



# A Brilliant Example for Women—Comments on My Brilliant Career

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## Abstract

Based on the theory of American feminist critic Elaine Showalter, this paper analyzes a peculiar feature of early Australian novel *My Brilliant Career* and discovers that it spans three phases of Women's Literature. Through her indefatigable strive for equality between men and women, independent personality and self-fulfillment, the bush girl Sybylla in the novel had set a brilliant example for today's women.

**Keywords:** My Brilliant Career; Sybylla; Phases of Women's Literature; struggle

## 1. Introduction

Reading Australian early novel *My Brilliant Career*, I was deeply impressed by the fragrance of the bush landscape penetrating through the whole novel as well as amazed by the extraordinary literary gift of the sixteen-year-old young girl who finished the great work within a few weeks. The writer of the novel Miles Franklin (1879—1954) by name was one of the most famous woman writers in Australia, and her maiden work, being considered an Australian classic, caused a great sensation throughout the Australian literary circles since its publication in 1901. The founder of Australian realism Henry Lawson wrote Preface to the book and sang high praise of the novel, "the descriptions of bush life and scenery came startlingly, painfully real to me, and I know that, as far as they are concerned, the book is true to Australia—the truest I ever read". The novel was acclaimed as "the first Australian novel" by A·G· Stephenson. Miles Franklin has had a long-lasting impact on Australian literary life through her endowment of a Australia's most prestigious literary award known as the Miles Franklin Award, which is an annual literary prize to encourage and support writers of Australian literature and is awarded to "a novel which is of the highest literary merit and presents Australian life in any of its phases". The award was set up according to the will of Miles Franklin, who is best known for writing *My Brilliant Career* and for bequeathing her estate to fund this prestigious award.

*My Brilliant Career* was regarded as Australia's Jane Eyre and has been a typical text for feminism analysis.

In *Toward a Feminist Poetics*, American feminist critic Elaine Showalter traces the history of woman's literature, suggesting that it can be divided into three phases: Feminine, Feminist and Female. In the Feminine phase (1840—1880), "women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalized its assumptions about female nature". Women writers tended to imitate the literature of patriarchy and write under a male pseudonym. The Feminist phase (1880—1920) was characterized by women's writing that protested against male standards and values, and advocated women's rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. The Female phase (1920— ) is one of self-discovery. Showalter says, "women reject both imitation and protest two forms of dependency—and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature". The three phrases overlap sometimes and the special significance of *My Brilliant Career* lies in its spanning the three phrases mentioned above.

## 2. Hard Struggles

First, the name of the writer Miles Franklin sounded like a male writer's name. By adopting a male pseudonym, the writer would be likely to remove readers' prejudice against women under such a situation that men were the master of the literary circles. The narrator of the novel repeatedly expressed her hope that one day she could clasp hands with Australian male writers Lawson and Peterson, and feel the unspeakable comfort and heart-rest of congenial companionship. But to her disappointment, it was impossible for a woman to set up and keep Plato friendship with men. Her consciousness of being independent and brave exactly showed that the novel belonged to the first phase mentioned above.

All the stories revolved around protagonist Sybylla Melvyn who was depicted as the first full and rebellious female image in Australian literary history. Her rebelliousness was manifested in the following three aspects, which shows that the novel belonged to the second phase of Women's Literature---the Feminist phase.

### 2.1 *Sybylla's struggle against her living environment*

Sybylla's independent ego results from the influence of bush environment, and her battling personality is displayed in her ambivalent attitudes towards marriage. Endowed with bush spirit, Sybylla cherished high ambitions and typified Australian bush intellectual women. She struggled unswervingly against the environment and society that hindered her personality development. Her actions were closely related with the voice of the times when people were eager to change social reality and establish Australian nationalism. Sybylla strived for her independent personality and struggled continuously, which reflected the spirit of the times and constituted a part of it. Primitive bush environment and hard life shaped her character of being rugged, shrewish and strong like a man. In the novel, her life was full of ups and downs with the change of her living places. Since her childhood, Sybylla spent many hours on household drudgery, wood-cutting, milking and gardening in Possum Gully which in the girl's eyes was dreary, wing-clipping, mind-starving, monotonous and stagnant. But under such a hard living environment, Sybylla had her own dreams and vision of life different from those common village girls, for they were not interested in the outside world nor did they know anything about it. They had but two states of existence---work and sleep. They were taught to find a good husband to live a better life.

But unlike other girls, Sybylla was quite special and peculiar in terms of her personal interest and lifelong pursuit for arts and literature. Besides work and sleep, there was a third part in Syballa which carried out to be fed. She longed for the arts and had a passion for music and literature. Under such a harsh living condition, we could hardly imagine a girl would have such high pursuit of arts and literature. Her desire for art had never perished as time went by. She read extensively the famous works of British writers and learned by heart the works of Australian writers such as Peterson and Lawson. She lived a dream-life with writers, artists and musicians. She often purloined paper and sneaked out of bed every night at one or two o'clock to write a prodigious novel in point of length and detail. Through her broad reading, Sybylla knew of every celebrity in literature, art, music and drama. Their world was her world and in fancy she lived with them. The more she read, the less satisfied she felt about her monotonous life. She had a dream of entering the artistic world. And her dream penetrated through the whole novel. No matter how hard the natural environment and her living conditions were, her aspiration for and pursuit of arts never died out.

Sybylla was never content with her living environment; her steps and rhythm were incompatible with the surroundings. "How coarse and grating were the sounds to be heard around me! Lack, nay, not lack, but utter freedom from the first instincts of cultivation, was to be heard even in the great heavy footfalls and the rasping sharp voices which fell on my ears." (Franklin, 1981:95) She longed to be out in the stream of life.

### 2.2 *Sybylla's struggle against her family*

Sybyllas, as a child, had her own opinions and she was hard to be controlled by her parents. At the age of 15, their crops were withering in the fields for want of rain, the family could not afford to keep all the children at home, and obviously it was not an over-bright outlook. Sybylla's mother thought of a way out. "I will have to give the little kids to some of the relatives; the bigger ones will have to go out to service." Sybylla protested, "Why can't we live at home? Others have no bigger places than we, and families just as large, and yet they make a living. It would be terrible for the little ones to grow up separated; they would be no more to each other than strangers." (Franklin, 1981:29) She could not follow her mother's ideas to be a general servant, a cook, a hospital nurse, or a tutor. In her mother's eyes, she was really a useless girl for her age. She thought her mother's arrangement was nothing but her continued vain struggle in the morass of life, which would not be helpful of changing her living predicament. Her hope would come to naught.

Sybylla quarreled with her mother, and her feelings toward her father changed from admiration to contempt as she grew up and began to have her sense of self-consciousness and judgment of right and wrong. Her father Richard Melvyn used to hold three stations and was admitted into swelldom merely by right of his position. Mr. Melvyn was "my hero, confidant, encyclopedia, and mate... a fine fellow in those days, a kind and indulgent parent, a chivalrous husband, a capital host, a man full of ambition and gentleness." (Franklin, 1981:2) At that time, Mr. Melvyn was perfect in her daughter's eyes and Sybylla's short but happy childhood came to an end when they moved to Possum Gully where Melvyn indulged in drinking and gambling which soon left him on the verge of bankruptcy. He was heavily in debt and shifted the heavy burden of family onto his wife. He failed to support his family and to fulfill the family obligations. He seemed to lose all love and interest in his family, and grew cross and silent, utterly without pride and pluck. Sybylla tracked her father from one pub to another and brought his drunken father back home often after midnight. Now his father was an irresponsible father and husband. Sybylla began to contempt her father and considered him a despicable, selfish, weak creature. Under such a circumstance, Sybylla's mother still required her to respect her father, but she had different opinion and disagreed with her mother and showed hatred and contempt to her father who degraded from a hero to a drunken.

Sybylla began to feel sympathy for her mother and thought women like her mother were property and slave of men, and they knew nothing but sacrifice. Her mother was all gentleness and refinement, but the polish has been worn off it by years and years of scrubbing and scratching, and washing and patching, and poverty and husbandly neglect, and the bearing of burdens too heavy for delicate shoulders. Her mother had yielded up her youth, freedom, strength, and sacrificed the greatest possession of woman for her sad life. It could be said that it was Sybylla's family that woke up her female consciousness and made her realize that women should strive for equal rights and status as men in society

instead of being subject to men when getting married. Women should break their traditional life track, get rid of the yoke of family and realize their ideals.

### 2.3 *Sybylla's struggle against traditional moral values*

Marriage remained a central and engrossing theme for 19th-century novelists. Sybylla's story is no exception.

Women's life stories around Sybylla made her realize that women were fettered and ruined by marriage, and they were subject to men. "Marriage" was the only profession open to women in the 19th century. Being good wives and mothers, attending to their homes and doing what God intended were established principles for women to follow. Just as Sybylla's grandmother put it, "a girl's only proper sphere in life was marriage". Women depended on men physically, financially and spiritually. Women with such qualities as humility, obedience, sacrifice and selflessness were ideal roles in society. Men shackled women's minds by traditional social values and the relationship between men and women became one of the conqueror and the conquered. As a British woman writer Marion Reid pointed out in her work *A Plea for Women* (1843), "Most girls are given merely 'cramps and confines', any symptom of independent thought is quickly depressed...the majority of girls are subdued into mere automatons. Most girls are brought up to a mechanical performance of duty, their own minds are lying barren and unfruitful. She argues that there is no reason why women should be limited to domesticity. She admits that most women go about their household duties in a cold, hard, mechanical, loveless spiritless way. (Walters, 2008) Women could only find their proper position in marriage or family, women's education is confined and limited. Women are subject to men and they should fulfill domestic responsibilities.

As for Sybylla, considering that she could never gain the equal personality and status with men in marriage, the heroine was determined not to marry in her lifetime, which was the most desperate condemnation of the traditional society. In real life, the writer Miles Franklin herself did not get married. The novel reflected her true life in reality. From this point, *My Brilliant Career* belongs to the second phase of women's literature----- the Feminist phase.

Sybylla believed that marriage appeared the most horribly tied-down and unfair-to-women existence going. She laughed at the idea of love and determined never, never, never to marry. Under this principle and self-created guidance, Sybylla was doomed to find no happiness in marriage. "As a little girl, I was filled with dreams of the great things as I was to do when grown up. My ambition was as boundless as the mighty bush in which I have always lived. 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, battering and bruising without mercy." She could not see any hope for women to grasp their fate, give free play to their abilities and talent, and felt extremely disappointed in her struggle and revolt.

Her attitudes to marriage could be reflected in her relationship with three young men.

Her grandmother's jackeroo Frank Hawden was healthy, had a good character, came of a high family and had a potential of being rich in three years. When he proposed to her, Sybylla replied, "I loathe and despise him. I would not marry him or any one like him though he were King of England. The idea of marriage even with the best man in the world seems to me a lowering thing, but with him it would be pollution---the lowest degradation that could be heaped upon me! I will never come down to marry any one." (Franklin, 1981:84) Sybylla made her attitude towards marriage clear in her conflict with her first pursuer. Marriage, in her eyes, would not provide a happy and secure ending.

Another pursuer was a promising lawyer from Sydney, her grandmother's adopted son, Everard Grey by name. He dabbled in all the arts---writing, music, acting and sketching, and went to every good concert and play in Sydney. His wit and humor brought her a lot of pleasure. What's more important was that Grey appreciated Sybylla's artistic talent, thought it a sin to have such exceptional talent wasting in the bush and promised to bring her to Sydney and put her under a good master. Though Sybylla was interested in his talk on art, her feeling to him was nothing but friendship. Hence when Grey proposed to her, she thought it ridiculous.

The love story of the novel depicted a perfect young bushman--- the hero Harold Beecham, who was tremendously tall, big, handsome, sober-minded, experienced, and well-behaved. That is to say he had all the good qualities of a perfect man. He had artistic talent, and was an excellent pianist, a gifted violinist, a singer with a strong, clear and well-trained tenor.

Apart from Beecham's good inner accomplishments, the beginning of the story also described his wealthy family and successful career: He had an immense station, plenty of house-room, tennis courts, musical instruments, a river wherein to fish, swim and boat, any number of horses, vehicles, orchards, and gardens. Obviously Beecham's house could be called a "paradise" once put in the 19th century social and living environment. There were a sharp contrast between his luxurious living conditions and Sybylla's poor family. I am afraid every young girl would admire Beecham's wealthy family. He loved Sybylla who has peculiar personal charm and they had a lot of carefree happiness. But in terms of marriage, Sybylla insisted on her principles: "I would not marry him even if I could. I am so sick of every one thinking I would marry any man for his possessions. I would not stoop to marry a king if I did not love him. As for trying to win a man, I would scorn any action that way; I never intend to marry. Instead of wasting so much money on me in presents and other ways, I wish you would get me something to do, a profession that will last me all my life, so that I may be independent." (Franklin, 1981:132) During a quarrel, Sybylla said that she reserved the right of behaving as she pleased without Beecham's permission, that is to say, she had right to be independent in thinking and action. After the quarrel, Sybylla drew the costly ring from her finger and tossed it to his feet with indifference and contempt. She said

mockingly, "You thought you had a right to lecture me as your future slave! Just fancy! I never had the slightest intention of marrying you. You were so disgustingly conceited that I have been attempting to rub a little of it out of you. Marry you! Because the social laws are so arranged that a woman's only sphere is marriage, and because they endeavor to secure a man who can give them a little more ease, you must not run away when you are only the bothersome appendage with which they would have to put up, for the sake of your property. And you must not think that because some women marry for a home they all will." (Franklin, 1981:163) It indicates that she would not marry Beecham for his property and she would not be subject to a man, be his slave and lose her independence, her freedom and her career. On the contrary, she was eager to be her own master.

But after a series of sufferings and Beecham's loss of his home and property, Sybylla agreed to marry him. On the surface, she thought Beecham needed her when he was penniless, but in a deep sense, if she married a man without property, it meant that she would not lose her independence. To gain her independence, she was willing to sacrifice. But when Beecham restored his lost property, regained his fame as a wealthy man and proposed to her, she refused his proposal considering that her independence would be controlled by his wealth. As a woman, she wanted to have independence and freedom of her own career. "He was rich; he would not need me now; my obligation to him ceased to exist; I was free. He would no longer wish to be hampered with me. He could take his choice of beauty and worth." (Franklin, 1981:235) "He offered me everything---but control." (Franklin, 1981:255) It could be seen that Sybylla was doomed to part from Beecham. What she desired and what she despised was beyond her reach. Sybylla's strive for her independent personality and equality between men and women reflected the voice of feminists in the 19th century.

### 3. Conclusion

The novel showed a young girl's self-consciousness and self-fulfillment under the cruel natural and social environment, which indicated that the novel also belonged to the third phase of Women's Literature. Sybylla's dream for art and her reality was too far. Her remarkable gift enabled her to pursue a brilliant career, but her living environment, the social environment and her family environment burst the bubble of her ideal.

In the novel, terrible scenes appeared before the 15-year-old-girl filled with great expectations and yearnings for life: The day was hot, dry, a time when it was impossible to make a living. The scorching furnace-breath winds shriveled every blade of grass, dust and the moan of starving stock filled the air, vegetables became a thing of the past. The calves she had reared died one by one, and the cows followed in their footsteps. The title of the novel "*my brilliant career*" first appeared in Chapter Five. Faced with drought day after day, the narrator used twelve "Weariness" to describe everything around her and introduce the title, "This was life—my life— my career, my brilliant career!" Under the poor and hard living conditions, the bush girl did not realize her dream of "having a brilliant career", and in fact it was impossible for her to have a "brilliant career" in the 19th century Australian social life. It was a strong conflict between ideal and reality.

In the 19th century, Australia was a British colony which suffered a great deal from hard and harsh natural environment and economic depression, and the early Australians had to slog against such natural disasters as flood, fire, droughts, pests, stock diseases, and women were confined to dairy farms. But Sybylla was different, she had a strong desire for being the master of her fate. She was a lonely, brave and helpless fighter, in spite of her poor living situations, she was not blinded nor twisted by wealth, position, and power of any man around her. Though Sybylla did not realize her dream of having a "brilliant career", she had set a brilliant example for all the women today, that is, women should strive for their self-improvement, self-support and self-fulfillment so as to achieve self-perfection and make more contributions to society and human civilization.

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