



# My Brilliant Career by Miles Franklin

Teaching notes  
prepared by Nicola O'Shea



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION  
FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH



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Edited by Faye Crossman

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## Introduction

*My Brilliant Career* is considered an Australian classic. Such a label may now be regarded as problematic, but the novel undoubtedly holds its place in the nation's literary history. Indeed, although written in the 1890s during a period of significant drought and depression, the novel was only published in 1901, the year of Australian Federation, when six British colonies united to become a new nation: the Commonwealth of Australia. Notwithstanding the long history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who have lived on the unceded land for millennia, Franklin's novel, as a product of its colonial environment, represents a period of significant change in white Australia's history.

The burgeoning nation heralded a new era that could be free to establish its own unique identity and culture, unyoked from its colonial past. Federation delivered its own parliament, promised increased trade and strengthened economies, a national defence force, greater control of immigration and a more democratic government that would enable women to vote. As such, *My Brilliant Career* was written and published during an epoch in Australia's history. The fact it received publication after being repeatedly rejected was largely due to the growing demand for authentically Australian literature (and a lauded intervention from Henry Lawson). Much of the nineteenth century literary output had catered for overseas markets, presenting an exotic and 'othered' representation of this wild outpost of empire. However, a growing sense of nationhood demanded more internal representations of Australia that could convey an unvarnished view of life inside this 'young' nation, reflecting the nascent view that

Australia was not simply a transposed Britain on the other side of the world, but a nation with its own worthy character. Yet, somewhat ironically, due to prohibitive publishing costs within Australia, Franklin's novel was finally commissioned in Scotland with the publishers Angus & Robertson, to whom she modestly promised a realistic and unflinching representation<sup>2</sup>:

Nothing great has been attempted, merely a few pictures of Australian life ... There will be no mistakes in geography, scenery or climate as I write from fact not fancy. The heroine, who tells the story, is a study from life and illustrates the misery of being born out of one's sphere.

Franklin's letter is as unapologetic in style as her subsequent novel. True to her word, Franklin did not shy away from either her study of misery or from the stark realities of bush life. Inserting herself into the male-dominated terrain of bush literature, she largely defers from the romanticised mythology of Banjo Paterson, embracing more of Henry Lawson's raw and rugged realism, nonetheless delineating a landscape that is uniquely Australian bush. The awesome, untamed majesty of the bush serves to illuminate both the potential and limitations of Sybylla Melvyn's world. The scope of her ambitions might be reflected in the vastness of the landscape, but the narrowness of a woman's place in that world is underscored by the physical walls of her domestic dwellings. Moreover, her depiction of an emerging nation, reliant upon the land but never fully its master, subject to the whims of nature and the economic caprice of a proliferating capitalism, might be read as Sybylla's struggles writ large. Franklin's heroine is imbued with the determination, audacity and spirit required to forge a new nation, and yet

<sup>1</sup> The Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory did not exist until 1911.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from 'S.M.S. Miles Franklin' to publishers Angus & Robertson, 30 March 1899

Sybylla, perhaps like turn-of-the-century Australia, is never fully able to cast off the unwelcome colonial legacies that bequeathed structural hierarchies and ideologies that would continue to divide people on such bases as class, gender and race.

*My Brilliant Career* is undoubtedly autobiographical in nature, tracking a young woman's formative years in rural Australia and her personal and professional travails. Notably, the professional travails of both Franklin as author, and Sybylla Melvyn as narrator and character, are a central concern. The ironic title of the novel, which Franklin originally intended to be *My Brilliant (?) Career*, can be read as an indictment of the very limited professional opportunities for women, as Franklin poses uncomfortable questions about whether intellectual or professional fulfilment might ever be possible for a woman. Her publishers preferred to remove the parenthesised question mark, perhaps to let the irony assert itself more subtly, perhaps to render the work less controversial, but in true Sybylla fashion, Franklin protested the change, believing it to neutralise the sardonic style she intended. There is certainly a blurring between art and life in that her protagonist Sybylla is ultimately denied the right to edit her own life according to her talents and desires, thus her proclamation in her 1899 letter of 'the misery of being born outside of one's sphere' sets the tone for an anguished and contradictory interjection into the male-dominated world of publishing and society.

The novel owes much of its success to the paternalistic intervention of Lawson, who advocated for its publication because he judged its portrayal of Australia 'the truest I ever read' (Lawson, Preface). However, the spirit of the novel rejects his condescending interpretation of the female experience, searching, although futilely for Sybylla, to find a new expression of womanhood that extends beyond the traditionally servile role of wife, conceiving a world where a woman's value would not be measured by an index of her beauty and feminine virtue. Although Sybylla's 'brilliant career' (p. 39) ultimately remains an ironic epitaph to her unrealised artistic dreams, Franklin issues a clarion call on behalf of 'my sisters', the '[d]aughters of toil, who scrub and wash and mend and cook ...' (p. 391). Though bemoaning their obligation to 'make the best of ... the narrow dusty track of [their] existence' (p. 391), Franklin advocates the radical notion of a career wherein women might transcend the domestic realm and attain intellectual stimulation, personal fulfilment and financial independence. However, for a late nineteenth century Franklin, that dream clearly felt elusive as she ironically, angrily, understands, expressing through her mouthpiece Sybylla:

I cannot help you ... I am only a—woman! (p. 391)

## Ways into the text

### Genre and wider reading

- To fully appreciate the text, it will be helpful to consider the genre/s of the novel. Students will likely be familiar with the concept of a hybrid and *My Brilliant Career* fuses elements of the Romance and Realism genres.
- Romance novels were hugely popular across the nineteenth century. The Romance genre was characterised by melodrama, sentimental discourse and romantic arcs. Romance novels were gendered and viewed as inferior to the male literary mode of Realism.
- Franklin inserts herself into this cultural debate by creating a novel that fuses moments of sentimentality and bush romanticism with an unembellished portrait of working class Australia, an unusual combination that seemed to beguile and bemuse Henry Lawson in equal measure.
- Henry Lawson's short story 'The Drover's Wife' would provide a useful insight into bush realism. The story could be read and discussed in class as a precursor to the novel to introduce students to the bleak style and bush aesthetic that Franklin emulates.
- The poetry of Banjo Paterson could enhance such discussions as students could explore the contrasting styles of these two legendary Australian writers. Poems such as 'The Man From Snowy River', written on the cusp of Federation, reflects a similar spirit to *My Brilliant Career* as it explores the sense of national identity that was being forged.
- The spirit of the writers Louisa May Alcott and Charlotte Bronte also seems to infuse the text. Students could explore some relevant quotations from Franklin's female predecessors. For example: 'I'd rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe.' When asked why she did not marry, this was Louisa May Alcott's response. It could serve as a metaphor for Sybylla's choice also.
- Alcott was pressured by her publishers to have her heroine marry at the end of her novel *Little Women* (1868), even though Alcott preferred her protagonist Jo March to pursue her literary aspirations. The publishers prevailed, arguing that the book would not be a commercial success unless it satisfied the romantic expectations of readers. As part of any wider reading, students could view Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation, which delivers an ending more in keeping with Alcott's wishes.
- It is interesting to note that approximately forty years later, the fledgling women's movement had advanced sufficiently for Franklin to resist such commercial pressure, although Sybylla's fate is still far from a victory.
- *Jane Eyre* (1847) is another nineteenth century novel that has much in common with *My Brilliant Career*. Charlotte Bronte's iconic heroine is another spirited, plain young woman, who endures poverty and dispossession, and she will only submit to a man on her own terms. Jane challenges the status of women who did not have the money and social connections to make their voices heard: 'Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! – I have as much soul as you, and full as much heart!' (ch. XXIII).
- Bronte's plea for a path for women is taken up by Franklin who also argues for a platform for women, and for them to be granted the same heart and intellectual capacity as men.
- Students may be interested to learn that both female authors, Alcott and Bronte, published under male pseudonyms to gain publication and both faced censure when their identities were revealed, chiefly for allegedly controversial and unfeminine content.

### Suggested classroom activities

- Ask students to identify some of the major challenges facing Australia today. Make links between those issues and the ones encountered in the novel and discuss the similar and different ways they affect individuals, families and society.
- Sybylla's self-image is central to the text. She is burdened with an unhealthy fixation on her physical appearance and the judgement of others is keenly felt. This is an idea with which students will likely identify. It would be interesting to discuss what it is that influences self-image (historically and in the present day). It may be relevant to compare the 'ugly duckling' transformation of Sybylla and the mirror reveal in the novel with the use of fashion, beauty treatments and social media filters today, particularly in terms of how people see themselves and how they wish to be viewed by others.
- Sybylla's conflict is largely internal because she rarely feels able to express herself authentically, nor does she believe she can attain the same freedoms as more privileged groups in society. Students could explore similar connections with the modern world.



## Structure of the text

Like many of its literary predecessors, *My Brilliant Career* is predominantly a linear narrative that chronologically traces the childhood years of its protagonist, Sybylla Melvyn. The novel also incorporates elements of an epistolary novel, including letters and direct addresses to the reader, and it is bookended with a prologue (Introduction) and epilogue (Chapter 38), that together form a retrospective narrative frame. Indeed, this narrative frame makes clear that the novel's main character is also its narrator, revealing that Sybylla is looking back on the events of her life thus far.

The novel's autobiographical plot, which is concerned with Sybylla's formative years aged three to nineteen, is encompassed by Sybylla's reflections, which set out '[t]here is no plot in this story, because there has been none in my life' (p. 3) and latterly confirms that 'my life is still the same' (p. 389). Through this outer narrative frame, the novel's timeline is established as beginning and ending in 1899, just two years before the promise of Federation, yet offering little hope for its narrator.

The narrative framing holds further significance. It also establishes Sybylla as an unreliable narrator. One of the challenges of *My Brilliant Career* is trying to understand who Sybylla Melvyn really is. Although the older narrator might conceivably present an informed understanding of her younger self, there are many occasions in the novel when her words and actions contradict each other, not least in her protestations that her story 'is not a romance' (p. 1), despite devoting many chapters to Sybylla's interactions with potential romantic suitors, often described in sentimental and melodramatic style.

Such contradictions are immediately apparent in the Introduction (pp. 1-3). Addressed to 'MY DEAR FELLOW AUSTRALIANS', it establishes both the microcosmic and macrocosmic elements of the narrative. Although the story is squarely about Sybylla's personal hopes and frustrations, more broadly the novel examines the social and economic challenges facing Federation Australia. For all Sybylla's avowals that her tale is 'simply a yarn ... all about myself', from the outset this is at least partially untrue. Although Sybylla's greatest resentment is that 'my sphere in life is not congenial to me', in the prologue, broader ideas of poverty and struggle are foregrounded as Sybylla admits: 'I am one of a class ... which have not time for plots in their life ...'.

The novel also reflects the declining fortunes of her family, with Sybylla's experiences largely shaped by the Melvyn family's circumstances. The different settings from Bruggabrong, Possum Gully, Caddagat, Barney's Gap and then finally Possum Gully again, broadly correlate with the highs and lows of Sybylla's life.

The plot is arranged over thirty-eight chapters. The chapters can be helpfully broken into sections that cover the different places where Sybylla lives.

### Bruggabrong: Chapter 1

Sybylla's childhood before moving to Possum Gully is a happy one. The descriptions of the bucolic Bruggabrong are romanticised, reflecting a contented period in her family's life where money and like-minded company were in good supply. The first chapter fondly recalls a time when Sybylla's father was still a 'fine fellow' (p. 10), and the rural enclave is portrayed idyllically:

I can remember the majestic gum-trees surrounding us, the sun glinting on their straight white trunks, and falling on the gurgling fern-banked stream ... (p. 5)

Yet, the self-reflexive narrative style foreshadows the family's failing fortunes, and specifically anticipates the fall of Richard Melvyn who 'was a swell in those days' (p. 7). Sybylla acknowledges that her father was 'my hero, confidant, encyclopedia, mate, and even my religion till I was ten'. The swift disclosure that 'since then I have been religionless' (p. 10) makes clear that he would fall far and hard in her estimation.

### Possum Gully: Chapters 2-7

When Sybylla is nearly nine years old, convinced that he is 'wasting his talents' in the remote Bruggabrong, Richard Melvyn moves the family to Possum Gully, where he believes there would be 'more scope for his ability' (p. 11). Sybylla narrates this move with heavy irony, foregrounding the terrible consequences that her father's ambition and misjudgements would have upon the family. Susceptible to flattery and lacking self-awareness, Dick Melvyn, Sybylla informs readers, readily believed his guests' assertions that 'a man of his intelligence' would 'make a name and fortune for himself dealing or auctioneering' (p. 12). Thus, with pitiful consequences, her father's hubris unsettles their contented equilibrium by reducing the family fortunes and status.

Throughout the novel, Possum Gully is synonymous with hardship and struggle. Although the venture always seems unwise due to Richard Melvyn's lack of business acumen, their move inland from the more fertile mountain terrain coincides with the significant drought and depression of the 1890s, leading to bankruptcy and ongoing poverty. After a series of failures, the family is cheated by an unscrupulous minister and faces ruination, only saved by the charitable assistance of relatives and neighbours. The family eventually turns to dairy work, an occupation equated with slavery for its physical arduour and scant profit, reflected in the servant Jane Haizelip's excoriating assessment:

I don't think much of dairyin'. It's slavin', an' delvin', and scrapin' yer eyeballs out from mornin' to night, and nothing to show for your pains ... (p. 22)

In Sybylla's mind, Possum Gully is an uncongenial sphere, a form of prison where 'nothing ever happened' (p. 16). Used to the 'graphic descriptions of life on big stations outback' and 'the anecdotes of African hunting, travel, and society life' (p. 17) that characterised the conversations at Bruggabrong, for Sybylla, and her genteel mother, the 'common bushmen farmers' and their 'endless fiddle-faddle' about farm produce prices and the state of crops prove 'very fatuous' (p. 17). Possum Gully is also a place of degradation and humiliation as her father's continuing failures expose the family to shame and a loss of status, epitomised in his notorious drinking sprees.

As a result of the poor education Sybylla receives in the public school and because of her lack of skills and experience, there is little she can do to contribute to the family's finances. As she grows older, she represents an increasing burden to her family, especially for her mother, not least because of her constant complaining. Sybylla's grandmother seems to offer a solution when she invites Sybylla to stay at Caddagat, her mother's family home, and from there the narrative action transfers to Caddagat, representing a different stage in Sybylla's life where she lives as a young woman, temporarily free from the burden of relentless toil.

## Caddagat: Chapters 8-26

Caddagat is the home of the Bossier family, Lucy Melvyn's mother and siblings. Caddagat is Sybylla's spiritual home, it is the place where she was born, and the place where she is most content and free. As Sybylla departs Possum Gully she exclaims:

I was not leaving home behind, I was flying homeward now. Home, home to Caddagat, home to ferny gullies ... home to dear old grannie, and uncle and aunt, to books, to music; refinement, company, pleasure, and the dear old homestead I love so well. (p. 69)

At Caddagat, Sybylla is supplied with many of the things she has longed for, most especially cultural stimulation and conversation. During her stay she flourishes, benefitting from the nurture of aunt Helen and the fond indulgences of uncle Julius, whilst submitting more gracefully to guidance and discipline from her grandmother. This experience is a pointed contrast to the fraught family dynamics and precarious financial situation at Possum Gully. As Sybylla acknowledges:

Yes, life was a pleasant thing to me now. I forgot all my wild unattainable ambitions in the little pleasures of everyday life. Such a thing as writing never entered my head ... It was nice to live in comfort, and among ladies and gentlemen—people who knew how to conduct themselves properly (pp. 268-9)

The tone of the novel also changes during these chapters. Despite Sybylla's earlier assertions, the plot becomes more romantic as Sybylla encounters a number of potential suitors. Under the gentle care of aunt Helen, Sybylla also undergoes something of a fairy tale transformation, emerging (at least partially) from her 'ugly duckling' persona to attract the attentions of Everard Grey, who offers the tantalising prospect of a career on stage, the jackaroo Frank Hawden, and most particularly, the eligible station owner, Harold Beecham.

The focus of her stay at Caddagat centres around the developing relationship between Sybylla and Harold, her seeming inability to trust his feelings for her, and her own abhorrence of marriage. Despite being invited to stay at his home, Five Bob Downs, Sybylla fails to

recognise his matrimonial intentions, believing them to be friends rather than lovers. Although she reluctantly accepts his proposal, their engagement is tenuous at best, as Sybylla equivocates with Harold and struggles internally with the concept of marriage and her lack of truly romantic feelings for him. However, when he dramatically loses his fortune, she feels a shift in their relationship has occurred and she pledges ‘if I am of any use to you—I will marry you when I attain my majority’ (p. 263). This promise is heavily caveated though as Sybylla tells Harold that ‘you will be perfectly free if you see anyone you like better than me’ (p. 262), foreshadowing her later, final refusal of him.

Sybylla’s idyll is rudely interrupted by news from Possum Gully of her father’s ongoing financial struggles. A letter from Lucy Melvyn results in Sybylla being sent from her beloved Caddagat to Barney’s Gap, where she will work as a governess for the M’Swat family, to whom her father is indebted. Despite protestations from Sybylla and Mrs Bossier, her mother insists that Sybylla fulfil her family obligations and she reluctantly departs Caddagat.

### Barney’s Gap: Chapters 27-32

Barney’s Gap is the polar opposite to the convivial Caddagat. It is a place ‘quite tabooed on account of its squalor and dirt!’ (p. 273) that was ‘between two steep stony hills, which, destitute of grass, rose like grim walls of rock, imparting a desolate and prison-like aspect’ (p. 285). Here, Sybylla finds herself in another metaphorical prison, located there against her will and ‘torn away from Caddagat—from refinement and comfort—from home!’ (p. 275).

Sybylla is quickly appalled by the condition of the M’Swat family. Described in caricature terms, Sybylla recalls that the eight children were ‘the dirtiest urchins I have ever seen’ (p. 286). Although Sybylla recognises their slovenly condition is not due to poverty but ‘on account of ignorance and slatternliness’ (p. 286), she is overwhelmed with a ‘frantic longing to get back to Caddagat’ (p. 287).

Sybylla’s stay is characteristically punctuated with mishap and fiery encounters. She struggles to impose herself on the M’Swat children who dismiss her as ‘only the daughter of old hard-up Melvyn’ (p. 306).

She consequently ‘had little weight with the children, which made things very hard for me as a teacher’ (p. 306). However, she later asserts her will, using a switch<sup>3</sup> to discipline the eldest boy, Jimmy. Despite Mrs M’Swat’s objections, Sybylla prevails and wins the grudging respect of her charges. Through the use of letters across the novel, Sybylla records the deteriorating relationship between herself and her mother. Whilst at Barney’s Gap, a letter from her brother Horace alerts Sybylla to her mother’s lack of pity for her situation, which fuels Sybylla’s resentment.

A ‘bust-up’ with Mr M’Swat (Chapter 31) follows when he mistakenly believes that Sybylla is romantically interested in his eldest son. Informing Sybylla that ‘I have no objections ... only that ye have no prawperty’ (p. 326), he incurs her wrath as she is offended at ‘the preposterousness of the thing’ (p. 327) and unleashes a tongue-lashing where she rails against his ‘boor of a son’ and his ‘odious home’ (p. 328). An epiphany follows this outburst as Sybylla acknowledges the toll of Barney’s Gap:

This monotonous sordid life was unhinging me, and there was no legitimate way of escape from it. I formed wild plans of running away ... but my love for my little brothers and sisters held me back ... I was so reduced in spirit that had Harold Beecham appeared then with a matrimonial scheme to be fulfilled at once, I would have quickly erased the fine lines I had drawn and accepted his proposal; but he did not come, and I was unacquainted with his whereabouts or welfare. (p. 328)

Her unhappy stay is ultimately short-lived as she suffers a form of break-down, descending into ‘such a state of nervousness’ (p. 330) that she believed life ‘was warping [her] very soul’ (p. 333). The novel’s central refrain about the need for a congenial sphere in life re-emerges here as Sybylla understands that ‘I could not change my organisation to one which would find sufficient sustenance in the mental atmosphere of Barney’s Gap.’ (p. 333). She is finally released from her obligations by the kindly M’Swats and returned once again to Possum Gully, but in this instance only to replace one uncongenial sphere with another.

<sup>3</sup> A switch was a flexible rod, typically used for corporal punishment. Switching was not dissimilar to birching.

## Possum Gully: Chapters 33-38

As Lucy Melvyn tartly acknowledges upon Sybylla's return to Possum Gully, 'It seems it was possible for you to find a worse place than home' (p. 339). Despite having travelled some distance to Caddagat and Barney's Gap, Sybylla finds herself back at the family home in the same unsatisfactory circumstances as before. Life continues with the monotony of dairy work and poverty, although Sybylla does find some comfort in her mother's gentility after the coarse environs of Barney's Gap. Notwithstanding, her relationship with her mother remains complicated with the two struggling to find common ground and her frustrations are compounded when her mother prefers that Gertie should go to Caddagat rather than herself. Thus, Sybylla 'remained at Possum Gully to tread the same old life in its tame narrow path, with its never-ending-dawn-till-daylight round of tasks' (p. 343).

The epistolary nature of the narrative continues to the end as letters between Possum Gully and Caddagat provide updates about Gertie, and Harold Beecham, whose fortune is miraculously restored through an unexpected inheritance, and whom Sybylla mistakenly believes has transferred his affections to her more attractive, younger sister. It is clear to readers, however, that Harold's love for Sybylla is genuine and he makes the journey to Possum Gully to claim his bride. This leads to the climax of the novel as Sybylla is forced to reckon with her ambivalent feelings towards Harold and towards marriage itself. Indeed, it is relief that she feels when she learns that Harold is wealthy again and 'would not need me now' (p. 348). Letters are used in the terse exchanges between Sybylla and Harold when she ends their engagement, setting him free to 'Choose some one who will reflect more credit on your taste and sense' (p. 350). Although Sybylla oscillates between regret and certainty over her decision to reject a potential soul mate, when Harold arrives at Possum Gully, she cannot bring herself to become his wife. Marriage, in the end, is another uncongenial sphere that Sybylla cannot submit to, however self-defeating her choice may seem to refuse a wealthy and loving

husband who could support her literary aspirations and provide a comfortable home. Her decision is comprised of compassion for Harold – she believes she would be 'a two-edged sword ... gashing his fingers at every turn ... eventually stabbing his honest heart' (p. 376) – and her own uncompromising romantic expectations, believing that she was only suited for marriage with 'an exceptional helpmeet —and Harold was not he' (p. 378).

Sybylla's rejection has a profound impact upon Harold Beecham. As reported through letters from Gertie and Mrs Bossier, he leaves for America and 'is not coming home till he has gone over the world' reporting that 'he didn't mind if all his property was blown into atoms' (p. 386). The novel thus concludes in a decidedly unromantic style, with a crushed and dejected lover failing to win the girl, replacing the conventional 'happy ending' with differing forms of disillusion for both Harold and Sybylla. To capture her own discontented feelings, Sybylla recites from A. L. Gordon's 'Wormwood and Nightingale':

... yet  
I long with a longing savage,  
I regret with a fierce regret (p. 388)

Having remonstrated with her self-pity one last time, 'enough of pessimistic snarling and grumbling!' (p. 390), her tone changes to one of nationalist praise, redirecting her thoughts to the concerns of her countrymen. For a final time, Sybylla directly addresses readers with a paean of praise to her 'sunburnt brothers' (p. 390). Nevertheless, her final salutation is characteristically ambivalent; it is a patriotic tribute from 'a daughter of the Southern Cross' (p. 390) whilst auguring a future that may not deliver on its egalitarian promises, fearing 'the rope of class distinction drawing closer, closer, tighter, tighter' (p. 391). The settler's ability to prevail in the bush is also questioned as she mistrusts the 'great sun ... grinning and winking knowingly ... upon the starving stock and drought-smitten wastes of land' (p. 391). In this regard, the epilogue is characteristic of the whole novel, which is riven with contradictions and seemingly torn between self-pity, nationalist pride and societal critique.



## Characters

### Sybylla Melvyn

Sybylla Melvyn is the novel's quixotic protagonist. She is a heady mix of idealism and impracticality, desire and defiance – a woman not of her time, but ahead of her time. Sybylla's incompatibility with turn-of-the-century norms, namely her indifference to marriage and her desire for a career, place her at odds with herself, her family and society:

As a tiny child I was filled with dreams of the great things I was to do when grown up ... As I grew it dawned upon me that I was a girl ... Only a girl!—merely this and nothing more. (pp. 60-61)

Sybylla is a challenging protagonist, one who is likely to divide opinion. She might be regarded as both a heroine and anti-heroine. Her spirited rebellion against patriarchal structures and her awakening social consciousness (particularly regarding poverty and class structures) renders her an engaging and empathetic figure whilst her egotism and self-pity can be grating for some readers. She is also a character full of contradictions, at times rejecting marriage and romance, at others bemoaning her perceived unattractiveness to men.

Early in life, Sybylla makes the 'unpleasant discovery' that 'I was woefully out of my sphere' (p. 62). After comparing herself with the neighbourhood girls of a similar age she discerns that:

... they were not only in their world, they were of it; I was not. Their daily tasks and their little pleasures provided sufficient oil for the lamp of their existence—mine demanded more than Possum Gully could supply. (p. 62)

This sense of disconnect and dissatisfaction manifests in restlessness as Sybylla's desire for 'literature, art, music, and drama' (p. 62) compels her to demand 'Action! Action!' (p. 63). Even though she resigns herself to 'cut my coat according to my cloth' (p. 65), she feels nonetheless 'crushed, compressed, and bruised', and going 'in quest of a God, and finding one not, grew weary' (p. 65). The antipathy of her situation, and the lost respect for her father, foster an atheism that prevails for Sybylla. Richard Melvyn, the early touchstone of her life, proves a huge disappointment. The benevolent figure who initially sought to protect her from the 'rubbishing conventionalities which are the curse of her sex' (p. 9) shatters her faith in men when he is reduced in her eyes to 'a despicable, selfish, weak creature' (p. 28). Meanwhile, her indignations

are compounded by the 'hideous truth' that 'I was ugly!' (p. 61). This vexation leads her to curse God 'for casting upon me a burden greater than I could bear' and subsequently her faith dissipates in her declaration that '[t]here was no God', bringing with it a bleak realisation that an atheist has 'Nothing to live for in life—no hope beyond the grave.' (p. 66).

However self-interested Sybylla's protestations may be, they are often linked to wider malaises as she develops a keen sense of social consciousness, developing 'a knowledge of the sin and sorrow abroad in the world' for which she wishes she could 'find a cure' (p. 65). During her time at Caddagat, she takes a seemingly unique interest in the struggles of the 'great army' of tramps who traversed 'from north to south, and east to west, never relinquishing their heart-sickening, futile quest for work'. Sybylla's disclosure that 'on average fifty tramps a week, and seldom ... the same man twice' (p. 147) alludes to the widespread poverty and substantial challenges facing Federation Australia. Sybylla questions: 'In a wide young country of boundless resources, why is this thing?' (p. 148).

In spite of occasional but good-natured quarrels with her uncle and grandmother, Caddagat proves a temporary balm for Sybylla's anguished soul. Here, amongst cultivated and curious companions, she finds a creative outlet and she luxuriates in performing for her relatives and their guests, singing, reciting and improvising to please her audiences. She revels in the chance to take centre stage and acknowledges that 'Flattery is sweet to youth.' (p. 107).

Opportunities abound for Sybylla at Caddagat, both romantic and professional, although all are contingent on a man, or her family's consent, for their fruition. Everard Grey wishes to put her 'on the stage' but Mrs Bossier quickly extinguishes such hopes with the pronouncement that becoming an actress would render Sybylla 'a vile, low, brazen hussy!' (p. 110). Her traditional views prove anathema to Sybylla's dramatic aspirations:

Career! That is all girls think of now, instead of being good wives and mothers and attending to their homes and doing what God intended. All they think of is gadding about and being fast, and ruining themselves body and soul. And the men are as bad to encourage them ... (p. 111)

The proposal from Harold Beecham also represents an opportunity for Sybylla to escape drudgery. Her final decision not to marry him epitomises the contradictions in her character. Sybylla rails consistently against the weariness of her existence, she detests 'grimy manual labour' (p. 48), and she is 'very,



very fond of Harold Beecham' (p. 245) so her decision to marry him should be a simple one and yet it is not. She oscillates between platonic and romantic feelings for him, sometimes desiring a chum, 'fully aware' of her 'lack of wifely love' (p. 348), often lamenting 'how near I had been to loving Harold Beecham' (p. 352). Notwithstanding these oscillations, in the end, marriage is a price Sybylla is not willing to pay, even if that means accepting her likely fate as a spinster destined to spend her days toiling at Possum Gully. To readers, this feels a contrary choice; restored to his fortune by the end of the novel, Harold declares 'I love you, and have plenty of money' (p. 375) and he offers her a life beyond the oppressive domain of Possum Gully where she could 'write as many yarns as [she'd] like' (p. 374). However, the notion of submitting to a man who 'offered me everything—but control' (p. 375) is ultimately unpalatable. In spite of the physical desire she feels for Harold whose 'manly countenance' and 'virile fascination' were temporarily 'irresistible' (p. 376), it is the lack of spiritual connection that Sybylla perceives between them, 'My love must know, must have suffered, must understand' (p. 376) that irrevocably ends their courtship. Sybylla's blindness to Harold's affinity and fidelity to her is most apparent when she resolves: 'he was not for me' (p. 376). The astuteness that Sybylla often displays is noticeably absent in her judgement of Harold. Plainly, his loss of fortune did cause him suffering, 'I was a beastly cad once: I've had all that knocked out of me.' (p. 373) and he does 'know' Sybylla, observing to aunt Helen that teaching would break her spirit as indeed it did at the M'Swats (albeit Sybylla claims it was the squalid environment rather than the actual teaching that ailed her). Ironically, her final rejection inflicts a level of suffering that might equal her own, as he abandons Five Bob Downs a bitter and disillusioned man.

### Richard 'Dick' Melvyn

Richard Melvyn is Sybylla's father, a 'swell' whose downward mobility reduces him to the status of peasant. '[A]dmitt[ed] into swelldom merely by right of his position' (p. 7), he is the hereditary master of three stations, totalling roughly 200,000 acres. His substantial property is inherited from his grandfather, an early warning sign that he may lack the entrepreneurial experience to succeed in his own ventures. He is a hospitable and jovial man

enjoying life in the Timlinbilly Ranges, ostensibly acting as Sybylla's protector, accepting her wild ways as 'a great unwomanly tomboy' (p. 9) and shielding her from her mother's remonstrations.

When Sybylla is almost nine, Melvyn sells his stations and purchases Possum Gully, near Goulburn, 'a small farm of one thousand acres' (p. 12), retaining only one servant and just enough furniture 'to get along with' (p. 13) until he had time to settle and purchase more. His ill-fated intention to 'deal in stock' even though half of the land was 'fit to run nothing but wallabies' (p. 14) quickly proves disastrous. The family's situation deteriorates as he invests rashly and overextends himself. Sybylla summarises her father's fall, lampooning his folly of being 'too soft ever to come off anything but second-best in a deal'. Thus, he lost money 'every time he sold a beast', which 'quickly left him on the verge of bankruptcy' (p. 24). Within a year, 'all the spare capital in his coffers ... had been squandered' (p. 25). In his desperation, he mortgages Possum Gully to an unscrupulous minister, before falling stock prices several years later force him to start a dairy to earn a meagre living. This decline in fortune, combined with increasing alcoholism and further bad luck, is terminal:

Dick Melvyn of Bruggabrong was not recognizable in Dick Melvyn, dairy farmer and cocky of Possum Gully. The former had been a man worthy of the name. The latter was a slave of drink, careless, even dirty and bedraggled in his personal appearance. He disregarded all manners, and had become far more plebeian and common than the most miserable specimen of humanity around him. (p. 27)

His reckless irresponsibility and the 'influence of liquor' are potent forces. Most damningly in Sybylla's eyes, Melvyn is the 'support of his family, yet not its support. The head of his family, yet failing to fulfill the obligations demanded of one in that capacity.' (p. 27). His wife and daughters are particularly dependent on him for their survival and prosperity and are effectively abandoned as he 'seemed to lose all love and interest in his family' (p. 27). Melvyn's fall and loss of manhood (Sybylla recounts tracking him 'from one pub to another' [p. 28]), precipitates their disgrace and penury, engendering disgust in his then fifteen-year-old daughter, who the older Sybylla concedes made 'no allowance for human frailty and weakness' (p. 28).

## Lucy Melvyn

Lucy Melvyn is Sybylla's beautiful and refined mother. Born a 'full-fledged aristocrat', she was 'one of the Bossiers of Caddagat' (p. 7). Sybylla admires her mother's beauty, elegance and impeccable housekeeping and she feels a keen sense of her mother's degradation by Richard Melvyn, recognising that she is a victim of her husband's vice and incompetence because a 'woman is but the helpless tool of man' (p. 29). Lucy laments her marriage to Richard Melvyn, admitting to Sybylla 'I regret the day I ever saw him' (p. 45). Despite marrying him for love, their relationship has brought significant hardship upon Lucy, who bears eight children in increasingly desperate circumstances, and she distances herself from her former friends, presumably because she is ashamed of her reduced condition and cannot afford to send letters. As Miss Beecham notes:

Your mother used to be very dear to me,  
but I don't know why she doesn't write  
to me now. (p. 156)

Sybylla's relationship with her mother is strained and they routinely clash. Sybylla is unable to fulfil her mother's idea of womanhood, namely feminine virtue, nor is she an obedient daughter. Unlike her pretty sister Gertie, Sybylla does not come 'within the range of mother's understanding' (p. 51), hence they quarrel frequently. Lucy regards Sybylla as a financial and emotional burden, fearing she will struggle to marry because she is 'so very plain' (p. 56). Lucy's stinging criticisms of Sybylla fuel their mutual resentment, particularly as Sybylla feels that 'Mother might have ... kept the tale of my sins to herself' (p. 57).

Over the course of the novel, Lucy is worn down with exhaustion and worry, striving against the odds to maintain the family's respectability and solvency. Richard's debt to Peter M'Swat obliges her to send Sybylla to Barney's Gap, where Sybylla will learn to '[give] up pleasuring' and 'meet the responsibilities of life' (p. 272). In spite of Sybylla's exhortations to be released from Barney's Gap, the hardened Lucy is unwilling to listen to her woes, despairing 'unless you remain there, how are we to pay the interest' on the M'Swat loan (p. 303). Consumed with the pressure of maintaining Possum Gully, and controlling her errant husband, her appreciation of culture erodes, and she is a bitter, broken woman, reduced in stature and debased by marriage to a man ultimately unworthy of her love.

## Harold Beecham

Harold Beecham belongs to the tradition of the idealised bushman. He is described as 'tremendously tall and big and sunburnt, with an open pleasant face and chestnut moustache' (p. 131). Sybylla recalls that he was 'fearfully and wonderfully quiet' admiring that it was 'an intelligent silence, not of that wooden brainless description' (p. 141). Harold (Harry) is Sybylla's 'only *real* sweetheart' (p. 129) and he is widely held to be a good and capable man with 'as much bushman ability as he had' (p. 184). The Beecham family, along with the Bossiers, are 'leaders of sweldom among the squattocracy up the country' and his family are 'firm and intimate friends' (p. 90) with Sybylla's relations. He is the respected proprietor of Five Bob Downs, and he is a fair boss and affable host. Whilst renowned for his fearsome temper, something Sybylla only sees glimpses of, Harold is a kind and good-natured man who swiftly forgives Sybylla's outbursts and fusses over Minnie Benson, his overseer's child, framing him favourably.

Harold is a quiet and stoic man, rarely expressing emotion even when he loses his property and is a ruined man. For much of the novel, Sybylla is amused by the idea of provoking passion within Harold and although she is engaged to him for much of the narrative, she only really achieves this when she rejects him for the last time, and he abandons Five Bob Downs. For all his reserve, it is clear that his feelings for Sybylla are true, and he is susceptible to jealousy, evident in his reactions to Sybylla's flirtations with Joe Archer and Archie Goodchum. In the end, he is apparently heartbroken by her rejection of him, travelling the world as if 'some craze' had 'suddenly taken [him]' (p. 386), contradicting Sybylla's notion of men as faithless creatures incapable of loving an ugly tomboy like herself.

## Mrs Bossier

Mrs Lucy Bossier is Sybylla's grandmother, who she affectionately refers to as 'grannie'. Mrs Bossier represents a traditional view of womanhood, espousing conservative sentiments about a woman's role as a wife and mother. She is a formidable matriarch who '[f]ew dared argue with' (p. 112) and she rules over Caddagat with a firm but benevolent grip. When required, she disciplines her wayward granddaughter, especially when she fears Sybylla's unladylike behaviour and potential dishonour. Sybylla recalls that 'Grannie frequently showed marked displeasure regarding what she termed my larrikinism' (p. 221), but upon witnessing Sybylla climbing on Harold's back whilst descending from a tree, Mrs Bossier denounces Sybylla for being an 'immodest, bold, bad hussy!' (p. 221), revealing an unprecedented level of anger as Sybylla breaches her perception of respectable feminine conduct.

But she is predominantly a kindly woman who acts 'according to her principles' (p. 222) and she is 'never angry [for] long' (p. 112), offering shelter and hospitality to all who visit her homestead. She is a loyal mother to Lucy, who she supports financially, albeit not as much as she might have because the Bossiers 'were so disgusted with [Richard Melvyn's] insobriety' (p. 305). She also respects Lucy's parental authority, never interfering in the squabbles between Lucy and Sybylla. She is an affectionate grandmother, and she is clearly very fond of Everard Grey, who is adopted into their family when the orphaned boy is abandoned by his appointed guardians. Indeed, Mrs Bossier 'loved him as her own son' (p. 95).

Mrs Bossier's actions also provide insight into outback life, which differs significantly between the squattocracy and the peasant class. Although still a demanding and challenging life, it is markedly more comfortable and civilised. Mrs Bossier serves as a midwife for local women (p. 103), manages business letters and the accounts, and she is a generous hostess who 'would surely have made a fortune' if 'there [had] been any charge for [the] board and lodging' (p. 147) provided at scale.

## Aunt Helen

Aunt Helen, or Mrs Bell, is Sybylla's beloved aunt. She is sister to Lucy Melvyn and daughter to Mrs Bossier. Aunt Helen is a tragic figure who serves as another warning for Sybylla about the dangers of

marriage. As a young, beautiful woman, the eighteen-year-old Helen Bossier engaged in a whirlwind romance with a 'dashing colonel' who married Helen and took her to America with his army regiment. In spite of the fairytale nature of her courtship, aunt Helen's experience is not a romantic one as within a year her rakish husband became 'enamoured of another woman'. Although he could not divorce Helen because of her 'spotless character', he lived openly with his mistress, forcing Helen to return to Caddagat 'humiliated and outraged in the cruellest way by the man whom she loved and trusted' (p. 86).

Helen proves an empathetic guardian to Sybylla, recognising and accepting her flaws, gently offering guidance and building Sybylla's self-confidence by turning her into a 'nice-looking little girl' (p. 87). Aunt Helen also perceives Harold's love for Sybylla, entreating with her niece not 'To play with a man's heart' (p. 191), offering her a noble model of womanhood, not dissimilar to the one advocated by her mother and grandmother, but perhaps more palatably delivered due to Helen's gentle temperament. However, even this relationship eventually sours as Sybylla's impetuous temper finally proves too much, even for Helen's generous nature. When Helen understandably advises Sybylla that she must try to bear working at Barney's Gap, her letter is like 'a slap in the face' (p. 307) for Sybylla, whose bitter epistle to Helen severs their ties indefinitely. Aunt Helen, the 'best of women', is found wanting in Sybylla's exacting eyes when she 'did not deign to reply' and 'from that day to this ... rigidly ignored' (p. 308) her niece.

## Uncle Julius

Julius John Bossier, or uncle Jay-Jay as he is known to Sybylla, is an affectionate uncle and the masculine figurehead at Caddagat. He provides a different model of manhood than the wretched Richard Melvyn and Sybylla admits she was 'very proud to call him uncle' (p. 100). Dressing in 'frock-coats' (p. 99) he is described as a 'big, fat, burly, broad ... bachelor of forty' who is well-known as 'a jolly good fellow all round' (p. 100). As a man of independent means, he is free to remain unmarried and he pursues his interests and desires in a way not yet possible for women. Uncle Julius is amused by Sybylla's wit and will, taking great pleasure in her amateur dramatics and spirited exploits, 'dwelling with great delight upon the fact that Frank Hawden was forced to walk four miles in the heat and dust' (p. 187) when Sybylla abandoned him.

## Everard Grey

Everard Grey is one of the potential suitors that Sybylla encounters at Caddagat. Born to 'very aristocratic English parents' (p. 94), he forms part of a broader representation of Australia's colonial history. Sybylla recounts that 'Grannie had discovered, reared and educated him' and he was 'one of Sydney's most promising young barristers' (p. 95). He also offers a tantalising glimpse into a metropolitan and cultured world far from the bush where a person might 'wind up on the stage'. His 'opinion on artistic matters was considered worth having' and his appreciation of Sybylla's talents gave her 'an intoxicated sensation of joy' (p. 105). Everard is seemingly enchanted with Sybylla and even contemplates marrying her so he can respectably take her to Sydney and 'have her put under the best masters ... (for) Elocution and singing' (p. 110). He even attempts to rebut Mrs Bossier's 'old notion about the stage being a low profession' (p. 111), and agrees to show aunt Helen and Sybylla around Sydney.

Their friendship has barely had the chance to get off the ground when Sybylla eavesdrops on his conversation with Helen where she learns of his reputation as a 'lady-killer' who might destroy aunt Helen's 'country maiden' (p. 116). Sybylla is indignant about what she regards as further proof of men's faithlessness, and despite writing him an intimate letter sharing her private thoughts and hopes (pp. 145-146), she destroys it believing he would think her a 'poor little fool'. She subsequently rebuffs him until he ceases his correspondence, compounding in Sybylla's mind that men 'make a great parade of friendship ... then go away and forget one's existence in an hour' (p. 146).

## Frank Hawden

Frank Hawden is first introduced when he escorts Sybylla from the train station to Caddagat. By his 'accent and innocent style', Sybylla quickly deduces that he 'was not a colonial'. He is an arrogant and hapless Englishman who has travelled widely before coming to Caddagat as a jackaroo. The merciless Sybylla quickly 'take[s] the measure' of him (p. 74); on their first encounter, he opines his disappointment that Sybylla had 'no pretensions to prettiness' (p. 73) and condescendingly reassures her you're 'not a bad sort' (p. 74). In spite of disappointing Frank's 'great

hopes' for her beauty (p. 74), Sybylla quickly becomes the object of his romantic attentions, and he proposes, wishing to take her to England when he inherits his family property aged twenty-four, to 'surprise some English girls I know' (p. 122). Such presumption and brash insensitivity subject him to Sybylla's ire who is filled with 'loathing and disgust' at being the 'object of ... puerile emotions in a fellow like Frank Hawden' (p. 96). Frank lacks the respective charm and substance of his would-be-rivals, Everard Grey and Harold Beecham, and responds peevishly to Sybylla's myriad rejections of him, complaining to her grandmother about her 'unwomanly' conduct (p. 124). Evidently, he lacks the noble manhood that would render him worthy of her love and an exasperated Sybylla entreats 'if you have any sense of manliness ... cease persecuting me with your idiotic professions of love' (p. 127).

His petulant reaction is diametrically opposed to the gracious tenor of Harold Beecham, who regrets Sybylla's decision to end their engagement but trusts he has 'sufficient manhood to prevent me from thrusting myself upon any lady' (p. 351). In particular, the vain and entitled Englishman is characterised as inferior next to his firmly Australian counterpart, Harold Beecham.

## Mr and Mrs M'Swat

The Irish family who loans money to Richard Melvyn represent a form of *petit bourgeoisie* in settler Australia. They have the money but not the pedigree to form part of the squattocracy. They are caricatured grotesquely as slovenly and ignorant, drawing in no small way on racist tropes of the era. Mrs M'Swat is described as 'a great, fat ignorant' woman who is 'shockingly dirty and untidy' while Mr M'Swat boasts of his 'substantial banking account' (p. 286).

However, despite Sybylla's satirical treatment of their idiosyncrasies and her abhorrence for their unsanitary living conditions, the M'Swats are not dehumanised for Sybylla respects them, believing them 'much superior to me'. In his 'little sphere', she believes Mr M'Swat 'was as sensible and kind a man as one could wish for' and she is unerring in her praise for Mrs M'Swat who is a 'faithful' wife who 'bore uncomplainingly' the frequent agonies of childbirth, contributing 'more to her nation and her Maker than I will ever be noble enough to do' (p. 333).



## Issues and themes

### Women and womanhood

When a woman is separated from her husband it is the religion of the world at large to cast the whole blame on the wife. By reason of her youth and purity Mrs Bell had not as much to suffer in this way as some others. But, comparatively speaking, her life was wrecked ... neither a wife, widow, nor maid. (p. 86)

Sybylla's reflections on the ignominious fate of aunt Helen serve as a useful insight into the dominant ideology of her world. A woman's role is conceptually divided into the distinct categories of 'wife', 'widow' and 'maid'. Significantly, each title is a role that defines a woman according to her relationship with a man, and each title alludes to her sexual and marital status. Indeed, marriage is presented as the ultimate goal for women, and it is the barometer against which her value is measured. Sybylla understands the conventional wisdom that 'a girl's only proper sphere in life was marriage' (p. 57) and she is beset with righteous indignation at the sexual double standard that decrees 'scampy young fellows ... can live a life of bestiality', sowing their 'wild oats' only to be considered 'a fit husband for the youngest and purest girl!' (p. 125), who is, of course, bound by expectations of sexual purity. For unfortunate women such as Helen Bell, abandoned by her husband and occupying the no-man's land of 'judicial separation' (p. 86), neither scandalously divorced nor respectably married, she must submit to a life of humiliation and unspoken resentment because she has been turned adrift by a faithless husband and therefore has no defined role in society. Thereafter, her only discernible value is as spinster aunt to her sister's children.

Through her depictions of marriage, both the institution, and its lived experience for her characters, Franklin raises questions about the narrow and often unjust constraints placed upon women within a patriarchal society. Although not literally abandoned by her spouse, Lucy Melvyn suffers another form of betrayal and degradation at the hands of her feckless husband. Richard Melvyn was 'the prince who had won Lucy Bossier from her home' yet his failings and vices reduce her from beautiful and refined young woman to a 'work-roughened and temper-soured' peasant (p. 79). Lucy, like her sister, is a passive object in marriage, subject to the whim of her husband. Whilst both Colonel Bell and Richard Melvyn initially present as dashing suitors, both prove

unworthy of their wives who each pay a heavy price for pursuing romantic love, something the older Helen acknowledges is a 'hot fleeting passion' that 'frequently passes' (p. 85). Such examples of marriage unsurprisingly inform Sybylla's cynical view of the institution, when she considers the 'sacrifice[s]' women make when 'yield[ing]' up their 'youth, freedom, strength' (p. 79), her own most valued attributes.

Sybylla's own story sheds light on the difficulties likely to be faced by a woman who does not conform to society's expectations. In Sybylla's world, character traits are gendered and inculcated from an early age. A woman is valued for her beauty, charm, manners, obedience and respectability and she is censured for outspokenness, vulgarity, anger and rebellion. In fact, signs of unfeminine behaviour are even considered unnatural. When Lucy Melvyn complains of Sybylla's tomboyish and disobedient conduct, Mrs Bossier offers the unenlightened view that the 'girl must surely be ill, or she would never act as you describe' (p. 56). Sybylla rails against the register of feminine attributes, mostly because they are antithetical to her own dominant personality traits. The scope of occupations presented to her are mostly limited to home and hearth, either as daughter, wife, servant or housemaid. Beyond the domestic realm, the only feasible, respectable employment is to be as a pupil-teacher, 'a very nice occupation for girls'. These options are all unpalatable to Sybylla who would 'as soon go on the wallaby' (p. 47) and live as an itinerant than submit to the modest and stereotypically feminine pleasures that satisfy her peers. She laments that 'a new dress, everyday work, and an occasional picnic' were insufficient to her, understanding that such superficial pursuits would not satisfy her intellectual yearning to relieve her feelings through writing, an idea that 'had taken firm root in [her] brain' (p. 53). Sybylla's appearance also proves unsatisfactory. She is 'given more time' to find a husband 'on account of being ugly' (p. 57) and even her mother regards her as 'a very useless girl' (p. 47). Sybylla certainly cannot find herself in the prescribed gender roles, nor in the 'simply angelic' expression of her mother's face (p. 78) nor in the performative tears of Gertie, who understood how to obtain forgiveness and who 'straightaway forgot the whole matter' of conflict with their mother (p. 51).

Although Sybylla understands the gendered rules that govern her world, she struggles to submit to them, questioning why 'social arrangements' did not permit 'a man and a maid to be chums' (p. 121). She abhors that 'girls of my age ... were totally ignorant of the outside world' (p. 62) and she satirises the hypocrisy



that forgave beautiful women all their 'shortcomings' whilst punishing plain ones, ironically suggesting 'uncomely female infants' should be 'put ... to death at their birth' (p. 62). Her indignation and resentment are tempered by respect for other women who acquiesce, seemingly without conflict, to their assigned roles as daughters, wives and mothers. At times, she even seems to envy them, noting that Mrs M'Swat was a 'contented and good-natured' wife (p. 333) whilst observing that Miss Derrick 'was the kind of woman with whom men become much infatuated' because she 'would adorn the head' of any table and 'never act with impropriety' (p. 206). On other occasions, she rebels against these societal norms with wanton insouciance. When Frank Hawden proposes marriage, his attitude reflects the assumption that women would submit to their suitors, irrespective of their own inclinations. Frank's violent response to her rejection is noted when he seizes Sybylla 'angrily by the wrist', symbolising his sense of entitlement as he threatens to 'make you listen to me' (p. 123). Even when Sybylla continues to dismiss him, Hawden negotiates with Mrs Bossier, disregarding Sybylla's feelings to ensure his own are satisfied. Aggravated by his arrogance, she demands that he 'cease persecuting' her with 'idiotic professions of love', later chuckling to herself that she had 'euchred Frank Hawden' (p. 179), leaving him abandoned in the bush as punishment for his unwanted addresses.

Mrs Bossier's sympathy for Frank Hawden, who considers himself wronged by Sybylla's alleged flirting, reflects Franklin's wider concern that women seemed to be the primary gatekeepers of patriarchal values and structures. At various stages, women are shown to be enforcing these expectations more than men. After Sybylla humiliates Frank Hawden in the buggy, Mrs Bossier reproves her granddaughter for being a 'wicked hussy' even as uncle Julius is highly entertained by the anecdote. Mrs Bossier berates her son for encouraging Sybylla's 'tomboyish ways', admitting that 'it grieves me to see she makes no effort to acquire a ladylike demeanour' (pp. 186-7). In comparison, the male figures seem more benevolent custodians of Sybylla's honour. Her father permits her to ride without a saddle as a child, Everard Grey believes she is capable of a life on stage, Frank Hawden wants her to shake up English society, and Harold Beecham expresses a desire for an equal partner and seems willing to support her literary aspirations. In this regard, it seems that the women, more than the men, seek to suppress Sybylla's identity and maintain the status quo.

As reflected in the customs and behaviour of Franklin's characters, the colonial environment of nineteenth century Australia was influenced by patriarchal values

imported from Europe, especially pertaining to male superintendence and feminine virtue. Hence, despite Federation heralding the birth of an independent nation that would cement its own identity and deliver greater freedoms, the privileges enjoyed by its citizens would continue to be gendered and inequitable as long as society as was dictated by the tenet that men 'are the power to truckle to' (p. 62).

## The Australian landscape

The Realist tradition of late nineteenth century Australian literature was believed to contain three defining characteristics:

One is the predominance of the rural environment and the lack of any real engagement with the life of the cities ... the second is the uneasiness about the status of the hero. The third is ambivalence towards the Aboriginal inhabitants of the country, or the total lack of any awareness of their existence. (McLaren, 1980)

*My Brilliant Career* is clearly influenced by this Realist tradition. The bush is a dominant feature, even a character in its own right, and there is woeful disregard for First Nations communities, who are ignored or referenced in passing, pejorative terms. The status of the hero, or heroine in this case, is also unclear. Regarding the protagonist, Franklin departs somewhat from the Realist tradition, replacing the male Bush Legend (Penn, 2007), whose identity is moulded by 'Trials in the Bush' (Penn, 2007), with a rebellious young woman who is tested in a different way. Where those masculine heroes were pitted against drought, fire and flood, forging homosocial bonds of mateship to combat the isolation and danger of a vast, hostile environment, Franklin pits Sybylla against the gendered expectations of her world, emphasising the isolation she feels alienated from her peers and denied the comradeship enjoyed by her male counterparts.

The Australian bush is often conceived as a harsh opponent to those who struggle to survive its inhospitable conditions. This is certainly true in *My Brilliant Career*, but Franklin's portrayals of rural life offer more than one view. Bruggabrong and Caddagat are fertile sanctuaries, respectively due to topography and effective management. Caddagat is not immune to drought, but is effectively managed to afford comfortable living whereas Possum Gully is attacked by the elements, and the Melvyn family are forced to 'keep the doors and windows closed on account of the wind and dust' (p. 41). The claustrophobia and stasis of Possum Gully is further emphasised by the minimal opportunities

for young men who ‘drifted outback to shear, drove, or to take up land’ because ‘[t]hey found it too slow at home’ (p. 16). Notwithstanding the material differences between Caddagat and Possum Gully, Franklin raises the idea that divisions in living standards are not solely down to money, but also to land management and education. Richard Melvyn is clearly unsuited to stock trading and lacks the knowledge of irrigation that benefits Caddagat. Sybylla notes the differences in her letter to Gertie:

They have great squawking about the drought up here. I wish they could see Goulburn, and then they’d know what drought means ... everyone calls the paddocks about the house an oasis. You see there are such splendid facilities for irrigation here. (p. 143)

Possum Gully is associated with old-fashioned agricultural methods, using buckets instead of irrigation, and Franklin implies that water scarcity is a greater burden even than the absence of money. Sybylla’s descriptions of the drought evoke images of a hellscape:

The scorching furnace-breath winds shrivelled every blade of grass, dust and the moan of starving stock filled the air, vegetables became a thing of the past. The calves I reared died one by one, and the cows followed in their footsteps. (p. 33)

The consequences of living at the mercy of the ‘raging wind’ and the ‘cruel dazzling brilliance of the metal sky’ is debilitating. Sybylla’s refrain across of the novel of the ‘weariness’ of life at Possum Gully gives voice to Franklin’s repudiation of sentimental representations of country life, asserting that ‘Summer is fiendish and life is a curse’ (p. 41).

Franklin’s evident pride in the rugged beauty of her country is apparent in her lyrical descriptions. It seems the majestic landscape holds the same mystery and delight for her as it did for her literary compatriots:

The weird witchery of mighty bush, the breath of wide sunlit plains, the sound of camp-bells and jingle of hobble chains, floating on the soft twilight breezes, had come to these men and had written a tale on their hearts as had been written on mine. The glory of the starlit heavens, the mighty wonder of the sea, and the majesty of thunder had come home to them, and the breathless fulness of the sunset hour had whispered of something more than the humour of tomorrow’s weather. The wind and rain had a voice which spoke to Kendall ... I pored with renewed zeal over the terse realism and pathos of Lawson, and enjoyed Paterson’s redolence of the rollicking side of the wholesome life beneath these sunny skies ... (pp. 92-93)

At other times, nature’s beauty is redundant and fails to soothe Sybylla’s anxiety. In this manner, pathetic fallacy is deployed classically to reflect the protagonist’s emotional state. After overhearing aunt Helen warn Everard Grey not to seduce her innocent niece, an affronted Sybylla retreats to the Caddagat orchard and is immune to the pastoral delights:

Bees were busy, and countless bright-coloured butterflies flitted hither and thither, sipping from hundreds of trees, white or pink with bloom—their beauty was lost upon me. I stood ankle-deep in violets, where they had run wild under a gnarled old apple-tree, and gave way to my wounded vanity. (p. 117)

Franklin’s diverse representations of rural life are unflinching in their realism, and unabashed in their patriotic pride. Henry Lawson foreshadows this duality in his Preface:

The descriptions of bush life and scenery came startlingly, painfully real to me ... (p. xv)

Franklin’s defining image of country Australia is as contradictory as her heroine. It is a land where a ‘sunburnt bushman’ has ‘the sadness of the bush deep in his eyes’ and ‘where every third bushman is a poet, with a big heart that keeps his pockets empty’ (Lawson, Preface). This combination of kindness, suffering and fortitude reflects Franklin’s endorsement of the best of the Australian identity. Those character traits are projected onto the land itself, where ‘great wreaths of magnificent white bloom’ exist alongside the proprietary magpies who ‘built their nests in the tall gumtrees, and savagely attacked unwary travellers who ventured too near their domain’. Franklin’s Australia is a place where man is gradually extending his hold upon the landscape, but still needs to be respectful of its bounds. When humankind can exist harmoniously on the land, as the Bossiers have learned to at Caddagat, ‘it was good to be alive!’ (p. 128).

## Status and class in rural Australia

Franklin’s portrayal of rural Australia seems firmly rooted in its own class system. Despite its egalitarian principles, there is a distinct hierarchy, both uniquely Australian and a legacy of its colonial past. Across the novel, Sybylla traverses the social divisions, experiencing the grinding poverty of the peasant class, the bourgeoisie comforts of the squattocracy, whilst also witnessing the plight of the swagmen and the rise of parvenus such as the Irish M’Swat family, wealthy but without the education or formal property to be admitted the status of swelldom.

The swagmen represent the rural proletariat, dispossessed itinerant men who rely on the charity of strangers. The 'great army' who comprised 'all shapes, sizes, ages, kinds, and conditions of men' (p. 147) are portrayed compassionately, contradicting the prevailing assumption that the 'crawling devils are terrified' of work (p. 149). Working class life is demystified by Franklin, who, through Sybylla's narrative, rebuts the 'genteel and artistic' representations of dairy farming 'eulogized in ... agricultural newspapers' (p. 31), instead presenting an unvarnished view of 'practical dairying', which involves earning a 'scant livelihood by the heavy sweat of our brows' (p. 33). Albeit this life is a 'purgatory' (p. 32) for Sybylla due to her artistic sensibilities, Franklin proudly asserts the identity of the Australian working class proclaiming through Sybylla:

We were not ashamed to look day in the face, and fought our way against all odds ... (p. 33)

The squattocracy, the landed upper middle class, is in effect a ruling class. The term is a derisive play on words for the British term 'aristocracy'. The squatters were typically wealthy men who had come to Australia in search of new opportunities, and they held large land holdings passed down to subsequent generations. Notably, both the Melvyn and Bossier family have English lineage, although Franklin skewers any pretensions of grandeur, mocking the Bossiers 'who numbered among their ancestry one of the depraved old pirates who pillaged England with William the Conqueror.' (p. 7).

British culture, and more specifically its class system, is a clear target for Franklin's ire. The nationalist sentiment that underpins the novel stands in defiant opposition to the social structures of its colonisers. It is notable that the British characters prove wanting in comparison to their Australian counterparts, apparent in the caricatured descriptions of Frank Hawden and even Everard Grey. Both men come from wealthy, respectable families but this does not recommend them to Sybylla. The petulant Frank Hawden, who will inherit extensive property and 'comes of a high family', is insufficiently manly to interest Sybylla, who respects honest toil over inherited privilege, claiming she 'would not marry him or anyone like him though he were the King of England' (p. 125). Indeed, Harold Beecham is a more palatable marital prospect when he loses his fortune because it places them on a more equal footing. Similarly, Everard Grey cannot be seriously entertained as a suitor. Despite his charm and artistic connections, he still has 'a typically aristocratic English face ... cold rather heartless, which is as established a point of an English blue blood' and he is

ultimately reduced to the pleasant but insubstantial status of 'a veritable carpet knight' (p. 103). This further implicit comparison to the 'open pleasant face' (p. 131) and 'big brown hands' (p. 160) of the physically superior (and Australian) Harold Beecham is clear, particularly as 'the bushmen up-country' never shaved 'during the week for anything less than a ball' (p. 161). Franklin's appreciation of the raw and rugged extends beyond the landscape and is also projected onto this iteration of Australian masculinity, devoid of the vanity attributed to the foppish British.

## Inclusion and belonging

A prevailing idea is Franklin's identification of the importance of belonging and connection. The novel is primarily interested in Sybylla's futile quest to find a congenial sphere where her spirit no longer 'frets and champs its unbreakable fetters' (p. 2) but it recognises that others are disconnected, ignored, or marginalised.

The most obvious oversight is the experience or even existence of Indigenous Australians. *My Brilliant Career* is a story of Australia, but only according to the false consciousness of colonial Australia that failed to recognise the racial inequality and oppression for which it was responsible. It is a story that indirectly reveals much about the colonial psyche, not only in its disregard of First Nations people, but also in its xenophobia towards the migrant classes.

The opening chapter establishes a pattern of 'othering', not only of different nations, but of atypical behaviours. The spirited young Sybylla relishes the freedom of the bush, exploring with her father. When she cries aloud 'Boo hoo! ... The pain, the pain! Boo, hoo!' (p. 5), she is swiftly admonished for her emotional outburst. Even from the tender age of three, Sybylla is conditioned to regulate her emotions, maintain polite discourse and conform to the expected feminine etiquette. Sybylla is implicitly warned against becoming a savage: 'Daddy's little mate isn't going to turn Turk like that, is she?' (p. 5). His language alludes to the broader notion in settler populations that oriental cultures were barbaric and inferior to western Christian cultures. More broadly, Sybylla is reproved for unladylike behaviour, with Mrs Bossier despairing, 'I don't know what makes you so forward with men.' (p. 221,) and Frank Hawden decrying her 'A hideous barbarian' (p. 189), which further represents her as different and outside of mainstream society, a savage who must be tamed to conform.

Less widely understood is Sybylla's atheism, which she confesses to readers. In a nineteenth century colonial context, a Christian identity provided a sense of purpose and belonging, but her loss of faith

proves another burden. Sybylla admits to ‘ask[ing] the Christians around me for help’ before realising her folly in broaching such a taboo subject. She reports that ‘I might as well have announced that I was a harlot.’ as her confidants ‘... washed their hands of me at once.’ (p. 66).

Whilst Franklin appears uncomfortable with the intolerance shown to Sybylla, she is more ambivalent in other cases. Sybylla typically demonstrates empathy for her fellow man, and even when she finds fault, her criticisms are usually tempered with humanity. She despises her father at fifteen but concedes that her youthful certainty made ‘no allowance for human frailty’ (p. 28). However, on the rare occasion when Aboriginal Australians are referenced, her language is devoid of its usual generosity and is highly derogatory:

Harold Beecham kept a snivelling little Queensland black boy as a sort of black-your-boots, odd-jobs, slavey or factotum, and he came to Dogtrap for the mail ... (p. 173)

Sybylla’s scornful tone identifies Harold’s worker in the most demeaning terms, denying him any sense of humanity or dignity. Franklin is highly cognisant of the prejudices endured by women, but she appears tin-eared in such moments as her own racial bias is exposed.

There are a number of Irish characters who feature in the novel who seem to exist on the margins of settler society, either as manual workers, figures of fun or caricatures like the M’Swat family. At Caddagat, Sybylla dresses up as ‘a fat old Irish woman, with a smudge of dirt on my face’ that elicits ‘a general laugh’ (p. 105), essentially blacking her face to entertain Julius

Bossier and Everard Grey at the expense of their Irish compatriots. At Barney’s Gap, Irishness is equated with savage primitivism (Dalziell, 2004) as Sybylla describes the semi-naked children and their ‘wide hanging-open mouths’ in grotesque terms, explaining that ‘parts of them which should have been covered were exposed to view’ (p. 286). The absence of Indigenous representation, and the pejorative descriptions of the Irish, cement the view that nineteenth century rural Australia had little interest, respect or tolerance for different cultures and ethnicities.

A suspicion or fear of foreigners extends to the migrant community as well. Again, such references are brief and remain at the margins of the text. Sybylla remembers Italian workers, ‘a score of two dark-browed sons of Italy’, digging near Bruggabrong who ‘made mother nervous’. In this matter, Sybylla does not share her mother’s suspicions ‘they were not to be trusted’, presumably because they ‘carried [her] on their broad shoulders’ (indulging her tomboyishness) and ‘stuffed [her] with lollies’ (p. 9). As a child, Sybylla seems more willing to accept people on face value, but as she matures, she becomes more inured to mainstream prejudices, particularly in relation to Irish and First Nations communities.

Thus, Franklin’s ideas about Australia and her address to ‘MY DEAR FELLOW AUSTRALIANS’ (p. 1) is not as inclusive as it might first appear. She is passionately concerned about the future of the nation, and she is a fierce advocate for the working class and for women’s rights, but her social consciousness is limited in its scope, failing to recognise the wider injustices in her society.



## Language and style

The language of *My Brilliant Career* is distinctly Australian. The story itself is framed as a ‘yarn’ (p. 1). Franklin employs bush vernacular, idioms, diction and lexicon to demark character, culture and class. Sybylla is rebuked by her refined mother for ‘getting very vulgar’ when she uses idiomatic phrases such as ‘Cook, be grannied!’ (p. 47) to express contempt for domestic duties. Sybylla’s jocularity and insouciance are also aptly defined by Mrs Bossier’s disapproval of her ‘larrikinism’ (p. 221). Employment and status are also identified by the emerging national language with men ‘going on the wallaby’, working as ‘jackaroos’, or living as ‘squats’ and ‘swells’ on stations or with their worldly possessions packed up in a ‘swag’. Franklin’s sense of nationhood is reflected in the dialogue of her characters, evident when Sybylla admires the ‘slow twangy drawl’ of Harold Beecham, which ‘would have proclaimed his Colonial nationality anywhere’ (p. 210). Their courtship is characterised by unromantic discourse and quintessentially Australian ‘straight talking’. Harold is often self-deprecating, and he speaks colloquially, shortening words and using nicknames, suggesting an intimacy and equality between them, and a relationship that is free from pretension and rank distinction. When they argue after she strikes him in a rage, he reassures her:

It doesn’t matter, Syb ... I suppose you thought you couldn’t affect my dark, old, saddle-flap-looking phiz. That is one of the disadvantages of being a big lumbering concern like I am. (p. 213)

Elsewhere the cadence of accent and dialect, particularly of working class and migrant characters, is captured. When Sybylla imitates an Irish woman, the mockery and condescension of the accent and ignorance is implied through phonetic spelling: ‘Shure, sir, seeing it was a good bhoy yez were afther to run errants ...’ (p. 106), a pattern that extends into the portraits of the similarly inarticulate M’Swat family and into servants like Jane Haizelip.

Sybylla’s own rhetoric is childish. Her dialogue and internal monologue is typically marked with melodramatic exclamations and repetitions, epitomised when the three-year-old Sybylla burns her hands on her father’s smoking pipe:

Boo, hoo! Ow, ow; Oh! oh! Me’ll die. Boo, hoo. The pain, the pain! Boo, hoo! (p. 5)

Sybylla’s pain is expressed melodramatically throughout the novel. By the end, Sybylla is no longer burning her hands by reaching for things that are

forbidden. Perhaps this is a metaphorical acceptance of women’s fate when First Wave Feminism was still limited in its scope, mostly concerned with voting rights rather than broader equality and she is reconciled (dramatically) to her fate:

And my heart is weary. Oh, how it aches tonight—not with the ache of a young heart passionately crying out for battle, but with the slow dead ache of an old heart returning vanquished and defeated! (p. 390)

Although the novel traces her childhood and teenage years, it is not a classic *bildungsroman* in that Sybylla barely reaches a better understanding of herself and her world by the resolution. Rather than becoming a traditional rites-of-passage tale, the basis of Sybylla’s story is an articulation of her pain that will not be absolved. Sybylla’s anguished story forms a rhetorical protest against the narrow role that nineteenth century society assigned to women and by the novel’s conclusion there is little growth for Sybylla whose ‘life is still the same’ (p. 389). Unlike her brother Horace, Sybylla cannot ‘[leave] the family roof’ and ‘set out on horseback ... with all [her] earthly possessions strapped before [her]’ (p. 354).

The novel is ironic in tone. Irony is used to convey Sybylla’s dissatisfactions and to highlight the absurdities and inconsistencies that she encounters. The novel’s title is the most obvious example as the plot is based on Sybylla’s growing recognition that a career is not considered appropriate for a woman, brilliant or otherwise. The chapter titles are often ironic, too. Chapter 4: ‘A Career Which Soon Careered to an End’ ironically foreshadows Dick Melvyn’s spectacular and largely self-inflicted failures. There is a sense of dramatic irony as Sybylla recounts the events leading to his loss of fortune, as the first chapter had previously forewarned that in the past Dick was ‘a swell’ (p. 7) before revealing that she ‘developed curious ideas on the fifth commandment<sup>4</sup>’ when she had to fetch her drunken father from the pub, an experience that challenges her mother’s teaching that Sybylla ‘should honour my parents, whether they were deserving of honour or not’ (p. 28).

There is also a degree of parody, with Franklin at times humorously imitating the melodramatic and sentimental conventions of romance novels. From the outset, Sybylla reassures her readers, ‘[d]o not fear encountering such trash descriptions of beautiful sunsets and whisperings of wind’ (p. 2), yet there are occasions when her lampooning of romantic tropes and clichés subsides into a more sincere imitation of the genre, narrating the girlish thrill of walking with



Harold on a 'glorious summer day' (p. 248) as he takes her hands and declares, 'You are the best little woman in the world', leading to 'sweet, sweet thoughts of youth and love' (p. 250). Elsewhere, her insistence that 'vain and foolish imagining' should be left to 'poets and painters—poor fools!' (p. 2) is belied by her giddy response to Harold's potent masculinity, 'I could feel the heat of his body, and his big heart beating wildly' (p. 240), which elicits 'the most thrilling, electric, and exquisite sensation known' (p. 241).

The tension between romance and realism, parody and authentic experience, is characteristic of Franklin's novel and her inconsistent and unreliable narrator. Sybylla bemoans her appearance, '[a] very ugly spectacle' (p. 87) and she judges men harshly for their fallibilities, 'Provided a woman is beautiful ... men will stand by her ...' (pp. 61-62). Sybylla yet proves unexpectedly popular with men, particularly at Caddagat. As aunt Helen understands, 'faces which might have few if any pretensions to beauty' can still be regarded as 'brilliant' (p. 99). There is an unconventional pattern established in Sybylla's first and last meeting with Harold Beecham: on both occasions she is dirty, dishevelled and dressed as a servant or, in the 'working uniform of the Australian peasantry' (p. 359). Sybylla is mortified when Harold surprises her at Possum Gully, 'imagining with a keen pain that [he] must be wondering how ... he could have been foolish enough to fancy such an object' (p. 360), presuming he has transferred his affections to her prettier sister. He rebuts her assumptions, 'did you think I was that sort of fellow ...?' before modestly submitting, 'I know you are too clever for me; but I love you ...' (p. 371). Franklin implies that Harold is attracted to her spirit rather than her physical appearance, eroticising Sybylla's spirit and intelligence, which are the foundation of her aforementioned brilliance, proffering through such tensions a more progressive model for romantic heterosexual relationships.

Intertextuality is another prominent feature of the novel. Franklin incorporates numerous references to other writers from notable British and American muses (Rudyard Kipling, Charles Dickens and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow<sup>5</sup>) to national luminaries such as Adam Lindsay Gordon, Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson. These intertextual references illuminate and symbolise Sybylla's state of mind at various stages. She pores with 'renewed zeal over the terse realism and pathos of Lawson, and enjoyed Paterson's redolence of the rollicking side of the wholesome life beneath these sunny skies' (p. 93). The '*restless throbbings and burnings*' (p. 65) of Gordon resonate with her sense of frustration whilst Kipling's line '*The toad beneath the harrow knows / exactly where each tooth-point goes.*'<sup>6</sup> (p. 63) speaks to the futility of Sybylla's ambition. At Caddagat, her acclaimed recital of Longfellow's 'The Slave's Dream' (p. 105) is also significant. Although Franklin does not quote from the poem directly, Longfellow's verse calls for emancipation from slavery, alluding to the gender and class oppression Sybylla discerns in her own world.

<sup>4</sup> According to The Bible, the fifth commandment states: 'Honor thy father and thy mother.'

<sup>5</sup> Sybylla recites Longfellow's 'The Slave's Dream' to great acclaim whilst at Caddagat.

<sup>6</sup> From the poem 'Pagett, M.P.' by Rudyard Kipling (1886).

## Perspective on the text

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone.

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

The seminal ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft foregrounded the feminist discourse of which *My Brilliant Career* can now be considered a part. Even before the word feminism existed, Wollstonecraft radically addressed the ideological and structural biases that shaped traditional perceptions of women as infantile, weak and vain. In her ground-breaking treatise she responded to eighteenth century debate about the human rights accorded to men, but she interrupted the conversation to assert that the rights of women, including their religious and civil liberties, should also be considered. Further, she offered the enlightened view that if men could be corrupted by their ignorance (lack of education), as was believed, the same could be argued for women. Therefore, according to Wollstonecraft, similar access and rights should be granted to both men and women for the betterment of civilisation. Expressing sentiments that are certainly echoed by Sybylla Melvyn, Wollstonecraft (1792) criticises the status quo for ‘considering females rather as women than human creatures’, arguing that such a system limits the expectations of women who ‘with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition.’ With revolutionary fervour, Wollstonecraft argues that women should be considered as ‘human creatures’ whose purpose in life, ‘in common with men’, is to ‘unfold their faculties’ and earn respect through their ‘abilities and virtues’.

In Wollstonecraft’s words, students can locate Sybylla’s existential struggle:

My ambition was as boundless as the mighty bush ... It came home to me as a great blow that it was only men who could take the world by its ears and conquer their fate, while women, metaphorically speaking, were forced to sit with tied hands and patiently suffer as the waves of fate tossed them hither and thither. (pp. 60-61)

Her ironic repudiation of such gendered expectations is directly addressed to other girls like her, scathing in her delineation of the incompatibility of female intelligence (in her view, a desirable condition in women) and marriage (society’s expectation for women):

So, if you feel that you are afflicted with more than ordinary intelligence, and especially if you are plain with it, hide your brains, cramp your mind, study to appear unintellectual—it is your only chance. (p. 61)

*My Brilliant Career* makes clear that it was not yet possible for women to pursue personal ambition beyond marriage. In fact, Sybylla’s grand ambitions of a life on stage or as a writer are replaced (albeit temporarily) with the indignity of working as a governess for the M’Swats, involuntarily providing her labour to repay her father’s debt, an ironic inversion of her desire to be free of a man’s control.

Thus, the scale of Franklin’s work extends beyond the maturation of its young, tortured heroine and demands to be read for more than what Henry Lawson called its ‘girlishly emotional parts’ (Lawson, Preface), dissecting with surprising savageness the insidious reach of male prerogative that shaped society and its expectations so much in favour of men. In Sybylla’s own acidic words:

... men, in this world, are “the dog on top” ... (p. 62)

In this regard, Franklin’s debut is a bold, albeit imperfect novel of a young woman’s howl against the establishment. It is a novel that reflects the Federation zeitgeist – a period imbued with a spirit of optimism, perhaps at odds with the ongoing lived realities of social, racial and gender inequities. As such, the novel is very much the product of its environment. Yet, in her introduction to the Text Classics edition, Jennifer Byrne attests that: ‘The mark of the classic is that it keeps talking to us even if it says different things to successive generations.’ (p. VII). For today’s students, likely coming to the novel for the first time, the exposure to a world of ‘swells’ and ‘squatters’ may seem as foreign as a first reading of Shakespeare. Nonetheless, there is an uncompromising defiance to the youthful angst of Sybylla Melvyn that is sure to resonate. Although Franklin’s central concern was the nineteenth century enslavement of women, her examination of the status quo, gendered expectations and performative identity still feels remarkably fresh over a century later. As Byrne notes, Australian society has evolved far beyond a world where ‘the horizon for women was so low’ (p. XIII), but a validation of living authentically, according to a clear set of principles, free from undue societal expectation and binary conceptions continues to evolve the conversation of *My Brilliant Career*.

The divisions are not just about money, but also management, education and class. (Martin, 2013)

Perhaps because of the ongoing influence of British culture, Franklin was clearly concerned about the apparent class-consciousness in Australia. The social and economic decline of the Melvyn family from swelldom to peasantry reflects this apprehension. When Richard Melvyn is swindled by the bishop's agent, who leaves them on the edge of ruin, they are almost reduced to the status of swagmen with no home or possessions, only avoiding this indignity due to 'the generosity of our relatives' (p. 43). Sybylla recalls the change in her parents' circumstances:

They were among and of the peasantry. None of their former acquaintances came within their circle now, for the iron ungodly hand of class distinction has settled surely down upon Australian society—Australia's democracy is only a tradition of the past. (p. 32)

Whilst this view of stratification is undoubtedly critical, Franklin is criticising the parochial snobbery of the landowners rather than demeaning the peasantry, who Sybylla describes as 'the bulwarks of every nation' but whose lives are narrowly defined by 'two states of existence—work and sleep.' (p. 32).

Franklin's attention to the working-class condition, and to the plight of the rural proletariat, is instructive in understanding the socialist and humanitarian dimensions of *My Brilliant Career*. Sybylla is keenly aware of the inequities in her world, namely the differing opportunities and living standards between the 'haves and have nots' that typically fuel class conflict. The squatters enjoy a comfortable life characterised by plentiful supplies, admirable homesteads and congenial hospitality, whereas the swagmen have been 'so long on the tramp that the ambitions of manhood had been ground out of them' (p. 147). Amongst these men, Sybylla can discern 'shame-faced' boys humiliated by the indignity of begging, and she can perceive 'strong men in their prime who really desired work' (p. 147). Unwilling to accept that this 'great army' of men could simply be written off as 'a lazy lot of sneaking creatures' (p. 149), Franklin raises the idea that 'the cause of tramps' was something Australia's legislators should be addressing. Their perceived moral failing is projected onto Julius Bossier who articulates a capitalist defence. 'Uncle Boss', secure in his own position as master of Caddagat, is unwilling to risk sharing his good fortune for the communal good:

'A law to make me cut up Caddagat and give ten of 'em each a piece, and go on the wallaby myself, I suppose?' (p. 149)

Summarily dismissed by Julius for being naïve, Sybylla's social consciousness alludes to the challenges that Franklin believed Federation Australia would face. Sybylla's humanitarian concerns are dismissed as 'silly ideas' (p. 149) as she admonishes 'our legislators' who would 'trouble not to be patriots or statesmen' (p. 148) to address the class-based poverty that was exacerbated by drought and depression. Franklin also acknowledges the partisan resentment of some swagmen who believed the squatters had 'monopolized the land' (p. 148), and the private greed that would threaten the sense of nationhood Australia was striving for, commodifying animals to drive the economy: 'Poor little calves! Slaves to the greed of man!' (p. 30). Although the divisions between the landowners (squatters) and the proletariat (swagmen) were defined by uniquely Australian vernacular, the simmering conflict represents a timeless power struggle, an old problem for a new world.

A possible antidote to the class divisions is conceived in the splendence of Five Bob Downs. For all its grandeur and material comforts, 'plenty of house-room, tennis courts ... any number of horses, vehicles, orchards, gardens' (p. 169), Harold Beecham's 'immense station' is an egalitarian and hospitable environment, where 'overseer[s], jackeroos, and other employees were all allowed the freedom of the home' (p. 169), perhaps representing a model for a more inclusive and classless society. Significantly, Five Bob Downs is also a reminder that Australian society attributed greater value to land, property and money, rather than family or position. In this new world order, Franklin accepts that social mobility is fluid and will be based on circumstances and fortune rather than any ordained right. Consider, Harold's financial losses are attributed to economic forces whereas Richard Melvyn inherited substantial property and lost it all largely due to his pride and ineptitude.

In Franklin's Australia, a new spirit of societal 'mateship' is fitting for a nation wishing to divest itself of its elitist structures and veneration for the British. For the egalitarian Sybylla, a prince and a shearer will be accorded the same respect until their virtues (not their position) demand any greater respect:

My organ of veneration must be flatter than a pancake, because to venerate a person simply for his position I never did or will. To me the Prince of Wales will be no more than a shearer, unless when I meet him he displays some personality apart from his princeliness—otherwise he can go hang. (p. 8)

## Close study

### Sybylla's awakening / the mirror scene

Chapter 10, pp. 96-99

**'Aunt Helen hustled me off to dress ... "brilliant is the word which best describes you."**

After a couple of weeks at Caddagat, Sybylla has been taken in hand by aunt Helen who oversees every aspect of the way she presents herself to polite society. Forbidden from looking at herself in the mirror whilst Helen tries to 'cultivate a little more healthy girlish vanity', Sybylla is subjected to a routine intended to make her 'presentable ... and [r]ub off some ... gloomy pessimism' (p. 89). Accustomed to looking sunburnt and tomboyish, this scene signifies a transformation for Sybylla as she is presented with a new image of herself, and for the first time her reflection is met with 'pleased surprise'. Helen's keen eye adorns Sybylla's best traits 'to perfection' altering her 'almost beyond recognition' (p. 98), restoring her youth and vitality so that Sybylla believes 'I did not look out of the way ugly' (p. 99).

#### Suggested questions for discussion

- Why is physical appearance so connected to a person's self-image and self-worth?
- What role do light and mirrors play in this scene?
- What does Sybylla's language suggest about her own and others' attitudes to appearance? ('half-rigged', 'decked in my first evening dress', 'donned full war-paint', 'endanger one's health ... what can be more beautiful?')
- For a possible extension, have students research Jacques Lacan's 'Concept of Mirror Stage' and consider how this theory might deepen their understanding of Sybylla's experience in this moment.

### Harold and Sybylla's power struggle / the whip scene

Chapter 20, pp. 208-214

**'He ordered Joe Archer to play a waltz ... Harold entered by one door and I by another, and I slipped into a seat as though I had been there some time.'**

During Sybylla's stay at Five Bob Downs, Harold hosts a ball and proposes to Sybylla for the first time. Sybylla is taken aback by Harold's understated proposal, making presumptions on his behalf that he would not be attracted to her. Partly because she is caught off-guard, but mostly because his down-to-earth proposal is insufficiently romantic for Sybylla, she accepts out of malice, secretly vowing to 'take the conceit out of

you when the time comes' (p. 210). Due to her mixed feelings of surprise, wounded pride and anger, and because she has a 'tendency to strike when touched' (p. 211), Sybylla hits Harold with a horse whip when he tries to kiss, eliciting the briefest glimpse of his infamous temper. Ultimately, Harold is revealed to be a gentleman whose feelings for Sybylla are genuine. In her later years, Sybylla understands that it was not conceit that motivated Harold's modest proposal but 'his quiet unpretending way' and that '[h]e had meant all his actions towards me, and had taken mine in return' (p. 210). This scene is a pivotal moment in their relationship and reveals much about the shifting power dynamics and their ultimately irreconcilable different desires.

#### Suggested questions for discussion

- How are Harold's power and possessiveness revealed?
- How does Franklin imply Sybylla's ambivalence towards Harold and to marriage?
- What role does the older Sybylla (narrating the scene) play?
- Why does Sybylla feel such remorse for her actions?

### Sybylla's ambition and despair

Chapter 7, pp. 60-67

**'As a tiny child, I was filled with dreams of the great things I was to do when grown up ... at the age of sixteen I was as rank a cynic and infidel as could be found in three days' march.'**

Early in the novel, Franklin sets out the central dilemmas facing Sybylla. As a child she had grand ambitions until 'it dawned upon [her] that [she] was ... Only a girl!' (p. 61), an indignity compounded by the feeling that she was 'woefully out of [her] sphere' (p. 62) and unable to solve the problems of humankind, a fate she believes consigns her to isolation as 'a creature out of her sphere ... without a sphere' who is doomed to be 'a lonely being!' (p. 66). In this section of interior monologue, Sybylla unfolds her sorrows, frustrations and keen sense of injustice, through which Franklin offers one of the clearest insights into Sybylla's conflicted character.

#### Suggested questions for discussion

- What does this passage reveal about nineteenth century gendered expectations?
- Why might an intelligent and well-read individual struggle in the rural environment of Possum Gully?
- How does Franklin suggest that Sybylla's concerns extend beyond her own self-pity?
- What role does faith and/or religion typically play in a person's life? Why does Sybylla's loss of faith add to her struggles?



## Further activities

### Compare and contrast the film adaptation to the novel

Gillian Armstrong's 1979 film could certainly enhance students' understanding of the core ideas in Franklin's novel and encourage them to consider where the original novel sits on the Feminist continuum, and as part of the ongoing evolution of gender roles and personal liberties in society.

It would be interesting and instructive to compare the ending of Franklin's novel with the altered ending of Armstrong's film. Whereas the novel ends with Sybylla seemingly reconciled to an ongoing life of struggle, with no career to fulfil her, Armstrong, in the midst of Second Wave Feminism, offers a more optimistic message. Sybylla, played by actor Judy Davis, still rejects Harold Beecham (portrayed by actor Sam Neill), but rather than accepting failure in the personal and professional facets of her life, the final shot reveals Sybylla posting a manuscript to a prospective publisher.

### Four corners

Sybylla is a divisive, contradictory and complex character. Students may find it helpful to interrogate her decisions and actions as they form their interpretations of her character, and of others.

Statements could be provided to students which require them to choose one of the 'four corner' positions.

<b>STRONGLY AGREE</b>	<b>AGREE</b>
<b>DISAGREE</b>	<b>STRONGLY DISAGREE</b>

They should then form and defend a supported position in relation to different key moments in the text:

- There is nothing redeemable about the character Sybylla Melvyn.
- Sybylla should have married Harold Beecham.
- Sybylla should have married Frank Hawden.
- Lucy Melvyn should not have sent Sybylla to Barney's Gap.
- Richard Melvyn deserves more sympathy.
- Nineteenth century Australia was a classless society.
- Harold Beecham is the more sympathetic character in the novel.

These discussions could then be used to develop sample paragraphs as students practise articulating their ideas and integrating appropriate evidence to support their arguments.

### The particular and the universal

*My Brilliant Career* is an historic novel that provides insight into late nineteenth century life. In many ways it is an historic document of a world that no longer exists; in others, it still feels remarkably current in its examination of individual struggle, societal challenges, and the quest for identity and personal fulfilment.

Ask students to identify elements of the novel which are historic (only applicable to Sybylla's world), and which are universal (can be connected to their own world, or any time and place).

Issues such as class, gender and societal norms, and the search for purpose, happiness and acceptance might be considered timeless whereas particular concerns such as the depression and drought of the 1890s and the pre-feminist rights of women (now largely achieved) might be attributed more directly to the context of the novel.

In such discussions, it will be interesting to note where these ideas intersect. Whilst women's position in society has certainly advanced since the 1890s, students may well recognise areas where advancements for women and other traditionally marginalised groups are still needed. Economic and environmental challenges can also still affect the quality of a person's life with external forces such as economic depression (inflation, cost-of-living crises etc.) and climate events contributing to the hardships that ordinary people can face, fundamentally shaping the course of their lives. Contemporary discourse about the proposed Indigenous Voice to parliament and referendum, and the path to reconciliation for First Nations people might also extend the scope of discussion, particularly in reference to the minimal representation in Franklin's novel, indicative of a broader literary 'silence' about the treatment and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians due to colonisation.



## Tips for deconstructing topics and planning responses

- The final examination and the assessment in both Unit 3 and Unit 4 for Area of Study 1 'Reading and responding to texts' require students to develop effective strategies for analysing and interpreting the ways authors present and explore ideas, concerns and values.
- It is essential that students respond directly to the wording and main ideas of the topic selected. They must also definitively resolve the topic, presenting a clear and nuanced view that engages with the topic's implications.
- Students must develop a laser-like focus on deconstructing and responding to topics on a range of relevant ideas, drawing on their text understanding to produce thoughtful and well-supported interpretations.
- Students will need to be supported with appropriate vocabulary and structures to demonstrate their knowledge and skills optimally.
- Explicit teaching of historical terms, literary and analytical metalanguage is recommended to support this process. Teachers may find it beneficial to pre-teach vocabulary before commencing with the text and to model correct uses of that vocabulary in class regularly, through a combination of live modelling and sample responses that should be aspirational but achievable for students.
- Regular low-stakes writing across the study is recommended to help students develop the confidence and vocabulary to express their ideas accurately. 'Quick writes' (10-15 minutes with a clear focus and success criteria) at the start of lessons or for homework can efficiently establish the writing routine in classrooms, and can gradually foster independence and students' self-regulation of their learning.
- Providing paragraph and essay scaffolds and sentence stems can help students to experience early success in their writing, fueling their motivation to continue working and improving.
- The new VCE English Study Design (Units 3-4; 2024-2027) requires students to engage with the ideas, concerns and values of authors. Explicit teaching of these terms is recommended to help students understand what they mean and refer to in literary texts.

<i>My Brilliant Career</i>	Definition	Examples
<b>Ideas</b>	The questions raised by the text. What readers are encouraged to think about.	What prevented/s women from attaining freedom or pursuing careers? What role does the bush play in 19th century Australian life? What is necessary for a lasting romantic relationship?
<b>Concerns</b>	What disturbs or troubles the author about human nature and/or society. As depicted in the particular time and place of their narrative.	Gendered expectations and norms Societal judgement Hypocrisy regarding sexual conduct of men and women Lack of access to quality education for the working class
<b>Values</b>	What authors believe are positive and negative in society and human nature. Protagonists are usually admirable/ represent the positive attributes/ best of human nature/society Antagonists usually embody the negatives/ worst of human nature/society	Franklin values intelligence, courage, forbearance, virtue, humour etc. Franklin is critical of vice, weakness, vanity, arrogance, pride etc.

## A sample template for deconstructing essay topics

“Men, in this world, are ‘the dog on top’.” Do men hold all the power in *My Brilliant Career*?

<p><b>Ideas</b></p> <p>Interrogate the topic</p>	<p>Highlight or underline key words.</p> <p>Use a dictionary to define key words and gather synonyms/ antonyms.</p> <p>Divide the essay question in half.</p> <p>Ask questions of each half.</p>	<p>If a text quote is included in an essay topic, the quote and its ideas must be addressed within the response.</p> <p><b>“Men, in this world, are ‘the dog on top’.”</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What is implied when Sybylla describes men as ‘the dog on top?’</li> <li>- What is implied about the gender dynamics of Sybylla’s world</li> <li>- Are men <b>always</b> ‘the dog on top?’</li> </ul> <p><b>Do men hold all the power in <i>My Brilliant Career</i>?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What different forms of male power are present?</li> <li>- Where does this power stem from? How do men wield their power and what is its impact?</li> <li>- What, if any, power do female characters possess?</li> <li>- How would you define any examples of female power?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Interpretation</b></p> <p>What is your reading of this question?</p>	<p>Develop a thesis statement that sets out a clear and focused position in response to the topic</p>	<p>E.g. Whilst men in this patriarchal world are predominantly ‘the dog on top’, Franklin recognises the frailties and vulnerabilities of men who fail in business or who are disappointed in love.</p>
<p><b>Arguments (3-4)</b></p> <p>Brainstorm supporting argument and examples.</p> <p>Look for challenge invited by the topic – it’s rarely a straight yes or no answer.</p>	<p>Aim to use multiple examples from different places in the text to build your argument and to reflect Franklin’s ideas, values and concerns in the text.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The superiority and freedom of men is upheld by society (Frank Hawden’s wild oats/presumption to marry Sybylla; Everard Grey and Julius Bossier enjoy freedom as womanising bachelors; Colonel Bell’s treatment of aunt Helen)</li> <li>- Men hold power because they control lives of workers/ families (Harold Beecham/Richard Melvyn)</li> <li>- Male power is not an absolute and men are frail/flawed (respective business misfortunes of Richard Melvyn and Harold Beecham)</li> <li>- Women hold power because they are the gatekeepers of gendered expectations (Lucy Melvyn and Mrs Bossier’s views of Sybylla)</li> <li>- Women hold power in matters of the heart (Sybylla breaks Harold’s heart and turns his life upside down; notably, Harold seems an exception in this world as the only man apparently capable of fidelity and deserving of a woman’s love and trust. It is his misfortune that Sybylla cannot submit to his expectation of possessing her)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Conclusion</b></p> <p>Resolve the topic</p>	<p>Offer a clear position on the topic and evaluate authorial intention</p>	<p>Franklin’s ending reflects her apparent dismay that pre-Federation Australia was not yet ready to cede greater power to women. The novel reflects the belief that until societal attitudes regarding the value and role of women progressed, men would remain ‘the dog on top’, irrespective of whether they deserved that status and fortune.</p>

## Key quotes

We went to school, and in our dainty befrilled pinafores and light shoes were regarded as great swells by the other scholars. They for the most part were the children of very poor farmers, whose farm earnings were augmented by road-work, wood-carting, or any such labour which came within their grasp. All the boys went barefooted, also a moiety of the girls. The school was situated on a wild scrubby hill, and the teacher boarded with a resident a mile from it. He was a man addicted to drink, and the parents of his scholars lived in daily expectation of seeing his dismissal from the service.

It is nearly ten years since the twins (who came next to me) and I were enrolled as pupils of the Tiger Swamp public school. My education was completed there; so was that of the twins, who are eleven months younger than I ... it is the only school any of us have seen or known. There was even a time when father spoke of filling in the free forms for our attendance there. But mother—a woman's pride bears more wear than a man's—would never allow us to come to that. (pp. 19-20)

Sybylla's description of the local school reveals the inadequacy of rural education, and also reflects the deteriorating circumstances of the Melvyn family at Possum Gully. Lucy Melvyn is loath to send her children, preferring a governess, but must accept the reality of their situation. Whilst Dick Melvyn assures her this will be a temporary measure, Sybylla subsequently reveals that even her siblings were still in attendance many years later.

Franklin draws attention to the poverty of the school's children, looking more broadly at how the drought and depression had affected so many of the population, whose 'barefooted' children faced futures just as bleak, not least because of the poor educational provision, remotely situated and characterised by incompetent, alcoholic teachers. The aptly named Tiger Swamp school offers woeful education. As Sybylla and other poor rural children do not 'have good teachers' and cannot 'give up their time to study' (p. 47) like the Goulburn girls, there is scant chance for them to break the cycle of poverty that has ensnared their parents, suggesting they and their descendants will be trapped with little hope of upward social mobility.

A few light wind-smitten clouds made wan streaks across the white sky, haggard with the fierce relentless glare of the afternoon sun. Weariness was written across my mother's delicate careworn features, and found expression in my father's knitted brows and dusty face. Blackshaw was weary, and said so, as he wiped the dust, made mud with perspiration, off his cheeks. I was weary—my limbs ached with the heat and work. The poor beast stretched at our feet was weary. All nature was weary, and seemed to sing a dirge to that effect in the furnace-breath wind which roared among the trees on the low ranges at our back and smote the parched and thirsty ground. All were weary, all but the sun. He seemed to glory in his power, relentless and untiring, as he swung boldly in the sky, triumphantly leering down upon his helpless victims.

Weariness! Weariness!

This was my life—my life—my career, my brilliant career! I was fifteen—fifteen! A few fleeting hours and I would be old as those around me ... When young, no doubt they had hoped for, and dreamed of, better things—had even known them. But here they were. This had been their life; this was their career. It was, and in all probability would be, mine too. My life—my career—my brilliant career! (pp. 38-39)

The height of the drought is captured in Sybylla's embattled and disillusioned monologue. The weather is personified as a fierce and merciless opponent. The human cost of such exhaustive effort is laid bare in Sybylla's repeated exclamations about the omnipotent 'weariness' experienced by her parents, Mr Blackshaw, and herself. Even nature and the cows ('the poor beast') are wearied by the unrelenting glare of the sun which 'smote the parched and thirsty ground'. The sustaining force of the farmers' lives – the land – is starved of its most essential resource – water – thus farmers are prisoners of the weather just as much as they are prisoners of market forces that dictate the value of their livestock and produce. The impact of these desperate circumstances delivers an epiphany to the young Sybylla. At fifteen, she understands that she is witnessing her likely future, a realisation that coins the novel's eponymous, ironic title: this debilitating existence of drudgery and despair is to be 'my brilliant career!'

‘... I won’t let you put a finger on me till the three months are up ... till then, don’t for the life of you hint by word or sign that we have any sort of an arrangement between us.’ (p. 220)

I wondered what Harold thought of the woman he had selected as his future wife being shut up for being a “naughty girl”. The situation amused me exceedingly ... During the following fortnight I saw Harold a good many times at cricket-matches, hare-drives, and so forth, but he did not take any particular notice of me. I flirted and frolicked with my other young men friends, but he did not care. I did not find him an ardent or jealous lover. He was so irritatingly cool and matter-of-fact that I wished for the three months to pass so that I might be done with him, as I had come to the conclusion that he was barren of emotion or passion of any kind. (pp. 223-224)

Sybylla’s engagement to Harold Beecham is never conventional and is always caveated with conditions and equivocations. Despite his age and wealth, Sybylla dictates the terms of their relationship, something he indulges affectionately. Insisting that their engagement remain secret for three months until they are certain of their feelings, Sybylla forbids him disclosing any intimacy between them, and yet grows angry with him when he does not display jealousy at her flirting with other men, an action intended to provoke him (he later reveals it does, but he conceals his anger in accordance with Sybylla’s demand that he not betray their ‘arrangement’). Sybylla’s contradictory nature and immaturity are present in different ways; she fails to perceive Harold’s true passion, instead petulantly and callously planning to ‘be done with him’ because he does not play the ‘ardent or jealous lover’ of the romance novels that Sybylla claims to despise. It is perhaps fitting then that a mildly absurd situation eventuates when an engaged woman is confined to her room for ‘being a “naughty girl”’, reflecting both an infantilisation of women that Franklin rails against and a tacit acknowledgement that Sybylla lacks the etiquette and emotional intelligence to navigate the adult world, not least marriage.

**At noon—a nice, blazing, dusty noon—we halted within a mile of Caddagat for lunch. I could have easily ridden home for mine, but preferred to have it with the drovers for fun. The men boiled the billy and made the tea, which we drank out of tin pots, with tinned fish and damper off tin plates as the completion of the menu, Mr Ledwood and I at a little**

**distance from the men. Tea boiled in a billy at a bush fire has a deliciously aromatic flavour, and I enjoyed my birthday lunch immensely. Leaving the cook to collect the things and put them in the spring-cart, we continued on our way, lazily lolling on our horses and chewing gum-leaves as we went. (pp. 227-228)**

The Australian landscape is as changeable as Sybylla. Often an adversary at Possum Gully, at Caddagat, it is a pastoral idyll – a form of paradise (before the Hell of Barney’s Gap and the purgatory of Possum Gully), which yields some of Sybylla’s most contented moments. The occasion of Sybylla’s birthday affords her the opportunity to enjoy the companionship of the drovers, and to delight in the freedom and simplicity of life on the land, away from the formal etiquette of the dining room and the matriarchal restraints of Mrs Bossier. Sybylla’s languid descriptions evoke an almost utopian view of bush life, signified by billy tea, damper and gum-leaves. Sybylla receives the best gift she could wish for, spending the day romping on horseback, amidst men whose company she can enjoy without romantic or matrimonial complications.

**Our greatest heart-treasure is a knowledge that there is in creation an individual to whom our existence is necessary—some one who is part of our life as we are part of theirs, some one in whose life we feel assured our death would leave a gap for a day or two. And who can this be but a husband or wife? Our parents have other children and themselves, our brothers and sisters marry and have lives apart, so with our friends; but one’s husband would be different. And I had thrown behind me this chance; but in the days that followed I knew that I had acted wisely. (pp. 352-353)**

Notwithstanding her mixed feelings for Harold Beecham, Sybylla expresses the desire, or at least recognises why such a desire might exist, for a ‘soul mate’, someone ‘who is part of our life as we are part of theirs’. There is a degree of pathos as she wonders: ‘And who can this be but a husband or wife?’ Having rejected Harold with such finality and ‘thrown behind me this chance’, it is clear that Sybylla will be unlikely to find someone with whom to share this sacred bond. Instead, her brave choice to maintain her freedom and not submit to a man’s control will deliver a potentially lonely future but one that she alone will determine, and she takes comfort in the wisdom of her choice, knowing that it was the right one for her.



## Analytical text response topics

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1. “Men, in this world, are ‘the dog on top.’”  
Do men hold all the power in *My Brilliant Career*?
2. ‘In *My Brilliant Career*, characters must compromise to adapt to their circumstances and environment.’  
Discuss.
3. How does *My Brilliant Career* convey the struggles of characters, and of the evolving nation?
4. ‘Sybylla believes that she understands her world, but she never really understands herself.’  
Do you agree?
5. “The iron ungodly hand of class distinction has settled surely down upon Australian society ...”  
How does *My Brilliant Career* reveal the ways that a character’s class and position in society determine their fate?
6. To what extent are Franklin’s characters ultimately disappointed in their lives?
7. “The scorching furnace-breath winds shrivelled every blade of grass ...”  
To what extent are the characters in *My Brilliant Career* shown to be at the mercy of the Australian landscape?
8. Does any character ever have a ‘brilliant career’ in Franklin’s novel?

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