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# The Face of the Australian Girl in Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901) and Christina Stead's *For Love Alone* (1944)

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## Abstract

Modernist Australian women's fiction explores varying degrees of social and political radicalism, especially in relation to the conventional marriage plot. Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901) and Christina Stead's *For Love Alone* (1944) feature heroines who defy traditional expectations about women's desire for heterosexual romance and a happy marriage as the formal mark of narrative closure in the novel. The two women are also repeatedly characterised as physically unattractive, especially in their faces, which are frequently remarked upon by their families, friends and even strangers. Franklin's first-person narrative is driven by Sybylla's colloquial expressions and her passionate desire for emotional independence but its mode of representation is predominantly realist. In contrast, Stead's novel experiments with some of the representational paradoxes and ambiguities associated with modernist innovation; and culminates in a melodramatic scene of facial recognition and misrecognition that resists interpretative closure.

## Keywords

face – modernism – Australian literature – romance – girlhood

The rejection of the traditional marriage-plot is one of the hallmarks of modernist women's writing, and Australian fiction of the early twentieth century

is no exception. In this essay I compare two canonical Australian novels by women, written nearly fifty years apart. Each is a coming-of-age story told through the perspective of a poor young woman who is introduced as plain or unattractive, and whose appearance is frequently the subject of unflattering, and sometimes cruel, remarks. Each girl is restless, unconventional in her demeanour, and an atheist; and neither enters a conventional marriage. Each is also familiar with a life of labor, be it agricultural, domestic, teacherly, or clerical. My first text is *My Brilliant Career* (1901), by Miles Franklin, set in country New South Wales in the 1880s. The second, *For Love Alone* (1944), by Christina Stead, begins in Sydney in the 1930s and follows its heroine to London. While these texts share a number of modernist narrative preoccupations with changing expectations around women's lives, especially in relation to questions about marriage and financial independence, the historical contrast between them is evident in their very different styles. Franklin's text is a lively first-person narrative that celebrates Australian cultural and linguistic vernacular traditions in a spirited, satirical and conversational style; all the action is focalised through the unconventional eyes of its well-read, but somewhat naïve heroine in rural, colonial Australia. Stead's third-person narrative, by contrast, draws on a range of modernist techniques that offer an unblinking analysis of its characters, endlessly fascinated by their desires and psychological motivations, while also exploring more overtly political questions about gendered roles in two very different urban contexts: Sydney and London.

Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin (1879–1954) spent most of her life in Australia, though she moved to the US in 1906, several years after the publication of *My Brilliant Career*, where she engaged closely with questions of feminism and social justice (Lee 8). She left an enduring mark on Australian literature by bequeathing money for a literary prize, the Miles Franklin prize, awarded each year for a novel commemorating some aspect of “Australian life.” *My Brilliant Career* was made into a popular film directed by Gillian Armstrong in 1979, and was the subject of a well-reviewed musical in 2024. The novel appears regularly on the literary syllabus in High Schools around Australia.

Christina Ellen Stead (1902–1983) moved from Sydney to London in 1928, and spent several years in the UK, Europe, and the US before returning to Australia in 1969. Although in many ways *For Love Alone* reads like a first novel, several commentators observe that its self-conscious style experiments with certain formal and ambitious rhetorical choices: it is in fact a “mid-life, mid-career” novel (Rooney 56) that also has affinities with the genre of the *Künstlerroman* (Gardner 27, Rooney 61). *For Love Alone* followed the better-known *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) in working through some painful autobiographical material. Stead wrote twelve novels in all, including *Seven Poor Men of Syd-*

ney (1934) and *Miss Herbert* (1976). As a committed Marxist, Stead was a more controversial figure than Franklin; and indeed her novel *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946) was a prohibited book in Australia for some years, being perceived as both amoral and deliberately salacious, a judgement that, according to Nicole Moore (68, 77–8), was both hard to disassociate from Stead's expatriate status and very deleterious to her reputation in Australia. Her works went out of print and remained so throughout most of her writing career (Gribble 1). Yet, in the judgement of her biographer, Hazel Rowley, "No major writer of any nationality has been more cosmopolitan than Christina Stead, with her genius for portraying disparate locales, voices and expressions" (xi).

Each novel is widely recognised to be driven by an autobiographical impulse to some degree, especially *For Love Alone*. Nevertheless, autobiography is not my principal concern here, except in so far as both texts dramatise the personal experience of being perceived as unattractive (Roderick 64, 70 [though see also Gardner 23 n. 5]; Rowley 24). The question of physical beauty is painfully foregrounded in both novels, especially in their early stages. Both young women are making their way in a world where marriageability framed most questions about their future (Roe 39), and where one of the greatest fears women faced was remaining unmarried (Smith, *Consuming Female Beauty*, 29–30; see also the work of *The Modern Girl around the World* Research Group). Both characters acutely understand the pressures to marry and to present an attractive face to the male gaze; but the novels also register several moments of feminine resistance to such pressure.

Critical and theoretical work on the face in modernist literature often foregrounds questions of poetics and representation, especially in relation to changes in the visual arts and developments in cinematic technology, but also in the growing anonymity and impersonality of crowded urban settings. As Rochelle Rives shows in her recent study, *The New Physiognomy: Face, Form, and Modern Expression*, the history of facial reading and representation is dominated by a series of interpretative traditions and assumptions about the legibility of facial expression and personality, while modernist poetics often disrupt those assumptions. In another recent book, *Face and Form: Physiognomy in Literary Modernism*, Anca Parvulescu underlines the influence of writers and commentators such as Mina Loy and Georg Simmel in modernist thinking about the face as a significant cultural and social artefact. As both writers show, a number of modernist poets and novelists explore the productive gaps and rifts in the conventional representational economy of facial description. Rives is interested in "the face as an aesthetic site of ambiguity linked to the distortion of modern vision" (14); and "the face's capacity to both solicit and undo modes of visual perception and surveillance" (26). Modernist faces, that

is, do not always “cohere” as forms, either as easily legible registers of expression, or as the site of straightforward physiognomic forms of representation, even while many of those conventions persist, as Parvulescu shows. Virginia Woolf’s story, “An Unwritten Novel” (1921), for example, illustrates how easy it is to *misread* the face, but the narrator’s act of misreading has the effect of liberating a much more adventurous, experimental, even lyrical writerly voice. The two Australian novels I juxtapose in this essay might be positioned at either end of such a representational spectrum, stretching from the first-person narrative in *My Brilliant Career*, where the textual mediation of the face is barely brought into question, to the more self-conscious narrative mode of *For Love Alone*, especially in its final, haunted scene of facial encounter that deliberately distorts the image of the human face and its emotional effect on others.

My focus on the “ugly” or “plain” faces of young women directs our attention to questions of perception and evaluation. Beautiful faces often generate powerful narrative arcs for the characters, and strong visual images in the reader, but plain faces invite a different kind of response and challenge. This is particularly the case where female beauty is assessed and measured, as it so often is in patriarchal culture. When young girls are seen looking into mirrors in fiction, for example, we might initially query their perceptions and evaluations of their own appearance. But in the two novels I discuss here, other characters frequently offer disparaging assessments of the faces of the two heroines, though they respond very differently. In *My Brilliant Career*, the heroine’s unattractiveness is coded as at least partly a question of attitude and grooming; it is subject to careful improvement under the care of a loving aunt. In *For Love Alone*, conversely, the heroine damages her own appearance through the privations of poverty and labor for the sake of “love alone,” even though that love will be unrequited.

### 1 Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career*

The novel is set in rural Australia in the 1890s. Franklin’s heroine, Sybylla, is the daughter of a once prosperous landowner in the colony of New South Wales; but severe drought has brought him to the point of ruin. He soon falls into debt, and becomes a heavy drinker. Sybylla must work hard to support her father’s dairy business, but reads as voraciously as she can, and aspires to “a dream-life with writers, artists, and musicians” (Franklin 32).

From the outset, Franklin’s narrator strikes us with her direct, dispirited, but nevertheless energetic voice. She is deeply grounded in the beauty of the Australian bush setting and the community of landowners, firmly eschewing the

temptations of romance or even companionship. Sybylla writes from a place of hard work and disenchantment:

This is not a romance – I have too often faced the music of life to the tune of hardship to waste time in snivelling and gushing over fancies and dreams; neither is it a novel, but simply a yarn – a *real* yarn. Oh! as real, as really real – provided life itself is anything beyond a heartless little chimera – it is as real in its weariness and bitter heartache as the tall gum-trees, among which I first saw the light, are real in their stateliness and substantiality.

FRANKLIN 1–2

By the age of fifteen, Sybylla is exhausted with physical labor, but is also rebellious and querulous, firmly atheist, fully conscious of the difficulty of the life before her and the hopelessness of her father's condition. At thirteen she had already written a romantic novel that she had tried, unsuccessfully, to get published, and now she attempts another, exhausting herself by writing at night after a day's physical labor.

In a major plot turn, however, Sybylla's grandmother invites her to her own property, Caddagat, which is both more prosperous and in a more pleasant part of the country. This invitation is extended partly because Sybylla is such a trial to her mother, but also because she will have better marriage prospects there. "Sybylla, being so very plain, will need all the time she can get," she writes (Franklin 56). It's worth quoting this section to give a flavour of Sybylla's lively, conversational voice as she takes in the way her own family has appraised her low value on the marriage market.

I was to be given more time on account of being ugly – I was not a valuable article in the marriage market, sweet thought! My grandmother is one of the good old school, who believed that a girl's only proper sphere in life was marriage; so, knowing her sentiments, her purpose to get me married neither surprised nor annoyed me. But I was plain. Ah, bosh! Oh! Ah! I cannot express what kind of a feeling that fact gave me. It sank into my heart and cut like a cruel jagged knife – not because it would be a drawback to me in the marriage line for I had an antipathy to the very thought of marriage. Marriage to me appeared the most horribly tied-down and unfair-to-women existence going. It would be from fair to middling if there was love; but I laughed at the idea of love, and determined never, never, never to marry.

FRANKLIN 57–8

This distinctive voice, so striking in its colloquial immediacy (“Ah, bosh! Oh! Ah!”), resonates more with Australian informality than with the stylistic innovations of modernism, but Sybylla’s political statements about marriage set her apart from her peers and her family’s expectations, aligning her attitudes more closely with those of the modernist “new woman.” This moment, in Chapter 7, is the first we hear of Sybylla being unattractive, but it soon becomes clear that the issue has rankled with her for some time. Shortly after this episode, she breaks into her narrative with a passage entitled “SELF-ANALYSIS” and a further annotation to the reader: “N.B. This is dull and egotistical. Better skip it. That’s my advice” (Franklin 60). In this fierce passage, Sybylla tells us that as a small child she was initially disappointed to realise that her ambitions for great deeds and adventures would be thwarted by being a girl; but became reconciled to these limitations 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.

FRANKLIN 61

Sybylla’s language is typically dramatic, but of course, the “unattractive” heroine is not a new trope in fiction. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* is probably the most familiar example; and many women writers refuse to make physical beauty a necessary condition for romantic happiness. Later modernist and feminist writers, indeed, often deliberately confound or blur the categories of beauty or ugliness. Franklin makes Sybylla’s appearance a social event, however: the subject of external, even public rebuke. Friends and family and strangers often tell her how unattractive or, at least, odd-looking she is; until she declares, “I am so dreadfully ugly that I cannot bear to have anyone look at me” (Franklin 156).

In addition to being “ugly,” Sybylla is also clever, and far more curious about the world than any of her schoolmates, though she had little access to books and the world of music she loved: “Patti, Melba, Irving, Terry, Kipling, Caine, Corelli, and even the name of Gladstone, were only names to them” (Franklin 62). These unfulfilled passions left her in fruitless search of a God, but her reluctant atheism leaves her further isolated from her friends and family, though still able to mock her own fate.

I am sadly lacking in self-reliance. I needed some one to help me over the rough spots in life, and finding them not, at the age of sixteen I was as rank a cynic and infidel as could be found in three days’ march.

FRANKLIN 67

The tone here is uncertain: it is in part confessional, but it also gives voice to the social criticisms she has internalised. Sybylla takes little care with her appearance, thinking it makes no difference.

Even on her journey to her grandmother's property, the coachman tells her she is unattractive, affirming that female appearance is a public property that invites uninhibited assessment and judgement: "Well, you are not a bit like Mrs Bossier or Mrs Bell; they are both so good-looking," says the coachman, comparing her to her grandmother and aunt (Franklin 73). When she arrives, she is greeted lovingly, and her grandmother initially praises her beautiful clear skin and "beautiful bright brown" (Stead 81) hair; then on seeing it loosed, "pronounced it beautifully fine, silky, and wavy, and the most wonderful head of hair she had seen out of a picture" (Stead 81–2). This detailed assessment of Sybylla's hair is delivered with deep affection, but also establishes the aesthetic standard by which her face clearly falls short. In contrast to this warm welcome, Sybylla laments that her parents did not love her: "Why was I ugly and nasty and miserable and useless – without a place in the world?" (Stead 82)

Sybylla's personality is as prickly, and her mood as low, as her face is said to be plain; suggesting it can be hard to disentangle feelings of self-worth from judgements about facial appearance. In the pivotal scene that follows this outburst, Sybylla's aunt Helen finds her weeping: "How there was no good in the world, no use for me there, no one loved me or ever could on account of my hideousness" (Franklin 84). Helen counsels her to "curb and strain" her "wild and wayward" spirit as a way of "gaining the *friendship* love of your fellows – the only real love there is" (Franklin 85). But she also enlists Sybylla in a plan: she must turn the mirror to the wall and not look at it for three or four weeks; she must wear gloves and a hat every time she goes outside; but she must also spend more time on her appearance: "Rub off some of your gloomy pessimism and cultivate a little more healthy girlish vanity, and you will do very well,' she would say" (Franklin 89). Helen's program of protecting Sybylla from the sun and from mirrors is enforced when she becomes bed-bound with influenza and a scalded foot. During this time, Sybylla revels in having time and leisure to read: "The pleasure, so exquisite as to be almost pain, which I derived from the books, and especially the Australian poets, is beyond description" (Franklin 92). Where before she felt isolation and loneliness on her father's farm "at last! here was congeniality, here was companionship" (Franklin 92).

When she is recovered, her grandmother hosts a dinner in which Sybylla dresses for the first time in "full-blown dinner costume" (Franklin 95) and "full war-paint" (Franklin 96). Aunt Helen helps her prepare, and the narrator

teases us with a little delay before the full reveal, expostulating on the follies of evening dress: “one of the prettiest and most idiotic customs extant” (Franklin 96). Finally she is allowed to look in the mirror:

I looked, and looked again in pleased surprise. I beheld a young girl with eyes and skin of the clearest and brightest, and lips of brilliant scarlet, and a chest and pair of arms which would pass muster with the best. If Nature had been in bad humour when moulding my face, she had used her tools craftily in forming my figure. Aunt Helen had proved a clever maid and dressmaker. My pale blue cashmere dress fitted my fully developed yet girlish figure to perfection. Some of my hair fell in cunning little curls on my forehead; the remainder, tied simply with a piece of ribbon, hung in thick waves nearly to my knees. My toilet had altered me almost beyond recognition. [...] Joy and merriment lit up my face, which glowed with youth, health, and happiness, which rippled my lips in smiles, which displayed a splendid set of teeth, and I really believe that on that night I did not look out of the way ugly.

FRANKLIN 98–99

This self-assessment, or in literary terms, this blazon of the self, is coded as an honest one, in its acknowledgement of the artistry involved (painted lips, skilfully fitted dress, arranged curls), alongside Sybylla's naturally good features (hair, figure, teeth); though of course the distinction between nature and artifice is blurred in the traditional image of Nature as accomplished artisan. It is clear that a life without hard labor or exposure to the sun, the experience of being cherished and cared for, and the anticipation of a pleasant evening have improved Sybylla's appearance. But the feeling of alienation – not recognising her own reflection – is destabilising.

Her aunt tells her she would describe her appearance as “brilliant”; and one of the guests, another uncle, says “By George, you're a wonderful-looking girl!” (Franklin 100). Sybylla overhears another conversation in which the guest of honour, Everard Grey, a successful barrister, remarks that she must be very excitable: “I have never seen any but very highly strung temperaments have that transparent brilliance of expression” (Franklin 102). Helen tries to account for her striking appearance: “‘It may be her complexion,’ said aunt Helen; ‘her skin is whiter than the fairest blonde, and her eyebrows and lashes very dark’” (Franklin 102). Yet she describes Sybylla's moodiness and her “morbid” brooding over her appearance, and warns Everard not to “say anything that would let her know you think her not nice looking” (Franklin 102). Sybylla's self-consciousness makes everyone around her wary.

Nevertheless, the evening is a great success. Sybylla entertains the guests by singing, and then reciting a poem by Longfellow; and even dressing up as “a fat old Irish woman” with a smudged face (Franklin 105). This scene may strike us as uncomfortable in its casual racism: in the context of the novel’s preoccupation with appearance it seems to indicate that on this occasion at least, Sybylla does not care what she looks like.

Despite this success (Sybylla goes to bed that night “greatly elated”), the next morning she addresses herself sternly in the mirror:

Bah, you hideous animal! Ha ha! Your peerless conceit does you credit. So you actually imagined that by one or two out of every hundred you might be considered passable. You are the most uninteresting person in the world. You are small and nasty and bad and every other thing that’s abominable. That’s what you are.

FRANKLIN 108

Before leaving the room, she takes a last look and admonishes herself again: “You’re ugly, you’re ugly and useless; so don’t forget that and make a fool of yourself again” (Franklin 109). She also tells us this has long been her daily, secular habit – “it had long ago taken the place of a morning prayer” (Franklin 109).

Sybylla’s self-loathing is extreme; and clearly bound up with her sense of being unlovable. Time and time again in this novel, people tell her what she looks like, and declare she is not pretty or beautiful; sometimes they puzzle over her appearance or pay her what she sees as condescending compliments that only make her angry. Nevertheless, she is not short of male admirers and is courted by a wealthy young landowner, Harold Beacham, who admires Sybylla’s spirits and persists in his suit even though she refuses him over and again, both because she does not love him as she feels should be a condition of marriage (which she suggests is a form of slavery); and also because she is sure that what he is really seeking is a conventional wife who will accept his husbandly authority. It is the absence of deep passion that drives her to reject him.

She is further tried when she is sent away from Caddagat, to serve as a teacher and governess to the Irish family of the man to whom her father is indebted and thereby save her own family from further ruin. Life with the M’Swats is brutal and cruel and Sybylla is miserable.

I was often sleepless for more than forty-eight hours at a stretch and cried through the nights until my eyes had black rings round them, which washing failed to remove. The neighbours described me as “a sorrowful lookin’ delicate creetur, that couldn’t larf to save her life”.

FRANKLIN 330

As Tanya Dalziell remarks, the M'Swat family is uncomfortably close to the Irish woman she had mocked with a blackened face at Caddagat: these scenes are uncomfortably close to an ethnographic encounter between the "normal" subject and the primitive other (Franklin 117).

Eventually Sybylla collapses in exhaustion, and returns home to her parents. Even though marriage to Harry would bring her family out of distress, she continues to refuse him and the novel ends as she is living with her parents, embracing a life of labor, taking in washing, ironing and mending. Her second novel has remained unpublished. The final pages of *My Brilliant Career* sing the praises of Australia's workers, its "peasants":

I am proud that I am an Australian, a daughter of the Southern Cross, a child of the mighty bush. I am thankful I am a peasant, a part of the bone and muscle of my nation, and earn my bread by the sweat of my brow, as man was meant to do.

FRANKLIN 390

In this rousing form of nationalist politics, there is no room for consideration of personal vanity: the anxieties of facial appearance and the question of lovability have been set aside in favour of the necessity of labor.

In her rebelliousness and wildness, in her courage, her fearless spirits and good horsemanship, Sybylla is contrasted to other girls who are keen to marry and conform to domestic and patriarchal ideals (indeed, she often draws this contrast herself). Nevertheless, in her free-spiritedness, Sybylla represents a character type of girlhood quite familiar in Australian colonial fiction, sometimes typified as the "colonial" or "Australian girl" (Gardner 27, Dalziell 1–6, Smith, "The Australian Girl" 76). We might compare, for example, several of the women characters in Francis Adams' "A Bush Girl" (1892), or Rosa Praed's "The Bushman's Love Story" (1909). These women reject easy or condescending marriage proposals, and they are practical, courageous, accomplished, and fiercely independent. These stories sometimes make direct reference to the figure of the New Woman or "the woman question," but often in disapproving ways: Australian girls are often inflected with a kind of colonial independence and strength that is contrasted with conventional English models of girlhood. As Dalziell remarks, "very specific concerns regarding race, gender, sexuality, class and colonisation in settler Australia are played out around the Australian girl" (23), though Franklin's novel does not foreground anything like a collective, feminist politics. Gardner draws attention to the "chaotic" nature of Franklin's "racist, national-chauvinist, conceptually and esthetically garbled narrative" (Franklin 38) and, despite Sybylla's determination to work,

the ending of the novel does seem problematic. As Gardner writes, “not only does *My Brilliant Career* have no conventional romantic ending, it has no ending at all” (Franklin 37). Sybylla’s “ugliness” was an important plot point for establishing her unlikeliness as a romantic heroine, but her lack of beauty or prettiness did not inhibit the possibility of romance in her life. As she embraces a life of hard domestic labor, in her principled refusal to marry the wealthy Harry, we see that these anxieties have been displaced by the development of a strong current of emotional and economic self-reliance. This novel does not foreground self-conscious questions of representation or challenges to traditional forms of facial description; rather, it uses the face as a starting-point to develop its emergent modernist sensibilities in its narrative structure, its unconventional female voice, and its refusal of the marriage plot.

## 2 Christina Stead, *For Love Alone*

Written around forty years later, *For Love Alone* is set in a very different world, amid much greater consciousness of global social and cultural change, and of political and intellectual movements towards social revolution. The novel’s trajectory follows its heroine, Teresa, from Sydney to London, following her own powerful though sometimes contradictory desires. Like Sybylla, Teresa has no share in traditional beauty.

As the novel opens, Teresa is nineteen, living at home with her father, sister and two brothers in a ramshackle house on the north side of Sydney Harbour, and working as a schoolteacher. Her father berates her for being unattractive, relative to his own handsome good looks. “What a strange thing that I didn’t have lovely daughters, I who worship beauty so much!” (Stead 8). And, “I don’t know where you got your face of a little tramp, Trees, a ragamuffin” (Stead 8). He claims he has been much loved, but that Teresa will never understand the meaning of love and passion. Nor will she learn the lessons of charm or modesty that might soothe a man. He draws a contrast between her attitude and that of her sister Kitty, who is “a woman’s woman, a womanly little girl, pretty, humble, sweet” (Stead 12). (We might note that Sybylla also has a contrast foil in her eager-to-please and mild-natured pretty sister Gertie.) There is a furious row, in which Teresa threatens to kill her father, leading to his laughing mockery:

He began to laugh. “Look at her! Pale, haggard, a regular witch. She looks like a beggar. Who would want her! What pride! Pride in rags! Plain Jane

on the high horse! When she is an old maid, she'll still be proud, and noble.  
No one else will count!"

STEAD 14

Teresa remains calm in her hatred, however; and accuses her father of cowardice in his physical and emotional abuse of his children. "Base coward, hitting your children when they're small, insulting them when they're big and saying you're their father" (Stead 15).

The theme of marriageability drives much of this first part of the novel, which includes a long, elaborately presented wedding scene, drawn out to accentuate all the social niceties of lower middle class suburban and familial surroundings, and the accumulation of material goods, and to articulate the widespread fear of so many of Teresa's friends of remaining unmarried: the curse of spinsterhood, of being "an old maid," described in a melodramatic image: "There was a glass pane in the breast of each girl; there every other girl could see the rat gnawing at her, the fear of being on the shelf" (Stead 74). Teresa herself is determined not to fall, like her sister and Malfi, the bride, into a conventional marriage. Instead, she is intrigued by the idea of sexual passion, enjoying a powerful sensual life in the privacy of her own room, enacting "the febrile, masochistic fantasies of a young woman" (Rowley 46) about sex, and experimenting with sewing obscene costumes for her own erotic pleasure.

She was there, night after night, dreaming hotly and without thinking of any human beings. Her long walks at night through the Bay, in which she had discovered all the lost alleys, vacant lots and lonely cottages, her meditation over the poor lovers from the city, her voluptuous swimming and rolling by herself in the deep grass of the garden and her long waking nights were part of the life of profound pleasure she had made for herself, unknown to them. She was able to feel active creation going on around her in the rocks and hills, where the mystery of lust took place; and in herself, where all was yet only the night of the senses and wild dreams, the work of passion was going on.

STEAD 73

Teresa Petersen reads Teresa's auto-eroticism as a form of lesbian desire: "she seems to be fantasising her desire for another woman" (Petersen 63): "It is in the secrecy and privacy of her bedroom that Teresa can rejuvenate – she can allow her sexuality to express itself and feel the power within her, a power not allowed her within a male-dominated system of values" (Petersen 64).

Indeed, there is much about Teresa's sexuality that remains coded in this way. This is in part a function of the third-person focalised narration, as well as Stead's own more passionate agenda in this unevenly paced novel, described by Susan Sheridan as a "work of endless restlessness, of journeying" (Stead 55). Where Franklin's first-person narrator, Sybylla, recounts her own adventures in disarmingly direct and conversational speech, whether her mood is ebullient or distressed, Stead's Teresa is more remote and unknown, perhaps even to herself. Petersen describes *For Love Alone* as "Stead's most baffling novel," suggesting that the most productive reading is one that goes against the grain of dominant heterosexuality, and that draws out the themes of lesbianism and homoeroticism (Petersen 57). Brigid Rooney's reading is more modulated and she deftly captures the novel's tonal opacity: "the author's driving self-mythology is simultaneously writ large and ironically framed" (Rooney 53). Teresa's face, and the faces of the two men she loves in this novel constitute powerful sites for these acts of self-mythologisation but also for the gendered and emotional tensions in her relationships with men.

When Teresa and Kitty are on the ferry to the wedding, they are approached by "A dark, axe-faced, starved young man, with spectacles and a black felt hat cocked" (Stead 23). This is Crow, who becomes Teresa's main object of desire; this mention of his "axe-face" prefigures the violence of his cruelty to women. As Diana Brydon argues, this is a reversal of the tradition of courtly love in which the man pursues the unattainable woman: "*For Love Alone* turns romantic conventions upside-down, rewriting them from an antipodean point of view – the woman's rather than the man's" (81). Teresa's perception of Crow as "axe-faced" proleptically invokes the psychological violence he will inflict on her.

Crow is moody, abusive and insulting: a poor philosopher with whom several other women fall in love, though he repels them and cannot bear the thought of intimacy with them. Teresa is drawn into his circle, and attends a number of discussions and lectures at the University of Sydney. She appears to fall in love, but her desire seems driven primarily by her wish to experience both sexual passion and intellectual intimacy. Their relationship remains non-sexual. If anything, Crow is irritated by her devoted face, which inspires him to greater cruelty. His revulsion is exacerbated by seeing her yearning face in the impersonal setting of public transport, such a familiar trope of modernist literature, as shown in the Introduction to this themed issue.

He had seen the girl's pale face blazing with ecstasy as she sat in the moving tram. [...] It irritated him to give this great naked slobbering joy to one who could not make payment in kind; the wretched woman could

get pleasure out of him when she wished, merely by looking at him; he did not own himself, it made him feel helpless. [...] Only to wipe that expression off her face and make it droop, as he liked to see it, thoughtful and wretched, wearied, with the spurt of resistance breaking through.

STEAD 196–7

In this passage, it is the female gaze fixed on him that irritates Crow and provokes him to this form of imagined violence against Teresa's face.

Crow wins a scholarship to study in England and Teresa determines to save money and follow him. She abandons her teaching job and takes on factory work; she starves herself, and wears out her shoes instead of taking the bus. She is perpetually hungry, and develops a persistent cough. We are told over and over again how unattractive she makes herself: "She did not notice how her bones were showing, nor was ashamed of her threadbare clothes; she appeared to others an ill-kempt sallow woman five years older than she was" (Stead 228). But at other times, she is more aware of what she is doing to her own face: "She looked at herself in the glass and saw how pale and ugly she was" (Stead 239). Eventually, when Crow is sailing for England, she does not see him off at the dock, because "she knew by now that Jonathan would be ashamed of her bare bones and bad clothes, before all those girls and university men" (Stead 239).

A year later, on her twenty-first birthday, her friends and family are shocked by her appearance: "she looked many years older, terribly thin, and distracted, almost as if she did not know they were there" (Stead 255). Later that evening she feels excluded from "normal" happiness:

... all familiar joys were forbidden to her. She supposed it was because she was ugly, because, like all poor, timid people, she blamed herself. When she looked in the mirror and saw this pasty face, the face of a devout monk who has felt love-pangs and denied them, she believed that she had no right to pity or indulgence or love.

STEAD 256

A few days later, her brother tells her how terrible she looks. "You look a wreck," said Lance kindly. "You're ready to fall apart. You look like a skeleton" (Stead 273). Her father, similarly, admonishes her: "Women go mad if they don't get married [...] It isn't their fault. If Terry would get herself up a bit, make herself more attractive, she'd probably get a nibble, but she can't expect men to go after a bag of bones" (Stead 273).

I quote these passages at length because their cumulative effect is an important part of Teresa's own obsessive self-mythologising, seemingly supported by

this external empirical evidence: the withering judgements of everyone else on her facial appearance. When Teresa finally arrives in England, Crow echoes the general criticism, telling her he finds her unattractive and that she has been wrong to pursue him. Finding office work to support herself, Teresa soon falls in love with her employer, James Quick, who treats her lovingly and passionately.

I have rushed through this plot summary for the sake of readers who may not be familiar with this novel, to give a sense of Teresa's romantic and sexual trajectory. I now loop back to consider two significant scenes of mutual face reading: first between Teresa and Quick; and finally, in the culminating encounter with Crow.

Early in their relationship, Teresa impulsively tells Quick that she loves him, but their most intense mutual declaration comes after a curious encounter between Quick and Crow in which the two men discuss Crow's ideas and ambitions. Quick is appalled by Crow's narcissism, and what he sees as his misogynist and racist views in support of eugenics. Crow boasts that he has taken the maid in his lodgings as his mistress, and immediately after this meeting Quick rushes impulsively to Teresa's lodging and declares his own love for her. He says he loved her since he first met her, but did not at first realise it. "But the first day I walked down the street, feeling quite different as if there had been a revolution and the poor were free – almost like that! I didn't know it was you. I kept seeing your face, your funny pale face and your hat and hearing your soft, timid voice, but I didn't know it was *you*" (Stead 451).

This is a typical characterisation of Teresa's "funny pale face," and indeed, Quick's sense that in her independence, she stands, in some way, for "a revolution," but the feeling it arouses provokes an odd exchange. Quick needs Teresa to tell him how *she* feels, but her answer, more dramatic and more revolutionary in its assessment of the male face, disturbs him.

"I liked you – you've always been the same, since the first minute. I thought you had the face of an angel, I trusted you, you had a beautiful face," she said at last.

"A beautiful face!" he said in an astounded tone. "Did you really think it was *beautiful*? It's such a funny word to use about a man. No one says a man has a beautiful face."

"But men have," said Teresa.

"And you think that I have? Then you must love me," said Quick with decision. "Don't you?" he pressed.

She said, "Yes."

STEAD 451–2

This exchange shows Teresa under some pressure to agree to Quick's terms of "love," but also her unconventional expression of desire. The lack of facial reciprocity here is astounding. Just as men in *My Brilliant Career* consistently tell Sybylla what her face looks like and how it does not measure up to conventional ideas of beauty, Quick feels free to describe Teresa's "funny pale face" but bristles when she describes his own as beautiful: it's a "funny" word to use for a man. Her unconventional appearance fills him full of desire; but her perceptions, and her radical expressions of feminine sexuality are disturbing to him. And indeed, as becomes clear, he is unequal to her strength of character and her sense of control over him:

in unchecked intimacy, Teresa began to tell him about herself, what her feelings really were in this honeymoon and how she felt now that she had the whip and check-rein in her hands – he went cold, so cold, that she felt the warmth dying out of his breast; he lay like a dying man.

STEAD 459

Teresa's true and unveiled expressions of desire, having finally achieved a kind of mastery, render Quick impotent, and she must retract and cajole to "warm" him up again.

She realized her mistake, with a pinching of the heart, and at once abandoned the thought of telling him the truth about her love. There were a thousand sides to it, it was pervasive, strong, intellectual, and physical, but he only wanted "a woman's love," the intensely passionate, ideal, romantic love of famous love affairs.

STEAD 459

Again, we observe the disparity between Quick's possessive claiming of his capacity to see her "funny, pale face" (Stead 451) and his incapacity to deal with the strength of her feeling. He tells her Crow had complained to him that she was too thin (Stead 462), but we are told that he himself, Quick, "loved her with the sentiment of his own generosity, he loved her because she was strange, thin, pale, hot-tempered and a dreamer" (Stead 462).

Quick and Teresa cannot marry (he already has a wife in the US), but they set up house together. The household becomes a point of focus for a group of friends, including Harry Girton, who is also in love with Teresa. The final chapters feel unresolved and the plot of their relationship remains uncertain. Teresa seeks a kind of closure with Quick about Girton, after the latter has left London to fight in the Spanish resistance, promising not to see him again:

... she felt she could not bear any ambiguities in their life and she looked frankly at Quick. "Jim, it was funny, wasn't it? We really liked each other."

"You loved each other, do you think it is possible for *me* to see wrong in that? When he comes back –"

"He won't come back, I know, and if he comes back I will never see him again," said Teresa. "I know that and I promise it to you now. I don't think chastity and monogamy and all that is necessary, but somehow – I don't want you to think I love you less."

Quick was not able to get out a word.

STEAD 500

Normally confident and loquacious, Quick is silenced by Teresa's articulate directness and her dismissal of "chastity and monogamy and all that."

Two pages after this impasse, the novel concludes with a dramatic, even melodramatic or gothic facial encounter between Teresa and Crow. Teresa is waiting on the street at dusk one evening while Quick enters a shop, and she sees "a peculiar, sliding, fumbling figure go by, the typical self-pickled bachelor, well but unbecomingly dressed, dark, with a foreign-looking, broad-leafed black hat" (Stead 500). She starts to fantasise about writing a story about "that incomprehensible type, the bachelor, and here's one, the bachelor sucked into himself like a sea-anemone which suddenly sees something wrong and falls into itself, and both like a half-knit flesh wound" (Stead 500). Like Sybylla in *My Brilliant Career*, Teresa has developed the sensibility and impulses of a writer, but in doing so she turns the novel's earlier expressions of the patriarchal fear of spinsterhood as a form of feminine failure into an extravagant critique of the bachelor as a form of failed masculinity.

Teresa starts to follow the man, who turns and reveals himself to be Crow. They are standing under a lamp outside a jeweller's shop:

In the lamp Teresa looked ghastly, blue, her cheek-bones protruded and her mouth was blue-black, the whole face unlikely. The man half-turned, stared, while the fringe of the bluish light fell on his unshaven lantern jaw and thin spectacles. Teresa felt a pang as if faced by a murderer. The vile-faced man, the bent-backed man, walking crowded with all the apparatus of melodrama was Jonathan Crow! They looked at each other, and he saw her eyes, ghastly to him, pale vapours in brilliant eye-balls, fastened upon him.

STEAD 501

This moment is framed as a scene in a gothic melodrama. The perspective is initially Crow's, as he observes the "ghastly" and "unlikely" apparition of Teresa's

face and the “pale vapours” of her eyes. But neither face is attractive here: both are bony, lit by the blue light that also renders the scene cinematic, distorted, and that dehumanises both their faces. She recovers first, as she begins to laugh and steps closer to him: “Her laugh and nearness were perhaps a horrific gibberish to him; his face changed” and, without recognising her, he turns and walks swiftly away. As Petersen observes, “Jonathan is Teresa’s self as other” (Stead 65): she reads this scene as the two of them “blending” into one (Stead 71). Another way of reading this scene of *mis*recognition is as a dramatization of their unresolved dynamic.

Quick comes out of the shop and she tells him, “he thought I was a vampire, I think. [...] I was in that ugly lamp and I looked blue to him!” Quick tells her he has noticed, however, that Crow is colour-blind. This is a startling moment of retrospective re-writing that tells us how little Teresa knew about him, but that also shows the monochromatic perspective through which Crow sees the world (Rooney 64). This moment of gothic drama foregrounds the kind of perceptual indeterminacy we associate with modernist facial representation and self-reflection. Seeing herself seen by Crow in such an extremely ugly, gothic way is curiously liberating for Teresa.

But the novel resists any kind of redemptive ending or closure. It comes to an end, shortly after this dramatic facial encounter, as Teresa says, “It’s dreadful to think that it will go on being repeated for ever, he – and me! What’s there to stop it?” (502). This ending, with its inconclusive rhetorical question, refers to “the infernal cycle of desire and suffering of her relationship with Jonathan” (Sheridan “For Love Alone” 178), but it also invites a more generalised reading: what is there to stop the ongoing problems of unresolved male and female relationships in a world still dominated by patriarchal expectations, where facial appearance and facial encounters are still organised by tradition hierarchies of beauty and the structure of the gaze?

*My Brilliant Career* and *For Love Alone* differ widely in narrative register, in plot development, and in social and cultural setting, but each novel explores the ways facial appearance is formative of female subjectivity, especially in the first stages of each text. The faces of unmarried women are open to public scrutiny, assessment and judgement in ways that brutally rank and value women in a patriarchal marriage system. In her early adolescence, Sybilla accepts the low value placed on her face and internalises the widespread social opinion that she is unattractive. As the novel develops, however, she becomes more resilient, more independent, and more determined, embracing a life of hard domestic labor in her mother’s house. She remains unmarried, not because she is not pretty, but because she has not found a partner to match her own strength of character. Teresa, by contrast, takes an almost perverse plea-

sure in observing the way her face registers poverty and privation as she starves herself to follow her own desires. Over the course of the novel, consciousness of the social value of her face gives way to more political questions about how to live in a way that is true to those desires. Yet in the final encounter with her old lover, both faces register a kind of horror at the other's: she sees that her face and the intensity of her gaze look ghastly to him, like a vampire, while she feels she has come face to face with a murderer. The intensity of feeling between them, then, remains unresolved.

Neither of these novels can be said in any simple way to be "about" the face. Nevertheless, these twinned examples of early and later modernist writing in Australia bear witness to the variety of women writers' engagement with facial appearance as a social phenomenon and as a major determinant of character. In *My Brilliant Career* and *For Love Alone*, the face is a significant point of focus for female identity and the question of what can and can't be changed about one's appearance, one's feeling about that appearance, and consequently, one's place in the world.

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