Young, ambitious, clever – but... "only a woman": the heroine of My Brilliant Career

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In 1901 *My Brilliant Career* was first published by Blackwood, the Edinburgh firm. It had been written a few years earlier by an Australian girl of nineteen, Miles Franklin, who became famous almost overnight. Less than ten years after her book first appeared, the young woman stopped its sale. The reason was that, along with fame, the novel had brought distress to its author on account of the strong autobiographical overtones which the critics had not failed to discover in the story of Sybylla Melvyn.

For the British sexologist Havelock Ellis the autobiographical nature of the book was unquestionable, and rumour has it that he considered *My Brilliant Career* as an example of unconscious abnormality.[1] Whether the story narrated by Sybylla Melvyn mirrors Miles Franklin's own life or whether it is merely a figment of her imagination, one cannot deny that the disconcerting heroine arouses the reader's curiosity by her apparently inconsistent behaviour. A survey of Sybylla's statements as regards the position of women in society and a close study of her personality, whose development the reader follows from early childhood to the age of nineteen, should help towards an understanding of her strange behaviour and may yield some clues concerning the equally baffling personality of her creator who, after nearly twenty years of silence (1909-1928), published the larger part of her work under an assumed name.

Sybylla Melvyn is hardly more than a child when she realizes that being a woman in a male-dominated culture will necessarily confine her ambitions and her prospects in life within very narrow limits:

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1. See Ray Mathew, *Miles Franklin, Australian Writers and their Work*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1963.

> 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.[2] (33)

Such lines have a definitely feminist ring and would not be out of place in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. To take the full measure of Sybylla's — or rather Miles Franklin's — boldness one has to remember that the girl had not yet outgrown her teens when she expressed a point of view which Beauvoir did not expound at length before she had turned forty-one and two world wars in less than half a century had brought about important changes in society.

To be born a girl is hard luck indeed, but the situation worsens when this girl happens to be clever, which is precisely Sybylla's case. "I am afflicted with the power of thought, which is a heavy curse"(16), the heroine confides to her readers in the first pages of the book, leaving no doubt as regards the bitterness with which her heart is filled. From a very early age, Sybylla is aware that, since she is a woman, her generous ideas as regards justice and the need to readjust the wheels of social mechanism will only serve to alienate her from society. Why, one may wonder, should the power of thought be so much more of a burden in a woman than in a man? Sybylla makes it perfectly clear in the advice she delivers to her sisters all over the world:

> Girls! Girls! Those of you who have hearts, and therefore a wish for happiness, homes, and husbands by and by, never develop a reputation of being clever. It will put you out of the matrimonial running as effectually as though it had been circulated that you had leprosy. So, if you feel that you are afflicted with more than ordinary intelligence [...] hide your brains, cramp your mind, study to appear unintellectual — it is your only chance. (34)

Unless a woman cunningly dissembles in order not to frighten away all eligible young men, a life of loneliness awaits her. From the fact that Miles Franklin remained single, one may be tempted to infer that she herself did not put into practice the advice she gave to all girls, using Sybylla as her mouth-piece?

Hardly has Sybylla recovered from the disappointment of being a girl that a "hideous truth" dawns upon her: she is ugly, or rather — but it amounts to the same thing psychologically speaking — she believes herself to be unattractive, and this thought embitters her whole existence like "a sensitive sore that will

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2. All quotes from *My Brilliant Career* are from the Eden Paperbacks edition, North Ryde, NSW, Australia and London, 1987.

never heal"(33). In a world in which a woman's pretty face and elegant figure are her main assets, a plain girl like Sybylla is not "a valuable article in the marriage market"(31). The narrator is aware that "a plain woman will have nothing forgiven her. Her fate is such that the parents of uncomely female infants should be compelled to put them to death at their birth"(34). The sad fate of ugly girls is repeatedly alluded to, each time with the same pity for the narrator is aware that such girls "must be possessed of natures very absurdly sanguine indeed ever to hope for any enjoyment in life"(162).

Sybylla reacts very violently to the leniency society shows towards men in matters of sex while setting so much store by the purity of women. Is it fair, she thinks, to be treated so differently according to whether you are male or female? Her grandmother merely expresses the view commonly held on the subject when she tells her that "Very often, after they sow their wild oats, some of those scampy young fellows settle down and marry a nice young girl and turn out very good husbands"(72). But Mrs Bossier's remark is not to Sybylla's liking, for she indignantly exclaims: "It is disgusting, and you ought to be downright ashamed of yourself, grannie! A man can live a life of bestiality and then be considered a fit husband for the youngest and purest girl! It is shameful!" (72).

The girl who has a keen sense of justice is outraged to see that no one finds fault with a man leading such a life as would make a woman an object of shame. It is all right for Everard Grey to indulge in his passing fancies, and even aunt Helen, this paragon of virtue, does not reproach him with being a lady-killer — "Flirt as much as you will with society belles who understand the game" (67) — provided he does not try to win Sybylla. Similarly, the fact that uncle Julius, a big, fat, burly, jovial bachelor of forty, should be "too fond of all the opposite sex ever to have settled his affections on one in particular" (57) does not prevent him from being respected and liked by everyone.

But what goes for men does not apply to women: young ladies are expected to behave and conform to a strict code of morals; on no account must they be suspected of being "forward with men." Sybylla is scolded by her grandmother, or even ordered to stay in her bedroom without anything to eat until the following morning, whenever she is caught behaving in a way which Mrs Bossier regards as indecorous.

Sybylla considers her grandmother as "one of the good old school, who believe[s] that a girl's only proper sphere in life [is] marriage"(31). For Mrs Bossier, marriage is synonymous with respectability, to which any decent woman

ought to aspire. What the old lady does not realize is that the prospects marriage offers to a girl do not in the least appeal to Sybylla. "I had an antipathy to the very thought of marriage," the girl confides to the reader, "Marriage to me appeared the most horribly tied-down and unfair-to-women existence going"(31). When Mrs Bossier tells Sybylla that there is no objection to her marrying Frank Hawden, the young jackeroo who has asked for her hand, the girl flies into a rage and vehemently rejects both her suitor and the very idea of marriage which she considers as "a lowering thing"(72). This violent rejection of the traditional role of wife-mother assigned to women has undoubtedly something to do with the image of married life Sybylla has had before her eyes. The girl has seen her gentle, refined mother, "a full-fledged aristocrat"(2), worn out by hard work, turned into little better than a drudge by her pluckless, prideless drunkard of a husband.

Marriage implies constant childbearing and childbirth, "that most cruelly agonising of human duties"(198), which women must bear uncomplainingly, year after year. The reader learns incidentally, from a remark by one of Harold Beecham's aunts, that Sybylla's mother has had eight children and may still have some more. When Sybylla leaves Caddagat, she goes to work for a Mrs M'Swat who has had twelve children, three of whom died at an early age. Childbirth appears to Miss Melvyn as a form of slavery which is part and parcel of a married woman's condition, but to which she does not feel any disposition.

Aunt Helen provides her niece with another example of the evil to which a woman exposes herself when she marries. Sybylla's aunt fell in love with a dashing colonel who married her but in less than twelve months tired of his lovely wife and became infatuated with another woman for whom he deserted his lawful spouse. All that Helen could do was return to her mother's, at Caddagat, and sue for a judicial separation. When Sybylla comes to stay at Mrs Bossier's, Helen is a young woman of thirty whose prospects are already ruined: "her life was wrecked. She had been humiliated and outraged in the cruellest way by the man whom she loved and trusted. He had turned her adrift, neither a wife, widow, nor maid"(49). If aunt Helen has retained the respect of her relatives and acquaintances, she owes it exclusively to her spotless character, for Sybylla is aware that "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"(49).

If a woman does not marry, what sort of life can she lead? Harold Beecham's maiden aunts live with their nephew and depend upon him; when he is ruined and must sell his family estate, they have to leave the house and follow his

directions. The two women have no control of their fate which is linked to the ups and downs of Harold's fortune.

When Sybylla decides that she will never marry, she realizes that she will have to earn her living: "I would procure some occupation in which I could tread my life out, independent of the degradation of marriage"(72). But finding an occupation is not that easy. Her mother had suggested teaching, "a very nice occupation for girls" according to her, but Sybylla loathes the very thought of it. Both marriage and teaching, the only respectable careers open to a girl at the turn of the century, seem oppressive to the heroine, and her subsequent experience at Barney's Gap as a governess to the children of Mr and Mrs M'Swat will only serve to reinforce her aversion to this occupation.

On her seventeenth birthday, Sybylla has a conversation with uncle Jay-Jay in which she states that she does not intend to marry and asks for help: "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"(117). Independence, the means to take the world "by its ears," and conquer her fate: this is what the seventeen-year-old girl has set her mind upon. In 1896 few women dared express such subversive thoughts, and uncle Julius does not, even for a moment, imagine that his niece is in earnest. For him her request is a joke which he answers with another joke: "You can be my companion till further orders. That's a profession that will last you a goodish while"(117).

On the same day, in the evening, when Sybylla opens the large box containing Jay-Jay's present for her seventeenth birthday, she is disappointed to find a doll with materials to make it clothes. The young woman who nurtured dreams of independence is cut down to size and reminded that "it would be more in [her] line"(147) to play like a girl than to think of a profession or to worry about politics and social issues which only concern men. Jay-Jay's present was meant to tease Sybylla, not to hurt her feelings, yet it says a lot as regards Mr Bossier's point of view on women for, had Sybylla been a seventeen-year-old nephew, he would certainly never have dreamt of offering the young man a teddy-bear.

At the end of the novel, when Sybylla turns down Harold Beecham's second marriage proposal, she has found a personal solution to the problem of earning a living: she will live by her pen. She is given to writing stories, and literary people predict that she will be an authoress. What strikes the reader is the manner at once defiant and paradoxically apologetic with which she breaks the news to Harold: "Yes, I am queer. If you had any sense, you'd have nothing to do

with me. [...] I am given to something which a man never pardons in a woman. You will draw away as though I were a snake when you hear"(222).

The career which Sybylla (like her creator) has chosen for herself will enable her to be independent but it will at the same time exclude her from the ordinary run of life. Sybylla — or is it Miles Franklin? — never openly advocates revolt against the conventional roles of submissive, dependent wives and mothers allotted to women, but she manages to side-step them, thus suggesting that it is not impossible to break away from tradition provided one is willing to pay the price.

The style of Sybylla's relationship with men may partly be accounted for by the fact that she does not feel so very different from them. Her tastes are those of a boy, not those of a quiet, little girl. At the age of eight Sybylla is a daredevil afraid of nothing and no one. She can already ride a horse "as gamely as any of the big sunburnt bushmen"(3). "Side-saddle, man-saddle, no-saddle, or astride were all the same to me," the narrator comments. Her mother remonstrates but Sybylla is backed by her father who objects that "the rubbishing conventionalities which are the curse of her sex will bother her soon enough"(3).

During her stay with her grandmother at Caddagat, the sixteen-year-old girl is "continually chid for being a romp, a hoyden, a boisterous tomboy, a whirl-wind"(196). Mrs Bossier keeps reminding her that she has by no means the manners of a lady. Unlike most girls, she pays no attention to her appearance and is never so happy as when she goes up the creek in a pair of men's boots and a dilapidated old dress borrowed from one of the servants. But the boisterous tomboy is also able, when necessary, to assume the responsibilities usually devolved to men: on the eve of her seventeenth birthday, a drover comes to report that twenty thousand sheep are going to pass through the run. As all the men happen to be at a cattle-station seventeen miles away from Caddagat, Sybylla volunteers her services and sees the sheep through. She obviously enjoys the ride: "I sang and cracked my stock-whip as I cantered along, quite forgetting to be reserved and proper"(134). The girl rides side by side with the drover in charge of the sheep and they soon fall "a-talking in dead earnest without the least restraint"(135) as two men might do.

Because there is more "animus" than "anima" in Sybylla's nature, she tends to regard men as companions or, to use her own word, as "chums": "In associating with men I never realize that the trifling difference of sex is sufficient to be a great wall between us. The fact of sex never for an instant enters my head,

and I find it as easy to be chummy with men as with girls [...]"(132). Unfortunately the world does not share her views as regards what the proper behaviour of a woman towards a man should be. Sybylla, who has found in Everard Grey a man "from her world," handsome and winning, is forced to admit that "the trifling difference of sex" does raise a great wall between them: "Oh, what pleasure I might have derived from companionship with him! I bit my lip to keep back the tears. Why did not social arrangements allow a man and a maid to be chums — chums as two men or two maids may be to each other, enjoying each other without thought beyond pure platonic friendship? But no; it could not be" (69).

Sybylla tends to think of men not as individuals but as a category all the members of which would be cast in the same mould. She therefore passes categorical, wholesale judgements on masculine nature. In her opinion, all men are fickle, superficial beings, unable of any sincere, lasting attachment, merely attracted to women on account of their physical beauty, regardless of what they are from a moral or spiritual point of view. She has not yet turned seventeen when she confides to her aunt Helen that, being "cursed with the power of seeing, thinking, and, worse than all, feeling" she has already seen through the deceitful notion of romantic love. To her aunt, who entreats her never to play with a man's heart, Sybylla vehemently replies: "Play with a man's heart! You'd really think they had such a thing, aunt Helen, to hear you talk. Hurt their vanity for a few days is the most a woman could do with any of them"(113).

The idea that all men are conceited creatures makes Sybylla unfair to Harold Beecham: although the young man gives her abundant proof of the sincerity and depth of his attachment, she finds it difficult not to lump him together with all "hateful" males. When she breaks their engagement, and contemptuously tosses to Harold's feet the ring he had given her, the young man's suffering and keen disappointment are so obvious that they cannot go unnoticed. Then, but only then, does Sybylla begin to think that "Perhaps in some cases there was actually something more than wounded vanity when a man's alleged love was rejected or spurned" (145) .

Yet her distrust of males is so ingrained that when Harold, after a separation of more than one year, writes to inform her that since he has recovered his estate and wealth, there is no reason why their marriage should be postponed, she sends him a refusal letter in which she refers to the young squatter's love for

her as "only a fancy" which will soon pass. "Take a look in the glass," she goes on to add,

> and you will see reflected there the figure of a stalwart man who is purely virile, possessing not the slightest attribute of the weaker sex, *therefore* your love is merely a passing flame. I do not impute fickleness to you, but merely point out a masculine characteristic, and that you are a man, and only a man, pure and unadulterated. (my italics) (225)

Whenever a man shows an interest in her, Sybylla's behaviour ceases to be natural and spontaneous on account of her conviction that she is ugly and that no man can sincerely fall for an ugly girl. Flattered by Everard Grey's admiration for her on the evening when they first meet, she soon reacts violently, persuading herself that the aristocratic gentleman is simply making fun of her and "plastering [her] vanity with the ointment of flattery"(62). The following morning at breakfast, she therefore answers his compliments with a sarcastic reply, served up "red-hot and well-seasoned with pepper"(62), and goes off abruptly to shut herself in her room. Later, when Everard sends her books and magazines from Sydney, she starts writing to him a friendly letter but stops short after two paragraphs and tears the letter to shreds because the thought suddenly crossed her mind that Everard would laugh and call her "a poor little fool." A prim, formal note thanking Mr Grey for the books and magazines replaces the friendly letter.

The first time Harold Beecham proposes to her at Caddagat, on her seventeenth birthday, Sybylla cannot understand why this "sort of young sultan who could throw the handkerchief where he liked"(127) has chosen her of all women: "I had no charms to recommend me [...] I was nothing but a tomboy — and, cardinal disqualification, I was ugly. Why, then, had he proposed matrimony to me? Was it merely a whim? Was he really in earnest?" (127-8). When Harold, who had gone bankrupt, is restored to his former wealth owing to a providential bequest, Sybylla experiences a sense of relief because she now feels free to break her engagement. But her train of thought betrays the inferiority complex which lurks behind this sense of relief: "He was rich; he would not need me now; [...] He would no longer wish to be hampered with me. He could take his choice of beauty and worth"(207). Sybylla is so sure of her lack of physical attractions that she persuades herself that Harold, although he may not be aware of it yet, has fallen under the spell of her attractive sister who now lives at Caddagat.

The moral suffering Sybylla experiences on account of her plainness — whether real or imaginary — is even compounded by her immense pride. She knows that she is cleverer than most of the people she meets, and therefore reacts

very strongly whenever she believes that she is being made fun of or treated like a little ignorant country girl. When she overhears a conversation between Everard Grey and her aunt Helen, in which the latter asks the young man to forget his passing fancy and leave her "country maiden" alone, Sybylla's vanity is wounded because both Everard and Helen seem to think of her as an easy prey. The girl's reaction is violent and instantaneous: "Little country maiden, indeed! There's no need for him to bag his attractions up. If he exerted himself to the utmost of his ability, he could not make me love him. [...] There's not enough in him to win my love"(67).

Sybylla's pride also accounts to a certain extent for her defiant attitude towards Harold Beecham in the orchard at Caddagat when, beside himself with jealousy, the young man tells her fiercely that he could get any amount of splendid women to wear his engagement ring and behave themselves properly too. Sybylla draws the costly ring from her finger, and, "with indifference and contempt"(143), tosses it to Harold's feet, adding mockingly: "If you think I think you as great a catch as you think yourself, just because you have a little money, you are a trifle mistaken, Mr Beecham, that is all. Ha ha ha! So you thought you had a right to lecture me as your future slave!"(143).

Nearly two years later, when Harold comes unexpectedly to Possum Gully and finds Sybylla in a tattered skirt, a soiled cotton blouse and bursted boots, nursing a sickly calf, the girl perceives an unmistakable expression of pity in the visitor's eyes which stings her to the quick. This offer of sympathy is more than her pride can bear. Sybylla immediately feels her heart grow "bitterly cold" and her demeanour "icily stiff"(213). She answers Harold's questions curtly and tartly, persuaded that he must be wondering "how for an instant he could have been foolish enough to fancy such an object two years ago"(214).

Although Sybylla does not think highly of men and claims to have seen through the myth of love; although, in the very first page of the novel, she dismisses as "trash" descriptions of beautiful sunsets and whisperings of wind, the reader soon realizes that the heroine is a romantic girl at heart and imagines love and passion as they are pictured in the novels she has been able to lay her hands on. When Harold first proposes to her, she is disappointed by his matter-of-fact, abrupt tone — "It's no use of me making a long yarn about nothing" — and startled to hear him ask point blank: "will it be yes or no?"(124). She had imagined that a young man, confessing to a girl that he loved her and wanted to marry her, would turn red or white, tremble or stammer, become fierce, tender or passionate.

Because Harold has uttered no word of love to her and requested none from her, Sybylla jumps to the conclusion that the young man's composure is due to his conceit. Her pride is therefore wounded; she resents Harold's attitude, and decides to make him smart for it. Thus, Sybylla's frustrated — though unacknowledged — need for romance, allied to her touchy pride, leads her to misinterpret Harold's behaviour and to accept an engagement which she means to break after a short while to punish the young man who has dared to think of her as an easy conquest.

Before the engagement becomes effective, Sybylla imposes on Harold three-months' probation during which he must not pay her any special attentions. When Harold keeps his word, the romantic girl who dreamt of great outbursts of passion is once more disappointed and draws false conclusions concerning her suitor's character:

> I flirted and frolicked with my other young men friends, but he did not care. I did not find him an ardent or a jealous lover. He was so irritatingly cool and matter-of-fact that [I came] to the conclusion that he was barren of emotion or passion of any kind." (133)

When, by dint of defying Harold, Sybylla succeeds in getting him into a rage, her elation knows no bounds: here it is, at last, the unbridled passion which novels describe! Her exhilaration remains unaltered when, undressing for the night, she discovers the black marks which Harold's strong fingers have left on her shoulders and arms; it has, indeed, been "a very happy day"(148) for her.

Sybylla's secret yearning for passionate love paradoxically goes with a revulsion from physical contact with men undoubtedly linked both to her pride and to the inferiority complex generated by her plainness. "I cannot bear the touch of any one — it is one of my idiosyncrasies [...] my motto with men is touch-me-not" (70-1), the narrator confesses.

When Frank Hawden, whose marriage proposal she has contemptuously turned down, angrily seizes Sybylla by the wrist, the heroine strikes him a vigorous blow on the nose with her free hand, and wrenching herself from the young man's grip, indignantly exclaims: "How dare you lay a finger on me!" (71). One might object that there is nothing surprising in a woman refusing any form of contact with a man she despises; yet Sybylla's violent reaction seems out of proportion with the gesture that triggered it and which was itself touched off by her provokingly scornful tone.

But it is above all with Harold Beecham that the heroine's refusal of the slightest physical contact raises a psychological problem. Sybylla herself cannot account for "the enormity" of what she did when, having obtained her consent to their engagement, Harold stooped to kiss her. Whatever the underlying reasons for her action may be, one thing is certain: Sybylla did not make any decision in cold blood. When she seized the long riding-whip Harold had placed on the table, quickly raised it and brought it with all her strength right across the young man's face, she was undeniably acting on impulse, a prey, as she herself suggests it, to an uncontrollable fit of hysteria, the origin of which the reader is left free to trace.

Sybylla's revulsion from physical contact is all the more surprising as there can be no doubt about the sensuousness of her nature. In the flower-garden at Caddagat she "revels"(65) in the rich perfumes of mignonette, jonquils and narcissi. On the day when she is seventeen, she closes her eyes and lets the beauty of Caddagat fill her senses: "The warmth was delightful. [...] Bright butterflies flitted round the garden, and thousands of bees droned lazily among the flowers"(136). "What a delightful place the world was! [...] It was like an orange — I merely had to squeeze it and it gave forth sweets plenteously"(137).

Two years later, when she decides to put an end to her engagement with Harold, Sybylla, once more closing her eyes, recalls, not without nostalgia, the sensuous setting in which the young man gave vent to his jealous rage. The orchard itself seemed to invite her to sexual fulfilment and, judging from her keen memories, the heroine was certainly not indifferent to the masculine charm and power that radiated from Harold:

> He drew me so closely to him that, through his thin shirt — the only garment on the upper part of his figure — I could feel the heat of his body, and his big heart beating wildly. (143)
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> .....
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> I could feel Harold's wild jolting heart-beats, his burning breath on my brow, and his voice husky with rage in my ear. (209)

At Possum Gully, when Harold proposes to her for the second time, the reader feels that Sybylla is nearly won over by the young man's passion and is about to yield to the physical attraction he exerts upon her: "His hot breath was upon my cheek. The pleasant, open, manly countenance was very near — perilously near. The intoxication of his love was overpowering me. [...] He was drawing me to him; he was irresistible. [...] I grew dizzy [...]" (223).

But as she is about to respond to Harold's passion, Sybylla turns her head sharply backwards and takes "a long gasping breath, another and another, of that

fresh cool air suggestive of the grand old sea and creak of cordage and bustle and strife of life"(223). The spell is broken, the fleeting moment of weakness is over, the sexual drive which nearly overwhelmed her has been suppressed, and owing to the fresh air which smacks of freedom, Sybylla's old spirit revives. In spite of his undeniable virile fascination, Harold does not win the day because Sybylla realizes in time that the loss of her independence is the price she will have to pay for sexual fulfilment. The short sentence: "He offered me everything — but control"(223). leaves the reader in no doubt as to the ultimate reason for Harold's disqualification.

Sybylla is never so happy as when circumstances give her an opportunity to get the upper hand over a man and make him feel her superiority. When Frank Hawden the young jackeroo who works at Caddagat declares his love to her, she takes pleasure in humiliating him, referring to his proposal as "a screaming farce"(70).

Sybylla once more enjoys herself at Frank Hawden's expense when, disobeying her grandmother, she drives by herself to Dogtrap, taking advantage of the moment when Frank is shutting a gate to set the horses galloping. As she whips the horses, the heroine chuckles at the thought that she has managed to fool the young man, leaving him to walk four miles back to Caddagat in the heat and dust.

Even with Harold Beecham, Sybylla enjoys — though in a more subtle manner — having the upper hand. Her exultation when she has driven him almost mad with jealousy is due to the sudden realization that — unbelievable though it seems to her — she holds the young man in her power: "At last! at last! I had waked this calm silent giant into life. After many an ineffectual struggle I had got a little real love or passion [...] something wild and warm and splendidly alive that one could feel, the most thrilling, electric, and exquisite sensation known"(143).

In the same evening, the pleasure she feels at the sight of the bruises left on her arms and shoulders by the pressure of Harold's fingers is not so much a sign of masochism as a proof of the pride she takes in those emblems of her power over the landlord of Five-Bob Downs. Men, she thinks, "were not so invincible and invulnerable"(148) as she had imagined them to be. "Invincible," "invulnerable," those are words which call to mind not the realm of tender love, but the harsh world in which male and female, each wielding their own weapons, struggle for dominance.

Despite the pleasure Sybylla experiences whenever she finds herself in a position of superiority over men, some of her remarks lead the reader to believe that she paradoxically expects males not to submit and accept her domination. When Sybylla insists on driving back from Dogtrap to Caddagat by herself, Harold, who is aware of the girl's foolhardy nature, refuses to argue with her; stepping quietly into the buggy, he puts Sybylla away from the driver's seat "as though [she] were a baby," quietly takes the reins and whip, and drives off. One would expect the proud girl to feel humiliated and fly into a temper; but she reacts in a quite different manner: "I was highly delighted with his action, as I would have despised him as a booby had he given in to me, but I did not let my satisfaction appear"(106).

Of course, she is too proud to show Harold that she is delighted because he took no notice of her objection to his company, yet it is clear that she enjoys being treated "as though [she] were a baby," and she behaves, indeed, like a silly kid, teasing Harold with her parasol, flouting it in front of his eyes and threatening his ears until the young man lifts her out of the buggy and warns her that she won't be allowed back until she has promised to behave.

Conversely, towards the end of the novel, when Harold, after an exchange of letters with Sybylla, agrees to put an end to their engagement, the heroine experiences a painful sense of loss as she holds in her hand the young man's acceptance of his dismissal. The reader cannot help thinking that Sybylla unconsciously expected her suitor to ignore her letters and to come and claim her as his own.

Harold finally does come to Possum Gully to propose to her once again, but he comes as a beggar, and this is what Sybylla can't bear: "Why did he look so exasperatingly humble? [...] I wanted a man who would be masterful and strong, who would help me over the rough spots of life [...] No; I could never marry Harold Beecham"(221). Whereas in the episode when Harold took her back to Caddagat, the heroine was delighted to see the young man oppose her and assume control of the situation, now she feels unhappy because her suitor no longer behaves with self-confidence and lets her have the upper hand. Although she is perfectly aware that marrying Harold is her only means of rising quickly above her condition, Sybylla cannot say yes to a man in whom she sees a child "pleading for a dangerous toy." "I desired to gratify him," she writes, "but the awful responsibility of the after-effects loomed up and deterred me"(224). The girl begins to feel pity for a man to whom she would be "as a two-edged sword in the hand of a novice — gashing his fingers at every turn" (223).

Sybylla's need for a "master-hand" is mentioned as early as chapter four in connection with the judgement she passed on her father when she was fifteen. At that age she realized that Dick Melvyn was "a despicable, selfish, weak creature"(15) for whom she felt nothing but disgust. The man she had worshipped during her childhood — "He was my hero [...] and even religion till I was ten"(4) — this man, or rather this god, tumbled down from his pedestal, and the girl felt deprived of a protector and a guide. The metaphor of the climbing plant at the end of chapter four may hold the key to Sybylla's attitude towards men, towards Harold in particular whom she tends to identify for a while with a father figure, only to realize in the end that she was mistaken. The metaphor reads as follows:

> It [the spirit which was maturing within her] was as a climbing plant without a pole — it groped about the ground, bruised itself, and became hungry searching for something strong to which to cling. Needing a master-hand to train and prune, it was becoming rank and sour. (15)

When we have finished the novel and remember this passage, it becomes clear to us that the heroine's lack of emotional coherence, for which the critics have often blamed the author, is quite natural in a girl who idolized her father and saw him turn, in a few years' time, from "an indulgent parent, a chivalrous husband, a capital host, a man full of ambition and gentlemanliness"(4) into a pitiful, contemptible, cowardly drunk whom she had to track from one pub to another and bring home. A wound inflicted upon a sensitive girl, at such an early age, cannot be so easily healed, and one should not be surprised to discover, in the young woman's relationship with men, an inextricable knot of contradictions and paradoxical attitudes.

That the heroine should be called Sybylla is certainly not innocent. The name, which calls to mind the sibyls of classical legend, is suggestive of mystery, and there is indeed something enigmatic in Sybylla's incompatible aspirations, something which will probably make it impossible for her ever to achieve self-fulfilment. The only glimmer of hope at the end of the book is the prospect of a literary career that will have to make up for the "ghastly aloneness" to which the heroine has deliberately condemned herself.

Despite the author's statements to the contrary, the reader is tempted to consider Sybylla Melvyn, if not as Mile Franklin's accurate self-portrait, at least as a character spiritually akin to her creator. Faithful to her heroine's line of thought, Miles Franklin never married, gained her independence by working as a freelance journalist and joined the ranks of the feminist movement during the

thirty years or so which she spent away from Australia in the United States and in Great Britain.

The protective mask of the pseudonym Brent of Bin Bin under which she published six novels was certainly unable to relieve her inner tensions, for the sexual and psychological contradictions characteristic of Sybylla's personality recur in the Brent of Bin Bin novels which offer extraordinary studies of women desiring but incapable of consummation and deliberately thwarting their sexual drives.

All this tends to suggest that Sybylla Melvyn's dilemma was also Miles Franklin's and that *My Brilliant Career* displays "those aspects of self in conflict with convention which determined both her [Miles Franklin's] public life and the manner and matter of her literary work."[3] As Ray Mathew puts it: "Disguise is often the clearest expression of self, the least inhibited display of event..."[4] The reader would not be surprised to hear that, all her life long, the writer paid the high price for her independence, sacrificing to it an unacknowledged desire for sexual fulfilment and a deliberately thwarted longing for romantic love. But Miles Franklin jealously guarded her privacy from all intrusions, so that very little is known of her apart from what she was willing to reveal.

3. Ray Mathew, ibid., p. 12.
4. Ibid., p. 29.