

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Veronica Brady

1929-

Nun and Academic

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Australian Biography: Veronica Brady

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SYNOPSIS

Born in Melbourne in 1929, Veronica Brady became one of the first Australian nuns to teach in a university, broadcast on radio or join in socio-political debate. After teaching at Loreto Convent in Kirribilli, NSW, she moved to the University of Western Australia in 1972, becoming an Associate Professor in 1991.

She has spoken out publicly against the Vatican stance on abortion, homosexuality and contraception, and has been involved in the Aboriginal rights movement and the anti-uranium mining lobby. She also supports the ordination of female priests in the Catholic Church.

Sister Veronica Brady is a member of many organisations including Amnesty International, the Campaign against Nuclear Energy, the Campaign against Racial Exploitation, the Fellowship of Australian Writers and the Association for Study of Australian Literature. She is the author of several books including **The Future People, The Mystics** and **Crucible of Prophets**.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Threads and activities in this study guide will have interest and relevance for teachers and students from middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels studying English, Australian Literature, Studies of Religion, Beliefs and Values, Philosophy, Studies of Society and Environment, Society and Culture, Politics, Aboriginal Studies and Community and Family Studies.

FOREWORD

Sister Veronica Brady seems to be a paradox: an outspoken paradox. Many of her ideas appear to flout Catholic Church teaching and yet, in other ways she reflects most accurately the ideals of the nuns belonging to the Loreto order.

The Loreto Order

Mary Ward founded the Loreto order of nuns. Sister Veronica Brady extols her as 'a wonderful...English woman of the 17th century'. Many of Mary's ideas attracted her to this particular order of religious women.

- What 'sort of work' do the Jesuit priests carry out?
- Why did it mean so much to Veronica 'not have to dress up in specific religious garb'?
- Why was it important to her 'not [to] have to live behind convent walls'?

Veronica values the order's focus on 'time for prayer and contemplation', particularly the absence of 'fixed hours of prayer'.

- What do you see in this way of thinking that fits Veronica's lifestyle?

While Veronica is talking about what attracted her to the order, we see a painting of Frances Mary Teresa Ball.

- Who was she? What was her connection to Mary Ward?

Mary Ward set down several dearly held principles which Sister Brady demonstrates in her daily life. They are freedom of spirit, sincerity in communication, personal integrity, a cheerful disposition and a discriminating attitude to truth. Although we will look at each of them in greater depth, it's fitting to initially examine the last quality in the list, because it has caused a lot of controversy and given people grounds to see major contradictions in Veronica's life.

A DISCRIMINATING ATTITUDE TO TRUTH

This tenet of the order has suited Veronica extremely well. She is an academic, and 'not much good as anything else except thinking and talking'. However, bringing such a discerning search for truth to an examination of her Church's doctrine has brought her into conflict with traditionally accepted Roman Catholic beliefs.

The Papacy

The notion of the Pope and the functions of the papacy is a pillar within the Roman Catholic Church. For Roman Catholics, the Pope has ultimate authority and is infallible. It is Rome to which they look '...for advice, for mediation of disputes, and for guidance on doctrinal issues'.¹

- Research the history of the first Pope. How did the papal institution begin?

Sister Brady openly states that she cannot accept the Pope's assumptions that 'some acts are intrinsically evil'. She goes on to say that the Pope's encyclicals are badly written, dogmatic and 'not infallible' at all.

- Why do Catholics think the Pope's authority is unquestionable?
- What do you understand by Veronica's criticism of the Pope's encyclicals as 'utterly individualistic' rather than embracing the needs of people as a group?
- What is Veronica's major defence against heresy (an accusation which may be levelled against her by other Roman Catholics)?

Sexuality

During the interview, Sister Brady speaks about elements which provide enjoyment in life. Her argument is that God made us to live with dignity and happiness and it is an insult to Him to pervert those elements of enjoyment by turning them into obsessive sources of evil.

- What does she see as the major function of sex?
- Does this opinion exclude the views of any other groups of people?

In discussing abortion, Veronica is horrified by 'poor women [who] are just baby-bearing machines'.

- How do you interpret 'poor'?

Part of Veronica's truth is that the Catholic Church has guided its people to make an association between sin and sex.

- What feelings may emerge in people if they associate sex with sin? What actions may ensue as a result of such feelings?

- What are your criteria for deciding whether an action is evil or harmful?

Of the Pope's 'most astonishing statement that some acts are intrinsically evil', Veronica states 'Now I'm sorry, I cannot accept that'.

- What are Veronica's criteria for deciding whether an action is evil or sinful?

- Do you agree with her on the subject of allegiance to God rather than the Pope? Bring evidence to your answer.

She firmly insists that people are alienated from the Catholic Church by its insistence on celibacy from religious orders. 'What's wrong with being married?' she asks.

- What point of church doctrine does the program emphasise by intercutting scenes from the mass in which the priest intones the congregation 'This is my body which will be given up for you'?

- Why do you think the program shows three different priests saying mass?

On the subject of women priests, Veronica's ideas are equally progressive. She recalls the words of Neeta Panel during a homily espousing an all male priesthood, 'Oh Father, don't be silly'.

- Why was Neeta's remonstrance so effective?

The Catholic Church's argument for male priests is 'that the sacrament of orders is Jesus' and because he was male, only males can be priests.

- Why is this argument called Neo-Scholastic?

- What is Veronica's evidence for ignoring it?

- What are your ideas about women priests?

Veronica is shy about sanctioning the notion of the Church accepting openly practising homosexuals.

- Why might that be so?

- Do you agree with her ideas that there may be genetic or biological evidence that predisposes a person to homosexuality?

The Notion of God

Again, Veronica does not stay within Catholic Church guidelines when talking about her understanding of God.

- In a couple of sentences, summarise her understanding of God.

- What is her problem with the analogy of the watch and the world?

- What happened during the period of the Enlightenment that changed religious outlook? When was this period?

The truth of both Christ's Resurrection and the Bible is pivotal to the Christian faith.

- What does Veronica mean when she says neither are 'this verifiable kind of truth'?

- What marks a liberation theologian from someone who studies divinity?

- Who was Jung, and what was his understanding of 'the shadow'?

Education

Teaching at university is perhaps the ideal pursuit for Veronica. Uncovering truth requires habits of mind that a university environment can support. The motto of the University of Western Australia, where Veronica is a Senior Honorary Research Fellow, is 'seek wisdom', something which Sister Brady appears to do.

- Name some factors that a university provides to stimulate thought. Explore what these factors can contribute to a rigorous mind.

- What is the meaning of William Blake's line 'Standing pools breed only toads and vipers'? Do university teachers have the opportunity to redress the outcome implicit in this line?

The way Veronica sees the world informs her critical writing.

- Why is this? Can it be said of all writers?

- What is the advantage in having a mediator between readers and 'books that are sometimes complicated...?'

- Why does Veronica enjoy seeing books 'which can open up our possibilities as human beings'?

Veronica's doctoral thesis is on Patrick White, the Australian author.

- Because someone has obtained a doctorate, does it mean they are educated?

- What in your opinion is the difference between having a degree and being educated?

- Does education facilitate thought, or is it that thought facilitates education? Or are they not necessarily related?

A FREEDOM OF SPIRIT

Sister Brady is drawn to many causes that she believes are just. Her freedom of spirit is an integral part of her need to find truth.

- How do you define 'freedom of spirit'?

Politics

Veronica is very political for a nun. She became involved in the anti-Vietnam movement, speaking in various debates but 'I wasn't allowed to go to the Moratorium'.

- What was the Vietnam Moratorium and how successful was it?

- Why might she have been forbidden to go to the Moratorium?

- Who had the power to forbid Veronica to attend the Moratorium?

Gough Whitlam was the Australian Prime Minister from 1972 to 1975. Veronica considers him to be 'a statesman who took us out of Vietnam'.

- Examine policies from the Whitlam era and look at why they would have justified Veronica's view that this was a 'great and glorious time'.

She acknowledges that she romanticises this 'golden age'.

- What were the qualities of the Greek Golden Age?

- Why does Veronica say that Whitlam's deposition was 'one of the most dreadful days' of her life?

- Does Whitlam's removal from office indicate that not everyone saw him as 'doing all the things that Australia was about'?

- Research why he was ultimately sacked.

The Fuel and Energy Emergency Bill

This was a bill that the Liberal Premier of Western Australia, Sir Charles Court, sought to introduce 'to outlaw strikes'.

- Research the circumstances of Sir Charles Court's action.

- Evaluate Brady's assertion that this bill would 'make every single unionist liable for thousands of dollars'.

Veronica's letter to the **West Australian**, Perth's daily newspaper, analogised the Premier's action to 'the way Hitler started'.

- Why is the analogy effective in drawing attention to the issue?

The letter resulted in **Four Corners** doing a story on the strong political views of this 'little nun'.

- Even 25 years after this incident, does our stereotype view of nuns embrace fierce political commitment?

- What is your view of nuns? In today's world of power women, are they irrelevant?'

Veronica is astounded at the fuss that was made over her letter and overt political views.

- Why do you believe religious orders should/should not openly express political views?
- Do you support her methods to prevent 'the nasties going uncontested'?

The Mabo case and the Wik decision

Veronica feels strongly about the issues surrounding Aboriginal land rights. The Mabo case of 1992 was a landmark decision by the High Court of Australia giving credence to native title. Mabo, as it became known, destroyed forever the idea that Australia was an empty land before Europeans arrived.

- Who was Eddie Mabo?
- Why specifically does Veronica despair about stopping the 'appalling racism and madness' of Richard Court, the then Premier of Western Australia?
- What is the meaning of the words 'terra nullius' and why did these words become important in the Mabo and Wik decisions. From what language does this term originate?
- What was the Wik decision?

Veronica's philosophy that things will stay on track 'if one person influences one person in her lifetime' and that 'a certain amount of decency will prevail' is very similar to the maxim that 'evil triumphs when good men do nothing'.

- Explain why this philosophy does/does not work in today's world.
- Do you believe in the power of just one person?

PERSONAL INTEGRITY

The word 'integrity' means a state of soundness or not being impaired. We can preserve the integrity of a car by making sure it has only authentic parts. An organisation's integrity is preserved when solutions to problems are found within its previously laid down boundaries of acceptable practice.

- How would you define 'personal integrity'?
- What actions by a person keep it intact?
- Examine why personal integrity is a prerequisite for both freedom of spirit, and a discriminating attitude to truth.
- Choose one matter on which Veronica makes a personal stance of conscience and trace her reasons.

Catholic Subculture

Veronica speaks about Catholicism being 'part of you' if your parents came to Australia from Catholic Ireland.

- What sorts of things in a child's upbringing make religion second nature to them if they're 'born into the Catholic tradition'?

Veronica paints a strong visual image when she recalls an incident from her childhood. Sprawled under the backyard lemon tree, she felt a 'sense of sheer beatitude and sheer holiness'. This mental picture has stayed with her for many years.

- How do you think she felt at this time? Bring evidence to support your answer.

- Can you see this as a religious experience? Why? If not, what words would you substitute to explain 'the strong sense that there are realities beyond us'?

She feels part of a big community, a big family.

- What is your notion of family and its importance?
- Are wider, extended and non-related families different from nuclear, blood-related families? Why/why not?
- What evidence is there in the program that Veronica embraces the entire Catholic family, 'warts and all'?

She cites her tradition as who she is, and her parents as a big part of it.

- Trace one quality from each parent and explain how it has manifested in Veronica's life.
- How has Veronica maintained integrity to her nuclear and wider family?
- Can you clarify Veronica's reference to 'good Freudian stuff' when she is explaining that she was so similar to her father she used to quarrel with him?

SINCERITY IN COMMUNICATION

Mary Ward's requirement in her Sisters for sincerity in their contacts is linked with an approach to communication rather than the content of what they say.

- What scenarios can arise when a person's communication lacks honesty? Look at this question from two points of view—the speaker's and the listener's.
- How do you know if your friend is sincere in his/her interaction with you?

Is Veronica Brady sincere in her communication? Let's look at several speech traits within this interview. Decide whether each affirms her sincerity. As well, find other similar examples to build a bigger picture.

- As she is answering a question, she very often goes back over the statement and modifies it. For example, of her father she states he 'was a bit feckless'. However, she reconsiders, then modifies this to 'he wasn't feckless but he was just gentle...'
- Her meaning is usually direct. She is not scared to 'call a spade a spade'. For example, she openly states, 'I'm a practising communist...'
- She is not afraid of making unpopular statements if she believes them to be true. For example, she openly states 'Religion is a dangerous drug'.

A CHEERFUL DISPOSITION

Your face to the world dictates your actions and interactions with others.

- Why would the founder of the Loreto order desire that her Sisters nurture a happy temperament?
- Using evidence from the program, describe Veronica Brady's natural qualities of mind and character.
- What circumstances influence the way others perceive our disposition?
- How can we misinterpret other people's dispositions?

CONCLUSION

We have looked at Veronica Brady's life through the lens of the Loreto Sisters' guiding tenets. Perhaps the best summary of Veronica's life can be found in Mary Ward's charge to her Sisters 'that we be such as we appear, and appear such as we are'. Veronica's life, devoted to social justice, seems to say that if we damage another human being our own humanity is damaged. The small nun, riding her bike along the river foreshore tackling big issues, is perhaps not the paradox she seems. Her constant questioning, her demand for truth and her freedom of spirit ground her firmly in reality.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

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Veronica Brady—Selected Publications

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ENDNOTE

1 www.catholic.com/library/Authority_of_the_PopePart_1.asp