

Story Model 3:

Miles Franklin

My Brilliant Career



My Brilliant Career by Miles Franklin

Sybylla Melvyn is independent and headstrong, defiant and ambitious. Growing up in the Australian bush, she dreads a life like her mother's of boring chores and endless hardship. As a result, Sybylla has a difficult relationship with her mother, who fears her daughter will become a "great unwomanly tomboy". (Gertie is Sybylla's younger sister.) Sybylla writes:

"She (Sybylla's mother) wondered why I did not cry and beg forgiveness, and thereby give evidence of being human. I was too wrought up for tears. Ah, that tears might have come to relieve my overburdened heart! I took up the home-made tallow candle in its tin stick and looked at my pretty sleeping sister Gertie (she and I shared the one bed). It was as mother had said. If Gertie was scolded for any of her shortcomings, she immediately took refuge in tears, said she was sorry, obtained forgiveness, and straightaway forgot the whole matter. She came within the range of mother's understanding. I did not; she had feelings, mother thought, I had none. Did my mother understand me, she would know that I am capable of more agony and more exquisite heights of joy in one day than Gertie will experience in her whole life. Was I mad as mother had said? A fear took possession of me that I might be. I certainly was utterly different to any girl I had seen or known. What was the hot wild spirit which surged within me? Ah, that I might weep! I threw myself on my bed and moaned. Why was I not like other girls? Why was I not like Gertie? Why were not a new dress, everyday work and an occasional picnic sufficient to fill my mind?" (p. 28)

(The bush becomes a symbol of Sybylla's dreams.)

"I was weary — my limbs ached with the heat and work (...) All nature was weary and seemed to sing a dirge (a funeral song or tune) to that effect in the furnace-breath wind which roared among the trees on the low ranges at our back and smote (to strike or hit hard with the hand, a stick or weapon) the parched (to become dry) 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. (to leer: to give a side glance)

Weariness! Weariness!

This was my life — my life — my brilliant career! I was fifteen — fifteen! A few fleeting hours and I would be old as those around me. I looked at them as they stood there, weary, and turning down the other side of the hill of life. When young, no doubt they had hoped for, and dreamed of, better things -- had even known them. But here they were. This has been their life; this was their career. It was, and in all probability would be, mine too. My life -- my career -- my brilliant career.

Weariness! Weariness!

The summer sun danced on. Summer is fiendish (an evil spirit) and life is a curse, I said in my heart. What a great dull hard rock the world was!" (p. 21) "As a tiny child I was filled with dreams of the great things I was to do when grown up. My ambition was as boundless as the mighty bush in which I have always lived. As I grew it dawned upon me that I was a girl — the makings of a woman! Only a girl! — merely this and nothing more. 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.

Familiarity made me used to this yoke; I recovered from the disappointment of being a girl, and was reconciled to that part of my fate. In fact, I found that being a girl was quite pleasant until a hideous truth dawned upon me — I was ugly! That truth has embittered my whole existence. It gives me

days and nights of agony. It is a sensitive sore that will never heal, a grim hobgoblin that nought can scare away. In conjunction with this brand of hell I developed a reputation of cleverness. Worse and worse! Girls! Girls! Those of you who have hearts, and therefore wish for happiness, homes, and husbands by and by, never develop a reputation of being clever.” (33)

Because of her fiery ways, Syblla’s mother struggles to look after her 15-year old daughter as well as the other siblings. Syblla is sent to live with her Grandmother at Caddagat “up in the country”. It is Wednesday, August, 1986. (pp. 131-133)

That afternoon when leaving the house, I had been followed by one of the dogs, which, when I went up the willow-tree, amused himself chasing water lizards along the bank of the creek. He treed one, and kept up a furious barking at the base of its refuge. The helping had disturbed grannie where she was reading on the veranda, and coming down the road, under a big umbrella to see what the noise was about, as luck would have it, she was in the nick of time to catch me standing on Harold Beecham’s back. Grannie frequently showed marked displeasure regarding what she termed my larrikinism, but never before had I seen her so thoroughly angry. Shutting her umbrella, she thrust at me with it, saying, “shame! Shame! You’ll come to some harm yet, you immodest, body, bad hussy! I will write to your mother about you. Go home at once, miss, and confine yourself in your room for the remainder of the day, and don’t dare eat anything until tomorrow. Spend the time in fasting, and pray to God to make you better. I don’t know what makes you so forward with me. Your mother and aunt never gave me the slightest trouble in that way.”

She pushed me from her in anger and I turned and strode housewards without a word or glancing behind. I could hear grannie deprecating my conduct as I departed, and Harold quietly and decidedly differing from her.

From the time of my infancy punishment of any description never had a beneficial effect upon me. But dear old grannie acting according to her principles in putting me through a term of penance, so I shut myself in my room as directed, with goodwill towards her at my heart. I was burning with shame. Was I bold and immodest with men, as accused of being? It was the last indiscretion I would intentionally have been guilty of.

The fact of gender never on any instant enters my head, and I find it as easy to be chummy with men as with girls: men in return have always been very good, and have treated me in the same way.

On returning from her walk Grannie came to my room, brought me some preachy books to read, and held out to me the privilege of saying I was sorry, and being restored to my usual place in the society of the household.

“Grannie, I cannot say I am sorry and promise to reform, for my conscience does not reproach me in the least. I had no evil – not even a violation of manners – in my intentions; but I am sorry that I vexed you,” I said.

“Vexing me is not the sinful part of it. It is your unrepentant heart that fills me with fears for your future. I will leave you here to think by yourself. The only redeeming point about you is, you do not pretend to be sorry when you are not.”

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.

About nine o’clock he knocked at my window and said:

“Never mind, Syb. I tried to get you off, but it was no go. Old people often have troublesome strait-laced ideas. It will be over by tomorrow.”

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.

Reference: Franklin, Miles. *My Brilliant Career*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1966.

My Brilliant Career

Your story: the following is a useful guide to your Statement of Intention.

10 tips for creative essays

- 1. Narrative perspective:** Sybylla is a “central” first person narrator. She conveys her thoughts, feelings and frustrations in a deeply personal manner: “I said in my heart.” Throughout the novel, Franklin also uses embedded narratives such as diary excerpts and letters to include other characters’ perspective and to enhance tension.
- 2. Narrative “voice” and writing style:** Sybylla’s melodramatic personality and heartfelt writing style draw us into the action and into her thoughts as she challenges stereotypical expectations of the feminine. At times, akin to stream of consciousness, she reveals her anguish. She uses long and short sentences, interrogative sentences and rhetorical questions to draw attention to her pain and disappointments. She includes exclamations such as “ah”. Although headstrong and stubborn, she also doubts herself – “was I mad as mother had said? A fear took possession of me that I might be.” Notice how Sybylla includes an occasional address to the reader – “Those of you”.
- 3. The story-line:** the action revolves around Sybylla’s desire to lead an intellectually fulfilling life which propels her into conflict with traditional feminine figures such as her mother and grandmother — women in the bush with narrow horizons; women who conform to the status quo.
- 4. The setting:** The bush is vast and harsh; it captures Sybylla’s sense of loneliness. The extreme heat reflects Sybylla’s frustrations and emotional turmoil.
- 5. Characterisation:** Sybylla is presented as a “larrikin” and “tomboy”; she is unladylike; clever, frustrated and ambitious. She envisages a life for herself beyond the restrictive confines of her immediate family and surrounds. She refuses to be stereotyped and refuses to conform to the idea of the “feminine”. Her mother is presented as the antagonist: someone who thwarts Sybylla’s desires and ambitions and insists on tradition and conformity.
- 6. The use of dialogue:** Note Sybylla’s conversation with Grannie about her relationship with Harold Beecham. Grannie rebukes Sybylla because of her “unacceptable” and familiar behaviour.
- 7. Tension and suspense:** The narrator-author creates tension by depicting the conflict between Sybylla and her mother. There is a large emotional distance between them, which appears to be unresolvable. Sybylla is adamant that she will not compromise her dreams and her high hopes. Her fiery spirit exasperates both her mother and her grandmother.
- 8. Story-telling devices:** comparisons: Mrs Melvyn compares Sybylla to Gertie who acts in a predictably feminine way; Gertie is emotional, submissive and predictable. (Note how this triangle fuels tension.) As well as the symbolism of the bush, there are comparisons/contrasts and similes. (Her dreams are as “boundless as the mighty bush”). Franklin also uses alliteration, assonance and personification to capture Sybylla’s attitude.
- 9. Resolution and message:** Through the characterisation of two different sisters, the author highlights two distinct choices for girls – they can either conform and “yoke” one’s happiness to their husband or carve out an independent lifestyle. Sybylla develops a romantic relationship with Harry, but will she amend her strong views about womanhood, marriage and careers?

Your story: Sybylla’s story is relayed in a first-person narrative style. Notice her distinct “voice” and story-telling devices; she wears her heart on her sleeve as she tries to convey the depth of her frustrations.

Note Sybylla’s conflict with her mother and with her conversation with her grandmother. Pay particular attention to the dialogue, tone, mannerisms.

Using the model, write your own story on an experience of conflict.

Your Story: the generational divide

Your story:
write a story
based on conflict
and difference.

Notice how Sybylla Melvyn (*My Brilliant Career*) does not want to follow the same life-story as her mother. In her conversations with both her mother and her grandmother, she resents the fact that she is misunderstood.

Similarly, tension between tradition and change is commonplace in Alistair MacLeod's short stories. (See *The Island*). In *Growing up Asian in Australia*, numerous authors reveal their struggles with their parents/grandparents as they grow up in a different cultural landscape.

- » Explore your conflict with someone you love, and who you think misunderstands you — someone who seems steeped in the “old” ways. You think that they are being unreasonable and unfair, old-fashioned and/or “stuck in the past”. You don't want to conform to the way things are done simply because it is expected of you.
- » Use the “story-telling plan” on p. 78. Also see Model 2: Scrooge's and Fred's conversation and Model 3: Sybylla's conversation with her grandmother.

1. The beginning

Open with a particular incident placing readers right in the middle of the action. It may be an anecdote in the first person perspective or a conversation dramatising a bone of contention between two characters (yourself and a grandparent)

What happens? What is the topic of conversation? Your mother might be asking you to do something that you think is unreasonable or unfair — just because it is convenient or you are always there and willing to help. She is making you feel angry and resentful, which is so unlike you. Why me? Why not Tim? What do you do and why?

- » *“I am not particularly kind to my grandmother/grandfather. One day she went to sit down, and I moved the chair, while smirking at my brother.”*

2. The middle

Using examples, develop and dramatise the conflict/action, leading to a climax.

- » *Provide a narrative context; my mother often asks me to take my grandmother to the park. My grandmother likes to walk around the neighbourhood and enjoys the flowers. However, she is showing signs of memory loss. She is also very slow and frustrating.*
 - » Give a flashback. Compare what your grandmother used to be like.
- » **(Immediate past tense)** *On this particular occasion, I was sick of waiting so I told my grandmother just to walk home on her own. Describe your state of mind and your conflicting emotions. What happened to her? Nana ended up at a neighbour's house (Sally) who kindly brought her home.*

It's grandparents' day at school and you are excited to invite Pa who has recently come to Australia, but when you see him standing glumly in the corridor, huddled at the back, muttering to himself in Chinese, you are embarrassed.” Some of your friends start giggling. Some mock his accent. You feel uncomfortable -- torn and upset.

It is your birthday, and you've given your grandmother a list of “possible” presents — mostly new-fangled gadgets. However, she gives you a rare cactus plant. You struggle to conceal your disappointment. However, after her death, the plant begins to flower and you appreciate its beauty. What does it remind you of?

3. The end

What is the fall-out? How do you change your behaviour? What are your resolutions? You might be ashamed of your negligence. You resolve to make amends and find ways to gain respect.

- » See Story 5: Notice Najaf's resolutions.