

Does Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier* support the proposition that Literary texts produced during periods of social transition always hark back to imaginary golden ages?

A period of social transition is a period in which society experiences changes of social structure and in the rules of moral, religious, economic, political behaviour within that society. Social transition often occurs as a consequence of major events such as war (as in the emancipation of women after World War 1, revolution (e.g., the rise of communism after the Bolshevik revolution), technological change, such as the Industrial Revolution and the consequent depopulation of the countryside and the growth of empire and adoption of colonialism.

An imaginary golden age can be thought of as a “period of greatest prosperity in the history of a nation, state, etc” or “the time when a specified art or activity is at its finest, most advanced, or most popular” (‘golden age’, 2018). Retrospectively, such eras may be “golden” as they are seen with nostalgia and a favourably enhanced perspective. Examples are the ancient pastoral environment envied by modern city dwellers, or the golden age of knightly chivalry described in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* that popularised an entirely fictional legend of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table (Keen, 2005).

The proposition is the primary bearer of a truth or falsity. Since the subject proposition uses the declarative phrase ‘always harks back’, then if there is a single counter example, then this proposition is demonstrably false. Harking back in this context means ‘recalling, remembering or returning’ – it does not imply that such recollections are favourable or otherwise. Given the many periods of social transitions experienced by various human societies and the many texts written during these periods, it seems highly probable that at least one of these might not recall, remember or return to a period that the author or audience perceived as a golden age. *The War of the Worlds* (Wells, 1898) is an obvious Edwardian

candidate, with its prescient depictions of alien and mechanistic technologies that resolutely look forward to the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is hard to argue that any of the three texts considered in TMA3 are similar counterexamples as they all have some aspects that recall, reference or recollect some sort of golden age.

Victorian writers such as Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy took a realistic approach to their writing and laid an emphasis on specific actions and verifiable consequences, issues of personal conduct, occurring in the here now, depicted in a factual (almost journalistic) style using direct language. However, as this golden age of realism ended, a new generation of authors sought new approaches. This led to a Modernistic style characterised by a desire to discard convention, to present a more subjective or impressionistic discourse, and to reflect ideas of subjectivity, perspective and consciousness. (Haslam in Ford, 2010, p. 13). Ezra Pound summarised this in his declamation “Make it new!” (Pound, 1935) but T.S. Eliot expressed it rather more eloquently in reference to poetry:

It appears likely that poets in our civilization,  
as it exists at present, must be difficult. . . .  
The poet must become more and more comprehensive,  
more allusive, more indirect, in order to force,  
to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.

(Eliot, 1921)

Importantly, “a recurrent feature of Modernist writing is, arguably, that it seeks to respond to a prevailing sense of crisis and fragmentation” (Tickell, 2016, p. 12). This is certainly true for *The Good Soldier* which Ford Maddox Ford set during the cataclysmic years leading up to World War 1 - a period he viewed as a “‘sack full of cats all at each other’s throats’, torn apart by fears of socialism, suffragism, Irish independence and German rearmament” (Moser in Ford, 1990, p. 11). Ford was also writing at time when his often turbulent personal life was in a particularly intense state of flux as he was still married to his

original wife Elsie, had fallen out of love with a second (bigamous) bride Violet Hunt, only to replace her in his affections with the unhappily married Bridget Patmore (p. 11). It has been said that “A recurrent feature of Modernist writing is, arguably, that it seeks to respond to a prevailing sense of crisis and fragmentation” and this certainly seems to accurately characterise the genesis of *The Good Soldier* (Beattie, 2023).

From 1898 Ford had a fruitful ten year period of collaboration with Joseph Conrad (Meixner, 1974, pp. 162-167) in which he developed and embraced techniques of impressionism: “time-shift, fidelity to point of view of the narrating consciousness, careful selection of details to render the exact impression of perceived experiences and use of pictorial images and symbols” (Hoffman, 1990 p. 3). For Ford, Impressionist writing was about showing the reader rather than telling. Ford stated, “For Impressionism is a thing all together momentary [...] a piece of Impressionism should give a sense of two, of three, of as many as you will, places, persons, emotions, all going on simultaneously in the emotions of the writer” (p. 40). However, “Ford distances himself from more extreme versions of art-for-art's-sake, which assert that art should turn its back on a profane world and argues instead that precisely because reality has become so complex and sordid the writer's most pressing task is to represent it in as accurate and non-judgmental a way as possible” (Gasiorek, 2001, p. 9).

Although Ford turned away from the literary techniques of previous golden ages, he cannot be said to be fully disconnected from all aspect of those ages. Ford places the origins of Edward and Florence Ashburnham in the Golden Age - the culmination of the British Empire and the dominance of British values of morality, politics and religion over one quarter of the globe. Dowell insists that Edward is a “good” soldier: “Edward Ashburnham was the cleanest looking sort of chap; —an excellent magistrate, a first rate soldier, one of the best landlords, so they said, in Hampshire, England.” (Ford, 2010, p. 32). But the “so they said” raises a question mark in the reader’s mind - Dowell is only relaying secondary

evidence. Dowell goes backwards and forwards, skidding through the narrative witching times and tenses, offering often fogged perspectives and confused commentary. At one point, addressing the reader, Dowell says: "Supposing that you should come upon us sitting together . . ." yet he has already explained that two of the quartet are dead, and realising he is caught in his own confusion, he tries to obscure his confusion by a change to the past conditional: ". . . you would have said that, as human affairs go, we were an extraordinarily safe castle" (p. 28). Dowell may be unreliable and opaquely confusing in his statements, but Ford himself is entirely in control of his prose. As VS Pritchett wrote of Ford: "Confusion was the mainspring of his art as a novelist. He confused to make clear" (Barnes, 2008).

Ford challenges the traditional realistic, factual narrative techniques of the Victorian realism, by using a disjointed non-chronological timeline, and infusing Dowell's narration with reflective commentary. While it is Dowell who raises the question of how to tell his story or even in what order: "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)" (p. 32) it is Ford that is inviting the reader to ponder on the meaning of narration itself. While Dowell says: "Is all this digression or isn't it digression? Again, I don't know." (p. 34) Ford is teasing the reader, and both reader and authors are enjoying the process. Sometimes the apparently naive Dowell, who sees people as good simply because of their dress and manners injects a shocking 180 degree turn in perception in a single sentence: "I had forgotten his eyes. . . . When you looked at them carefully you saw that they were perfectly honest, perfectly straightforward, perfectly, perfectly stupid." (p. 42). When Dowell uses a simple word such as "poor" (as in "poor Edward", that "poor devil"), it is near-impossible to gauge whether he is being sympathetic or sarcastic. Ford's controlled use of the disruption of the straightforward language typical of previous generation of realists is very much a modernist technique, where the reader must provide their own participation to

properly understand the text.

Although Ford uses Modernist techniques, he nevertheless, in some ways, still harks back to a Golden Age. Although he rejects the literary techniques of that Golden Age he recalls and comments on its social morality. Ford “presents the operative definition of patriarchal masculinity in late Victorian/Edwardian England as inextricably linked to the assumptions and practices of imperialism, likening the expectation that men transgress boundaries in order to possess ever more women to the scramble for colonies among colonial powers” (Hoffman, 2004, p. 30). Ford thus sees both the literary techniques and moral structure of the Victorian, colonial age as an imagined (i.e., false) Golden Age.

This essay could conclude that finding a single counterexample is a simple method of disproving the proposition. Such a pedantic approach is somewhat futile, not because a single counter example cannot be found amongst the millions of literary works in existence, but because disproving the proposition does not change the fact that the best literature will always seek to reshape the past to illuminate the present:

“Every artistic act is generated in some way by those which have come before. Artists react against or take what they want or need from their predecessors, consciously or unconsciously, adding their own twists, styles, refutations, repetitions or interests.” (Hallam, 2016, p. 100).

The more important conclusion of this essay is that the value of the vast body of work that supports the proposition, (such as *The Good Soldier*) vastly outweighs the value of a single counterexample.

[1646 words]

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