one takes John at his word, then most of the main characters manipulate one another at some point: Florence and Edward constantly manipulate their partners to engage in affairs; Leonora manipulates Edward and Nancy’s feelings toward one another; Florence tricks John into thinking she has a heart defect and therefore can’t risk having sex with him.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MARRIAGE AND INFIDELITY

At the center of *The Good Soldier* are two marriages—one between John and Florence Dowell, the other between Edward and Leonora Ashburnham. Although marriage is recognized as a valuable institution by John and Leonora, it is completely disregarded by their respective spouses Florence and Edward. Throughout the course of the story, Florence and Edward partake in multiple extramarital affairs, including one with each other. These affairs give Florence and Edward their vitality, as both characters feel the most alive when cheating on their partners. In this way, the concept of marriage does provide some utility for Florence and Edward because they revel in flouting it. This is particularly true of Edward, who cannot help but begin a new affair as soon as the last one ends, no matter how destructive

However, because John narrates the story, it is possible that he's done some manipulation of his own. For instance, it is convenient that he is the only person present for the two deaths that occur in the story. It is also convenient that Florence's Uncle John died only a few days before Florence herself, allowing John to inherit over a million dollars. Of course, these facts could be coincidences. However, they could also be lies. *The Good Soldier* never tilts its hand too heavily in one direction or the other. Like many narrators, John is unreliable, but just how unreliable is he? The reader cannot definitively answer this question. However, it can be said that one reason *The Good Soldier* thematizes manipulation is to sow the seeds of paranoia and doubt in the reader's mind. As such, this theme becomes a reading method, and both the theme and the method reinforce one another. The more one reads about characters being manipulated, the more one has the sense that one is being manipulated; the more one has the sense that one is being manipulated, the more manipulation one tends to find in the story.



CLASS AND TRADITIONAL MORALITY

Throughout the novel, John Dowell regularly makes use of the phrase “good people,” often to describe Edward and Leonora. However, it is difficult to apply this phrase to Edward and Leonora and still have it make sense. According to John's version of events, Edward and Leonora constantly lie to one another. Edward regularly carries on affairs behind Leonora's back and for much of the novel Leonora despises her husband. Meanwhile, Leonora acts selfishly toward everyone who isn't Edward. She gets angry any time Edward gives money to the poor and she essentially blames Edward's suicide on Nancy.

When taking all of these actions into account, it is difficult to see how Edward and Leonora could be described as “good people.” That is, until Nancy uses the phrase—or, at least, the phrase is used by John on her behalf—later in the novel. Toward the end of the novel, Nancy looks at a newspaper article, which describes the relationship of a couple she knows. Nancy thinks of the couple as “good people” because they are well off; however, the article describes a relationship full of alcoholism, infidelity, and violence. Therefore, it appears that Nancy associates the idea of “goodness” with those who are high class. By virtue of being rich, having resources, and carrying oneself in a particular way, one can affect the appearance of “goodness,” even if one does not act “good” in any meaningful sense of the word. As such, *The Good Soldier* depicts a world where the link between wealth and traditional morality has become blurred, while simultaneously demonstrating just how absurd that conflation is.



RELIGION

Religion is constantly in the background of *The Good Soldier* and there are several moments where it comes to the forefront. Although religion does not provide its central characters with moral scruples, it does still give them a certain cultural cache, which they feel attached to; in other words, characters use religion to be seen as “good people” in the eyes of their peers. Additionally, one's religion is closely linked to one's nationality, both of which carry certain assumptions about one's character. This dynamic between religion and identity is most apparent in the scene where the two couples travel to M—. In M—, Florence, who is a Protestant, reads Martin Luther's Protest and acts as though it adds value to her identity as a Protestant. She then uses the Protest to feel superior to Leonora, who is an Irish Catholic, arguing that the piece of paper makes Protestants “honest, sober, industrious, provident, and clean-lived”—unlike Catholics like Leonora, who (according to Florence) lack these traits. In this scene, Florence does not think about or cite particular Protestant beliefs that would suggest her superiority, she simply feels superior because of the identity itself. Florence, though American, is descended from an old English family and she sees Englishness as a fundamental part of her identity.

Later in the novel, John says that Edward and Leonora regularly argued over which denomination they would raise their potential children. Both felt that their respective religious upbringings were crucial to their identities and wanted their children to follow in their footsteps. Ironically, Edward and Leonora don't even end up having children, rendering their argument a performative display of cultural values rather than a substantive matter of belief. Given these examples, it is clear that religion is still alive and well in the characters' minds. However, rather than providing these characters with a strict set of beliefs and morals, religion gives them a stable sense of their sociocultural and national identities.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



WEAK HEARTS

In *The Good Soldier*, weak hearts represent moral failure, particularly regarding infidelity. At the beginning of the novel, John tells the reader that Florence and Edward both suffer from heart conditions, which is why they must spend several months of the year relaxing in Nauheim. At this point in the story, Florence and Edward's weak hearts are nothing more than physical conditions. However, as the novel develops and John reveals that Florence and Edward are having an affair with each other, the symbolic significance of

their weak hearts deepens. Traditionally, the heart is the organ most associated with love and passion, and the novel builds on these associations. Because Florence and Edward's hearts are weak, they are willing to abandon John and Leonora in favor of each other. Eventually, John reveals that neither Florence nor Edward has a genuine heart condition—both faked their conditions for their own benefit. As such, by the end of the story, the symbol of the weak heart loses its literal significance in favor of pure metaphor. Although Florence and Edward do not have hearts that are literally weak, they do have hearts that are symbolically weak. Their weak hearts lead to both the destruction of their marriages and the termination of their own lives (both characters eventually die by suicide).



MARTIN LUTHER'S PROTEST

In *The Good Soldier*, Martin Luther's Protest demonstrates the cultural gap between Florence and Leonora while simultaneously representing a rejection of conventional ideas about marriage and fidelity. Historically, the Protest was written to separate the beliefs of Protestants from Catholics, and, in effect, it brought about the fracturing of Christianity. In *The Good Soldier*, Edward, Leonora, Florence, and John take a trip to view the Protest. While looking at it, Florence discusses its historical importance and says that it is responsible for creating "honest, sober, and industrious" people like herself. In praising English Protestants, she also insults Irish Catholics, a group she knows Leonora belongs to. In addition, Florence takes this moment to touch Edward's wrist, which reveals to Leonora that Florence and Edward are having an affair. This instance of physical contact, combined with the presence of the Protest, suggests that Florence is creating a division of her own. Like Martin Luther, she rejects what came before—in this case traditional ideas about fidelity—and, in turn, creates division. Her actions here lead to the fracturing of both marriages and turn conventional morality of its head.

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This sentence is the opening line of the novel. Originally, Ford Madox Ford was going to call this book "The Saddest Story." However, his publisher convinced him to pick a different title. This line is significant because it sets the tone for everything that follows it. Once one has finished the novel, it is difficult not to notice the peculiarity of John's phrasing. He describes the story as something he's "heard" rather than something he was a part of. Though it is true that other people related parts of the story to John, certain John was present for all of the tragic events he describes in the story. As such, it seems that this opening line is John's attempt to distance himself from the story. This is significant because depending on how one interprets the novel, John is a tragic victim of circumstance or a vengeful killer. If the former is true, then these opening lines could suggest that he is attempting to psychologically distance himself from the events of the story because they are too much to bear. However, if the latter is true, then it seems John is trying to manipulate the reader into thinking he had nothing to do with the tragedy that unfolded.

☹️ I don't know. And there is nothing to guide us. And if everything is so nebulous about a matter so elementary as the morals of sex, what is there to guide us in the more subtle morality of all other personal contacts, associations, and activities? Or are we meant to act on impulse alone? It is all a darkness.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the end of Part 1, Chapter 1, as John reflects on what has become of morality in the modern world. Here, he suggests that if society cannot agree on "the morals of sex"—which are fundamental to human interaction—then morality itself is a hopeless pursuit. As with everything John says, this quote could be taken one of two ways. On the one hand, John is reflecting a very real anxiety that the western world felt at the dawn of the 20th century. Indeed, moral standards surrounding sexual interaction became laxer as the 20th century progressed, which caused a moral panic in many social and intellectual circles. If the reader interprets John as a manipulative



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Warbler Classics edition of *The Good Soldier* published in 2021.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

☹️ This is the saddest story I have ever heard.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker)

Related Themes: 


murderer who will do anything for money and revenge, then this quote could be his attempt to justify his own immoral actions. In other words, he could be suggesting that if society is no longer morally policing sex, then his non-sexual crimes ought to be permissible too.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ I don't know how it is best to put this thing down—whether it would be better to try and tell the story from the beginning, as if it were a story; or whether to tell it from this distance of time, as it reached me from the lips of Leonora or from those of Edward himself.

So I shall just imagine myself for a fortnight or so at one side of the fireplace of a country cottage, with a sympathetic soul opposite me.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell, Edward Ashburnham

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the beginning of Part 1, Chapter 2, as John takes a moment to reset and explain to the reader his purpose for telling this story. John's indecisiveness regarding the proper way to tell this story is something he will return to throughout the novel. Evidently, he never decides on a proper way to tell the tale because he jumps back and forth in time and often retells important events with varying degrees of detail. If one is being uncharitable to John, one could argue that he tells the story in a confusing manner on purpose to hide his own guilt. For instance, if John *did* kill Edward, then it makes sense for him to narrate that chapter as far away from John's discovery of Florence's affair with Edward as possible. However, in reality, the two events—that is, John's discovery of the affair and Edward's untimely death—occur close together. If narrated in chronological order, the possibility that John is a murderer seems more obvious. Similarly, John's request for "a sympathetic soul" suggests that he wants someone who will listen to him without questioning the events he sets forth. Put together, these narrative strategies and rhetorical gestures suggest that John is hiding something.

☝ I inherited his money because Florence died five days after him. I wish I hadn't. It was a great worry. I had to go out to Waterbury just after Florence's death because the poor dear old fellow had left a good many charitable bequests and I had to appoint trustees. I didn't like the idea of their not being properly handled.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell, Uncle John

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is the first time in the novel where John reveals that he inherited a great deal of money in the aftermath of Florence's death. Elsewhere, he will reveal that Florence's family fortune made him a millionaire. This passage is important because it provides evidence that John may have murdered Florence. Although he claims Florence died by suicide, John has much to gain from her death. In particular, it is suspicious that Florence died only a few days after her Uncle John.



For John's story to add up, a lot of coincidences must have occurred, and this is one of the most striking coincidences. If John did murder Florence for her money, then it would make sense that he did so right after the death of her uncle. Otherwise, there is a chance that Florence could have escaped with Edward. Here and elsewhere, John's words tend to seem phony and intentionally misleading. For instance, in this passage he speaks of the money as though it is a great burden—when in reality, the money has just made a millionaire. Of course, the reader can't know any of this for sure, so it is possible that everything occurred just as John says it did. However, for readers looking for evidence of John's guilt, this is one of the more damning passages.


Part 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ Yes, that is how I most exactly remember her, in that dress, in that hat, looking over her shoulder at me so that the eyes flashed very blue—dark pebble blue...

And, what the devil! For whose benefit did she do it? For that of the bath attendant? of the passers-by? I don't know. Anyhow, it can't have been for me, for never, in all the years of her life, never on any possible occasion, or in any other place did she so smile to me, mockingly, invitingly. Ah, she was a riddle; but then, all other women are riddles.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 


Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as John is walking Florence to a hot bath. Before she leaves his side, she turns around and gives him a glance that startles him. Evidently, the look is of a sexual nature, which is shocking to John. This is the first moment in the novel where John alludes to the fact that the Dowells do not have a sex life. Later, it will be revealed that they do not have sex because of Florence's weak heart. However, because Florence's heart problem is fake, the glance she gives John (assuming he interprets it correctly) is a cruel tease. Even thinking about the look enrages John. In retrospect, it is clear that John is sexually frustrated, and this frustration is especially irritating because it is unnecessary. Although there is plenty to criticize John for, if his descriptions of how Florence treats him are accurate, then this is a moment in the story where he deserves at least some sympathy.

☞ Good God, what did they all see in him? for I swear there was all there was of him, inside and out; though they said he was a good soldier. Yet, Leonora adored him with a passion that was like an agony, and hated him with an agony that was as bitter as the sea. How could he arouse anything like a sentiment, in anybody?

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell, Edward Ashburnham

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 18


Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from John's description of the first time he met Edward, although his thoughts here are largely retrospective. Throughout the novel, John tends to defend Edward, even though he has plenty of reasons to hate the man. However, in this case he is more vitriolic. Although John regularly describes Edward as a sentimentalist, here he suggests that Edward couldn't "arouse anything like a

sentiment." In other words, this description runs completely contrary to the characterization of Edward that John provides elsewhere. The main reason for John's anger is that he is jealous of Edward's ability to attract women. When John asks, "what did they all see in him?" he is not referring to people in general; rather, he is thinking specifically of women. Over the course of the novel, Edward has sex with numerous women—including John's wife—and John has sex with none. Because of this, John seems to have built up some resentment toward Edward that he will mostly hide for the rest of the story.

☞ I loved Leonora always and, today, I would very cheerfully lay down my life, what is left of it, in her service. But I am sure I never had the beginnings of a trace of what is called the sex instinct towards her. And I suppose—no I am certain that she never had it towards me.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Leonora Ashburnham

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 21-22



Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes shortly after John describes his first dinner with Edward in Leonora. Here, John returns to the present day and describes his relationship with Leonora. As with everything John says, readers should regard his assertions here with some skepticism. If one wants to take an uncharitable reading of John, one might say that he tends to overstate his case, so much so that it feels more likely that the opposite of what he is saying could be true. Here, for instance, John insists that he is not sexually attracted to Leonora. However, one might question why he even brings up this point at all. There is no reason to—unless John is trying to hide something—and it isn't something he does when discussing his relationships with other female characters. Furthermore, John asserts that he knows for a fact that Leonora is not attracted to him. But how would he that for certain unless the topic had come up? This suggests that John might have sexually propositioned Leonora at some point, but she rejected him.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ It really worried poor Florence that she couldn't, in matters of culture, ever get the better of Leonora. I don't know what Leonora knew or what she didn't know, but certainly she was always there whenever Florence brought out any information. And she gave, somehow, the impression of really knowing what poor Florence gave the impression of having only picked up.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell, Edward Ashburnham, Leonora Ashburnham

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis


This quote comes from John's description of the Ashburnhams' and the Dowells' trip to Prussia. It is significant because it details the rivalry that popped up between Leonora and Florence. Although Leonora and Florence generally act friendly to one another, their relationship is filled with tension. This quote suggests that Florence feels intellectually inferior to Leonora—and that Leonora likes to rub that fact in Florence's face. At this point, Leonora does not know that Florence is having an affair with Edward, so her actions are petty rather than they are spiteful. Throughout the novel, Leonora continues to be the most intellectually capable character despite her modest background. Because Leonora did not grow up with much wealth, she has compensated by educating herself to an impressive degree. However, this strength only adds to Florence's insecurity and ultimately emboldens her to reveal her affair with Edward, which will flip the power dynamic of their relationship on its head.

☞ She continued, looking up into Captain Ashburnham's eyes: "It's because of that piece of paper that you're honest, sober, industrious, provident, and clean-lived. If it weren't for that piece of paper you'd be like the Irish or the Italians or the Poles, but particularly the Irish..."

And she laid one finger upon Captain Ashburnham's wrist.

Related Characters: John Dowell, Florence Dowell (speaker), Edward Ashburnham, Leonora Ashburnham

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the Ashburnhams' and the Dowells' trip to Prussia. While in Prussia, the couples look at Martin Luther's Protest, an important historical document that led to the separation of Protestantism from Catholicism. Florence is a proud Protestant, and she takes this opportunity to insult Leonora, who she knows is an Irish Catholic. At the same time, she touches Edward's wrist, a gesture suggesting physical intimacy, which Leonora correctly interprets as a sign of Edward and Florence's affair. Symbolically, Martin Luther's Protest is a fitting document for Ford to include. Just as the Protest influenced Protestants to break away from Catholicism, Florence's actions in this scene create a schism between the main characters. Although John is still in the dark about the affair—or at least he claims to be—Edward, Florence, and Leonora all dramatically change how they interact with one another. Ultimately, the affair drives a wedge between the Ashburnhams that destroys their relationship.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ But just think of that poor wretch.... I, who have surely the right, beg you to think of that poor wretch. Is it possible that such a luckless devil should be so tormented by blind and inscrutable destiny? For there is no other way to think of it. None. I have the right to say it, since for years he was my wife's lover, since he killed her, since he broke up all the pleasantnesses that there were in my life. There is no priest that has the right to tell me that I must not ask pity for him, from you, silent listener beyond the hearth-stone, from the world, or from the God who created in him those desires, those madnesses....

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell, Edward Ashburnham

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis



This quote is one of John's many impassioned defenses of Edward. It comes as John is listing Edward's past affairs before meeting the Dowells and is one example of the many instances where it feels like John is trying too hard to be charitable to Edward, to the point of disingenuousness. After all, Edward carried on an affair with John's wife; John has every reason to hate this man, but instead he often

resorts to asides such as this one. Although John considers Edward a “poor wretch,” he is happy to openly disparage Florence and does so freely throughout the story. Although John occasionally employs some harsh words for Edward, generally his comments are overly sympathetic and forgiving. This should make readers consider why John would be so kind to someone who has wronged him. One possibility is that he pays Edward excessive compliments and makes excuses for him in order to discourage the interpretation that Edward’s suicide was in fact a murder that John committed.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ You ask how it feels to be a deceived husband. Just Heavens, I do not know. It feels just nothing at all. It is not Hell, certainly it is not necessarily Heaven. So I suppose it is the intermediate stage. What do they call it? Limbo. No, I feel nothing at all about that. They are dead; they have gone before their Judge who, I hope, will open to them the springs of His compassion.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell, Edward Ashburnham

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, John reflects on what it felt like to be tricked by Edward and Florence, who were having an affair. His reaction to learning about the affair is similar to many of his reactions to dramatic events throughout the novel—that is, he mostly responds with indifference. The state of “limbo” he describes here is very similar to his mindset when he finds Florence’s corpse and watches Edward commit suicide. John seems to think that his reaction is appropriate and not a cause for concern. However, even if the reader takes him at his word and assumes he describes each of these instances accurately, John does not come out of them looking good. His behavior is sociopathic; he doesn’t care that his wife and friend are dead. All he has are empty gestures toward God’s judgment, even though religion matters little to him. Of course, a less charitable reading of John would suggest that he killed both Edward and Florence, which would explain his indifference to their affair and their subsequent deaths

☝☝ And, do you know, at the thought of that intense solitude I feel an overwhelming desire to rush forward and comfort her. You cannot, you see, have acted as nurse to a person for twelve years without wishing to go on nursing them, even though you hate them with the hatred of the adder, and even in the palm of God. But, in the nights, with that vision of judgement before me, I know that I hold myself back. For I hate Florence. I hate Florence with such a hatred that I would not spare her an eternity of loneliness. She need not have done what she did. She was an American, a New Englander. She had not the hot passions of these Europeans.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

This is the first time that John lets some of his true feelings about Florence begin to slip out. Previously, John was careful to never say anything too negative about his wife. Although he implied that she was to blame for their circumstances, he never expressed outright contempt for her. Here, however, he speaks honestly, and his feelings only get more intense as the novel continues. One notable element of this passage is the distinction it creates between Americans and Europeans. Here, John states that Europeans are more sexual in nature, implying that they are more prone to having affairs. Meanwhile, he presents Americans as relatively sexless. Whether John actually thinks this distinction has merit is unclear, but it does fit with the stereotypes about Americans and Europeans that were present in the early 20th century. Ironically, this quote reveals that John is quite passionate himself, although he often keeps his feelings bottled up behind his careful, often misleading rhetoric.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ Well, Julius was so overcome with grief at being left behind that he must needs go and drop the precious grip. I saw red, I saw purple. I flew at Julius. On the ferry, it was, I filled up one of his eyes; I threatened to strangle him. And, since an unresisting negro can make a deplorable noise and a deplorable spectacle, and, since that was Florence’s first adventure in the married state, she got a pretty idea of my character. It affirmed in her the desperate resolve to conceal from me the fact that she was not what she would have called “a pure woman.” For that was really the mainspring of her fantastic actions. She was afraid that I should murder her....

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell, Edward Ashburnham, Leonora Ashburnham, Julius

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 65-66

Explanation and Analysis



This passage comes from John's narration of the day after his wedding night. Julius is John's Black servant who is carrying a suitcase, which John thinks contains medicine for Florence's heart. Ironically, Florence made up her heart condition, so John's sudden outburst of violence is even more unnecessary than it seems. For someone who claims that he is a morally upstanding member of society, John's actions here are rather shocking; he exhibits a capacity for violence, which scares Florence and calls his future claims into question. In particular, this passage suggests that John is capable of having murdered both Florence and Edward to get revenge.

However, this passage isn't definitive proof, as it highlights one inconsistency that would work against this theory. Here, John claims that Florence is deathly afraid of him, so much so that she would not admit to him that she was not a virgin when they married. However, while in Europe, Florence does not put much effort into hiding her affair with Edward. Leonora discovers it almost immediately and is shocked that John never pieces it together. If Florence really did think John would murder her for a much lesser crime, then her conduct with Edward does not make much sense.

Part 2, Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ A long time afterwards I pulled myself out of the lounge and went up to Florence's room. She had not locked the door—for the first time of our married life. She was lying, quite respectably arranged, unlike Mrs. Maidan, on her bed. She had a little phial that rightly should have contained nitrate of amyl, in her right hand. That was on the 4th of August, 1913.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell, Edward Ashburnham

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the end of Part 2, Chapter 2, and it describes John discovering Florence's corpse. Previously,

John had witnessed Florence run into their hotel, clutching her heart. Despite knowing his wife has a heart problem, John does not go and check on her until "a long time afterwards." When John finds Florence, she is dead and holding a "phial" (vial) in her hand. According to John, the phial is supposed to contain Florence's heart medication, but the implication here is that it actually contained poison, which Florence consumed to kill herself.

John's version of events in this scene is suspect for a few reasons. First, it seems unlikely that Florence would "respectably" arrange *herself* to commit suicide—instead, John's phrasing suggests that someone else staged Florence's "suicide," arranging the body to make the scene more believable. Second, as is the case with Edward's death, John is the only witness, and John is a difficult person to trust. Ultimately, it comes down to what seems more likely. Did Florence kill herself because she discovered Edward was interested in another woman? Or is it more likely that John killed Florence to get revenge on her for her infidelity and so he could inherit her fortune? Ultimately, it's up to readers to decide which scenario is more convincing.


Part 3, Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ I must have talked in an odd way, as people do who are recovering from an anaesthetic. It is as if one had a dual personality, the one I being entirely unconscious of the other. I had thought nothing; I had said such an extraordinary thing.

I don't know that analysis of my own psychology matters at all to this story. I should say that it didn't or, at any rate, that I had given enough of it. But that odd remark of mine had a strong influence upon what came after. I mean, that Leonora would probably never have spoken to me at all about Florence's relations with Edward if I hadn't said, two hours after my wife's death:

"Now I can marry the girl."

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell, Nancy Rufford

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis


This quote comes from the beginning of Part 3, Chapter 1, as John is describing the aftermath of Florence's death. Here, John tries to present himself as a grieving husband who is out of his mind and doesn't know what he is saying. He chalks up his confusion to a remarkable psychological

phenomenon and nothing more. This is a tactic John uses throughout the story. At the time of the book's initial publication, human psychology was in its infancy, and John uses this new science to justify improbable actions. Perhaps it is true that John is traumatized and only mentions marrying "the girl" (Nancy) because he is in shock. However, what seems more likely is that he's wanted to marry Nancy all along. In fact, if he did kill Florence, then his desire to marry Nancy could be yet another motivation of his list. Additionally, it is worth noting that this sudden desire to marry Nancy is not a fleeting thought. Rather, it is a course of action that John pursues throughout the second half of the novel.

Part 3, Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ I don't know why they never had any children—not that I really believe that children would have made any difference. The dissimilarity of Edward and Leonora was too profound. It will give you some idea of the extraordinary naïveté of Edward Ashburnham that, at the time of his marriage and for perhaps a couple of years after, he did not really know how children are produced. Neither did Leonora. I don't mean to say that this state of things continued, but there it was. I dare say it had a good deal of influence on their mentalities. At any rate, they never had a child. It was the Will of God.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Edward Ashburnham, Leonora Ashburnham

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 104-105

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the portion of John's narrative dedicated to fleshing out Edward and Leonora's background. This passage highlights the large cultural shift that occurred in the early years of the 20th century regarding sexual mores. Edward and Leonora did not know how children are produced because they are products of the 19th century, a time known for its prudishness regarding sexual matters. However, Edward and Leonora came of age in a time of unprecedented sexual liberation. Although Leonora resists the urge to stray from her marriage, Edward turns himself into a full-fledged libertine and all but abandons Leonora.


The fracturing of the Ashburnhams' marriage leads to a childless existence and, eventually, feelings of deep loneliness and regret. Everything in this novel regarding sex, marriage, and the erosion of traditional values encapsulates

a real cultural anxiety that consumed western culture in the early decades of the 20th century. Conservative voices feared that lax attitudes toward sex would lead to situations like Edward and Leonora's, and while Ford's book does not necessarily endorse these ideas, it does not challenge them either.

Part 3, Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ 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 natures—here, then, were two noble natures, drifting down life, like fireships afloat on a lagoon and causing miseries, heartaches, 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.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Edward Ashburnham, Leonora Ashburnham

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Before delving into the last part of the story, John takes time to reflect on the larger purpose of the tale once again he is telling. Here, he distinguishes his story from anything that might be called a "tragedy." He doesn't feel that his story rises to the level of a tragedy because it is far less dramatic in nature; there are no metaphysical forces trying to rip Edward and Leonora apart. Rather, their relationship continues to fall apart for no reason that John can discern.

As he nears the end of his story, John doesn't seem to have gained new insight from telling it. Instead, he returns to the same phrase he used at the beginning of the novel: "it is all a darkness." Evidently, John cannot draw a lesson from the tale he has told. This suggests that he doesn't know what anyone could have done differently to stop this sad story from happening. However, John's conclusion seems disingenuous or, at the very least, too charitable to Edward. There are simple lessons one could draw from the Ashburnhams' story regarding fidelity. However, John avoids coming to such conclusions.

Part 4, Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ And, when one discusses an affair—a long, sad affair—one goes back, one goes forward. One remembers points that one has forgotten and one explains them all the more minutely since one recognizes that one has forgotten to mention them in their proper places and that one may have given, by omitting them, a false impression. I console myself with thinking that this is a real story and that, after all, real stories are probably told best in the way a person telling a story would tell them. They will then seem most real.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell, Edward Ashburnham

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 131



Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, John reflects on his method of storytelling. As he openly admits, he doesn't tell his story in chronological order. Not only that, but he often narrates certain events more than once with varying degrees of detail. John claims that this is the proper way to tell the story in order to make it seem human and real. Depending on John's reason for telling the story in the first place, this could be understood as a noble cause. A charitable reading of John would say that he told the story this way because it was the best way to represent human nature and psychology. He wants to give proper impressions of what occurred while also speaking accurately.

However, there is also another way to interpret John's narrative technique: that it is yet another way for him to manipulate the reader. Perhaps John tells events in a certain order to obscure his own intentions and motivations. For instance, he narrates Edward's death long after he discovers that Edward had sex with Florence. However, in reality, these events occurred close together—a fact John seems intentionally to obscure. One reason to place them chronologically far apart in the narrative is to dissuade the reader from speculating that John murdered Edward as an act of vengeance for Edward's affair with Florence.

☞ And the longer I think about them the more certain I become that Florence was a contaminating influence—she depressed and deteriorated poor Edward; she deteriorated, hopelessly, the miserable Leonora. There is no doubt that she caused Leonora's character to deteriorate.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell, Edward Ashburnham

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as John once again reevaluates Florence's position in the story he is telling. As the novel progresses, John blames Florence more and more. At first, he describes her as rather innocent, then he claims she is guilty and that he hates her, and now he blames her more than anyone else. On the one hand, John's opinion is reasonable. He has plenty of reasons to be angry with Florence, all of which are understandable. However, the problem is that John is inconsistent with how he discusses Florence, and it makes him seem like a liar.

John acts as though he—like the reader—is coming to the events of the novel for the first time. However, in reality, he lived through the events he narrates and has presumably had plenty of time to come to terms with what Florence has done to him. As such, his claim that he is just now coming to terms with how much of “a contaminating influence” Florence was seems disingenuous. Of course, John's accusations toward Florence would be easier to accept if he displayed a similar level of contempt for Edward. However, as always, he continues to pity Edward and throw little to no blame his way.

☞ I have told you, I think, that Edward spent a great deal of time, and about two hundred pounds for law fees on getting a poor girl, the daughter of one of his gardeners, acquitted of a charge of murdering her baby. That was positively the last act of Edward's life. It came at a time when Nancy Rufford was on her way to India; when the most horrible gloom was over the household; when Edward himself was in an agony and behaving as prettily as he knew how. Yet even then Leonora made him a terrible scene about this expenditure of time and trouble. She sort of had the vague idea that what had passed with the girl and the rest of it ought to have taught Edward a lesson—the lesson of economy. She threatened to take his banking account away from him again. I guess that made him cut his throat.

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence Dowell, Edward Ashburnham, Leonora Ashburnham, Nancy Rufford

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis


This quote comes at the end of Part 4, Chapter 1 and reveals how Edward killed himself without going into explicit detail. John will return to Edward's suicide at the end of the novel, but for now this is all the detail he provides. John's description in this chapter provides crucial insights into Edward and Leonora's relationship toward the end of Edward's life. Leading up to Edward's death, Leonora and Edward lost all love for one another. Neither one respected the other's positive qualities. For instance, although there is plenty to criticize Edward for, Leonora constantly faults him for his charitable efforts—such as paying law fees for a poor girl—even though they are genuinely commendable. Meanwhile, Edward has no respect for Leonora's financial prowess. Leonora single-handedly saved Edward's fortune for disappearing completely. However, Edward is too distracted by the way Leonora infantilizes him to care. This description of the Ashburnhams' marriage is disturbing, and it provides a much better rationale for suicide than John's earlier claims about Florence's death.

Part 4, Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ “This is the most atrocious thing you have done in your atrocious life.” He never moved and he never looked at her. God knows what was in Leonora's mind exactly.

I like to think that, uppermost in it was concern and horror at the thought of the poor girl's going back to a father whose voice made her shriek in the night. And, indeed, that motive was very strong with Leonora. But I think there was also present the thought that she wanted to go on torturing Edward with the girl's presence. She was, at that time, capable of that.

Related Characters: John Dowell, Leonora Ashburnham (speaker), Edward Ashburnham, Nancy Rufford

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a conversation between Leonora, Edward, and Nancy. Leonora is angry with Edward because he has suggested to Nancy that she return to India to live with her father. Edward thinks he is doing the right thing for everyone by sending Nancy away, but Leonora can only interpret it as a selfish act. Indeed, Edward is being


somewhat selfish. He knows Nancy's father is abusive and doesn't take that fact into account when making his decision. However, Leonora's response reads as an uncharitable overreaction.

Although there is some selfishness to Edward's decision, there is a great deal of sacrifice as well. Edward loves Nancy and knows that might die without her. In fact, if his suicide is genuine, he may already have planned it and doesn't want Nancy around to witness it. Meanwhile, Leonora has shifted into as much of a villain as Edward. Although she wants to fix her marriage, she seems to have given up and has decided on torturing Edward instead.

Part 4, Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ Yet there it was—in black and white. Mr. Brand drank; Mr. Brand had struck Mrs. Brand to the ground when he was drunk. Mr. Brand was adjudged, in two or three abrupt words, at the end of columns and columns of paper, to have been guilty of cruelty to his wife and to have committed adultery with Miss Lupton. The last words conveyed nothing to Nancy—nothing real, that is to say. She knew that one was commanded not to commit adultery—but why, she thought, should one? It was probably something like catching salmon out of season—a thing one did not do. She gathered it had something to do with kissing, or holding some one in your arms[.]

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Nancy Rufford

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 156-157

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a moment where Nancy is reading a newspaper and sees some disturbing information about people she knows. Before picking up the newspaper, Nancy was a naïve and innocent young woman. She had no idea about the true nature of the Ashburnhams' relationship. In fact, she doesn't even know what adultery is after reading the newspaper; sex is a foreign concept to her. However, even though Nancy doesn't piece everything together in a single moment, the newspaper is a significant step that makes her realize that something is deeply wrong in the Ashburnham residence. After reading about the Brands, Nancy realizes that there is no guarantee that her friends and family are “good people” just because they are upper class and know how to conduct themselves in public. The reality of most situations and relationships involving adults is much more complicated than what appears on the surface; here, Nancy digs beneath that superficial outer

layer. The moment marks a significant step in her coming of age and marks the beginning of the end for her relationship with the Ashburnhams.

Part 4, Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ “He is going to telephone to your mother,” Leonora said. “He will make it all right for her.” She got up and closed the door. She came back to the fire, and added bitterly: “He can always make it all right for everybody, except me—excepting me!”

Related Characters: Leonora Ashburnham (speaker), Edward Ashburnham, Nancy Rufford

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a conversation between Leonora and Nancy. Nancy has come to Leonora to tell her that she is leaving to be with her mother because her mother has fallen on hard times. Evidently, Edward has stepped in to rectify the situation in a manner that is lifesaving for Nancy’s mother, even if it enrages Leonora. Leonora’s words in this moment indicate the fundamental problem she has in her relationship with Edward. Ever since they were married, Edward always put everyone else’s problems in front of hers. This is true of how he uses his money, his body, and his time. After his first affair, the only attention Edward gives to Leonora occurs in public. In private, the two rarely speak to each other, often because Edward is having an affair with another woman. Clearly, Leonora does not feel that he does anything to satisfy her needs. While this is true, Leonora doesn’t do herself any favors by screaming at Nancy, who is simply concerned for her mother’s wellbeing.

Part 4, Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ For I can’t conceal from myself the fact that I loved Edward Ashburnham—and that I love him because he was just myself. If I had had the courage and virility and possibly also the physique of Edward Ashburnham I should, I fancy, have done much what he did. He seems to me like a large elder brother who took me out on several excursions and did many dashing things whilst I just watched him robbing the orchards, from a distance. And, you see, I am just as much of a sentimentalist as he was...

Related Characters: John Dowell (speaker), Florence

Dowell, Edward Ashburnham

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of John’s final reflection on Edward before he narrates his suicide. Once again, John’s attitude toward Edward is overwhelming positive in a way that is difficult to fathom considering everything Edward has done to him. This final reflection, specifically because of its mentions of love, virility, and physique, introduce a homoerotic subtext to Edward and John’s relationship.

Although such an interpretation of the novel would cause other narrative inconsistencies—as all interpretations of this novel do—the interpretation does answer some questions. For instance, it would explain why John constantly vilifies Florence while complimenting Edward. Another reason why John constantly compliments and provides excuses for Edward is because he murdered him and does not want to draw unwanted attention to himself. Here, he describes Edward as a “brother” and a fellow “sentimentalist.” None of this language hints at murder—which, ironically, is exactly why it hints at murder. Put differently, John’s description of Edward is too forgiving, too kind, and too naïve to be entirely believable.

☞ When he saw that I did not intend to interfere with him his eyes became soft and almost affectionate. He remarked: “So long, old man, I must have a bit of a rest, you know.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to say, “God bless you,” for I also am a sentimentalist. But I thought that perhaps that would not be quite English good form, so I trotted off with the telegram to Leonora. She was quite pleased with it.

Related Characters: John Dowell, Edward Ashburnham (speaker), Florence Dowell, Leonora Ashburnham, Nancy Rufford

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of the novel, John finally gives his description of Edward’s suicide. There are a few notable details in this description. First, despite knowing Edward’s intentions and despite claiming to love Edward like a

brother, John allows Edward to cut his own throat. At the time, the two of them are alone, and no one else is around to stop Edward. Second, after Edward is dead, John trots off, which is a rather nonchalant way of behaving following the suicide of a close friend. At the very least John is guilty of allowing his friend to die by suicide. A less sympathetic reading is that John killed Edward himself and is now doing

his best to cover it up. John's reason for wanting Edward dead is clear: Edward had sex with Florence. Because they are alone and because Edward is sad about Nancy's departure, John has the perfect circumstances to make a murder look like a suicide. However, whether this is actually what happened is a question that readers must answer for themselves.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

The narrator, John Dowell, promises to tell the saddest story he's ever heard. The story relates to the narrator, his wife Florence (who is now dead), and the Ashburnhams, another married couple. John and Florence are Americans, while the Ashburnhams—Edward and Leonora—are English. Although the narrator has known English people for a long time, he is only now realizing that he's never known an Englishman or an Englishwoman on a deep level, including his friends, the Ashburnhams.

Both Florence and Edward Ashburnham have **heart problems**. Florence's issues are the result of a difficult sea voyage, while Edward's came from competitive sports. Both the Dowells and the Ashburnhams always travel to Nauheim from July to September because the trip is supposed to help Florence's and Edward's heart conditions. While the trip certainly helps Edward, it is absolutely necessary for Florence's survival. John, Florence, Edward, and Leonora are all roughly the same age and come from notable families.

John says he wants to tell this sad story as a way of purging it from his mind. He compares his situation to the destruction of a city; things have fallen apart, and he is now keenly aware that nothing is permanent. John also likens the couples to a house with decaying supports and suggests that two members of the group, in particular, are to blame. Evidently, he does not consider himself one of the guilty parties, as he claims that he did not know about the decay until it was too late. Although John thought Florence was always by his side, now he realizes that she wasn't. He doesn't blame her for what's happened, but he implies that she is one of the two people responsible for the destruction of the group.

John Dowell, the narrator of The Good Soldier, is a notoriously unreliable narrator. John tells his story in non-chronological order and often hints at or explicitly comments on certain events before he actually narrates them. Rhetorically, this allows John to manipulate how the reader responds to these events when he narrates them later on. For instance, he frames his entire tale as "the saddest story" he knows. This framing makes the reader sympathetic to John and his story, even before any details have been provided. Indeed, read one way, John's story is incredibly sad for everyone involved, John included. However, read another way, as the reader will later see, the story is a great triumph for John—a triumph he wants to minimize.



In the 19th and early 20th centuries it was not uncommon for members of the upper class to spend significant portions of their year relaxing in temperate climates to treat any number of conditions.



John frames his story like a great tragedy, complete with melodramatic images of a crumbling empire. Such imagery allows John to manipulate reality in his favor, making readers sympathetic to his plight. According to this description, John is the victim in this great tragedy, while Florence is partially responsible for what has happened. John says he doesn't blame Florence, but this is a claim that readers should question as the novel progresses and more information comes to light.



John speaks highly of the Ashburnhams, who he considers morally upstanding members of society. Edward is a magistrate and “a first rate soldier” who you “could have trusted your wife with.” Meanwhile, Leonora is beautiful and entirely devoted to her husband. As proof of Leonora’s devotion, John tells a story that Leonora once told him, in which Leonora almost had an affair but called it off because the situation made her physically ill.

Even as John emphasizes the strong moral character of the Ashburnhams, he is criticizing exactly what he claims to praise. Though his description of Edward as someone you “could have trusted your wife with” reads like a compliment, the fact that John delivers it in the past tense suggests that this description is no longer true. Additionally, Leonora’s attempt at an affair, even if it didn’t come to fruition, is not the example someone would typically use to illustrate a friend’s moral sensibility—at least not if one is trying to provide a positive image of that person.



As for himself, John claims to be morally pure, both in thought and action. However, he wonders whether morality is just “a folly and a mockery.” From his present situation, he sees that the moral guidelines governing sex have broken down, and he worries that everything else will follow. After all, the rules governing sex are relatively straightforward and morality can get much more complicated in other areas. Hopelessly, John professes that morality “is all a darkness.”

John’s notion that morality “is all a darkness” echoes the anxieties that were present in England during the early 20th century. After the end of the Victorian era in 1901, social attitudes toward sex became laxer, resulting in a great deal of moral confusion. John’s worldview is particularly bleak—he seems to think that if the rules governing sex erode, then all of society could devolve into moral chaos. Of course, as with anything John says, there is always the possibility that he is lying, thus readers could view his claims of moral purity as suspect.



PART 1, CHAPTER 2

Before settling into the story proper, John wrestles with the appropriate way to frame it. He settles on imagining himself by a fireplace with “a sympathetic soul” willing to lend an ear. Feeling satisfied with this image, John begins describing Florence in more detail. Florence is a loquacious woman with a great mind; she loves traveling and talking about the history of any given area. However, her conversations are often one-sided because she is not a good listener.

John’s desire for “a sympathetic soul” suggests that he wants a listener who will pity him rather than question him. However, his description of Florence seems fair and honest. He primarily compliments her, and the one negative characteristic he describes is not damning. Although the reader never gets an objective look at Florence to see if John is telling the truth, there is nothing in this initial description that seems particularly biased.



Although John would prefer to visit the same places repeatedly, Florence only wants to go everywhere once. After a single trip, Florence feels she’s understood the essence of a place and is content to move on. Even though he feels differently, John thinks it is his duty to keep Florence happy so that her **heart** stays healthy; as such, he always does as Florence says. Additionally, John ensures that he never speaks to Florence about topics that might upset her such as politics.

Here and elsewhere, John paints himself as the perfect husband. He sacrifices his thoughts and feelings for the good of his ill wife.



Florence's closest relatives do not like John because they think he is lazy. John admits that he never feels the need to work but doesn't think it is an indictment on his character because he does not have to. He claims to have all the money that he will ever need. In sharp contrast, Florence's Uncle John worked all his life in a factory to ensure that his family had money. After being told by his doctor that he had a **heart condition**, Uncle John retired from his factory and spent the rest of his life traveling around the world.

Coincidentally, Uncle John died just five days prior to Florence herself. However, as it turns out, he did not have a **heart condition**. In the wake of these two deaths, John travels back to the United States to take care of Uncle John's will, as he is the new owner of the estate. Not long after returning to America, John gets a letter from Edward and Leonora asking him to visit them in England. John complies, and when he arrives in England, he finds that Leonora is happy, even though Edward is deeply upset about something.

PART 1, CHAPTER 3

John shifts his focus to August 1904, when he and Florence first met the Ashburnhams. At the time, Florence was routinely taking spa baths, and it was John's job to accompany her from their hotel to the bath. These walks bored John, who started counting his steps to amuse himself. One such morning, John remembers dropping Florence off at the spa and receiving a wanton look from her. Instantly, this look made him jealous because he didn't think it was for his benefit.

In the midst of boredom, John remembers meeting the Ashburnhams in the dining room of their hotel. Leonora and Florence were the first to become acquainted, and the two of them suggested that the couples have dinner together. As a result, Edward and John indulged their wives and got to know one another. John remembers that Edward's good looks immediately struck him. He also recalls Edward talking about how to get all of the best items a man can have, including clothing and alcohol.

In the present, John takes a moment to think about why women find Edward so attractive. John finds Edward too concerned with material objects to be interesting and he wonders how women could like such a boring man. He decides that it must be because Edward is a sentimentalist in the presence of women; that is, he acts like someone who upholds traditional values such as honesty, loyalty, and honor.

John never discusses his family in depth, nor does he reveal where his money came from. However, he is clearly wealthy because he never works and has money to travel around the world. As such, there is a sharp contrast between John and Florence's Uncle John. One is the product of hard work and self-reliance; the other has never worked a day in his life.



One question that will persist throughout the novel is whether the proximity of Uncle John and Florence's deaths is truly an accident. The huge financial boost John gains as a result of Florence's death is enough to cause suspicion.



John's response to Florence's look is peculiar. He assumes the look is not for his benefit despite the fact that she seems to have directed it at him. This suggests that John is not used to receiving sexual signals from his wife and, in turn, that their sex life is strained or non-existent.



Later, John will come back to this moment and reveal that the origin of the couples' relationship is not as innocent as it appears here. However, in this description, the Dowells and the Ashburnhams appear to enjoy one another's company.



Right after complimenting Edward, John immediately criticizes him. Perhaps John's criticism is genuine and doesn't entirely detract from his compliments. However, another interpretation would be that John is jealous of Edward and enjoys undermining him.



Returning to the first night he met the Ashburnhams, John remembers having mixed feelings about Leonora. Although beautiful, she is too pale for John's taste, and he cannot imagine ever being with her. He compares her skin to marble and says that kissing her would result in quite a cold feeling. He also recalls that Leonora gave him a strange look the first night they met, as though he was the one with the **heart condition** and not Florence. Nonetheless, he insists that he loves Leonora and would happily give his life for hers.

John is more reticent about the nature of his relationship with Leonora than he is with other characters. Although he claims he is not sexually attracted to her, there are moments later in the novel that would suggest otherwise. Also notable is this section is the strange look Leonora gives John. It is difficult to interpret the look at this moment in the story, although it is clear that something is off. On a structural level, it is worth noting that this chapter both begins and ends with a mysterious look from the main female characters.



PART 1, CHAPTER 4

John reminisces about the time the Dowells and the Ashburnhams spent together. For the most part, their excursions were full of peace and happiness. They went on trips together, threw parties, and enjoyed each other's company. In retrospect, John realizes that he should have spent more time getting to know the Ashburnhams intimately. Instead, he feels as though he wasted years of his life living a shallow existence.

All of John's relationships are shallow. Not only does he not get to know the Ashburnhams, but he also only ever engages in superficial conversations with Florence.



When the group travels together, Florence always acts as a tour guide. She knows a lot about history and likes to show off her knowledge to the group. Despite Florence's expertise, she is constantly outclassed by Leonora who always seems to know more. One notable trip the four took together was to the city of M— in Prussia. Together, they visited the spot where Martin Luther originally stated his desire to separate himself from the Catholic Church. John recalls that on the way to M—, he saw a bull use its horns to throw another small animal into some water. Even though no one else thought it was funny, John remembers laughing at the sight. In retrospect, he realizes his response was callous, though at the time, he couldn't help but be amused by the sight.

Here, John introduces a rivalry between Florence and Leonora. Evidently, their friendship is not as simple as John has made it seem. Additionally, this chapter of the novel provides proof of John's sociopathic tendencies for those who want to interpret him in a less charitable way. After all, he laughs at the injury and possible death of a small animal, which no one else in his group finds funny. There are several moments like this throughout the novel where John seems to slip up and show that he is not as morally virtuous as he initially claimed.



When the group arrives in M—, they visit Martin Luther's bedroom and look at his **Protest**, a document which differentiates Protestantism from Catholicism. Florence lectures the group about the importance of the document and in doing so makes disparaging remarks about Irish Catholics. During her lecture, she touches Edward's hand, which causes Leonora to leave the room abruptly. As Leonora departs, she grabs John and brings him with her. Once out of earshot of Florence and Edward, Leonora tells John that "that" is "the cause of the whole miserable affair." However, she does not specify what "that" is.

Martin Luther's Protest is an important document in the religious history of England because it helped to fragment Christianity into various sects. In this scene, Leonora sees the physical contact between Edward and Florence and assumes the two of them are having an affair. She attempts to signal as much to John, but she does not say it explicitly.



John has a general sense that something about the day is off but cannot identify what. As such, he is puzzled by Leonora's remarks. Realizing that John doesn't know what is happening, Leonora pulls herself together. Knowing she needs an explanation for her behavior, Leonora tells John that she is offended that Florence would speak disparagingly about Irish Catholics because she is a member of the faith.

Evidently, John does not understand what Leonora is trying to imply. Whether he is really as oblivious as he claims to be is unclear at this point in the story. This moment also raises questions about Leonora's character, specifically whether she's right to hide the affair from John now that she knows about it.



PART 1, CHAPTER 5

John thinks that his mission in life is to care for Florence and ensure **her heart** stays healthy. He constantly optimizes their travel plans around Florence's health. Although Florence and John are married, they have never had sex because it could be dangerous for Florence's heart. John's position in life makes him sympathetic toward Leonora. After all, both are in charge of caring for people with weak hearts. In retrospect, John thinks that it is likely that nothing was wrong with Edward's heart; Edward just faked the condition to get out of the army and spend time with a girl named Maisie Maiden in Nauheim.

This revelation is a significant moment in the story for two reasons. First, it explains why John is so frustrated in his marriage to Florence and why he didn't understand her sensual look in a previous scene. Second, it reveals that both Florence and Edward are faking their heart conditions. Although John doesn't state it explicitly in the case of Florence, it is clear that she is faking because her heart is just fine despite her affair with Edward.



Before explaining the importance of Maisie to his story, John makes a point to discuss Edward's many affairs. Several years before John met Edward, Edward was caught trying to kiss a servant girl. This incident became public and was a great embarrassment for both Edward and Leonora. However, Edward did not learn his lesson. The following year, he began an affair with La Dolciquita, a woman with expensive taste who convinced Edward to blow a great sum of money over the course of a single week. Edward attempted to hide his actions from Leonora, but she found out almost immediately and took it upon herself to rectify their finances.

Here, John peels back the layers of Edward's "good soldier" outer appearance. As it turns out, he is not a sentimentalist driven by traditional values; rather, he is a lascivious man who cannot control his urges. Because Edward is so irresponsible, Leonora takes on the traditionally masculine role of financial planning. Additionally, Leonora's knowledge of Edward's previous affairs clarifies the events of the previous chapter. Evidently, Leonora was quick to catch on to Edward's affair with Florence because she's dealt with similar behavior in the past.



Having taken a financial hit, the Ashburnhams traveled to India, where they could live cheaply. However, before long, Edward began yet another affair, this time with Mrs. Basil, the wife of a major in the army. Because Edward is terrible at hiding his affairs, Major Basil quickly found out and began blackmailing Edward. Realizing his relationship with Mrs. Basil could not continue, Edward decided to pursue Maisie Maiden. Maisie was also married to a soldier, but he was on active duty.

Edward's image continues to erode as John goes through each of his affairs. Notably, everything John narrates here is second-hand information that he got from Leonora.



By this time, Leonora decided that she could not stop her husband from having affairs and so she must make the best of her situation. As such, she allowed Edward to pursue Maisie because she didn't think Maisie or her husband would pose a threat to the Ashburnhams' finances. Despite knowing his intentions, she even allowed Edward to invite Maisie to come with them to Nauheim.

Even if one takes John at his word, there is a question of whether to trust what Leonora says about Edward. In this chapter of their lives, which Leonora relates to John, Leonora comes out looking like the perfect wife. Perhaps this image is justified, but it is impossible to know this for sure because there are multiple layers of mediation between John's version of the story and what actually happened.



The day the Dowells and the Ashburnhams first met was the same day Leonora found out that Major Basil was blackmailing Edward. Upon discovering yet another of her husband's errors, Leonora was deeply upset and worried about their financial future. In response, she openly confronted Edward, who was embarrassed that his wife knew so much about what he'd been doing behind her back. Only a few hours after their fight, Leonora spotted Maisie leaving Edward's room. Although nothing inappropriate occurred, this sight was one step too far for Leonora, and she hit Maisie on the side of the head. Coincidentally, Florence came upon this scene just in time to see Leonora hit Maisie. Not wanting to create another scandal, Leonora befriended Florence, leading to the first dinner between the two couples.

This chapter of the novel reveals that the relationship between the Ashburnhams and the Dowells is not what it seems. Florence and Leonora were never on equal footing because Florence knew information that could harm Leonora's reputation. Meanwhile, it also becomes clear that Leonora is not handling her husband's infidelity as well as she would like to admit. Here, she starts to come apart at the seams.



PART 1, CHAPTER 6

John returns to describing his trip to Prussia and Leonora's sudden outburst. In the moment, John is struck by how much Florence's comments about Catholicism bother Leonora. For a moment, John thinks there is even something threatening about Leonora. However, he quickly dismisses this thought and decides that religion is simply a topic that Leonora is touchy about. Then, John reiterates that he had no idea what was going on between Florence, Edward, and Leonora; he compares them to high-level gamblers who cleverly hid their hands from him. John thinks about how blissfully unaware he was at the time compared to the present moment, where he cannot help but judge his wife unfavorably. He even admits that he "hates" Florence for what she's done.

Here is another moment in the story when John acts suspiciously innocent. John has already established that Edward is not good at keeping his affairs a secret. Yet here, John compares him to a high-level gambler. If this is the case, then John must be exceptionally naïve for his story to be consistent. Additionally, this passage is the first time that John openly expresses contempt for Florence.



While John was blissfully unaware, Leonora and Florence openly discussed Florence's affair with Edward. Despite her attachment to Edward, Florence promised Leonora that she would leave him if the Ashburnhams repaired their marriage. Such promises only angered Leonora further. In one conversation, Florence claimed that her relationship with Edward was primarily spiritual in nature, and she likens herself to Maisie Maiden. This comparison enraged Leonora, who told Florence that their behavior toward Maisie amounted to "murder." Florence responded that she was not to blame, and Leonora granted Florence the fact that she was less responsible than Leonora herself.

Although attitudes surrounding sex changed at the start of 20th century, society would still consider the behavior that Florene, Leonora, and Edward exhibit scandalous. In this chapter of the novel, the word "murder" is used for the first time, and it is an act that will remain in the background for the rest of the novel.

This reminiscence leads John to tell the story of Maisie's death. The same day as their trip to M—, Leonora received a letter from Maisie. In the letter, Maisie says that she thinks the Ashburnhams brought her to Nauheim so that she could act as Edward's mistress. Upon realizing this, Maisie decided to leave immediately. However, while packing, she had a **heart attack**, died, and fell into her open trunk. Leonora found her body and showed it only to John because she didn't want Edward to see it. In general, Leonora hid the details of the situation from Edward. Edward doesn't feel bad about what happened because he doesn't know better. Meanwhile, Leonora is wracked with guilt.

There are three major deaths in the novel, and all of them occur under peculiar circumstances. Additionally, John is the first person to see two of the three corpses and the second person to see Maisie's corpse. These facts combined suggest that John might have killed Maisie or—more likely—that Leonora killed Maisie and John helped cover things up. After all, John has already stated that he loves Leonora and would do anything for her. From Leonora's point of view, her motivations for killing Maisie could include jealousy and a desire to protect her reputation.



PART 2, CHAPTER 1

John explains that August 4th is an important date for his story because, coincidentally, it is when significant events tend to happen. August 4th is when John and Florence were married, it is the day of Maisie's death, and it is Florence's birthday. Something important also happened on August 4th, 1913, although John does not say what.

It is difficult to know what to make of this coincidence. There are many times throughout the story where—if one is being uncharitable to John—it seems John is manipulating the truth. However, there is no reason for him to do so here, especially given that anyone could easily confirm these dates. As such, the coincidence appears to be genuine.



Before continuing his story, John once again delves deeper into the past to explain how he and Florence came to be married. John met Florence at the home of a famous family and was immediately determined to marry her. After their first meeting, John regularly went to Florence's house to pay her a visit, even though her aunts didn't care for him. At first, John has a difficult time getting close to Florence. However, gradually, they developed a relationship, and Florence revealed her desires to John. During this time, she told John that she wanted an English husband of substantial means who could travel with her around Europe. She also hinted that she "did not want much physical passion in the affair."

Florence set ground rules for her and John's relationship from the start, though her rules are unreasonable. John knew that he was not Florence's ideal man, yet they decided to marry anyway. Evidently, Florence just used John to get the English partner that she actually wanted.



Although John is not English, he knows he can provide Florence with the European lifestyle she desires. Eventually, Florence decides that this is good enough and tells her aunts that she plans to marry John. The next time John pays a visit to Florence, her aunts take him aside and beg him not to marry her. They even slander Florence and imply that she's been with other men before. However, none of their protests work on John; eventually he and Florence marry.

The behavior of Florence's aunts is another strange detail in John's story. If it is an attempt to protect Florence, then it is a cruel way to do so. It seems unlikely that they want to protect John considering they do not like him. One explanation is that they want to keep Florence close to them so they can benefit from the fortune that will come her way when her Uncle John dies.



Only after their marriage did Florence mention her **heart condition** to John. At the time, John assumes that Florence's weak heart is why her aunts didn't want him to marry her. Together John and Florence board a boat to Europe, and immediately Florence's heart acts up. They quickly find a doctor who tells them they cannot engage in sexual relations because doing so might hurt Florence's heart. Much later in life, John learns through Leonora that Florence's heart issues are entirely made up. In retrospect, he wonders if even her doctors were in on the ruse.

Florence and John arrive in Paris where Florence begins an affair with Jimmy, a cabin boy who Florence's family previously employed. Together, Jimmy and Florence schemed ways to keep up the ruse of Florence's **delicate heart**. Although previously John thought that Florence was never out of his sight, he realizes now that she was constantly out of his sight at Jimmy's behest. While John thought he was leaving Florence alone so that she could rest, in reality, he was only enabling her affair with Jimmy. Like Florence, Jimmy is a selfish actor. Behind Florence's back, he convinces John that even sailing the English Channel would be too much for Florence's heart, so it would be better if they did not risk it. This advice flies directly in the face of Florence's plans to live out her life in England.

While reflecting on Florence's affairs, John tells a story that he thinks set the tone for their relationship. Before departing for England, John gave a suitcase with Florence's heart medicine to his servant, Julius. When Julius learned he wouldn't be accompanying John to England, he dropped the case. Enraged that he would be so careless with Florence's medicine, John brutally beat Julius in front of Florence. John thinks this incident might have made Florence afraid he would "murder her."

John returns to contemplating Florence's affairs. He cannot fathom how she would fall in love with Jimmy. He considers Jimmy a worse man in every way compared to himself. However, he understands her love for Edward. John reiterates Edward's many great qualities, including his good looks and charitable sensibility. Then, John turns his focus to a new character: Nancy Rufford. Nancy is a young girl for whom the Ashburnhams act as guardians. Nancy admires Edward greatly and when she comes of age, Edward starts to admire her in return. Leonora immediately worries that Edward will pursue Nancy, and she implies as much to John. However, at the time, John is still utterly oblivious to Edward's behavior, and so he assures Leonora that Edward is a faithful husband who never so much as bats an eye at another woman.

Florence's manipulation of John mirrors the relationship between John and the reader. It is difficult to disentangle the truth from the lies and to know who is guilty and who is innocent.



This section is one of several times where John contradicts a previous statement. Although he often offers contradictory statements without acknowledging it, here he openly admits to misstating the truth. The question is whether he does so to represent his own genuine confusion or to further mislead the reader. Additionally, at a previous point in this chapter, John implies that he and Florence do not have a love life because she is looking for an Englishman to take as her lover. Yet here she is willing to settle for a man who is American and outside her social class. Again, this could be Florence's manipulation and not John's, but the details and implications littered throughout the story do not cohere as well as John seems to think they do.



This is another moment that readers could point to if they wanted to make the case that John harbors violent tendencies. Despite his claims of moral purity, John behaves barbarically in a manner that shocks Florence. In fact, this incident is impossible to square with the otherwise gentle and naive portrait that John paints of himself. However, whether this incident proves that John is capable of murder is up for debate.



Here, John seems to realize the inconsistency in his story regarding Jimmy. Again, like the rest of his inconsistencies, it is difficult to tell if it is due to natural human error or a deliberate attempt to mislead readers. Meanwhile, Edward's pursuit of Nancy turns him into an irredeemable character. Although John will continue to express sympathy for Edward and reference his sentimental attitude, his relationship with Nancy is a step too far. Such a relationship would have been just as scandalous to Ford's readers in 1915 as it is today, rendering Edward extremely unlikable. The question, then, is why John continues to defend him. Here, he defends Edward to Leonora because he is not yet aware of Edward's infidelity. However, even when speaking in the present tense, John expresses sympathy for Edward.



PART 2, CHAPTER 2

John suspects Florence got rid of Jimmy as her lover by getting Edward to assault him physically. Regardless, once Jimmy is out of the picture, Florence and Edward's affair heats up, even though Florence still can't travel to England because of her fake **heart condition**. Due to the distance between them, Florence becomes jealous of Edward and constantly instructs him to return to Paris to see her. Florence even suggests that the two of them abandon their respective partners and escape to California. However, Edward has no interest in her plan, and he worries about what will happen when Leonora discovers the details of their affair. Of course, because Edward is terrible at hiding his affairs, Leonora already knows he is seeing Florence. However, John is still in the dark because Leonora wants to shield him from pain and suffering.

After contemplating Edward and Florence's affair, John returns to August 4th, 1913. On the evening of the 4th, Nancy and Edward go to a concert together. Florence goes with them at Leonora's behest; Leonora assumes the worst, but she thinks Edward won't do anything untoward if Florence is present. Hours later, John is sitting in his hotel lounge with Bagshawe, a new acquaintance who he finds odious. During their conversation, Florence runs through the hotel door with a pale face and her hand on **her heart**. She sees John with Bagshawe, and the sight of them only upsets her further as she runs up to her room.

When Bagshawe sees Florence, he recognizes her and tells John about her affair with Jimmy. Bagshawe doesn't know John is Florence's wife and thinks he is simply gossiping. However, this information deeply affects John who becomes lost in his thoughts as Bagshawe goes on talking. Hours later, John returns to his room to find Florence dead, clutching an empty vial.

PART 3, CHAPTER 1

On the night of Florence's death, John considers marrying Nancy. He even says this out loud to Leonora. He assures his reader that the idea of marrying Nancy never came into his head until Florence died. When John states his desire to Leonora, she tells him she will think about it. After all, Nancy is like a daughter to her, and her situation is complicated to say the least.

Although Florence is clearly in love with Edward, he doesn't seem to love her back. Like most of his relationships, Florence is replaceable. However, Florence doesn't know this or doesn't want to admit it; she still wants to make her way to England and settle down with an Englishman.



Leonora's request for Florence to go with Edward and Nancy serves two purposes. First, she can make sure Edward does not go too far with Nancy. Second, she can hurt Florence by showing her Edward's true colors. Evidently, the latter of these two purposes comes to fruition as Florence returns the hotel with her hand on her heart as though it is injured. The irony here is that Florence's heart is metaphorically wounded after she's been lying about having a physically weak heart.



Bagshawe is yet another odd detail in John's story because he only appears in this scene and then disappears from the narrative altogether. The charitable reading of this section is that the events transpired exactly as John says. However, an uncharitable reading would suggest that John killed his wife, perhaps out of jealousy, perhaps to get his hands on her money, or perhaps a mix of both.



Here, John cites yet another reason why he might have killed Florence: he is in love with someone else. Additionally, marrying Nancy would give John a chance to get back at Edward for having sex with Florence. For Leonora, this is also a good solution. If John marries Nancy, it will help keep her away from Edward.



In the months following Edward's death, Leonora begins revealing her knowledge to John. By this point, Leonora assumed John knew about Florence and Edward's affair, so she talked about it openly. According to John, this is the first time he realized the extent of his wife's infidelities. Additionally, Leonora tells John that his wife's death was a suicide, which is also news to him. Previously, John assumed Florence died because of her **heart condition**. John admits that he is completely unbothered by Florence's death. He does not feel anger or sadness toward her; he is utterly indifferent.

Eventually, John figures out what led to Florence's suicide. Apparently, Florence followed Edward and Nancy (as instructed by Leonora) who went to a park. While at the park, Edward and Nancy assume they are alone, as Florence doesn't make herself known to them. Florence overhears Edward attempting to seduce Nancy, which breaks her heart. Meanwhile, Nancy finds Edward's advances charming because she thinks they are the kind words of a father rather than the romantic words of a lover.

Florence runs back to the hotel where she sees John with Bagshawe. John thinks that the sight of the two of them together is what pushed Florence over the edge. Although she may have been able to withstand Edward's betrayal, John's discovery of her own infidelity in the same night was too much. After Florence's death, John directs all of his energy toward marrying Nancy. Although he claims that he never thinks of Florence, he is at the very least glad that he no longer must act as her nurse.

PART 3, CHAPTER 2

In the wake of Florence's suicide, Leonora pieces together what she saw in the park and does her best to keep Edward away from Nancy. John describes Nancy as an eccentric girl whose personality shifts from moment to moment. Sometimes she is wise beyond her years and other times she is immature. Additionally, she is completely open, honest, and innocent.

Nancy's background is somewhat tragic. She has an abusive drunkard of a father who would often beat her mother in front of her. Luckily, as a young girl, Nancy was able to escape her father by doing her schooling in a convent. While Nancy was still young, her father went to India to serve in the army. Around the same time, Nancy's mother, who was best friends with Leonora, asked the Ashburnhams to serve as Nancy's guardians, a position they happily accepted.

John continues to profess his utter naivety, which becomes harder and harder to believe. However, this is the first time that he provides a reason for being so kind to Edward while Edward was still alive. Still, it doesn't explain why John continues to compliment Edward after his death. Of course, if the reader believes John, then his desire to marry Nancy could not be part of a revenge plan. However, it is difficult to believe John when he admits that his wife's suicide didn't bother him. Even if Florence did treat John cruelly, indifference is an odd and inhuman response to the death of one's spouse.



As always, the question here is whether John's story is plausible. While the story in the park is consistent with everything the reader knows about Edward, is seeing Edward try to seduce Nancy enough to drive Florence to suicide?



John seems to think that his story of Edward and Nancy in the park is not enough to cause Florence to commit suicide because he adds his conversation with Bagshawe into the mix. However, this is rather flimsy evidence. There is no reason for Florence to assume that Bagshawe is telling John about her affair with Edward. Additionally, she doesn't care much about John anyway, and it seems unlikely that his knowledge of her affair would drive her to suicide. Once again, the question is whether John is being deliberately misleading.



Nancy is similar in nature to Maisie. She is young, naïve, and assumes the best of the Ashburnhams.



Because Nancy is from an abusive background, Edward's predatory behavior is only more sickening. Leonora knows as much and wants to do her best to protect the young girl.



Luckily for Leonora, it is not as difficult as normal to keep Edward away from Nancy because he's grown weak following Florence's death. As the days stretch on, Edward continues to lose strength and drink heavily. Eventually, Leonora realizes that he is no threat to Nancy's chastity and allows them to go out together unsupervised. That same night, Leonora returns to her room to find Edward on his knees, crying, while praying to the Virgin Mary. At this point, Leonora knows definitively that she can trust Edward with Nancy.

Edward's sudden shift in behavior is difficult to interpret. Perhaps he feels guilt about Florence's death, or maybe he's come to realize how morally reprehensible his relationship with Nancy is. Either way, this is the first time he expresses a genuine interest in religion. Previously, religion was only present in the novel as a sort of identity marker. However, here, Edward engages with the spiritual side of religion.



PART 3, CHAPTER 3

When she no longer had to worry about Edward and Nancy, Leonora relaxed her mind, marking the beginning of the end for her. Despite their strange relationship, John says that Leonora loved Edward "with a passion" and for the first time elaborates on Leonora's background. Leonora was one of seven daughters who grew up in an isolated Irish manor home. As a child, Leonora only ever spent time with her sisters, as her family rarely traveled or had visitors. However, her parents were friends with the Ashburnhams and when Edward came of age, Colonel Powys (Leonora's father) asked Colonel Ashburnham (Edward's father) if one of his daughters could marry Edward. At the time, Edward was a pure youth with a strong mind.

Unlike the story's other main characters, Leonora did not grow up with money. This is one explanation for why Leonora is so willing to put up with Edward's behavior. Without him, she would go back to being broke, which she seems unwilling to do.



In an attempt to arrange a marriage, the Powyses invited the Ashburnhams to come and visit them. Despite their established name, the Powyses were poor and thought that it would be cheaper to have the Ashburnhams come to them than the other way around. After spending the weekend with Leonora and her sisters, Edward had a talk with his mother about which one he would like to marry. Of course, he chose Leonora and, even though Leonora was their third daughter, the Powyses accepted the marriage offer.

Edward's choosing of Leonora is not what the Powyses would have preferred. It would be ideal for them to have married off their eldest daughter, but because Colonel Ashburnham is essentially doing Colonel Powys a favor, Colonel Powys accepts the marriage offer.



The first five or six years of Edward and Leonora's marriage were a happy, albeit uneventful, time. During these years, Edward demonstrated great admiration and respect for Leonora and, in return, Leonora obeyed his every wish. Although there was never true love between them, they got on well enough and they were faithful to one another. However, problems began to develop after the death of Edward's parents. After inheriting his parents' estate, Edward became frivolous with money, much to Leonora's consternation. Their first major falling out occurred because Edward wanted to build a Catholic Church in Leonora's name, even though to do so would have been financially irresponsible.

Here, John begins to retell the same story he's already told about Edward and Leonora's marriage, expect this time with more detail. In contrast to Florence and John, Edward and Leonora initially have a good marriage. However, Edward's frivolity with money is understandably stressful for Leonora, who was raised in relative poverty and does not want to go back to such a lifestyle.



Around the same time, the English economy took a hit and Edward acted too generously toward his tenants for Colonel Powys's taste. Colonel Powys relayed his opinions to Leonora, which only made her worry more about how her husband handled their finances. Leonora's fears about their financial situation boiled over when she heard Edward completely absolve one of his tenants from paying rent. This led to a fight between Edward and Leonora, although nothing was resolved. Edward argued that in hard times, he should bear as much financial strain as possible to help out his tenants. However, at the time, Leonora had other matters to consider, including the children she hoped to have with Edward.

The topic of children also drove a wedge between Edward and Leonora. Although they never had a child of their own, they regularly argued about their potential children's religious upbringing. Such arguments only put more stress on the relationship and drove Edward and Leonora further apart. These tensions eventually led to Edward's first attempt at an affair. While in the back of a carriage, he attempted to console a grieving servant woman by kissing her. Horrified, the woman alerted their driver, and the event became a public affair. Although Edward's public reputation survived, the event had a permanent effect on his mental wellbeing.

PART 3, CHAPTER 4

John once again extols the virtues of Edward's character. He thinks of Edward as a proper Englishman with a sentimental nature whose tendency to cheat on Leonora only makes up a small part of his character. For a moment, John contemplates what gives someone their character. He decides that character is not a stable concept; although people often act one way, their behavior can shift suddenly, especially under stressful circumstances.

Prior to the Kilsyte case—the name given to Edward's indiscretion in the back of the carriage—Edward had never considered cheating on Leonora. However, having gotten a small taste of what it would be like to be with another woman, it was only a matter of time before he found someone else. Although Edward swore off lower-class women, he continued pursuing women of his own rank as soon as he got the chance. After a brief moment of unity, the Kilsyte case drove Edward and Leonora further apart than ever, and Edward was eager to find another woman.

Despite his many negative attributes, Edward's one redeeming quality is his charitability. Although he may go too far, Edward genuinely cares for those who are less fortunate and does what he can to help them. Meanwhile, Leonora comes off as callous toward people who are of a lower class.



Edward and Leonora's argument about religion is absurd precisely because of how irrelevant it ends up being. They spend their time arguing about religions which, in this cultural context, function more as identity markers than guides for living a moral life. Both Protestantism and Catholicism would say that fidelity and giving to the poor are moral acts. Yet, Leonora is not charitable, and Edward is not faithful to his wife.



If John is a manipulative murderer, then this passage is his most conniving work. Here, he expresses the idea that identity is fundamentally unstable and so people can act irrationally. While this is true, there is a question of degree. For instance, Edward's decision to have an affair seems believable because it falls within the realm of normative human behavior, even if it is morally wrong. However, can the same be said about Florence's suicide? John's comments here refer to that situation as well, and he seems to imply that Florence's decision to kill herself is similar to Edward's decision to have an affair. Essentially, if one is assuming the worst of John, then what he is doing is creating a false equivalency to explain away Florence's death.



Edward's sudden shift in character quickly becomes his new pattern of behavior. He cheats, gets caught, then moves on to the next woman.



Edward and Leonora travel to Monte Carlo at the suggestion of Leonora's priest. Although the intended purpose of the trip is to heal their marriage, it ironically does the opposite. Because Edward is enjoying his time dancing with some Spanish women, Leonora leaves him alone and goes to bed. While dancing, Edward meets La Dolciquita, the mistress of the Russian Grand Duke. Immediately, Edward is infatuated with La Dolciquita, and the two of them go to bed together.

After sleeping with Edward, La Dolciquita has gotten all she wanted out of their relationship. However, in sharp contrast, Edward falls deeply in love with her. Edward urges La Dolciquita to continue acting as his lover. In response, La Dolciquita says that she will only continue spending time with Edward if he pays her. After all, she is the mistress to a Grand Duke; if her association with Edward was discovered, she would lose a great deal of wealth, as well as her social standing. Although Edward initially finds the idea of paying La Dolciquita abhorrent, he eventually gives in and pays her more than 20,000 pounds for her company. After spending a week with La Dolciquita, Edward realizes that he is not in love with her and that he's acted dishonorably. After the affair, he returns to Leonora with a great sense of shame about what he's done.

PART 3, CHAPTER 5

John says that he's decided to call his tale "the saddest story" because there is nothing elevated about it that could promote it to the level of tragedy. Rather, it is simply a string of bad events happening to "two noble people." According to John, there is no villain in his story.

John returns to what happened in the wake of Edward's affair with La Dolciquita. When Edward returned to Leonora, he was forced to tell her about the great sum of money he lost. However, he did not elaborate upon how he lost it, even though Leonora could probably guess. After realizing that her husband could not be trusted with their finances, Leonora took control of their estate and only allowed Edward a set allowance. She also sold, rented, and refinanced their properties as necessary so that they could financially recover in the wake of Edward's affair with La Dolciquita. Although Leonora gives Edward the courtesy of discussing their financial affairs—to pass the time if nothing else—she has the final say in nearly everything. Only Edward's allowance is his own and even there she counsels him on how to spend it.

At this point, Leonora still trusts Edward enough to leave him alone with another woman. However, she is wrong to do so, and this proves to be one of her most costly mistakes.



Edward's notion of love is really just lust, which wears off after only a few days. However, the emotional and financial damage his affair with La Dolciquita creates is far more permanent. Although Edward feels somewhat ashamed about his actions, he doesn't stay ashamed—instead, he continues to act in a similar manner going forward.



John's insistence that there is no villain in this story is suspicious. Again, John seems too charitable toward Edward, considering Edward had sex with Florence, and there remains the possibility that John himself is the villain.



At the time, it would be incredibly unusual for a woman to control the family's finances, especially because all of the Ashburnhams' wealth came from Edward's side of the family. However, it is clear to Leonora that she cannot trust Edward, and so she treats him like a child by giving him an allowance. At this point, Edward and Leonora's marriage is falling apart, and Leonora believes that stabilizing their finances is the only thing that can repair it.



Because they need to live on a relatively small sum of money, the Ashburnhams move to Burma—which was part of the Indian Empire at the time—where Edward meets Mrs. Basil. Before long, Edward and Mrs. Basil begin their affair, which is much more discreet and less financially taxing than Edward's previous infidelities, at least at the start. Unlike La Dolciquita, Mrs. Basil is genuinely in love with Edward, and he loves her in return. Their affair could have lasted forever if Major Basil hadn't been positioned elsewhere by the army.

Major Basil discovered Edward and Mrs. Basil's affair just before moving. Almost immediately, he decided on blackmail. Every year, for as long as he could get away with it, Major Basil extorted 300 pounds out of Edward. The blackmail was yet another stress for Edward, who was already upset because Mrs. Basil had moved away. After the Basils went away, the Ashburnhams moved to Chitral, where Edward met Maisie. By this time, Edward and Leonora were married only in the legal sense. Although they always acted in a morally upright fashion in public, they barely spoke to one other in private.

In Chitral, Edward immediately grows fond of Maisie. He spends as much time with her as he can, even as he and Leonora continue to drift apart, barely speaking to one another. He also continues writing to Mrs. Basil, whom he is still fond of. While Edward is busy carrying on his affairs, Leonora continues rebuilding their finances. She is quite successful and manages to make back a good portion of the money that Edward lost.

Knowing they will be departing for Nauheim soon, Edward boldly asks Leonora if they can take Maisie with them. Surprisingly, Leonora accepts the request, even though she knows that Edward is likely trying to sleep with Maisie. Leonora thinks it unlikely that her husband will be successful, which is part of the reason she doesn't mind bringing Maisie with them. Secretly, Leonora hopes that Edward will eventually get sick of Maisie, as well as his other affairs, and come back to her.

Despite Leonora's efforts, Edward continues to feel alienated from his wife. He wonders whether she accepted his request to bring Maisie with them as a way of controlling his love life in a similar manner to how she runs their finances. Still, Leonora has hope that one day Edward will come back to her; or, at least, she did until Edward met Florence.

Edward continues his established pattern of behavior. He readily cheats on his wife without thinking of the consequences.



Edward's behavioral pattern persists as the Ashburnhams' marriage continues to deteriorate. Their public behavior is only to keep up appearances; in reality, their marriage is all but lost.



During this time, Leonora does what she can to secure her financial future. It is difficult to find fault with her behavior during this portion of the story. However, perhaps this is because Leonora herself provided much of the information in this chapter. One of the difficulties of determining fact from fiction in this novel is that John rarely elaborates on who told him what.



Despite his infidelity—which he isn't even trying to hide at this point—Leonora still wants Edward back. Whether her desire is based in love or a thirst for normalcy is unclear.



It is difficult to feel sympathy for Edward because all the restrictions Leonora has put on him are of his own making. Of course, it is worth reaffirming that all of this information could have come from Leonora, which is why it is biased in her favor.



PART 4, CHAPTER 1

John takes a moment to reset. He apologizes for telling the story in non-chronological order. However, he insists that this is the best way for it to be told. As he reflects on what has been said so far, John thinks about Florence's place in the whole affair. At this point, he feels she is greatly responsible for many of the misfortunes that befell the Dowells and the Ashburnhams. He blames Florence for destroying not one but two marriages and for Leonora's deteriorating mental state. John puts some blame on Leonora as well for not trying harder to stop the affair, but Florence is far more guilty in his mind.

Before Florence and Edward's affair, Leonora was making good progress in bringing Edward back to her. They began talking more than they had been and Leonora forgave Edward for his past indiscretions. In return, Edward would regularly compliment Leonora's beauty in a way he hadn't in a long time. However, just as Leonora thought things were returning to normal, the Dowells and the Ashburnhams took their trip to M— where she realized Florence and Edward were having an affair. From this moment on, Leonora hated both Edward and Florence. She hated Edward for once again violating the sanctity of their marriage, and Florence for so brazenly carrying on an affair with her husband.

After Florence's death, Leonora and Edward returned to Branshaw Manor, their primary estate. At this point, their marriage was in shambles. Leonora once again significantly restricted Edward's access to money—after briefly easing up—because Edward kept donating his money and things to charitable causes. John speculates that this renewed restriction is why Edward eventually slit his own throat.

John continues to refine his opinion of Florence to be more negative. This would make some sense if he also placed blame on Edward, but he doesn't. For some reason, John consistently refrains from making harsh critiques of Edward, even though Edward deserves them.



Again, John portrays Leonora as reasonable. She does what she can to fix her marriage and only reacts negatively when Edward once again betrays her trust.



John reveals the cause of Edward's death offhandedly and then quickly changes the subject, which seems suspicious.



PART 4, CHAPTER 2

John turns the focus of his tale to his own life story in the wake of Florence's death. As was previously mentioned, after Florence died, he had to go to Connecticut to settle her affairs. To make matters more complicated, Florence's Uncle John died five days before Florence and John inherited both of their estates. In Connecticut, John discovers that Florence's uncle wanted his money to go toward funding a treatment center for people with **heart conditions** because he thought suffered from one himself. However, in the aftermath of his death, Uncle John's autopsy revealed that his heart was fine and that his lungs were the real issue. After some discussion and debate with Florence's aunts, John decides to put the money toward a treatment center that would help people with heart and lung problems. This way, Uncle John's wishes could be met, and Florence's aunts could be appeased.

If one reads John cynically, then this passage contains one of John's primary motivations for killing Florence. Because Uncle John died just days before Florence died, John inherited a great deal of money. Of course, their deaths could be yet another coincidence. Alternatively, John could have killed Florence immediately after hearing of Uncle John's death because he wanted the money for himself. It's also possible that John didn't need the money himself, but he didn't want Florence to get her hands on it. After all, with that amount of money, Florence could leave John and run off with Edward.



After settling his affairs in Connecticut, John travels to England to see Edward and Leonora at Branshaw Manor. When he arrives, he is told that Nancy, whom he hopes to marry, is leaving for India the following day. Not wanting to miss his chance, John makes plans to propose to Nancy. However, before he puts his plan into action, he speaks with Edward who catches him up on everything that has gone on between the Ashburnhams and Nancy.

Apparently, Leonora's health has declined rapidly since returning from Nauheim. She regularly spends the day in bed with splitting headaches and she is profoundly depressed. Although Edward is more mobile than his wife, he, too, is on the decline. Try as she might, Nancy cannot make the situation better; in fact, although she doesn't know it, she's making things worse. One day Nancy sees Edward give his horse to someone less fortunate. Thinking it a great deed, she reports the act to Leonora. This is the last time that Nancy will ever naively give up information to her aunt because, in response, Leonora throws a fit. As usual, she is annoyed that her husband is wasting resources on the less fortunate. Additionally, she is increasingly annoyed by Nancy and Edward's relationship, even if it is entirely innocent.

One night at dinner, Edward tells Nancy and Leonora that he is sending Nancy to India so she can be with her father. Edward thinks he is doing the right thing—he knows Nancy's presence is destroying his marriage—but Leonora is appalled at the suggestion. Leonora thinks Edward is acting selfishly; after all, Nancy's father is a brute who is sure to abuse her. That night, Leonora visits Nancy and tells her that Edward's suffering is a result of his love for her. In return, Nancy admits that she loves Edward. However, she doesn't think she should stay. Instead, she plans to travel to Glasgow to be with her mother. Leonora begs Nancy to stay because she thinks she is the only thing keeping Edward alive. However, Nancy declines.

PART 4, CHAPTER 3

For most of her life, Nancy has been a naïve and innocent girl. She was brought up in the church and has no idea what the modern, adult world looks like. Although she's heard of adultery, she doesn't know of anyone who's committed it, nor does she have a firm grasp on the concept in the first place. However, several weeks before her discussion with Leonora about Edward, Nancy loses some of her innocence.

Keep in mind that John plans to propose to Nancy just a few weeks after Florence's death. Even a charitable reading of John renders him a far cry from the saint of a husband he claimed to be at the beginning of the story.



In this part of the novel, Nancy plays an important role in a dynamic that she does not comprehend. Even though Edward is no longer pursuing her, Leonora knows that Edward loves Nancy on more than a basic, familial level. Leonora is disgusted by her circumstances, but she doesn't see a good solution. Sending Nancy away would mean giving her back to her abusive father. However, if Nancy stays, the Ashburnhams' relationship will only continue to get worse.



Here, Edward does what Leonora could not do: he sends Nancy away. Luckily, Nancy has another plan and does not need to go back to her father. However, Edward did not know that at the time, which only makes him look more selfish.



Nancy's ideas about the world would not have been out of place in England just a few decades before her birth. Although adultery has always occurred, it was not talked about in England for much of the 19th century. However, the turn of the century ushered in a different social paradigm that was more open about sex. In this environment, Nancy comes off as hopelessly naïve.



One day, while reading the newspaper, Nancy comes across the names of two people she knows, Mr. and Mrs. Brand, who are getting a divorce. The newspaper provides all of the lurid details of Mr. and Mrs. Brand's personal lives, including adultery, alcoholism, and physical abuse. The article shocks Nancy: she didn't know that high class people could act like this. However, after reading the article and thinking on it, she wonders whether something similar could be going on with Edward and Leonora. Nancy decides to discuss the article with Leonora to see what she can learn. In the course of their conversation, Leonora asks Nancy if she ever wants to get married. Nancy is unsure, but says that if she does get married, she wants to be with somebody like Edward. This response elicits thinly veiled disgust from Leonora.

The newspaper article and her conversation with Leonora leads Nancy to see her situation more clearly. She realizes that Edward must love another woman and that is why his marriage is falling apart. As she ruminates on the Ashburnhams' circumstances, Nancy becomes depressed and even tries alcohol for the first time. However, drinking only makes matters worse; when Nancy tries some of Edward's liquor, it makes her lust after Edward, so she vows to never try it again. Although Nancy wants to stay and help Edward and Leonora, she realizes that her situation has grown complicated and that her presence isn't helping anyone improve. Shortly after this realization, Nancy receives a letter from her mother who has fallen on hard times. Seeing an out, as well as a better calling, Nancy begins packing her things. That same night is when Leonora comes into her room and begs her to stay.

PART 4, CHAPTER 4

Nancy's conversation with Leonora helps put everything in perspective. Nancy knows now that she is in love with Edward and Edward is in love with her. However, because Edward is married to Leonora and Nancy was too innocent to know better, these feelings only make sense to her after Leonora spells everything out. Although Nancy wants to go on caring for Edward, she feels she can only do so by loving him from far away. To do anything else would be immoral.

The explicit details contained in the newspaper are an example of how different the 20th century was from the 19th. Such descriptions of violence and infidelity would not have been explicitly detailed in widely distributed 19th-century newspapers. When Nancy talks about marriage with Leonora, Leonora is disgusted because she realizes that Nancy loves Edward as more than a father, even if she doesn't think of it like that.



Although Nancy hasn't put all the pieces together yet, she is getting close. Additionally, her drinking helps her discover the feelings that she's been harboring about Edward but doesn't want to deal with. Because Nancy is a respectable young woman who wants to do what is right, she decides it would be best to remove herself from the situation. However, as with everything relating to the Ashburnhams, the matter is not as cut and dry as Nancy thinks, which is why Leonora goes to Nancy's room to speak her.



Finally, everything falls into place for Nancy, and she realizes the complexity of her situation. It is an unfortunate but necessary coming-of-age moment where she realizes that doing the right thing is not as straightforward as she previously thought.



Ironically, Leonora holds the opposite position. She wants Nancy to stay at Branshaw Manor and act as Edward's mistress. Leonora knows that what she is asking of Nancy is wrong, but it is the only option she feels she has left. However, Nancy refuses to give in to Leonora's demands and give up her moral purity. Nancy and Leonora continue their argument for hours, as Edward listens through the wall. However, neither changes the other's mind. Ultimately, Nancy ends up returning to India. Although she wanted to go to Glasgow to be with her mother, Edward insisted that she return to India instead. Realizing that anything would be better than Branshaw Manor, Nancy does as Edward says.

Leonora's declining health coincides with the decline of her moral sensibility. At this point, she is desperate and will do anything to try to fix her life. This conversation with Leonora only reinforces what Nancy already knew—she needs to get as far away as possible from Branshaw Manor.



PART 4, CHAPTER 5

Finally, John arrives at what he says is the saddest part of "the saddest story." As he sees it, Nancy, Edward, and Leonora are all in unsalvageable positions. It seems obvious to John, writing in retrospect, that Edward will die if Nancy doesn't return to him. Indeed, as it turns out, Edward does kill himself, although John withholds the details for the time being. In the aftermath of Edward's death, Nancy goes insane. Nancy's mind cannot bear the idea that she is directly responsible for his death. By the time her father gets to her, Nancy can no longer speak coherently. The only thing she utters is her apparent belief in an "Omnipotent Deity."

Despite her desire to do the right thing, Nancy is punished because her psyche cannot bear the weight of her actions. Her references to an "Omnipotent Deity" resemble Edward's prayer from earlier in the novel; that is, they are cries of desperation more than anything else. Indeed, Nancy was put in an impossible situation, and John is right to portray her fate as the saddest part of his melancholy tale.



Because Leonora can no longer stand to face Nancy herself, she sends John in her place. John visits Nancy and sees that she is still as beautiful as ever, even though her mental state has sharply deteriorated. As he looks at Nancy, John realizes that he is once again acting as a nurse for a woman he loves. He cannot help but notice the bitter irony of the situation. In the end, John realizes, no one in his life ended up happy. He is rich, but alone, Florence and Edward killed themselves, and Leonora settled for Rodney Bayham, a man she considered having an affair with while still married to Edward.

If John did kill Florence to marry Nancy, then his plan was an abject failure. Not only does John fail to marry Nancy, but he is also once again utterly alone. Even Leonora has settled for someone else and moved on. However, John is only left with a lifeless woman and his memories of this tragic story, which he may or may not be responsible for.



Still, John places little to no blame on Edward for what has transpired. He describes how Nancy and Leonora tortured Edward and gave him no control over the outcome of his life. Leonora knew Nancy loved Edward and so she did everything she could to make her dislike him. However, eventually, her only option was to make Nancy Edward's mistress and by that point it was already too late; Nancy could never accept such a position. John thinks this situation must have tortured Edward and drained him of any life force he had remaining. In the final months of his life, Edward knew that Nancy, the one person he truly loved, was poisoned against him forever because of Leonora.

John's refusal to blame Edward for anything is almost laughable at this point. Edward may be a tragic figure, but to absolve him of all blame is absurd, assuming the story John tells is even mildly accurate. Meanwhile, John portrays Leonora as a schemer who turned Nancy against Edward, even though she is also the one who wanted Nancy to stay. Of course, she could be both, but the insinuation that she is entirely to blame for what happened is blatantly unfair.



PART 4, CHAPTER 6

John begins to wrap up his story by posing questions to the reader, which he does not answer. He asks, for instance, whether Edward's decision to send Nancy to India was selfish. According to Leonora, it was dooming the girl to a life of abuse. However, according to Edward, any act that results in such pain to oneself cannot be selfish. When posing such questions, John is careful to act as a neutral party; in this section, he always leaves the final moral judgment up to the reader.

However, there is some story left to tell. John returns to the moment when he first arrived at Branshaw Manor. While there, he asks Leonora about marrying Nancy. Leonora gives her permission but tells John that he cannot settle down close to the Ashburnhams because she doesn't want Nancy nearby. John understands, accepts Leonora's request, and decides to postpone his proposal for several months. Eventually, he plans to travel to India and propose to Nancy once he is there.

The day before Nancy leaves for India, John talks to Edward who reveals his love for Nancy. The next day when Nancy is put on her train, Edward is deeply upset, while Leonora is the happiest that she's been in a long time. Edward feels as though his wife has got the best of him. Meanwhile, Leonora feels that there is once again a possibility of winning her husband back.

At this point, John remembers that there is only one bit of the story that he's failed to mention so far: Edward's death. Coincidentally, John was present for it. A few days after Nancy's departure, a letter arrives from Nancy stating her current location and the fact that she is safe. Edward reads the letter while in the stables with John. Afterwards, he hands the letter to John, asks him to take it to Leonora, and then pulls out a knife. John sees the knife and realizes what Edward intends to do but does not stop him. Moments later, Edward puts the knife to his throat and slices it open.

John's question here is fair, although it is a bit late for him to start acting like a neutral party. His story and commentary have been biased throughout, so readers should ignore his claims regarding neutrality.



Leonora's request here is reasonable and probably what's best for everyone. Of course, it never comes to fruition because of Edward's suicide and Nancy's subsequent breakdown.



Edward and Leonora's opposing attitudes toward Nancy's departure suggest that their marriage is far from fixed. Leonora's notion that she can win her husband back is nothing more than pipe dream, and, of course, it does not happen.



Finally, John narrates Edward's suicide, and in doing so calls into question everything that has come before it. First of all, it's unclear whether John is telling the truth. This is yet another death that only John was around to witness. Furthermore, John had clear incentive to kill Edward; after all, Edward had sex with John's wife. Alternatively, John could secretly wish to marry Leonora either for love or to inherit yet another fortune. However, even if John did not kill Edward, he does not come out of the scene innocent. At the very least, he allows Edward to kill himself and doesn't seem emotionally affected by what he sees. If John did kill Edward, then this might explain why he is so forgiving to him throughout the novel; his excessive kindness could be a way of covering up his tracks. Ultimately, like everything else in this novel, the truth is unknowable because there is no omniscient narrator to confirm or deny what John is saying. Instead, the reader is left with only John's words, which can be slippery to say the least.





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