

MY BRILLIANT CAREER & MY CAREER GOES BUNG

MILES FRANKLIN

Teachers' notes

ISBN: 9780732296919



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Contents

- Introduction
 - About the author/illustrator
 - Author/illustrator inspiration
 - Study notes on themes and curriculum topics:
- a) **CURRICULUM AREAS**
ENGLISH: Language, Literacy and Literature
HISTORY: Historical Knowledge and Understanding
THE ARTS: Making
- b) **THEMES**
Feminism
Societal Expectations
Class Distinctions
- Questions for reading and discussion
 - Bibliography
 - About the author of the notes

Introduction

My Brilliant Career is a fictional autobiography narrated by the protagonist Sybylla Melvyn, a teenager frustrated by the lack of options for women and the monotony of daily life in rural NSW. When the family farm fails her parents can no longer afford to keep her at home so she is sent to stay with her wealthier grandmother. At Caddagat, Sybylla appreciates a more cultured life enjoying music and literature, which fuels her dubious ambition of becoming a writer. Despite her low self-esteem she catches the attention of a suitor named Harold Beecham. Their courtship is laboured and filled with many misunderstandings. Harold makes several offers of marriage but Sybylla is reluctant to accept despite her attraction.

The high-life is short lived and Sybylla is sent to work off her father's debt by caring for the children of a lower class family. Upon returning home to Possum Gully she chooses not to be married, even though Harold's fortunes would provide a more comfortable life than the drudgery she is forced to endure in the Melvyn family. Sybylla ultimately rejects the idea of marriage and the expectations of society in favour of a life and career of her own.

The sequel *My Career Goes Bung* is Miles Franklin's attempt at setting the record straight regarding the autobiographical nature of *My Brilliant Career*. The real Sybylla is revealed as she tells the story of how her first story (the original novel) got published. Sybylla faces criticism as she tries to persuade locals and readers from afar that she fabricated many of the events and people from her autobiography. She becomes entangled with Henry Beauchamp, an Australian squatter whom people are convinced is the hero of her imagination: Harold Beecham. He proposes marriage and heads to Queensland for her to ponder the offer.

Sybylla is invited to Sydney where she has become somewhat of a novelty to the high society and literati of Sydney, only to be faced with further marriage proposals, which confirms the impending need to earn a living or be forced to submit to marriage. Upon returning to Possum Gully she believes her career and ideas of romance and marriage have gone bung and decides to follow her dreams abroad in London.

About the author/illustrator

Stella Mariah Sarah Miles Franklin, known as Miles Franklin, was born in the Australian bush in 1879. She is best known for her debut novel *My Brilliant Career*, which was first published in Britain in 1901. Following this publication, Franklin moved to the US where she worked for the National Women's Trade Union of America. She relocated to London in 1915 where she assisted wounded soldiers and campaigned for various women's causes. She returned to Australia in 1927 and published *Up the Country* in 1928, the first of six novels under the pseudonym 'Brent of Bin Bin'. She confirmed her place in the literary world in 1936 with the publication of the instant classic *All That Swagger*, which won the S.H Prior Memorial Prize. Miles Franklin died in 1954 at the age of 74. Her greatest contribution to Australian literature was the foundation of a literary award that was left in her will. The Miles Franklin Literary award is Australia's most prestigious literary prize and is awarded annually to the novel of the highest literary merit that represents Australian life in any of its phases.

Study notes on themes and curriculum topics

This text will be useful in addressing National Curriculum objectives for years 10 and above and for studying Australian literature and feminism at a university level.

Learning Outcomes

Students will have the opportunity to:

- Understand that Standard Australian English in its spoken and written forms has a history of evolution and change.
- Evaluate individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts to their own.
- Consider how the use of a structural device, such as a female narrator, may influence female readers to respond sympathetically to an event or issue.
- Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts.
- Evaluate how responses to text and genres may change over time.
- Investigate and reflect on the themes of nationality and gender in Australian literature.
- Make relevant thematic and intertextual connections with other texts.
- Examine the inter-relations between writing and political movements and ideologies of the late nineteenth century.
- Consider how the conventions of genre can be challenged, manipulated or parodied.
- Consider living and working conditions in Australia around the turn of the twentieth century.

Themes

Feminism

Feminism is a movement to improve the equality of the sexes. Sybylla appears to be ahead of her time with an awareness of how different the world would be if women had the same options as men. She rebels against the limited options of women despite being told by everyone in her life that she can't expect any more than what her gender offers. Men, like Harold Beecham, feared women with feminist ideals: 'You'll grow into one of those dreadful female agitators — eccentric women that men hate. You'll get the name of a man-hater if you don't take care' (p.248). Sybylla reveals her hatred for men on several occasions; however, her hate is most likely jealousy and a lack of respect for the way women are expected to worship them. It is when Sybylla is near Harry that she struggles the most with her feminist ideals, suggesting that she is open to the love of a man. She is torn between her yearning for romance and her desire for independence. Sybylla is in search for a career that will bring her independence from men and suggests to her Uncle that she would prefer he found her something to do rather than giving her presents. The social order of women was beginning to be challenged by women like Sybylla. She believes that society needs to change in order for women to change their fate and begins to experience some small steps forward for women. In *My Career Goes Bung* Big Checks expresses his aversion to female suffrage, 'Now that women are to have votes, life won't be worth livin' much longer' (p. 320). Henry Beauchamp also warns Sybylla not to be a man-hater and that her destiny is to have love and children because women who don't get married are despised as old maids. Sybylla comes to the sad realisation that it will be the next generation of women that reap the rewards of the progression of women and not hers. However, this does not stop her striving for equal opportunities for women.

- Which characters have the biggest impact on Sybylla's feministic attitudes and why?
- Based on Sybylla's character, what are the traits of a feminist?
- Can you sum up Sybylla's feminist philosophy in one sentence?
- Why is 'feminism' considered a dirty word in today's society?

Societal expectations

The expectation of women in the nineteenth century was to marry and raise a family. Sybylla's mother and grandmother both married young and had children of their own, and Sybylla is expected to do the same. Early in Sybylla's life her mother worries that riding a horse will make her daughter too much of a tomboy, which would ultimately hinder her chances of finding a suitable husband. Her father replies, 'The rubbishing conventionalities that are the curse of her sex will worry her soon enough' (p.10). This is exactly how Sybylla feels: cursed. Sybylla also disagrees with the practice of women having to dress for the evening in order to please men and the amount of household chores they endure. She believes they waste their lives working too hard in the home and then have nothing to show for it. Sybylla vows never to marry because she would prefer to go in search of an occupation that she could work in independent of a man. Girls of lower class families were often required to go out and work to help support their families—often these roles were limited to governesses, teachers or nurses. When it is suggested that she has the potential to become an actress her grandmother will not allow it as acting was not a respectable profession. Her grandmother discourages any idea of Sybylla having her own career in chapter 11, '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' (p. 68-69). While marriage is clearly the social norm of the era Sybylla does not behave the way other women do even when met with marriage proposals. She continually tells Harold that he should go and find one of the many women who would be happy to marry him. She clearly sees the inequality of the sexes and rebels against the many expectations of women.

- Sybylla is told that her lack of talents makes her useless and she is too plain to find a husband. Do you think Sybylla would still defy social customs and expected standards if she was beautiful or had employable abilities?
- Why must Sybylla choose marriage or a career? Why can't she have both?
- What is society's expectation of women in the modern world?

Class distinctions

Throughout *My Brilliant Career* Sybylla experiences differences in class that have a strong impact on her life. When Possum Gully feels the effect of drought Mr Melvyn succumbs to alcoholism and the family begins to suffer. Sybylla experiences the full force of poverty and deems the life of a peasant as purgatory. Despite the hardships of poverty, Sybylla notes that only in poverty does one experience the true heart of people, 'People are your friends from pure friendship and love, not from sponging self-

interestedness' (31). When her parents can no longer afford to care for her she is sent to live with her grandmother. Sybylla's mood immediately improves and she is lucky enough to enjoy the finer parts of high society for several years. Upon receiving the news that she will be sent to live with the M'Swat family to work as a governess she immediately despises her mother for taking away her comfortable life at Caddagat. It is not just the return to poverty that annoys her but also the fact that she is forced to work off her father's debt and not in a job that she wants. Eventually she returns to live with her family at Possum Gully and again struggles with her 'peasant surroundings and peasant tasks' (p. 204). Rising up from the lower class was usually only possibly by marrying into a rich family. Surprisingly, when Harold Beechman returns to take possession of Sybylla and give her a ticket out of poverty she turns his offer down. His wealth is of no interest to her, having made it clear earlier that she would not marry a man for his possessions if she did not love him. Although she prefers the luxuries of prosperity, and perhaps does even love Harold, she obviously does not want the limited life of a woman that comes with being a wealthy man's wife even if it is the more comfortable option.

- Sybylla has fallen out of the world that Harold lives in and therefore despises his sense of entitlement. Do you feel Sybylla's feelings towards Harold would have been different had her father never moved the family from the original station and lost all their money?
- Compare the change in Sybylla's moods with the changes in her lifestyle.
- How does the piano in *My Brilliant Career* work as a symbol of class distinction?

English activities

The Great Aussie Yarn

My Brilliant Career is introduced by saying the story is not a romance, nor a novel, but simply a yarn. Classic bush yarns are a great Australian tradition of storytelling and often involve the humorous adventures of larrikins, swagmen and bush women. A yarn can be any long, detailed story that is exaggerated for entertainment. Yarns are also known as tall tales because they involve made up or imagined events and characters.

Activity: Identify any classic Australian characters in Franklin's yarn. After reading the sequel and finding out about the real Sybylla, which parts of her life do you think have been exaggerated or made up? Can you write your own Aussie Yarn (one page)?

Fiction vs. reality

Many first novels are closely correlated to the author's experience and it is a common theory that the fictional Sybylla Melvyn draws a strong resemblance to the author. Miles Franklin was so disturbed that people assumed the work was completely autobiographical that she banned the republication of her book until ten years after her death.

Activity: Research the life of Miles Franklin by reading biographies, either in books or online, and write a few paragraphs about whether you believe there is any verisimilitude to Miles Franklin's own life in these works.

Euphemisms

Oh, but I couldn't put in real people. They would not like to see themselves except as white-washed saints — like the yarns on the tombstones. (p. 254)

Sybylla suggests to Mr Harris that she couldn't possibly write how people really are but instead write them in their best light—the way that people are remembered or written about in death. A euphemism is a word or phrase that replaces a less offensive or blunt one and can be used for a variety of reasons, such as to soften an expression or to be more polite. For example, you would use the euphemism indisposed instead of saying using the bathroom, or you might say passed away instead of died. Euphemisms can also be used to describe people.

Activity: Write your own euphemisms to describe the more offensive traits of at least five characters in the story, such as Mr Melvyn's drinking, Mrs Bossier's snobbery, Sybylla's vulgarity etc.

Both sides of the story

Some readers consider Sybylla's decision not to marry the wrong choice, while others agree that she chose correctly. Whatever your opinion, there are strong arguments for both sides of marriage in Sybylla's time period.

Activity: Split the class into two and devise arguments for and against Sybylla getting married and hold a class debate.

Literary Devices

In Her Own Words

A female narrator is a structural device used by the author to show the importance of how the female tells the story. Using a first-person female narrator as opposed to a third-person narrator focuses the reader on the narrator's view of the world. Sybylla is questioning the world that she lives in and the limitations placed upon women, so it is crucial to the story that the main character also be the narrator. The manuscript was originally sent away with the gender neutral name Miles Franklin, but it was soon revealed to Henry Lawson that the author was a young girl.

Activity: re-write a section of *My Brilliant Career* in third-person narration. Compare the styles of narration and discuss whether first or third makes you more sympathetic to the themes of the book. Why would Miles Franklin try to conceal her gender by using her middle name?

Metaphor

My ambition was as boundless as the mighty bush in which I have always lived. (p. 40)

Literary symbolism can take many forms including metaphor. In *My Brilliant Career* the land can be seen as a metaphor for Sybylla's life; like Sybylla, the land is wild, powerful and unpredictable.

Activity: Watch the 1979 film version of *My Brilliant Career* and examine the visual metaphor of the land. What are the gates and fences a metaphor of? How have they been used in the film to visually echo the themes from the book?

Simile

A simile is a figure of speech employed in writing to compare one thing to another and is used to make descriptions more emphatic or vivid.

Activity: Miles Franklin uses many similes. Make a list of her more original and innovative similes.

Irony

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! (p. 233)

The title of Miles Franklin's first novel is laden with irony. The novel's title is clearly sarcastic as she is 15 and forced to work day after day on her parent's dairy farm. This is far from her ideal occupation as a writer and far from her dreams of having her own career. The original manuscript had a question mark after the word brilliant, but was removed as it was redundant.

Activity: Make a list of alternative titles to *My Brilliant Career*. Discuss the irony of the title and if it how it would affect from the story to change the title.

Language activities

Evolution of Language

The English language evolves and changes over time; sometimes words from other languages are absorbed, new words are invented or older words fall out of usage. Because Miles Franklin wrote *My Brilliant Career* in the 1890s, there are words in this text that are now deemed archaic. There are also newly coined terms known as neologisms.

Activity: From the list of words below, identify which words are archaisms or neologisms. Discuss the context in which any of these words would still be used.

Hither and thither, betimes, realisting, forenoon, gainsay, hobbledehoy, fiddle-faddle, spooning, methinks, fal-de-rals, squashation

Language structure

Miles Franklin writes in a very vivid style but her prose has been criticised as overwritten. The structure of sentences seems a little verbose compared to today's grammatical style but is at times extremely poetic.

Activity: Have a go at rewriting the sentences below (or any others that you find) so that the meaning is more concise. Compare the new sentences to the originals and discuss the difference. Have they lost something by changing them? Which style do you prefer?

1. *Therefore he determined to take up his residence in a locality where he would have more scope for his ability* (p. 12)
2. *But I bound her to secrecy, and took a strange delight in bringing to her face with my stories the laughter, the wide-eyed wonder, or the tears — just as my humour dictated.* (p. 40)

3. *They were as ducks on a duck-pond; but I was as a duck forced for ever to live in a desert, ever wildly longing for water, but never reaching it outside of dreams. (p. 190)*
4. *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. 193)*
5. *That would have been a situation to turn one camp a yellow tinged with green and give the other that pea-green feeling trimmed with orange, which would have been jolly good for both. (p. 278)*

Writing activities

Letter writing

Letter writing was an important tool of communication in Sybylla's time, as indicated through the number of letters that she sends and receives in the text.

Activity: Find a scene in the text where a letter is sent but not explained in detail, or a letter could have been sent, and write one in the writing style of the period.

Review

Sybylla gets many positive and negative reviews for her first novel. Although *My Brilliant Career* was published in 1901, the book received a revival after the movie was released and has now once again gained momentum as it is considered a classic Australian novel.

Activity: Write a short review of the novel that could have appeared in the newspaper in Sybylla's time period and another that could appear today. Are the themes and criticisms still relevant to today's women?

Art activities

Australian landscape

Dreamy blue hills rose behind, and wide rich flats stretched before, through which the Yarrangung river, glazed with sunset, could be seen like a silver snake winding between shrubberied banks. (p. 94)

Activity: Find a section of descriptive prose from either novel, like the example above, and create a drawing or painting which reflects the scene. Discuss the visual setting that Miles Franklin is able to create with her language.

WORKSHEET: SYNONYMS

Find a more commonly used substitute for the advanced vocabulary of Miles Franklin.

WORD	SYNONYM	WORD	SYNONYM
remonstrated		opined	
averred		fatuous	
volubly		cordially	
churlish		bedraggled	
punctiliously		edification	
dirge		ablutions	
nostrum		alacrity	
furlough		deference	
sinecure		frowzy	
incorrigible		equanimity	
delectation		deign	
obstreperous		perjure	
windlass		dinned	
careworn		bulwarks	
laxity		languid	
stultifying		extols	
chary		reticule	
bilious		avuncular	
slavish		colloquy	
clement		acquiesced	
approbation		emissaries	
panacea		dilatory	
pestiferous		cynosure	

coterie		adduced	
dragooned		ossified	
obviate		extirpate	
amelioration		quondam	

Questions for reading and discussion

My Brilliant Career

1. The narrator prefaces the book by saying there is no plot to the story because she does not have the luxury. Explain how a plot is a luxury in life?
2. Sybylla describes herself as 'religionless' in chapter 1. Discuss the importance of religion in the late nineteenth century and the impact of being religionless.
3. At Bruggabrong the women didn't have to work so hard. What does it say about the state of their lives and wealth in Possum Gully that the women have to do everything?
4. The roles of women were limited to a few occupations in the 1800s. Discuss the difference in the opportunities for women today and what has contributed to this evolution.
5. Discuss the pros and cons of marriage in the nineteenth century. As a class, make a list of the reasons that Sybylla would not want to be married and what has contributed to these reasons.
6. Does Sybylla want to find love? Find examples in the text to back up your response and discuss as a class.
7. Why does Sybylla feel so disconnected from her world compared to other girls her age?
8. How important is it for Sybylla to meet someone who is likeminded? What impact would this have on her?
9. Is acting still considered a low profession today?
10. If Franklin had changed the ending of *My Brilliant Career* to be more romantic, how would this alter the themes and message of the text?

My Career Goes Bung

1. Why is Sybylla told to hide her brains and enhance her beauty?
2. Do you think Sybylla would have preferred to be a man rather than have the same opportunities as a man? Support your response with examples from the text.
3. Do women now receive the same pay as men?

4. To what extent do you think Mrs Melvyn was jealous of her daughter?
5. Do you agree that you need to be egotistical to write an autobiography?
6. Mrs Melvyn and Mr Harris believe that you can't find any pleasure in reading about misfortune. A lot of Sybylla's story is about her struggle and misfortune. Do you find any pleasure in her story and why?
7. If the Melvyn family lives in poverty, why do they pretend to be too busy to sit down with shearers in chapter 5?
8. If Sybylla does not envy Edmee's looks and she is not in competition as she doesn't want to marry, why is Sybylla so taken with her?
9. Sybylla reveals that the two greatest women in Australia are unmarried. Who is she referring to?
10. Sybylla always seems to return to her family home at Possum Gully. Do you think she will have any success in London or will she eventually want to return home again?

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About the author of the notes

Shanyn Limpus began her professional career in education after studying a combined Arts/Education degree. Shanyn also has a Master of Arts in Writing, Editing and Publishing from the University of Queensland. She currently lives in Brisbane where she works as a freelance writer, combining her creativity and communication skills for various clients.