

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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My Brilliant Career (1979)

Gillian Armstrong

OVERVIEW

Director Gillian Armstrong was born in 1950 and raised in a suburb of Melbourne, Australia. While studying directing at the newly established Australian Film and Television School, she made several much-lauded short films. With Peter Weir, Armstrong was one of the first Australian directors to be recognized internationally, beginning with her first feature film, *My Brilliant Career* (1979), which competed at Cannes. Armstrong went on to make other films in Australia (including *Starstruck* [1982], *High Tide* [1987], *Oscar and Lucinda* [1997], and several documentaries) and in Hollywood (including *Mrs. Soffel* [1985] and *Little Women* [1994]). Internationally acclaimed throughout her career, Armstrong has won numerous awards in Australia and abroad.

Film *My Brilliant Career* is based on the novel of the same name, published in 1901 by Miles Franklin, who was barely out of her teens at the time. In the novel, Franklin tells the semiautobiographical tale of Sybylla Melvyn, a vivacious girl from the Australian bush (i.e. wilderness) who longs for a career in art, music, or literature. Armstrong's film follows much of the novel's plot, including Sybylla's decision to reject a marriage proposal from the man she loves in order to prioritize her career. The film extends the novel's conclusion, showing Sybylla triumphantly sending off a manuscript to Blackwood's Publishers in Edinburgh.

Background Producer Margaret Fink saw Armstrong's short films and approached her to direct *My Brilliant Career*. Although hesitant to take on a complex period production, Armstrong agreed after she overheard a sexist comment about Sybylla and realized she did not want a man to direct the film. The young director and young stars, Judy Davis and Sam Neill, were joined by experienced Australian film professionals including Eleanor Witcombe (screenplay) and Donald McAlpine (cinematography). The film was an immediate success, competing for the Palme d'Or at Cannes and winning many accolades, including Best Film and Best Director at the Australian Film Institute's annual awards ceremony.

LIST OF MAIN CHARACTERS

Sybylla Melvyn – teenager living in the Australian bush

Lucy Melvyn – Sybylla's mother

Gertie Melvyn – Sybylla's younger sister

Mrs. Bossier – Sybylla's wealthy grandmother

Frank Hawden – Englishman visiting Mrs. Bossier

Aunt Helen – Sybylla's mother's sister

Uncle Julius – Sybylla's mother's brother

Harry Beecham – young man who lives near Mrs. Bossier

Miss Augusta – Harry's aunt

Mr. and Mrs. McSwat – poor family to whom the Melvyns become indebted

SYNOPSIS

Teenage Sybylla Melvyn lives with her large family at the turn of the twentieth century in the Australian bush. Sybylla longs for a career in art, literature, or music, but her parents are very poor. Her wealthy maternal grandmother invites her to stay at her estate, Caddagat. There, Sybylla enjoys nicer clothes and leisure to play the piano and write, though her grandmother and aunt, Helen, gently encourage her to curb her "wild spirit." Sybylla rejects a visiting Englishman's marriage proposal and develops an interest in Harry Beecham, a neighbor even wealthier than her grandmother. She is invited to

spend a few days at the home of Harry and his aunt. Sybylla and Harry enjoy playing duets, punting on the river, and even having a pillow fight.

Sybylla returns to her grandmother's house. At a ball, Harry proposes to her. She asks him to wait for two years, so that she can learn more about the world and herself before marrying him. He agrees. Soon after, Sybylla is sent to work as a governess in the home of the very poor McSwat family as repayment of a debt owed to Mr. McSwat by Sybylla's father. The numerous McSwat children are totally uneducated and poorly behaved, but Sybylla makes some headway in teaching them to read. Eventually, the McSwats send her home, forgiving the debt. Sybylla returns to life at her parents' home, helping to manage the cattle. One day—two years after the proposal—Harry appears, asking her if she is ready to marry him. Sybylla tells him that even though she cares for him, she is not willing to sacrifice herself in becoming a wife and mother at the expense of her own career. Harry is crushed but understands. Soon after, Sybylla finishes the manuscript of her semiautobiographical novel and sends it off to Blackwood's Publishers.

SCENES

In a different world – A teenage girl wearing late-nineteenth-century clothing writes in a notebook, then reads aloud what she has just read, saying it is the story of her brilliant career and that she has always known she belongs to the world of art, literature, and music. Outside in the sunny, barren landscape, a dust storm begins. Several men in work clothes try to get a group of cattle to move. A woman appears and calls "Sybylla!" to the girl while closing the windows. "I'm coming!" Sybylla finally replies.



Bad news – Sybylla plays the piano while others in the house do domestic chores or study; there are several children as well as a middle-aged man and a middle-aged woman. The woman frowns and goes to Sybylla, saying that she and Sybylla's father cannot afford to keep her any longer. Sybylla says she could earn her own living as a pianist. Her mother says she has arranged a position for her as a general servant. Sybylla leaves the room.



Dissatisfied – At night, Sybylla talks to her younger sister, Gertie, saying she hates this life. Gertie says that the drought is no one's fault. Sybylla insists that she cannot stand to live in the bush her whole life, as someone who has desires and thoughts of her own. "It would be better if I didn't think at all," she says.

Saved – Sybylla does chores, including milking a cow and chopping wood. Her mother brings her a letter from her own mother, Sybylla's grandmother, inviting her to stay with her at Caddagat. Sybylla and Gertie laugh and shout joyfully; their mother walks back to the house expressionless.



Frank – Sybylla disembarks from a mail coach, where she is met by a well-dressed young man looking for Mrs. Bossier's granddaughter. He introduces himself to her as Frank Hawden. He drives her to Caddagat in a horse-drawn buggy. He says he is English and has only been in Australia for three months.



Caddagat – The cart arrives at Caddagat, Sybylla's maternal grandmother's estate. Mrs. Bossier and another woman, whom Sybylla addresses as Aunt Helen, greet her warmly. Sybylla smiles to see the opulence of the house. She enjoys dinner with Mrs. Bossier, Helen, and Frank, and she plays the piano for them afterward.



Self-doubt – At bedtime, Helen helps Sybylla get settled into a bedroom, saying it used to be Sybylla's mother's room. Sybylla looks at an old picture of her mother and begins to cry. In response to Helen's questions, Sybylla explains that her mother is so beautiful, while she herself is so ugly and unloved. Helen embraces her and protests, assuring her that there is a lot of love to go around in the world.



Rain – Sybylla, wearing a nice new dress and hat, reads a book under a tree at Caddagat. Frank Hawden appears with a bouquet of flowers. After he leaves, she throws the flowers in the river. It begins to rain, to which Sybylla reacts gleefully, dancing in it and letting herself get soaked. She explains to Mrs. Bossier later that she had not seen decent rain in over a year.



A newcomer – Sybylla sits in a tree picking flowers and singing. A young man rides up on horseback and dismounts to investigate the singing. He asks whether she works at Caddagat; she says yes and begins to speak in an Irish accent. He helps her down and then asks for a reward; she tells him to let go of her and runs away smiling.



Dinner party – Sybylla and Helen dress and then descend for dinner, where they are joined not only by Mrs. Bossier but also by Uncle Julius and the same young man Sybylla met by the tree earlier. Mrs. Bossier introduces him as Harry Beecham, saying she thinks they may have met as children. At dinner, the party discusses the increase in tramps begging for food lately; Sybylla slyly says that she was met by one earlier the same day, an ill-mannered sort who accosted her while she was picking flowers.



Merrymaking – Mrs. Bossier leaves, saying she must attend to a neighbor about to give birth. The rest of the party remain, eventually playing and singing music, as well as dancing. Sybylla sings a song about three drunken maidens, saying she learned it in the pub. The men are surprised but smiling; Helen does not smile.



Proposal – In the morning, Mrs. Bossier says that she hears they engaged in what was just short of a "Bacchanalian debauch." Sybylla goes for a walk to the sheep paddocks, where she is followed by Frank, who proposes to her. She laughs and pushes him into the herd of sheep.



Marriage warnings – Mrs. Bossier and Helen discuss the proposal with Sybylla. Mrs. Bossier points out that Frank will soon come into a large fortune in England. Sybylla insists that she will not marry someone she dislikes. Mrs. Bossier leaves, and Helen and Sybylla continue the discussion. Helen tells Sybylla that the best kind of marriage is based not on love but on friendship. She says that both she and her sister, Sybylla's mother, married for love and have struggled ever since. While Sybylla's mother married a poor man, her own husband, Helen says, is not dead, but abandoned her, leaving her in an ambiguous state of being neither wife, nor widow, nor maiden.



Five Bob Downs – Sybylla is invited to spend a few days at Five Bob Downs, where Harry Beecham lives with Miss Augusta, his aunt. Miss Augusta greets her by saying she has little resemblance to her mother, which is a pity. Sybylla frowns, but Harry smiles at her and leads her into the house. Miss Augusta shows Sybylla her aviary; both smile and feed the birds. Sybylla also watches Miss Augusta paint and sees several paintings she has made. Sybylla goes punting with Harry; she deliberately rocks the boat, causing them both to tip into the water. "Race you home," she says when they both get out of the water soaking wet. Harry tells her he was very worried



when he initially didn't see her and thought she might have drowned. Back at the house, Harry and Sybylla play a duet on the piano.

Pillow fight – In the morning the next day, Harry and Sybylla have a pillow fight that takes them all over the grounds of the estate. They finally collapse breathlessly in the grass. Later, Harry and Miss Augusta discuss Sybylla; Miss Augusta says that Sybylla has improved since childhood but not much. She tells Harry to take care and not rush into anything. Uncle Julius comes to Five Bob Downs to pick up Sybylla. Harry tells Sybylla that he will have to go away for quite a few weeks on business but will come see her as soon as he returns.



Frank humiliated – Sybylla plays the piano at Caddagat. When a tramp comes by begging, she gives him some food and supplies. Uncle Julius mentions that Harry Beecham is back and has been for a couple of weeks. Sybylla looks troubled and volunteers to do an errand in town. Mrs. Bossier will not let her go alone, so Frank accompanies her. On the way, he taunts her for Harry's neglect and says she won't do better than Frank for a husband. In revenge, Sybylla drives off alone without him when he gets out of the buggy to open the gate.



Frosty reunion – In town, Sybylla sees Harry, who looks serious. Sybylla chides him for not coming to Caddagat; he says he has been busy. It becomes clear that Frank has been spreading rumors that Sybylla is flirting with many men; Sybylla assures Harry that this is untrue. Harry apologizes to Sybylla. "I'll see you at the ball," he says.



Helen's next warning – Sybylla writes alone in her room at Caddagat. Aunt Helen comes in and tries to talk to Sybylla about Harry. But Sybylla insists that she knows Harry would never propose to her because of her class status, and that she does not wish to marry anyone anyway. After Helen leaves the room, Sybylla looks at her new ball gown and flings it violently on the bed.



Violent proposal – Sybylla and everyone else from Caddagat attend the ball at Five Bob Downs. Harry comes over to talk to Sybylla but is intercepted by an elegant blond woman, who sits next to him at dinner. When he approaches Sybylla again later, she rebuffs him and goes to join the servants' party. Harry follows her there and eventually pulls her away from the dance, taking her to a gun lodge. Fiercely, he says that he has to go away for a few days and must know "whether it's to be yes or no." When Sybylla asks what the question is, he says he thinks they should get married. She chides him for the ungraciousness of the proposal. When he grabs her, she hits him across the face with a riding crop. After this, both are shocked, and both apologize.



Miss Augusta's opinion – Harry returns to the party. Miss Augusta finds Sybylla crying just outside the gun lodge and attempts to comfort her. Sybylla does not dispute it when Augusta says she thinks that Harry loves her and she loves Harry, but she counters, "Why does it always have to come down to marriage?" Miss Augusta observes that loneliness is a heavy price to pay for independence.



An understanding – Around the breaking of dawn, Sybylla finds Harry smoking a cigarette alone outside. She goes to him and they embrace. He tells her that he is in financial trouble and may lose all his property. She assures him that she did not like him for his riches. Nevertheless, she says she is not ready to marry, and she asks him to give her two years to “find out what’s wrong with the world, and with me.” He says he understands, and they kiss.



Repaying a debt – Sybylla sits in a tree at Caddagat, writing in a notebook. Mrs. Bossier sends for her. She announces to Sybylla that her parents are in financial difficulties, having borrowed several hundred pounds from a man named McSwat that they cannot pay back. It has been arranged that instead of paying the interest, the Melvyns will send Sybylla to be a governess to the McSwat children. Sybylla is indignant but realizes she has no choice.



Governess – Sybylla goes to the McSwat home. The eight children are dirty and unruly, the establishment primitive. She tries to teach the children to read and write. One of the boys attacks her using a slingshot and she spansks him. Sybylla plays “Beautiful Dreamer” on the tinny piano and the McSwat family sings along. There are no books in the house, so she has the children practice reading using newspapers that are plastered all over the walls as wallpaper. Sybylla receives a letter from her mother indicating that Harry has returned to Five Bob Downs in better financial shape and is now spending a lot of time with Gertie, Sybylla’s younger sister.



Misunderstanding – Sybylla goes for a walk by herself in the hills behind the McSwat home. The oldest son, Peter, comes by on horseback, saying he has been over to see Susie, and they return to the house together. The next morning, Mr. and Mrs. McSwat approach Sybylla. They gently say that they have seen her with Peter and need her to understand that he is all but engaged to Susie. She tries to tell them they misunderstand the situation. But Mr. McSwat says that they have decided to send her home, along with a letter saying that her parents do not have to worry about the money they owe them. The McSwats embrace her and say they like her.



Home again – Back home at Possum Gully, Sybylla’s mother has a new baby. Sybylla helps a calf that has gotten stuck in the mud. She drags the calf far enough out of the mud that it can go the rest of the way on its own. Harry Beecham appears on horseback and asks if she needs a hand. Sybylla smiles.



Parting – Harry asks Sybylla whether she has found the answers to her questions. She says she has, partly. Harry says he wants to marry her. Sybylla shakes her head and says that she cannot become a wife in the bush having a baby every year, and that she cannot lose herself in someone else’s life at the expense of her own. She adds that she wants to be a writer and has to do it alone. When Harry says, “I thought you loved me,” she replies that she is very close to loving him but is afraid of destroying him. She kisses him and leans her head on his shoulder.



Finishing her book – Sybylla writes in her bedroom while her younger sister sleeps. She reads the conclusion of what is written in the notebook. Sybylla gets dressed and goes outside, holding a large rectangular package addressed to Blackwood’s Publishers, Edinburgh. She puts the package in a mailbox and stands leaning against a gate, watching the sun rise.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sybylla Melvyn Sybylla is a teenager living in the Australian bush at the turn of the twentieth century. Her parents have many children and raise cattle, but her mother comes from a wealthy family. Sybylla is a free spirit who longs for a career in art, literature, or music.

Artistic The first thing we learn about Sybylla is that she wishes for a career in some branch of the arts. She frequently plays the piano, reads, and writes, whether at home with her parents or at her grandmother's estate. Despite domestic duties, she manages to complete a manuscript that is accepted by Blackwood's Publishers.

Passionate Sybylla does not merely like things: she is passionate about them. Sybylla pursues a career in the arts fiercely, despite opposition from her parents and, to a lesser extent, her grandmother. Sybylla is also passionate about Harry. She is furious when he neglects her and does little to hide her love for him.

Independent Given her love for Harry, Sybylla's prioritization of her own independence is all the more striking. Ultimately, Sybylla chooses to remain free from the constraints that would inevitably come with marriage. Throughout the film, Sybylla resists her surroundings, whether playing the piano as her relatives do chores or singing drinking songs in her grandmother's house.

Harry Beecham Harry is heir to an estate near Caddagat. He lives there with his aunt and is trying to save the estate from financial difficulties. Harry has a reputation for being a ladies' man, but he shows no interest in anyone else after meeting Sybylla.

Loving Almost as soon as he meets her, Harry is defined by his love for Sybylla. He rarely takes his eyes off her during their initial encounters, and later he proposes to her, undeterred by her social inferiority and unconventional ambitions. Throughout the film, Harry seeks Sybylla's company and never looks happier than when he is with her.

Accommodating Beyond what would be expected for a man of his time, Harry accommodates Sybylla's feelings. When he first proposes, Sybylla asks him to wait for her for two years, giving her time to gain more experience of the world. He agrees. Two years later, he tries to assure her that if they marry, he will let her do what she wants.

Aunt Helen Helen is the sister of Sybylla's mother. She lives with her own mother, Sybylla's grandmother, at Caddagat and helps her manage Sybylla. Helen reveals to Sybylla that she lives in a sort of social limbo because her husband deserted her, leaving her neither wife, nor widow, nor maiden.

Conventional Helen has much more conventional ideas about the world than Sybylla does. She looks on with concern when Sybylla dances vigorously and sings a vulgar song at a small party. Helen knows what a woman must do to dress, behave, and think "correctly."

Kind Despite her conventionality, Aunt Helen shows Sybylla more kindness than anyone else in the film. For example, when Sybylla cries about her appearance, Helen embraces her and assures her that she is loved. Helen also reveals her marital status to Sybylla, despite her shame, to try to save Sybylla from a similarly bad marriage choice.

THEMES

Society

Social class Sybylla struggles with a complex social status. While her parents are poor, her mother comes from a wealthy family. When Sybylla goes to Caddagat, it is clear that she has been there before. Her childhood, then, has been marked by the contrast between her mother's original circumstances and the family's current circumstances. Sybylla clearly feels more kinship with the upper-class branch of the family, insisting on playing the piano and writing even as there are chores to be done. She is delighted when she receives the invitation to stay with her grandmother at Caddagat. Her grandmother and Aunt Helen immediately begin to make plans to buy her some new dresses that will better fit the company she will be keeping at Caddagat. After Sybylla meets and falls in love with Harry, she tells Helen she is well aware that Harry would never marry her because of her social status. This turns out to be incorrect,

however: Harry does propose to her. But Sybylla, ironically, decides that the best place to focus on her writing actually is her parents' house, even though she must share a bedroom and do chores there. Poverty demands less of her time than marriage would.

Illustrative moment: Early in the film, Sybylla's parents lie in bed at night discussing what to do with her, given that they think they cannot afford to "keep" her forever, but she has refused to work as a servant. Sybylla's father remarks, "She's like your whole damn family: delusions of grandeur." In other words, he attributes Sybylla's behavior to the social class background of her mother.

Gender Gender is among the most prominent themes of *My Brilliant Career*. The film is set during a period of strictly defined gender roles, with a stark division in the clothing, lifestyles, and expected behavior of men and women. As a young woman, Sybylla is expected to marry and have children. She is not expected to have a career. Sybylla resents this expectation and persists in working toward a career in spite of it; she plays the piano, reads, and writes. While these activities are not treated as inherently unfeminine, the idea of pursuing them professionally certainly is. Importantly, Sybylla is not portrayed as a tomboy. She loves her new dresses at Caddagat and eagerly accepts a regime of hair and skin care. She wishes to be beautiful and cries about how "ugly" she is. Sybylla is also heterosexual and passionately loves Harry. Thus, Sybylla does not reject all aspects of conventional femininity—only the expectation of marriage and childbirth instead of career. The film therefore does not suggest that only totally unconventional women would ever question societal expectations for their futures. Instead, it demonstrates that any kind of woman might want something more than what society demands.

Illustrative moment: In order to caution her against marrying for love, Aunt Helen explains to Sybylla that her husband essentially ruined her life by abandoning her. He has left her "neither wife, nor widow, nor maiden." This phrasing is telling, because it demonstrates that those three states are the only ways of defining a woman in this society. Now, Helen explains, she is adrift, living in her mother's house and lying to people, saying that her husband is dead. Since her role in relation to a man is compromised and she has no children, society has nothing for her to do.

Art Sybylla expresses early in the film that she longs for a career in the arts, but whether it will be visual art, literature, or music is uncertain. In speaking to her sister Gertie, Sybylla explains that she wants to interact with intelligent, creative people and see the world beyond Australia. She loves to read books and often closes her eyes in rapture while playing the piano. Writing serves as a means of self-expression; the writing Sybylla does is always about herself. Sybylla's parents do not support her ambitions; her mother chides her for wanting to be a concert pianist, saying that they could never afford the lessons required for her to become sufficiently skilled. At Caddagat, Sybylla's uncle, Julius, remarks that she would make a fine actress; Mrs. Bossier replies in horror that no granddaughter of hers will ever go on the stage. Sybylla's life with her grandmother offers her more leisure to play the piano, read, and write. Interestingly, art seems to play no part in her relationship with Harry; he expresses no similar interest, and they never discuss works of art together. In the end, Sybylla's desire to produce art overshadows all other desires: she gives up Harry, moves back in with her parents, and sacrifices nights of sleep in order to write.

Illustrative moment: Sybylla manages to make art a part of her life wherever she goes. One day, after she has been working as a governess for the McSwat family for some time, Sybylla goes to their tinny piano and plays a song, encouraging the family to sing along. They do so, vigorously, and Sybylla smiles, looking happier than she has looked at any time since her arrival there.

Relationships

Marriage *My Brilliant Career* raises questions about marriage that apply to its own release time of the late 1970s as well as to the Victorian period it depicts. Coming out at the height of second-wave feminism, when more women were disputing the centrality of marriage to a woman's life, the film follows a heroine doing the same thing at a time when almost no one else was. For Sybylla, the downsides of marriage for a woman in the period are clear: ceding control over her own destiny to someone else, and becoming consumed by childbirth and childrearing. Her object lesson is her mother, who left an affluent and

comfortable life to marry a poor man and is now constantly under the weight of many cares about money and her children's well-being. Later in the film, Sybylla meets a counterpoint in the person of Miss Augusta, Harry's aunt. Miss Augusta is unmarried, owns the Five Bob Downs estate, and spends her time pursuing her interests, including painting and maintaining an aviary of exotic birds. Sybylla is intrigued by this lifestyle, but Miss Augusta confesses to her that "loneliness is a terrible price to pay for independence." Avoiding marriage, it seems, does not guarantee happiness either.

Illustrative moment: After Harry first proposes to her, Miss Augusta finds Sybylla sitting alone and crying. Miss Augusta remarks that it seems clear that she loves Harry and that Harry loves her, so perhaps they should get married. Sybylla replies in frustration, "But why must it always come down to marriage?" This is the question of the film.

Politics

Nation Sybylla seems dissatisfied with Australia in the early part of the film, expressing a desire to travel and talk to people in other countries. She loves Caddagat partly because it is like an English estate. Moreover, she tells Harry she could not stand to be a wife and mother in the bush. However, in the end, she does choose to live with her parents in bush and seems tolerably content to do so. After she puts her packaged manuscript in the post box at the end of the film, she stops to lean on a gate and watch the sun rise over the arid landscape. She smiles while doing so. Sybylla has, it seems, become reconciled to her country. Throughout the film, comments are made about the country's economic state. Several times, tramps come by asking for provisions. Mrs. Bossier and Helen are somewhat conservative in their handouts, saying that Sybylla would give away half the estate if she could. At a couple of the dinners at Caddagat, the diners discuss Australia's economy. The film takes place right at the beginning of Australia's new status as a commonwealth largely separate from Britain. Like her country, Sybylla seeks a measure of independence.

Illustrative moment: The first words of the film are "Dear fellow countryman"—the opening of Sybylla's manuscript, read aloud by Sybylla herself. She chooses to address her autobiography to other citizens of Australia. She thus sees herself as engaged in something of a nationalist project even from the beginning, despite her desire to explore other lands.

Life Stages

Coming of Age Sybylla is a teenager throughout the several years spanned by the film. In an early scene, while Sybylla is playing the piano, her mother interrupts her to say that because she is "a young woman now," Sybylla must provide for herself. Her mother's plan is for her to go out to work as a general servant. Sybylla is horrified by this idea but is only saved by her grandmother's invitation to state at Caddagat—Sybylla herself does not have a say in the matter. At Caddagat, she begins to wear clothes and hairstyles more suitable for a young woman than a young girl, and she has her first two romantic experiences. Later Sybylla does go out to work as a governess for a large family; although she hates it at first, she learns how to cope and ends up winning the affection of her employers. By the end of the film, Sybylla is making her own decisions—staying at her parents' home and working there, writing her book, and turning down Harry's renewed marriage proposal. Unlike a conventional Victorian or Hollywood heroine, Sybylla comes of age through independence rather than marriage.

Illustrative moment: Mirroring Sybylla's defiant act of writing at the beginning of the film, the very last scene of the film depicts the completion of her manuscript and a peaceful walk to the post box to mail it off to Blackwood's Publishers in Edinburgh. Writing on the screen tells us that Blackwood's went on to publish Sybylla's book. Coming of age as a writer is the happy ending of the film.

Quest

Ideals Sybylla is above all an idealist. At the beginning of the film, she is striving toward the ideal of an artist's life despite living in unfavorable circumstances. Sybylla speaks to her sister Gertie early in the film of her desire to leave Australia for a place in which she can be surrounded by other people who want to

talk about books, music, and the visual arts. She has no sense of how she would get there or what it would really be like, but she aspires to this future. Nothing that happens to Sybylla in the film, though, gets her much closer to this ideal. She turns down the wealthy Londoner who proposes to her, even though presumably marrying him could very well grant access to the milieu she desires. This is because her other ideal is love; unlike many people around her, Sybylla will not consent to marriage without love. Ultimately, though, Sybylla's initial ideal of being an artist is the most important one: even marriage to a man she loves is unacceptable because she knows it would make her life as an artist impossible. The publication of Sybylla's manuscript, noted at the end of the film, is the partial achievement of this ideal.

Illustrative moment: Sybylla's grandmother, Mrs. Bossier, is unhappy when she hears of Sybylla's decisive rejection of Frank Hawdon's proposal. She encourages Sybylla to think about Frank's wealth and her own limited prospects. Sybylla replies that she does not love Frank, so marrying him is out of the question. Mrs. Bossier scoffs at this response and tells her to be realistic. Sybylla insists again that she will not marry someone she dislikes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you find yourself wanting to happen at the end of the film? Sybylla to accept Harry's proposal? Sybylla to hold firm and remain independent? Something else entirely? Why?
2. What did you think of the character of Sybylla's mother?
3. The film's attitude toward Australia—which may or may not be the same as Sybylla's—is somewhat ambiguous. What did you make of it, and why?
4. Compare and contrast the ending of *My Brilliant Career* with that of *Little Women* (the novel or any film version, though Gillian Armstrong's own 1994 adaptation may be the most apt) or some other coming-of-age narrative.
5. Armstrong has resisted being pigeonholed as a feminist filmmaker but also has feminist convictions and ultimately chose to direct the film for feminist reasons. To what extent and in what ways would you characterize *My Brilliant Career* as a feminist film?