

The Good Soldier Study Guide

The Good Soldier by Ford Madox Ford

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Plot Summary

The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion is a novel about the nine-year association between two married couples. John Dowell is married to Florence; Captain Edward Ashburnham is married to Leonora; Florence and Edward are having an affair, with Leonora's knowledge. John does not find out about this affair until his wife's death. John narrates what he considers "the saddest story" he has ever heard to an imagined companion, as if he were telling the story by the fire one night. The Good Soldier, thus, is a novel in which events are not presented chronologically, in which there is much speculation about character motivation, and in which John—the narrator—tries to understand his life and relationships.

The events of the novel unfold somewhat in reverse order. The young American, Florence Hurlbird, accompanies her uncle and his young male companion, Jimmy, on a world tour. While in England, Florence and Jimmy begin a sexual relationship. While they are staying at the Bagshawe house, Florence is spotted leaving Jimmy's room at five in the morning. Back in America, John Dowell, a wealthy man with no occupation or hobbies, courts her. Florence and John elope. They travel by sea to Europe, and a storm weakens Florence's heart. Doctors state that another sea voyage will kill her. Florence and John Dowell end up permanently residing in Europe. For two months every year, Florence visits a health spa in Nauheim, Germany for medical treatment. They meet and become friends with another married couple, the Ashburnhams.

Captain Edward Ashburnham and his wife, Leonora, have an arranged marriage. Leonora is the guardian of her old friend's daughter, Nancy Rufford. Once on a train, Edward kisses a girl he does not know and ends up in court. Afterward, Leonora urges Edward to go to Monte Carlo to relax. There, he incurs enormous debt by gambling and by paying a courtesan to spend time with him. To economize, the Ashburnhams move to India. Edward becomes involved with Mrs Basil, and then has an affair with young Maisie Maidan. Leonora attempts an affair of her own, but withdraws at the last minute.

Maisie Maidan has a damaged heart. Edward, too, has a weak heart. In 1904, Maisie, Edward, and Leonora travel together to the spa at Nauheim. One day, Edward disappears for a few hours, and Leonora sees Maisie exiting Edward's room. Leonora loses control and boxes Maisie's ears in the hallway. Her bracelet becomes tangled in Maisie's hair. Florence Dowell comes to their assistance. Florence deduces that the Ashburnham marriage is not a success and begins to pursue Edward in front of Maisie. Maisie decides to return to her husband but dies from heart failure while packing.

One afternoon, Florence disparages Irish Catholics and touches Edward's wrist. Leonora runs away; John follows her. John thinks that Leonora is upset about Florence's offensive remarks about Irish Catholics. Leonora is shocked that John does not guess that Florence and Edward are beginning an affair but says nothing.

Nine years pass. The Dowells and Ashburnhams visit the spa at Nauheim yearly so Florence and Edward can receive treatment. Leonora suspects that Edward desires



Nancy. One night, Edward accompanies Nancy to a concert. Leonora asks Florence to follow them. While John is talking to a man named Bagshawe, they see Florence running past the window. Florence sees them and keeps running. Bagshawe tells John that the last time he saw Florence was in his home when she was exiting Jimmy's bedroom at five in the morning. Florence is found dead in her bedroom with an empty vial in her hand. Immediately after Florence dies, John remarks to Leonora that he is now free to marry Nancy, then returns to America to manage Florence's estate.

Edward is disgusted by his feelings for a girl he has raised as a daughter. He holds himself aloof from her. The forced distance puts a strain on the entire household. Nancy reads a newspaper account of the divorce of a married couple she knows. It is Nancy's first realization that marriages can be dissolved. After a night of drinking alone, Nancy realizes that she is in love with Edward. Leonora and Edward separately send telegrams to John Dowell in America, asking him for help. John travels with the expectation that he will marry Nancy. Edward's health starts to decline. He spends a large sum on behalf of a woman accused of murder. Leonora threatens to take away his access to the bank account again.

Edwards orders Nancy to go live with her father in India. Leonora is outraged at the idea. Coincidentally, Nancy receives a letter from her estranged mother, who is in Scotland and demands that Nancy come rescue her. Edward finds someone to take care of Nancy's mother and plans are fixed for Nancy to travel to India. Before she departs, Leonora tells Nancy that Edward is dying of love for her, and that she should accept him. Leonora also tells Nancy about Edward's sordid history. John arrives in England and is puzzled that no one seems to be thinking about his proposal to Nancy. Leonora tells John that Florence and Edward had an affair. When Nancy leaves, John accompanies Edward and Nancy to the train station, where they part coldly and formally.

John is with Edward when he receives a telegram from Nancy, in which she says that she is having a "rattling good time." Edward removes a penknife from his pocket, tells John that he needs rest, and says goodbye. John leaves. Edward slits his own throat. A month later, Leonora offhandedly informs John that Florence and Edward had been conducting an affair.

When Nancy hears of Edward's death, she enters a catatonic state. The only words she utters henceforth are Latin for "I believe in an omnipotent God." Leonora remarries and becomes pregnant. John brings Nancy home to England and takes care of her.



Part 1, Chapter 1

Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary

The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion is a novel about the nine-year association between two married couples. John Dowell is married to Florence; Captain Edward Ashburnham is married to Leonora; Florence and Edward are having an affair, with Leonora's knowledge. John does not find out about this affair until his wife's death. John narrates what he considers "the saddest story" he has ever heard to an imagined companion, as if he were telling the story by the fire one night. The Good Soldier, thus, is a novel in which events are not presented chronologically, in which there is much speculation about character motivation, and in which John—the narrator—tries to understand his life and relationships.

The American Dowells and the English Ashburnhams meet at a health spa in the city of Nauheim. Both Florence Dowell and Captain Edward Ashburnham suffer from weak hearts. Florence's heart trouble began during the sea journey to Europe on her honeymoon; she and John have been confined to Europe for three years. Edward's heart is weak from athletics in his youth. The foursome fall into perfect habits of leisure with each other, and agree on everything from what table to dine at to what excursions to take. John Dowell realizes later that their friendship was like a shining apple with a rotten core.

John Dowell cannot understand how his wife, Florence, found time to conduct an affair with Edward Ashburnham as during twelve years of marriage John and Florence were never separated from each other, unless she was in bed for the night or he was having a bath. Although Edward and Leonora Ashburnham appear to be a model married couple, he is a repeat adulterer, she is aware of every liaison he has, and they do not ever have private conversations. Leonora once tried to take a lover of her own, but left the man's arms at the last minute. Leonora and Florence engage in long conversations about the affair between Florence and Edward, and John is confident that Edward—"Teddy"—is the sort of honorable man you could leave your wife with.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter introduces the four main characters—John and Florence Dowell, and Captain Edward Ashburnham and his wife, Leonora—and reveals that Florence and Edward conducted an affair for almost the entire of the foursome's nine-year friendship. The main themes of the novel are established in this chapter. Appearances can be deceiving, hearts can fail (literally and figuratively), wedded bliss is unattainable, and Americans and Englishmen are too different to achieve true understanding. John Dowell the narrator distinguishes himself from John Dowell the character in this story, which he describes as the saddest story he has ever heard.



By his own admission, John the narrator is still reeling from the events that he promises to describe. He says he has many reasons for writing his story, and compares himself to a survivor of the sacking of Rome recording the events for posterity. He feels completely alone and fears that he will never be a part of society again. He is as shocked by Leonora's confession that she considered conducting her own sexual affair as he is shocked by the idea that the modest and discreet Edward was not the man to trust your wife with after all. Finally, John the narrator wonders if he is a eunuch in a world of sexual predators or "proper" men.

In this chapter, great significance is given to the institution of marriage, all within the context of failure. It is compared to a rotten apple and a prison; the failure of a marriage is compared to the sacking of a great city, like Rome; the two married couples sitting serenely to dine are compared to a masted ship, proud and safe on the sea. Although it was a steamship, the Titanic was also thought to be safe at sea but sank in 1912; its tragedy would have been fresh in readers' minds when the book was published in 1914. Without revealing much at all, John the narrator has prepared the reader for doom and devastation.



Part 1, Chapter 2

Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary

John and Florence spend twelve years bouncing from city to city, making short, superficial visits to places Florence choose. John monitors and curtails Florence's behavior so she doesn't further damage her heart. He has no profession and no personal interests, so he has plenty of time to act as Florence's nurse. His experiences remind him of a story he once heard, about a great poet who cuckolded the wife of a ferocious warrior while the warrior lectured his wife on how to treat poets with respect.

Florence's uncle, with whom she made one extended voyage by sea before marrying John, also seems to suffer from a weak heart but dies of bronchitis at age 84, just five days before Florence dies. Florence inherits his money; when Florence dies, it passes to John but he does not want it. As he is sorting out the legal details, he receives an urgent telegraph from Edward Ashburnham from his home in England, begging John to come talk to him. He receives another telegraph very soon after from Leonora, saying that his presence would be helpful.

In England, Edward personally drives John to his home, where they are graciously but casually greeted by Leonora and some servants. The girl—who has not before been mentioned by John in his tale—is absent, possibly out with the hounds.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

The second chapter establishes the personal history of Florence Hurlbird and the pattern of her married life with John Dowell. It was introduced in the first chapter that she was one of the Hurlbirds of Stamford, Connecticut, a family more old-fashioned than any in England. Once on her own, however, Florence behaves quite like a modern woman. Despite her weak heart, she directs the travels of herself and her husband, John. John brings a fortune to the marriage, but he doesn't control it. He is too distracted by his need to keep Florence alive—a task that requires constant vigilance. Florence is not to engage in any conversation or activity that might stimulate her emotions, lest her heart fail from the strain.

John does not suspect any ulterior motives to Florence's continual need for a nurse, and undertakes his duty with willingness befit to a new husband. John the narrator, however, chooses to summarize a folk tale about a wife, known as a she-wolf, who betrays her husband for a poet who pretends to be an emperor. Parallels can be drawn between this story and the larger one John the narrator is telling. John the narrator presents the tale in an off-hand manner, as if he doesn't care much about its resolution, as a way to distance and distract himself from the tragedies he had witnessed. Even now, he is unwilling or unable to face the reality of what he has lost.



This chapter also makes explicit comparisons between the awkwardness and unruliness of American life and the stately and opulent life of an English estate by describing the generous and industrious eccentricities of Florence's Uncle John and the serenity that masked the agony of the Ashburnham home. The oblique reference to the girl, who will eventually be revealed a character of huge significance, suggests that she is at the heart of John the narrator's misery but that he cannot bear to face it yet.



Part 1, Chapter 3

Part 1, Chapter 3 Summary

John Dowell the narrator remembers the Nauheim spa well but remembers almost nothing about Florence's dresses, save one—a blue silk gown with a Chinese pattern. He remembers this dress because she was wearing it when she looked at him over her shoulder as she entered the bath without him. The look is coquettish and mocking, and John is not sure what Florence intends by it because that is the only moment in their entire relationship in which she looks at him invitingly.

Later that day, the Dowells meet the Ashburnhams for the first time. The Dowells are seated for dinner, and the waiter brings the Ashburnhams to a nearby table. Captain Edward Ashburnham is an English landowner who has been serving in the military in India. He is considered by all who meet him to be a good soldier, both in deed and demeanor. John describes him as sentimental and charismatic, and capable of great expression.

The Ashburnhams are not pleased with the table the waiter has brought them to and suggest that they join the Dowells because John and Florence seem like nice, quiet people. Leonora thinks that John is the invalid in the marriage (despite the fact that Florence is the patient receiving treatment).

Part 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

John Dowell feels like an outsider in many ways. He is a healthy person at a medical facility, he is an American in Europe, he is the only person in the foursome who does not know about the affair between Edward Ashburnham and Florence Dowell, and he feels like a eunuch among men. Edward, Leonora, and Florence have their passions and occupations, but John Dowell only talks about what he is required to do for others. He expresses no wishes to pursue projects or interests of his own were he to find the time to do so.

John the narrator dwells on the first meeting of the Dowells and Ashburnhams as a reason to linger on his portrayal of Captain Edward Ashburnham. He extensively describes his clothing, his athletic habits, his effect on others, his character, his mind, and his romantic affairs, only to conclude that there is nothing to the man and that he does not understand what people find to admire in him. John the narrator does concede, however, that Captain Edward is known as a "good soldier." The length of time John the narrator spends describing this character, and his expressed fear that he (John) is a eunuch among real men, could be interpreted that John has homosexual desire for Edward.

John the narrator also describes Leonora's person and dress. He makes the statement that she looks best in blue. The color blue plays a significant symbolic role in this novel,

but this statement is the first time a judgment has been made about the color, which alerts the reader to its importance.



Part 1, Chapter 4

Part 1, Chapter 4 Summary

So begin "nine years of uninterrupted tranquility." The Dowells and the Ashburnhams combine parts of their lives, like sharing newspaper subscriptions and co-hosting dinners. John Dowell marvels at how easily the four of them fall into intimacy, but then realizes that what appears to be intimacy is often quite shallow.

John, Florence, Leonora, and Edward one day take a train to visit a castle. Florence makes it her goal to educate Edward on all the historical details of the castle, and speaks almost non-stop to him while they are there. John enjoys the train ride and the weather and finds the day quite pleasant; he feels like he is finally off-duty because no one is paying much attention to him. Florence is talking to Edward and Leonora is listening to them both.

Inside the castle, Florence draws everyone's attention to a draft of Martin Luther's protest against the Catholic Church. She looks directly into Edward's eyes and says, "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." She lays one finger on Edward's wrist and Leonora flees the room. John follows her. He finds her outside in a state of anguish. Leonora explains she is Irish Catholic.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

The Dowells and Ashburnhams make an excursion to the castle of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, a short train ride away. Florence wants to visit the castle to show off what she knows to Leonora and to educate Edward about history (which will provide an excuse to monopolize his time). Edward wants to go because Florence wants to go, and he has a habit of following the women he is interested in. Leonora wants to go to keep an eye on Edward and Florence, because she does not trust the pair. John does not particularly want to go but has no objection to going, either.

It is in a room of the castle purported to be the sleeping place of Martin Luther—the priest who triggered the Protestant Reformation by criticizing the practices of Catholicism. In this room, the group sees a draft of a document by Martin Luther. Florence claims Edward as hers in front of Leonora and John by using her knowledge of history and telling Edward he has Martin Luther to thank for all the virtues that separate him from the Catholics, specifically the Irish ones. This statement is clearly a dig at Leonora, because Edward does not lead a particularly honest, industrious, or clean life. Florence then touches Edward's wrist to physically claim him.

John follows Leonora when she flees the room, but misunderstands her distress. Leonora is, in fact, a devout Irish Catholic, but it is not the reference to her religion that



offends her. John's failure to understand the true reason is critical. Because he does not realize his wife is having an affair with Leonora's husband, he leaves the worry and burden on Leonora's shoulders and commits her to nine years of misery instead of the tranquility he enjoys.



Part 1, Chapter 5

Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary

John Dowell is relieved to think that Leonora Ashburnham only took offense at the slur against Catholics. He is drawn to Leonora because she is the one person he has met who understands how difficult it is to take care of a person with a weak heart. He learns that Captain Ashburnham resigned his military commission in India to follow the young matron, Maisie Maidan (who did have a heart condition), to Nauheim.

Leonora and Edward's parents arranged their marriage. They have no children. Leonora has made it her personal duty to turn Edward into a faithful husband. Edward had lost an enormous amount of money gambling and purchasing the favors of a woman in Monte Carlo. Leonora assumed control of the estate's finances and rebuilt the estate, but they have been living in India to economize. Edward has barely escaped imprisonment for kissing a servant girl (not his own servant) on a train. When he begins a liaison with the genteel and generally sweet Maisie Maidan, Leonora accommodates the relationship.

Leonora discovers that Edward is being blackmailed over another affair. Edward mysteriously disappears for two hours and Leonora sees Maisie exiting Edward's room at the spa. She boxes Maisie's ears. Florence Dowell witnesses the attack. Leonora establishes a friendship with Florence in exchange for her discretion; Florence begins to address Edward in intimate terms within Maisie's hearing.

Maisie is discovered dead the evening that the Dowells and Ashburnhams return from their excursion to the castle. John makes perfunctory apologies to Leonora for Florence's silly and ignorant remarks about Catholicism. He confesses that he does not care much for Leonora's religion, but he does care for her. Leonora admits she wishes every man was like John, and says that she can accept the situation if he can.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter explores the marital dynamics between Leonora and Edward Ashburnham, and reveals that Leonora is completely in charge of the management of the Ashburnham estate and Edward's personal life. Not only has the estate been officially signed over to Leonora, an Irish Catholic outsider and a woman, Leonora is managing Edward's mistress, Maisie Maidan. The chapter also shows how Florence Dowell, a middle-class American, becomes so intimate with the upper-class English Ashburnhams. Florence catches Leonora in an embarrassing position, and Leonora offers intimacy in exchange for discretion. This is a major achievement for Florence, who desires to enter upper-class English society. Witnessing Leonora physically attack of Maisie also informs Florence that the Ashburnham marriage is not stable. Because



Florence is tiring of her current lover, Jimmy, she selects Edward as a possible replacement.

It is significant that Leonora's bracelet becomes tangled in Maisie's hair, and that Florence is needed to separate them. At this moment, the connection between Leonora and Maisie manifests physically. Up to this moment, they have shared the burden of taking care of Edward's various needs, despite the fact that they could not acknowledge Maisie's affair with Edward. When Florence steps between the women, literally and symbolically, she causes Maisie's death. At the end of the chapter, Leonora reaches out to John Dowell, attempting to forge a personal connection with him over their shared betrayals.



Part 1, Chapter 6

Part 1, Chapter 6 Summary

John Dowell laughs at Leonora Ashburnham's seriousness when she says she can "accept the situation" between Florence Dowell and Edward Ashburnham. John assumes Leonora is still talking about religion. John the narrator justifies his naiveté to his audience by reminding the listener that he was a mere sick nurse among three hardened gamblers. John the narrator then posits the question, "What it was like to be a deceived husband?" and answers that it felt like nothing at all. John admits that he hates Florence, although he understands how an American could be caught up in European intrigue.

Leonora treats Florence like a whore and Florence tries to convince Leonora to reconcile with Edward. Leonora accuses Florence of murdering Maisie Maidan, but then accepts the guilt herself because she is the one who brings Maisie from India.

Leonora goes to Maisie's room after the trip to the castle, and finds a letter addressed to her in Maisie's hand. In the letter, Maisie accuses Leonora of leading her astray and vows to return to her husband in India. Maisie reproaches Leonora for letting Edward talk about her to Florence, especially in light of the fact that Maisie and Leonora were educated at the same convent. Maisie had packed her trunks and was ready to go, but her heart failed in the physical effort required to strap up a large portmanteau. Leonora finds Maisie's legs sticking out from the portmanteau after her body tumbled into it. Leonora prevents Edward from seeing the corpse and never tells him about the letter. Edward forgets about the affair and never feels much remorse.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Analysis

John Dowell the narrator emphasizes how naive he has always been by reminding readers of his innocence in comparison to his wife and the Ashburnhams. Rather than attempting to expand on his knowledge, however, John deliberately remains naive and dismisses the destructive behavior he witnesses as European habits. Rather than learning from Maisie—a very young and sheltered woman—how to see clearly and understand the evil that surrounds him, John attacks Maisie's letter as "illiterate" for its awkward and improper sentences. He lets form distract him from substance. It is a major flaw in his character. On the other hand, this habit of his to focus on appearances rather than reality is a successful survival mechanism. When Maisie learns the truth of what is happening, she dies. (At the conclusion of the novel, Nancy comes to harm when she learns a truth, too.)

John interprets Leonora's refusal to let Edward see Maisie's body as a gesture of kindness to a man so sensitive and gentle that he cannot bear the sight of a corpse. Edward shows no remorse over the death of his mistress, for which John the narrator



indirectly blames Leonora (instead of considering the possibility that Edward just does not care). It is the first hint that John the narrator is as angry with Leonora as he is at his dead wife. An objective observer might have concluded that Leonora refuses to let Edward pay tribute to Maisie in order to deny him the chance to begin the grieving process. Part 1 of the novel ends with the suggestion that Edward has no feelings whatsoever about the death of the girl whose marriage he personally destroyed, but the narrator makes no judgments of Edward's character.



Part 2, Chapter 1

Part 2, Chapter 1 Summary

The courtship of John Dowell and Florence Hurlbird is chaste and noisy, and takes place during the afternoons. John learns that Florence wants to marry a wealthy, leisured man with an English accent who could get her into the British Royal Court. John informs Florence's aunts that he is going to take her to Europe as his wife, and they ask him to reconsider because he is a "good young man." Late that night, John fetches Florence with a rope ladder. She offers herself to him from her bed, but he rejects her. John hurries out the window so they can meet the minister, but Florence does not follow for nearly two hours. They marry, breakfast with Florence's family, and leave for Europe.

Florence suffers heart trouble during a storm at sea, and doctors tell John that he better not engage in physical affection with her. Jimmy rendezvous with the married couple in France, and is with them always. John assumes the task of making sure Florence does not overexcite herself. John the narrator has the revelation that even though he remembers that Florence was almost never out of his sight, it is more accurate that she was almost never in his sight. John the narrator reveals that Florence had a lock on her bedroom door. When Florence suggests that they move to England, John curtly reminds her that crossing the English Channel would kill her.

Right after they are married, Florence gives John a case of medicine to hold; John hands it to his elderly valet, who drops it. John flies into a fury in front of Florence; John decides that Florence becomes terrified of him ever learning about her past sexual history, and so fakes heart trouble to avoid him.

John the narrator concedes that Edward Ashburnham was a lover worth pursuing. He also identifies the "girl" he mentions in Part 1 as Nancy Rufford, Leonora's ward. Nancy talks to John enthusiastically of Edward's military accomplishments, including his Distinguished Service Order (D.S.O.) for rescuing two men who had fallen overboard. John tells Leonora that Edward is a splendid fellow; she agrees and says that she is sure Edward always speaks well of her.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Analysis

Part 2 begins with John the narrator's suggestion—he is not yet ready to say it explicitly—that his marriage to Florence was a sham. She marries him to escape to Europe, but realizes immediately that he is frigid and that he can have a violent temper. It is possible to interpret Florence's delay in going with John to elope as her suspicion that marrying him is not a good idea. Florence's heart "troubles" begin at the first storm at sea. She retreats behind a locked door and doctor's advice and keeps John so busy taking care of her that she has the opportunity to conduct her own affairs behind his back. Jimmy is



her lover for the first few years of their marriage. When Florence expresses the wish to move from Europe to England to fulfill her dream of living there, John the character snaps at her and reminds her that she is not to leave the continent. Florence realizes that her strategy for managing her marriage by claiming a weak heart has backfired.

Nancy Rufford feels for Edward Ashburnham a mix of gratitude for her stable home, love as a father figure, and the adolescent crush of a teenager. John comes to admire Edward through Nancy's eyes, and is quite caught up in his accomplishments. As Nancy gushes to John the character, John gushes to Leonora Ashburnham about how wonderful her husband is. Leonora frames a response that manages to disparage and compliment Edward at the same time. She does not say that he is not a good husband and guardian, and she does say that he always says nice things about her, too. Leonora expresses no personal opinion. John the narrator is not aware that Leonora is less than thrilled with her husband's character, and assumes her measured answer reflects the habit of a woman who has answered this question many times rather than the ambiguous response of a woman who has been betrayed but does not want to say so.



Part 2, Chapter 2

Part 2, Chapter 2 Summary

John the narrator says that Edward Ashburnham probably tired of Florence within three years. Florence is an insecure lover who sends telegrams to Edward in England whenever she hears that a woman might be staying there, and who demands immediate physical attention whenever the mood strikes her. Florence wants to tell John all about her affair, in order to secure a divorce and settle in California with Edward, but Leonora Ashburnham stops her.

On the night of August 4, 1913, Leonora goes to bed after sending Florence after Edward and Nancy Rufford, who have gone to a concert. John is sitting with a man named Bagshawe in the lounge, to whom he takes a dislike. The two men spot Florence running back to the spa. Florence sees the men and runs to her bedroom. Bagshawe laughs and tells John he recognizes her from when she stayed at his house; she was the girl who was sneaking out of Jimmy's bedroom at five in the morning. John stays in the lounge for a long time after that, and then goes to Florence's room. She has not locked the door. She is dead.

Part 2, Chapter 2 Analysis

Florence Dowell's is the death that closes the second part of the novel. In this chapter, she is directly compared to Leonora and to Maisie. John Dowell the narrator describes Florence as a "Tartar" (a term for the barbarian warriors of Eastern Europe and Mongolia) and, in comparison, Leonora as having no more ferocity than a baby goat. John the narrator sympathizes with the problems he assumes Florence created for Edward. A sympathetic reader, however, could interpret Florence's increasing demands as the manifestation of her fears that she was going to lose Edward to either Nancy or his wife. (He does choose Nancy, so Florence's fears were reasonable.) Florence is so desperate to gain Edward that she proposes they divorce their spouses and move to California together. This plan would require Florence to abandon her hopes of entered British county society. This goal of hers is why she has stayed in a loveless marriage for so long; casting it aside would represent a great sacrifice on her part.

Leonora's actions in this chapter are open to interpretation. She sends Florence out to chaperone Edward and Nancy without telling her why; she insists that Florence's affair with Edward be kept a secret from John. On the one hand, her actions could be attributed to a sense of compassion; does she want to spare the feelings of Florence and John by not giving them information that could hurt them? On the other hand, is Leonora's silence about their respective betrayals a way to punish them? Florence sees something happen between Edward and Nancy that upsets her badly. Because John has no idea about how his wife is behaving, he is made to look foolish for nine years.

Maisie Maidan dies while trying to return to her husband, in an undignified way that causes others to feel real grief. Florence dies in an act of either cowardice or stupidity, gracefully arranged but not mourned.



Part 3, Chapter 1

Part 3, Chapter 1 Summary

Two hours after Florence Dowell dies, John Dowell tells Leonora Ashburnham that he is free to marry "the girl," Nancy Rufford. Leonora answers that yes, he might. The scene jumps to Branshaw Manor after Edward Ashburnham's funeral, when Leonora and John are talking in the twilight. She surprises him with two shocking bits of information. Florence and Edward were having an affair, and Florence committed suicide. John the narrator pieces together the story of what he thinks must have happened.

Edward Ashburnham and Nancy Rufford follow a path that leads them past trees and benches. Florence is close behind. Nancy's white gown stands out in the darkness; Florence's black gown hides her from notice. Edward and Nancy have an animated conversation in their usual intimate way. Edward tells Nancy that she is the person for whom he cares most in the world, and suddenly realizes that he means it in a romantic sense. From the shadows, Florence hears Edward make this statement and runs away. When she sees Bagshawe talking to her husband she assumes that he has exposed her, and takes poison rather than lose Edward's affection or her husband John's respect.

John discovers that he loves Nancy when Florence dies and he has the freedom to consider a new wife. He is too embarrassed to immediately approach the much younger woman with a proposal because he doesn't want her to think he is unable to live alone. He returns to the United States.

Part 3, Chapter 1 Analysis

John Dowell the narrator spends the second half of the book filling in gaps (often with speculation or from third-party reports) and analyzing why characters have behaved as they did. John the narrator first has to react to the news that Edward Ashburnham—the man he trusted his wife with—was having sex with his wife for nine years, and that his wife Florence took her own life. John the narrator claims that he feels nothing, but from this point on his assessment of Leonora is less and less flattering. He is angry with her for telling him now instead of when he could have confronted either Florence or Edward, for the manner in which she told him, for telling him at all, or a combination of all three. It is typical of John the narrator that he does not realize his own emotions even as he attempts to analyze the emotions of others.

John the narrator really tries to justify Edward's feelings for Nancy Rufford. Edward and Nancy do deserve some sympathy from the reader. Despite the fact that they are hurting Leonora badly, they are both consenting adults, they are not related by blood, and Edward did not raise Nancy from infancy. Still, Nancy's position as Leonora's ward taints the entire attraction with the incest taboo. It would not be a very well regarded



match by anyone. John the narrator explains it from every angle in order to help the reader understand and accept what he calls the great passion of Edward's life—even though John had thought he was in love with Nancy and had planned to marry her!

John the narrator perhaps writes so much about Edward's genuine love for Nancy to avoid examining how he (John) feels about her himself. He finally admits that he wanted to marry her as some people want to go to the city of Carcassonne. John writes two paragraphs essentially about their age difference, and then says he left for the United States instead of marrying her. These are not the sentiments of a man in love.



Part 3, Chapter 2

Part 3, Chapter 2 Summary

Leonora Ashburnham tries to rein in Edward's feelings for Nancy Rufford without drawing attention to the fact that she is doing so. John the narrator attributes Leonora's success at this subterfuge to Leonora's Catholicism, because Catholics are known to be strange about secrets and privacy.

Edward gradually becomes ill under Leonora's efforts to keep him separated from Nancy. Leonora first thinks that he is grieving for Florence. During the Ashburnham's last night at Nauheim, Leonora suggests that Edward take Nancy out for some fun. Edward agrees very reluctantly. Leonora realizes that Edward is sickened by his own feelings for his foster daughter, and has been willingly cooperating with her efforts to keep them apart. Later that night, Leonora checks on Edward in his room, and discovers him sobbing and praying to a statue of the Virgin Mary. She sleeps soundly for the first time in weeks.

The chapter explores Nancy's appearance, personality, and history. At school, she deliberately breaks one rule she finds ridiculous, but she always confesses to it because the girls of her school are known for their honesty. When she was twelve years old, Nancy's father hit her so hard she was unconscious for three days. Nonetheless, Nancy prefers her father to her mother, because her mother is cruel. One day, Nancy's mother disappeared. Two weeks later, Leonora told Nancy her mother was dead. Nancy has a very happy life with the Ashburnhams.

Part 3, Chapter 2 Analysis

It is to Edward's Ashburnham's credit that he holds himself aloof from a romantic relationship with Nancy. He feels like a father to her even as he feels like her lover. Still, it is up for debate as to whether or not he is really dying of a broken heart. He has contributed to the deaths of two women he has loved; John Dowell the narrator says that Edward does not feel remorse, but John the narrator cannot be trusted. Grief and guilt may take their toll on Edward's health.

Leonora is presented as cold and calculating towards Edward, but her motivations are open to interpretations other than the one John the narrator provides. It is reasonable for a mother to try to protect her daughter from sexual exploitation, even if the daughter is a legal adult. Leonora never actually forbids Nancy to see Edward, and Nancy never actually objects to Leonora's rules. Leonora also feels real pity for Edward when she understands the scope of his self-restraint. Leonora may send Edward out to entertain Nancy as a test he is expected to fail, but his grim acceptance restores much of the respect Leonora has lost for him. For the first time in years, Leonora checks on Edward in his bedroom after he returns from the outing. There she finds him seeking comfort in



a Catholic idol. Leonora sleeps so well that night because she has hope again for her marriage.

The details about Nancy's background reveal less about her than they do about John the narrator. He emphasizes her childlike tendencies by placing her so descriptively within the environment of a convent school. He suggests that Nancy is looking for a father figure in Edward, as opposed to a romantic partner. He also paints Leonora as a parental usurper, who mysteriously appears at Nancy's school when she is a child, tells her that her mother is dead, and then takes Nancy into her own family. The one remarkable detail about Nancy's personality is that she confesses regularly to breaking the same rule repeatedly, and that she values honesty. A true confession requires that a Catholic vow not to commit the same sin again, but Nancy clearly has no intention of stopping. She picks and chooses which parts of Catholicism to follow rather than accept the entire doctrine. Her strong belief in trustworthiness may contribute to her later downfall.



Part 3, Chapter 3

Part 3, Chapter 3 Summary

When Leonora Ashburnham realizes that she no longer has to stalk Edward and Nancy because Edward does not want to be left alone with Nancy, she relaxes her attention. The moment she lets herself rest, she has a breakdown.

This chapter explores Leonora's biographical information, charts how she came to be married to Edward Ashburnham, and how she became estranged from him. Leonora is the third of seven daughters of Colonel Powys. She is convent educated and unworldly. The Ashburnham and Powys families have close ties, and Colonel Powys asks Colonel Ashburnham (Edward's father) to consider one of his girls as a wife for Edward. The Ashburnhams visit the family, and choose Leonora as a bride for Edward. Leonora's Catholic parents do not extract from Edward's Anglican parents a promise that any children born to the marriage will be raised Catholic. Leonora is nineteen and Edward is twenty-two when they marry.

Leonora discovers that Edward is extravagant with money and starts to worry. She is terrified by his military heroics. Edward takes offense when Leonora declines his offer to build her an extravagant chapel. Leonora frets that she's had no children. Her father, Colonel Powys, comes to visit and makes financial suggestions that anger Edward. Leonora panics at the idea of raising children outside the Catholic faith. Edward kisses a servant girl on a train and ends up in court. Although the "Kilsyte case" concludes with no damage to his reputation, Edward suffers mentally from the experience.

Part 3, Chapter 3 Analysis

It is odd to learn that the Powys family and the Ashburnham family have been so close to the point that Colonel Powys asks Colonel Ashburnham to accept one of his daughters as a wife for Edward and Colonel Ashburnham agrees. For a woman with so many sisters and a father who is interested enough in her life that he makes an expensive trip to come to her aid, it is remarkable that Leonora and Edward are without guidance. Leonora relies on her priests in spiritual matters, but receives no financial or personal advice. Her only friend was Nancy's mother, who is known for her cruelty. The reader is left to wonder why Leonora does not ask for help from her family, or what has happened between Leonora and her family that she feels she cannot approach them. John Dowell the narrator does not care enough to find out, or he is deliberately silent.

John the narrator has no qualms about divulging peculiar details about Edward Ashburnham's relationship with his mother, however. John portrays the young Edward Ashburnham as a rather prissy young man, who vacations with his parents, avoids coarse stories (presumably about sex), and enjoys reading. When the twenty-two-year-old Edward happens to turn his head to watch a pretty girl pass, his mother expresses



alarm about it. She rationalizes it as a reflex, and believes that he had been under so much stress that he did not know what he was doing. The senior Mrs. Ashburnham thinks that arranging a marriage is a good idea, and personally talks Edward into complying. From the beginning, Edward admires Leonora without feeling any desire for her.

Leonora and Edward are childless because they do not consummate their marriage for at least the first few years. It is unclear whether they ever have sex.



Part 3, Chapter 4

Part 3, Chapter 4 Summary

However many love affairs Edward Ashburnham finds the time to conduct, he is primarily a man of business. He is a professional soldier with a large estate to manage. He has men that report to him in the military, and he has tenants and rents property at home. However, in the witness box, while defending himself during the Kilsyte case, he realizes that it is a pleasant thing to feel a soft woman's body pressed against his own. Edward starts to daydream about romantic scenarios. When Leonora takes Edward to Monte Carlo so he can relax, he spends one night with the courtesan, La Dolciquita, and becomes obsessed with her. She refuses to see him again unless he buys her an expensive tiara. Edward spends the next two weeks drinking and gambling away his fortune. Leonora finds out about La Dolciquita and goes home. Edward buys a week of La Dolciquita's time and takes her to a resort. When the thrill wears off, he is disgusted with himself for being unfaithful to Leonora, and realizes too late that Leonora is desirable.

Part 3, Chapter 4 Analysis

The story of the early years of Edward and Leonora Ashburnham's marriage is heartbreaking. They newlyweds are very young to be saddled with the financial responsibilities that they have, and their lack of understanding about the sexual aspects of marriage is sad. Whether or not John Dowell the narrator has accurate information or if he is merely inventing their history, here he presents both Edward and Leonora very sympathetically. The ruin of their marriage really can be blamed on inappropriate or inadequate advice, and poor timing and misunderstanding.

This story of the Ashburnham marriage reminds John the narrator of a maid he once employed who stole a ring from Florence, and his experiences traveling in America and visiting his relatives. His anecdote about the theft teaches the reader that one can never really know what another person is capable of, or know in advance what acts you may yourself commit out of character. John the narrator decides that a person's character is irrelevant and that it is pointless to ask for references, because anyone can do anything at anytime. Yet he is concerned that he has presented to the reader an unflattering image of Edward Ashburnham, when he was really leading a "perfectly normal...life of a hard-working, sentimental, and efficient professional man." John the narrator is bitter about humanity everywhere, but excuses Edward Ashburnham from this judgment.



Part 3, Chapter 5

Part 3, Chapter 5 Summary

John Dowell the narrator explains that he considers his tale "the saddest story" rather than "the Ashburnham Tragedy" because the participants slowly sink to their doom rather than being destroyed by one climactic event.

At age twenty-four, Leonora Ashburnham makes it her responsibility to rebuild the Ashburnham fortune. When Edward returns, ashamed, from Monte Carlo with an affectionate speech prepared for Leonora, she interrupts to ask if he wants her to take over the finances or go to ruin. Leonora arranges for Edward to join his regiment in Burma so they can rent out the house to earn cash. In Burma, Edward develops a romantic attachment to Mrs. Basil. He is blackmailed over this. Mr. Basil somehow finds out; Edward and Leonora leave Burma for Chitral.

Edward becomes smitten with the young matron Maisie Maidan, who is suffering from a true heart condition. He is despondent over what will happen to her after he and Leonora leave Chitral to return home to Branshaw. Leonora tells him that she has already arranged with Maisie's husband to pay for Maisie's voyage to Nauheim for treatment.

Edward's dalliance with La Dolciquita has made Leonora suspicious of every attention he pays to other women. She deduced both of his affairs in India, but decides not to denounce them because Mrs. Basil and Maisie Maidan are such nice people. When the affair with Mrs. Basil breaks up and the affair with Maisie begins, Leonora takes comfort in the fact that they are women quite like her. She hopes that Edward will eventually return her love, but these hopes are dashed when Edward meets Florence Dowell in Nauheim.

Part 3, Chapter 5 Analysis

Although Edward Ashburnham has significantly reduced his fortune, he and Leonora are by no means poor. Still, Leonora becomes very anxious about further diminishing the estate, and takes control. Edward officially signs over his family estate to her, and she is able to restore it. Young, unworldly Leonora holds incredible power over Edward's head. His serial affairs could be interpreted as a reaction to his emasculation by his celibate marriage and by the fact that his wife gives him an allowance.

John Dowell the narrator constantly makes the claim that Leonora is passionately in love with Edward and does everything she can to endear herself to him. Alternately, he says that she puts up with Edward's affairs because she is Catholic and wants to prove to the world that Catholic women can keep their men. Leonora's acceptance of Edward's affairs appears rather to stem from her financial concerns. True, if Edward is attracted to women like Leonora he might find Leonora a suitable object for his affect.



On the other hand, women like Leonora do not make demands for extravagant presents that could affect the value of the Ashburnham estate. Edward may be sentimental about his affairs, but Leonora is sensible about them. She arranges for his affair with Maisie to continue because she can control it.

Edward, distressed at the thought of leaving Maisie behind at the spa in Nauheim when he and Leonora continue on to England, invents his heart condition to have a reason to stay. Leonora agrees because Maisie is so sick that she is not likely to live very much longer. Her hopes for reconciliation with Edward are killed by Florence because Florence is not a woman like Leonora; she is not a woman that Leonora can control.



Part 4, Chapter 1

Part 4, Chapter 1 Summary

John Dowell the narrator blames Florence Dowell for destroying the marriage and lives of Edward and Leonora Ashburnham because she was a flirt and talked too much. He then transfers the blame to Leonora because she is a Catholic with a hostile view of marriage, and who turns to nuns for advice about male/female relationships. John the narrator also faults Leonora for keeping Edward on too tight of a budget and for not telling him that Florence was a harlot as soon as she herself knew it.

Leonora despises Florence and has no compunctions about discussing the affair directly with her. They spend the next nine years in hostile but open communication about Edward, Edward and Florence, and whether or not Florence and Leonora should share him. The more Leonora associates with Florence, the more of herself she loses, especially her ability to seek comfort in her spiritual advisers. She attempts to start up a romance with Rodney Bayham, but fails. Edward spends two hundred pounds to help a woman accused of murdering her baby, which outrages Leonora. Leonora threatens to take away Edward's access to his bank account.

Part 4, Chapter 1 Analysis

John Dowell the narrator, who has admitted he hates his dead wife Florence, tries to lay all the blame for the Ashburnham misfortunes on her shoulders. He ends up putting the blame onto Leonora, however. Leonora is presented as confrontational, outspoken, miserly, self-doubting, and frigid. It is perfectly understandable why Leonora would be tense and accusatory towards Florence and Edward, but John the narrator implies that she has a character flaw. He attributes Edward's decision to cut his throat to Leonora's close watch over his expenditures.

After tolerating so much from Edward and his women, and his lust for her foster daughter, Leonora snaps over Edward's payments to help a woman accused of murdering her baby. Two hundred pounds is nowhere near the magnitude of the gambling debts he accrued in the past, so her anger cannot be over the money. She has always wanted children and Edward did not give her any. The thought of the money Leonora worked so hard to regain going to help a woman who may have murdered her baby is probably too much to bear. Of all Edward's wrongs to Leonora, this one cannot be forgiven.



Part 4, Chapter 2

Part 4, Chapter 2 Summary

Florence's Uncle John Hurlbird dies five days before she does, so John Dowell ends up with the fortune that Uncle John leaves to Florence. Doctors discover that nothing was ever wrong with Uncle John's heart.

Uncle John requested that some of the money be used to erect a memorial in his name in the form of an institution for the relief of sufferers of the heart. This stipulation begins a quiet family argument. Miss Florence Hurlbird believes the memorial should be for sufferers of lung ailments, because Uncle John died of bronchitis. Miss Emily Hurlbird tells John Dowell to keep the money for himself and to scrap the memorial project. John Dowell thinks that he should spend some of the money on heart relief and some of the money on lung relief. John Dowell learns that Florence had had relations with Jimmy before she married John.

Edward Ashburnham sends a telegram to John Dowell the character asking him to come to England for a talk. Four hours later, John receives a telegram from Leonora asking the same thing. John assumes that Nancy has fallen in love with some undesirable fellow and needs to be married off right away. One evening, at dinner, Leonora announces that Nancy will be traveling to India to join her father.

During the interval between the Ashburnhams and Nancy returning to England and John's arrival, Leonora suffers from migraines. Nancy spends her days nursing Leonora and her evenings alone with Edward in awkward silence. Nancy slowly realizes that Edward and Leonora are not the sound married couple she had always thought they were. One evening, Leonora hears Nancy saying, from another part of the house, "Well, it was only under the mistletoe." Leonora strikes Nancy in the face with a riding whip. Edward suggests at dinner that Nancy go to India to her father, Colonel Rufford. That night, Nancy receives a letter from her (not dead) mother demanding that she join her in Scotland. The letter suggests that Colonel Rufford may not be her father.

Part 4, Chapter 2 Analysis

Uncle John Hurlbird was misdiagnosed with a weak heart, so Florence Dowell having a weak heart is extremely unlikely. Nevertheless, even though John Dowell is in constant negotiation with Florence's relatives and their lawyers, and they specifically discuss heart and lung diseases, John Dowell does not wonder if Florence's heart condition was real. Before her death, Florence penned a confessional letter to her Aunt Emily Hurlbird; Miss Emily Hurlbird asks John many unusual questions about Florence and Edward Ashburnham, and he suspects nothing. John Dowell has learned of Florence's association with Jimmy before her marriage, but still does not extrapolate to the nature of Florence's association with Jimmy after her marriage.



John Dowell the character seems to be going out of his way to deny that Florence was anything other than the model wife. His thoughts are exclusively of what might be happening to Nancy Rufford in Branshaw. If John spent too much time reflecting on his first marriage, which was begun in haste and brought him no happy, he might have second thoughts about marrying Nancy. If he does not marry Nancy, he will lose his connection to the Ashburnhams.

At Branshaw in England, Leonora continues to publicly act the role of happy wife and mother even as she lashes out, verbally and physically, at her husband and daughter. She accuses Edward of committing the worst act of his life and she hits Nancy in the face with a whip. By offering to divorce Edward, she is trying to tempt him beyond his self-control; if Edward admits aloud that he desires his foster daughter, his moral ruin is complete. By blaming Nancy for Edward's decline, Leonora puts into Nancy's head the idea that she is responsible for her parents' fates. She also elicits Nancy's admission that Nancy desires Edward, too, even as Nancy still thinks of Edward as her father. Leonora has focused Edward and Nancy's thoughts on the most universal social taboo of incest. By even imagining a romantic relationship, Edward and Nancy have cast themselves as pariahs.

Two images foreshadow the tragic events to come. Leonora expects Edward to commit suicide and finds him oiling a gun. Leonora also seeks out Nancy and finds her sitting perfectly still in a chair.



Part 4, Chapter 3

Part 4, Chapter 3 Summary

Nancy Rufford, a Catholic with a sheltered convent education, has never really thought about divorce. When Leonora is confined to her bed with headaches and Edward has left the house early to oversee his estate, Nancy breakfasts alone and reads the papers. She learns about a divorce suit that has ended up in court. Mr. and Mrs. Brand are acquaintances of the Ashburnhams; Mr. Brand has been accused of being in love with Miss Lupton, an acquaintance of Nancy. Nancy knows at this point that Leonora and Edward do not love each other, and realizes that Edward is thus free to love someone else. Nancy's heart surges with the thought that she might be the person Edward loves instead of Leonora.

When Leonora recovers, Nancy asks her about the divorce proceedings. Leonora explains that because the Brands are Protestant, their marriage can be dissolved. Leonora asks Nancy if she ever wants to get married; Nancy says that if she ever marries anyone, she hopes he will be like Edward. Nancy spends the next three weeks pondering the intricacies of intimacy and love. One night, she consumes an entire decanter and fantasizes that her bed spins beneath her because Edward is kissing her. She finds it impossible to stay in the house if Edward loves someone else and impossible to leave Edward. Nancy determines to go to her mother in Glasgow and take care of her.

Part 4, Chapter 3 Analysis

If Nancy Rufford is really so innocent that she does not understand divorce, then her awareness that she feels romantic desire for the man who acted as her father for the past ten years is extraordinary. The reader should remember that Nancy has always prided herself for her honesty and truthfulness, even when she was penalized a sixpence every time she broke a school rule. Nancy is perhaps the character in the novel with the greatest clarity of vision, and the greatest capacity for insight. John Dowell the narrator uses the phrase "the saddest story" several times, but his primary objects of sympathy seem to be the Ashburnhams themselves. In this version, Nancy is just an accessory to their sorrow.

Nancy, however, is the true victim of all the events in the book. She is the child caught between her parents' dispute, and she is a means to an end for John Dowell, but when she is left alone to think about what is happening around her, she discovers herself. Her decision to go to Glasgow to rescue an abusive and undeserving mother is not the action of a frightened daughter following orders. It is Nancy's choice to start her life on her own terms. It is her refusal to give her life to Edward, dying of love for her, just because he is dying of love for her. Finally, it is a rejection of Leonora as a mother. Nancy has been portrayed by John Dowell the narrator as needy and infantile, and

unable to make decisions as simple as what dress to wear to a party without someone's input. Nancy may even have been like that, but at this moment in her life, she chooses her own future without consulting anyone.



Part 4, Chapter 4

Part 4, Chapter 4 Summary

Leonora Ashburnham enters Nancy Rufford's bedroom to insist that Nancy assume the role of Edward Ashburnham's lover. Nancy refuses. Edward enters the room and gives her orders of his own, which she does not refuse. Rather than allowing Nancy to go to Glasgow to see to her mother, Edward tells her she must go to her father in India. Edward leaves the room and places a phone call Edward White in Glasgow. Nancy basks in Edward's attention and imagines that she and Edward are already lovers. She tells Leonora that she will go to India, and then they fall sobbing into each other's arms to comfort each other. Edward hears them up all night, talking in Nancy's bed.

The next morning, the family interacts as if nothing has happened. Edward tells Nancy that John Dowell is coming to visit until Nancy leaves for India, and hands her a telegram from Edward White that says he will take Mrs. Rufford to Italy, and that he did not know there was a daughter.

Part 4, Chapter 4 Analysis

Nancy Rufford has found the strength to stand up to Leonora Ashburnham and to assert her independence. When Edward Ashburnham gives her orders, however, Nancy is unable to resist them. By giving Nancy orders, Edward has found a way to stand up to Leonora, too. Nancy does not object to Edward's orders because she really is in love with him, and thrills to see him assert masculine authority; he has been so frail for so long. Edward seems like his old self at that moment. When Edward regains his former confidence and charisma, it returns the household to a semblance of normal. Instead of being rivals, Leonora and Nancy can go back to being mother and daughter. They are finally able to comfort each other for the disaster that has befallen them.

To free Nancy to go to India, Edward Ashburnham arranges for Edward White to take care of her mother. The conversation with the telephone operator reveals that Edward White is a person Edward Ashburnham has contacted before. Edward White's relationship with Nancy's mother—Mrs. Rufford—is close enough that Edward White can be presumed upon to step in and take care of her. The wording of the telegram that arrives the next day alludes to the possibility that Edward White has had an intimate relationship with Mrs. Rufford and that Nancy might be his natural daughter. Nevertheless, plans remain in place to send Nancy to India to be with Colonel Rufford.

In all likelihood, Edward and Leonora Ashburnham have known all the circumstances of Nancy's parentage and have never revealed it to her. Nancy has been alone in the world to an even greater degree than she thought.



Part 4, Chapter 5

Part 4, Chapter 5 Summary

Edward Ashburnham commits suicide, Nancy Rufford suffers a fate worse than death, Leonora Ashburnham marries Rodney Bayham, and John Dowell maintains a residence at Branshaw Manor House. Leonora shares with John a letter from Colonel Rufford in Ceylon. Nancy heard about Edward's suicide and had gone insane. The only words Nancy will speak are the Latin words for, "I believe in an omnipotent deity." Colonel Rufford asks Leonora to send someone from Branshaw to comfort her. Leonora refuses to go because she does not want to see Nancy again. John goes and brings her back to England in a catatonic state. He assumes the role of her caretaker, buys Branshaw Manor from Leonora, and lives with Nancy there. Leonora becomes pregnant.

John Dowell the narrator imagines scenes that occurred at Branshaw House before he arrives. He describes Leonora and Nancy uniting against Edward with constant talk, driving him to drink to escape their voices. John the narrator resumes his habit of referring to Nancy as "the girl." Leonora insists that she will get a divorce and that Nancy must take her place as Edward's wife, but then regales Nancy with warnings about what a terrible man Edward is. Edward, meanwhile, is trying to do the right thing by sending Nancy away, but hopes that she continues to love him.

Nancy appears in Edward's room one night and says she will give herself to him to save her life but she will never love him because she knows his character. Edward refuses her offer. John Dowell arrives from America.

Part 4, Chapter 5 Analysis

Eighteen months have passed since John Dowell the narrator wrote the previous chapter. His opinions of the characters involved have dramatically changed. He is now sympathetic to the elderly Colonel Rufford, dismissive of Nancy Rufford, and scornful of Leonora, especially of her choice in her second husband. John the narrator picks on Rodney for being normal, for having the type of physique that makes it easy to buy clothes off the rack, and for being a pleasant sheep. Rodney is described in terms opposite to those John the narrator uses for Edward Ashburnham. Edward is heroic, he has his clothing tailor-made, and he moves like a jungle predator.

John the narrator and Leonora are estranged. She suspected that he disapproved of her and he has conceded that she is probably correct. He is jealous of her, although he does not say what he is jealous of. Leonora is six months pregnant; he may be jealous that she has started a sexual life and he has not. Leonora and John the character were united in their probable virginity and now John is the only one of the former foursome who has not advanced. He complains that he has gone from being Florence's nurse-attendant to Nancy's nurse-attendant, but Nancy has her own nurses. John merely

provides her a home. His idleness gives him plenty of time to obsess over the unfairness of his fate, and it has soured him.



Part 4, Chapter 6

Part 4, Chapter 6 Summary

John Dowell the narrator wonders if Nancy Rufford ever really loved Edward Ashburnham. Leonora Ashburnham insists that she did not.

Before Nancy leaves for India, Leonora and Edward argue about whether it is wrong for Edward to ask her to love him from afar. John Dowell the character asks Leonora why she and Edward are going through the rigmarole of sending Nancy all the way to India if he (John) is going to marry her. Leonora explains to John that Nancy needs to see more of life before "taking such an important step."

Edward asks John the character to accompany him and Nancy on the cart ride to the train station to begin her journey to India. Edward confides to John that he is "so desperately in love with Nancy Rufford that [he] is dying of it." At the station, Nancy says goodbye to Edward and shakes John's hand. Leonora adopts an air of triumph. John the narrator says that is the end of the story, but keeps writing.

John the narrator concludes that he dislikes Leonora. He reports that at lunch Nancy exclaimed, "shuttlecocks," a reference to how each character felt batted about by the others as if they were shuttlecocks in a game of badminton. Then, John the narrator suddenly remembers to describe the circumstances of Edward's death. John the character and Edward are talking when a telegram arrives. It is from Nancy, who says she is having a good time in Italy. Edward pulls a penknife out of his pocket and tells John to deliver the telegram to Leonora. John understands that Edward is about to kill himself and decides not to intervene. He sees affection in Edward's eyes. Edward wishes him goodbye and says he needs a rest. John takes the telegram to Leonora.

Part 4, Chapter 6 Analysis

John Dowell the narrator uses this final chapter to rehash themes and concepts he has already explored. He reminds the reader that, yes; Leonora is probably to blame and states redundantly that he does not like her. He establishes a debate of whether or not Nancy really loved Edward but merely states his and Leonora's opposing viewpoints; he does not argue his point of view with any conviction. He describes the sterility of Edward and Nancy's final parting. He says that Leonora may have gotten a happy ending, but makes the happy ending seem undesirable. Overall, he is wasting time. He is avoiding the topic of Edward's suicide. When John finally mentions it, it is in the manner of someone reminding a spouse to pick up a gallon of milk on the way home.

John the narrator's detachment is a coping mechanism. John the narrator says that John the character knew Edward was going to kill himself, yet allows it to happen. The language of the scene attempts to make the failure to intervene seem like a gesture of kindness by emphasizing that Edward's eyes softened and by claiming that Edward did



not want to be stopped. In this way, John the character's inaction appears to be helping Edward achieve his goals. John the narrator takes refuge behind the excuse that giving Edward privacy was "English good form." The book ends without John reflecting on his actions. The reader is left to decide if John lacks the strength of character to intervene and is sorry, and laments his friend's death, or if he purposefully leaves Edward alone in a moment of weakness to punish him for Florence or Nancy. On the other hand, is Edward the man John has been jealous of all along?



Characters

John Dowell

John Dowell is the narrator of *The Good Soldier*, as well as a main character in the story. He is a wealthy man of leisure from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is from an old family that still holds the original deeds of ownership for the land they bought from an Indian chief centuries before. He is a Quaker passing as an Episcopalian. John has no profession because he cannot determine a reason why he should work. He is about forty-five years old when he is writing down his story; he is about thirty-three years old when the events he tells about begin. John never gives a physical description of himself. He is married to Florence Dowell, and serves as her caretaker. They have a celibate marriage and no children. He lives in Europe with his wife until her death, and then returns to America.

John Dowell the character and John Dowell the narrator are two personalities. John Dowell the character is naive about human relationships and completely involved with tending to Florence's health. He is the model of amiability and concern, who is devoted to his wife. John Dowell the narrator has learned the truth about his wife and his friends, and is bitter about the time he has spent with them. John Dowell the narrator does not grieve for his wife and he has resigned himself to living alone for the rest of his life. Although John Dowell the narrator has more information about how humans behave in relationships, he does not tell the story as if he has learned much. John Dowell the narrator is still as naive as John Dowell the character is. He explains the motives for other people's behavior to his satisfaction but lacks an understanding of himself.

Florence Dowell

Florence Dowell is the wife of John Dowell. She is twenty-seven years old at the start of the novel's events and commits suicide at age thirty-nine. Florence likes to talk about what she knows on any topic. Her personal ambition is to marry a man who can give her a home in a great English county estate. She is an Episcopalian.

Florence is a small woman with copper-colored hair and; another sea voyage would kill her. This heart condition is the reason Florence and John have separate bedrooms. For two months each year, Florence visits a health spa in Nauheim, Germany, where she meets Edward Ashburnham and engages in a nine-year sexual affair with him.

Many of the important events in her life occur on her birthday, August 4. On that day, she embarks on a world tour with her Uncle John and his companion, Jimmy in 1899. She has sexual intercourse with Jimmy in 1900. She elopes with John in 1901, and she and John Dowell meet Edward and Leonora Ashburnham in 1904. Finally, she commits suicide in 1913.



Captain Edward Ashburnham

Captain Edward "Teddy" Ashburnham is the gentleman owner of Branshaw House, a county estate in Fordingbridge, England. He is a member of the Anglican Church. His marriage to Leonora Pepys was arranged by their parents, and he is fond of his wife although he is not faithful to her. He has no children. Captain Edward Ashburnham is performing his military service in India. He has squandered a large sum of money by gambling and keeping a mistress.

Edward Ashburnham has blond hair and a ruddy complexion, and piercing blue eyes. He speaks constantly about military life but knows where to buy the best clothes and has profitable investment tips. Edward has a magnetic, powerful air that draws attention to him even as his manners suggest he wants to deflect it. He is sentimental about women and dislikes crude humor; John Dowell is convinced that Edward is exactly the type of man who can be trusted with a wife. Edward Ashburnham has affairs with "La Dolciquita," Mrs. Basil, Maisie Maidan, and Florence Dowell. He is arrested for kissing a servant girl on a train, intervenes on behalf of a young woman accused of murdering her baby, and is in love with his wife's ward, Nancy Rufford.

Edward's heart condition is attributed to athletic behavior in his youth, but he is faking illness just to follow Maisie Maidan to Nauheim (she is sick). He is thirty-three years old when he and Leonora meet the Dowells. He returns year after year because of his affair with Florence. Edward is forty-two when he commits suicide after sending Nancy away. He is ashamed of his attraction to her, and she sends a telegram saying that she is happy without him.

Leonora Ashburnham

Leonora Ashburnham is the wife of Captain Edward Ashburnham. She is an Irish Catholic with six sisters, a member of the Powys family in Glasmoyle, Ireland. Florence has a convent education. Her marriage to the Anglican Edward was arranged by their parents without the stipulation that children born to the marriage would be raised Catholic, which makes her very anxious. Leonora believes that it is her duty as a Catholic woman to reform her husband, partly because of her religious education and partly because she wants to prove that Catholic wives are capable. She has taken over the finances of Branshaw House and its tenants in order to recoup the losses that Edward incurred. Leonora and Edward reside in India because it is cheaper and so they can rent the house in order to earn money. Leonora is aware of Edward's affairs, and facilitates some of them. She attempts to have one of her own with Rodney Bayham, but loses heart at the last minute.

Leonora is a tall woman with blond hair and blue eyes. She is thirty-one-years-old when she meets the Dowells, and forty when she is widowed. She is the image of the perfect gentlewoman. Leonora is the guardian of Nancy Rufford, a young woman with an alcoholic mother and abusive father; Leonora was once friends with Nancy's mother.



Nancy Rufford

Nancy Rufford is the ward of Leonora Ashburnham, a friend of her mother's. Nancy needs a guardian because her mother is a drunk and her father is abusive. She comes to live with the Ashburnhams when she is thirteen years old. She adores Edward Ashburnham as the father figure she never had, and her adolescent feelings eventually turn into romantic love. She was educated at the same convent as Leonora.

Nancy leaves the Ashburnham household when she is summoned by her father in India. When she learns that Edward has killed himself, she enters a catatonic state and repeats only "Credo in unum Deum omnipotentem" (I believe in an omnipotent God) and "shuttlecocks."

Maisie Maidan

Maisie Maidan is a twenty-three-year-old bride with a twenty-four-year-old husband engaged in an affair with Edward Ashburnham. She suffers from a fatal heart defect, and goes to Nauheim for treatment in the company of Leonora and Edward, at Leonora's suggestion. At Nauheim, in a moment of frustration, Leonora boxes Maisie's ears. Maisie decides to return to her husband, but dies from heart failure as she is packing to go.

La Dolciquita

"La Dolciquita" is a woman who passes as the mistress of a Russian Grand Duke. She attracts Edward Ashburnham's attention in Monte Carlo, and receives a gift worth twenty thousand pounds from Edward in exchange for a week of her company.

Mrs. Basil

Mrs. Basil has an affair with Edward Ashburnham that ends when her husband, Major Basil, is transferred to another military station.

A Servant Girl

A "quite pretty girl of about nineteen" with blue eyes sobs in front of Edward in a railway carriage. She confides that she is upset with her young man, and Edward kisses her. The girl screams and calls for help. The episode, referred to as the Kilsyte case, ends up in the public eye.



Rodney Bayham

Rodney Bayham is a normal, ordinary English gentleman. He almost has an affair with Leonora Ashburnham while she is married to Edward, and marries her after Edward dies. He agrees to raise their expected child Catholic.

The Misses Hurlbird

Miss Florence Hurlbird and Miss Emily Hurlbird are the aunts of Florence Dowell. They are unhappy with Florence's marriage to John Dowell, and it is suggested that they disapprove on his behalf because of Florence's past behavior.

Uncle John Hurlbird

John Hurlbird is Florence Dowell's wealthy uncle. He is thought to suffer from a weak heart, but it is revealed after his death at age eighty-four that an anomaly in his lungs confused doctors and that his heart was perfectly healthy. Uncle John brings Florence with him on a world tour, along with a young man, Jimmy. Uncle John leaves his fortune to Florence when he dies of bronchitis. As he dies only five days before Florence, the entire fortune passes into John Dowell's hands.

Jimmy

Jimmy is an artist who accompanies young Florence Hurlbird and her uncle John Hurlbird on a world tour. He and Florence begin a sexual relationship a year before her marriage to John Dowell, which continues until she meets Edward Ashburnham.

Bagshawe

Bagshawe is a guest at the spa at Nauheim, who recognizes Florence Dowell. He tells John Dowell that he saw Florence at his house when she was coming out of Jimmy's guest bedroom. His home in England accepts paying guests.

Mr & Mrs Brand

The Brands are acquaintances of the Ashburnhams. They are divorcing as Mr Brand has feelings for a Miss Lupton. The divorce is written about in the newspaper.

Mrs Colonel Whalen

Mrs. Colonel Whalen alerts Leonora about the affair between Edward Ashburnham and La Dolciquita. John Dowell the narrator considers her the most sensible person Leonora has ever interacted with.



Objects/Places

The Spa at Nauheim

The spa at Nauheim is a German medical facility. The Dowells and the Ashburnhams meet there, because Florence Dowell and Edward Ashburnham are seeking treatment for heart trouble.

The Branshaw Manor House

The Branshaw Manor House is the Ashburnham English county estate. The house is rented out when Edward and Leonora Ashburnham live in India. After Edward's death and Leonora's marriage to Rodney Bayham, John Dowell purchases the house and lives there with the catatonic Nancy.

Monte Carlo, Monaco

Edward Ashburnham accrues tens of thousands of pounds of gambling debts in Monte Carlo. He also meets La Dolciquita there, and spends more money to purchase her sexual favors.

The Castle of St. Elizabeth of Hungary

The Castle of St. Elizabeth of Hungary is in the unnamed town of M——. It is where Florence Dowell enrages Leonora Ashburnham by touching Edward Ashburnham's wrist.

Burma

Edward Ashburnham is serving in Burma when he has his affair with Mrs. Basil.

Chitral, India

Edward Ashburnham is serving in Chitral when he began his affair with Maisie Maidan.

Antibes, France

Edward Ashburnham pays La Dolciquita five thousand dollars to spend a week with him in the resort town of Antibes.



Brindisi, Italy

Nancy Rufford sends Edward Ashburnham a telegram from Brindisi, where she has been sent in order to be separated from him. She enjoys herself immensely there, until she learns that Edward has committed suicide.

Paris, France

John and Florence Dowell keep an apartment in Paris. They have hosted the Ashburnhams there, as well as the artist, Jimmy.

Ledbury, England

Young, unmarried Florence Hurlbird spent time as a paying guest at the Bagshawe home in Ledbury during a two-month tour of Great Britain. It is during this tour that she decides she wants to marry an English gentleman with a county estate.

Ceylon

Nancy Rufford travels to Ceylon to take care of her aging father, Colonel Rufford.



Themes

Let Your Heart Be Your Guide

The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion is positively infected with references to the heart and its fickleness. Many of the characters appear to suffer from a physical ailment of their heart, which alerts the reader that the heart is not a reliable organ. Florence Dowell and Edward Ashburnham fake heart problems in order to facilitate their extramarital affairs. Although the hearts that beat in their chests are healthy enough, their emotional hearts—the passion that directs their decision-making—are diseased.

Florence knowingly enters into a marriage she has no intention of honoring. In fact, Florence is already in a sexual affair when she meets her future husband, an affair that continues for several years until she takes a different lover. The problem with Edward Ashburnham's emotional heart is that he suppressed passion too long in his youth. He does not think to express it to his wife because they have an arranged marriage. When the impulse to act on passion finally appears, Edward cannot control it. He first imposes his attentions on a young girl on a train who does not want them; after a string of lovers, Edward focuses his attention on his foster daughter. Both Florence and Edward let their hearts lead them through their lives and both are led to their deaths.

The characters that rely on their minds to guide them don't die, but they do not find happiness. John Dowell seems to be infatuated with Florence. They have a short engagement and elope, but when Florence first offers herself to Edward, he spurns her advances. When Florence appears to develop a weak heart, John keeps himself so busy tending to her that he fails to develop any passion for any person or place. When he is widowed and the tasks of executing Florence's estate conclude, John has nothing to do. He spends his days writing the story of his life and tending to the catatonic Nancy Rufford—a woman whose heart and head have been destroyed by passion. John does not even feel enough passion to analyze his role in the events he spends so much time detailing. His head has led him nowhere.

Leonora Ashburnham is a woman whose passions are in constant battle with her good sense. She wants to be close to her husband Edward, but she is anxious about the condition of their finances. Leonora becomes estranged from Edward even as she is rebuilding his family's fortune. She cannot share her heart with him, but she still feels passion for her religion. Leonora also feels passionate about reinstating the camaraderie of the early days of their marriage, and she flies into passionate rages when she is pushed too far. Leonora's passion does not blind her to the complex relationships that surround her, and she can suppress her passion when necessary to control the direction of Edward's affairs. It is hardly a surprise that Leonora is the one character whose story ends in a happy ending. She has developed both her passion and her mind without letting one or the other rule her.



Sacrifice

For all of its emphasis on "getting" and "having," the characters in *The Good Soldier* mostly engage in acts of "giving up." Sacrifice is rampant. John Dowell sacrifices a life of his own so he can take care of Florence. Florence sacrifices her dreams of entering landed English society for the sake of leaving the oppressive environment of her aunt's home. Leonora Ashburnham sacrifices her relationship with her husband Edward to protect his family's estate. She forgoes the chance to have his children in order to preserve his estate for his offspring. Edward Ashburnham sacrifices his chance to be united with the one true love of his life (Nancy Rufford) out of respect of social values.

It is worth considering whether these characters have gained anything by their sacrifices. The definition of sacrifice includes not just the relinquishing of something prized but also includes the idea that a valued object is exchanged for something—usually not tangible—even more valuable. Has John's life improved in any way since marriage? Was Florence's passionless marriage an acceptable price for her freedom? What does Florence gain from her restored social standing? Would the joy Edward and Nancy find in marrying each other be enough compensation for being social outcasts who break the incest taboo?

Nancy takes her sacrifice to the extend of martyrdom. When Nancy goes to Edward's room at night, prepared to ruin her life for no other purpose than to save his, she sees no personal benefits from the liaison. Any affection she once had for Edward was quashed by Leonora before Nancy approaches him. Nancy believes that she is not a good enough person to put her needs above Edward's. She martyrs herself on the altar of filial duty. Although Nancy does not die, she loses her conscious self. She puts into motion a series of events that result in Leonora's successful marriage to Rodney Bayham. Because the novel does portray this happy, fruitful marriage, the reader is able to take from the book the message that happiness is not elusive, and that sinners can be redeemed.

The Exotic Other

The "exotic other" is a literary device that presents the mysterious and foreign in a way that enables readers (and characters) to reflect upon the ordinary and commonplace. In *The Good Soldier*, the exotic other manifests as European (to Americans), as Catholic (to Protestants), and as passionate (to people who are merely friendly).

The narrator of the novel, John Dowell, sets up from the very beginning an opposition between American and European values. Florence Dowell has visited the great county estates of England and finds her own home in Connecticut unbearable upon her return. Florence is drawn to the freedoms she imagines she will have if she lived in Europe. Her eagerness to get there leads her to make a very poor choice of husbands. To escape the consequences of this choice, Florence invents a heart ailment that ultimately turns Europe into a prison for her, and her travels there represent a long, frantic, unsatisfying tour for its own sake instead of progress towards her goal.



Gentleman Edward Ashburnham is in a passionless marriage, although not an antagonistic one. His first passionate feelings are triggered by the tears of a servant girl traveling third class—a woman nothing like his wife in bearing or demeanor. This encounter primes him for others like it with women who are not his wife, who do not worry about money, and who do not read his mail.

John Dowell is a Quaker masquerading as an Episcopalian who interprets everything that Leonora does as an artifact of her Catholic faith. This intense interest in Catholicism leads him to make incorrect conclusions about the serious betrayals that surround him. Because he does not understand when Leonora is trying to tell him about Florence and Edward (he dismisses her indirect comments as Catholic quirks about secrets), he wastes half of his adult life by catering to a woman who gives him nothing in return.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is first person. The narrator, a participant in the events described, is unreliable for several reasons. He relies on memory alone for the details of his story, which stretch back at least a dozen years. He also describes events that he could not have witnessed, based on information he received from people involved. These scenes are recreated from second-hand information, and it is likely that they have altered somewhat in the retelling. Furthermore, the narrator is unreliable because he is describing events that still involve him personally. His wife has recently died, his friend has even more recently died, and the young woman he had thought to make his second wife has gone completely mad. The narrator is too close to the events to be objective. Finally, the story the narrator tells presents a version of himself that is unable to understand the significance of events as they unfold, and the narrator provides no evidence that he has become any wiser for it. His is the only point of view presented in the book.

The story is not told linearly, but rather jumps around in time and place as the narrator is reminded of events. What begins as a straightforward scenario—two married couples form a friendship that ends when two of those people have an affair with each other—gradually becomes a tangle of betrayal involving fake illnesses, gambling debts, tours of the world, arranged marriages, Catholic guilt, promiscuity, and the incest taboo. The story is told mostly through expository text that describes what the narrator feels about the events as often as it describes what those events actually are. The dialogue supports an impression the narrator has or a value he espouses—it never allows the other characters to speak for themselves.

Despite the fact that the point of view is consistent, it is confusing. The reader struggles to understand the story as much as the narrator does, which serves as a way for the reader to identify with the narrator, who is the main character of the novel. Because the narrator provides very few personal details, the reader has few ways to sympathize with him. Sharing the narrator's distress and bewilderment is a way to connect to the novel.

Setting

The main setting of the novel is Nauheim, Germany, at the health spa where Florence Dowell and Edward Ashburnham are patients and the surrounding area. None of the characters are from Nauheim, nor are any of them permanently residing in the place of their birth. Florence is from Connecticut, John from Pennsylvania; the two of them are living in Europe. Edward is from England but he is serving as in the British military in India; Leonora leaves her family in Ireland to live with Edward in England before they both leave for Asia. Maisie Maidan is an Irish girl who travels far away to India, and then far away from her husband to Nauheim. Nancy Rufford leaves her family for the



convent, and then to live with the Ashburnhams (and is displaced as they are), and travels finally to Italy.

The lack of a fixed setting affects the characters as well as the reader. For the characters, being far away from home is liberating, but it also weakens their sense of propriety and they engage in behaviors that they would never dream of at home. (This is especially true for the characters that spend time in India.) On the other hand, without the watchful (and censorious) eyes of family and neighbors, liberating behaviors can easily become destructive behaviors. Several of the characters' lives are ruined by this factor. For the reader, the constant changes of setting are disorienting. The narrator himself, however, is disoriented. By puzzling the way through the timeline and locales of the narrator's story, the reader experiences the confusion that the narrator feels.

Language and Meaning

Although the narrator imagines he is telling his story to a friend by a fireside, he is actually writing it down. The language thus seems very formal and distant. It is not very artistic or poetic, and most of the sentences simply describe a fact or a feeling. It is the order in which the details of the story are presented that makes the novel complex. The book is filled with oblique references to events that have not yet occurred, characters that have not yet been introduced, and contemporary events and locations that have not yet been identified. The continual reference to the "Kilsyte case" is a good example of this narrative obscurity. The reader is assumed to share knowledge with the narrator, but does not. As a result, the reader often struggles to understand what the narrator is communicating. The reader's difficulty parallels the difficulty John Dowell the narrator and John Dowell the character have interpreting the events around them.

Because the language is so straightforward and dry, the expository text itself cannot provide much depth to the novel's meaning. The author, however, has provided other ways of exploring the multiple layers of the story. There are names fraught with significance. "Florence" reminds readers of flowers, which are ornamental, sexual, and cut down in their prime. "Leonora" suggests lions, the kings of the animal world. In medieval heraldry, lions signified soldiers. Lionesses are the real hunters of the pride, who provide all the food so the male lion can roam, fight battles, and increase the number of his mates. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when the novel was written, "nancy" is a slang term for effeminate or homosexual men. John Dowell's association with Nancy Rufford, and his unwillingness to use her name for much of the novel, could support the interpretation that John Dowell is attracted to Edward Ashburnham. Maisie Moidan's surname is a homophone of "maiden," a word that represents youth, innocence, and virginity. "La Dolciquita" suggests the sweetness of the forbidden. John Dowell's name suggests a wooden rod used by carpenters to join other pieces; in chapter 1, the narrator refers to the friendship of the two couples as a "four-square house." "Jimmy" suggests thieves and burglars using a crowbar to let themselves into rooms. The name Ashburnham evokes fire and sacrifice.



The color blue appears frequently. It traditionally represents true love (brides are supposed to wear "something blue" on their wedding day). In Christianity, it represents faithfulness. Ironically, neither of these ideals is embodied by the characters in the novel, except for John Dowell's willingness to dedicate himself to serving sick women. Blue is also associated with sadness and gloom; Picasso's "Blue Period," during which he painted melancholy scenes mostly in blue, covered the years 1901 to 1904, which are the years directly preceding the main events of the novel. Because blue is mentioned so much, the few times red is mentioned makes the color red stand out, too. Red represents blood and sacrifice, and in Christianity is the color that symbolizes martyrs. Edward Ashburnham is described as having a ruddy complexion; Florence has copper-colored hair; the etymology of Nancy Rufford's surname is commonly thought to be "red ford." These characters all meet their demise in the novel.

Structure

The novel is broken into four parts, which are broken into chapters. Each of the parts ends in a death. Part 1 ends with the death of Maisie Maidan. Part 2 ends with the death of Florence Dowell. Part 3 ends with the death of Leonora Asburnham's hopes of reconciling with her husband. Part 4 ends with the death of Edward Ashburnham, as well as the beginning of Nancy Rufford's madness. The story is told in a rambling way, with key information about an event withheld for several chapters and major events brushed over the first time they are mentioned. When the true significance of an event or character is finally revealed, the reader is often shocked by how poorly the narrator introduced them. One such example is the narrator's referral to "the girl" at the end of chapter two. The girl is, of course, Nancy Rufford—a character that possibly inspires two characters to commit suicide and with whom John Dowell is residing as he is writing down his story.

The structure of the novel could be compared to an iceberg. The story seems simple enough when it is first presented—two married couples are friends, but are split apart by an affair—but the further the reader probes beneath the surface the larger the betrayal is revealed to be. Each chapter presents more details about the affair. By the last chapter, each character is shown to have behaved in ways that make them contributors to the tragic events as much as victims of them. This is especially true for John the narrator. Throughout the book, he has insisted that he is innocent and unused to participating in intrigues and is blameless. On the very last page, he leaves Edward alone even though he knows that Edward is about to kill himself. The story ends before John can express any remorse, but the final paragraph suggests that he does not feel any, anyway.

The story of the novel takes John the narrator at least two years to write, including an eighteen-month break before the last two chapters are written. Over this span of time, he reflects on what has happened and portrays characters very differently than he does in the beginning of the book. Leonora, for example, is first described by John the narrator as noble and eager to help her husband; by the end she is blamed for Edward's death, Nancy's madness, and John's empty shell of a life. However, taking time to



reflect and change the story is not the only reason that John the narrator is unreliable. He describes events he could not have witnessed. Many of his statements are based on hearsay and conjecture. He also makes some obvious errors. At various points, he notes that Maisie Maidan dies about a month after she arrived with the Ashburnhams to Nauheim, that the Ashburnhams arrive in August, and that the date of the excursion to the castle and of Maisie's death is August 4, 1904. Whether John the narrator is demonstrating a mistake of memory or deliberately adjusting dates to paint a particular picture is immaterial. Very little of what he says can be taken at face value. The reader must perform his own search for truth in the material.



Quotes

"This is the saddest story I have ever heard. We had known the Ashburnhams for nine seasons of the town of Nauheim with an extreme intimacy—or, rather with an acquaintanceship as loose and easy and yet as close as a good glove's with your hand. My wife and I knew Captain and Mrs Ashburnham as well as it was possible to know anybody, and yet, in another sense, we knew nothing at all about them." Part 1, Chapter 1, pg. 15

"His face [Captain Ashburnham] hitherto had, in wonderful English fashion, expressed nothing whatsoever. Nothing. There was in it neither joy nor despair; neither hope nor fear; neither boredom nor satisfaction. He seemed to perceive no soul in that crowded room; he might have been walking through a jungle. I never came across such a perfect expression before and I never shall again." Part 1, Chapter 1, p. 32

"The measure of my relief when Leonora said that she was an Irish Catholic gives you the measure of my affection for that couple. It was an affection so intense that even to this day I cannot think of Edward without sighing." Part 1, Chapter 5, p. 66

"Perhaps one day when I am unconscious or walking in my sleep I may go and spit upon poor Edward's grave. It seems about the most unlikely thing I could do; but there it is." Part 3, Chapter 1, p. 98

"Well, it is all over. Not one of us has got what he really wanted. Leonora wanted Edward, and she has got Rodney Bayham, a pleasant enough sort of sheep. Florence wanted Branshaw, and it is I who have bought it from Leonora. I didn't really want it; what I wanted mostly was to cease being a nurse-attendant. Well, I am a nurse-attendant. Edward wanted Nancy Rufford, and I have got her. Only she is mad. It is a queer and fantastic world." Part 4, Chapter 5, p. 204

"I don't know; I don't know; was that last remark of hers the remark of a harlot, or is it what every decent woman, county family or not county family, thinks at the bottom of her heart? Or thinks all the time for the matter of that? Who knows?" Part 1, Chapter 1, p. 20

"The first question they asked me was not how I did but what did I do. And I did nothing. I suppose I ought to have done something, but I didn't see any call to do it. Why does one do things? I just drifted in and wanted Florence." Part 1, Chapter 2, p. 24

"Yes, society must go one; it must breed, like rabbits. That is what we are here for. But then, I don't like society—much. I am that absurd figure, and American millionaire, who has bought one of the ancient haunts of English peace. I sit here, in Edward's gun-room, all day and all day in a house that is absolutely quiet. No one visits me, for I visit no one. No one is interested in me, for I have no interests. In twenty minutes or so I shall walk down to the village, beneath my own oaks, alongside my own clumps of



gorse, to get the American mail. My tenants, the village boys and the tradesmen will touch their hats to me. So life peters out." Part 4, Chapter 6, p. 218

"I can't conceal from myself the fact that I loved Edward Ashburnham—and that I love him because he was just myself. If I had had the courage and the virility and possibly also the physique of Edward Ashburnham I should, I fancy, have done much what he did." Part 4, Chapter 6, p. 217

"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 job of making Edward Ashburnham a faithful husband." Part 1, Chapter 5, p. 61

"She ran her hand with a singular motion upwards over her forehead. Her eyes were enormously distended; her face was exactly that of a person looking into the pit of hell and seeing horrors there. And then suddenly she stopped. She was, most amazingly, just Mrs Ashburnham again." Part 1, Chapter 4, pp. 49-50

She drank the little phial of prussic acid and there she lay.—Oh, extremely charming and clear-cut—looking with a puzzled expression at the electric-light bulb that hung from the ceiling, or perhaps through it, to the stars above. Who knows? Anyhow, there was an end of Florence." Part 3, Chapter 1, p. 110

"She received me with an embrace of a warmth... Well, it was the first time I had ever been embraced by a woman—and it was the last when a woman's embrace has had in it any warmth for me...." Part 2, Chapter 1, p. 80

"The girls of the Holy Child have always been noted for their truthfulness. It's a beastly bore, but I've got to do it." Part 3, Chapter 2, p. 80

"I don't know; I don't know; was that last remark of hers the remark of a harlot, or is it what every decent woman, county family or not county family, thinks at the bottom of her heart? Or thinks all the time for the matter of that? Who knows? Part 1, Chapter 1, p. 20

"Well, that is the end of the story. And, when I come to look at it I see that it is a happy ending with wedding bells and all. The villains—for obviously Edward and the girl were villains—have been punished by suicide and madness. The heroine—the perfectly normal, virtuous and slightly deceitful heroine—has become the happy wife of a perfectly normal, virtuous and slightly deceitful husband. She will shortly become a mother of a perfectly normal, virtuous slightly deceitful son or daughter. A happy ending, that is what it works out at." Part 4, Chapter 6, p. 216

"Well, it is all over. Not one of us has got what he really wanted. Leonora wanted Edward, and she has got Rodney Bayham, a pleasant enough sort of sheep. Florence wanted Branshaw, and it is I who have bought it from Leonora. I didn't really want it; what I wanted mostly was to cease being a nurse-attendant. Well, I am a nurse-attendant. Edward wanted Nancy Rufford, and I have got her. Only she is mad. It is a queer and fantastic world. Why can't people have what they want? The things were all



there to content everybody; yet everybody has the wrong thing. Perhaps you can make head or tail of it; it is beyond me." Part 4, Chapter 5, p. 204

"You may well ask why I write. And yet my reasons are quite many. For it is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people to desire to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote; or, if you please, just to get the sight out of their heads." Part 1, Chapter 1, p. 17.

"It wasn't a minuet that we stepped; it was a prison—a prison full of screaming hysterics, tied down so that they might not outsound the rolling of our carriage wheels as we went along the shaded avenues of the Taunus Wald." Part 1, Chapter 1, p. 18

"I shall just imagine myself for a fortnight or so at one side of the fireplace of a country cottage, with a sympathetic soul opposite me. And I shall go on talking, in a low voice while the sea sounds in the distance and overhead the great black flood of wind polishes the bright stars. From time to time we shall get up and go to the door and look out at the great moon and say: 'Why, it is nearly as bright as in Provence!' And then we shall come back to the fireside, with just the touch of a sigh because we are not in that Provence where even the saddest stories are gay." Part 1, Chapter 2, p. 22



Topics for Discussion

On the night of August 4, 1913, Florence dies from drinking poison labeled as medicine. Did she commit suicide or make a horrible mistake? If she had only seen Edward with Nancy, or if she had only seen Bagshawe talking to her husband, would she have reacted in the same way? Why did the occurrence of both events in the same evening upset her so terribly?

John Dowell claims that he knew Edward Ashburnham was going to commit suicide, yet John left Edward alone to do it. Is John in any way culpable for Edward's death?

Why did Edward and Leonora Ashburnham really summon John Dowell to England? Why did Edward and Leonora summon him separately? What did they hope he could accomplish? Did he meet their expectations once he arrived?

Before marrying, Leonora spent her time at either a convent school or at home with her six sisters. In contrast, Leonora traveled the world with her uncle and his male companion, and entertained several other men as regular suitors. Do these experiences influence the way Leonora and Florence behave as wives? Or does another factor, such as nationality, religion, or social class, contribute to the differences in their attitudes about marriage?

Nancy Rufford emerges from her catatonic state only to utter the words, "Credo in unum Deum omnipotentem," the Latin words for "I believe in an omnipotent deity." What significance might these words have? How do they relate her madness to the death of Edward Ashburnham?

John Dowell claims he does not want to be a nurse-attendant for another sick woman who does not love him, yet he volunteers to take care of Nancy when she goes mad. Why does John do this? What benefit does he get from the relationship?

John Dowell, the narrator, ultimately identifies Leonora as the villain in his story. Is this a fair assessment of the role she plays? Do you think another character should get the bulk of the blame? If you had to list the characters in order from most to least culpable for the tragic events that occur, who would be the most to blame? Who would you consider to be most victimized?

What significance do you attach to the author's use of the color blue? Are all the references to blue coincidental? What other symbols are embedded in the text?

If John and Leonora were the spouses receiving treatment for heart problems, and Florence and Edward were the healthy spouses looking after them, would the events of the book unfold any differently? What aspect of this story is the most likely to change? Would the story have been different if Florence and Edward suffered from real ailments?



Is Edward Ashburnham likable? Is he drawn to women as he is sentimental, or because he is selfish and heartless? Is his indulgence in extramarital affairs his worst flaw? Can the good, productive work he does when he is not pursuing lovers outweigh the fact that he is cheating on his wife?

Suicide and references to suicide appear fairly often in the book. Based on what you have learned about Florence and Edward, does it seem reasonable that they would commit suicide? Is the author using the examples of suicide to make a larger philosophical or moral point? What does a character's willingness to commit suicide say about that character specifically or society in general?