‘IT IS MELODRAMA; BUT I CAN’T HELP IT’: DOWELL’S MELODRAMATIC IMAGINATION

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Abstract
While much discussion of The Good Soldier has focused on the question of its genre, little attention has been paid to what I describe as Dowell’s ‘melodramatic imagination’. This chapter argues for the recognition of melodrama as an important aspect of the novel’s generic fabric. As critics such as Peter Brooks and Ben Singer underscore, melodrama is an acutely modern form, having emerged in the aftermath of the French Revolution and being marked by the tendency to articulate whilst simultaneously mitigating the uncertainties and contradictions of modernity. In emphasising the significance of Dowell’s melodramatic imagination, I compare The Good Soldier to Ford’s Mr. Fleight (1913) which also draws heavily on melodrama’s dramatic apparatus. For Dowell, I argue that the melodramatic mode becomes a powerful narrative resource, allowing him to negotiate a series of apparently incomprehensible events by adopting a form that circumvents the necessity to make sense.

For all its narrative intricacy and bewildering chronological complexity, the plot of The Good Soldier revolves around just a small number of key incidents. Many of these events take place on 4 August and, of course, Dowell famously describes several incompatible events as having occurred on 4 August 1904: the very first meeting of the Dowells and the Ashburnhams in ‘the dining-room of the Hotel Excelsior’¹ and the death of Maisie Maidan following the ‘protest scene’ at Marburg castle. For the purposes of this essay, though, I want to begin with another of these red-letter days: 4 August 1913. This date marks what is arguably the novel’s most significant turning point: the fateful evening on which Edward Ashburnham suddenly declares his passion for his ward Nancy Rufford and is overheard by Florence Dowell, who commits suicide in response to what she hears and thus brings to an end her nine-year affair with Ashburnham. It is this event, furthermore, that destroys John Dowell’s ‘long, tranquil life, which was just stepping a minuet’ (GS 11) by revealing the duplicity of both his best friend and his wife and sets in motion the series of events leading to Ashburnham’s own suicide and to Nancy’s
mental collapse. The scene which precipitates all of this is described by Dowell as follows:

Anyhow, there you have the picture, the immensely tall trees, elms most of them, towering and feathering away up into the black mistiness that trees seem to gather about them at night; the silhouettes of those two upon the seat; the beams of light coming from the Casino, the woman all in black peeping with fear behind the tree-trunk. It is melodrama; but I can’t help it. (GS 80)

The ‘woman all in black’ is, of course, Florence, poised to run back to her hotel room and poison herself. What interests me here is Dowell’s description of the scene as melodrama and, even more intriguingly, as melodrama that can’t be helped. A common complaint about modernist novels is that ‘nothing happens’ in them, but this accusation can hardly be levelled at Ford’s masterpiece. It is packed with incident: betrayals, love affairs, storms on the high seas, violence, suicide and madness; and if one simply considers the stripped-down series of events that make up the tale – which Vincent Cheng was kind enough to provide in 1986 – then it does indeed come across as a work of high melodrama. And yet, this is not what a great many readers are struck by when first encountering the text. Instead, discussions of the novel often focus on its technical achievement, or on the problem of Dowell’s unreliable narration and the epistemological questions it raises. Furthermore, although a significant part of the critical discussion surrounding The Good Soldier has focused on the question of its genre, what hasn’t been discussed in depth is what I will describe here as Dowell’s ‘melodramatic imagination’. Indeed, I will argue that melodrama needs to be acknowledged as an important aspect of The Good Soldier’s generic texture, while asking why Dowell might want to view his adoption of the melodramatic mode as something that he ‘can’t help’.

Ever since Mark Schorer first described The Good Soldier as ‘a comedy of humor’ in 1948, the debate has raged among critics as to whether the novel should be read as essentially a comic or a tragic vision. If we turn our attention to the novel itself, it becomes apparent that the seeds of this contention, over which generations of critics have argued, are rooted in Dowell’s own language and in his perplexed attempts to provide shape and structure to his tale:

I call this the Saddest Story, rather than ‘The Ashburnham Tragedy’, just because it is so sad, just because there was no current to draw things along to