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## **Allegiance and valor in Keneally's novel *The Widow and Her Hero***

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*The present paper is a humble attempt to explain the facts of bravery of a soldier in Thomas Keneally's novel *The Widow and Her Hero*. In this novel Keneally approaches the subject not through the eyes of soldiers but through those people who are well placed to question the morality in their edge of the conflict and examine its effect on individual lives. Keneally is one of the prolific writers of the Australian literature. His contribution would be remembered for years and ages to come by. The aim of this paper is to highlight the concepts of loyalty and sacrifice through the present novel.*

**Keywords:** *Allegiance, liquid darkness, heroic impulse, Errol Flynn, Cornflakes and Memerang Raid.*

Thomas Keneally has given a new dimension to the Australian fiction. Keneally's fictional world provides us almost an encyclopaedic portrayal of the pursuits of Australian identity in all representational forms with all the definitive issues at all historical stages. War is the centre concern of Keneally's writings. He often comes with the theme in almost all his works. His portrayals of war and its consequences are claustrophobic rather than panoramic. Quatermaine criticized: "For Keneally, war has a central, if multi- faceted place in his apprehension of the destiny of individuals and nations, and of how these intersect; a crucial aspect of such intersection is that- In sex, in war, people fall apart. Their individuality is jeopardised."(*Thomas Keneally, Modern Fiction* 46).

Keneally penetrates Allegiance and valor in *The Widow and her Hero* which takes the events of *Rimau* and uses them as the basis for a larger exploration of the idea of the heroism and long term effects of war on those who left behind in the war. The story was inspired by two real Australian operations against the Japanese in WWII. The first was success but the second operation is failed. The soldiers who took part in operation either killed in action or captured and beheaded. Leo, the hero of the novel, exhibits great bravery in everything he does.

The story of novel is told by Graceperplexed widow of Leo Waterhouse who was beheaded by the Japanese after an abortive attempt to repeat a successful raid on shipping in Singapore harbour. Novel starts with the hero's death and comes full circle. For the past sixty years Grace has been haunted by the death of her young husband, Captain Leo Waterhouse, who was killed on a covert commando mission during the Second World War, into the heart of Singapore, shortly after their marriage. The account Grace gives strains in several directions at once. Initially a means of bearing witness to Leo and what befall him, a document written for the benefit of Grace's " I believe I began to write this for the sake of my somewhat bemused granddaughter Rachel and for her daughters,"(*The Widow and her Hero* 4 ). It grows in the writing to be something else, something larger, not just addressed "to have a

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vaguer, more general audience than that”( *The Widow and her Hero* 4), but something which , in its increasingly naked pain and grief, seeks to tear down the altar on which men like Leo are too easily placed.

For as long as Grace knows Leo, he’s a soldier. She meets him while he’s on leave, and her earliest memories are of watching him and her cousin practice sneaking up on each other and slitting one another’s throats. She wrote: “Leo Waterhouse was the most beautiful adult boy I have seen in nearly ninety years on life on Earth”( *The Widow and her Hero* 4). Grace wanted to join the Land Army or any of the women’s military units, but her father denied. She was permitted to work in Canberra for the Department of the Navy. Their love grows quickly, but Leo disappears for months at a time, unable to tell Grace where he is. She waits behind in Canberra while he completes a daring raid on Japanese warships in Singapore. Only years later does she learn the details of that successful and pioneering mission, which earns Leo his first marks of heroism from the military. Grace suspects he is driven not so much by a desire to honour “the empire” but by “something more ancient and eternal still” (*The Widow and her Hero* 73). The highest moment of his life, she suspects, is that “liquid darkness” (*The Widow and her Hero* 73) in which the mission comes to a climax, when he’s with a major he loves more than his wife-to-be and in a world where he doesn’t need a womb. Leo’s role in the war was mysterious. He was dashing but reckless, an “Errol Flynn” (*The Widow and her Hero* 5) looks alike.

After a successful attack against Japanese shipping, the commando group come home. When Leo returns, they begin what has the makings of “an excellent, happy marriage,” full of “All was a golden, unified sphere of delight and very ordinary reassurances to each other that we had never been happier” (*The Widow and her Hero* 75). Grace remembers that Leo bears the burden of heroism lightly, and as the woman in his life, her duty is never to question or criticize his sacrifice, which becomes hers as well. “We never really believed till it happened that it was our marriage which would be picked up and hurled into the fiery pit,” (*The Widow and her Hero* 4) she says: They enjoy a brief period of marital bliss, during which Leo and his team plan a second operation, inspired by the success of the first. Then Leo leaves again, full of confidence, promising to return by Christmas. A second mission is planned but this time they captured by the Japanese, tried as war criminals and beheaded.

Grace numbs herself with routine and counts down the days. December arrives, and with it comes news that the group is missing. The New Year passes, the war ends, world arrives of the executions, and suddenly Grace is a widow. The world moved on to new alliances, leaving Grace , like so many widows , to bear the pain of losing the love of her life and wonder what it had all been for. In the ensuing decades, Grace slowly carries on as more and more details of the doomed mission trickle in.

Each revelation of new details reshapes the circumstances of Leo’s death and forces her to re-examine her memory of him. She learns of betrayals, miscommunications, selfish decisions, foolish mistakes and a rigged trial all contributing to the demise of the mission. She resents and fears these intrusions upon her version of the truth because they bring with them additional burdens she has to carry: “Every time I approached Leo’s death I was repelled by the temperature of the event itself and saw refracted through its heat a new version to which I had to somehow to adjust” (*The Widow and her Hero* 197). Sixty years on, Grace is still haunted by the tragedy of her doomed hero when the real story of his ill- fated secret mission is at last unearthed. The mission is pieced together by Grace from a Japanese translator who

was present at Leo's death, a visit from an American seeking absolution for letting Leo and his men down, and from part of a diary Leo wrote on toilet paper when he was captured and was somehow saved. "It was for his sake that I knew I had to approach the rough diary Leo had written and Hidaka had delivered fifty years late." (*The Widow and her Hero* 209). After the war Grace and several of her fellow widows visit the office of the Minister for Defence in search of some official recognition of the sacrifice their husband made. His walls "heartened" by pictures of bombers and aircraft carriers. The minister seeks to deflect their request. But when Grace and the others will not be put off so easily he changed tack, insinuating their deaths may have been at their own hands. "Of course they had cyanide pills. Did you know that?" (*The Widow and her Hero* 167) and gravely informing Grace and her companions their deaths had been covered up because they cracked under interrogation. As new fragments of her hero's story emerge, Grace is forced to keep revising her picture of what happened to Leo and his fellow commandoes- until she learns about the final piece in the jigsaw, and the ultimate betrayal.

Grace' husband goes with certainty and confidence to his death, unaware of the politics and betrayal his widow would have to wade through to find the honour in it. She wonders over the purpose of Leo's death and the result of his bravery, thinking perhaps that bravery itself was the goal. At the same time, however, she refuses to assign to Leo the same motivation for empty glory that she sees in those who surround him.

No death in war is the fault solely of the man who pulls the trigger or swings the sword, as Keneally tells us with each new revelation Leo's death. A thousand decisions move the players of a conflict, who have loved ones at home awaiting their return. It takes Grace a lifetime to question the wisdom behind the "heroic impulse" (*The Widow and her Hero*, 3) that claims her husband, and in doing so she reminds the reader that doubt is not unheroic and that heroism is at times naive and selfish.

Not until she's ninety years old does Grace Burden finally voice her thoughts about the circumstances surrounding the death of her first husband, Leo Waterhouse. The facts of the doomed World War II mission from which he never returns are well researched by journalists, scholars and hobbyists, and her husband remembered as a hero for his sacrifice. But for the widow left behind to sort through her grief, such a loss is not so easily assuaged with the knowledge of his bravery. The Bravery (heroism) represents the ideal of citizens transforming civic virtue into the highest form of civic action, accepting either physical hazard or social sacrifice.

As absorbing as it is moving, this timely novel reminds us of the terrible costs of war as it questions why men so willingly and fatally adopt the heroic code. Grace uses the term "hero" with as much disdain for the idea and the actions it inspired as she has respect and admiration for her husband "What is so precious about the heroic impulse? Why do ordinary lusty boys love it better in the end than lust itself, and better than love?" (*The Widow and her Hero*, 3). She asks early on, letting thought serve as the foundation for recollections that span decades. She is tormented by the thought that bravery was its own end, that the purpose was to be brave, even to be doomed. She said at the last in the novel:

"The truth is, heroism and its code take you only so far...I didn't want a hero. A person is never married to a hero- the heroic pose is not designed for ultimate domesticity. Ulysses on his return found not a wife to charm but suitors to fight. Nothing is learned, and everything is

learned. And at last Judicial Sergeant Abukara got it right, and Leo was liberated”(The Widow and her Hero 4). This clever, compelling novel asks some uncomfortable questions.

The loyalty has remained a centre subject of Australian literature from colonial times to the present day. It is also a subtle examination of the concept of heroism of what it is that makes young men risk their lives and why especially in the climate of that time. One aspect of Keneally's novel examines currently obsolete notions of heroism and self sacrifice. A touching and deeply perspective about novel is the powerful allure of heroism and the sacrifice cheerfully made by the lady who was left behind. There is a tragic innocence in the young man whose lives end so horribly. Therefore Keneally's view on a war hero comes out as very believable and helps him to establish his opinion. Keneally sees a war hero as someone who does not win the game of life but loses with stoic acceptance of the worst life. The good thing about Keneally is that he gives us a true picture of happening of our day to day life. Keneally is always possess a true observation of belongings which go a long way in making him a novelist of a repute.

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