CHAPTER SEVEN

“I Leave It to You”

Church, State, and Morality in Ford Madox Ford’s The Good Soldier

Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* has always been viewed as a novel that masterfully dramatizes epistemological uncertainty. Dowell appears to have the exact experience lauded by new ethical theorists: he is brought face to face with “unknowability” and has uncomfortably to recognize the limits of his own perspective. As he struggles to understand the truth about the last nine years and his own ignorance and blindness, a recurring phrase for Dowell is simply: “I don’t know.” The novel’s scattered impressionistic form was radical in its day, breaking all the narrative conventions of fiction, and seeming to lead the reader, too, to a position of unknowability. Many prominent critics supported such a view of the novel and argued that for Dowell, epistemological and moral unknowability go hand in hand. Max Saunders calls *The Good Soldier* a “rendering without a comment” and says it “cannot be reduced to a moral message” (441). Hugh Kenner said the reader is left with “an impasse of sympathy for all sides” (54). And Mark Schorer: “*The Good Soldier* describes a world that is without a moral point.”¹

Such critics seem to assume that dismantling narrative conventions is equivalent to dismantling morality and that moral unknowability is the

¹ I am indebted to Jeffrey Mathes McCarty’s essay for this collection of quotations. There are other major critics who value the novel’s “amorality” or moral pluralism. See, for example, Samuel Hynes, “The Epistemology of *The Good Soldier*” in *The Sewanee Review* 69:2 (1961): 225–235, and also Michael Levenson’s arguments in “Character” and *Modernism*. 158
reality of human life. Dowell’s struggle for literary form represents, then, the human need for warding off a sense of meaninglessness. Ford himself might seem to support such a view, such as when he says that during his life he never developed a “fixed moral attitude” or “scheme of ethics” (qtd. in Mizener 21). As Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy has argued, however, such readings tend to “reproduce the limitations of autonomous aesthetics by justifying the process without measuring the results” (332). In other words, Ford’s creation of Dowell in the novel is admired and reproduced in the criticism without an examination of whether this is an efficacious or good view of the self to hold. In a sense, modernism reads modernism into Ford’s novel in order to justify its own aesthetics. This chapter argues that Ford’s novel, while certainly a radical and groundbreaking experiment with characterization, is also concerned for the moral ramifications of Dowell’s position.

Ford clearly links morality to England’s religious and literary history, yet many proponents of the novel’s moral unknowability ignore the historical religious references in the novel.² In contemplating Edward’s character, Dowell ponders the English “Nonconformist Conscience,” Anglo-Catholicism, Anglicanism, and novel-reading. Clearly the Irish Roman Catholicism of Leonora is pitted against the Protestant Reformation in the crucial scene at Marburg. Here, when Florence touches Edward’s wrist, both Leonora and the reader know, but not Dowell, that an adulterous affair between them is about to begin. Ford’s placement of this event in a significant early modern Protestant setting highlights the influence of Protestantism as a whole on shifting moral and political views of marriage and adultery.³ The tension between the Nonconformist (or Puritan) background of Dowell and the Roman Catholicism of Leonora, as well as the relation of both of these to Florence’s and Edward’s Anglicanism, informs the entire novel. While recently more attention has been paid to such references, there is more to be said about how religious history relates to the novel’s epistemological and moral concerns.⁴ In its analysis of Puritanism and Puritan hermeneutics, this book has argued that religion, morality, history, and epistemology are integrally linked in the novel’s form. This chapter argues that Ford was aware of and consciously manipulated these elements in The Good Soldier. In the

². Saunders is an exception on this point.
³. Cheng was one of the first literary critics (beyond the biographers) to take the historical-religious references seriously; see “Religious Differences.”
⁴. For other treatments of the religious references, see Cheng (“The Spirit of The Good Soldier”), Mizener, Sutton, and also Stannard.
process, he renders Dowell’s stance morally questionable and reveals its limitations. Debates in the 1900s and 1910s over the role of church and state in issues of marriage and divorce also influenced Ford’s treatment of religious history, and so, as with the other novels analyzed in this book, readings of Puritanism in the novel are joined with those of the author’s context.

As seen in chapter 3, battles between Anglo-Catholics and Protestants, and between Nonconformists and the Establishment, continued into the 1900s and 1910s, and certainly influenced Ford’s perspective. Yet Ford’s own religious identity has been a matter of some disagreement among his biographers. Ford was brought up “in the back rooms and nurseries of pre-Raphaelitism” (Mizener 6), with his famous grandfather, the painter Ford Madox Brown, and an atheist father who hailed from a German Catholic family. As a young man in 1892, Ford converted to Roman Catholicism while on the Continent, but the level of his commitment to practicing this faith over the course of his life is sketchy. Arthur Mizener argues that Ford was “scarcely Catholic in either feeling or conduct” most of the time and that his Catholicism was “essentially a by-product of his social and political views rather than a religious attitude” (20). Ford clearly put himself in the conservative camp, linking his “sentimental Tory” commitments to his Catholicism and “feudalism.” Alan Judd calls Ford “a kind of Catholic, or agnostic, or a Catholic-agnostic—what he would have said would have depended upon his audience and when he was speaking” (1). Judd judges that Ford remained nominally a Catholic after his conversion, though “his practice was irregular and his belief at best ambiguous” (19). Judd believes Ford found the ceremony and tradition of Catholicism in line with his general worldview, but that Ford often had negative things to say about God and in general believed in a heretical “Albigensian Christ,” one whose “redemptive work consisted only in His teaching” and not in his resurrection (20). Max Saunders gives Ford a little more credit for his belief, but argues that Ford’s Catholicism had appeal because it “provoked the rationalist friends he was defining himself against,” not because he was interested in any theological matters (54). It is probably safe to say that Ford’s Catholicism did not play a vital role in his thinking about morality nor did it shape the way he lived. Interestingly, Ford’s two daughters entered the church, and one even became a nun, much to Ford’s dismay (Judd 20).

Ford’s criticisms of English Nonconformity and Protestantism are well known, and one can only infer that Continental Roman Catholi-
cism in part provided a means for him to rebel against his own culture. While he voices an appreciation for his childhood experiences in the Anglican Church, suggesting that in church services there are “moments which are unsurpassable in this life” (Spirit 91), many of his writings are critical of the Reformation’s influence on England. In his 1907 The Spirit of the People, and his 1911 The Critical Attitude, Ford analyzes the British “Puritan spirit,” which he says is “the backbone of England” (Spirit 80). Like Arnold and Newman before him, Ford characterizes the Victorian era as the fulfillment of what the Reformation had started: it was a time in which Protestantism, individualism, “free speech, free thought, free trade, political economics” were all accepted as “unquestionable fact”—“firm, unquestionable, unshakeable” and certainly providential (Spirit 75). While this may have led to world ascendancy, Ford argues it also made the English religion “almost entirely a standard of manners” by which the Englishman “accepts an Anglicized Christ Jesus for his personal model” (Spirit 119, 169). This quote points to the idea that Puritanism had become merely an outer social morality while losing its religious and communal vitality. To Ford, the Protestant revolution “doomed England to be the land of impracticable ideals. Before that date a man could live without his finger upon his moral pulse: since then it has grown more and more impossible” (Spirit 81). Echoing Arnold, Ford felt that the Nonconformist conscience had created the British tendency to discourage “open and free expression,” especially in religious and sexual matters, and to avoid one’s feelings and passions (Cheng, “Spirit”). In terms reminiscent of Newman, such moral idealism leads to moral self-centeredness and a real “lack of sympathetic imagination” among Englishmen (Spirit 120). The Puritan Spirit also “availed itself of reason at the expense of intuition” (Spirit 115). Yet despite its rational nature, the Puritan Spirit squashed the “Critical Attitude” in England: “the Englishman has founded three hundred and forty-seven religions. And each of these religions is founded on a compromise. That is what the Englishman does to, that is how he floors—the critical attitude” (Critical 5). Using the example of Bible-reading, Ford describes Protestants as people who “take in its teachings from their births, and by its standards measure good and evil. . . . It is beloved, it is pored over, it is learned by heart, it inspires heroism, devotions, or cruelties” (Critical 7). Yet Protestants never examine the Bible critically. Roman Catholics, on the other hand, as well as free thinkers, have a more critical attitude toward the

5. For more on Ford and Continental Roman Catholicism, see Sutton.
Bible and at times find it “a disagreeably realistic book” because it contains “barbarisms, crudenesses, disproportions, and revelations of sickening cruelties” (Critical 7–8). Clearly shaped by previous interpretations of Puritanism, Ford sees its negative influence on England in a fairly stereotypical light: it brought an emphasis on morality to the detriment of other aspects of being human; it elevated reason over feeling; it lacked a self-critical eye. Vincent Cheng suggests that Ford found in Continental Catholicism a society more open to the “instinctual, the sense of divine mystery, and the open expression of feelings” (Cheng, “Spirit”). This openness coupled with the “critical attitude” and a less rigid sense of morality, meant that Catholicism for Ford was “a religion that men can live up to” (Spirit 81), for it was based on the “sentiments and weaknesses of humanity” rather than on its quest for moral perfection (Spirit 115).

In his own time, Ford believed the Nonconformist denominations were waning, as Unitarians, Anglicans, Congregationalists, Quakers, and Methodists all seemed to have forgotten their original creeds and practiced instead a “faith of a vague and a humanitarian nature” (Spirit 99, 102). The established church’s theology had likewise become fragmentary (Spirit 99), and overall the Puritan Spirit had lost its appeal, authority, tradition, and “popular comprehensibility” (Spirit 115). Like so many other modernists, Ford believed that because Protestantism had fragmented the modern world, making it “impossible to see [life] whole” (Critical 28), England would have to look to art to gain a knowledge of life (Spirit 111). Ford seems to find the wholeness Protestantism lacked in his quartet of feudalism, Toryism, Roman Catholicism, and art.

How Ford’s characters—Nonconformist Dowell and Episcopalian Florence, Anglican Edward and Roman Catholic Leonora—fit in with such views of Protestantism seems confusing, for the novel does not paint a sympathetic picture of Catholicism in Leonora. It makes Dowell at least somewhat a victim and Edward the hero. Like Wilde, Ford seems to pit the moral, which is attached to Leonora, against the “ethical,” which seems to be Dowell’s attempted position. Yet interestingly, Ford reverses the stereotypical orientation of each: Leonora with her moral concerns is Irish Roman Catholic, and Dowell with his ethical unknowability is American Nonconformist Quaker.

It is important to remember these characterizations are all from Dowell’s perspective. Ford clearly has in mind what Henry James said of the novel, “There is the story of one’s hero and then there is the story of one’s story.” As he works through the information he has recently been given about the last nine years—the information about Edward’s affair with his
wife, Florence, as well as the history of Edward’s multiple infidelities and final struggle to maintain an idealized love for Nancy—Dowell himself writes a novel. He does not merely offer incoherent conversational fragments to his listener as he claims, nor does he stay caught in an impossible quest for form. Rather, his novel takes a specific form: romantic tragedy. Readers should attend to Dowell not simply as a poor, repressed soul who is caught with horrible newfound knowledge and is trying to make sense of it. They should also attend to Dowell as a novelist and consider his choices and methods as a novelist. His epistemological uncertainty centers on ideas of morality and character, and the central question of his novel is a moral one: “How should we judge Edward Ashburnham on a moral level?” Dowell’s novel begs a larger question, however, that readers should ask about Ford’s novel: “How should we judge the novelist Dowell on a moral level?”

As Wilde did with Dorian Gray, Dowell depicts Leonora, Edward, and Nancy as being tragically caught between conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable, one-sided social-moral narratives about how one should live. According to Dowell, the story is tragically sad because the moral “normal type,” Leonora, goes on to survive in society while the great souls—Edward and Nancy—are snuffed out (174–75). Leonora remarries and has a child, while Edward commits suicide and Nancy goes mad. Yet associating Dowell’s position with what the reader is supposed to believe, or even with Ford’s own position, is problematic. Certainly like Dowell, who claims he wants to be like Edward, Ford himself wanted to be free of, or at least struggled with, social-moral ideas about sex and marriage. Ford led a rather tumultuous sexual life, with several marriages, divorces, affairs, and longer extramarital relationships over the years. He told his publisher that The Good Soldier was a “serious . . . analysis of the polygamous desires that that underlie all men” (qtd. in Stannard 112). While it is difficult to know how seriously to take this line, in part this seems right. Dowell fairly successfully leads the reader to pity Edward as he imagines and identifies with Edward’s “polygamous” desires. Yet the novel also purposefully considers Edward’s desires in light of Great Britain’s social structures, literary and religious history, and Christian ethos. While Dowell mournfully claims society does not allow people like Edward and Nancy to survive, it does not follow that this attitude should also be the reader’s. Dowell’s romantic tragic form and the position of unknowability he claims need careful analysis.

Examining Ford’s historical context illuminates how and why he characterizes the religion and actions of his characters as he does. Ford sets
up a clear difference in his British and American characters regarding the morality of marriage, divorce, and sex, despite the Protestant backgrounds of the Americans and the influence of Puritanism in both countries. Interestingly, Dowell never labels Edward’s or Florence’s adultery a “sin” like Leonora does. In parallel, Florence never seems to bear guilt in her conscience over her adultery like Edward does, or at least not to his extent. The novel attributes these different approaches in England and the United States to the different historical trajectories of church–state relations in both countries.

When Florence touches Edward’s wrist at Marburg to signal she is ready to sleep with him, she states:

There it is—the “Protest.” . . . Don’t you know that is why we were all called Protestants? That is the pencil draft of the Protest they drew up. . . . 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. (29)

In setting this scene at Marburg, Ford highlights the shift in church–state relations that the Reformation brought and the consequent effects on marriage and divorce law. In non-Catholic regions after the Reformation, marriage tended to become a civic contract governed by the civil courts, losing its status as a religious sacrament protected by church courts. Of course Protestants could individually maintain a sacramental, religious view of marriage, seeing it as indissoluble, but with the emergence of Protestantism appeals regarding divorce, adultery, and marriage are increasingly made to the state, not to the church. In this area, morality begins to separate from religion with the Protestant Reformation. This is what Leonora seems to express when she says to Dowell after the wrist-touching: “Don’t you see that that’s the cause of the whole miserable affair; of the whole sorrow of the world? And of the eternal damnation of you and me and them” (30).

In England, of course, Protestantism was founded on Henry VIII’s break from Rome in order to get a divorce. The Church of England henceforth was bound to the state, and marriage, divorce, and adultery became the province of both church and state, which were intimately connected. The ecclesiastical courts of the Church of England still retained the power to dissolve marriages in the case of adultery, but an Act of Parliament also had to be granted. Because this was very expensive, divorce was largely open only to wealthy men. The English state was involved
in religious and moral matters because it was part and parcel with the church. Even into Ford’s day, England considered itself to be a Christian state. The Nonconformists emerged simultaneously in the Reformation period to combat this union of religion and nationalism, both theologically and politically.

Events in Ford’s day were directly descended from the events of the Reformation. The relation of church and state, religion and morality, were dominant issues in Edwardian England; indeed, these issues constitute the crisis Wilde was dramatizing. In the wake of the Charles Stewart Parnell case, Nonconformists increasingly put pressure on the Establishment Parliament regarding moral matters. For example, one of these became the question of Sunday or Sabbath. When Prince Edward started playing golf on Sundays, a precedent was set for the “Victorian Sunday” to be violated, and the relation of religion and sport became a huge debate (Robbins 57–58). Nonconformists in particular put pressure on Parliament to protect the Sabbath. Bicycling, going to the theater, or participating in some other form of non-Sunday “play” was termed “going Continental” and seemed to be considered simultaneously nonnationalist and non-Christian (Robbins 58). At the Church of Ireland Conference in 1910, “The Secularization of Sunday” was debated at great length. With this issue, the relation of church and state in England was highlighted: should the state be expected to enforce religious, moral principles and practices? With the weakening of state protection of religious practices, increasingly Nonconformist churches formed organizations to combat irreligious patterns in society such as gambling, prostitution, and drinking (58). These organizations emphasized individual behavior, personal responsibility, character formation, and conversion as the ways to combat the larger evils of society (59). According to Robbins, while other types of Christians also participated in such tactics, including Catholics, this “zeal for respectable living” became associated primarily with the “Nonconformist Conscience” and the Puritan emphasis on morality which emerged and intensified in the wake of the Parnell case (59). Such endeavors were often seen as “hangovers from the nineteenth century” and “as an essentially middle-class moral crusade” (Munson 1).

The “Nonconformist Conscience” came stereotypically to mean “a selective application of rigid rules” pressured onto others but not onto one’s self (Munson 241).

Yet as Munson argues, there was more to the Nonconformist conscience than this stereotype. Methodists were interested in making sure public political figures were also morally upright (108). This trend
is reflected in Dowell’s treatment of the Kilsyte case, Edward’s first infidelity:

You see, the servant girl that he then kissed was nurse in the family of the Nonconformist head of the county—whatever that post may be called. And that gentleman was so determined to ruin Edward, who was the chairman of the Tory caucus, or whatever it is—that the poor dear sufferer had the very devil of a time. They asked questions about it in the House of Commons; they tried to get the Hampshire magistrates degraded; they suggested to the War Ministry that Edward was not the proper person to hold the King’s commission. Yes, he got it hot and strong. (41)

For the Baptists and Congregationalists, politics and religion had always been more thoroughly related. These denominations felt responsible for ensuring and maintaining English liberties: freedom and hope for all citizens, not just the elite (Munson 220).

With the success of Nonconformity in politics in the 1900s, however, according to Munson, Nonconformist religion, just like Anglicanism, simply became absorbed into “mainstream urban life” (304). Nonconformist prosperity in politics did not aid its cause, for just as in the Anglican Church, others could simply see the divergence of public and private forms of Christianity, mistrusting the alliance of religion and politics. Perhaps this is what Ford observed when he said the Protestant forces were waning in England. Even some Nonconformists felt the weakening of their current influence and of their historical position as social and political gadfly. The Baptist leader, J. H. Shakespeare, advocated for ecumenical unity instead of denominational solidarity, saying in 1918: “so far as England is concerned, the era of division has spent its force and lost its moral appeal” and that “the gains do not outweigh the losses” when it comes to “Puritanism” (71–72). In addition to this weakening of the Nonconformist position, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales were all in their own ways exerting pressure on the “religion” versus “nation” question, such that as the state wrestled with unity so did the Anglican Church (Robbins 87). Despite all this, however, Robbins still sees the period leading up to the Great War as one in which the established church was “part of the fabric of the State” (103). In fact, when the war began, many of these religious-national tensions receded as other matters became more important.
Ford would have witnessed and read about, as well as been personally affected by, extended political debates over laws regarding marriage, divorce, and adultery that occurred in the 1900s and 1910s. In these years divorce law reform was a hot topic of debate. Divorce law had not been modified in England since 1857. In that year, Parliament had passed the Matrimonial Causes Act, which allowed ordinary people, and not just the wealthy, to divorce under certain conditions. Men could divorce on grounds of adultery, but it was much harder for women to initiate and secure a divorce. Not only did women need to prove their husbands were unfaithful, but they also had to prove at least one additional fault such as cruelty, rape, incest, sodomy, bestiality, bigamy, or two years of abandonment. If another fault were not present, women could not divorce on the basis of adultery. Well into the twentieth century, then, women in Britain had little recourse against abusive husbands. This means that Leonora, who late in the novel offers to divorce Edward in order that he can be with Nancy, really could not have attained a divorce, for there was no other fault she could prove. In her case, both her Catholic Church and the state would have prevented a divorce. Any divorces that did occur in Ford’s day would likely have been widely publicized and considered scandalous, such as the Brand case Nancy reads about in the newspaper. In this case the courts are able to prove on behalf of Mrs. Brand that Mr. Brand committed adultery and that he was physically abusive to her when he was drunk. The paper Nancy reads is probably a popular tabloid, which often dramatized open court divorce proceedings and revealed “scandalous details” to please and draw in curious readers (Harris 35).

E. S. P. Haynes, a leading proponent of divorce law reform, blamed the popularity of divorce court publicity specifically on the Puritans:

> We are suffering from the type of Puritan whom Macaulay described as putting down bear-baiting not because it gives pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the non-Puritan spectator. Our Puritan of today not only enjoys the spectacle of the Divorce Court but also the satisfaction of knowing that it gives pain to a vast number of persons, and particularly to those who, however foolishly or innocently, have strayed from the path of Puritan conventions. (99–100)

Because divorce was so publically scrutinized, often it was a matter of honor for the man to take the blame. Perhaps this is why Edward does not consider divorce an option, for it would bring dishonor to Leonora
as well. Dowell reflects this fact when he says “it was only by [Edward’s] making it plain that a divorced lady could never assume a position in the county of Hampshire that he could prevent [Florence] from making a bolt of it with him in her train,” for she had constantly offered to divorce Dowell (68).

In the 1900s, books, articles, editorials, and novels were widely published on the topics of marriage and divorce. Among other things, at issue were unequal rights for the poor, who could not afford a divorce; unequal rights for women; and the bawdy publicity allowed in tabloids and other venues. In 1910, debates heated up so much that King Edward established a Royal Commission on Divorce and Matrimonial Causes, whose purpose was to consider these issues. The Commission was made up of fourteen commissioners, including two women, the first ever to serve on a Royal Commission. They sat from February 25, 1910, to December 1912, and heard 246 witnesses from all walks of life and from various institutions and organizations. Janice Harris puts forth four reasons for why the Royal Commission was established: an English sense of vulnerability within Europe; fear of a declining population or “racial” degeneration; anxiety over the increasing numbers of marital separations and consequent extramarital relationships and illegitimate children; and David Lloyd George’s agenda of social welfare. In the latter case, Lloyd George argued that the state should take an interest in the welfare of its people by establishing various social programs to support them. This policy went against England’s established tradition of seeing public and private moral and economic responsibility as separate things. Harris believes such policies opened the way for the state to enter into family issues, opening marriage in England to more public scrutiny.

An issue Harris addresses only briefly in her study of Edwardian divorce is one that is central to the debate and to Ford’s novel: the relation of church and state and their proper roles in moral issues. The Commission’s recommendations called for changes in the civil law including: court reduction of costs so poor people could have equal access to divorce; the establishment of equity between men and women in divorce proceedings; and curbing of divorce case publicity (Harris 67). The Commission on the whole split over the issue of whether grounds for divorce should be broadened beyond adultery, and so did not make a recommendation regarding it. The minority report formulated and distributed

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6. The proceedings of the Commission are well documented in The Times as well as in most of the major journals of the period.
widely in opposition to the majority report was written mostly by churchmen who did not agree with the Commission’s recommendations. The minority report continued to cause much debate in the ensuing years, and perhaps caused such a divide at the time that essentially nothing was done to make the changes for which the Commission had called. Only after the Great War in 1923, were more laws passed making divorce slightly easier for women in England, although the essentials of the law remained unchanged. Only in the 1950s was another Royal Commission established on this topic.

Most fundamentally at stake in the Royal Commission debates was the nature of marriage. Is it sacred or secular? Sacramental or merely a legal contract? In England it historically had been both as church and state were closely linked. As one writer in the Times put it, the Commission arises recognizing the “increased difficulty of correlating the civil and the ecclesiastical factors of marriage” and that “since the Reformation the tendency had been more and more to exalt the civil and depress the ecclesiastical aspect of marriage.” In England, this writer says, “the Church’s control of marriage had never been complete.”7 This ill-defined relation of church and state regarding marriage law stemming from the Reformation consistently fueled the Edwardian debates. Although they had some differences on how to interpret the Bible on moral issues, church leaders—Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Nonconformist—all essentially agreed that the Christian view of marriage was sacramental and that marriage was therefore indissoluble, except perhaps in the case of adultery. The Nonconformists actually tended to favor equal rights for women and men, but vehemently argued for the sanctity of marriage and against law reform.

In arguing this question of marriage’s nature, various other subquestions were debated during the Commission between churchmen and secularists. These included: What exactly did the Reformers believe in England about marriage and divorce? Was Thomas Cranmer’s Reformatio Legum, which allowed for more causes for divorce, actually acted upon, or was it a mute document with little effect historically? Haynes, one of the dominant voices for secularizing marriage, claimed the church did not know its own history as well as it should. He argued:

It is fairly common knowledge that Cranmer and others recommended a law of divorce that would have given liberty of remarriage in the case of

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adultery, cruelty, and desertion, and abolished permanent separation as opposed to divorce. At the Reformation the doctrine of a sacrament in marriage was abandoned, and this revived the controversy whether marriage was of its nature indissoluble. (739–40)

Haynes argued that the church had never upheld the position for which it currently was standing. The man most responsible for the minority report, Sir Lewis Dibdin, Dean of the Arches, on the other hand, argued that not only was Cranmer’s document not made law, it was not instituted at all in the Reformation and “never had any operative force” (“English Church Law” 904). Related questions argued over were: Is the Church of England more Catholic, Protestant, or a mixture of both? If more Catholic, as surely it is, because the English church adhered more to Catholicism’s “rigorous state of things than other Protestant countries” did, can’t it get around this issue by establishing a practice of annulment, as the Roman Catholic Church has done? Another line of argument asked: Despite the Church of England’s stance on the sanctity of marriage, what have its practices actually been in the past? Have not there been times when the church has looked the other way, so to speak, and allowed aristocrats to buy divorces through Parliament? One writer suggests that even if the upper classes divorced and remarried through private Acts of Parliament or in “defiance of the law” from the Reformation onwards, even if the “national conscience had fallen away from the Catholic ideal of marriage, the law alike of Church and State still stood for the higher morality” and should continue to do so (“Divorce and the English Reformation” 21). Debaters argued over whether divorce reform would actually lead to more social immorality or not. Some saw England’s being so far behind the rest of the West on this issue an embarrassment and a sign of England’s decline. They wanted England to overcome its Puritan history on this topic.

Numerous churchmen and women, officials and laity, gave testimony before the Commission on these topics, and many articles and essays were published in journals arguing for all sides. The marriage question like no other seemed to bring to the forefront of national discussion the potential effects of the separation of church and state on religious and moral issues. Many could not understand the church’s upholding of the sacramental view of indissoluble marriage to the detriment of women and the poor, who might be stuck in abusive situations or who might cohabitate

and establish families outside of marriage in light of having little other option. They wondered why the civil law had to uphold the sacramental view of marriage, even more so if since the Reformation marriage had been primarily a civil contract. Clearly, while not ever in danger of having to change its position, the church saw as the most crucial issue the need to maintain the law’s alliance with Christian teachings. In the terms of this book, at stake in the marriage debate was this question: should the law uphold Puritan morality as it currently stands, or not?

In the time Ford writes, then, while the state’s governance over moral and religious issues is debated in response to the Royal Commission as well as in other areas, the state nevertheless upholds what the church had upheld for centuries: it was very difficult to get a divorce in England. The effect of such laws, which Dowell specifically links to religious attitudes and beliefs, is the reason Dowell sees Edward, Leonora, and Nancy as trapped and tragically doomed. English marriage laws still assume and speak to the inner conscience and to ideas of sin, good and evil, and God; they are still informed and shaped by both Puritan religious belief and Puritan social morality. In Dowell’s novelistic view, which is very similar to Nietzsche’s, the laws and religions of England inhibit the freedom and passions of the natural true self by causing religious guilt, social shame, and inner conflict.

In the United States, on the other hand, where the terms “dissent” and “nonconformist” held little meaning, church and state were constitutionally separate entities and always had been. Marriage and divorce laws more quickly lost their religious grounding. By 1880, one in sixteen marriages in the United States ended in divorce, the highest rate in the world. By 1910, the United States had by far the most divorces in the world. The skyrocketing divorce rate and looser legalities against adultery paralleled increasing American affluence, a trend Ford reflects in his American characters. Quite simply, the transition of marriage from a sacrament to a civil contract occurred much more quickly in the United States than it did in England, even if the full opening of the law to no-fault divorces in both places came at similar times (1960s and 1970s). Ford’s novel clearly implies that the more liberal American morality was a function of the separation of church and state and hence of religion and morality, while the slower pace of England was due to the fact that church and state, and hence religion, morality, and the law were one and the same Protestant Establishment.

Ford’s stance in this seems contradictory, however, for Tory–Catholic–Feudal Ford held disdain for Protestantism, yet he and his character Dow-
ell seem to want the freer sexual morality it historically enabled. England had been slow to find this sexual freedom, as the union of church and state maintained the guilt and shame cultures longer than in other Protestant nations. Ford in his own life certainly identifies with the impulse found in so many modernist texts to escape the “Puritan” idea of the self. Yet what Ford knew, but his character Dowell seems not to know, is that the relation of Puritan social morality to sexual freedom and romantic desire is in large part the dialectic of the novelistic narrative. The Good Soldier explores and manipulates this dialectic.

In the novel, American Protestant concern over adultery and extramarital sex seems to be retained only by Florence’s old spinster aunts, who were thoroughly imbued with the “New England Conscience” (9), but who nonetheless could not actually use the word “sacrament” when describing marriage (56). The sisters Hurlbird are characterized by Dowell as the old-fashioned keepers of an old-fashioned religion and morality that no longer applies in the world. Although they are Episcopalian, they are among the last remnants of what emigrated as the English Puritan Spirit to the United States and manifested itself, according to Dowell’s stereotypical view, in the form of a rigid work ethic and a rigid morality. They were the Hurlbirds of Stamford, Connecticut, “where, as you know, they are more old-fashioned than even the inhabitants of Cranford, England, could have been” (2). The family came to America from Fordingbridge in 1688, presumably before the Glorious Revolution during the months when it appeared as if England was headed for an extended Catholic monarchy. As Dowell sees it: “on the strength of that [Florence] was going to take her place in the ranks of English country society” (55). Dowell claims that: “when I called in on Florence in the little, ancient, colonial, wooden house . . . the first question [the aunts] asked me was not how I did but what did I do” (9). Because Dowell does “nothing,” they used to say he was “the laziest man in Philadelphia” (9). This concern for a work ethic is also seen in Florence’s father, who, when he retired from being a manufacturer, decided to take a world tour in order that he not be called “the laziest man in Waterbury” (11). The aunts were emotionally and stereotypically repressed. When Florence announces her intent to marry Dowell, the aunts “could not say one single thing direct” but merely wrung their hands, got tears in their eyes, and tried indirectly to warn him because they knew of Florence’s premarital affairs (56). On the morning after Florence and Dowell’s elopement, her father reads to Dowell a “full-blooded lecture, in the style of American oration, as to the perils for young American girlhood lurking in the European jungle” (59).
Dowell hails from a different branch of American Nonconformity: he is a Quaker of Philadelphia, “where, it is historically true, there are more old English families than you would find in any six English counties taken together” (2). He carries around the world with him the title to his family farm, deeded by the Indians to the “first Dowell, who left Farnham in Surrey in company with William Penn.” This deed he keeps “as if it were the only thing that invisibly anchored [him] to any spot upon the globe” (2). In fact, Dowell claims he has traveled so much that “the whole world for [him] is like spots of colour in an immense canvas,” and he reflects that “perhaps if it weren’t so [he] should have something to catch hold of now” (9). Proclaiming himself to be a “wanderer upon the face of public resorts,” Dowell has absolutely nothing to do and has “no attachments, no accumulations” (13–14). He does nothing because he never saw “any call to do it”: “Why does one do things? I just drifted in and wanted Florence” (9).

As Americans, then, both Dowell and Florence are detached from the religious narratives of their family histories. There is no connection in their minds between religion and marriage, and in fact, they seem to have little religious sensibility at all. At one point, for example, when discussing Leonora’s consternation over any future children not being raised Catholic and Edward’s insistence they be raised Anglican, Dowell says: “I don’t understand the bearing of these things in English society. Indeed, Englishmen seem to me to be a little mad in matters of politics or of religion” (101). Florence appears to flit from experience to experience with little to motivate her except her aesthetic interests and economic and social drive. She is all “culture,” always reading guidebooks and instructing her companions on European history and art, “always an Anglomaniac” (22). It would appear, then, that the Americans Dowell and Florence, although different, attempt to live life entirely on the surface without religious or moral grounding and without a narrative to live by: a life of supposed freedom.

Yet Dowell’s Quaker heritage perhaps plays a vague role in shaping him, for it is the Puritan view of the self that he ends up struggling with in his moral assessment of Edward. Dowell’s central concern for the moral judgment of Edward is remarkable, given the pain and anguish Dowell’s newfound knowledge must generate in him. He has learned that his own marriage was built on lies; that his best friends whom he thought constituted a model couple, instead had a terrible marriage and didn’t speak to each other in private; that his hero was a frequent adulterer, including with Dowell’s wife; that his wife committed suicide; that his hero also was
desperately in love with the same woman Dowell was in love with; and that this woman loved Edward, not him. Dowell also learns that he has been ignorant of all of these facts. Yet unfathomably, Dowell’s storytelling, while occasionally showing signs of anger, centers on the epistemological problem of how to understand Edward on a moral level.

Dowell’s first shock from his new knowledge seems to be the idea that there is a divide between the depth and surface in people’s character, that the Puritan view of the self may be true, or at least that it appears to be true with English people. He realizes he “had never sounded the depths of an English heart” but had “known only the shallows” (1). He thinks: “After forty-five years of mixing with one’s kind, one ought to have acquired the habit of being able to know something about one’s fellow beings. But one doesn’t” (23). Dowell is frustrated with the split he now sees between surface and depth, between social convention and inner passions or sentiments. In this frustration, Dowell echoes much of what Ford himself believed about the Englishman. Dowell says that “this state of things,” in which there is such a divide between outer and inner personhood, in “only possible with English people” (1). He goes on to describe that

the whole collection of rules applies to anybody. . . . You meet a man or a woman and, from tiny and intimate sounds, from the slightest of movements, you know at once whether you are concerned with good people or with those who won’t do. You know, this is to say, whether they will go rigidly through with the whole programme from the underdone beef to the Anglicanism. (24)

There is a social-moral establishment built entirely on the surface and this surface is so strongly embedded in the English character that it masks or even makes it impossible to access the inner self: “with all the taking for granted, you never really get an inch deeper than the things I have catalogued” (24).

Yet ironically, Dowell has himself been incapable of accessing his inner desires or intuitions about people. Like Ford’s “Puritan-spirited” Englishman, Dowell has been satisfied entirely with the surface and hence has been blindly optimistic his whole life, despite the moral trespassing occurring beneath his very nose. He may have lost his religion, but Dowell’s stereotyped Nonconformist heritage has been passed on nonetheless: he has lacked “the critical attitude” as well as the ability to intuit and to express the feelings of his true self.
To Dowell, Edward’s virtues were always clearly evident on the surface: Edward was a good soldier, a good “feudal” landlord to his tenants, a sentimental and generous person. Leonora’s divulgences about Edward’s affairs makes Dowell wonder, however, whether the entire idea of forming judgments of people based on the appearance of their virtue should be dismissed forever. He wonders if one should change one’s view of someone and of their virtue if one finds out things that do not comply with one’s previous judgment. Perhaps there is the outward person whom one sees, whom one judges to be “good people” based on conventions and experience, but then also the inner person who is more inscrutable, hidden, who might have passions and desires not detectable on the surface but which point to a person’s “real” self. As did Wilde’s Lord Henry, Dowell questions the Puritan idea of “character” itself, asking: “For who in this world can give anyone a character? Who in this world knows anything of any other heart—or of his own?” (107). He goes on to say that one cannot predict a person’s behavior all the time but can only form “average estimates” about how people will act (107). Just as Florence’s longtime trusted maid all of a sudden stole a ring, so Edward had aberrations in his behavior that resulted in extramarital affairs. At first Dowell says “It was nothing in her [or Edward’s] “character,” nothing fixed in their natures that caused these breaches. But then immediately, Dowell backtracks, thinking it may have been Edward’s character after all, but then he leaves the discussion saying, “It is difficult to figure out” (107). In the end, Dowell is unwilling to assign Edward a permanently or even temporarily corrupt or malformed inner character, as might be done in Puritan hermeneutics.

Instead, Dowell ends up lauding Edward’s inner desires as being “natural” in a novelistic, Nietzschean sense: his multiple affairs are merely the product of Edward’s inner sentimental and emotional, passionate self. Edward is heroic for Dowell because he is able to access and live out these desires. Yet unlike Wilde’s Lord Henry, Dowell does not dismiss the surface elements of social morality. Rather, Dowell admires both Edward’s outward social-moral virtues and his inner passions. To him, the aristocratic–feudal ideals of “courage, loyalty, honour, constancy” are not misaligned with Edward’s inner sentimentalty and romantic drives (17). Ideally, they could work together, and Dowell admits to wanting to be just like Edward. Rather than pass definitive moral judgment on him, identifying Edward as an immoral character type and establishing in the reader a negative judgment of him, Dowell says: “It is impossible of me to think of Edward Ashburnham as anything but straight, upright, and honour-
able. That, I mean, is, in spite of everything, my permanent view of him” (78). For Dowell, the Puritan view of the self is not capable of providing full and accurate knowledge about Edward’s true nature. Such questioning and dismantling of Puritan epistemology is, as we have seen, part and parcel of the British novelistic tradition. Dowell himself adheres to what this book has been outlining as the novelistic narrative: the view in which natural human passions or the true self are in conflict with the Puritan narrative of morality and truth. These natural passions preside outside society’s moral codes and any narratives that establish those codes.

From the beginning to the end of his novel, Dowell sets up a romantic, tragic framework by arguing that there is not a universal narrative that provides us with the categories by which to make moral judgments: “Madness? Predestination? Who the devil knows?” (19). The absence of a directing narrative or a God at work in human history particularly seems a problem for interpreting moral matters, especially sexual ones: “I don’t know. And there is nothing to guide us. And if everything is so nebulous about a matter as 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” (7). If there is a motivating force in the universe, for Dowell it is cruel and impersonal, and the story is sad to him because he does not see how anyone could have done anything differently (161). He claims to pity Edward that he “should be so tormented by blind and inscrutable destiny,” and says 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 hearthstone, from the world, or from the God who created in him those desires, those madnesses” (33). Dowell also refers to the events of the last nine years as a “monstrous and incomprehensible working of Fate” (123); as a “merciless trick of the devil that pays attention to this sweltering hell of ours” (146), and as Providence’s “sinister jokes” (36). The only truth is that “the record of humanity is a record of sorrows” (143). Even the coincidence of the dates—all of the major events in Florence’s life occur on August 4—is an ironic reversal of the coincidence of dates in Robinson Crusoe. In Defoe’s novel, the coincidence of dates would have been recognized by Puritan readers as an indication that God’s Providence is at work, guiding history with a purpose. In contrast, Dowell does not

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9. Florence’s birth, her world tour, her first time being a mistress, her marriage to Dowell, the beginning of her affair with Edward, Maisie Maidan’s death, and Florence’s own death, all occur on August 4 (82). Similarly, in Robinson Crusoe, many of the key events occur on the same date.
know if this “curious coincidence of dates is one of those sinister, as if half-jocular and altogether merciless proceedings on the part of a cruel Providence that we call a coincidence,” or whether it was “the superstitious mind of Florence that forced her to certain acts, as if she had been hypnotized” (53).

In Dowell’s novel, then, there is no telos for human life other than the satisfaction of one’s desires. Because there is no narrative by which to make moral judgments, and because all religious narratives restrict human nature, Dowell explicitly and purposefully leaves most moral points open for the reader to judge, especially toward the end of his novel. When reflecting on Edward’s long struggle to stay away from Nancy as well as Leonora’s behavior during that time, Dowell wonders if Edward was “unfortunate” because of Leonora’s lashings, or whether he is fortunate “because he had done what he knew to be the right thing” (146). He does not pass judgment, and says, “I leave it to you” (146). He repeats this phrase again when he discusses whether Nancy really loved Edward or not after learning of his affairs, and also when discussing whether Edward was selfish or not in making Nancy move to India: “I can’t make out which of them was right: I leave it to you” (170). In this light, Dowell appears to be an “ethical self,” a person who exists outside social-moral concerns and categories, beyond good and evil. He explicitly puts himself and the reader in the position of unknowability. In this view, moral judgment is made to be radically individualist—each reader must form a moral judgment of any given case for him- or herself. Michael Levenson explains Dowell’s lack of moral direction by arguing that Dowell is an “impressionistic” self: a subjectivity “before doing, feeling, and knowing takes shape” (“Character” 120), before experience, norms, and conventions put the limits on his judgment. Levenson calls Dowell a subject without a “character,” an innocent man who has “performed no act that would place him beyond the moral pale” (Modernism 110, 116).

On one level, this seems true: by giving seemingly random and hodge-podge memories and impressions and by avoiding making judgments, Dowell supposedly imposes no interpretive framework on the reader nor does he seem have an interpretive framework for himself. Yet there are too many inconsistencies and troubling moments in his narrative to believe he is entirely original or “pre-form.” Despite his repeated denials and claims to the contrary, Dowell imposes, albeit subtly, the genre of romantic tragedy upon the reader and clearly wants the reader to agree with his placement of the characters into this form. When Dowell argues that he hopes he has not given the wrong impression of Edward, that all
of Edward’s life was not taken up by affairs despite the time they receive in his narration, and that really these were just brief moments when one considers Edward’s whole life and everyday activity (104), Dowell is saying that life is not like a novel. On the flipside, though, he is also admitting that his narration of Edward is more like a novel because his text focuses mostly on Edward’s desires, affairs, and romantic ideals, just as many novels tend to do. Additionally, Dowell is constantly giving us information that he could never have had. The only way he can explain his newfound knowledge is to imagine these people as characters in a novel. His characterizations become the types seen in novels. Dowell depicts Edward and Nancy as the tragic heroes whose lives, like Dorian Gray’s, challenged the Puritan categories of social morality in order to live their natural, passionate desires, but in the end were tragically eliminated from society. Female novelistic types are exploited: Nancy is depicted as the ideal, pure, virtuous woman; Florence as the conniving harlot; and Leonora, by the end, as the villain.

Similar to Wilde’s tragic Hegelian structure, Dowell portrays Edward, Leonora, and Nancy all as “shuttlecocks,” to use the word Nancy is prone to yell out in her insanity at the end of the novel. They are tragically torn between conflicting yet mutually constitutive narratives. Edward is caught between the narrative of the Anglican Establishment and his sentimental novelistic passions. Nancy’s Catholicism conflicts with her sentimental novelistic passions. Leonora, the “normal type,” is also torn between conflicting narratives—Catholicism and English social morality—but she is able to survive because in English society, according to Dowell, these are compatible with each other. Yet inconsistencies in Dowell’s narration of these conflicts should cause readers to question his choice of narrative form and his own position within that form.

The character with whom Dowell wants his readers to sympathize the most is Edward, the hero of the tragedy. Edward’s outward character and virtue are clearly linked to his position in the Establishment. He is descended from the “Ashburnham who accompanied Charles I to the scaffold” (2). His virtues are mostly social and outward, but he does feel regret and remorse with each marital infidelity that seem to be shaped by his Anglican conscience. When Edward is on his quest to stay away from Nancy and to keep his love for her idealized, it is to the Anglican prayer book that he returns, hoping to find the strength to remain “pure” in his desire (91). Edward’s sense of Anglicanism is not helpful to him, however, and his character reflects what Ford writes about the Establishment in The Spirit of the People:
What distinguishes the worshippers belonging to the Established Church is a frame of mind and not a religion—a frame of mind in which, though the ethical basis of Christianity is more or less excellently preserved, the theological conditions remain in a very fragmentary condition. Thus the devout and carefully practicing Churchman is apt to awaken and find the state of his mind to be singularly chaotic. (99–100)

Edward is the product of a long-standing family and religious tradition in which the theology is disjointed from the social-moral behavior he is supposed to uphold. Dowell describes Edward as trying to work through both his “passions and his shame for them” as well as “the violent conviction of the duties of his station” (38). For Dowell, it is the religious narrative and its expected morality and sense of conscience, especially regarding sexual matters, that hinders Edward’s passions. In the end, according to Dowell’s novel, it is Edward’s religious sense of guilt, however fragmentary, in conflict with his novelistic desire for pure and ultimate love for Nancy, that causes his final tragic fall. The two cannot be reconciled.

Ironically, however, Dowell does not seem to catch that the romantic ideals Edward gains from his novel-reading might be just as limiting, and perhaps just as false, as Edward’s Establishment religion and social-morality. As an Anglican, Edward does not hold the Puritan fear of novels, yet novel-reading typologically shapes him in the ways Puritans feared it could: novels orient Edward’s passions toward a sentimental, idealistic view of love and women that ironically seems to cause and shape his marital infidelities. Dowell suggests that for Edward life imitates art. As Levenson has brilliantly argued, Ford’s novel dismantles social values and reveals romantic passion to be just as much a convention (116). Saunders identifies this, too when he says that “Edward and Nancy are acting out the ultimate romantic clichés” (429). Novels tend to say that romance and sexual desire—the supposed stuff of man’s natural true self—is what can be accessed if one is able to escape and dismantle Puritan social-morality. Dowell buys into this narrative and clearly elevates Edward’s romantic sentimentalism as noble. When describing Edward’s “sentimental view of the cosmos,” Dowell remembers how Edward “would say how much the society of a good woman could do toward redeeming you, and he would say that constancy was the finest of the virtues” (17). Dowell points out how ironic this is, given Edward’s own marital inconstancy, but he justifies it as an influence of novels: “I must add that poor dear

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10. For elaboration on this point, see Cheng, “Spirit.”
Edward was a great reader—he would pass hours lost in novels of a sentimental type—novels in which typewriter girls marries Marquises and governesses Earls. And in his books, as a rule, the course of true love ran as smooth as buttered honey” (17). Edward talks like a novelist (75), and Dowell has seen “his eyes filled with tears at reading of a hopeless parting” (17). Dowell describes Edward’s desire that “the girl should go five thousand miles away and love him steadfastly,” providing “moral support” from afar, as something one finds in “sentimental novels” (168). Yet even though he says it is silly at times, Dowell does not condemn Edward for this influence. In fact, in the end Dowell claims he is “just as much of a sentimentalist as [Edward] was” (175). Dowell’s tragic novel, like so many novels, shows the incompatibility of novelistic romantic passion with Puritan social morality and leads the reader to sympathize with Edward for his noble goals, entrapment, and unfulfilled love. Dowell writes a novel fully conforming to the dialectic of the novelistic narrative and sees it to be the truth about human life.

Yet there is a glaring inconsistency in Dowell’s narrative if this is the narrative by which readers should judge Edward, for he also narrates Florence as being driven by novelistic role-playing and yet he condemns her behavior. Unlike Nancy, whom Dowell always describes in idealistic terms and who is impassioned by novels in the same idealistic ways Edward is, Dowell sees Florence modeling herself after great erotic characters. Clearly there is a connection between Florence and Flaubert’s Emma Bovary: both commit adultery multiple times, both take prussic acid to kill themselves. Dowell says Florence “wanted to be a great lady” (80), to be “like one of the great erotic women of whom history tells us” (81). He even suggests that Florence never told Edward about the fabrication of her heart condition because the fiction made her seem more romantic (90). In the end, Dowell says Florence “wasn’t real, she was just a mass of talk out of guidebooks, out of fashion plates”; she had the “personality of paper” (83). Unlike with Edward and Nancy, Dowell passes judgment on Florence, suggesting that “perhaps she deserved all that she got” (76), and he admits to hating what Florence did “with such a hatred that [he] would not spare her an eternity of loneliness” (47). To Dowell, Florence acted only out of self-interest: she wanted to live on an English estate and be an English lady, and Edward provided the means to this. But Dowell’s hatred is curious. One would think he would hate Florence for lying throughout their marriage and for cheating on him with his best friend. But ironically this is not the case, for Dowell hates Florence not for her dishonesty and adulterous behavior, but rather for “cut[ting] out
that poor imbecile of an Edward” from her own “sheer vanity” (47). She used sex for economic and social gain as well as for developing a certain sense of her own image, according to Dowell, and she thereby disrupted and denigrated Edward’s quest for true love. Dowell has Florence play the novelistic type of the fallen, vicious harlot, and Dowell condemns her for wanting to be this type.

Dowell’s treatment of Leonora is only slightly better. He does show some sympathy for her position of being stuck in a marriage with an unfaithful husband, but he clearly shows disdain for her church and blames it for pushing her toward unrealistic moral ideals regarding marriage. In some ways Dowell reflects a typical Nonconformist hatred of Catholicism that was still prevalent in Ford’s day. Debates between Nonconformists and Anglo-Catholics had peaked in the 1890s, and both camps felt historically and presently abused by each other (Munson 228). Nonconformists described themselves as suffering particularly at the hands of Catholics and invoked much “anti-Popery” rhetoric (Munson 265). Well into the twentieth century, Roman Catholicism in the British Empire was still seen to be the enemy of democratic values (Robbins 14). Anglicanism’s relation to Roman Catholicism was no better. In 1895, Pope Leo wrote Ad Anglos, which called for the conversion of England but never mentioned the Church of England. As Robbins says, “Rome pronounced Anglican orders to be null and void; Canterbury pronounced Nonconformist orders to be null and void” (19).

Yet, ironically, Dowell despises Leonora’s Catholicism not so much because it is Catholic, but more because it is particularly English and Nonconformist in its concern for morality:

Leonora was a woman of a strong, cold conscience, like all English Catholics. (I cannot, myself, help disliking this religion; there is always, at the bottom of my mind, in spite of Leonora, the feeling of shuddering at the Scarlet Woman, that filtered in upon me in the tranquility of the little old Friends’ Meeting House in Arch Street, Philadelphia.) So I do set down a good deal of Leonora’s mismanagement of poor dear Edward’s case to the peculiarly English form of her religion. (39–40)

Dowell goes on to say that her “English Catholic conscience” was “all wrong” in this case because

she quite seriously and naively imagined that the Church of Rome disapproves of divorce; she quite seriously and naively believed that her
church could be such a monstrous and imbecile institution as to expect her to take on the impossible task of making Edward Ashburnham a faithful husband. She had, as the English would say, the Nonconformist temperament. (40)

The Nonconformist Conscience was imposed on the Anglo-Catholics, according to Dowell, through centuries of blind and malignant oppression, of ostracism from public employment, of being, as it were, a small beleaguered garrison in a hostile country, and therefore having to act with great formality—all these things have combined to perform that conjuring trick. And I suppose that Papists in England are even technically Nonconformists. (40)

On the Continent, a simple bribe would have secured Leonora a divorce, says Dowell. According to Dowell, Leonora responds to Edward’s infidelities with a harsh asceticism, enduring self-denial, and working with such a “purposeful efficiency” to manage the estate that she loses her ability to feel, to access her desires, as well as to relate sympathetically to her husband (99). By the end of the novel, Edward’s infidelities and final fall appear to be her villainous fault.

Leonora feels like a shuttlecock between her Roman Catholicism, by which she sees marriage as a sacrament, and her English social role, which did not expect divorce or even marital troubles of a gentlewoman, between her own guilt and shame. While she always maintains her social façade, Leonora also participates in religious practices. Both Leonora and Nancy attended the same convent. A fairly common practice in Ford’s day, by 1900, 10,000 Roman Catholic women in England were in 600 houses. At these convents women performed both domestic tasks and typically “male” tasks such as managing property (Robbins 75). Leonora’s experience in the convent gave her the skills to take over the estate when Edward was squandering it and having to pay blackmail. While she doesn’t seem to attend church on a regular basis, Leonora does seek advice from her “spiritual advisers,” and she attends retreats periodically. Dowell thinks the advice she gets from her spiritual advisers to be pretty bad, however. They encourage her to give Edward a fun time in Monte Carlo, but this is where his affair with La Dolcequita begins (109). In response to her concern for Edward’s affairs, her advisers simply tell her, “Men are like that. By the blessing of God it will all come right in the end” (129). This makes Dowell state that in the Catholic Church,
“the lot of women was patience and patience and again patience” until God should reward them (129). Indeed, Catholic women in Ford’s day tended to see Protestant women as “disturbed” as they worried about suffrage and divorce rights (Robbins 74). Dowell sees Leonora’s passion to get Edward back as one that she felt would be a victory for her church, and he does not understand it (129). The whole situation causes her great consternation, something for which Dowell has some sympathy, but in the end it seems he despises her, too, for her Nonconformist morality intervened in and prevented Edward’s happiness. With her Nonconformist temperament Leonora “had read few novels,” and this, along with her Anglo-Catholic view of marriage, meant she had never been exposed to “the idea of a pure and constant love succeeding the sound of wedding bells” (129). Dowell implies that Leonora thus would never have been able to provide what Edward sought. His novel considers her to be the “normal type” because her outward social role, even though Catholic, and her essentially Nonconformist inner self, although in tension with each other, coincide enough to be acceptable in English society.

The only other character Dowell is sympathetic toward is Nancy, who is eventually caught between a Catholic understanding of marriage (it was “one of those blessed things . . . contemplated with reverence by her church”) and a novelistic view of romance (77). The tension arises for Nancy when she reads of the Brand divorce case in the tabloid. This article shifts her thinking: she realizes that marriage was not a thing that always lasted forever or was necessarily based on love, and so it was possible Edward could love someone else. She also sees for the first time the hatred between Leonora and Edward. Leonora reminds her that the permanent sacramental view of marriage is the “law of the church. It is not the law of the land” (153), and that Protestants, if there is due cause, could secure a divorce. Nancy gradually summons in her imagination the versions of love and passion she has read about in novels, in which love is described as “a flame, a thirst, a withering up of the vitals” (154), in which love could “render a hopeless lover’s eyes hopeless,” causing drinking and sighing (155). Gradually, she realizes this description of the lover type matches Edward and his condition exactly. Ironically, she interprets Edward’s inner state typologically as life imitates art. Through this identification of the “truth” of Edward’s soul, Nancy comes to

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11. One distinctly gets the sense with Leonora that Ford is consciously making her situation parallel to that of Augustine’s mother, Monica, in the Confessions. Here, Monica endured abuse and infidelity from her husband with patience and prudence, until he saw the errors of his ways and late in life converted to the faith.
understand both that he loves her instead of Leonora, and that because he is Protestant, he might do so more readily. When Leonora intervenes with her “talk,” however, it puts Nancy’s soul in conflict: What was her Catholic duty, and what did her heart, as shaped by novels, desire? As it was for Edward, her inability to reconcile the contradictory narratives is the end of her, causing her to go mad. Dowell describes Nancy as someone who could have matched Edward’s passion and returned the idealized love he sought because she believed, as Edward did, in the novelistic narrative of confinement and escape (169, 77).

Interestingly, in Nancy’s madness, as she repeats over and over again in Latin: “I believe in God the Father Almighty” (162), Dowell claims “it is a picture without a meaning” (176). It appears that Dowell leaves the reader in a similar position as Wilde’s novel does: which one of these is the truth about life—the Christian narrative or the dismantling of it? To Dowell, all the pain and anguish caused by and in these characters as they are batted back and forth among conflicting religious and social narratives, has come to nothing. Dowell derives no lesson from this tale other than his novelistic one: the norms and types exist to perpetuate society while those who are “the passionate, the headstrong, and the too-truthful” are condemned (175). He conveniently ends with a scene he has forgotten to include earlier: Edward’s suicide scene—the final fall of the tragic hero. The romantic tragic novel is complete, and all the characters have fulfilled their novelistic roles.

And yet this ending should not sit well with the reader because it raises an explicit moral question that Dowell seems to avoid: Why would Dowell let Edward kill himself? Putting this scene at the end leads the reader to see it as the end of Edward’s misery, perhaps the only option left as he succumbs to tragic contradiction, as Dowell claims it is. In fact, this is the excuse Dowell gives for not stopping Edward from killing himself:

> I guess he could see in my eyes that I didn’t intend to hinder him. Why should I hinder him? I didn’t think he was wanted in the world, let his confounded tenants, his rifle-associations, his drunkards, reclaimed and unreclaimed, get on as they liked. Not all the hundreds and hundreds of them deserved that that poor devil should go on suffering for their sakes. (177)

Dowell seems all the more impotent when he finds he has nothing to say to Edward’s last words: “I wanted to say, ‘God bless you,’ for I also am a sentimentalist. But I thought perhaps that would not be quite English
good form, so I trotted off with the telegram to Leonora” (177). In the novel Dowell writes, Edward's suicide is the necessary escape from the torments and contradictions of the world, and Dowell does not want to hinder this dramatic, romantic ending. The reader sees at some level that Edward has been pushed to this point. Yet what kind of person would let his friend commit suicide? If they have not already, at this point readers should begin to question Dowell’s moral position, for the scene Dowell ends with is not the ending of the real story in terms of chronology. At the time of Edward’s suicide, Nancy is still fully sane and potentially available to Dowell, though she is on her way to India. Dowell has not heard of Edward’s infidelities yet from Leonora, including with his wife, Florence. He has not heard of the despicable state of Edward and Leonora’s marriage. All he knows at this point is that Edward loves Nancy desperately, for Edward himself has confessed this to him. Might not Dowell have simply wanted Edward out of the way in order that he might have Nancy? Might his tragic narrative be constructed in order to hide the immoral nature of his own character? These are certainly possibilities that the reader ought to consider.12

There is also some incoherence on Dowell’s part about the telegram Edward receives in this moment. Edward commits suicide shortly after reading a telegram from Nancy, who is at Brindisi. Earlier, however, we are told that Edward responded to the telegram with the belief that Nancy still loved him “underneath the official aspect of hatred,” and that “her quite atrocious telegram from Brindisi was only another attempt to do that—to prove that she had feelings creditable to a member of the feminine commonweal” (170). He does not respond with suicide, but rather with a continued hopefulness that Nancy was just confused with her own conflicted soul and was trying to irk him. This inconsistency might simply be an error on Ford’s part, but it also might be an error on Dowell’s part, revealing how much he constructs his story into a tragic ending and fictionalizes events. There are plenty of other inconsistencies that previous scholars have pointed out that bring his reliability into deep question.13

12. The number of different ways Dowell’s moral character and his response to Edward’s suicide have been interpreted is intriguing. Some downplay Edward’s passivity or try to justify Dowell’s passivity in some way (see Sutton, and also McFate). Others believe Dowell undergoes moral growth or moral education over the course of the story (see Hood, and also Lynn). For other views, see Poole, Hawkes, Snitov, and also Bailin.

That Dowell simply wanted Edward out of the picture does not seem so far-fetched when one looks back to Dowell’s behavior in Florence’s death scene. Although he believes at the time Florence died of her heart condition and is thus ignorant of her suicide, Dowell is still amazingly passive in this scene. He says he had little feeling for her at the time of her death (even though he did not know of her affair with Edward at the time): “I thought nothing, absolutely nothing. I had no ideas; I had no strength. I felt no sorrow, no desire for action, no inclination to go upstairs and fall upon the body of my wife” (75). In fact, he even says, “Florence didn’t matter” (83), and that since that time he has had “no regret” and has considered her merely to be “a problem in algebra” (82). After he learns from Leonora years later of Florence’s suicide, he says: “It is even possible that, if that feeling [of Florence not being real or mattering much] had not possessed me, I should have run up sooner to her room and might have prevented her drinking the prussic acid. But I just couldn’t do it; it would have been like chasing a scrap of paper—an occupation ignoble for a grown man” (83). She didn’t matter, the reader can infer, because Dowell’s interests were with Nancy. The singular utterance he makes when told of Florence’s death is to Leonora: “Now I can marry the girl” (71). Although he tells readers they should not think negatively about him for this and that he doesn’t know why he said it at the time, it is hard to ignore. While Dowell claims he did not know he loved Nancy until that moment, readers also have to see that he is capable of not caring enough about people to intervene in life and death situations. He cannot act in real life, and he believed his intervention in two suicide cases would have been too “ignoble” or not quite “good English form.”

Dowell tries to maintain a detachment from the world that disbelieves in the Puritan notion of the self and tries to exist outside social morality, but he has no ability, resolve, or convictions to act morally in the world. In fact, in this light he exemplifies the corruption of following only one’s inner “natural” desires without a narrative or set of categories to guide one morally. As Dowell pursues his desire for Nancy, other humans become dispensible. It is entirely possible that Dowell constructs his passive and impotent “unknowable” stance and his tragic romance in such a way as to hide from his readers and even possibly himself his own moral emptiness and his despicable moral position. Extremely ironically, then, one possible ending for the reader is to judge Dowell’s Puritan self typologically.

As it foregrounds the constructed nature of the novelistic narrative, Ford’s novel asks its readers to consider how narratives form moral sen-
sibilities and shape the self. It shows how the romance narrative and its elevation of human passion is itself a set of conventions perpetuated by the dialectic of Puritanism and escape in the novel. In Dowell’s mind, romance novels tap the more real and natural desires and passions of the human being. In typical novelistic fashion, he pits religious and social-moral narratives—English Roman Catholicism, Nonconformity, Anglican Establishment, each of which is thoroughly imbued with the “Puritan Spirit”—against the romance narrative. Not surprisingly, he finds all the religious narratives lacking, false, and imprisoning, tragically hindering the ability to live out one’s desires. The romantic genre Dowell chooses allows him to relegate real moral issues and judgments to the background as he assumes he has attained an ethical position and experience of life that is more representative of man’s nature and human truth. Yet disturbingly, the romance narrative and Dowell’s fragmentary form that hides it, also become Dowell’s excuse for ignoring and hiding his own questionable social-moral position in regards to others. In the end, Dowell claims not to find meaning in the story or in Nancy’s madness—it merely was inevitably fated to occur. Yet this explanatory narrative of tragic romance itself constitutes a moral position: one does not have to worry about morality because one is inevitably trapped in a fate that is beyond one’s control. The novel thereby self-reflexively reminds readers that all narratives, even the narrative of escaping the Puritan narrative to achieve an ethical, natural self, embodies a moral stance.

Levenson argues that Dowell is an impressionistic self who at the end of the novel can begin to construct himself from scratch, so to speak, and begin to make moral judgments not based on norms but individually (117). This complies with the view in new ethical theory that morality can only be individualized. In Dowell, Levenson says, we see “morality, degraded by convention and thwarted by passion, hesitantly reappear[ing] in the simple judgments of a mind struggling to weigh its preferences” (121). When Dowell decides to favor Edward and Nancy, Levenson says, he may not “know, but he decides, and in so deciding, he gives a picture of morality in its nascent state, founded not on inherited norms but on original judgments of value” (121). Although this seems in many ways to be true, this chapter contests that argument. First, although Levenson shows how *The Good Soldier* reveals the constructed nature of both social-moral norms and romantic passion, he also seems to buy into Dowell’s portrait of himself and neglects to question its moral validity. His argument focuses on the story of the hero and less on the story of the story. Ironically, in putting forth the idea that moral judg-
ments can be derived individually and originally, Levenson and new ethical theorists promote an even more radical individualism than what the Puritan social-moral narrative was purported to do. Second, it fails to discuss the fact that when Dowell chooses Edward and Nancy it is not only at the end; he chooses them and the tragic romance genre throughout the novel. Additionally, Dowell’s choice of a conventional narrative seems far from original. This leads one to ask: are there ever choices that are original and individual? Is there ever a nascent moral stance to be had? Not only does Ford make Dowell at least morally questionable if not reprehensible, he also shows the inadequacy, the lack of care, the self-focus, of the subject who believes he can be ethically sovereign as an individual. The ethical self is radically liberally individualist, and this is an asceticizing—and dangerous—limitation. In Ford’s novel, the ethical self is not an adequate telos.

Rather than simply admiring Dowell’s premoral ethical stance and Ford’s construction of this personality, I believe that as with Wilde’s novel, readers are also forced to consider the ramifications of this stance. Generating a frustration and disdain for Dowell, the novel forces readers to ask whether moral unknowability is really an adequate position for living in human community. “I leave it to you” might be what one feels like saying because of the complexity or ambiguity of many situations, but for humans to live in community and to value each other, seeing and connecting across the boundaries that separate groups and races, there has to be common ground, meeting points and norms of some kind. Leaving all moral judgments up to the individual—or believing the individual can exist outside or “before” morality—allows all individuals to remain sovereign individuals and is a great contradiction. Dowell seems to be the epitome of an uncaring radical individualism, unattached to society, and even unattached to his friends, who are expendable when they conflict with his desires.

To say all this, however, does not mean Ford did not see value in escaping Puritan social morality. Obviously he, too, longed for sexual freedom and furthered the social norm that stereotypically defined Puritanism as ascetic and repressed, as something in need of surpassing. Like many modernists, he also believed in art’s ability over institutional religion’s to speak truth about human life. Yet by exposing the modernist ethical self’s link to novelistic conventions, he shows how this need for escape is conventional in itself and can never, or should never, be united from social-moral concerns. While Dowell elevates novelistic romance over English religious narratives, Ford does not dismiss religion entirely and
knows a mere dismantling of the Puritan framework is inadequate and itself limiting. Indeed, this book argues that achieving freedom from Puritan morality is an impossible stance to achieve, for ethical unknowability and Puritan morality are dialectically dependent upon each other in the novel’s form. In shifting the idea of the self toward the ethical, as many modernists did, one can never escape the moral. In fact, as Ford’s novel and Dowell’s novel show, one can never fully escape a Puritan approach to morality and the self, one can never deconstruct it away, at least when one is writing a novel, for the novel is built upon this very foundation. Any sense of self, no matter how impressionistic or ethical, involves a form of asceticism. In this case, while the ethical subject seemingly finds more pleasure and less conflict in life, he occupies a morally questionable position, for he elevates his own desires and status over those of others and of society and assumes an even more sovereign individualist position of interpretive authority.

In making England’s moral and religious history a theme, Ford returns us to the roots of the novelistic dialectic of Puritanism and its dismantling as well as to the roots of England’s church, state, and morality debates. The status of marriage law in Ford’s day is tied to this history. His novel stresses that Puritanism is a historical thing in England that should be historicized and analyzed. The church and state in England could separate; the state did not necessarily have to uphold religious principles or Puritan morality. Yet Ford’s text also shows how the novel is a part of England’s moral and religious history. Through pointing out the limitations of Dowell’s novel and perspective, Ford’s novel asks: How much have attitudes about marriage and romance and passion been shaped by religious belief, and how much by novels? Even more, how much have attitudes toward Puritanism been shaped by novels? Ford seems to know both that history shapes the novel and that the novel shapes history and at least in part, determines how the modern self thinks of itself and others. Like Wilde, Ford depicts a crisis point faced by society, a crisis over the relation of religion and morality, church and state, the freedom of the individual and the law. But bound up in this crisis is a crisis faced by the novel, for in modernity its dialectic has become a grand narrative that shapes how people think about these topics. The ideas that religion and morality do not have to cohere, and that man’s natural desires and passions are opposed to Puritan morality, such that this morality must be escaped in order to achieve freedom, are ideas perpetuated by and constitutive of novels. One implication of Ford’s novel may be the idea that this novelistic dialectic has run its course. While Ford obviously wants Puritan
influences to be overcome in England, he also does not condone an “ethical self” such as Dowell who claims unknowability on all issues and is entirely aloof from and unable to act in the social-moral realm. Complete autonomy to pursue one’s own natural desires, and to let others “be” in order that they can pursue their own, cannot be an adequate moral position. Although to Ford it needed overhaul, the realm of the social-moral must never and can never be neglected or escaped, especially in an art that claims to seek truth.