

## **Creative Disabilities and Vulnerable Bodies In Women In The Bush**

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**Abstract** *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977) and *My Brilliant Career* (1979), all set at the turn of the century, are key films for three reasons. First, with their strong, independently-minded and progressive female characters, these films challenged the male-centered ocker films made in the first part of the decade, while also providing female counterparts to *Gallipoli*, *Breaker Morant* and *Between Wars* which featured historical men. Secondly, these films presented and explored the Australian bush as a complex, vibrant “character,” organic to the narrative and with strong bonds to the female protagonists. Thirdly, these female protagonists can be considered prototypes for modern young women in films of the 80’s and 90’s.

The films’ time frames all allude to Federation (1901), when Australia achieved a greater measure of independence from Britain, thus providing a context for the female protagonists who seek to break away from repressive social orders: a British-modeled young women’s school (*Picnic*, *Wisdom*), or marriage as the only life choice for a respectable woman (*Career*). Further, with their proactive females, these films resonate in the wake of the women’s movement in the 60’s and 70’s which gave women more equal footing in Australia’s traditionally patriarchal society.

Films set in the past, or “period films,” were labeled the “AFC genre” by Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka. The AFC, or Australian Film Commission was the new name for the restructured and expanded former Australian Film Development Corporation (1970-75), and was the principle government funding body from 1975-1981, which financed in whole or in part many of the period films. However, the period films were criticized for featuring “bland characters” and retreating into “gentle nostalgia” (Dermody and Jacka, 1988, 34). They comment, “The cinematography is dedicated to the glories of Australian light, landform and vegetation, often with clear traces of a romantic, even charm-school, Australian post-impressionism” (Dermody and Jacka, 1988, 33). Or these films were stuck in an idealized past, as Graeme Turner implies: “The Australia most of these films mythologized was defined by its landscape and by its colonial history rather than the complex contemporary realities of an urban, middle class post-colonial ‘multicultural’ society” (Turner, 1989, 115) While specifically referring to *My Brilliant Career*, Neil Rattigan alludes to the assumed superficial quality of period films: “...teetering dangerously close to being little more than a stunningly beautiful film that gives visual pleasure but not much intellectual substance” (Rattigan, 1990, 221). However, these criticisms overlook and undervalue vibrant, dynamic and complex women--Miranda and Sara in *Picnic*, Laura in *Wisdom* and Sybylla in *Career*. Further, the bush is a far more multi-dimensional entity than these writers and others have acknowledged.

**Keywords:** Re-evaluating Australian historical women

This paper seeks to reevaluate these three films using two models, Liz Ferrier’s “Vulnerable Bodies and Creative Disabilities,” and Kay Schaffer’s “Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition.”

First, Ferrier's model, based on her analysis of 80's and 90's films (as well as 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> century Australian literature), identifies "an embattled artistic individual, suffering from a disability or difference which isolates him or her socially, [and who] manages to find solace and ultimately social recognition through creative performance and self-expression" (Ferrier, 2001, 58). According to Ferrier, the disability can be physical and/or psychological; the individual can also be disadvantaged because he/she is a social outcast. Moreover, "[t]hese characters are stigmatized because of their eccentricity or difference from the norm..." (Ferrier, 2001, 67). Personal success, inner fulfillment and satisfaction, then, is measured in a public setting where the protagonist's abilities and talents can be appreciated, praised or celebrated. (Performance can also be met with derision and stern criticism.) With these criteria, Ferrier's model facilitates a new and illuminating level of analysis for 70's female protagonists.

Second, Schaffer's model, developed through her analysis of literature and historical accounts of exploration and settlement in the larger context of Australia's patriarchal culture, argues that the Australian land/landscape or "bush" has traditionally been perceived as the body of a woman, a feminized entity which is essential to the construction of Australian male identity. She argues, "...the land as an object virtually always is represented as feminine. It functions as a metaphor for woman—as in father sky to mother earth, colonial master to the plains of promise, native son to the barren bush....All of these equations reproduce the 'perfect' couple, masculine activity/feminine passivity" (Schaffer, 1988, 14). *Picnic, Wisdom and Career* problematize this ideology, using the bush in highly expressive and dynamic ways in the construction of *female* identity (though not to the total exclusion of male identity). Using Kay Schaffer's model as a launching point in *Picnic*, I examine the relationship between the women and their bush environments in *Wisdom and Career*.

This paper addresses these questions: in what ways does the creative disabilities/vulnerable bodies model apply to protagonists? What is the nature of the relationship between each female protagonists and the bush? At the end of this chapter, I conclude by examining two modern women in *Muriel's Wedding* (1994) and *Sweetie* (1987).

### ***Picnic at Hanging Rock***

*Picnic* is situated in a British modeled boarding school in the bush, Appleyard College on Valentine's day, 1900, when its young women exchange their love tokens before taking off for a picnic one sunny afternoon at Hanging Rock. Miranda, Marion, Irma and Edith scale the rock, and the first three disappearing into one of its crevasses. Miranda is sorely missed by her love-struck roommate Sara who keeps a lonely vigil for her. Though Irma is eventually discovered on the rock, Miranda and Marion are never found.

Sara fits Ferrier's model in intriguing ways. She is the film's embattled artistic individual -- she writes her own poetry, yet is singled out for abuse by the school's principal, Mrs. Appleyard. She suffers from a disability *and* difference which isolates her from the others: her frail health and delicate

emotional state, exacerbated by Miranda's inexplicable disappearance. Further, she is the only orphan in a school for young women of privilege. Sara and Miranda are complete opposites: Miranda blond and fair, Sara brunette and pale, Miranda confident, graceful, poised, as well as healthy and fit, Sara self-conscious and timid, pale and thin. Miranda is a natural leader, admired by all the young women; Sara shrinks from the social spotlight.

Sara becomes Mrs. Appleyard's scapegoat and is the only student not permitted to go to the picnic with the rest of the young women. It's as if Mrs. Appleyard recognizes Sara's easy-to-exploit infirmities, tormenting and mistreating her in a bizarre British warden/colonial prisoner dynamic. On the day of the picnic, Sara is summoned to recite for Mrs. Appleyard, and she recites a poem with which Mrs. Appleyard is not familiar. Sara declares that she wrote the poem herself. Sara's "passionate and eccentric expression" (Ferrier, 2001, p. 57) of her Australian creativity fuels Appleyard's contempt. Nevertheless, Sara holds her head held high, immensely proud of her own original work, and refuses to recite any poems other than her own. This is her only opportunity to perform, yet this occasion is significant because she passionately believes in and stands behind her own original work. However, it is clear in this oppressive institution she will never have any opportunity to perform for her classmates or receive any recognition.

Appleyard's cruel treatment of Sara intensifies the longer Miranda, Marion and Miss McCraw are missing. Sara's naturally withdrawn nature becomes obsessive, reinforcing "the motifs of isolation and incarceration" that Ferrier identifies. Broken-hearted over Miranda's disappearance, Sara stops eating and spends her days in bed in her room surrounded by pictures of Miranda. Sara's final "performance" is committing suicide, throwing herself out her bedroom window late one night, smashing through the greenhouse below to her death. Her whole body appears to be impaled on the branches of the shrubs in the greenhouse, which could be a crude rendition of how she imagines Miranda's fate. This shocking and self-destructive act suggests that she gives up, "...powerless in the face of natural and social forces...(Ferrier, 2001, 64).

How does Sara's tragic death "in the bush" compare with Miranda's fate out in the bush? What is the nature of Hanging Rock? First, and most evident, the soaring monolithic rock that looms high above the bush where the young women and their teachers picnic connotes a strong masculine presence, as several have noted. Thus, Meaghan Morris comments on the "strange and phallic force of nature" (Morris, 1980, 143), which beckons to the women. The rock also connotes a feminine presence. The proximity of the virginal young women to the rock suggests "passive, pliant virgin[s]" (Schaffer, 1988, 62), imbuing it with a sexual charge. Accordingly, both Michael, the young British man, and Albert, his Australian steward, voyeuristically watch the women as they move through the bush: the women become objects of their erotic desire. With regard to the feminine, the rock also implies the maternal. In this context, Schaffer incorporates a psychoanalytic approach in assigning to the rock a pre-Oedipal role, or

“maternal omnipotence” (Schaffer, 1988, 56). Thus, the primal, pre-Oedipal mother, is capable of absorbing its inhabitants, [and] assimilating them into its contours (Schaffer, 1988, 52)

According to Schaffer’s analysis of *Picnic*, the film “engages [Michael] and the viewer in a primal scene of seduction between mother and child, outside the constraints of the Father’s Law (Schaffer, 1988, 55-56). She describes how this dynamic is enacted through Michael, who watches the young women on their way to the rock. After they disappear, he attempts to climb the rock himself in search of Miranda. Schaffer adds, “For Michael, and through him the audience, the desire for woman [Miranda] merges with a desire for meaning which in turn merges with the desire for a fixed self” (Schaffer, 1988, 55). “Man’s identity, which might be secured heroically by his possession and control of the land [linked to Miranda] as a primary object of desire...[is] called into doubt by the threat of the bush as a form of the monstrous feminine” (Schaffer, 1988, 62), the pre-Oedipal rock which absorbs the young women. Thus the film reinforces the double role of the bush as a feminized entity, the presence of the young women who scale the rock *and* a pre-Oedipal presence. Since the women disappear, “...the bush is both ‘no place for a woman’ (Schaffer, 1988, 52), as it presents a danger to the young women, and, at the same time, “the place of ... Woman...” (Schaffer, 1988, 56)--the embodiment of the maternal. By assimilating the women, “[t]he bush obstructs man’s [and Michael’s] possession and mastery of the girls, of logical narrative meaning and a coherent self-identity. (Schaffer, 1988, 55). A different interpretation of Michael’s quest, suggests that, “Oedipus like,” (Schaffer, 1988, 55), he seeks unity with the maternal. His rejection, however – he is found on a ledge by Albert implies that he does not master the rock, another way to interpret his inability to complete his identity.

What about the identities of Miranda and Marion who disappear and are never found? From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, as Schaffer argues, female identity is not possible apart from the maternal rock: “The women in the bush become the bush, without distinction.” (Schaffer, 1988, 56). Yet, on the cultural or even mystical cultural level, the young Australian women escape British control, by entering and merging with the rock, “leaping” into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and becoming part of a “brave new world” (Roginski, 1979, 24): Australia in the new millennium. The visionary Miranda--who implied early on that she knew she was destined for another purpose-- and the precocious Marion are part of the vital, vibrant foundation of a new Australia. Yet, this interpretation collapses female identity back into the bush. Let’s look at another way in which women are linked to the bush in *The Getting of Wisdom*.

### **The Getting Of Wisdom**

Rather than a solemn drama foregrounding the mystery and power of the bush which impacts a boarding school and contributes to its decline (but heralds a new age for Australia), *Wisdom*, with its strongly satirical edge, focuses on the politics of the upper crust female society of an elitist boarding school, the Presbyterian Ladies College. The title is pointedly ironic, as little

learning goes on. *Wisdom* could even be regarded as a parody of the idealized female student population in *Picnic* where classmates are bonded in love and harmony. In *Wisdom*, the atmosphere is mean-spirited and bitchy. Significantly, the bush is not an imposing and formidable androgynous primal character as in *Picnic*. At first, it is a “civilized,” even neutralized entity linked to the oppressive school. Yet, the bush also functions as an environment ripe for Laura to appropriate. Rather than being conquered or transformed by the bush, Laura learns to use it to her own creative advantage and growth as she plays out the power of her imagination.

Like Sara, Laura exudes an adolescent awkwardness, immaturity and stubbornness. However, Laura (age 13) has a much stronger constitution than Sara, and is far more assertive with a tough hide to boot. Whereas Sara is an orphan, Laura’s loving and decent mother has saved every penny to send her to boarding school. Laura is clearly gifted intellectually and artistically, attributes which separate her from many of the rest of the girls. She skips two grades after only being in the school for one term. Yet she must survive in a population that thrives on mediocrity and pettiness, and ruthlessly cuts down the tall poppies: these qualities are what make her different, and “disadvantaged,” to use Ferrier’s term. Whereas Sara in *Picnic* has only one chance to express herself in the recitation of her own poetry, Laura’s passionate “compulsive creative pursuit” (Ferrier, 2001, p. 60) is embodied in her many “performances” throughout the film—playing the piano, doing literary recitations, and even a bit of creative writing by concocting a romance with college resident Reverend Shepherd complete with love letters that she recites in front of her classmates. Laura succeeds in the school on her own terms—which includes cheating on her final exams, and at the end of the film she receives a full musical scholarship to study abroad in Europe.

Laura’s piano playing in public and private throughout the film is absolutely crucial in the development of her self confidence and the maturation of her talent. Her favorite piece is Schubert’s “Impromptu,” which is linked to private and public performance, and is intertwined with her passion towards an upper class woman, Evelyn, a maternal figure, to whom Laura develops a strong sexual attraction. It is the piece that they play together at the beginning of the second term which brings them closer together.

However, it is not long before Evelyn decides to withdraw from the college, not only because of the school’s repressive atmosphere but, more important, Laura’s increasingly hostile clinginess. “You are suffocating me,” Evelyn declares after Laura confronts her. On the day that Evelyn leaves for good and comes to say goodbye, Laura ignores her, compulsively playing the piano, ignoring Evelyn, her eyes intently focused on the keys, as she shuts out the real world, playing “from her head,” and repressing her heart (and hurt feelings) through the music. This alludes to the scene where the two played together earlier. Evelyn noted, quoting Miss Hicks the music teacher, that she (Evelyn) “played only from the heart,” whereas Laura

“played only from the head” (suggesting Laura’s mental fortitude and intelligence). But this duet scene also implied that Laura was pouring the passion for Evelyn into her beautiful and lyrical playing. Now she can only play solo in her silent misery, using her mental resolve to mask the deep pain that Evelyn’s departure causes.

Ferrier notes, “Success, when achieved, is the product of impractical, passionate self-expression, rather than pragmatism (Ferrier, 2001, 60). Laura’s performance on graduation day when she receives a scholarship to study abroad in Leipzig, Germany reinforces this notion. Laura plays the Impromptu proudly as a tribute to Evelyn, rather than the intended piece as announced, Beethoven’s Sonata No. 21 in C Major—a triumph of “heart over head.” Coming out in a way about Evelyn, Laura reaches a large audience, which includes the graduates and their parents.. Since their playing together was private, Laura is the only one who knows the truth behind her piece. Rather than an occasion to celebrate her talents to the whole school by playing another master, this piece is a tribute to her lost love.

Although much of *Wisdom* takes place within the school, the bush plays a significant role in the film with respect to Laura’s growth and mastery of her environment and our understanding of her personality and consciousness. Rather than exuding mystery, danger and ominousness as in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the bush first of all suggests a prison. The “tamed” meticulously landscaped grounds surrounding the school (not at all the wild bush in *Picnic*) function as an extension of the formidable building’s confining repressive atmosphere. Thus, after her initiation on her first day by the group of girls described earlier, Laura stands all alone in the green, a small figure in the alienating landscape, adrift and blinking at the immensity of the towering trees and spacious gardens. But just as she learns to live within the rarified school society, she uses the bush to transform this oppressive atmosphere into a backdrop for her fantasies, where her imagination runs wild. At the height of her fantasy about Reverend Shepherd, she selects a shady grove of trees near the school to read the fabricated love poem from Reverend Shepherd to a group of her classmates, amusing herself and awing them. Sitting on the large stone fence, the trees and shrubs providing an idyllic atmosphere, she “holds court,” as the sighing group of young women gaze spellbound, while she reads the impassioned words, turning the setting into a fabular world of yearning, intrigue and taboo love.

We saw similar powers of imagination and spinning of yarns at the beginning of the film in the bush near her home, a vastly different landscape, one which introduced Laura in the context of her working class environs. Unlike the lush area with healthy mature trees surrounding the school, the area where she lives is an expanse of dry, burnt sandy land, populated by a few native trees and some brush near the modest working class home that doubles as her mother’s post office. But as with the school grounds, the bush can also be linked to fantasy, caprice and wonderment. When we first meet Laura at the film’s beginning, she is a ways from her house, walking among gnarled tangles of dead branches, in the middle of a hot summer day.

She is spinning a lushly romantic tale to her younger sister about a prince and princess who meet in a “sylvan glade” in a dark forest. Both are caught up in the fable, where the “Prince meets the wondrous fair maiden...” Clearly this is a woman who can let her imagination run wild, and who can transcend her immediate environment to create a comforting, exciting and romantic setting. We shall see in *My Brilliant Career* the ways in Sybylla takes further command of the bush.

### ***My Brilliant Career***

In *My Brilliant Career*, the bush is not the seductive masculine or engulfing pre-Oedipal maternal as in *Picnic*, nor alienating and imprisoning (as linked to the oppressive school) in *Wisdom*, though *Career* characterizes the bush as an inspirational place for its protagonist, Sybylla Melvyn, just as *Wisdom* does. Throughout the film, Sybylla positions herself within the bush – ie, sitting in a meadow, perched in a tree, running through a grove of trees, or leaning on a fence. By doing this, the filmmakers conjure up Schaffer’s myth of the feminized landscape not in terms of the symbolic or psychoanalytic, but in terms of the bush as the *place of a Woman* (Schaffer, 1988, 56). The bush is where Sybylla belongs, and she develops a strong affinity to and rapport with it. The bush becomes a place where her identity evolves.

Moreover, and significantly, the bush is not linked to the development of the identities of the film’s male principles, Frank Hawdon and Harry Beachum. In various ways, Sybylla challenges the traditional cultural construct of a feminized landscape linked to the identity of the patriarchy. Frank and Harry are not the “colonial master[s] over the plains of promise.” (Schaffer, 1988, 14). Frank, a visitor from England, like Michael in *Picnic*, is quite out of place in the bush, and is a green horn in every sense of the word. Harry, though owner of vast estates elsewhere in Australia (in addition to Five Bob, his home), does not work the land, and his relationship to it is cosmetic. He functions as a figurehead. The film further suggests that he not able to manage it or make it profitable; at one point he is even in danger of losing Five Bob.

But first, in what ways does Sybylla fit Ferrier’s model?

Sybylla is “disadvantaged” and isolated by her tenacious independence as well as her determination to have a career—a *brilliant* career in the world of art and literature and music as she announces in voice over at the film’s beginning. She desires to break out of the stifling atmosphere of her working class home environment where she has two states of existence, “work and sleep.” This is a plan completely at odds with the intentions of her mother and grandmother who intend to marry her off, one of the few choices for a respectable woman at the time. Rather than institutional restrictions, as seen in *Picnic* and *Wisdom*, Sybylla faces societal constraints. Like Laura, Sybylla is headstrong and stubborn, and doesn’t fit the norm for female propriety; Sybylla is tomboyish, verging on the larrikin, as Dermody and Jacka have noted, her small frame accented by her long, striking red hair and freckled face. Further, her appearance deviates from her more conventional matronly,

brunette, fair-complexioned relatives; she is fully aware of this, and she deems herself “ugly.”

Like Laura, Sybylla expresses herself artistically through playing the piano. But Sybylla also has aspirations to be a writer to reach a broad audience of readers. As with Laura and her piano skills, Sybylla’s writing becomes worthy of a higher (that is, European) standard. Her autobiographical account of her life *My Brilliant Career* is published by Blackwood’s of Scotland. *Career* explores three different kinds of performance for Sybylla: piano playing, singing/dancing, and writing. Due to the restrictions of space, I will focus on the first two areas, as they fit nicely into Ferrier’s model.

At home in Possum Gully Sybylla plays the piano proudly, passionately and loudly, which alludes to her strong personality. Her mother, irritated with the noise, places her hands over Sybylla’s to hush the sound, misunderstanding as well as repressing her daughter’s artistic yearnings. Home is a place of toil and duty, and is no place for such pursuits. However, at her grandmother’s, Sybylla’s playing is appreciated; she has an attentive audience of family and friends in a congenial atmosphere. This kind of audience in a family setting is revisited and reinforced at the film’s end, where in spare and squalid surroundings, Sybylla plays for the McSwatt family, where she works as a governess to pay off the interest on a debt her father has incurred. Despite the enormity of the job, which includes corralling and educating several unruly youngsters, there are calmer moments to convene around the piano, and they all sing earnestly together. With her playing, Sybylla brings the family together, just as she did with her relatives, creating with her performance, a comradeship and closeness that was missing, and not possible in her own home.

But Sybylla is also capable of another kind of performance, folk singing and dancing, which has a completely different function than her piano playing. Not only does she kick up her heels and flirt shamelessly with Frank Hawdon and Harry Beachum (both potential suitors) but she acts subversively to challenge her grandmother’s house rules, singing “Three Drunken Maidens,” a raucous song she learned at her father’s local pub. Though all have a grand time one evening word gets back to her displeased grandmother who labels the evening “bacchanalian debauch.”

Sybylla’s penchant for acting out against propriety escalates later, at a large party thrown by Harry’s aunt Gussie at Five Bob. Her performance is for Harry’s eyes, but in a different context than before. Though the two have had an exciting courtship and are clearly attracted to each other, Frank lives up to his reputation as a ladies’ man and pairs off with another woman, irritating and hurting Sybylla. When he later seeks her out for a dance, Sybylla, to avenge his slight of her, pulls away in a huff and joins the servants outside. She dances in a deliriously animated way with one of the hands, making a spectacle of herself just as she did with Frank earlier. This is designed not only to attract Harry’s attention, but to shame him in public – her rebuff of the most eligible and desirable bachelor around. Furious and

embarrassed, Harry drags Sybylla, smug and defensive, into a nearby room, declaring, "I thought we should get married." Sybylla sarcastically replies, "What a handsome proposal! How could *anyone* say no?" Glowering, Harry grabs her arm, pulls her to him aggressively and menacingly. She quickly hits him across the face with a horse crop. Stunned, he backs off. Almost as quickly, she winces in shame.

This scene dramatizes another way in which women are linked to the land in the larger paternal order as Harry displays a fierce attitude of entitlement with regard to Sybylla, particularly when his "authority" is challenged. By turning Harry down (partly out of her commitment not to marry), Sybylla emasculates him. Harry's identity is already in a fragile state as he is on the verge of losing his property at Five Bob. His identity is not only a function of ownership of land, but ownership of Sybylla. The act of trying to take her by force suggests his putting a claim on her, "civilizing" her as a wild unruly woman just as he/the Australian male claims authority by controlling and civilizing the land, ideally for him, a "passive, pliant virgin." (Schaffer, 1988, 62). The bush-woman link is dramatized further towards the end of the film when Sybylla is living at McSwatt's.

Sybylla's friendship with McSwatt's eldest son Peter is misunderstood by his parents as romantic interest on her part. Sybylla's worthiness for Peter through his parents' eyes is contingent on her having a dowry, in this case, considerable acreage. Mr. and Mrs. McSwatt choose to let Sybylla go, because she has no property to speak of, and is not deemed worthy of their son who wants to "marry up." Peter's identity as husband as well as his manhood is contingent on land ownership. Sybylla's supposed intentions for Peter complicate McSwatt's plans, as he is already engaged to a woman with property. Peter's future wife functions as part of the patriarchal economic system for land acquisition as she will turn her land over to the ownership of her husband. Both wife and land are possessions to be managed, exactly the situation that Sybylla wished to avoid when she rejected Harry's marriage offer. The difference is that Harry judges his worth by the amount of acreage *he* brings to the marriage. At the end of the film, as we will see, Sybylla will again challenge the land/female construct by turning down Harry's second offer of marriage (he has gotten back on his feet, and saved Five Bob), choosing independence over land, in essence refusing Harry's "dowry."

Once Sybylla is released from her obligations to McSwatt's, and back home on her parent's property, she strides confidently through the bush, content and perfectly comfortable wading into the water to pull out a calf that is stuck in the mud. Compare this to the beginning of the film when she deliberately stayed indoors, ignoring her parent's request for help with the livestock. Perhaps the birth of a calf, and the presence of water indicates that the land is more giving than before, easing somewhat her parent's marginal existence. But there are loose narrative ends. What will be her role at home? Will she accept "man's work"? How will she earn her keep? Her mother has a new baby: with a larger family, will Sybylla be sent out to work to help make ends meet? Though the film does not answer these questions, visually the

filmmakers reinforce Sybylla's bonds with the bush which are linked to this new stage in her life in two final sequences, the first with Harry, and the second where she posts her newly finished book outside her parent's homestead.

In the first sequence, while she helps the calf out of the mud, Harry appears. They are completely incongruent – Sybylla, sweaty, her hands and clothes muddy, Harry impeccably dressed in a neatly pressed tailored suit -- reinforcing their different and separate worlds. Though glad to see him, her face tightens and registers determination and resolve. This is a more mature woman, certain of her need for autonomy and breathing space. Harry declares, "Aunt Gussie sends her love. She's very keen on my getting married." Sybylla replies, "Yes, Gertie (Sybylla's younger sister) is just right for you. She's everything I'm not." With this deflection, Sybylla starts to run away, (with the excuse that she needs to change her muddy clothes). Her movement is picked up in the next long shot as she moves quickly towards the background, suggesting that Harry's presence is an intrusion into her designated bush, making her restless and eager to remain alone. Further, Harry's raising the question of marriage is incompatible with her need for independence and a writing career. She insists, "I've got to do it now. And I've got to do it alone." Whereas her turning down Harry before was a defiance of his attempt to control her as he would his land, in this instance, the mise en scene suggests that she designates herself a woman in the bush on her own terms.

At the end of the second sequence, two full shots capture Sybylla's figure centered in the shot, her packaged manuscript – soon to reach a larger audience with its publication -- tucked safely into the mail box nearby as she leans on the fence, arms comfortably outstretched. The first shot shows her intent and eager face with a confident stance; the other, behind her, shows her in silhouette at sunrise, "look[ing] off into the far distance towards another life which only she can envisage (Collins, 1999, 22). Alone in the bush, a comforting and inspirational environment, with the evidence of her artistic endeavors nearby, Sybylla is a content and self-assured woman.

In this paper we have seen the ways in which turn of the century historical females excel "beyond their wildest dreams" (Ferrier, 2001, 64), though disadvantaged by their difference and eccentricity. Laura in *The Getting of Wisdom* soars above the mediocrity of her school and wins a music scholarship to study abroad. Sybylla in *My Brilliant Career* chooses writing as her vocation over marriage; her first book is published overseas. Even though Miranda in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* does not fit Ferrier's creative disabilities/vulnerable bodies model, she is talented in her own right as a visionary leader, and succeeds in escaping British rule, leaping into a new Australia in the 20th century. These women are agents of their own destinies, self-empowered and proactive, rejecting institutional constraints, and dramatically altering the courses of their lives, and are certainly not victims of history as Tom Ryan argues (Ryan, 1980, 113). Sara's creative drive, however, is not enough to transcend beloved Miranda's disappearance, enormous

institutional forces, as well as her own frailties, all of which crush her spirit and lead to her suicide.

The depiction of the complexities of the bush in each film transcend the purely decorative or nostalgic; each young woman develops an affinity to it in different ways, significantly challenging the traditional Australian male identity construct of a feminized bush. In *Picnic*, the bush, gendered as male and female/pre-Oedipal is linked to Miranda's quest and the forging of her own identity away from British oppression; in *The Getting of Wisdom*, though the bush is "civilized," functioning as an extension of the oppressive school institution, it is also a source of inspiration for Laura's imagination; in *My Brilliant Career* the bush in all its diversity (from barren and windswept to lush and green) is a medium for Sybylla's artistic growth, maturity to young womanhood and independence. She also challenges the bush-woman link in rejecting Harry's insistence that they marry. All these women have an organic bond with the bush, unlike the men who have an uneasy, unsatisfying, uncomfortable existence on it. In *Picnic*, this is demonstrated by Michael's unsuccessful quest in scaling Hanging Rock. In *Career*, Frank is ridiculously inept in the bush. Harry remains a cosmetic presence on the bush, as opposed to Sybylla's deep roots.

*Sweetie* (1987) and *Muriel's Wedding* (1994) present interesting modern counterparts to these historical women. Both films focus on young female misfits who suffer from disabilities and difference, and who harbor a penchant for unusual performances. Both films are clever blends of comedy, satire and serious drama. (*Sweetie* also delves into the gothic.) There is not enough room to do a complete analysis of both films, but the next section puts them in the context of the historical films discussed in this chapter, as well as Ferrier's model. A further section on *Sweetie* covers the ways in which this film incorporates and appropriates Schaffer's myth of the bush.

Both *Sweetie* and *Muriel* come from dysfunctional families. Ferrier's terms "bad parenting" and "hopeless fathers" are particularly appropriate for each. Whereas fathers are deceased in *Wisdom*, or absent and marginalized in *Picnic* and *Career* (respectively), *Sweetie* and *Wedding* imply that fathers are a major cause of female disability and vulnerability. Muriel Hesslop is lorded over by a cruel, abusive father and is all but ignored by her deeply depressed mother. In addition to being a terrible father, he is an adulterer and corrupt politician. *Sweetie's* father Gordon, on the other hand, is weak, often childish (like *Sweetie*), and continuously dotes on her, treating his daughter as if she were still a little girl. The film also suggests a long-term incestuous relationship.

*Sweetie* and *Muriel* are far more disturbed than prior women discussed in this chapter. *Sweetie* is "officially" mentally ill (one of the first questions that her sister Kay asks is if she has taken her meds). *Sweetie's* reclusive, despondent and self-absorbed nature is reminiscent of Sarah after Miranda disappears. *Sweetie's* anti-social, aberrant behavior includes chewing Kay's china animals in her mouth, barking like a dog, or stripping naked and painting her body black. On the other hand, *Muriel* frequently retreats into a

fantasy world, hiding in her room, listening to Abba songs while conjuring up wedding daydreams, convinced that marriage is her only way to happiness and success.

Emily Rustin has made some insightful comparisons between Sybylla and Muriel, focusing primarily on the role of marriage in both time frames and settings. "...[N]either [woman] adheres to the conventional standards of beauty and desirability (Rustin, 2002, 137). Further, "...both are in some way constrained by society's desire for them to marry (Muriel has internalized these values, while Sybylla is consistently pressured by others to conform to [their ] expectations[s])...(Rustin, 2001, 137). Ultimately, both turn down marriage-- Sybylla rejects Harry, and Muriel leaves her husband, David, realizing she doesn't need the security of a man who doesn't love her and whom she doesn't love. She teams back up with best friend Rhonda to live in Sydney together. Rustin concludes, "What places *Muriel's Wedding* firmly in the present of the 1990's is that utopia is to be found not through isolated (if brilliant) writing in the outback—happiness through art—but in living the excitement of Sydney with another single woman. [Muriel] has found the support that Sybylla lacked." (Rustin, 2001, 137-8). Significantly, *My Brilliant Career* reaffirms that Sybylla is determined and successful in pursuing her goals alone.

With regard to the use of the bush in *Sweetie*, Champion's approach is radically different than any of the historical films discussed earlier. In her insightful article "Restating the Cultural Framework: Kay Schaffer's Women and the Bush and Jane Champion's *Sweetie*," Ellen Strain notes, "The icon employed by *Sweetie* is not exactly the vast and unknown bush described in *Women and the Bush*, but the tree, an element of Nature, transplanted into the [modern] city landscape of Sydney. The substitution of the tree for the bush in itself suggests the cultural metaphor's loss of relevance in urban times. The battle between man and nature...no longer pervades Australian life, at least not for the majority of the population. The tree, exemplary of man's triumph over nature, is commonly a benevolent, domesticated form of Nature, drained of the myth generating power of the outback [and bush]" (Strain, 1988, 35). (Bush is added here as Schaffer uses the two terms interchangeably in her work.) As Strain further notes, "...Champion must first reattach this fear of Nature to the tree and link it to the female Other in order to evoke the myth" (Strain, 1988, 35).

At the film's beginning, Sweetie's sister Kay in her voice over associates trees with Sweetie (whom she fears and dislikes). "We had a tree with a palace in the branches. It was built for my sister, and it had fairy lights that went on and off in a sequence. She was the princess. It was her tree. She wouldn't let me up it."

Trees (with the connotation family tree) also take on ominous overtones in Kay's visions—close shots of roots that grow menacingly into the ground, plants looking monstrous, one even appearing to roar. She comments, "I used to imagine the roots of that tree crawling, crawling right under the house, right under my bed. Maybe that's why trees scare me. It's

like they have hidden powers.” The baby elder that Kay’s boyfriend Louie plants, and which she soon uproots and hides in her house, plays out her fear of family ties. To uproot it and kill it prevents any more families (like her own—not a pleasant experience) from forming. Strain notes, “Fearing responsibility and the continued growth of family, ...[Kay] stunts the growth of her relationship with Louie. The tree planted in the yard, growing taller and stronger year by year, would have been a symbol of the growth of their relationship and a metaphorical child requiring nourishment and care” (Strain, 1988, 42)

Sweetie’s link to trees, as Strain further notes, conjures up the bush as a pre-Oedipal mother, “draw[ing]...one towards total fusion with itself and recreat[ing]... a desire for the lost unity between the child and the world before the imposition of the Father’s Law and the child’s entrance into language and culture” (Strain, 1988, 37, quoting Schaffer, 1988, p. 55). Rather than the rock in the context of the bush as a pre-Oedipal mother in *Picnic* as discussed earlier, Sweetie, already linked to trees, functions as the pre-Oedipal maternal for Gordon, her father. Throughout the film he is completely absorbed in her, coddling and indulging her as a great talent, and eventually losing his parental authority as well as all as a recognizable adult male (and husband). When Gordon’s wife, Flo, leaves him, Gordon retreats to Sweetie’s bed in her childhood room.

Like Sara in *Picnic*, Sweetie ultimately self-destructs. They both jump (or fall, in Sweetie’s case) to their deaths, in bizarre grand finale performances: Sara in utter despair, Sweetie, having regressed into a childlike state, crashing through her treehouse and plummeting to earth.

In conclusion, Ferrier’s and Schaffer’s models are flexible enough to accommodate a diversity of performers and settings, past and present. Unique, talented, iconoclastic yet vulnerable female protagonists, as well as the protean bush in all its complexities – seductive, dangerous, fatal, yet nurturing and inspirational -- can be understood and appreciated in a new light as vital and revealing components of Australian film culture.

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