# Melodrama, Victimhood, and Complicity in Whitney Terrell's *The Good Lieutenant*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how melodramatic political discourse shapes portrayals of victimhood, heroism, and culpability in Whitney Terrell's *The Good Lieutenant*. Building on Elisabeth Anker's account of melodrama—which frames the nation as a virtuous victim whose pain licenses redemptive force—we show how the novel both draws on and strains this moral grammar. Methodologically, we translate Anker's ideas into a practical toolkit for literary analysis, focusing on temporal design, role grammar, the rhetoric of victimhood, and the affective economy through which private loss becomes public meaning. Two axes organise the readings: first, the centering of American soldiers' suffering as the main source of pathos; second, the conditional and often short-lived recognition of Iraqi civilian pain. While reverse chronology, scenes of desecration, and gendered vulnerability lend American figures moral centrality, the book also unsettles melodramatic binaries by foregrounding complicity, failed rescue, and the limits of redemption. We conclude that *The Good Lieutenant* exemplifies the ambivalence of recent war fiction: it critiques the Iraq War's legitimating stories even as it remains entangled in the forms that elevate some victims over others.

**Keywords:** Iraq war; melodramatic political discourse; victimhood; war novel; Whitney Terrell

## INTRODUCTION

Post-9/11 wars generated an archive of images, speeches, and stories that staged U.S. power and vulnerability in heightened emotional registers. Literature does not simply reflect this discourse; it also shapes how political violence is remembered and judged. In an attempt to reflect on various aspects of the military endeavour in Iraq, a number of American novels, such as Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012), David Abrams' *Fobbit* (2012), and Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2016), to name a few, ventured into the realms of war and offered their fictional exemplifications through a diverse choice of perspectives. Whitney Terrell's *The Good Lieutenant* (2017) stands out for its reverse chronology, its interleaving of U.S. and Iraqi perspectives, and its sustained attention to a

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woman officer in a masculinised institution. These choices make the novel a precise site for examining what Elisabeth Anker (2014) calls melodramatic political discourse (MPD): a mode that frames the nation through innocent suffering, villainous threat, and heroic rescue. Although scholars of post-9/11 culture have traced this grammar in politics and media, literary studies have been slower to adapt it as a method for close reading, especially in fictions that use and question melodramatic tropes.

This article addresses that gap by operationalising the framework into scene-level indicators and applying them in close readings. It pursues three aims: first, to show how the novel casts American soldiers as virtuous sufferers within an economy of innocence and sacrifice; second, to examine how Iraqi civilians appear as conditional or muted victims, revealing asymmetries in moral attention; and third, to demonstrate how Anker's theory can be turned into explicit analytic steps for literary criticism. In advancing these aims, the study contributes to debates on post-9/11 literature, affect, and the cultural legitimation of war. It also offers a replicable set of indicators that other readers can apply to adjacent Iraq and Afghanistan war novels. Throughout, the analysis remains anchored in close reading of key scenes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Post-9/11 criticism widely argues that American cultural narratives recentre U.S. pain and convert injury into a mandate for action. Anker (2014) conceptualises this tendency as a melodramatic political discourse that makes national suffering the foundation for expanded state power and legitimates war through scenes of persecuted innocence. Her account tracks how conventions of virtuous victimhood, villainous threat, and redemptive force solidified during the Cold War and surged after 9/11 as a nation-building rhetoric. Within this frame, injury functions as moral evidence: the nation's unjust suffering appears to prove its virtue and authorise decisive, even violent, remedies. This review takes Anker's theorisation as a baseline for mapping how Iraq War fiction organises attention, sympathy, and blame.

Form has been shown to mediate ethical judgment in war fiction, and reverse chronology is a consequential device in this period. Critics of *The Good Lieutenant*, as this section shall show, repeatedly note that the novel opens with disaster and moves backward, requiring readers to back-form causality and to see earlier scenes through the after-image of loss. This temporal design concentrates pathos at the start, disciplines attention around a wound, and primes identification with figures who promise rescue or redress. Reviews further emphasise the prose's embedded-reportage texture and the active readerly stance it demands, which together heighten immediacy and moral pressure. In this article, the reverse order is read as a structural mechanism that installs loss as the interpretive frame across the text.

A significant body of scholarship examines gendered authority and the concept of the "trauma hero" as pivotal elements in post-9/11 storytelling. Research indicates that public discourse following 9/11 revived protective patriarchy, portraying women as symbols of the nation in need of protection, while the battlefield remained predominantly masculine, despite an increase in women's military participation (Faludi, 2007; Basham, 2016; Wright, 2018). Observers of military culture also highlight that institutions continue to uphold a "basic institutional masculinity," positioning women as supporters within the moral economy of war. Literary histories suggest that American war literature has long contended with these gender myths, and that post-9/11 fiction both inherits and reinterprets them. These insights inform our analysis of Emma

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Fowler's command labour as a form of feminised heroism that derives its strength from closeness to collapse rather than from triumphant victory.

A parallel strand in recent 9/11 scholarship advances Michael Rothberg's idea of the implicated subject to move beyond the simple victim–perpetrator binary. Alqahtani's (2023) reading of Inaam Kachachi's *The American Granddaughter* shows how an Iraqi American interpreter occupies a position aligned with power and privilege—benefiting from and mediating U.S. military operations—without being a direct agent of harm, thereby decentering white American trauma and foregrounding Iraqi experiences. Using trauma theory, the study traces how dispersed, intergenerational injuries surface through voice, memory, and narrative gaps, and how implication reframes responsibility across domestic and public spheres. This approach complements melodrama-focused accounts by explaining how texts can register harm ethically without reabsorbing non-U.S. pain into American redemption plots. It also offers a comparative lens for *The Good Lieutenant*: Fowler's role as a "victim–hero" can be read alongside patterns of implication and complicity that redistribute blame through bureaucratic speech and operational necessity. Incorporating this perspective strengthens the review's argument that post-9/11 war fiction negotiates both the allure of melodramatic clarity and the messier ethics of implication.

Histories of the "home front" clarify how authority and sympathy are apportioned across combatants and civilians. The term, crystallised in World War I usage, both links war to domestic life and reinscribes separate spheres—war as masculine, home as feminine—even as total war demands participation from both. This separate-spheres rhetoric helps privilege the combatant's voice as the presumed bearer of authentic war truth and relegates domestic experience to supporting roles. Contemporary U.S. war fiction, including Iraq War narratives, inherits this hierarchy of voice even when it seeks to trouble it. Analyses of post-9/11 novels therefore track how texts negotiate the boundary between front line and household in distributing moral attention.

A growing postcolonial strand shows how Iraq War fiction can recentre Iraqi subjectivity and expose colonial power. Alosman and Hashim (2023) argue that Roy Scranton's *War Porn*—strikingly, by a U.S. veteran—functions as a postcolonial narrative that foregrounds Iraqi voices, depicts cultural richness, and documents the harms of occupation. Their analysis emphasises the novel's refusal of redemptive soldier-heroism, its depiction of abuse and bureaucratic euphemism, and its granular scenes of air raids and domestic life that render Iraqi grief legible at the level of named places and families. Against the veteran-centred canon that marginalises locals, they show *War Porn* centering multiple Iraqi figures (e.g., Qasim, Othman, Warda) and the ordinary decisions forced by bombardment, thereby challenging U.S. narratives that instrumentalise Iraqi suffering. This postcolonial approach complements melodrama-focused accounts by demonstrating how an ethics of attention can be achieved through narration that resists absorbing Iraqi pain into American plots. It also offers a comparative horizon for *The Good Lieutenant*: where Scranton redistributes voice, Terrell's reverse chronicle often filters Iraqi experience through U.S. loss—a difference our operational framework makes visible.

Debates about trauma and representability place post-9/11 fiction within a longer genealogy of writing after catastrophe. Scholars (Mansutti, 2012; Frank, 2024) revisit claims of "unspeakability" not to prohibit representation but to highlight the pressures it creates, assertions that only those "who were there" can speak are often used to police voice, even as communities seek language to metabolize loss. In response, writers knit domesticity and conflict to make trauma sayable through rituals of care, letters, and scenes of return (Mansutti, 2012). Anker's account helps explain why melodramatic feeling remains attractive: surges of grief and outrage promise to convert everyday precarity into renewed agency (Anker, 2014). Together, these lines of work

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clarify how recent novels multiply representations of harm while risking the translation of pain into moral certainty.

Comparative scholarship identifies persistent asymmetries in how American- and Iraqi-authored texts distribute narrative legibility and voice. In many U.S. novels, Iraqi figures become legible chiefly in relation to American operational needs—appearing as interpreters, informants, obstacles, or moral tests—so their interiority surfaces only at the edges of scenes. In comparison, Iraqi authors like Blasim, Antoon, and Saadawi offer vivid, grounded portrayals of Iraq and its people, using genres like magical realism and Gothic surrealism to capture the war's absurdity and devastation (Firmani, 2018). These works emphasize Iraqi resilience, cultural identity, and the impact of both foreign occupation and internal strife, providing a corrective to the often-narrow depictions in American fiction. Terrell's novel, while powerful in its exploration of American soldiers' experiences, misses opportunities to engage deeply with Iraqi perspectives, a limitation acknowledged by some critics and readers. The result is a divergent ethics of attention: American fiction, even when critical of the war, frequently instrumentalises Iraqi suffering, whereas Iraqi fiction asserts autonomous perspectives and multi-directional harm. This contrast provides a baseline for evaluating *The Good Lieutenant*, where formal innovations coexist with a tendency to render Iraqi experience conditionally visible. It also grounds the article's broader claim about how melodramatic discourse orders visibility in contemporary war writing.

Reception studies place *The Good Lieutenant* among the most formally ambitious Iraq War narratives and emphasise its focus on a woman platoon leader. Round-ups and reviews register its reverse structure, compressed militarised prose, and granular rendering of command, and they repeatedly list the novel among notable books of the year. Scholarly notices add that the book balances immediacy with ethical poise while raising questions about the depth of Iraqi perspectives. These responses help position the novel within debates on whether American war fiction reproduces or interrogates melodramatic political discourse. They also justify the present study's attention to how formal decisions shape the distribution of sympathy and blame.

Terrell's novel was favorably reviewed by numerous critics, who commended its distinctive perspective on the war. The novel appeared on numerous best-of-the-year lists and receiving praise for both its intellectual depth and emotional resonance (Finch, 2016; Martin, 2017). Reviewers have particularly noted how Terrell's innovative narrative strategies by expanding war narratives' traditional boundaries and offering more empathetic, realistic insights into military conflict. Charles Finch (2016) contended that the work could be the most compelling fictional account of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. He further asserted that it is a more profound work than Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* and Phil Klay's *Redeployment.* The novel offers an intricate, multifaceted representation of women in war that allows for various interpretations and appreciations through multiple readings (Mabbott, 2017; Paumgarten, 2016). Although the novel was authored by a male, the experiences and perspectives of a female soldier provided insights into the nature of war and the realities of military life that were both profound and disheartening (Paumgarten, 2016). In addition to depicting ordinary Iraqi citizens as both manipulators and victims of American military personnel, the novel also provides previously unattainable perspectives of service women, who are not featured on traditional television news (Shapira, 2016). It offers a critical portrayal of the Iraq War, suggesting that the conflict has the potential to disable the moral capacities of individual soldiers (Holtz, 2024). Collectively, these assessments position *The Good Lieutenant* as a formally innovative and ethically exacting contribution to Iraq War fiction—one that broadens who is seen and how war is felt while sharpening the genre's critique of militarized narratives.

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Due to his narrative structure, scholars have frequently highlighted Terrell's bold use of reverse chronology. The author begins story with the catastrophic outcome of a military mission in Iraq and gradually moves backward in time to reveal the prior events. This storytelling method has been likened to peeling back layers of an onion, gradually uncovering the deeper complexities and motivations behind the characters' actions (Clark, 2019). This reverse storytelling emulates the disorienting and traumatic nature of war itself, akin to solving a jigsaw puzzle where readers piece together the soldiers' fragmented realities (Martin, 2017). This technique also intensifies emotional engagement, as readers experience the trauma of seeing characters, they have already seen perish return in earlier chapters, deepening the tragedy of their eventual fates (Kniggendorf, 2016).

Recent work argues that Iraq War writing is organised by an obsessive recovery plot—the search for captured soldiers, missing bodies, or a lost sense of meaning—yet these quests repeatedly fail, revealing a broader crisis of history and memory in the post-9/11 wars. Deer (2017) shows that this fixation on recovery reflects official failures to document loss and the collapse of grand narratives, pushing texts toward disjunctive temporalities, investigative/procedural modes, and refusals of consolatory closure. He reads contemporary U.S. and Iraqi writing as moving "beyond recovery," where melancholy and fragmentation resist the absorption of violence into national myths. This perspective helps clarify why *The Good Lieutenant* anchors its pathos in the pursuit of Sergeant Beale's body while also exposing the limits of rescue, converting the desire for repair into questions of complicity. Bringing Deer into the review situates melodramatic discourse within a wider archival and memory crisis, explaining the ethical pressure carried by scenes of desecration, failed rescue, and bureaucratic euphemism. In short, the novel not only mobilises melodrama; it also participates in a post-9/11 literature that unsettles recovery itself.

Finally, long-view genealogies of American war writing offer a frame for situating Terrell alongside canonical twentieth-century authors who fused questions of gender, home, and war. From Hemingway through Vonnegut and O'Brien to post-9/11 fiction, writers repeatedly return to imagined domestic spaces and revised gender roles as means of making trauma intelligible. A significant theme explored by Terrell is gender dynamics within military contexts, particularly through the character Lieutenant Emma Fowler, a female officer taking the helm a predominantly male and often adverse environment. Fowler's experiences highlight the entrenched sexism in military culture, presenting additional burdens women in combat roles frequently face (Molin, 2017). Fowler's navigation of leadership and gender expectations also portray the constant tension between personal integrity and institutional pressures. Because Terrell himself draws on his experience as a war correspondent, the setting, conflicts and emotions within the novel add realism and authenticity to this depiction. The resulting through-line—protective-patriarchal scripts that are constantly rehearsed and revised—helps explain the endurance of melodramatic patterns after 9/11. It also clarifies why a novel like *The Good Lieutenant* can both challenge and reproduce the moral grammar it narrates. In short, the field's historical continuities and post-9/11 intensifications jointly shape how contemporary texts allocate moral attention.

In synthesising these various strands of concerns, two issues motivate the present article. Substantively, post-9/11 narratives often mobilise melodramatic feeling to render suffering morally legible, while formal strategies such as reverse chronology and feminised command reconfigure—but do not erase—the hierarchy of visibility between American and Iraqi experiences. Methodologically, few studies specify scene-level indicators that make such claims replicable across texts. This paper, therefore, addresses that gap by operationalising Anker's framework into analysable features—temporal design, role grammar, rhetoric of victimhood, and affective

economy—and applying them to *The Good Lieutenant*. Doing so allows us to show not merely that melodrama is present, but how it organises attention, sympathy, and blame in the novel.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Anker's (2014) *Orgies of Feeling* treats melodrama as a political discourse that turns suffering into moral clarity. Using President Bush's televised address on September 11, 2001, that "our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts" (Bush, 2001) illustrates the collective grief experienced by the nation, establish a "moral economy of good and evil" to describe the actions and their perpetrators, recognize the victims of the attack as individuals, and proclaim the heroic triumph of the United States in the face of evil (Anker, 2016, p. 220). Americans collectively recognized a moral obligation to eradicate terrorism from the global order and to safeguard the nation's, and indeed all of civilization's, threatened freedom. Anker (2014, p. 2) asserts that "[t]he story of 9/11 is a melodrama." It aligns with the norms of a genre form that depicts dramatic events through a moral duality of good and evil, helpless victims, intensified expressions of pain and anguish, grandiose gestures, displays of heroism, and the redemption of virtue.

Melodramas recount the experiences of virtuous individuals who are subjected to the machinations of malevolent forces, and they examine the nuances of political and social conflict using exaggerated representations of unscrupulous persecution (Anker, 2014). Melodrama is regarded by many scholars as the most prevalent form of American mass culture (Anker, 2014; Jameson, 2010; Williams, 2001). Anker (2014, p. 2) posits that melodrama is not merely a cinematic, literary, or cultural genre; "it is also a political genre, more precisely a genre of national political discourse[,]" given that the conventions associated with the genre can be identified in political rhetoric, government and the shaping of national identity.

> What I call *melodramatic political discourse* casts politics, policies, and practices of citizenship within a moral economy that identifies the nation state as a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action. It locates goodness in the suffering of the nation, evil in its antagonists, and heroism in sovereign acts of war and global control coded as expressions of virtue. By evoking intense visceral responses to wrenching injustices imposed upon the nation- state, melodramatic discourse solicits affective states of astonishment, sorrow, and pathos through the scenes it shows of persecuted citizens. It suggests that the redemption of virtue obligates state power to exercise heroic retribution on the forces responsible for national injury. Melodrama depicts the United States as both the feminized, virginal victim [original emphasis]
>
> (Anker, 2014, p. 2)

In these melodramatic works, the nation's unjust suffering serves to demonstrate its inherent virtue. This virtue, in turn, authorizes the dramatization of state action, including the initiation of warfare and the implementation of state surveillance.

Heightened affect, threatened innocence, and stark binaries cast the nation as a virtuous victim, while state force appears as redemptive action. This account converges with work in melodrama studies that understands the mode as a cultural grammar for making good and evil legible across media. The present article adapts these insights into a method that remains accountable to evidence: instead of surveying themes, we specify recognisable features, explain how they operate, and apply decision rules tied to the text. In short, the framework moves from concept to practice by treating melodrama as a set of traceable operations.

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First, the focus on temporal design reveals that melodrama works through time-based intensification: reversals, revelations, and dislocations concentrate feeling at decisive moments and steer moral inference. *The Good Lieutenant* places catastrophe first, asking readers to back-form meaning from loss and to read earlier scenes through the lens of injury. Operationally, we read for the placement of injury and rescue scenes, the narrative dwell time around those scenes, and the type of closure promised (restorative rescue, partial repair, or failure). When catastrophe is front-loaded and closure deferred, we predict a melodramatic arc in which pathos governs subsequent judgment. This indicator lets us measure how form assigns moral weight.

Second, role grammar refers to melodramatic discourse that assigns and recombines three positions — victim, villain, rescuer — and often fuses them in a victim–hero figure. Our analysis maps these roles scene by scene, noting who is framed as innocent or endangered, who is named as the source of harm, and who is authorised to act. We also track slippages (for example, when a victim becomes a perpetrator) and delegations (when bureaucratic speech performs rescue or disavows harm). This role grammar describes not only who suffers but how suffering licenses action and redistributes responsibility. It thereby links character work to political effect.

Third, the rhetoric of victimhood that is employed in melodrama has a recognisable lexicon: images of desecration and sacrifice; idioms of duty, promise, mission, and redemption; gestures of mourning and memorialisation. The designation of "victim" has become a means of amplifying one's voice in a public sphere that does not recognize a multitude of legitimate speaking positions (Elsaesser, 2016). The victim is assigned both a circumscribed role and a certain power: that of occupying the position of “authenticity, righteousness, and subjective truth” (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 36). Still, this depends on their disposition to assume the role of a victim. The political aspect of victimhood is characterized by the significant disparities in the distribution of resources and essentials across the globe, the seemingly unstoppable proliferation of forms of injustice, both large and small, the alarming rate of exploitation of life and the environment in numerous regions of the world. Victimhood is now considered a universal aspect of the human condition and has become a subject position that is widely embraced.

With this victimhood aspect in mind, we treat these as rhetorical markers that convert feeling into meaning and meaning into mandate. Indicators include lexical binaries (innocent/evil; freedom/terror), sacrificial imagery (bodies carried, letters to families), rituals of recognition (naming the dead, writing home), and euphemisms that manage harm (*accident, collateral, proper procedure*). In *The Good Lieutenant*, for instance, the detailed handling of Beale’s body, the cadence of orders on the radio, and condolence-letter boilerplate are read as sites where the rhetoric does political work. Attention to such language shows how the novel solicits and directs sympathy.

Finally, the affective economy and identification refer to Anker’s emphasis of “orgies of feeling”: surges of grief, fear, and outrage that manufacture moral certainty and mobilise redress. We therefore trace affective spikes such as shock, sacred grief, righteous anger, the pivot where affect names a culprit or mandates a response, and moments of identification with power**.** Procedural language used during engagements of war such as “South… West… North… clear” is treated as a lexicon of control that draws readers into command, translating anxiety into agency. We also test Anker’s paradox: the promise of freedom through redemptive action can collapse into ongoing control and diminished agency, producing exhaustion rather than closure. Coding these moments clarifies how the novel moves readers between helplessness and resolve.

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### OPERATIONAL INDICATORS AND DECISION RULES

To keep the analysis replicable, we employ a compact grid. Moral Legibility (ML): assess whether a scene yields a clear innocent–culprit pairing and aligns reader judgment with it; if the alignment is troubled (e.g., the "villain" is a child), ML is coded as mixed. Role Map (RM): list victims, villains, and rescuers; mark fusions (victim–hero) and slippages (victim → perpetrator), noting any collapse of binaries. Affective Surge (AS): record tears, shock, desecration, or ritual; if the surge is immediately coupled to a call to action, AS is mobilising; if it produces hesitation or critique, AS is destabilising. Teleology/Outcome (TO): classify outcomes as redemptive rescue, partial repair, failed rescue, or recursive harm; when closure is withheld or rescue produces further damage, mark a failure of teleology. Alongside the grid we code focalisation, naming, and duration to compare the recognition afforded to American and Iraqi figures.

### PROCEDURE

The method follows four steps to keep interpretation evidence led. First, we identify scenes that centre injury, rescue, desecration, interrogation, or bureaucratic adjudication; reverse chronology is respected in selection but not allowed to obscure causality. Second, we apply the grid and record focalisation, naming, and duration, treating sector calls and "clear" checks as part of the language-of-command indicator. Third, we analyse function — what the features do for each scene and how they bear on Anker's claims about promise, power, and freedom. Fourth, we synthesise across scenes to assess asymmetries of recognition and to test points of complicity where melodramatic binaries fail. This sequence comprises four steps: (1) scene selection, (2) role/lexicon coding, (3) affect–causality check, and (4) outcome audit. This keeps claims accountable to textual operations.

## ANALYSIS

### NARRATIVE ORIENTATION

Set during the Iraq War and told in reverse chronology, *The Good Lieutenant* follows First Lieutenant Emma Fowler, a U.S. Army platoon leader in Delta Company operating around Baghdad. Our analysis centres on the Beale thread: the death of Sergeant Beale and Fowler's effort to recover his body — an arc that becomes the novel's ethical and emotional axis. Other figures include First Lieutenant Dixon Pulowski (Fowler's partner), Lieutenant Weazer (whom Fowler later rescues), Eggleston (the recovery-vehicle driver), Waldorf (a member of the unit), and Ayad, a deaf civilian in whose yard insurgents conceal Beale's body. This orientation sets up how the indicators will be applied in the readings that follow.

### THE BEALE THREAD AND THE MELODRAMATIC GRAMMAR OF WAR

Sergeant Beale's death installs loss as the story's frame and gives the novel immediate moral clarity. The platoon's collapse into grief — "one soldier… weeping with his hands clutching the back of his head" (p. 37) — casts the Americans as overwhelmed innocents whose suffering commands attention. Terrell repeatedly returns to Beale's last moments — "Beale was dead by now… He'd been terrified… and he'd barged into the darkness anyway" (p. 61)—so later choices are read through this first wound. The courage of the act does not cancel its pathos; instead, it

sharpens it by fusing bravery with doom. In MPD terms, a legible wound produces legible virtue and sets the stage for redressive action.

The narration then turns grief into anger through unsparing detail, using desecration to manufacture certainty. In Ayad's yard, men "hold it upside down, headfirst… shove him down, face first, into the earth," one using the body "like a plunger" until "the body disappeared entirely" (p. 96); later the unit hears, "They buried him in the field like an animal" (p. 274). These images make outrage feel inevitable by giving chaos a culprit and a charge to act. Yet the note that a perpetrator is "a boy… really a child" (p. 96) unsettles the clean moral line the scene draws. The episode thus exposes melodrama's double edge: it promises clarity yet seeds unease.

Fowler embodies melodrama's victim–hero fusion, where the one who suffers becomes the one who must act. She blames herself — "was her flaw, to pull back…" (p. 89); "You are slow… Imagine somebody dying because you took too long" (p. 89) — and turns shame into resolve, even "with only her Beretta" (p. 89). The narrative invites readers to identify with command decisions and shows how injury authorises agency by recoding hesitation as failure and action as duty. Through this lens, leadership becomes an affective discipline as much as a tactical skill. The framework's role grammar and affective-surge indicators align closely here.

The book also stages rescue—and then exposes its limits. During the Weazer extraction, Fowler crawls beneath a slab — "if Eggleston dropped it now, she would be dead" — until "there was… Lieutenant Weazer, blinking, pale with dust" (p. 147). In this instance the promise of redemption holds, and the unit pulls off a high-risk save. Yet the Beale thread keeps the wound open: his body is hidden, desecrated, and only belatedly recovered; Pulowski's death later "chok[es] her" (p. 271). Rescue consoles but cannot restore what the war has taken, revealing a failure of teleology. The scene pair thus demonstrates the arc from pathos to action and back to irreparable loss.

Finally, a background drumbeat of casualty news — "three more deaths in Iraq today…" (p. 186)—extends victimhood into ordinary time. Even before engagement, Pulowski feels "a snow… foreign to the warmth" (p. 186), a bodily figure for dread that exceeds any one event. Such moments show how melodramatic affect saturates daily life: it primes identification with protective force even as it drains the freedom that force promises to restore. In terms of our grid, ambient vulnerability raises ML and AS scores while leaving TO unresolved. The cumulative effect is an atmosphere of endurance rather than triumph.

## LOCAL VICTIMS: CONDITIONAL RECOGNITION AND THE USE OF GRIEF

If Beale's story centres American loss, the novel's handling of Iraqi civilians reveals how recognition is granted conditionally and often instrumentalised. Iraqi lives appear most fully when they mediate American injury; their intelligibility derives less from intrinsic perspective than from what they disclose—or fail to disclose—about U.S. casualties. Ayad al-Tayyib makes this dynamic clear. He tries to warn the patrol — "the body is here… Please wait! There's danger" (p. 31)—but cannot make himself understood, and when Fowler mistakenly kills him, the narration looks away from his face and back toward U.S. casualties (p. 20). The episode then shifts to Captain Hartz's condolence letter — "not an admission of guilt… acted properly… an accident" (p. 268) — which deflects responsibility through bureaucratic euphemism.

Ayad's mother contests this framing by insisting on personhood — "My son is Ayad al-Tayyib. Do you think a letter brings him back?" (p. 268) — yet the protest is quickly neutralised by inventories (five bombs found; the later-confirmed suspicion that Beale's body was on the

property) and by a logic of complicity. Fowler's direct address completes the inversion: "I shot your son," she says, before shifting blame — "Single males living alone are the people most likely to be targeted… You leave a kid out there alone…" (pp. 270–271). An Iraqi death at American hands becomes, in this logic, a tragedy of local danger and maternal failure. Iraqi grief appears; the narrative then explains it away as necessary harm. The pattern registers high ML for American injury and low duration for Iraqi interiority.

Faisal Ammar shows the binary from another angle. Once a U.S. translator, he becomes a suspect in Beale's disappearance and endures harsh interrogation — Masterson's "detainee policy was arguable" (p. 46). Early chapters register concern that he might be abused; once his role in Beale's torture and concealment is revealed, tolerance for coercion rises — his "hostility was clear enough" (p. 41). The arc illustrates MPD's affective ratchet: an Iraqi reads as conditionally innocent when helping and as a villain when hindering. In both cases, Iraqi subjectivity is subordinated to the work of American feeling — sympathy, guilt, righteous anger — and to the licensing of force. The indicators here show a role map that narrows Iraqi agency to instrumental functions.

Across these episodes, three effects recur with consistency. First, Iraqi perspectives surface mainly when they mediate American loss (Ayad's yard; Faisal's knowledge), which narrows their range and shortens narrative dwell time. Second, when Iraqi grief breaks through (the mother's rebuke), it is swiftly neutralised by evidence talk and threat assessment. Third, disability and communication barriers (Ayad's deafness) are mobilised not to humanise Iraqi vulnerability but to explain American violence as tragic necessity. The novel thus reproduces — while intermittently exposing — melodrama's hierarchy of suffering: American pain is individuated and memorialised; Iraqi pain is acknowledged, used, and often reassigned to complicity. These patterns prepare the ground for the discussion of complicity.

## HEROES AND THE POLITICS OF SACRIFICE

If victims create moral urgency, heroes promise meaning, and in *The Good Lieutenant* heroism is less victory than endurance. Fowler's authority is inseparable from her vulnerability; her command labour consists of issuing orders through fear, writing to families, and returning to patrol despite dread. A radio exchange captures this ethic of composure under pressure. In the sudden quiet after gunfire, Fowler moves the platoon from panic to procedure — "I need my perimeter security to do their jobs… South… West… North" — and "tries to keep her voice steady," "trying hard not to ask directly about Pulowski," until "a wave of relief" follows his reply (p. 53). The clipped cadence pulls readers into command-and-control from inside the headset, turning feeling into action without pretending the feeling is gone.

That steadiness, however, holds only for a beat before the novel punctures the rescue story. Almost immediately we see the limits of rescue: medics arrive to bodies, extractions miss their window, and vows to protect go unmet. The text registers this with an unadorned roll call — "McWilliams—dead —" (p. 20); later, "Pulowski's death… choking her" (p. 271) — that closes off the fantasy of reparation. What remains is not redemption but persistence: orders issued through grief and duty performed without the promise of repair. In teleological terms, melodrama's promise of deliverance collapses into a discipline of survival, which in turn leads to questions of responsibility and harm.

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### VILLAINS AND THE MELODRAMATIC LOGIC OF OUTRAGE

Melodrama needs an antagonist whose malice clarifies virtue, and insurgents often appear as faceless attackers that channel outrage and harden the moral polarity sustaining melodramatic feeling. At the same time, the novel records moments when U.S. actions produce civilian harm, briefly assigning villainy to the occupiers before rerouting the discourse into guilt and renewed commitment. This oscillation bends the binary without breaking it, keeping readers within a grammar of outrage and repair. A brief turn of the lens even assigns villainy inward: Masterson's "detainee policy" (p. 46) makes coercion the proximate threat to Faisal, bending the antagonist frame toward the occupiers themselves. The framework's role map therefore toggles between externalised threat and internalised abuse.

### COMPLICITY AND THE COLLAPSE OF BINARIES

Fowler's discovery of Ayad's note crystallises complicity by making an Iraqi plea visible and unanswerable. "If I help you, can you guarantee his safety?" (p. 33) asks for protection the occupation cannot credibly give, and the decision that follows — permit Masterson's questioning or let Faisal go — shows how the drive to redeem American loss pulls the narrative toward methods that create new victims. More broadly, Emma and her soldiers mourn losses inseparable from operations that cause other people's losses, a double condition that collapses melodrama's clean oppositions. Euphemisms — accident, procedure, collateral — sit beside images that refuse abstraction, reminding readers that language can conceal as well as console. Here the novel resists moral consolation: the emotional truth of suffering cannot erase political responsibility, and the analysis codes these scenes accordingly. In this light, complicity is not an aberration but a structural outcome of the melodramatic frame.

Across victims, heroes, villains, and complicity, the novel shows both the pull and the limits of MPD. Reverse chronology installs loss as the master key; intimate focalisation makes American pain morally luminous; Iraqi suffering appears but is subordinated or reframed; admitted wrongdoing is folded into sacrificial narratives. The resulting choreography is not simple endorsement or rejection but an ambivalent movement in which critique and complicity are co-present. Our grid helps make that movement visible by tying claims to scene-level features rather than thematic generalisation. In sum, the novel draws power from melodramatic feeling while quietly disclosing its costs. That ambivalence is the point of entry for the conclusion that follows.

## CONCLUSION

The American characters in Terrell's novel are representative of the archetypal American figure found in American war literature, who are characteristically depicted as being on the defensive, attempting to extricate themselves from challenging situations while facing opposition from adversaries who complicate their mission (Alosman & Omar, 2022; Alosman, 2023; Alosman, 2024; Alosman & Sabtan, 2024). The war depicted in the novel is a source of suffering for both human beings and humanity as a whole. American soldiers and Iraqi citizens are situated within a shared predicament, wherein the former strive for virtue and are willing to act in a humane manner, while the latter bear the brunt of their own afflictions and anguish. The portrayal of Fowler, *the good lieutenant* and the main character in the novel, as a valiant figure battling against formidable adversaries accentuates the contrast between the benevolence of the Americans and the

malevolence of their opponents. This dichotomy, which delineates between the virtuous and intrepid American characters and the predominantly benevolent Iraqis, exemplifies Anker's conception of melodrama. This trope functions to perpetuate the post-9/11 political discourse, concurrently promoting the notion of victimhood and asserting the superiority of the American spirit.

By turning Anker's theory into operational categories and applying them to *The Good Lieutenant*, this article clarifies how melodramatic discourse organises attention, sympathy, and blame in contemporary war fiction. The novel's form and affect sustain a hierarchy of suffering that privileges American loss and renders Iraqi pain conditionally visible, even as the text unsettles melodramatic binaries by foregrounding complicity and the failure of redemption. Methodologically, the study shows how concepts forged in political theory can become replicable procedures for literary criticism — identify features, test them against textual evidence, and place the findings within broader cultural debates. Substantively, the readings demonstrate how scenes of injury, rescue, desecration, and bureaucratic speech acts perform political work at the level of form. Future research can extend this grid to other Iraq and Afghanistan war novels to map how variations in structure recalibrate the distribution of moral attention.

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