

# A critical analysis of the novels of Ford Madox Ford

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## A critical analysis of the novels of Ford Madox Ford

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### Abstract

In the development of the English Novel, one of the recognizable trends is the gradually emerging conception of the novel as Art. From Richardson, Austen, Eliot, Meredith, to James and Conrad, the critic can trace the increasing involvement of the novelist in the discovery and perfection of techniques which would make it possible to represent in the novel life as it appears to the intelligent observer. Ford Madox Ford followed this trend in the novel and carried the form to new heights through the methods he evolved. -- Surrounded by artists and writers from birth, Ford naturally took up a career in writing. Strongly encouraged by his maternal grandfather, Ford Madox Brown, he found early success in the publication of a fairy-tale, *The Brown Owl* (1892). A second fairy-tale, *The Feather*, and his first novel, *The Shifting of the Fire*, were produced within the same year. During the following eight years, Ford published two volumes of poems, a third fairy-story, a biography of Ford Madox Brown, and *The Cinque Ports*, the first of a series of studies on significant areas of England. -- By 1900, Ford was established as a stylist of note. In that year he met Joseph Conrad and by the next year was involved in writing *The Inheritors*, the first of their three collaborations. This proved to be a turning point in Ford's career, for Conrad's absorption in his creative writings drew Ford away from the indolent, desultory approach he had had and forced him to formulate his theory of fiction. After working with Conrad, Ford knew much about the techniques he believed should be implemented in his craft, but he had not crystallized what he wanted to say. -- During the following decade he produced fifteen novels. Notable among them is his historical trilogy of Henry VIII's fifth queen, published under the titles *The Fifth Queen* (1906), *Privy Seal* (1907), and *The Fifth Queen Crowned* (1908). It was justifiably hailed by the critics of his day, for Ford's insight into the historical personages, his remarkable recreation of the sixteenth-century milieu, and the obvious command he wielded over the tools of his craft, raised the genre of historical fiction to new heights. The medieval period fascinated Ford so much that he wrote four other novels devoted to the folklore and superstitions of that time. *The "Half Moon"* (1909), presents the power of witch-craft in the period; *Ladies Whose Bright Eyes* (1911, and revised in 1935), gives a fascinating account of a twentieth-century man transferred back into the fourteenth century, who gains new understandings by which to measure his own way of life; and *The Young Lovell* (1913), is a pleasing study of knight-errantry. A fourth historical novel, *The Portrait* (1910), presents an unsuccessful account of the wits and fops of the reign of William and Mary. -- But it was in his novels of 'small circles' that Ford really began to develop his particular view of life. In *The Benefactor* (1905), and, much more thoroughly, in *A Call* (1910), he explored the peculiar situation of individuals caught at cross purposes in the conflict between the dictates of passion, an apparently outmoded code of behaviour, and the necessity to preserve some surface acceptable to the society within which they move. He attempted to broaden the field of his explorations through social satires including large groups of people in *Mr. Apollo* (1908), *The Simple Life Limited* (1911), *The New Humpty-Dumpty* (1912), and *Mr. Fleight* (1913). Only the first of these is in any way appealing, having sympathetically drawn characters revealed with depth, and an attractive philosophy of faith persuasively presented; whereas the remaining three novels give characters much more superficially drawn, with a philosophy of expediency chiefly distinguished by its coldness and harshness. Stimulated by the crucial events of 1914, Ford formulated what he wanted to say. After the many experiments of the preceding novels, he had perfected the technique of point of view, time-shift, selection, justification, le mot juste and progression d'effet, which enabled him in *The Good Soldier* (1915), to state, with overwhelming power and truth, the plight of twentieth-century man, terrifyingly alone in an incomprehensible situation, with all systems of communication broken down. In making explicit 'the saddest story', joining psychological insight with consummate artistry, Ford achieves the stature of a great novelist. -- Eight years later, he published *The Marsden Case*, a disappointing novel when compared to *The Good Soldier*, but interesting for the study it provides of Ford's attempt to broaden the scope of the material he used in *The Good Soldier*, to widen the 'small circle' to include a larger segment of society. The novel fails chiefly because of the inadequacy of the single point of view through which all events must be seen. However, the experiment proved fruitful, for in the next year, 1924, Ford published *Some Do Not*, the first of the Tietjens tetralogy. In 1925 *No More Parades* was published, followed by *A Man Could Stand Up* (1926), and *The Last Post* (1928). In the tetralogy, Ford gives fullest expression to his view of twentieth-century man alienated from all that gave stability, coherence, and contentment to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, unable to find within his society any foundations on which to build a new way of life, caught in a personal struggle that mirrors, and is mirrored in, the public struggle of World War I. The breadth and depth of psychological study, the emotional power and artistry with which Ford makes his statement, emphasizes the fact that *The Good Soldier* was no flash-in-the-pan, that Ford was indeed capable of producing more than one masterpiece. The Tietjens series proves this as it brings the twentieth-century world into focus, allowing the reader to see much about his society that perhaps he had only dimly perceived before, or of which he had been totally unaware. -- After *The Last Post*, Ford wrote six novels. None of them measures up to the standard of his two masterpieces. Most of them show flashes of the creative genius that is so apparent in his greatest works, but all of them give evidence of haste and lack of involvement of the author. In the last period of his life, Ford was mainly concerned with critical works and memoirs, dashing off novels in between them that must be dismissed, then, as potboilers. -- However, it is enough that Ford has given the world, not one, but two great works. In *The Good Soldier*, he presents a novel perfect in every aspect of its form; in the Tietjens tetralogy, he gives, if not an entirely flawless performance, a work of compelling power. Both rank with the best that has been produced in this century.

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