



Fragmentation, Dimness and Irregularity: On the Impressionistic Narrative in *The Good Soldier*

LIU Jiexiu^{[a],*}

^[a]Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Northeast Petroleum University, Daqing, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 17 November 2013; accepted 7 February 2014

Abstract

The paper aims to discuss the impressionistic narrative techniques in *The Good Soldier* by Ford Madox Ford, which has been famous for its innovative writing techniques. In the text, the limited narrator and non-linear narrative leave fragments on readers' mind with dense impressionist skills. The mixture of shining colors' setting results in the weakening of color result, which lead to the vagueness in reading that corresponds to the vagueness in painting as well. Relying on narrating series of impressions and actions of characters, the structure of the text appears irregular. Such discussion can both shed new light on its relevant research from the narrative point of view, and understand Ford's special contribution to modernism in English literature.

Key words: Impression; Narration; Modernism

LIU Jiexiu (2014). Fragmentation, Dimness and Irregularity: On the Impressionistic Narrative in *The Good Soldier*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 8(1), 106-109. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320140801.4128>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320140801.4128>

INTRODUCTION

Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939) published his masterpiece *The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion* (*The Good Soldier* hereinafter) in 1915, which was influential for its innovative literary impressionist techniques in the text. It abandoned the traditional chronological narration and omniscient narrator. Instead, Ford relied on the description of series of impressions, focused on mood and

sensations, employed anachrony or "time-shift" in Ford and Conrad's term, and unfolded the story in the limited narration. The work was produced in the literary period when the Realism was fading while the modernism just began to emerge. Hence, Ford contributed a lot to the development of modernism in British literature. He was praised the "Grand Master of Ceremonies of English Modernism" (Hampson & Saunders, 2003, p.135) and "the most prominent advocate of impressionism's power and modernity"(Katz, 2000, p.108). After its publication, some critics have commented the work on the basis of their biographical discoveries, comparing the story with Ford's own real life while others agreed on the pervasiveness of irony in it and discussed whether the irony was comic or tragic or something in between. More people discussed its contribution to literary impressionism. Based on narratology, the thesis will focus on its impressionistic narrative techniques so as to shed new light on its research.

1. FRAGMENTATION: POINT OF VIEW AND NARRATIVE TIME

According to Ford, literary impressionism must "render an affair" and "the impressionist's interest shifted from the mere events of the plot to the way those events mad an impression on a perceiving mind" (Matz, 2001, p.134). Therefore, the protagonist of the novel became the observer instead of the object observed. The authorial voice was suppressed and the story was told through a limited unreliable narrator. In the text, the narrator Dowell was piecing up the events of the past decade as he told the story, and as such he jumped back and forth over the course of the last ten years. In other words, Dowell was learning the story along with the reader and he did not know what had happened till the very end.

Ford broke the tradition of the old 19th English novel where good and evil were opposite poles, where

characters inevitably owned one or the other pole. The characters in *The Good Soldier* were never what they seemed at first meeting and the seeming events were full of deep hidden meanings, which attracted the readers to re-read from the first page even if they had come to the book's end. Also Ford added with his own imagination on some of his impressions, delivered the reader the incomplete and disordered information. The fragments of the plot interwoven with each other; the characters' deep thoughts were revealed layer by layer.

Meanwhile, Ford ignored chronology, for he followed "the wandering of memory in favor of impressions" (Stevenson, 1992, p.216). Time was created through the impressions and memories of the narrating consciousness of John Dowell. The past in the text was not constructed as a chronological report of what had happened from beginning to end. Instead it was reconstructed only as a series of impressions which were left or retrieved by the narrator Dowell. As Peters pointed out: the objective and regularized time no longer ruled the whole story and the subjective experience made the time speed up, slow down, move forward, backward, or even stop (2007, p.83). The moving forward and backward in time left the fragments on readers' mind with dense impressionist skills. Such a narrative skill was called "time-shift" device by Ford and Conrad. The narrator began his fiction with the ending of the story, or ended one part with someone's death. In the middle part he illustrated some of the events, added with his own measure of time. In this way, Dowell's narration shifted back and forth between past events and current reflections, most of which were based on his impressions.

As the story was not a linear narrative, the physical time order lost its sense as what it was in traditional novels. For example, Dowell found the time fleeting once a while. Sometimes he realized how slow it was. "The time had passed so slowly that I had the impression that it must have been thirty years since. It was only twelve years" (Ford, 2010, p.197). With the development of the plot, personal time, which was "time as human beings experience it" (Peters, 2007, p.60), was made irregular against the physical time. When the narrator was telling Edward's affair with Maidan, another affair with Mrs. Basil was inserted in the middle of it. Shortly afterwards, his marriage with Florence was recalled. It was difficult for the readers to find the physical time line among events at the first meeting. Moreover, linear time was fragmented into small pieces, all of which would be recombined and juxtaposed into a new pattern as "collage" (Matz, 2001, p.167) from different contexts. The juxtaposition increased the signification of time. The personal time August 4 mattered for Florence. Too many crucial things happened on this day: her birth, the beginning of her trip around the world, her first love affair, her marriage, meeting the Ashburnhams and finally her death. The recurring pattern of this personal time seemed to provide order in a chaotic modern life.

2. DIMNESS: LIGHT AND COLOR

Literary impressionism was formed under the influence of impressionism in painting. And the peculiar usage of color was the most distinctive feature of impressionist painting. Most of the painters even showed the theme just by colors. They tried their best to catch the instant change of colors in their eyes to symbolize the theme. Influenced by it, Ford made use of the vocabulary of colors and light, some of which were symbols of the fiction in his impressionist narration. For example, "heart and passion are associated with red, while pink is associated with dilution, or, at least, suppression of emotion" (Hawkes, 2012, p.190). The signal for the train's departure was "a very bright red" (Ford, 2010, p.250). When Dowell learnt that Florence's death was a suicide, he remembered only the "pink" effulgence from the electric lights in the hotel lounge. As Edward received Nancy's telegram, Edward's pink complexion displayed no outward emotion on receiving the "pink"-paper telegram, yet his inner emotions were in turmoil, for the telegram was a double shock to him.

Moreover, Ford was prone to use the color vocabulary to introduce the characters instead of describing their complexion. He introduced his wife by recalling her dress, the blue figured silk with her copper-colored hair and white hat. Ashe's eyes were as blue as the sides of a certain type of box of matches. Leonora always appeared to the narrator at her best in a blue tailor-made. "Both Florence and Leonora wear blue to heighten the blueness of their eyes" (Ford, 2010, p.164). The color blue implied mystery. The narrator knew little about people around him just from the appearance until everything was under light at last. They were mysterious for Dowell in this sense, and could not be recognized by Dowell at all. The twisted human nature were hidden underneath the colors.

On most of the occasions, different tincts mix together, instead of single color in the picture. When Florence was exposed to have had the love affair with the civilian Jimmy, she had a face "whiter than paper and her hand on the black stuff over her heart" (Ford, 2010, p.102). At the moment that Leo proposed to get divorced with Edward, "a dark-brown picture of a white house" (Ford, 2010, p.79) appeared above the mantelpiece. Just before Edward committed suicide, he showed "the skin was clear-colored; his hair was golden and perfectly brushed; the level brick-dust red of his complexion went clean up to the rims of his eyelids; his eyes were porcelain blue..." (Ford, 2010, p.255). The mixture of color setting resulted in the weakening of color result. The receivers could not help asking themselves which of color it was finally, which led to the vagueness in reading that corresponds to the vagueness in painting as well.

When Dowell and his friends had a tour to the ancient city, they came to a country where Dowell got the impression that: "the sun shines, the earth is blood red,

and purple and red, and green and red. And the oxen in the plough lands are bright varnished brown and black and blackish purple; and the peasants are dressed in the black and white of magpies ...” (Ford, 2010, p.255). The ancient city signified the human civilization; the oxen signified the developed social science and technology; and the peasants were the modern people at the turn of the 20th century. The mixture and vagueness of colors showed chaos in the psychology of human being against the fast development of society, and chaos in moral standards against the fast development of economy.

3. IRREGULARITY: STRUCTURE

In most of conventional novels before literary impressionist movement, there had been a clear framework, on which all details of the texts hang, holding together into a shape. Usually, there were three sections: a beginning which introduced the world of the text, a middle section that explored all the problems and complications which built up and made a drastic main crisis happen, and an ending after the main crises when the complications had been resolved and a concluding state of affairs was worked out. Most of Realist and Romanticist writers emphasized on the unity and wholeness of writing influenced by the doctrines of classicism. For example, most of the Romanticist poetry were created under the strict guidelines of certain form, with definite line and rhythms. The Realist writers created plot in time order, combined with cutback, foreboding and flashback once a while. Therefore, the function of structure was to unify the work in the traditional aesthetics before literary impressionism.

However, the time and physical order were disrupted completely and there were even no joints for the plot between the parts in *The Good Soldier*. The whole passage was seemingly divided into four parts. Yet, the reader could not find the clear framework or shape on the surface. The first chapter treated with the love affair of Edward with Mrs. Maidan by series of impressions combined with some conversations. It ended with Maidan’s sudden death. The second touched on the focus of the novel: love affair of Florence with Jimmy before her marriage, ending with her husband’s learning of the affair, which, in fact, predicted her death because of her humiliation. The third part began at the Leonora’s persuading of Dowell to marry with Nancy no less than ten days after Edward’s death. More important, it represented how Nancy became attached to Edward, and the real reason of Florence’s death; the miserable childhood of Nancy. He was blackmailed by his lover; love affair with Mrs. Basil and Mrs. Maisie; ending with Leonora’s naïve hope that her husband’s heart would be back to her. The final chapter served to unify the novel artistically and thematically. Dowell explained why he narrated in the rambling way. And Leonora began her new

life married with another man after her husband’s death. Yet most of the chapter touched on the contact between Edward and Nancy, which led to the madness of Nancy. At last, the novel came with an open end. When first read it, one was surprised at the labyrinth of the narration. It seemed that it was a very difficult task to find the pathway for the whole story and the mind was only packed with fragments of the plot. Yet after another close reading of the text, one would realize the disordered parts had its own inner logic underneath and were in the symmetrical design from a structural point of view. Each part was balanced ending with the death or madness of Edward’s paramour. It was this careful arrangement that gave coherence to the disparate episodes of the novel. In Ford’s view, the “structure” referred to what characters did. Hence the structure of a novel was made up by the actions of people. He also thought: “a story had to be developed according to its certainty. The action of every character must have their own justification, which will make the parts logic related” (Hampson & Saunders, 2003, p.156).

Ford ever pointed out in the text:

When one discusses an affair—a long, sad affair—one goes back, one goes forward. One remembers points that one has forgotten and one explains them all the more minutely since one recognizes that one has forgotten to mention them in their proper places, and that one may have given, by omitting them, a false impression. (Ford, 2010, p.183).

Such going back and forward narrative intended to search for a way to compose and embody the twisted affairs of the world enshrining the protagonist. Relying on narrating series of impressions, Ford also made use of *progression d’effet*, a narrative theory developed by Ford and Conrad during their collaboration. According to them, the story must be carried forward faster and more intensely as it progressed. In the text, Dowell unfolded the surface manners of those “good people” layer after layer, penetrating at a faster and more intense pace to the psychological and moral core of rottenness. With the utmost tenderness Ford pushed deeper and deeper into the minds of his characters, disclosing realms of passion and agony and meanness.

CONCLUSION

In *The Good Soldier*, Ford wrote in the limited narrator with series of impressions, discovering the violent emotional conflicts and fighting behind the two seeming perfect upper class families. He favored time in mind rather than time on the clock, which was obvious in most modernist fictions that smashed up the clock, resisted as far as possible the arrangement of “events in their time sequence” and the kind of “mechanical succession of day following day” (Hawkes, 2012, p.15). Moreover, the writer employed very radical disjunctions of narrative time: leaping from 1904 to 1913; recounting Florence’s illness at one point and later going back to it and showing it as a

shame; even using the coincidental date of August 4 as a kind of historical flattening device; its repetition suggesting that the temporal sequence of the calendar is merely one long repetition of the same day. Behind all this was the eighteen real months it took Dowell to recite his tale, and during the final chapters of *The Good Soldier*, the narrative was almost completely controlled by the “impressions” of the hopeless Dowell as he organized the various versions of Ashburham’s final days. While *The Good Soldier* successfully showed that the traditional elements of narrative stability were ruined; the “impressionist” self could be proposed as a new way of organizing and unifying a narrative. Just as Ford himself said:

Impressionism is the record of a moment, but it is not a sort of rounded, annotated record of a set of circumstances that happened ten years ago—or ten minutes. It might even be the impression of the moment—but it the impression, not the corrected chronicle (Stevenson, 1992, p.183).

The narrative rules under the text differed from those of both Romanticism and Realism, in which the former focused on the depiction of imagination and the latter on objective reality. Yet the literary impressionist narration paid more attention on the prolonging of the instinct moment of the mind or the direct perception in the inner world, mixed with the description of outward scenes once a while. Hence, the literary impressionist narration endowed the text with special artistic features from its narrator, narrative time, variety of color vocabulary, and structure, all of which resulted in the beauty sense of fragmentation, dimness, and irregularity, more importantly their strong effect of peculiar and innovative art on the readers. Moreover, literary impressionist narration in *The Good Soldier* brought an end to the imitation and reoccurrence in western art history and led to the advent of modernism in English literature.

REFERENCES

- Bal, M. (2009). *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative (3rd ed.)*. University of Toronto Press.
- Ford, M. F. (2010). *The Good Soldier: A tale of passion*. Wordsworth Edition Ltd.
- Gao, J. H. (2006). On the classic narratology in Ford’s *The Good Soldier*. *Foreign Literature*, 4, 49-53.
- Hampson, R., & Saunders, M. (2003). *Ford Madox Ford’s modernity*. New York: Rodopi.
- Hawkes, R. (2012). *Ford Madox Ford and the misfit moderns: Edwardian fiction and the First World War*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Judd, A. (1991). *Ford Madox Ford*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Katz, T. (2000). *Impressionist subjects: Gender interiority and modernist fiction in England*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- MacShane, F. (1972). *Ford Madox Ford: The critical heritage*. London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Matz, J. (2001). *Literary impressionism and modernist aesthetics*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Peters, G. J. (2007). *Conrad and impressionism*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Phelan, J., & Rabinowitz, P. (2005). *A companion to narrative theory*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Phelan, J. (2007). *Experiencing fiction: Judgments, progressions, and the rhetorical theory of narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Stevenson, R. (1992). *Modernist fiction: An introduction*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.
- Tamar, K. (2000). *Impressionist subject, gender, interiority and modernist fiction in England*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Xu, J. X. (2007). On narrative art in Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*. *Journal of East China Institute of Technology*, 11, 23-26.