

# Ethical Choices of the Protagonist in *My Life as a Foreign Country*

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*My Life as a Foreign Country* is an Iraq War narrative by American veteran Brian Turner, recounting the protagonist Turner's experiences in the Iraq War alongside the wartime experiences of his forefathers. As a descendant of a military family, the protagonist Turner makes ethical choices based on his ethical identity, elucidating the ethical concepts and dilemmas faced by Iraq War soldiers. This paper interprets the narrative from the perspective of literary ethics, analyzing the ethical choices made by the protagonist Turner to explain the underlying reasons and motivations, thereby revealing the ethical perplexities of American soldiers in modern warfare.

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Brian Turner, an American Iraq War Army veteran and poet, is renowned for his works on the Iraq War. His poetry collection *Here, Bullet* won the Beatrice Hawley Award. Similarly, his 2014 memoir, *My Life as a Foreign Country*, narrates the experiences of an Iraq War soldier, distinctively framed within the context of American war history. It tells the story of a boy from an American military family who becomes an Iraq War soldier and his experiences on the Iraqi battlefield. As National Book Award winner Larry Heinemann remarked, "Brian Turner has given us not so much a memoir as meditation, rendered with grace and wit and wisdom. If you want to know what modern soldiers see when they look at their world, read this book" (Brian Turner, n.d.). As a form of literary practice, memoir is essentially "an ethical art" (Nie, 2010, p. 14). Therefore, from an ethical perspective, this paper analyzes the ethical choices made by the protagonist Turner in the memoir, attempts to explain the motivations and reasons behind these choices, and reveals the spiritual confusion and ethical dilemmas of American soldiers in modern warfare.

## The Protagonist Turner's Ethical Choice to Become a Soldier

In specific literary works, the core content of ethics consists of the accepted and recognized ethical order formed between humans, between humans and society, and between humans and nature, as well as the moral concepts based on this order and the various norms that maintain it. (Nie, 2010, p. 17)

Therefore, from the perspective of literary ethics, the motivations driving the protagonist Turner's ethical choice to enlist primarily stem from his relationships with family and his own internal factors. Turner was born into an American military family; his grandfather fought in World War II, and his father and uncle experienced the Cold War and the Vietnam War. The familial atmosphere from childhood constantly immersed Turner in the aura of war. Three generations of men in the Turner family had participated in America's historical wars. As a descendant

and male member of this military family, Turner was steeped in war from an early age. The “machete” his grandfather kept, once used for brave combat (Turner, 2014, p. 106), the “infantry field manuals” preserved by his father (p. 38), and his uncle’s descriptions of the urban landscape like “Tu Do Street in Saigon” (p. 45) and the climate and food of Vietnam, all cast a mysterious and sacred hue over the battlefield. This inevitably ignited a longing and desire for war in adolescents like Turner. As Turner writes in the memoir:

The theatre of war, some call it. The space where war disentangles itself from the structure of human norms to thrash into the natural world, the idea of beauty, all that might view as the closest this world can come to a kind of sacred perfection. (p. 103)

War, beautified and sanctified, led the adolescent Turner to hold a lofty reverence for war as portrayed by his relatives. This, to some extent, reflects the contemporary American glorification and sanctification of war. America is a nation built on war.

The idea of the battlefield as sacred space is one of the things that perpetuate war in our world. This idea allows young men to embrace war with open eyes and courageous hearts, ready to take a warrior’s life or die a warrior’s death. (Washington Post, 2014)

Compared to other American youths, the adolescent Turner had close relatives with American war experiences. He witnessed his grandfather’s bravery in killing the enemy through his stories, simulated his own imagined battlefield using his father’s infantry field manual and by filming war movies with classmates, and experienced a climate and living environment completely different from America’s through his uncle’s descriptions of Vietnam. All this attracted the adolescent Turner. Simultaneously, due to his relatives’ war experiences, a wall formed in Turner’s mind: on one side were relatives with rich war experiences, on the other was the adolescent Turner with no personal war experience. Turner believed the way to break this wall was to enlist, to experience the battlefield firsthand. “When I come home from my own war, we’ll talk about these things” (Turner, 2014, p. 46) and talk about his grandfather’s “wide, pink, horizontal scar, maybe three inches long, at the midway point of his skin” (p. 99) left from the battle on Guam, which he never told anyone but his grandmother; talk about his father’s hysterical outbursts and emotional collapses when drunk; talk about everything about interrogations and military activities like the “Joint Military Interrogation Center near the runway in Saigon” that his uncle never mentioned regarding the Vietnam War. This would dissolve the wall created by war between them, allowing Turner to truly integrate into his war-steeped family.

Admittedly, Turner’s motivation for enlisting stemmed partly from family and partly from his own desire for self-validation. In the military recruitment office, he chose the infantry because “I didn’t know if I could do it, if I could take it, if it would break me down, chew me up, and then continue to keep on chewing” (Turner, 2014, p. 55). He wanted to prove himself through the battlefield as a male member of a military family, because “in the life of a hero, the hero is supposed to say ‘I swear’”, “because I hadn’t sign up for the First Gulf War”, because he wanted to experience sleeping “in a hammock under a canopy of plants and trees” in the jungle (p. 39). These are the reasons Turner gives us for enlisting. However, after stating these reasons, Turner abruptly shifts, “that most of what I’ve just said is total bullshit” (p. 39). Surprisingly, in the following section, Turner, as narrator, reiterates that his reason for enlisting was to prove to the recruiting officer that he was “willing and prepared to crawl through the mud and muck anytime of day or night, winter spring summer fall you name it” (p. 44). On one hand, Turner denies the motivations and reasons he narrates for enlisting; on the other, he repeatedly states that becoming a soldier was to prove himself—to prove he could do it, that he could withstand the trials of war. Through this contradictory and repetitive narration, we see that Turner attributes many seemingly firm and

grand reasons to his enlistment motivation. Yet, in reality, he himself is uncertain whether the reasons he narrates are truly those he internally acknowledges. Thus, the veteran narrator Turner, who participated in the Iraq War, repeatedly explains in the memoir that his enlistment was driven by personal motivations. To some extent, these “heroism”-oriented motivations stem from the officially propagated heroism in war—that participating in war can prove oneself, one’s bravery and capability. Therefore, from an ethical perspective, Turner’s ethical choice to become a soldier is due, on one hand, to his inherent identity as a male member of a military family, and on the other, to the call from the contemporary American political and cultural context that enlisting can validate the self. However, the various choices made by the protagonist as an American soldier on the Iraq War battlefield can no longer adhere to the convictions he held before choosing to become a soldier.

### **The Protagonist Turner’s Ethical Choices on the Iraq War Battlefield**

“Almost all ethical issues are often related to ethical identity” (Nie, 2010, p. 21). After becoming a soldier, Turner’s ethical identity shifts from that of an adolescent to that of an Iraq War soldier. He realizes that the Iraq War differs from America’s previous wars like WWII, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. As Turner states,

We know our prelude will be different from the trenches of the First World War or the front lines of Korea. We won’t hear the battle in progress and work our way toward it as baggage rains of wounded, exhausted soldiers and civilians carrying their lives on their backs travel in the opposite direction. (p. 9)

Here, every place could become a battlefield; a dead animal on the road might conceal a bomb. Turner lives cautiously every day, “I’m worried I’ll be blinded or crippled. I’m worried the same might happen to one of the guys of the squad” (p. 25). The pursuit of “heroism”, the desire for self-validation, and the wish to continue the family legacy, all important before enlisting, become insignificant in the face of war. The most important thing becomes survival. Turner desires to survive, and desires his comrades to survive intact. Simultaneously, Turner cannot alleviate this fear by confiding in his comrades, because as a soldier, he cannot spread feelings of fear and terror within the army—this is the most taboo thing in the military. Therefore, Turner chooses poetry to confess his fear and terror of war, creating “a space that didn’t belong to the army or to the community of soldiers I served with” (pp. 133-134). In this space, Turner admits to being a coward, lacking the bravery and fortitude a soldier should possess. In this closed world, Turner exists as an ordinary person, feeling fear in the face of the terror and omnipresence of the Iraq War as a high-tech local war, which triggers his intense desire for survival. Thus, Turner on the battlefield is divided. On the real battlefield, Turner plays the role of a soldier, striving to fulfill a soldier’s responsibilities and duties according to military norms, “We kicked in the doors of people’s homes and we put many of them in prison. In Mosul the war became routine” (p. 60). In the narrative world constructed by words, Turner chooses to be his true self. In fact, not only in the fictional narrative world does Turner become himself; in the real world, Turner also makes ethical choices that reflect his humanity. When kicking in the doors of Iraqi civilians’ homes and arresting the men, Turner and his comrades, as soldiers,

say to the frightened little children, softly, with their palms held out in the most tender of gestures they can offer, their eyes as brown as the hills that lead to the mountains, or as blue as the rivers that lead to the sea—“All is well, little ones, all is well.” (pp. 72-73)

Turner chooses to show as much gentleness as possible to the children, demonstrating his human side, rather than choosing to become a soulless cog in the (war) machine. Turner’s ethical choices on the battlefield allow readers to see the coexistence of gentleness and violence, fear and bravery within him.

### Writer Turner's Ethical Choice in Writing the Memoir

After returning from the Iraq War, Turner wrote the memoir *My Life as a Foreign Country*. Now, as narrator, Turner records his Iraq War experiences through literary work to preserve his ethical experience. Nie Zhenzhao argues, “Ethical consciousness leads humans to desire to preserve their ethical experiences in fixed forms, so as to pass them on to future generations and share them with humanity” (2010, p. 18). The fixed form Turner chooses is precisely the literary form of memoir. The motivation prompting Turner to create this memoir stems from his own ethical consciousness. Turner desires to share the ethical experience gained from his Iraq War with others. At the outset, Turner imagines himself as a drone juxtaposing different wars throughout American history. Turner does not merely narrate his own Iraq War experiences; he places them within the framework of America’s historical wars to highlight the influence of America’s traditional wars on the perception of war among American youth represented by Turner, thereby exposing the ethical confusion and dilemmas faced by modern soldiers in modern warfare. In past American wars, there were fixed combat modes and battlefields, such as the trenches in WWI and the Korean War. In the battle of Guam, the life-and-death struggle between his grandfather and a Japanese officer conveyed the ethical concept of direct confrontation between enemy and self in traditional warfare. In the Iraq War, however, Turner faced mostly Iraqi civilians—children, women—and the battlefield was not a traditional combat zone but a “360-degree three-dimensional environment” (p. 9). The differences between traditional and modern warfare lead to ethical confusion for modern soldiers in facing modern war—namely, how to interact with enemy civilians. As soldiers, they have an implicit adversarial relationship with enemy civilians; but as humans, enemy civilians are merely innocent victims. These two mentalities intertwine, creating ethical dilemmas for modern soldiers.

On the other hand, Turner focuses on the often-overlooked “others” in previous American war literature. Narrator Turner not only recounts the “others” in the Iraq War—the Turkish cook, Iraqi women and children, terrorists—but also describes “other” figures from WWII, such as Japanese kamikaze pilots, and from the Vietnam War, such as Vietnamese soldiers. Narrator Turner’s choice to present these “other” figures from American wars in his memoir is a unique way of presenting his own ethical experience. Having experienced modern war, Turner no longer views “others” with a binary opposition perspective, nor treats them with an absolute black-and-white attitude. The adolescent Turner listening to his grandfather’s brave killings did not possess this ethical awareness; it was participating in war that brought about this shift in ethical consciousness. War is not a black-and-white opposition; war is not only about losses on the American side; war also harms countless civilians and their homes. By writing the memoir, Turner guides people to pay attention to the “others” in war, hoping to evoke sympathy and reverence for these “others”, thereby advocating for peace and opposing war.

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