The Distribution of Grievability in Whitney Terrell's *The Good Lieutenant*

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Abstract
This essay analyses the intrinsic worth of life and the allocation of potential suffering in Whitney Terrell's novel *The Good Lieutenant* (2017). Its argument expands upon Judith Butler's assertion that the allocation of grievability varies depending on individuals' affinities and political circumstances. In this study, we examine two paradigms: "American Lives," which delves into the worth and grievability of American characters, and "Local Lives," which studies the same aspects for local Iraqi personalities. While Terrell does include some Iraqi characters and discusses particular elements of the Iraqi environment, the main focus of the novel is on the Americans and their experiences, making them the primary targets of grievance. The persistent and daring search for the missing body of Sergeant Beale highlights the increased threshold of grievability attributed to Americans, therefore strengthening the belief that their lives are intrinsically more precious than those of the local Iraqi community.

Keywords
Military occupation, human value in war, American soldiers, Iraqi civilians, ethical dimensions of conflict

Introduction

The attacks of September 11, 2001 on the US were witnessed across the world with a sense of disbelief, as images of the catastrophe circulated rapidly through

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major news organisations. In the days that followed, repeated footage of the collapsing Twin Towers in New York City, together with the testimonies of survivors, drew global attention to the scale of the tragedy and generated widespread sympathy for the American people. Condolences and expressions of solidarity emerged from both official channels and the public, consolidating a shared response to the event. Within a month, this moment of collective grief intersected with military action. The United States declared war on Afghanistan, followed by the invasion of Iraq in 2003, actions framed as retaliation for the attacks. What followed was a prolonged military engagement, as American troops entered Iraq and became involved in a conflict that would extend over many years.

It is within this context that Whitney Terrell's *The Good Lieutenant* (2017) can be situated. Terrell, who served as an embedded journalist with the US Army in Iraq between 2006 and 2010, draws on his experiences to construct a narrative grounded in the realities of military life. The novel, recognised by *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post* as one of the best books of the year, has been described by Charles Finch (2016) as among the most significant fictional portrayals of the Bush wars, surpassing works such as Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2015) and Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* (2013). It offers a multi-layered depiction of women in combat and invites sustained engagement through its narrative complexity (Mabbott 2017; Paumgarten 2016). Through the perspective of the protagonist Lieutenant Emma Fowler, the novel provides insight into both the institutional structures of the army and the everyday interactions between American soldiers and Iraqi civilians (Paumgarten 2016; Shapira 2016). In doing so, it brings into focus the often-overlooked experiences of female soldiers while situating them within a broader military and cultural landscape.

A defining feature of the novel is its reverse chronological structure, which, as Alastair Mabbott (2017) observes, departs from conventional war narratives by privileging character development over linear progression. This structural choice reflects the disordered and fragmented nature of warfare, allowing events to be understood retrospectively rather than as a sequence of cause and effect. At the same time, Terrell avoids relying on fixed gendered stereotypes and presents Fowler as a character negotiating the bureaucratic, hierarchical, and gendered dimensions of military life (Mabbott 2017). As an outsider within a predominantly male institution, she must navigate its rules, rituals, and internal dynamics, offering a perspective that is at once embedded and critically attentive (Paumgarten 2016). This positioning enables the narrative to revisit a subject often assumed to be familiar, while opening it to renewed scrutiny.

Based on the above observations, this article examines the value of life and the distribution of grievability in *The Good Lieutenant*, with particular attention to how American and non-American lives are represented within the narrative. Focusing on Fowler's perspective and the interactions that shape her experience, the analysis considers how the novel engages with broader questions of recognition, loss, and human value in the context of war. In doing so, it explores the ways in which certain lives are foregrounded while others remain less visible, revealing the uneven structures through which life and loss are understood. Through this reading, the article seeks to engage with the ethical and representational complexities of warfare and to reconsider the narratives that shape our understanding of whose lives are valued and whose losses are grieved.

The distribution of grievability

In 1996, during an interview with the American television network CBS, the late Madeleine Albright (1937–2022), then the US Ambassador to the United Nations, faced questions about the devastating effects of US sanctions on Iraq that had been in place since 1990. When asked about the reported deaths of "half a million children," she responded, "I think that is a very hard choice [. . .] but the price, we think, the price is worth it" (Twaij). The statement is stark, not only for what it acknowledges but for what it normalises: the deprioritisation of Iraqi lives in the service of US political interests, even when the lives in question are those of children.

It is within this broader ethical terrain that Judith Butler (2004; 2009; 2020) poses a series of persistent questions: What constitutes the value of a life, and on what grounds is that value unevenly distributed? Her formulation, "What makes a life valuable? What accounts for the unequal ways that lives are valued?" (The Force 28), refuses any assumption that life carries inherent and universally recognised worth. Instead, Butler situates human life within political and social frames, asking further, "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?" (Precarious Life 20). These questions foreground the extent to which recognition itself is structured, contingent, and unevenly granted.

Building on this, Butler (2009) links the value of life to the concept of grievability. Grief, in this sense, is not merely an emotional response but a condition that confirms whether a life has been recognised as livable in the first place. As she argues, "grievability is a condition of a life's emergence and sustenance" (Butler 15). To be grievable is to be acknowledged as a life whose loss matters; conversely, the absence of grievability signals a prior exclusion from that category. The distinction suggests at least two overlapping registers: lives that are publicly recognised and mourned, and lives that remain structurally

unacknowledged. Such differentiation raises not only ethical but also political questions, particularly in contexts shaped by conflict and occupation (Neto and dos Santos 2022).

Within this framework, Butler (2004) further observes that many non-Western lives are not consistently recognised as lives at all. They are rendered outside the boundaries of the "human," and in doing so, become more readily subjected to violence. This process of dehumanisation is not incidental; it sustains a broader narrative of otherness through which suffering can be overlooked or normalised. The contrast between the enduring memory of the September 11 attacks in the American consciousness and the relative absence of sustained attention to civilian deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq underscores this disparity. Grief, in this sense, is not evenly distributed; it is mediated through frameworks that determine whose losses are seen and whose remain peripheral.

This unevenness is further reflected in the absence of public commemoration. As Butler notes, without an obituary, there can be no recognition of "a life worth valuing and preserving" (Precarious Life 34). Lives that remain unrecorded are, in effect, lives that cannot be publicly mourned. Butler describes such lives as "ungrievable" (Frames of War 38), not because they do not end, but because they were never fully acknowledged as lives to begin with. The result is a global division between those whose deaths are marked and those whose deaths remain unregistered. This division becomes particularly visible in the aftermath of 9/11, where American victims are memorialised through names, images, and personal histories, while non-Americans, including undocumented workers, receive comparatively little recognition (Frames of War; Kopka). Talal Asad 60-61extends this discussion by examining how responses to violence are shaped by interpretive frameworks. He argues that reactions are not governed by a consistent moral standard but are contingent upon the identity of both the perpetrator and the victim. Violence carried out by certain groups is met with outrage, while similar acts by Western states are more readily justified or contextualised. This selective moral response influences how death is perceived: individuals killed in highly visible acts of violence may elicit strong sympathy, while those who die in protracted conflicts, particularly those initiated by Western powers, often remain less visible. In this way, the concept of just warfare becomes unevenly applied, allowing some lives to be defended while others are rendered expendable (Asad; Frames of War).

Despite the ethical frameworks articulated in international agreements such as the Geneva Conventions, Western states frequently position themselves as moral arbiters while failing to adhere consistently to these standards (Asad; Spratt). This perceived moral authority enables the justification of military

intervention, even as its consequences remain unevenly distributed. Within such contexts, the right to life, ostensibly guaranteed by the state, becomes stratified. While the deaths of soldiers and citizens are publicly acknowledged and commemorated, the deaths of those categorised as enemies or collateral damage are more readily marginalised (Asad). These dynamics complicate any straightforward understanding of grievability. While Western societies may mobilise collective grief in response to the loss of their own citizens, they often overlook the human cost of military actions beyond their borders. The result is not merely an imbalance in mourning but a deeper inconsistency in how life itself is recognised. As such, the ethical implications of violence extend beyond the act itself to include the conditions under which loss is acknowledged or disregarded.

At the level of conceptualisation, Butler further complicates the category of the "human," describing it as a differential construct that produces both inclusion and exclusion (Frames of War 76). The norm, she argues, generates a paradoxical figure, one who is recognised as human while simultaneously being positioned as less than fully human. This paradox reveals an embedded hierarchy in which recognition is unevenly distributed. The category of the human, therefore, is neither fixed nor universal; it is shaped by shifting boundaries that determine who is included and who is excluded. Recognising this instability requires an expansion of what counts as human life. When previously excluded groups are acknowledged, the boundaries of recognition are reconfigured (Frames of War 76). Yet such recognition is neither automatic nor guaranteed. While some lives are assumed to carry value, others must struggle to be seen at all. This tension underscores the extent to which "humanness" operates as both an ethical ideal and a mechanism of exclusion.

Within this theoretical framework, this paper examines Terrell's *The Good Lieutenant* through two analytical paradigms, namely, American lives and local lives. These categories are not merely descriptive but function as interpretive lenses through which the distribution of value and grievability can be understood. By placing these paradigms in relation to one another, the analysis seeks to illuminate how the novel constructs differential valuations of life within a context shaped by cultural and geopolitical asymmetries. In doing so, it invites a reconsideration of how recognition, loss, and mourning are structured, and of the implications that follow from these distinctions.

American lives

The narrative foregrounds the impact of loss through the death of Sergeant Beale and Lieutenant Emma Fowler's insistence on recovering his body. The emotional weight of this absence becomes immediately visible as Fowler's platoon returns

to the military base without him. Their physical posture—heads lowered, movements subdued—signals a collective recognition of defeat even before it is articulated. As Terrell describes, the soldiers appear already overcome, their gestures registering a shared grief that circulates through the group. One soldier begins to weep, hands gripping the back of his head, a gesture that condenses both helplessness and distress. In this moment, loss is not individualised but distributed across the unit, binding them through a shared obligation: all of them are, or soon will be, engaged in the search for Beale.

Beale's presence continues to be sustained through Fowler's recollection of his final moments. Her reconstruction is precise and unembellished: "Beale was dead by now. He'd lumbered out from behind that dumpster and run to the open door he'd identified" (Terrell 61). The memory does not offer resolution; instead, it holds on to his fear, his isolation, and the knowledge that help would not arrive. The emphasis falls not on the event itself, but on the conditions under which it occurs, uncertainty, abandonment, and inevitability. In recalling these moments, the narrative restores a form of presence to Beale, ensuring that his death is neither abstract nor distant. This insistence on remembering is tied to a broader sense of obligation. Beale is not treated solely as a casualty of war but as a life whose loss demands response. Fowler's determination to retrieve his body exceeds procedural duty; it emerges from a conviction that no soldier should be left behind, regardless of risk. In this sense, the effort to recover Beale becomes a moral act, one that affirms his value even in death. The search itself acquires symbolic weight, reinforcing the bonds that structure the unit and the expectations that govern their conduct.

Fowler's internal reflections further intensify this sense of responsibility. She returns repeatedly to the moment she failed to act, questioning her own hesitation: "You are slow. Imagine somebody dying because you took too long" (Terrell 89). The repetition of self-critique reveals how grief becomes internalised as guilt. Even as Beale had acted independently, Fowler assumes responsibility for the outcome. Her decision to re-enter danger, "walking into a firefight with nothing but her Beretta sidearm" (89), signals the extent to which duty is not merely institutional but deeply personal. The risk she takes does not resolve the loss, but it affirms the value attached to the life that has been lost. The treatment of Beale's body introduces a stark counterpoint to this reverence. Once taken by Iraqi men and concealed in Ayad's backyard, his remains are subjected to an act that is both violent and degrading. The description is deliberately graphic: The body is forced into the ground, "head first," pressed down until it disappears (Terrell 96). The emphasis on physical handling, its inversion, compression, and concealment, strips the body of dignity, reducing it to an object to be disposed

of. This moment disrupts the narrative's prior insistence on Beale's value, exposing a conflicting framework in which his humanity is no longer recognised.

The contrast between these two responses is pronounced. For Fowler, Beale remains a soldier whose body must be recovered, named, and returned. For those who handle him after his death, he becomes indistinguishable from waste. The comparison to an animal or discarded object underscores this shift, marking the point at which recognition collapses into erasure. The violence enacted upon the body is not only physical; it is also symbolic, revealing how value is contingent upon perspective. Fowler's continued pursuit of Beale's remains can therefore be read as an attempt to restore that lost recognition. To recover the body is to reassert personhood, to resist the reduction of the soldier to an anonymous object. The absence of proper burial rites further heightens this tension, drawing attention to the cultural and ethical frameworks that govern the treatment of the dead. By placing Fowler's grief alongside the indifference of those who conceal the body, the narrative exposes the uneven conditions under which dignity is maintained or denied. The emotional weight of loss is extended through the death of Pulowski, Fowler's boyfriend, whose absence marks a significant turning point. His death is not only sudden but disorienting, occurring in Fowler's presence and resisting immediate comprehension. The description namely his absence "choking her" (Terrell 271), captures the physicality of grief, its capacity to overwhelm and immobilise. Memory fragments replace continuity, as Fowler recalls him "scrambling away," as though he no longer recognises her (271). The metaphor of distance, of looking through the wrong end of a telescope, suggests a rupture that cannot be repaired.

On the other hand, Ayad's death does not carry the same narrative weight. Although his killing is acknowledged, it does not generate the same depth of reflection or emotional return. The distinction is not incidental. Pulowski's death reverberates through Fowler's relationships, her sense of self, and the unit's collective memory. Ayad's death, by comparison, remains contained within the event itself. The asymmetry between these losses signals a difference not in the fact of death, but in how that death is registered and sustained within the narrative. The deaths of Pulowski, Crawford, and McWilliams further extend this pattern, shaping the emotional landscape of the surviving soldiers. Their absence is felt collectively, producing shock, disbelief, and an ongoing struggle to make sense of what has occurred. The unit does not simply lose individuals; it loses the relationships that structured its internal coherence. In this way, grief becomes cumulative, binding the soldiers through shared experience even as it destabilises them.

This awareness of loss is not limited to immediate encounters. Even before deployment, soldiers are confronted with reports of casualties, transforming abstract statistics into personal anticipation. The announcement, "The Department of Defense has confirmed three more deaths in Iraq today" (Terrell 186), introduces death as a persistent horizon. The reaction it provokes a "chill" that disrupts the warmth of shared space, signals how the expectation of loss precedes its occurrence. Death is not only experienced; it is anticipated. Terrell's reverse chronological structure intensifies this effect. By revealing outcomes before their causes, the narrative compels the reader to inhabit moments already marked by loss. The present is continually shadowed by what is known to come, producing a tension between immediacy and inevitability. This structural choice amplifies the emotional impact of each death, as it situates individual moments within a broader trajectory of decline.

Taken together, these narrative strategies foreground the value assigned to American lives. Loss is rendered visible, sustained, and repeatedly revisited. The recovery of Beale's body, the mourning of fallen soldiers, and the risks undertaken to preserve their dignity all point to a framework in which these lives are recognised as worthy of grief. The willingness of soldiers to endanger themselves for one another further reinforces this valuation, positioning their survival and remembrance as matters of collective responsibility. The rescue of Lieutenant Weazer exemplifies this dynamic. Fowler's decision to crawl beneath unstable debris, fully aware of the risk, reflects a commitment that extends beyond self-preservation: "for the first time she was afraid… but he did not drop it" (Terrell 147). The moment captures both vulnerability and trust, as survival depends on the coordinated actions of others. The successful rescue affirms not only the value of the individual life saved but also the collective effort required to sustain it. In this way, the narrative constructs American lives as inherently recoverable, both physically and symbolically. Their deaths are neither anonymous nor final; they are marked, pursued, and integrated into an ongoing structure of meaning. The section on "American Lives" thus reveals how grievability operates within the novel, not as an abstract concept, but as a narrative practice through which certain lives are rendered visible, retrievable, and worthy of sustained attention.

Local/Iraqi lives

Terrell's narrative departs from conventional American war fiction by situating its events firmly within the Iraqi environment and incorporating local characters into its structure. Yet this inclusion does not necessarily translate into narrative centrality. The value of Iraqi characters is frequently determined through their

interactions with American soldiers, rather than through any sustained engagement with their own experiences. As a result, their actions are interpreted primarily in relation to American interests, and their moral positioning, whether as sympathetic or suspect, emerges through this limited frame. This dynamic is particularly evident in the portrayal of Ayad al-Tayyib and Faisal Ammar, both of whom are introduced in connection with the disappearance of Sergeant Beale. When Fowler and her platoon arrive at Ayad's home during their search, Ayad attempts to communicate that Beale's body is nearby and that danger remains in the area. His words—"Yes, the body is here. I don't want it. But watch out" (Terrell 31)—are clear in intention but fragmented in delivery. His deafness, combined with the urgency of the situation, renders his attempts ineffective. He repeats himself, insisting, "I am not against you! … There's danger this way!" (31), yet his inability to communicate fully results in his marginalisation within the scene.

Ayad's portrayal initially positions him as an innocent figure, one attempting to assist rather than obstruct. However, this apparent innocence is conditional. His value within the narrative depends less on his own circumstances than on his alignment with American soldiers. His inability to bridge the communicative gap ultimately negates his intent, leaving him vulnerable within a framework that prioritises clarity, immediacy, and compliance. His life, in this sense, is mediated through recognition by others rather than grounded in an inherent worth. This stands in contrast to the treatment of American soldiers, whose deaths are sustained through memory, retrieval, and emotional continuity. While American losses generate reflection and narrative return, the deaths of Iraqi characters do not receive equivalent attention. Ayad's death, though acknowledged, does not produce the same depth of engagement. The disparity suggests not merely a difference in narrative focus but a structural imbalance in how lives are valued and sustained within the text. The novel gestures toward this imbalance, even as it participates in it. By foregrounding American experiences while limiting the narrative interiority of Iraqi characters, it compels the reader to confront the uneven conditions under which empathy operates. At the same time, it raises questions about the extent to which such representation can move beyond the frameworks it depicts.

The concept of grievability sharpens this tension. Butler's argument that not all lives are equally recognised as worthy of mourning becomes particularly relevant in moments where violence is justified as self-defence (The Force 11). Within this logic, the definition of the "self" becomes crucial: Who is included within its boundaries, and whose exclusion renders them expendable? Assertions of self-defence, as Butler suggests, often function to preserve existing hierarchies,

framing certain lives as threats while securing the legitimacy of those who respond to them. Ayad's death exemplifies this dynamic. Perceived as a potential danger, he is shot before his intentions can be understood. Fowler's subsequent reaction, avoiding his face, turning instead to the wounded, suggests an inability, or refusal, to confront the full implications of her actions: "[S]he kept her eyes averted so she wouldn't see the dead Iraqi's face" (Terrell 20). The moment is acknowledged but not dwelt upon. Ayad's death remains contained, its emotional resonance limited in comparison to the deaths of American soldiers.

The narrative further complicates this moment by attributing Ayad's vulnerability to his circumstances. His inability to communicate effectively is foregrounded as a contributing factor, as is the absence of protection or guidance within his environment. These elements shift attention away from the act of violence itself, reframing his death as the outcome of situational failure rather than systemic inequity. As a result, the loss becomes partially displaced, its significance diminished within the broader narrative. This imbalance becomes more pronounced when read alongside other representations of the Iraq War, where American soldiers are afforded narrative depth while local characters remain peripheral (Alosman). The pattern reinforces a broader tendency within war narratives to prioritise certain lives over others, not only in terms of survival but in the capacity to be mourned.

The letter delivered to Ayad's mother makes this logic explicit. Framed as an official condolence, it simultaneously expresses regret and denies responsibility: "This letter is not an admission of guilt…. We believe our soldiers acted properly to defend themselves" (Terrell 268). The language of the letter transforms Ayad's death into an unintended consequence of justified action. While it acknowledges the event as a tragedy, it does so within a framework that absolves those responsible. The result is a form of recognition that remains conditional, constrained by institutional logic. Ayad's mother resists this framing. Her insistence, "My son is Ayad al-Tayyib. Do you think a letter brings him back?" (268), reclaims his identity, refusing to allow his death to be reduced to procedural language. By naming him, she reintroduces the singularity of his life, challenging the abstraction imposed by official discourse. Her grief is immediate and unmediated, yet it struggles to find space within a narrative that cannot fully accommodate it.

This tension intensifies in her confrontation with Fowler. Repeating that her son was deaf, she demands recognition of his vulnerability: "What kind of animal would kill a man like that?" (270). The question is both accusatory and ethical, forcing Fowler into a position where justification becomes necessary. Fowler's response, "I shot your son" (271), acknowledges responsibility but

redirects the frame. By invoking Pulowski's death and the broader conditions of war, she situates her action within a larger narrative of survival and loss. In doing so, the focus shifts. Ayad's death becomes one event among many, and its specificity is absorbed into the ongoing logic of conflict. Fowler's subsequent argument that leaving a vulnerable individual unprotected is itself a form of neglect further redistributes responsibility. The mother's grief is not dismissed outright, but it is destabilised, made to coexist with competing claims of loss and accountability.

The narrative thus complicates the legitimacy of mourning. While Ayad's death is recognised, it does not attain the same narrative weight as the deaths of American soldiers. Instead, it is reframed through questions of responsibility, threat, and circumstance. This reframing diminishes its capacity to generate sustained grief, reinforcing the broader asymmetry in how loss is represented. A similar pattern emerges in the portrayal of Faisal. As a former translator whose loyalties are uncertain, he occupies an ambiguous position within the narrative. Subjected to interrogation and physical violence, he is described in terms that emphasise his degradation, "cuffed, like a trash bag… tossed out for collection" (Terrell 8). The imagery underscores the extent of his mistreatment, even as it reflects the soldiers' perception of him as expendable. Yet Faisal's eventual implication in Beale's death complicates his position further. His suffering is overshadowed by his perceived culpability, aligning him with familiar stereotypes of betrayal and hostility. The shift from victim to suspect destabilises any claim to sympathy, reinforcing the idea that recognition is contingent upon alignment with American interests. His life, like Ayad's, is mediated through the roles he is assigned within the conflict.

Despite the novel's reverse chronology, which intensifies the sense of loss surrounding American soldiers, this narrative strategy does not extend equally to Iraqi characters. Their stories are not revisited with the same persistence, nor are their deaths integrated into a sustained structure of memory. Instead, their significance remains tied to their proximity to American lives, whether as allies, threats, or incidental figures within a larger narrative. In this way, the section on "Local Lives" reveals the limits of grievability within the novel. Iraqi lives are present, and at times vividly rendered, yet their capacity to generate lasting narrative attention remains constrained. Their losses do not disappear, but they are not held in the same way. The imbalance is not incidental; it is structured through the narrative itself, reflecting a broader hierarchy in which the value of life is unevenly distributed and unevenly mourned.

Conclusion

Whitney Terrell's *The Good Lieutenant* both begins and concludes with moments marked by sorrow and loss; yet these moments are not distributed evenly across the narrative. The novel offers a sustained and affective account of the conditions experienced by American soldiers during deployment, tracing the psychological and emotional impact of war on their lives. The persistent effort to recover Sergeant Beale's remains, in particular, generates a strong sense of urgency and attachment, reinforcing the value attributed to American lives within the narrative. Although Iraqi characters are present, their roles are largely structured in relation to American soldiers who are missing or dead. As a result, their narrative significance remains contingent, and their lives are not afforded the same degree of intrinsic recognition.

This article has examined the uneven representation of Iraqi and American lives in the novel, drawing attention to the asymmetries that shape how loss is depicted and sustained. In doing so, it has questioned the narrative frameworks through which certain lives are foregrounded while others remain marginal. The disparities identified here point to broader issues in the representation of conflict, particularly in relation to whose experiences are made visible and whose are not. Further inquiry is necessary to address these imbalances and to develop more nuanced approaches to representing lives under military occupation. Greater attention to the complexities of local experience would allow for a more equitable understanding of loss and recognition. In this context, the deaths of those positioned outside dominant narratives warrant fuller acknowledgment, not only as instances of casualty but as losses that carry significance in their own right. A more balanced representation of these lives is essential to any comprehensive understanding of the human consequences of war.

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