

THE CONTRIBUTION OF DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER TO THE
DEVELOPMENT OF REALISM IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL

by Joseph Paul Lovering

Thesis presented to the Faculty of Arts
of the University of Ottawa through the
Department of English as partial ful-
fillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



Degree granted

February 14, 1957

Stehouffer

Secret. Grad. Division

Winooski, Vermont, U. S. A., 1956

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis was prepared under the guidance of the Chairman of the Department of English, Dr. E. Emmett O'Grady.

The writer received the cooperation of Mrs. Dorothy Canfield Fisher and the University of Vermont in the use of the Canfield materials in the Wilbur Library at Burlington.

Gratitude is here expressed for their interest and cooperation.

THE CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

Joseph Paul Lovering was born on February 16, 1921 at Calais, Maine. He received his B.A. at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass. in February 1943 and his M.A. from Boston University in Boston, Mass. in August 1948. The title of his M.A. thesis was Emily Dickinson as a Poet of Religion.

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis an attempt is made to study critically the novels of Dorothy Canfield Fisher and to demonstrate the realism of the author. Furthermore it is the object of this thesis to locate the position of the author in relation to the development of the American novel and to point out her particular contribution in its growth.

This thesis project is believed to be important because no full study of the author's work and of her relationship to the general development of American fiction has ever been written. Yet, she is generally accepted as being a writer of some merit. Writing about Mrs. Fisher's works has been limited to short articles in magazines, to book reviews, and to historical surveys of the novel. Consequently it was felt that an overall study of her novels with an attempt to place her as an American realist would be a significant subject to explore in thesis form and might be a helpful contribution to knowledge in this field.

A short biographical chapter introduces the main events in the author's life with a view to giving some personal information about Mrs. Fisher in order to shed a little more light on her fiction.

In the next four chapters the ten novels she wrote are analyzed and criticized to bring out the development of the novelist in her themes and in her narrative method.

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The division of the novels into four groups is chronological but it also follows the development of the novelist as well. World War I interrupted her writing and hence Chapter Two is entitled "The Pre-War Novels", while Chapter Three is entitled "Three Post-War Novels". Chapter Four is called "Mid-Channel" because in this chapter are discussed the two novels which are generally recognized to be the best written by the author when she was at the height of her powers. A final chapter treating of the two remaining novels is necessary because in these two books the author somewhat expanded her usual themes and was still experimenting as she ended her career.

A synthesis of her qualities of characterization, plot, and theme is made in Chapter Six in order to give a clear summary of the four preceding chapters.

Chapter Seven is necessary as a background in the placing of the author as a realist and to give also a clearer meaning to the use of the term "realism".

In Chapters Eight and Nine, the method of comparative analysis with other authors is used in order to bring into focus the work of Dorothy Canfield Fisher as an American realist. The point of focus in these comparisons is the philosophical and artistic perspectives of the authors who are compared. Three feminine novelists and three male novelists are selected on the basis of their realism as well

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as for the general qualities in their fiction which would help to make clearer the contribution of Mrs. Fisher to American fiction.

CHAPTER ONE

A BIOGRAPHY

Any account of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's life which attempts a full portrait of the author's long and active career would necessarily be a very long one. And it is the express wish of Mrs. Fisher that no book-length biography be written until after her death. But for the purposes of this thesis no such account is necessary. It is to the purpose of this thesis, however, to at least chronicle the events that have crowded her existence in order to provide a framework for the novels which will be discussed in the later chapters, and also to provide a few glimpses into the personal side of Mrs. Fisher's life.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher was born in Lawrence, Kansas in 1879, the daughter of Dr. James Hulme Canfield, a professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas, and Flavia Canfield, an artist and writer. Dorothy Canfield Fisher has written interestingly of her early heritage and ancestry in her latest book called Vermont Tradition. ¹The first Canfields came over to the new world in 1636. They were not of Puritan stock but members of the Church of England and came to the new world to escape the rule of Archbishop Laud. One hundred years later the Canfields were among the first people

¹Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Vermont Tradition, Boston, Little Brown, 1953, p. 19-22.

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to push northward and to settle in the lower part of the State of Vermont in order to get away from the Puritan influence and austerity that prevailed in other parts of New England.

Later on in this same book Mrs. Fisher describes how Israel Canfield decided to stay in the particular part of Vermont where the Fishers still reside. ²Israel, a young officer during the French and Indian war, was mustered out of the service and came down from Montreal to his Connecticut home via Vermont. His description of a beautiful green valley gave his kinfolk the impulse to migrate northward in 1764. The author's great-great-grandmother came riding horseback up from Connecticut and insisted on only one qualification for their settlement. She carried a cake of soap with her to test the water to see if it were soft enough to wash her best linens. She found the right place beside the Battenkill River, one of the very few streams in Vermont that has soft water, and there the Canfields built homes which still stand. The Fishers since their marriage in June of 1907 have, with little exception, resided two miles from the main village of Arlington, Vermont.

Dr. James Hulme Canfield, the author's father, was educated in the common schools of Vermont and later was graduated from Williams College. After a brief career in

²Ibid., p. 46-47.

railroading, he turned to the field of education. ³His early interests were in History and English. At the time of the author's birth he was a professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas. He was known as a hard-working, liberal-minded professor who was an outspoken advocate of free-trade. As Chancellor of the University of Nebraska, he championed the cause of college education as an integral part of the state school system and assisted the growth of Nebraska University through a difficult growing period in the midst of an economic crash in agriculture and industry. He died in 1909.

⁴Dorothy Canfield's mother, Flavia Canfield, was a painter, who also turned occasionally to the writing of verses and, later in her life, stories for juveniles. She possessed an independence of character, one evidence of which is her setting out on a trip around the world at the age of eighty. She completed this trip unaccompanied by any friend and set down her recollections in a manuscript. Flavia Canfield had the opportunity in the early days of her marriage to spend much time in Europe and especially Paris where young Dorothy came to know first hand the atmosphere of an artist's studio. Later in her career Flavia Canfield turned her

³"He Saw the Golden Door" in Nebraska Alumnus, issue of Sept. 28, 1935. (Clipping from Canfield papers in Wilbur Library, University of Vermont.)

⁴The Delineator, issue of Feb. 1928. (Clipping from Canfield papers.)

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vitality and resourcefulness to the Woman's Club Movement and was prominently in the vanguard of the feminist movement in America.

Mrs. Fisher's best recollections of early childhood are those of her summers spent in Vermont when her professor father returned often with his family to enjoy the New England village life for a few months. She writes:

I used to get up very early, put the saddle on the horse myself, and gallop down from the village of Arlington to one or another farm, getting there in time to have a glass of fresh warm milk, right from the cow (.)) But perhaps what I enjoyed most of all in my Vermont childhood was hearing stories (. . .) I certainly was an appreciative audience, and have never forgotten most of the stories they told me, nor the lively and animated way in which they were presented⁵.

Dorothy Fisher's formal education began in the public schools in Lawrence, Kansas. She was still a little girl when her parents moved to Nebraska, but she had already spent a year in France, traveling with her mother and learning to speak French for the first time. During the family's residence in Nebraska, young Dorothy continued her preparation for college work. ⁶It was here that she became acquainted with Willa Cather who was a student at the University. Together they studied and wrote for the college publication. One fictional collaboration of theirs had for its hero a

⁵Personal correspondence of D. C. Fisher, Letter to Miss Mary J. O'Neill, dated Sept. 29, 1947, Arlington, Vt.

⁶"A Kansas Girl in New York", Origin unknown (Clipping)

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football player who passed on but whose spirit came back to win the big game!

Dorothy Fisher took her A.B., however, from the University of Ohio State because her father was called to the presidency of that school. After graduating with honors she went abroad again and this time spent a year in graduate work at the College de France, working under the advisement of the modern language department of Columbia University. After traveling and studying language in both Spain and Italy, she spent a year in Hanover concentrating on German. When she returned to America, she began four years of study for her doctoral degree in Comparative Literature from Columbia University where her father had been appointed head librarian.

⁷In 1904 her thesis was published by MacMillan Co. under the imprint of Columbia University's Studies and was entitled Corneille and Racine in England, a study of the English translations of the two Corneilles and Racine with especial reference to their presentation on the English stage.

From 1902 to 1905 she was secretary of the Horace Mann School in New York and also prepared with Professor George Carpenter a textbook for English classes of the sixth and seventh grades. It was also in this period that she began, very successfully, to publish short stories in the magazines.

⁷Fred Millet, Contemporary American Authors, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1940, p. 285.

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⁸The summer of 1905 was spent in Vik, Norway and her experiences in that small Norwegian coastal town with its simple folk, isolated from the English world and pretty much indifferent to it, provided Dorothy Canfield with the setting and some of the characters of her first novel, Gunhild, which was published later in 1907.

Sarah Cleghorn, a long-time friend and collaborator with Dorothy C. Fisher, gives two intimate close-ups of the author during these early years. In the following quotation she describes a first meeting at the Canfield home in Arlington when Dorothy was about sixteen.

Into the pleasant parlor (. . .) came a small figure of a sixteen-year-old girl, in a blue percale dress and wearing her hair in a pigtail. She came up to us with the naturalest sweet frank pleasure I'd ever seen and from her entrance I never took my eyes off her, or ceased to drink in the singular delightfulness of her presence⁹.

A few years later when Dorothy Canfield was in New York working on her Ph. D. degree, Sarah Cleghorn wrote again a striking passage of Mrs. Fisher's graciousness.

And it was in New York, when I'd begun genuinely to know her, that I made the fundamental discovery that she really meant it (her kindness). All those gracious, welcoming ways, that lighted-up look when you came in, weren't forms of politeness at all. They were Vermontishly honest and real (. . .) She felt that way about old and new friends, bashful strangers, Arlington neighbors, children in the

⁸Ibid., p. 286.

⁹Sarah N. Cleghorn, Threescore, New York, Smith Haas, 1936, p. 105.

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elevator, old gentlemen who had known her great-grandfather. It was as straight from nature as the rich sweetness of maple sugar¹⁰.

A male admirer at approximately the same period provides us with another description. Alfred Harcourt, who was later to publish much of her writing, comments:

My roommate, John Fisher, took me often to the Canfield's home. Dorothy was very lovely--so lovely that we callow youths vied for her favor, entirely unconscious of her extraordinary ability¹¹.

Dorothy Canfield first met John Redwood Fisher in December, 1903. He was a young man also interested in writing and education and was captain of the Columbia football team. The two became engaged three years later and were married on May 9, 1907 in Pleasantville, N. Y. The card enclosed with their wedding announcement read, "At home after June 15, Arlington, Vermont." This has been literally true except for the occasional trips to Europe and the Western States. The Arlington home has long been associated with warm, open friendship and hospitality. The Fishers have been "at home" to countless numbers of their friends and admirers over the years. Their home in Arlington has become a sort of Vermont tradition in itself.

In 1907 the Fishers came to Arlington to live in a very old, rather small farmhouse, about two miles on the

¹⁰Ibid., p. 105.

¹¹A. Harcourt, Some Experiences, 1951, p. 23. Privately printed in Rahway, N. J. (Wilbur Library, University of Vermont)

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north side of the village and a little way up the side of Red Mountain. ¹²The home and the land was a wedding present from the Canfields. Originally it was just a few acres but with time came other acreage and a complete remodelling of the house along modern lines done by themselves. The Fishers made no attempt to farm the land but devoted their main interest in the property to re-forestation of the mountainside with baby pine trees. Today its beauty testifies to the success of their efforts.

Gunhild, Mrs. Fisher's first novel, was published in October of 1907. It was a love story with a Scandanavian setting, presumably a fictionalized Vik, Norway where the author had spent some time. ¹³The novel sold some six hundred copies. Miss Cleghorn comments that Henry Holt had promised royalties of ten per cent on all copies sold over fifteen hundred. The reviews were not too sympathetic.

In 1909 when the Fishers were visiting in Paris and St. Michel, James H. Canfield died. Later in the same year a daughter, Sally, was born in July, the first of two children.

Characteristically, Mrs. Canfield began work on her second novel soon after the birth of her child. Squirrel

¹²G. Overton, The Women Who Make Our Novels, New York, Moffat, Yard Co., 1918, p. 302.

¹³Threescore, op. cit., p. 30.

Cage was first published serially in Everybody's Magazine and brought the author \$2,000. In the next year, 1912, it was published in book form.

The Squirrel Cage is a "problem" novel of the type which flourished before the war, dealing with the warping of the spirit and mind by the "squirrel cage" of meaningless motion, demanded to keep up with society, with the resulting crime against childhood and youth¹⁴.

This second novel brought more sympathetic reviews, some of which were quite enthusiastic over the social criticisms presented. The money from the novel provided an opportunity for travel to Europe again, this time principally to Rome, a visit which was to prove of great importance in the life of the author.

While in Italy with some of her friends (including Sarah Cleghorn and Zephine Humphrey), Mrs. Fisher, in response to a publisher's plea, assisted in translating for English readers and listeners the ideas of an Italian educator, Madame Maria Montessori, whose methods in training young Italian children were beginning to be acknowledged in foreign circles. In the second chapter an attempt is made to show something of the general influence that this event had on Mrs. Fisher's life and writing. It is sufficient to say, here, that Mrs. Fisher published in 1914 two books, both essentially interpretations of the Montessori method and both received very enthusiasti-

¹⁴Halford E. Luccock, Contemporary Literature and Religion, New York, Willet Clark Co., 1934, p. 90.

cally in the United States. The books were A Montessori Mother and Mothers and Children.

Back in Arlington in the summer of 1913 Mrs. Fisher gave birth to her second and last child, a son, Jimmy, who was destined to give his life in the cause of world freedom in the Philippines in 1945.

In 1922 Hillsboro People, a collection of short stories based largely on the village life of a fictional Arlington, contained many humanly drawn portraits of New England characters. Some of the tales are considered among her best short stories. Another book written during this same period of her life was The Bent Twig, her third novel, which told the story of a professor and his family in a growing midwestern university. The conflict was drawn between plain living and high thinking. Some critics ¹⁵have seen in this novel not only some of Mrs. Fisher's best writing, but also some of the best objective delineations of the academic circle drawn from the point of view of the faculty family.

In April 1916, John Fisher sailed for France. Work on the re-forestation of the farm home came second to the call for men for ambulance service in France. Dorothy Fisher, with Sally, six, and Jimmy, two, followed Mr. Fisher in August, much to the consternation of relatives. Mrs. Fisher's desire to aid the French people whom she had come to love and

¹⁵E. Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel, New York, Holt, 1952, p. 498.

her desire to be with her husband overcame all objections. Two more books, however, were published shortly before her going overseas. They were Understood Betsy and Fellow Captains. The first was a story depicting dramatically the need for parents to give their children a chance to grow up without unnecessary interference. It has since become a Children's Classic and has been translated into many tongues. The latter book was a collaboration with Sarah Cleghorn and was in the form of a dramatic dialogue on the power of self suggestion.

The following gives some idea of her work in France:

Dorothy Fisher's first work in France was on behalf of the war blind. At the beginning of the conflict French soldiers did not have helmets, and blindness caused by shrapnel was tragically common. Braille books were tediously home-made by charitable ladies. They became blurred when often read and consequently there was a crying need for reading matter for the afflicted soldiers, many of whom were brilliant young students. America was then the only place where machines for the making of Braille books were available. A few were imported from America, and under Mrs. Fisher's direction, the production of Braille books in quantity was begun¹⁶.

A letter written by a friend best describes the multiplicity of charitable work which she performed while in France:

She has been one who has not broken down under the strain but has gone on doing a prodigious amount of work. First editing a magazine for them, running the presses, often with her own hands, getting books written for them: all the time looking out for

¹⁶The Harcourt Brace News, Vol. 2, No. 4, issue of Feb. 20, 1939, p. 3.

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refugees and personal cases that came under her attention: caring for children from evacuated portions of France, organizing work for them: then she dropped all that and ran the camp on the edge of the war zone where her husband was stationed to train the young ambulance workers: and while there she started any number of important things--reading rooms, etc. Then she went back to her work in Paris. Just now she is at the base of the Pyrenees, organizing a Red Cross hospital for children from the evacuated portions¹⁷.

One would hardly think that anybody would have much time for writing, but two volumes of stories were published during this period, many of them struck off in the middle of all the war work, The Real Motive (1916) and Home Fires From France (1918).

Of course, fatigue and the war inevitably had its effect on her spirit. Her own daughter had suffered a severe attack of typhoid fever at the same time. In a letter to Zephine Humphrey after a year in France, she wrote:

Oh well, what is the use of writing or even thinking about it (. . .) I wonder if you realize how faint-hearted and sick I am most of the time, ever with the feeling not wavering that there was nothing for the French and Belgians to do but defend their countries? (. . .) I have the feeling that our generation is pretty well done for, stunned and stupified with the bludgeon of the war, and that it is only from the children that the future will draw enough vitality to stagger along¹⁸.

The Fishers were in Versailles in the early days of 1919 and in May they finally returned to Arlington. In one

¹⁷The Women Who Make Our Novels, op. cit., p. 298-299.

¹⁸Threescore, op. cit., p. 178.

of her later novels, The Deepening Stream, she describes the hero and heroine returning to their American home after similar war experience and finding the door to their home open, and supper all prepared awaiting them on the table. It was, of course, a description of the reception the Fishers were given by their Arlington neighbors in real life.

The Day of Glory, published in 1919, was chiefly a series of impressions on the close of the war based on her own experiences. Included in them is a rather poignant description of a trip to Lourdes and the procession at night by the pilgrims to the shrine. She was not to turn to the war as material for a novel, however, until some ten years later with the publication of The Deepening Stream, a novel which is generally considered to be her best achievement.

Back in Arlington the Fishers began again the work of raising their children, landscaping their farm and assisting other families to reestablish themselves after the war. Mrs. Fisher soon was appointed to the State Board of Education and was the first woman member of that Board. Several years later her husband was also appointed and served a long term.

This post-war period was also a very productive one for Mrs. Fisher, the novelist, too. The Brimming Cup was begun and a year later it was published. This novel dealt with the life of two young married people who face the problem of their adjustment in marriage and the bringing up of

their children in the post-war era.

With her appointment to the Board of Education, Mrs. Fisher gave a great deal of time and thought to this work as well as to educational problems generally. Her Vermont educational work has been directed principally to the improvement of rural schools and the general conditions of school life for country children. A campaign to bring rural schools up to good standards has been carried forward energetically and with good results.

Rough Hewn followed in October of 1922. The main characters in this story are the same as in the previous novel. However, Rough Hewn deals with an earlier period in their lives. In fact Mrs. Fisher interestingly traces their separate lives through most of the book, bringing the hero and heroine together in a final love scene.

The next two years were largely devoted to a work of translating from the Italian of Giovanni Papini's The Life of Christ. This was published in 1923 and sold more than three hundred thousand copies in America alone. Her ability as a linguist was amply shown. In this same year also was published another book of significance, an unusual book called Raw Material of which the author said:

In this unrelated, unorganized bundle of facts, I give you just the sort of thing from which a novelist makes principal or secondary characters and episodes in a novel. I offer them to you for the novels you are writing inside your own heads, before I have spoiled them by the additions,

cuttings, stretching or twisting necessary to make them fit into the fabric of a book¹⁹.

The Home Maker (1924), Made-to-Order Stories (1925), and Her Son's Wife (1926) were published in yearly succession. The last of the three was a novel that drew a lively response from her critics because of its rather daring character portrayal of a woman who faced a situation with her daughter-in-law. W. L. Phelps described it thus:

As both parties gain in a trade, so both usually lose in a war: but in this war, although one woman is crippled for life and the other robbed of her peace of mind, both parties gain²⁰.

With this novel Mrs. Fisher became recognized as an important contemporary novelist.

With her children now pretty well advanced in their secondary schooling, their mother turned her special interests in education toward the development of adult minds. She has continued an active interest in adult education ever since, whether in the matter of book clubs, libraries, or conferences that promote this important phase of American life. In 1926 she began her long association with the Book-of-the-Month Club as a charter member of its board of judges and she continued in that capacity until her retirement in 1951.

¹⁹Dorothy Canfield, Raw Material, New York, Holt, 1923, p. 22.

²⁰W. L. Phelps, "The Novel Crop of 1926" in the Saturday Review of Literature, issue of Mar. 5, 1938, Vol. 17, p. 376.

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With the publication of The Deepening Stream in 1930, Dorothy Canfield Fisher's reputation as a novelist who interpreted the American way of life was well established. Her books were published in France, England, Germany, Holland, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. The Manchester Guardian said of her:

We are tired of the young men and women who are too proud to live out of Paris and despise the culture of New England. The other American authors, who have no sense of anything outside the States, seem rather limited to a European. Miss Canfield is happy in being able to apply her European knowledge to American conditions and she occupies a very remarkable position in consequence among American authors (. . .) She is one of the few American authors, who while profoundly influenced by European experiences and her appreciation of many things in Europe, retains a full-bodied Americanism of the best kind²¹.

Essentially The Deepening Stream told the story of Matey Gilbert, the consistent, natural growth of her character from her background as a professor's daughter in the midwest to her marriage and her war-relief work in France. The year 1930 also brought the death of Flavia Canfield. It was the beginning of troubled times in America. The great stock market crash had just occurred and the war in Spain gave ominous warnings of more trouble ahead.

In the next year there followed a collection of short stories Basque People. (This contained some stories that were written previously during the war years.) In 1933

²¹Cited in Harcourt Brace News, Vol. 2, No. 4, issue of Feb. 20, 1939, p. 4.

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came the publication of the novel Bonfire which was "a study of the havoc wrought in several lives by a girl who comes from one of those backward settlements in New England and is a combination of over-sexed passion and shrewd ruthlessness"²².

Mrs. Fisher was at work on her last novel, Seasoned Timber, during the years that preceded the outbreak of World War II. It was published in 1939 and like Bonfire had its setting in a small Vermont mountain town. Seasoned Timber, however, concerns, through its hero schoolmaster, a pitched battle that a small Vermont village fights against anti-semitism in the form of an endowment for a village high school that would exclude Jewish children.

The war years for Mrs. Fisher were filled with the task of caring for refugee children in Arlington and elsewhere, organizing drives for funds, such as The Children's Crusade which saw American children donate \$130,000 in pennies for refugee children. Her son, Jimmy, had been graduated from Harvard Medical School and was a captain in the Medical Corps of the U. S. Army. Both her son and her daughter, Sally, were now married and the duties of grandmother were added, happily of course, to her many other assignments.

Since 1926 Mrs. Fisher had carried on her heavy burden of daily reading assignments as a member of the board

²²Arthur H. Quinn, American Fiction, New York, Appleton-Century, 1936, p. 713.

of judges of the Book-of-the-Month Club. There were monthly trips to New York to meet with the other members. ²³With her originally on the board of judges were Heywood Broun, H. S. Canby, Christopher Morley, William Allen White, and Henry Sherman. These judges, up to Mrs. Fisher's retirement in 1951, had accounted for three hundred fifty book selections and had consequently influenced the reading material of, and had been instrumental in disseminating among reading families, some one hundred fifteen million books. Her correspondence reveals how often her mature judgment of what was most suitable for such a wide audience influenced the other members of the board. Besides the task of reading practically a book every two days, there was the inevitable correspondence that mounted up concerning the book selections.

A great sorrow entered the life of Mrs. Fisher when on January 31, 1945 in the Philippines, her son, Captain James Fisher, U. S. A., met his death. On the above date Capt. Fisher died a hero's death as he led a medical detachment on a rescue mission to free five hundred American prisoners from a Japanese concentration camp.

The periods of weeping, brought on by the death of her beloved son, aggravated the fatigue of the eyes already strained from reading. Mrs. Fisher began to curtail her active participation in many functions. She still acts in

²³Publisher's Weekly, issue of Jan. 13, 1951, Vol. 159, p. 145.

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the capacity of consultant, however, to the Book-of-the-Month Club and her writing continued after she had recovered from her grief.

In 1949 another collection of short stories was issued, Four-Square. Many of her old favorites were included and revised for this publication. In 1953 there appeared Vermont Tradition. Its theme is best expressed perhaps in the subtitle, "The biography of a way of life."

Mrs. Fisher continues to live in Arlington with her husband and even though she is now in semi-retirement, she is still often active in community affairs or in matters of national concern when her spirit and her mind are aroused in the promotion of a worthwhile idea. Perhaps it might be an article on the democratic operation of the village library or the promotion of a conference on the modern novel at the University.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher is an author of whom America may well be proud, a gracious lady whose life, as well as her writings, deserves a very great measure of praise.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PRE-WAR NOVELS

In this second chapter of the thesis a critical analysis will be made of Mrs. Fisher's first three novels, Gunhild, The Squirrel Cage, and The Bent Twig. The analysis of the novels will try to steer a middle course between artistic or aesthetic considerations and other aspects such as philosophical, historical and sociological interests.

The reason for the grouping of the above-named novels is twofold. First, and most obvious, is the fact that the war interrupted her novel writing in 1916, as we have seen in the first chapter. She did not write any new novels until 1921. Secondly, most literary historians make, at this point, a period division in the general trend of American¹ literature.

It is important, of course, to bear in mind that Dorothy Canfield Fisher, like any author, had her roots reaching back into the past. Our most recent American literary historians sum up the pre-war period as follows:

The (. . .) writers of fiction of this period-- even those whose first important works were published in the twenties--were not innovators of a new era but belong to the nineteenth century in which were their roots. They were pre-war in

¹The term "American" throughout this thesis is used in the narrower sense as applied to the literature of the United States.

inspiration or in their fundamental sense of values, and were summary, not iconoclastic, in their artistic purposes. The women were deeply concerned with the preservation of character, and especially with virtue. (. . .) It was the decay or survival of ideals of living resulting from the great American experiment in nation-making which most stirred their imagination. (. . .) With the exception of Edith Wharton these novelists functioned as guardians of the race, and especially of its emotional life (. . .) It was a classic moment, the end and summation of an era, a moment when criticism and creation were equal in power. It was a brief pause to define and distill American values before new and sharper changes in our mores and our philosophy began².

Politically this pre-war period was dominated by the Progressive Movement. It was the era of Teddy Roosevelt and the muck-rakers. A new spirit was abroad in America. Fred B. Millet summarizes three main movements in the United States during this time:

The first of these movements was the tendency on the part of big business to form larger and larger combines (. . .) and to maintain its favored economic position by a more or less corrupt and invisible control of political power. The second (. . .) was the attempt to control and regulate the mercantile and political activities of big business. The third movement was the process of restoring to the common man a measure of the control over the machinery of democracy denied him by the alliance between big business and politics³.

GUNHILD

In many respects the first novel, Gunhild, stands apart from any of the others. For one thing the story

²Spiller-Thorp-Johnson-Canby, Literary History of the United States, New York, MacMillan, 1953, p. 1208.

³Fred B. Millett, Contemporary American Authors, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1944, p. 3-4.

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takes place entirely in a foreign land, Norway. For another, its dominant tone is distinctly romantic. There are some explicit comparisons to the story of Brunhild and the saga of the Volsungs. The novelist had spent the summer of 1905 in Vik, Norway, an isolated coastal village, and had published her novel just a few months after her marriage in October of 1907. It gained little critical recognition and is generally considered outside the main stream of her work as a novelist. However, it is interesting to observe Dorothy Canfield's powers as a novelist in their beginnings.

The main conflict of the story centers around a love triangle. A party of American tourists are detained in a Norwegian village because an elder member, Aunt Nancy Fox, is ill. Her nephew, Harry Fox, is the hero of the story. Other members of the group include Miss Caroline Martin, a young college graduate who is seeking the love of Fox, and Pollie Martin, Caroline's very young sister.

The complication arises when the Americans seek an interpreter to assist the sick woman. Gunhild, a very beautiful Norwegian girl, is the only available translator since she had spent some time in the United States. Miss Caroline Martin shows an almost immediate resentment at the intrusion of Gunhild, in whom Harry Fox begins to show an interest.

Miss Caroline is an attractive young lady with something of the intellectual pose. She has recently turned

down an offer of marriage from Mr. Campbell, an Oxford man who is still seeking her favor. Her interest in Harry Fox is manifested largely by her attitude toward Gunhild. Harry Fox is characterized early as a thoughtful, sensitive person, who is quite restless from European education and travel and is anxious to return to America to operate a farm in the middle west. We learn that:

His ideal was to lose himself in some vital action (. . .) Competition that was the way of life; to strive mightily against your fellows; that would always be the way a man's strength was to be used. One must subscribe to the general law, with no shrinking from the consequences. And yet he fell into a drowsing reverie in which he half saw the possibility of a life in which successes meant not wresting from another what he wished (. . .) but some happy mystic victory over self (. . .) the reaching of a bright goal to which all might come⁴.

All in all the situation at the beginning of this novel might easily be compared to a Henry James novel, e.g., The Ambassadors.

Harry Fox is not too interested in Caroline and feels a marriage with her might not bring him his life ambition. Aunt Nancy feels the arrangement would be quite desirable.

Gunhild offers to show the young Americans something of the native life and invites them to visit her at the saeter, a shepherd's hut some five thousand feet up the steep

⁴Dorothy Canfield, Gunhild, New York, Henry Holt, 1907, p. 63-64.

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mountainside. The tension between the three is heightened as we see Gunhild's native beauty and wholesomeness contrasted with the delicateness of Caroline. Harry Fox falls in love with Gunhild.

Mr. Campbell returns from England still hopeful of marrying Caroline. Aunt Nancy sees an opportunity to promote Caroline's chances with Harry Fox. But the American lad announces his plan of declaring his love for Gunhild and of marrying her and returning to a life in the Midwest farm.

Through little Pollie Martin's gossip with Mr. Campbell we hear about a certain Lieut. Siegfried who is on leave and who has also fallen in love with Gunhild and intends a swift courtship before his return to the army.

Pollie has told Gunhild mistakenly that Caroline and Harry are to be married in London. Gunhild meets Caroline and innocently offers congratulations. Caroline, by her silence, gives credence to the false report and even suggests to Gunhild that she should not speak of the engagement to Harry, implying that this is customary in America.

Matters approach a climax when a trip is made to the waterfall on the mountainside. On the trip Harry tries to have a talk with Gunhild. But before he is able to do this, Gunhild becomes hypnotized by her imagined Fossegrim that supposedly haunt the waterfall. Harry, in a desperate effort, manages to throw Gunhild back from the ledge of cliff, but is himself, hurt and becomes hospitalized for a few weeks.

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Aunt Nancy has a discussion with Harry and she is now reconciled to his marrying Gunhild, who has inquired for the patient every day but who has not seen him. All Harry's doubts about his plans for marriage are now removed. He decides to make the trip up to the saeter again and to declare finally his love to Gunhild. After a tiresome trip and some more interference on the part of Gunhild's brother, a dwarf, he reaches the cabin of the Norwegian girl. But he is too late. Lieut. Siegfried has beaten him to the prize. The rejection scene is conveyed indirectly to the reader. We learn about it through Harry's words to his Aunt. Gunhild tells him:

"You say you love me--that I must go with you because there is no world for you without me, because you love me with all your being, with all your soul, but listen--so Siegfried loves me, and so, just so, I love him⁵."

In the denouement Aunt Nancy reveals to Harry her own disappointment in her past life and how she had fallen in love with Caroline's father and how she is living out her life by caring for his daughter. She continues:

"Campbell looks despairingly at Caroline (. . .) Caroline looks to you (. . .) you to Gunhild; she to her officer, and he to his fatherland."

Harry broke in (. . .) "You but turn the knife in the wound. There is no reason why. There is no meaning."

⁵Ibid., p. 310.

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"Harry, you do not speak truth. Even as wholly ignorant and blind as we are, we can't fail to know that there is a meaning if we do but open our eyes. Somehow it makes us of some disciplined use in the world, makes soldiers of us; somehow, somehow, it's the only way to straighten the line⁶."

* * * *

Gunhild has some very obvious failings as a work of fictional art and yet it has some redeeming qualities too. The plot, however, successful in movement, depends largely on the mistaken information given by the little girl, Pollie, and also to some extent on Caroline's withholding information from Gunhild. These factors of plot might be better adapted to the stage and appear to be quite weak when centrally used in the development of a fictional narrative.

The characters are for the most part not strongly developed. Caroline is a type of sophisticated college graduate and Campbell is a stage Englishman, Oxford brand. Young Pollie is an inquisitive child and meddles in the affairs of the grownups. Aunt Nancy is individualized to a certain degree but she is not particularly a strong portrayal. Harry Fox is not entirely credible. He is presented to us largely by dialogue that does not sound too realistic. Gunhild's suitor, Siegfried, doesn't even appear in person and even Gunhild's personal feelings are often interpreted to us largely through the eyes of the other characters.

⁶Ibid., p. 325.

But there are several brilliant passages in description of Norway's mountainous beauty. Mrs. Fisher, a native Vermonter, was at home, at least, in this regard. For example, the following passage is somewhat reminiscent of the Willa Cather touch.

The sun sank with strange swiftness, its departure marked by the rushing, upward advance of the shadow from the valley. The yellow light retreated from the circle of green it had made so lustrous, across the snow-fields above and then up the great sloping peak of grey rock like a lofty watch-tower on the mountain wall, which stretched its prodigious height and length along the valley⁷.

All in all the book, despite the limitations described above, did show a notable clarity and directness on the part of the writer in her first attempt at the novel form after her work in the short story.

Critical interest in the book was not manifested to any great degree and the book sold only some six hundred copies.

About five years separated her first two novels. She was busy in establishing her home life and during this period her first child was born. Her next novel was to focus more on the American social scene in a small mid-western town.

⁷Ibid., p. 46.

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THE SQUIRREL CAGE

⁸By 1914, when The Squirrel Cage was published in book form, the United States was in the middle of a so-called expansion and boom. There were thirteen million immigrants and as many more children of foreign-born parents. The secondary school enrollment had doubled in the previous twelve years. The telephone had become a common instrument. The automobile and the movies were well on their way to shaping our national mores. There were ten and a half million cars on the road and some eighteen thousand theaters just for the showing of films.

In her second novel, Mrs. Fisher was attracted for her material to this new social spirit after the comparative isolatedness of Gunhild. She chose as the locale of her novel the mid-west. Other novelists had written of the frontier life, notably Willa Cather in My Antonia and O! Pioneers. But Mrs. Fisher switched the focus to a smaller social entity, life in the small but growing town of Endbury, Ohio.

The heroine of the novel is Lydia Emery. It is largely the story of her marriage to Paul Hollister, a representative type of go-getting young businessman, a member of one of Endbury's "best families". The novel portrays a young

⁸Fred Millet, Contemporary American Authors, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1940, p. 6.

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girl, sensitive to real values in life beyond those of the many social climbers of Endbury. But she is thrown into the endless involvements with their false social standards until her life suggests that of the animal in the title, a squirrel in a revolving cage. It is rather a striking figure and brings to mind the cylindrical chamber in which the animal would revolve endlessly on an axis. The same whirl went on in Lydia's life in Endbury. She became a sort of social Sisyphus. But Lydia reacts against her environment and fights back and this becomes the central conflict in the novel.

The story opens with a fairly broad look at Lydia's family background. She is the nineteen-year-old daughter of Judge Emery and she is returning to Endbury after a year in Europe. She had been educated at the best girl's boarding school available. This education reflects the conscious striving of the Emerys to keep up with the best of Endbury's society even though Judge Emery, a transplanted New Englander, has to overwork and is finding his salary as a judge barely sufficient to keep up with the social demands. The Emerys have four children but the novel concerns itself mainly with Lydia and her oldest sister, Marietta. Marietta made a marriage which had some promise but she is childless and is envious of what her parents have been able to do for young Lydia. The Emerys have done everything in their power to encourage the marriage of Lydia to Paul Hollister, mostly without consulting Lydia's wishes in the matter.

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Daniel Rankin is the foil for Paul. He detests the "Squirrel cage" of economic pressures and has left a good job in the insurance business to work as a cabinetmaker in his own small shop on the outskirts of town. Mr. Emery describes him as a "back-to-all-fours faddist". Lydia is somewhat intrigued by Rankin's social views and a certain intimacy is attained between them. But Rankin feels that she does not realize what his way of living means. Paul Hollister, with the conniving, especially, of Mrs. Emery, pursues Lydia who is in the midst of a continuous round of parties since her coming out. Judge Emery's salary and health are being taxed to the limit and he is warned by his friend, Dr. Melton to take it easy. Dr. Melton hears of Lydia's engagement to Hollister and arranges a meeting between Lydia and Rankin, who tells Lydia that it would be unfair to ask her to accept his way of life, but he secures her promise to call on him if ever she needs a friend.

Lydia begins to show the effects of the strenuous social pressures. On the eve of her marriage in a talk with Paul, she expresses some misgivings about their union. She wants them always to be very close in mind and heart. Paul dismisses her fears without really understanding them.

In the first few months of her marriage, Lydia works hard at becoming an efficient wife in all her many responsibilities. Especially she is careful not to bother her husband with her own concerns. This was the prevailing code

with Endbury wives. She becomes pregnant. The big social affair of the season in her home is approaching and Lydia finds out that she must send away her Irish maid, her only servant, because of a disgraceful affair she is carrying on with a very young lad. Paul is concerned only with the success of the party. The party is a dismal failure in Paul's eyes and a breach comes between them for the first time in their marriage, and Lydia looks on a "black, loveless face". A week later Ariadne is born.

The "squirrel cage" of the social whirl goes on. Paul Hollister still demands more of Lydia in his trying to keep up appearances with the rest of the community. A crisis is reached when little Ariadne becomes ill. The illness is caused by a too early weaning which was against the mother's wishes. Paul remains out of town during the crisis. Lydia still tries to talk over the problems honestly with Paul, but this results in a fierce quarrel and Paul rushes from the house. He is killed the same evening in a rather needless and dangerous experiment, testing a dynamo.

In the climactic scene of the novel, Lydia, ill and delirious from the death of her husband and the birth of her second child, calls for Daniel Rankin and insists that if anything happens to her that he bring up the children in order to keep them away from the confused pattern of living that she was raised in. Lydia pulls through and the door is left

open for her and Rankin to achieve happiness together.

* * * *

Elizabeth Wykoff called this novel the only one of Dorothy Fisher's that was dated.

A woman served as the "hero". Romance and Idealism were embodied in a shadowy male character and every girl and woman who reads the book identifies herself with the sensitive, frustrated and of course neurotic heroine⁹.

Other reviewers praised the theme of the novel in its obvious attack on two of the powerful tendencies of the period, the soul-stifling exactions of "society" and the domination of financial success over spiritual values. Typical of this kind of criticism was the following:

The theme of Mrs. Fisher's novel is not merely the relation of husband and wife to each other, but rather that of both to the pressure resulting from our peculiar form of economic and social organization. And the change implied in it is that "business", the god of the national cult, is not only a serpent leading men astray but a Moloch swallowing them alive. One might with some justification describe The Squirrel Cage as a presentation of Thorstein Veblen's economic theories in fictional form¹⁰.

Apart from Miss Wykoff's criticism of the tone of the novel, we can safely say that a problem was clearly presented but the solution of it and the conclusion seem ineffective. Reduced to the simplest terms, Mrs. Fisher had

⁹Elizabeth Wykoff, "Dorothy Canfield, a Neglected Best Seller", in the American Bookman, Vol. 54, No. 1, Sept. 1931, p. 62.

¹⁰Book review in the Review of Reviews, Vol. 45, p. 759.

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presented an individual in conflict with her environment. Lydia was an independent spirit caught up in a whirlpool of false social and cultural values. This certainly was not a new theme, but perhaps the method of presentation was a bit different. Instead of trying to shock the world into a recognition of a problem, Mrs. Fisher chose to delineate what the situation was and to suggest how it might be changed. The author perhaps found the situation she chose too hard to handle and consequently in the conclusion of the novel she makes a widow out of Lydia and has her become the prospective wife, at least, of a man who understands the situation. It should be remembered that the author had been for some time a very successful writer of magazine stories and The Squirrel Cage was published serially before it later came out as a novel. This fact could conceivably have influenced the development of the plot. Her use of details in describing scene after scene of the social labyrinth is effective but perhaps not as artistic as it could have been, and some critics have called her to task for it.

Most of the characters in the novel were realistically drawn, with the notable exception of Daniel Rankin who is not real either in word or act. His talks on socialism are hardly enough to awaken young Lydia Emery to the realities of life. Some critics referred to him as a Tolstoyan type. Lydia, herself, at one point in the story acts with a questionable motivation. I refer to her marriage to

Hollister when she seems to be aware somewhat of the "squirrel cage". But it is plausible that she could be hurried into marriage by a designing mother and other relatives with a man she likes before she understands what she is doing.

Finally it seems fair to say that the problem which Mrs. Fisher treats in this novel is not presented in order that she could write a story around it but rather the story does seem to grow out of a sincere consideration of a serious social situation that existed in America at that time. Perhaps the best criticism is that of A. H. Quinn:

The picture is realistic, but Mrs. Fisher had not yet learned that to create sympathy for a woman who feels that her marriage is unsatisfactory, a novelist must provide a character strong enough to hold the center of the stage¹¹.

In her next novel she was to portray a heroine of greater stature.

* * * *

Mrs. Fisher spent the winter of 1911-1912 in Europe and largely in Rome. During her stay in Rome she became interested in the work of Madame Maria Montessori, an Italian doctor, who had at first specialized in nervous diseases of children. Her work in this field, assisting the rehabilitation of boys and girls and developing their latent intellectual powers, led to some remarkable achievements. Madame

¹¹Arthur H. Quinn, American Fiction, New York, Appleton, 1936, p. 708.

Montessori's patients began to show higher results on examinations than even children of more normal backgrounds. These results convinced the Italian doctor that her efforts to help others might best be directed towards an educational rather than a purely medical program. She developed her methods in areas where there were large numbers of little children under school age who were left alone all day when their mothers were forced to go out and help earn the family living. The Montessori schools became known as the Casa Dei Bambini or Children's Home.

Soon the Montessori system was attracting the attention of other educators in foreign countries. In Rome an American publisher was having trouble with the translation of a book by Madame Montessori. Knowing that Mrs. Fisher was a language specialist, the publisher obtained her help for a translation. Almost every day of that winter in Rome, Mrs. Fisher was at the Casa Dei Bambini in the Via Giusti, a Franciscan convent, looking after the translation and helping to explain to others the system at work before her eyes.

Obviously, from her writings on the subject, what she saw at the school amazed her. In 1912 she published a book called A Montessori Mother, which gave an explanation of the system for the benefit of American mothers. Fundamentally the Montessori system was a method of training and instructing, whose essential aim was self-education by the children

themselves, accompanied by special emphasis on the training of the senses through a series of prepared apparatus. From the tone of Mrs. Fisher's book, A Montessori Mother, the reader easily feels the author's enthusiasm. It is that of a zealous apostle who is convinced that she has the answer to many of the educational problems that beset both parent and teacher.

The central idea of the Montessori system, on which every bit of apparatus, every detail of technique rests solidly, is a full recognition of the fact that no human being can be educated by anyone else. He must do it himself if it is never done. And this is as true at the age of three as at the age of thirty; even truer, for the man of thirty is at least physically strong, as any self-proposed mentor is apt to be, and can fight for his own right to chew and digest his own intellectual food¹².

The reviewers of Mrs. Fisher's third novel pointed out the obvious influence that the Montessori system had upon the conception of the main character, Sylvia Marshall. Furthermore, it will be seen, as we consider the later novels, that the Montessori influence prevailed to some degree in these works as well.

THE BENT TWIG

The Bent Twig, the last of the three novels written before World War I, was published in 1915. It is written on a much broader canvas than the previous ones. It concerns

¹²Dorothy Canfield, A Montessori Mother, New York, Holt, 1912, p. 49.

the growth to maturity of its central character, Sylvia Marshall, the daughter of a professor of economics at a mid-western university. This story traces the gradual growth of Sylvia as a young girl, then as a university student, and finally her emergence into adulthood. The social background of the University life is especially finely drawn but it is not made so obvious a part of the story as is the background in The Squirrel Cage. The focus in this story is somewhat more limited to the University circle and it is this part of the book that critic E. V. Wagenknecht considers "some of Dorothy Canfield's finest writing¹³."

The novel also deals importantly with Sylvia's later life and her efforts to find a true sense of values in a world where many other people were also searching for answers to the same problems.

Perhaps the four headings to the four different parts of the novel may give a hint as to the pattern of Sylvia's growth. They are: "In Arcadia"; "A False Start to Athens"; "In Capua at Last"; and "The Straight Path".

The early part of the novel gives a very complete picture of faculty life at the state university (presumably Nebraska or a fictionalization of it in some parts at least.) Sylvia's father is a rather hard-working conscientious professor of Economics, a man who has the courage of his

¹³Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel, New York, Holt, 1952, p. 295.

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convictions and one who is not afraid to lead a life of intellectual pursuits even if it leaves himself and his family misfits in a university society which is largely content with "getting on" and being in the swim. The Marshalls have a few friends, like the itinerant German music teacher, Reinhardt, with a philosophical bent (the same character type that Willa Cather uses prominently in her novels of the frontier, e. g., My Antonia and The Song of the Lark). Sylvia is conscious of her environment and gradually senses the difference between the way of life of her parents and the rest of the community. Mrs. Marshall is the power behind the scene. In Mrs. Fisher's words, "As happened so frequently, it was father who understood and mother who did the right thing¹⁴."

Sylvia is introduced to another social stratum when her rich aunt, Victoria, visits occasionally. She is a widow and the sister of Mr. Marshall, who represents in her materialism a set of values far different from those of her brother, the professor. Sylvia is, of course, attracted by the clothes and superficial graciousness of her aunt, who in turn is fond of Sylvia. But there is plain enmity between Sylvia's father and his sister because Mr. Marshall feels Victoria had married merely for money. When Victoria lures away one of Mr. Marshall's more promising young instructors as a private tutor for Arnold, her step-son, the family breach is

¹⁴Dorothy Canfield, The Bent Twig, New York, Holt, 1915, p. 11.

widened.

Sylvia is sent to the public schools for her early training and one of the most powerful scenes in Part I deals with an episode in the fifth grade when two negro children enter the school and are treated inhumanly by the other children. Sylvia and her younger sister react powerfully to this discrimination and reflect the training by their parents. It is evident that the Marshalls are thorough-going believers in the school of Madame Montessori which taught that the child should be given every opportunity to realize and cope with their own problems beginning at the earliest possible time.

In Part II the focus is on the growth of Sylvia's intellectual side. Her father believes that her best preparation for the university will be tutorial study at home. Music is an integral part of her training and when her father takes her to hear the symphony in Chicago play Wagner and Beethoven, she is awakened to a new world. It is an emotional milestone in her career. On the same visit to the metropolis, Mrs. Marshall takes Judy and Sylvia on a trip through one of the large hospitals. Judy comes away with a vocation for nursing while Sylvia hopes she will never have anything to do with a hospital again.

When Sylvia enrolls at the state university, she is also in a growing stage in her reading. Emerson (her father's

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favorite standby) and many other nineteenth century writers are her food. Maeterlinck is prominent among her more modern fare. She is not accepted into the young university set and is not pledged to any of the sororities. This is largely due to the reputation that her father enjoys as a "jay" on the campus. As a result Sylvia retreats more and more into the world of books. She is even a little snobbish in her own right as she takes out her disappointment on some young men who might have become friends.

Mrs. Draper, a campus socialite, takes Sylvia under her wing. In her sophomore year when Sylvia begins to win some attention by her expert fencing, Mrs. Draper succeeds in promoting a friendship with Jerry Fiske, one of the most prominent young men on the campus. Mr. and Mrs. Marshall begin to worry about Sylvia who is awakening to the sensual pleasures of companionship with her new friend. Despite some misgivings they choose to let Sylvia work out her own problems, and merely caution her that she may be playing with fire. So Sylvia goes off to the big Christmas party at the invitation of the Fiskes. The atmosphere surrounding the big event is that of irresponsible gaiety. A hasty and somewhat dubious engagement to Jerry Fiske is made at a skating party. It was brought on rather hurriedly because of another man's attention to Sylvia. A short while later, the same evening, Jerry, meeting Sylvia alone in a room, presumes upon his

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recent hasty pact with her and begins at once to take liberties with her. Sylvia resists and flies from the house, disillusioned in her whole attitude toward the opposite sex.

Mrs. Draper gives her the argument that all men are that way and there is no sense in trying to be stubborn about it.

Sylvia seeks the truth from her mother who tells her:

"Anything that's felt by decent men in love is felt just as truly, though maybe not always so strongly, by women in love. And if a woman doesn't feel that answer in her heart to what he feels-- why, he's no mate for her. Anything's better for her than going on. And, Sylvia, you mustn't get the wrong idea. Sensual feeling isn't bad in itself. It's in the world because we have bodies as well as minds--it's like the root of a plant. But it oughtn't to be a very big part of the plant. And it must be the root of the woman's feeling as well as the man's, or everything's all wrong."

"But how can you tell!" burst out Sylvia.

"You can tell by the way you feel, if you don't lie to yourself, or let things like money or social position count. If an honest girl shrinks from a man instinctively, there's something not right-- sensuality is too big a part of what the man feels for her--and look here, Sylvia, that's not always the man's fault. Women don't realize as they ought how base it is to try to attract men by their bodies," she made her position clear with relentless precision, "when they wear very low-necked dresses, for instance--" At this chance thrust, a wave of scarlet burst up suddenly over Sylvia's face, but she could not withdraw her eyes from her mother's searching, honest gaze, which, even more than her words, spoke to the girl's soul. The strong, grave voice went on unhesitatingly. For once in her life Mrs. Marshall was speaking out. She was like one who welcomes the opportunity to make a confession of faith. "There's no healthy life possible without some sensual feeling between the husband and wife, but

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there's nothing in the world more awful than married life when it's the only common ground¹⁵."

After this experience, Sylvia spends little time with social life. She concentrates on her studies and obtains her M. A. degree. For her the clock seems to stand still.

In Part III we witness Sylvia's coming out again. She is invited, against her parents' wishes, to spend the summer vacation with her Aunt Victoria at a fashionable mountain resort in Vermont. Here for the first time Sylvia meets a man whose interests are close to her own. He is Felix Morrison, a well-known art critic and aesthete who is attracted to Sylvia by her natural simplicity of manner and thought. Sylvia responds to his appeal but the relationship is interrupted when Molly Somerville, a rich girl, begs Sylvia to stay out of the picture long enough to give her one last chance with Felix. Molly and Felix become engaged. It is a marriage of convenience for Felix. Sylvia feels the loss acutely. But just as this occurs, there appears a new man, Austin Page, a millionaire. Page is a character foil to Morrison. He has known Morrison and at one time was an amateur art collector himself, but he has become interested in the new social movements and especially in the dignity of personal labor. He is in Vermont working some timberland

¹⁵Ibid., p. 227-228.

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that he has inherited. He feels that he can make a sufficient profit from it to sustain himself and also give the community a means of livelihood.

In Part IV Sylvia has accepted an invitation to travel in Europe with Aunt Victoria. Sylvia realizes that Austin has arranged to go to Europe also. In Paris, Page declares his love for Sylvia who does not feel sure of her feeling for him. She questions her own motives in accepting Page who is a millionaire. Furthermore, Molly Somerville is killed in an accident and Morrison arrives in Paris for a visit. Page returns to America on business but he also wants Sylvia to have leisure to consider his proposal. The headlines later revealed how Page, the American millionaire, has given up his entire fortune on an experiment in a socialized industrial operation and has returned to his small acreage in Vermont to earn his living by operating his own lumber business.

In Naples Sylvia receives word of her mother's illness. She makes a dramatic dash, against her aunt's wishes, to catch a ship home. As she arrives in New York she hears news of her mother's death.

There follows a long period in which Sylvia is occupied in straightening out the family affairs. Her father is completely shaken up over the death of Mrs. Marshall. Sylvia loses contact with Austin Page.

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It is a period of testing for Sylvia.

She found herself on her knees, her face hidden in her hands, sending out a passionate cry which transcended words. The child of the twentieth century, who had been taught not to pray, was praying.

She did not know how long she knelt there before the world emerged from the white glory which had whirled down upon it, and hidden it from her. But when she came to herself, her eyes were dry, and the weakening impulse to tears had gone. She stretched out her hands before her, and they did not tremble. The force stronger than herself was now in her own heart¹⁶.

Sylvia goes back to Vermont for a final meeting with Austin to see if he still wants her. Their final meeting is handled thus as they come toward each other:

And then he knew. He knew. And Sylvia knew. He gave a great cry of welcome which was to ring in her ears for all her life, like a benediction. He ran down to meet her, and took her in his arms¹⁷.

* * * *

The Bent Twig showed a marked advance in both grasp and breadth of material over the two earlier novels and this fact was recognized by her reviewers. The reviews seemed to stress her realistic treatment of life as well as her innate Americanism.

The New York Times reviewer said:

The Bent Twig stands well forward among the best American fiction of this or any previous time,

¹⁶Ibid., p. 450.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 480.

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for it is at once true in its portraiture of life, unusually artistic in its craftsmanship, interesting in its story and vitally worthwhile as a study in human nature. For her method, the author has taken the best of the realistic school and while making portrayal of character with copious detail and relentless truth, she has not missed interest, vitality and significance (. . .) She uses the trivial not because she works with a microscope at her eye and so befools herself as to its importance, but because she can make it illuminate her picture. Moreover each one of the small incidents which build up her characters has its own distinctive interest, is infused with emotional value, has some brightness or import, or is weighty with inherent meaning¹⁸.

It was true that the flavor of Mrs. Fisher's novel was of middle-western life. But it was a middle-western Americanism and not simply a provincialism of larger growth than the previous novel. There seemed to be a focus on a human experience that was interesting in itself.

The Boston Transcript noted the influence of the Madame Montessori method in the ideas behind the novel.

It may justly be said to sum up the tendencies of her other work. Her study of the Montessori methods has very naturally led her to lay more stress upon the impressions and accomplishments of childhood than do most writers. Her Vermont stories (Hillsboro People) have again laid the foundation for her portrayal of the rugged New England character which we find in Mrs. Marshall (. . .) Any novel founded on such well-defined theories as The Bent Twig must necessarily meet an argument. But Mrs. Fisher's portrayal of character and the ideals of American life are deeper than the theories of her story and give an interest and value which cannot be overlooked. The novel is one which shows

¹⁸New York Times, Book review section, issue of Nov. 6, 1915.

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a definite increase in the author's powers¹⁹.

Edward Wagenknecht, a critic of the novel, speaks generally in favor of The Bent Twig. He says:

The first two chapters in The Bent Twig which describe the heroic battle of Judith and Sylvia Marshall against race prejudice, after it has been discovered that two of their friends are part negro, is really strong and, unlike much of Mrs. Fisher's work, it does not seem to have been arranged for the purpose of illustrating the author's values; instead, the values emerge spontaneously from the characters and the situation. I am less interested in Sylvia's progress through the University and her mating, but toward the end of the novel Austin Page's socialism, the tragic alcoholism of Arnold, and the death of Mrs. Marshall and her husband's consequent mental anguish introduce new elements of interest, as life opens out for Sylvia in terms of "an adventure perilous and awful beyond imagination"²⁰.

SUMMARY

Dorothy Canfield Fisher began her career as a novelist in the midst of a new literary and social spirit that was stirring in America in the pre-war years. The scholars, Thorstein Veblen and John Dewey (the latter a Vermonter with an independent cast of mind), provided much of the intellectual ferment for the time. In the literary world writers began to turn their interests towards a scrutiny of existing institutions, economic and social, with a view to their improvement.

¹⁹Boston Transcript, book review, issue of Nov. 6, 1915.

²⁰Cavalcade of the American Novel, op. cit., p. 297.

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Dorothy Canfield's early fiction in this pre-war era belongs outside the main stream of the fiction of protest which included, among others, the "muck-rakers" and the liberal writers such as Frank Norris, Robert Herrick and Ernest Poole.

Besides the broad economic and social issues arising from the struggle between capital and labor which had shaken the country in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, writers like Mrs. Fisher began to examine more carefully the relation of the individual person to the community life around him. In her first three novels, and especially in The Squirrel Cage and The Bent Twig, Mrs. Fisher portrayed this relationship in a realistic manner.

Gunhild was a contrast between the simple, forthright nature of a Norwegian girl who had been born in Kansas and returned with her family to Norway, and a group of Americans. In this book there is little emphasis on any criticism of the American scene. There is seen an echo of dissatisfaction on the part of Harry Fox, the American student, in his desire to return to develop a mid-west farm rather than yield to the mental pressures of intense business competition. The theme of this novel is seen, rather, in the gradual growth of Fox, a sophisticated American who has received his university education in Europe. He learns through the disheartening experience of disillusionment in his affair with

Gunhild that life is something to be faced up to. This note of character growth in and through the real experiences of life itself is to be of continuing importance in the novels of Mrs. Fisher and at least it parallels the ideas contained in the philosophy of experience put forth by John Dewey.

The Squirrel Cage offered a more direct criticism of American social life. It was the study of an average American marriage in a growing mid-western town. There was heavy emphasis on the materialism of the community in which the families strove for social prominence at the expense of more human values. The title of the book itself is a caustic comment on this way of life. The conflict is focused on the life of Lydia Emery who is caught up in the dizzying whirl by trying to help her husband "get ahead". In sharp contrast to this sort of life is the somewhat sympathetic portrait of Daniel Rankin, a young socialist who withdraws from the materialism of the community and lives by his own craftsmanship. Mrs. Fisher by bringing together Rankin and Lydia Emery at the end of the novel showed that her attitude was one of condemnation for the life that sought only financial success and social prestige. She had emphasized that the individual man must struggle to keep his balance in this new American society but that the struggle was worth while.

When Paul Hollister dies as a result of his test at the power plant, we see how the machine, as Thorstein Veblen had

shown, had become a central figure in the tragedy of modern life.

In The Bent Twig Mrs. Fisher continued to focus on the relation of the individual person to community life and she continued to use the family as the main frame of reference for her stories. In Gunhild the main emphasis was on the individual's adjustment to life; in The Squirrel Cage the emphasis was more on the whole scheme of life in the community. In The Bent Twig there is a blending of both of these elements. The author paints a full-scale picture of the academic community in a young and growing mid-western state university. Her criticism of the petty social creed is seen in Professor Marshall's reaction to it. He brings up his daughters to be independent and self-reliant. "It always seemed to me it was bad enough to be poor without having other people with a little more money messing around in your life," said Sylvia²¹ in regard to the social up-lifters.

The novelist's attitude towards her own times is further seen in some of the minor themes running through this novel. There is the forthright stand the Marshalls, parents and children, take against the racial discrimination that crops up at the grammar school. There is Austin Page's decision to give over his fortune to an experiment in broad social planning for coal miners. He decides to operate a

²¹The Bent Twig, op. cit., p. 406.

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small business of his own in Vermont where he can contribute his own share to the development of the community life. But the main conflict in the story is within the heart of the heroine, Sylvia, who must choose between her instinct for luxury and her conscience. She finally chooses the life of obligation and service and turns down the epicurean Felix Morrison.

In common with the first two novels, The Bent Twig reveals a great stress on experience as a vital factor in the growth of Sylvia Marshall to adulthood. The educational philosophy of Professor Marshall was a kind of Emersonian self-reliance. This harmonized with the Montessori ideas on education which Mrs. Fisher subscribed to at this time. The first three novels all have a common bond in their stress on character growth from within, aided by the circumstantial experiences that life itself offered. Her realism in this period makes use of many commonplace experiences of community living to trace the inward growth of human character towards its fulfillment.

CHAPTER THREE

THREE POST-WAR NOVELS

To mention the year 1920 in American literature is to sound a familiar note in the history of literature. Immediately comes to mind the names of the Lost Generation writers such as Ernest Hemingway, E. E. Cummings and many others. The same year evokes memories of several important books that opened up a whole new era in American letters. Sherwood Anderson had just published his book of Grotesques entitled Winesburg, Ohio with its expose of a small middle-western town and written from the viewpoint of a Freudian. Sinclair Lewis's Main Street had just become a tremendously popular success. F. Scott Fitzgerald had already begun his chronicle of the jazz age in This Side of Paradise and Willa Cather's great novel of the frontier, My Antonia, also appeared. In the world of poetry there was also a renaissance. T. S. Eliot went to England and began to write The Wasteland. Here in America Robert Frost's second volume, North of Boston, first published in England, was beginning to be recognized. Taken all in all, it was the emergence of a new literary period.

It was also the beginning of the age of Ziegfeld and Vermont's Calvin Coolidge. There were many basic concepts being tested out and argued over and inevitably they

left their imprint on the literature of the time. There was, of course, the reaction to World War I; the new prosperity and the vulgarity of the newly rich; the continuing clash between science and religion; the theories of Sigmund Freud and Alfred Einstein; the "Boobocracy" of H. L. Mencken; and the good versus evil of the machine.

We have seen in Chapter One how Mrs. Fisher spent the years of the war in France aiding the cause of the Allies in many constructive activities. During this interval she published three collections of short stories: The Real Motive, Home Fires in France, and The Day of Glory. The last two mentioned dealt directly with her wartime experiences, but she did not turn to the war as source material for a novel until 1930 in The Deepening Stream.

In 1917 Mrs. Fisher published a story of novel length which eventually became a children's classic. Although it is not of great significance in the consideration of her main stream of novels, it is worthwhile to consider it in its relation to her over-all development as a novelist. The story was called Understood Betsy and accentuated the importance of a child's learning through the actual experiences that are presented for her when she comes to live with her aunt and uncle in Vermont. The episodes are simply but realistically portrayed and the theme is well orchestrated throughout. This latter quality of orchestration was one

that the novelist continued to show talent for in her later works. Also there is in Understood Betsy more economy of descriptive detail than one will find in the previous novels.

The Vermont background is treated realistically with its home-cooking, maple sugaring, and its country fairs. All these elements are an organic part of the story. Not only does Betsy grow within the pages of the book but so do the minor characters as well. The book well deserved the recognition it received in being translated into a dozen foreign languages. In this book is continued the prominent stress on experience as a vital factor in the growth of a character.

When the novelist returned to her native Vermont after her work in France, she and her husband settled down to the raising of their family and to active work in the life of their small town.

THE BRIMMING CUP

The Brimming Cup was published in 1921. It seems characteristic of Mrs. Fisher's fiction that she uses the immediate circumstances of setting and time of her own life and transposes them into her fictions. For example this novel is concerned with the married life of Neale and Marise Crittenden after their courtship in Italy in 1909. They have come to the small town of Ashley, Vermont. Neale has been a soldier in World War I, but this war aspect does not receive much attention at all.

The situation in The Brimming Cup is somewhat similar to the well-known Sinclair Lewis novel, Main Street, which was published a year earlier. The turn of events in the story is, however, quite different than in Lewis'. There is good reason to believe that the Vermont novelist was to some extent reacting to the attitude put forth by the satire of Sinclair Lewis.

The novel opens with a prelude or prologue in which the two lovers Marise and Neale are exchanging their vows on the top of a mountain near Rome, not long after their first meeting some few weeks before. Marise says:

"Not to be true to what is deepest and most living in us (. . .) that would be the betrayal I'm afraid of. That's what I mean. No matter what the cost to us personally, or what it brings, we must be true to that. We must!"¹

The scene shifts to Vermont. Eleven years have passed by. Neale and Marise are happily married, with three small children added to the family. Neale Crittenden is the operator of a small lumber mill. His wife, about thirty-eight, is a cultured person interested in the children's education and in the community interests as well. In a series of vignette-like scenes we see the Crittenden family in many phases of their environment. The focus of the narration is shifted from one character to another but is principally on the mother.

¹Dorothy Canfield, The Brimming Cup, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1921, p. 5.

The complication develops when two strangers arrive in Ashley, Mr. Welles and Mr. Marsh, the former an elderly man who is retired and the latter a younger man who is accompanying Mr. Welles until he has set up residence in Ashley. Marsh is suave and polished and a good conversationalist. He is attracted to Marise through her charm of manners and her cultural interests in music and literature. Marsh reacts harshly to all the limitations and confinements of the small village while Marise tries to convince him that Ashley has all that is essential to personal growth and development. Marsh senses in Marise's mannerisms and her attempt to conceal a picture album of Italy what he believes is her unhappiness and unfulfillment. He decides that he is the one to make her happy.

Marise begins to feel attracted to Marsh's suavity. Her husband shows none of the refinement of Marsh. She questions their engagement promises on the mountain in Italy.

Of course she loved Neale, and he loved her (. . .) but, oh! the living flood had been ebbing, ebbing out of their hearts. They were not alive as they had been alive when they clung to each other, there on that age old rock, and felt the tide of all the ages lift them high².

An old friend of Marise's, Eugenia Mills, comes for a visit to the Crittenden's. Eugenia is the opposite of Marise. Both were educated in Europe but Eugenia represents

²Ibid., p. 108.

all the latest fads, from Freudian psychology to Yogi exercises. Eugenia senses the situation existing in the Crittenden home and sees a chance to advance her own desires because she has always entertained a fondness for Neale.

Another sub-plot develops at this point. It closely parallels the main plot and concerns the Yankee neighbors of the Crittendens, the Powers, whose marriage is being threatened by the too friendly attentions paid to Nelly Powers by the shiftless Frank Warner at the village square dances.

Marise Crittenden tries to gain the support of her husband in her crisis. She does not openly reveal her problem to Neale but gradually he comes to realize her position.

Matters come to a climax toward the end of July, about three months after Mr. Marsh met Marise. Marsh presses every opportunity to see Marise alone, even though she makes no effort to meet him. Marise decides not to run away from her difficulty but to meet it squarely. She hears Marsh's declaration of love which consists mostly of his denunciation of Marise's wasting her charm on the drudgery of raising children and on a husband who cannot truly appreciate her. The scene is broken off by news of the death of Marise's Aunt Hetty. As she hurries home she becomes eye-witness to the flight of Gene Powers who, we learn later, has just killed Frank Warner.

In the crucial moment Marise is left alone to probe

her heart for the solution to her problem. Gradually, after a long vigil at the home of her dead aunt, Marise finds the answer by listening to the voice within:

It was something in her which had grown insensibly to life and strength, during all those uncounted hours of humble service to the children. And it was something golden and immortal in her poor, flawed human heart (.) She had been trying to span the unfathomable with a mean and grasping desire. Now she knew what she must try to do: to give up the lesser for the greater (. . .) Here was the life more abundant, within her own heart, waiting for her!³

Marise meets Vincent Marsh quite calmly. When he sees that his impassioned declarations of love are ineffective, he becomes vituperative. Marise asks forgiveness for whatever fault was hers and Marsh withdraws from her life.

The sub-plot of the murder of Frank Warner by Gene Powers is resolved when Marise, going to visit the Powers, witnesses the accidental death of both as Gene tries to shield Nelly from the path of a falling tree. Eugenia Mills departs from Ashley on another tour of Europe and Marise turns once again to her children, her community chorale work and to her husband with renewed vigor for the "brimming cup" of life.

* * * *

Criticism of this fourth novel of Dorothy Canfield Fisher centered around the attitude toward the village life that was portrayed. Many saw in the novel her answer to

³Ibid., p. 345.

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Main Street by Sinclair Lewis, published just a short time before in 1920. The Vermont author was aware of Lewis' satire on small-town environment. Lewis had just missed getting the Pulitzer prize for his satirical portrait of the small town and the influence that its narrowness had on Dr. Will Kennicott, his wife Carol, and her lover. The prize committee had voted unanimously for the Lewis novel but the advisory council at the School of Journalism of Columbia University had overruled their choice and had given the prize to Edith Wharton for The Age of Innocence. This unusual procedure was due no doubt to the harshness of Lewis' portrait. One spokesman indicated that the more normal features and the more wholesome aspects of small town life had been overlooked.

Sinclair Lewis had not been the first to attack the provincialism of the village. Carl Van Doren in his The American Novel devotes a chapter to this question which he calls "The Revolt from the Village". Among the precursors of Main Street he cites Mark Twain's The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg, Edgar Lee Master's The Spoon River Anthology, Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, and Zona Gale's Miss Lulu Bett.

The change in attitude toward the village was only one symptom of the general change that was going on in fiction, and the change in fiction was only one aspect of a wide-ranging shift in accepted values. The simple provincialism of the older America no longer

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met the needs of the younger generation, which had come to think of the country as dusty and dull⁴.

The Brimming Cup drew comment from the pen of William Allen White, famous editor of the Emporia (Kansas) Gazette. He compared it to Main Street and found:

The plots of Main Street and The Brimming Cup are the same (. . .) An intelligent American woman, living with a kind American husband who is of the enviroing soil, meets a man from beyond the horizon. She takes a good look at the third party and goes back to the enviroing soil. In Main Street she is impelled to her bed and board because she has not the mindnor spiritual courage nor the visible means of support nor the grit to follow her inclinations. (. . .) She hates the soil and accepts her husband as a cross. In The Brimming Cup she comes back to the soil and her husband because they are of all things the most worthwhile (.)) The Main Street of Lewis is a great book, but is written in ignorance of the tremendous forces that make for righteousness in every American town. Dorothy Canfield's Brimming Cup is a truer book because it takes into account these righteous currents that are moving⁵.

William Lyon Phelps wrote generally in favor of Mrs. Fisher's novel but also made some pointed criticisms which are very sound.

I confess the Launcelot of this story seems to me somewhat unreal; at his worst Mr. Marsh reminds me of the impossible Edgar in Tennyson's impossible play, The Promise of May. He is theatrical. Furthermore, the method by which Nelly and Gene are eliminated would strain the reader's credulity⁶.

⁴Carl Van Doren, The American Novel, New York, Mac-Millan, 1940, p. 299.

⁵William Allen White, "The Other Side of Main Street" in Collier's Weekly, issue of July 30, 1921, p. 10-21.

⁶William Lyon Phelps, "Dorothy Canfield's Novel" in The Literary Review, issue of Mar. 19, 1921.

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Phelps went on to give the novelist some advice about the need for humor in her narratives:

I would suggest that in every record of human life there is always room for humor by which I do not mean comic relief; but something elemental and inseparable from life itself. This book though never dull is almost humorless, the author being so conscious of a theme as to have neither time nor inclination for that general regard characteristic of all great humanists. A too tense attitude may eventually crystallize into inflexibility that cannot be cured. This is certainly not now characteristic of our author but it is the only obstacle I see in her upward climb toward the goal to which her splendid talents invite her⁷.

The above words of the Yale professor and humanist have a kindly tone. He had met Miss Canfield when the author's father had brought her to the office at Yale and had asked Phelps to give her some direction on her doctorate. But the point of the criticism of The Brimming Cup was well taken and later critics were to make a central issue of it in the discussion of her style.

One of the more interesting technical questions about the book concerns its experimentation with the shifting focus of narrative viewpoint from one character to another, both major and minor characters. This was generally overlooked in the book reviews. The over-all point of view of the narration is that of the third person, omniscient author, which is the one Mrs. Fisher generally inclines to. But throughout the book she constantly shifts from chapter to chapter to some half dozen different, main or subordinate, characters with

⁷Ibid. (clipping)

the result that at least in the early part of the novel, the reader's interest is weakened. This is especially true when we are viewing the action through the eyes of Marsh or Miss Mills. Perhaps the method is more effective when she is dealing with characters with whom she is more in sympathy. Experimentation in novel techniques was in vogue during this time and many writers were getting away from the "well-made" or Henry James type story structure. Mrs. Fisher's next novel was to be an attempt at an even broader experimentation in story design.

In summation, The Brimming Cup is a good example of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's dominant theme of the personal growth of the individual person and his adjustment to the life around him. Through the experience of her slight affair with Vincent Marsh, we see her make an adjustment in her own life and the life of her family and even to the life of the community around her.

There were also minor themes and variations of interest to the reader. The Freudian conception of life, as seen in Mr. Marsh's views, gets quite a raking over.

Marise declares, "But for me, there are things so sacred, so intimate, so much a part of me, that only to have them (. . .) pawed over and thought about frightens me so and sets me in a quiver. And they never seem the same again⁸."

⁸The Brimming Cup, op. cit., p. 235.

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Strong belief in active participation in the social and democratic life is evidenced by Marise's faith in the public school system, the village square dances, the formation of the village chorale group, her adoption of the Powers child when the parents are killed, and even the villagers collecting at their neighbor's house in the middle of the night each year to see the Cereus plant bloom.

One proof of the quality of realism in Mrs. Fisher's portrait of the small town scene is shown in her readiness to show us both sides of the coin. The situation with Marise and Marsh is solved on one plane, the intellectual, but that of Gene and Nelly Powers, representing the cruder side of the New England character, is solved in quite another manner by violence and the death of Frank Warner.

Throughout the novel there is maintained the conviction that work is a necessary discipline of life. Even old Mr. Welles, obsessed with the knowledge of the injustice being done to the negroes in the South, leaves his retirement and completes the pattern of his life by doing social settlement work down south. Especially in the lives of the Crittendens, old and young, is seen the value of experience as a molding process. The deepest sense of value is that of the triumph of domestic loyalty.

The Brimming Cup sounded a deeper note than any the novelist had yet struck.

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ROUGH HEWN

The unusual thing about Rough Hewn was that it developed the early lives of the two characters, Neale and Marise Crittenden, from her previous novel. The author tells the story of their youth and growth into maturity up until their marriage. Rough Hewn was published in 1922, but Arthur Hobson Quinn maintains that its plot had been thought out before that of The Brimming Cup. This seems quite plausible in view of the roundedness of the portraits of these characters in the former novel and the wealth of descriptive detail that is found in the latter one. The plot structure is also unusual in that the hero and heroine do not meet until almost at the end of the story.

The narrative consists of seven parts. The first six sections alternate between the life of Neale and that of Marise. The final section brings them together in Rome for their courtship.

First the reader gets a glimpse of the boyhood of Neale. He is ten years old, an only child, whose father is a moderately successful New York businessman, transplanted from New England. His parents have a stable life and Neale goes to a private school. He is of a quiet temperament but enjoys the normal boyhood pursuits.

⁹Arthur H. Quinn, American Fiction, New York, Appleton, 1936, p. 710.

The scene of the second portion of the story is the cathedral town of Bayonne in southern France. The Allens, a middle-class American family, are taking up residence here because Mr. Allen is the foreign representative for an American firm. Mr. Allen is typically American in his absorption in his business interests. Mrs. Allen appears a woman of leisure who is restless, however, in her efforts to spend her time in Bayonne. Their only child, Marise, eleven years old, is beginning her studies with the French nuns although the Allens are not Catholic. Marise seems to enjoy her instruction but she is also aware of tension in her home where "there were always a good many things not to be mentioned¹⁰."

Three incidents shape the early life of Marise. The first was the feeling she experiences in seeing the evening procession to the shrine at Lourdes.

It was then that the terrible moment came to Marise, something that she could never think about long enough to try to understand, because when she tried to think about it, she began to shake all over just as she had then, when, across the line of chanting pilgrims she looked down at all those little marching, singing flames. What was it that came to her then? The most aching sorrow; and yet an exaltation as though broad wings were lifting her up in a solemn beat of power¹¹.

Two lesser incidents cling to her memory. One was the silly look on her mother's face when a man kissed her

¹⁰Dorothy Canfield, Rough Hewn, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1922, p. 46.

¹¹Ibid., p. 79.

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hand. The other matter concerned a pretty, yellow-eyed, gray cat about to become a mother. Marise was not able to understand the amused yet shameful looks of the servants. Even after the joking explanation of what was going on, she felt as though she was dirty inside and could not wash herself clean.

In the third section we watch the progress of Neale through the horror of dancing school, the "mental polishing machine" called prep school, and finally his matriculation to Columbia University. He has no particular desire for college but it was "understood" with his father that he would go. During this period Neale discovers the novels of Dickens and Stevenson, the poetry of Bliss Carmen, and the philosophy of Emerson.

In section four we resume the story of the Allens in France. Mrs. Allen is entrenched in her boredom, reading romantic, sentimental novels and carrying on fanciful flirtations. Marise's main interests have turned to music which becomes her best ally against her moments of loneliness. She is fifteen and is very sensitive to the secretive jokes about sex from the other girls at school and also about the books that her mother reads, and the attentions that her mother is getting from some of the men, especially young Jean Pierre. Mrs. Allen lies to her daughter about an appointment and Marise invents a story to cover up her mother's actions to

the servants. Shortly after, news comes to the school that Jean Pierre has been killed in a neighboring town and that Mrs. Allen is suffering from a shock which she incurred when she was with the young man at the time of his death. Jeanne, the Allens' maid, invents an alibi for Mrs. Allen at the police investigation and swears Marise to secrecy. Mrs. Allen dies a few days later.

Part five traces the story of Neale Crittenden's college career. It largely concerns the growth of the young man through his football playing and the studies which he gets in spite of the atmosphere that surrounds him. He begins to lose some of his reticence and goes steady in his senior year with Martha Wentworth. After graduation Neale meets with some success in a lumber firm and drifts into an engagement with Martha. Both realize just in time that there is really no strong bond of affection between them. Neale gets a small inheritance, gives up the job for lack of real interest in selling, and goes abroad to try to find himself.

In part six Marise Allen is seventeen, an excellent music student, and very beautiful. Her music is pretty much her whole concern in life. She finds another American girl, Eugenia Mills, and they go to Rome for further study. Marise is scornful of love and a little afraid of it.

In the final section of the story Neale and Marise meet in Rome. Both are attracted to each other although

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Marise tries to prevent herself from falling in love with him. She goes away from Rome for a brief time and returns to the waiting Neale. She is won over to him largely by his honest, out-spoken attitude toward life in general, as well as to the world of art, to Marise's socialite friends and to Marise herself.

* * * *

As might be expected, criticism of this novel drew comparisons with the previous one and comments on the split-narrative structure of the plot.

An English reviewer wrote:

The practice of writing novels backwards is not a good one (. . .) Miss Canfield put the case very fairly and fully in her former story, so that for those who remember it, the present continuation backwards adds very little to their knowledge of the man and the woman (. . .) Her interest in the two characters is almost excessive, in fact, and there are times when one regrets that she is so adept in the art of suggestion. With her, everything must be put down in black and white, with the result that, for English readers at least, the task of following Neale through his college days is a trifle exhausting¹².

It is true that the college career of Neale is rendered too fully. However, at the same time it is surprising to see a woman novelist portray such an inside and realistic account of the game of football. E. Wagenknecht comments unfavorably on the treatment of Neale's college days: "She seems to feel that the way to make the boy real

¹²Book review of Rough Hewn, The London Times Literary Supplement, issue of April 19, 1923.

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is to cram these chapters with football lingo, a mistake less commonly made by male writers, who know that many boys hate athletics¹³." It is doubtful, however, that Mrs. Fisher was writing for an audience that included many boy readers. These chapters were written from the youth's own point of view and Neale at least liked the game.

Many reviewers were not sympathetic, moreover, with the experimental nature of the plot structure. There is a tendency toward uneven tone in the narrative. This is because the sections that deal with Neale's youth are written from the boy's point of view. On the other hand when the reader turns to the chapters about the early life of the Allens in France there is a switch to a more dramatic point of view wherein the American family is seen through the eyes of different French villagers. The rest of the story of Marise is told, however, from the girl's own point of view.

Mrs. Fisher continued to get very favorable reviews. The following is characteristic of this type.

The sensitive complexities of the New England inheritance are drawn here with a faithfulness that can only be the product of deep experience. This is a healthy story of the life struggles of two well-bred Anglo-Saxons. It is thoroughly American. It is readable throughout and to me, at least, comes as a blessed relief from the welter of our current novels where satirist, sexologist, psychoanalyst,

¹³Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel, New York, Holt, 1952, p. 297.

and Orientalist bash the ten commandments with a fool's bladder and hide behind the skirts of possible genius¹⁴.

The novel Rough Hewn presents a good opportunity to examine Mrs. Fisher's handling of the different cultural backgrounds of the United States and of Europe, especially France and Italy. Her realism shows to good advantage in this regard. She handles the visit to Lourdes with sympathy and insight, although she is not a Catholic. On the other hand she can draw realistic portraits of the prejudices of the Basque peasant women in their attitude towards Mrs. Allen, the Protestant, sojourning in their village. The same realistic attitude of the author prevails in her treatment of Neale and Marise at Rome. There is a true sensitivity towards the eternal city in its historical aspects. Mrs. Fisher's pen is just as sensitive in revealing the pseudo-culture of some of the tourists as well as some of the Italian patrons of the arts in the Roman musical circles. When at last Neale and Marise are reunited they attend Mass at St. Peter's and, again, although they are not Catholic, one feels a proper spirit of reverence pervading the whole scene.

Marise learned to appreciate the French ideal of a high standard of workmanship, of doing the thing to be done in the best manner possible. Neale's philosophy of life was

¹⁴Book review in The Bookman, issue of December, 1922, Vol. 56, No. 4, p. 489-490.

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conceived largely in terms of his experience gained on the football field and he later applied it to the business world, viz., to study the opponent, to adapt one's plans to the situation at hand, and to put all the will that one has into the game. Upon coming together at the end of the story, Neale and Marise seem to complement one another in their attitudes toward life.

Rough Hewn again showed a common characteristic of Mrs. Fisher, her interest in the life of the average men and women of her time. And there was a continuation of her feeling for the dignity behind all human experience. However too sharply or at times too fully she may draw her characters, there is no doubt that in their portraits we may recognize still a common humanity. Rough Hewn is essentially a study of the genesis of two characters, the story of their childhood, adolescence, and the beginning of their maturity. It is the story of their adjustment to the life they were born into and of their attempt to find their place in the scheme of things.

RAW MATERIAL

Before examining the last of the three novels we are considering, it might be profitable to pause briefly to look at a book of Mrs. Fisher's which isn't really a novel or perhaps not even fiction, but a book that does throw some light

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on her fictional methods. That book is Raw Material, published in 1923.

The term "raw material" had been used symbolically by the author when Neale in Rough Hewn explained why he wanted to give up a life of mere business competition.

The more I think of it the better it looks to me, like something I'd like to put my heart into doing as well as I could. Taking raw material, you know, that's of no special value in itself, and helping other men to make it worth more by adding work and intelligence to it¹⁵.

In her preface to the book Mrs. Fisher explains her exact purpose in writing Raw Material:

It is a book in which nearly everything is left for the reader to do. I have only set down in it, just as if I were noting for my own use, a score of instances from human life (. . .) pegs on which to hang the meditations of different moods (. . .) I know you can make infinitely better ones. I know that what you do for yourselves will be the living lacework of many colored seaweed floating free and quivering in quiet sunlit pools, and that what I could get down in a book would be a poor little faded collection of stiff dead tendrils, pasted on blotting paper¹⁶.

The idea of engaging the reader creatively in the author's work was not new. For example, Emerson proposed it in his essays, especially in The American Scholar. And Percy Lubbock in The Craft of Fiction maintains the critical reader is himself a novelist, reconstructing the picture in

¹⁵Rough Hewn, op. cit., p. 488.

¹⁶Dorothy Canfield, Raw Material, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1924, p. 21.

his own mind as he reads the book¹⁷. But the idea of putting down on paper the raw material only was a somewhat new device and the reactions to it were not too favorable in many instances. The New York Times review stated:

There is a fallacy in the author's reasoning when she leaps to the conclusion that if she can hurl this "raw material" at the reader it is going to carry with it, just because it is new, all the life and glow that it possessed for her (. . .) Miss Canfield is a bad psychologist when she tries to persuade herself and her reader that it can¹⁸.

Others, like the novelist Zona Gale, observed¹⁹ that Mrs. Fisher had put more art in the book in the way of grinding and polishing her material and saw in the book something more of the nature of the traditional character sketch. Such figures as Uncle Giles, who made his living sponging off his relatives, and Old Man Warner, who lives the life of a hermit on the mountain top, were vivid New England types.

The book is more significant when it is viewed in relation to the author's total attitude towards fiction and her attitude to life as well. It seems clear that she was trying to get the reader one step closer to the experience of

¹⁷Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction, New York, Scribner's, 1955, p. 17.

¹⁸"Such Stuff as Novels Are Made Of", book review in the New York Times, issue of August 26, 1923, p. 15.

¹⁹International Book Review of Raw Material, The Literary Digest, issue of Sept. 4, 1923, p. 43-44.

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life, even though the book may have been a failure in the achievement of this purpose.

THE HOME-MAKER

Dorothy Canfield Fisher's sixth novel was published in 1924. It was the shortest of all her novels and it told the story of the domestic life of Evangeline and Lester Knapp. The narrative is related in four evenly-divided parts, and the action is confined to a brief period of about three months. The setting is a small New England town. The center focus of the novel is the irony in the life of the family when Lester Knapp becomes the real home-maker while his wife becomes a successful business woman.

The Knapps are struggling to get along on a meagre salary which Lester makes at Willing's department store as an office clerk. They have three children, Helen, Henry and Stephen.

Mrs. Knapp is pictured as the household slave in the sense that she has no desire to be a real home-maker although out of a sense of duty she labors at it frustratedly. The neighbors realize her situation, especially how she is handicapped by her husband who is of a poetical temperament and is not getting ahead at his job. He had been studying English literature at the University thirteen years before until "that day, when vibrant with the excitement of his engagement

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to that flame-like girl, he had left the university classes and all his plans for the future and had rushed out to find work²⁰."

When the new management of the store puts everything on a bonus basis, Lester Knapp loses his job. He realizes what a dead loss he is to his family. He figures that he will do better by taking his life and allowing his wife to get the insurance. He uses the opportunity that is presented to him when he climbs a neighbor's roof needlessly to help put out a fire. He falls off the roof but succeeds only in crippling himself. The extent of his volition in the matter is not too clear to the reader since the action is reported by the neighbors.

Part two of the story focuses on Jerome Willing and his wife, the new managers of the department store. When they learn of Knapp's accident they offer token assistance as a way of gaining the good will of the townsmen. Mrs. Knapp refuses any outright aid but shortly after asks Willing for a job at the store. Willing recognizes in her just the person he needs to promote his clothing sales, but he is cautious about letting her know it. Mrs. Knapp proceeds to justify his hopes and becomes a very successful saleswoman who is enthusiastically interested in her work. Mr. Knapp's injury,

²⁰Dorothy Canfield, The Home-Maker, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1924, p. 75.

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at first thought permanent, improves to the extent that he can move about in a wheelchair.

Part three is the story of Lester Knapp's successful attempt to make a real home life for his children. He sees them, as it were, for the first time during his recovery. He probes to the root of little Stephen's stubbornness. The child had always been impossible for the mother to understand. Helen is also won over by her father's efforts in helping her with her writing and school work. Like her father she has a feeling for poetry. Son Henry's life becomes stabilized when Lester manoeuvres his wife into allowing a dog in the home. The household duties are accomplished systematically by all hands. And Lester Knapp successfully wards off the interference of busybody do-gooders who would have extended too much sympathy.

The novel reaches its climax in part four when Mrs. Knapp accidentally discovers that her husband can actually move his legs. She observes this one evening upon coming into the bedroom and seeing her husband turn over in his sleep and flex his limbs. She is thrown into a turmoil of fear and doubt. A short while later, Lester Knapp, himself, discovers his ability to move when he sees his son in danger from a fire. Mr. Knapp, too, is in a dilemma. He does not reveal his discovery which would bring back the former frustration to his family. With some collaboration from the

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family physician he manages to keep his secret from the family. Both Mrs. Knapp and the children accept the decision of the doctor that Mr. Knapp will at best be able to walk only with crutches.

* * * *

By almost any standard of measurement, The Home-Maker falls short of the previous novels, with the possible exception of Gunhild. Its plot seemed contrived to point up the thesis of the author that men and women are not necessarily endowed with special talents for one particular role in life. The characterizations (excepting the children where Mrs. Fisher is mostly always successful) were shallowly portrayed, even though treated in the realistic method.

The book nevertheless was a very popular success. It managed to make number ten on a list of ten best-sellers put out by Publisher's Weekly for 1924, Edna Ferber's So Big heading the list. Some cries of "pot-boiler" and "feminism" were heard among the reviewers. This was a new note in criticism of a Canfield novel.

Curiously enough the British reviews of the book were uniformly good. H. C. Harwood wrote:

But beyond doubt this is the most intelligent, humorous and strongly flavored book Canfield has published this side for years. To those who, like myself, have been rather sickened by a surfeit of her poorer stuff I can warmly recommend The Home-Maker, as capable of renewing their first careless delight in her ideas²¹.

²¹ H. C. Harwood, "The Gossip Shop", quoted in The Bookman, issue of August 1924, Vol. 59, No. 6, p. 761.

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John Crowe Ransom, who later became one of the leaders among the new critics and helped to give that school of criticism its name, reviewed The Home-Maker for a Southern journal. His review is worthwhile quoting at length, not so much for what he has to say about the novel itself, but for his general comment on the author's relationship to the over-all fictional tendencies of the period. He wrote:

It is not that The Home-Maker is in itself an unprofitable work. It is serious, it is interesting, it touches life, it is several planes above that best-seller fiction which is manufactured in quantity production according to a formula that works. But in this book the author has receded a great distance from the pure artistic purpose with which her best work was written.

Perhaps the truth is that Mrs. Fisher is undecided as to which of the current schools of fiction she will attach herself to. And, indeed, in The Brimming Cup itself, she showed some wavering of intention. The first half of that book was a very fine performance in the Henry James kind of thing; a distinguished style, and an exquisite play of the spiritual type struggling against vulgarity and grossness. But as the story developed, the author fell more and more into the popular, undistinguished and didactic sort of realism of which Main Street is the example par excellence (. . .)

The problem here is a real one, probably it is destined to obtrude itself more and more in these days of women's rights, though the examples used to present it here are most extreme (. . .)

There are lessons to be studied in this book, lessons in the care of children, lessons in finding for the individual his proper environment. But it is too obviously a book of lessons, and it is still to the summer schools, to the state extension courses, that we look for lessons out of textbooks; it seems

a pity for a creative artist to reduce himself or herself to the schoolteacher²².

In summation, The Home-Maker, as a representative of Mrs. Fisher's art in the novel, falls much short of her best work. Her theme tended toward an abstract thesis in human psychology even though realistic descriptive detail and incident were used. As a result, both characterization and plot were weakened.

Among the minor themes of the book was Mrs. Fisher's continued attack on the materialistic trend of the times. This is best seen in the commercial bag of tricks used by the department store to improve its trade.

They were intended to fix the human attention altogether on the importance of material things; to make women feel that the difference between linen and cotton is of more importance to them than the fine, difficultly drawn, always varying, line between warm human love and lust²³.

The Home-Maker also continued the author's emphasis on her characteristic themes of family loyalty, of conviction that work is a necessary discipline in life, and of confidence in education and experience. But, for Mrs. Fisher, experience always seems shot through with some spiritual significance. Young and old alike find a sense of value out of their experiences.

²²John C. Ransom, Book review in The Nashville Tennessean, issue of July 27, 1924.

²³The Home-Maker, op. cit., p. 310.

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SUMMARY

In this chapter it has been shown that in three novels written within a few years after World War I, Dorothy Canfield Fisher further developed her talents as a realistic novelist, expanding the scope of her earlier work and finding her theme largely in the domestic life, always stressing the struggle of the individual in his adjustment to the life of the American community in which he lives.

In The Brimming Cup the Vermont novelist gave a picture of village community life which differed radically from Main Street by Sinclair Lewis, yet the less desirable traits were not omitted from the picture. The Freudian view of life was treated very unsympathetically. The novel was chiefly the study of a happy marriage. Its main weakness was an unreal villain which makes the temptation of the heroine not very convincing, and at times the novelist relies too heavily on essay or argument.

In Rough Hewn the author experimented in both the form and the subject matter of her novel. She traced the lives of the two main characters of her previous novel, from their early youth until the point of their marriage. The structure of the story was shaped by alternating the narratives of each character separately until they meet near the end of the book. The author continued to use the method of experimental realism in her narrative about two Americans of

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widely diverse cultural environments. By "experimental realism" is meant that the characters, who are usually drawn from average American social ranks, are developed through the everyday experiences of life which surround them and they grow out of these experiences toward their fulfillment as individual human beings. There is a realistic balance in the handling of the pleasant as well as the more unpleasant aspects of life. Also the contrast between European and American cultures was treated realistically and effectively.

In The Home-Maker the author presented an ironical situation wherein the husband, a man unfitted for competing for a livelihood in the business world, becomes an ideal home-maker; while his wife, unsuited for achieving fulfillment in household managing, becomes an excellent saleswoman. The story is marred, however, because it was written more with an eye towards pointing up a thesis and this led the author into implausibilities of events and weak character motivation.

Through these novels Mrs. Fisher gained wide recognition with readers both in England and in her own country.

CHAPTER FOUR

MID-CHANNEL

In the latter half of the twenties Mrs. Fisher published two novels. The first of these was Her Son's Wife, and it came out in book form in 1926 after it had been serialized in the Woman's Home Companion. The second novel, written during the twenties, was published in 1930 and it is generally considered to be the author's best work of fiction. It is called The Deepening Stream. With these two works the Vermont novelist's powers of creation reached a peak of achievement.

If we make a general comparison of the kind of novel Mrs. Fisher was producing with the kind that was in vogue in the twenties, it will be seen that the Vermont writer was not following the main trends of the period.

John Dos Passos' Manhattan Transfer appeared in 1925 along with Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy and Sinclair Lewis's Arrowsmith. All of these novels, now well-known and representative of the new tendencies in the novel, were attempts to portray the American scene by using a broad canvas. These novels sought to give the reader an insight into the social and economic life on the grand scale. Similarly novels like Willa Cather's Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927) and Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward Angel (1929)

had an epic sweep in their attempts to capture a part of the American story. Other novelists sought, like Ernest Hemingway in The Sun Also Rises (1926) and A Farewell to Arms (1929), to convey the theme of complete disillusionment which was encountered in World War I.

In contrast to these themes Mrs. Fisher's two novels in the same period reveal a primary concentration on domestic life and the adjustment of character within its environment. In the latter portion of The Deepening Stream she did use the war as a source material but it did not become a major subject in her work. As one reads and compares her writing with her contemporaries it becomes quite evident that although she reflects the changing values of this period in American literature, she was nevertheless remaining essentially apart from the prevailing tendencies in American fiction.

HER SON'S WIFE

In Her Son's Wife Dorothy Canfield Fisher shifted her center of interest in character study from the relationship of husband-to-wife to that between mother and daughter-in-law. The breadth of this novel was not as great as some of the previous ones. Rather it was much more concentrated on a few characters. It is mainly the story of Mrs. John Bascomb and the changes in her character as the result of her son's marriage to Lottie Hicks.

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Mrs. Bascomb is a widow, forty-three, who teaches in a small town in northeast Pennsylvania. She is of New England stock, a Massachusetts Peabody. She appears to her colleagues as a very successful teacher with a firm discipline, but underneath she is a mixture of self-pity and of a Puritanic sense of devotion to duty. She lives in the shadow of her late husband's memory and wears a locket with his picture and the words "Character is Destiny" inscribed in it.

Mrs. Bascomb has made her only offspring, Ralph, the center of her world. She is quite shocked to receive a telegram that he has married a girl from his university town, a girl whom Mrs. Bascomb has never even heard about. When Ralph brings Lottie home, Mrs. Bascomb discovers "her son's wife" to be the essence of cheapness both in dress and manners. Her ideas about the girl seem to be confirmed when she hears that Lottie and Ralph are expecting a baby some five months after their marriage. Ralph tosses aside his plans for becoming a lawyer which was his mother's dream. Mrs. Bascomb condescends to allow the couple to remain in her house until after the baby is born. Later when Mrs. Bascomb looks into the blue eyes of little Gladys, she sees there the likeness of her dead husband's eyes. She changes her mind and allows the young people to stay for good.

Mrs. Bascomb is pushed further and further into the background of her own home. Even though Lottie has little

in the way of proper affection for her child, Mrs. Bascomb has to steal whatever opportunity she can to be near "Dids". Lottie soon begins a flirtation with a salesman and her mother-in-law decides to bide her time instead of telling her son. She believes Ralph's marriage will be broken up and she consoles herself with passages from the Old Testament which echo through her mind:

He has fallen into the ditch which he made,
His mischief shall return upon his head¹.

When Lottie one day actually walks out on Ralph and then quickly returns and is forgiven, Mrs. Bascomb is plunged into a new turmoil. She announces to Ralph that she is going to take a job in a neighboring city. The news is received quite calmly by Ralph, which is another blow to the mother's dignity. Three years go by and Mrs. Bascomb has become well-adjusted to her new environment. But one day she accidentally meets up with little Dids who is in the company of some teen-agers on a lark in the city where Mrs. Bascomb has been living. Dids is obviously being neglected by her parents. Mrs. Bascomb, her resentment against the married couple having abated, decides to return home again and to do whatever she can to help rear Dids in a better way.

She is accepted by Lottie and Ralph and she works hard at counteracting the cheapness Lottie's influence is

¹Dorothy Canfield, Her Son's Wife, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1926, p. 90.

having on the child. She succeeds in getting Dids to read and to take part in school activities. And when Lottie injures her foot slightly and begins to take pity on herself, Mrs. Bascomb sees an opportunity to further help Dids and encourages Lottie in her invalidism. She waits faithfully on Lottie but offers no encouragement that might help her regain her health. As time goes on Lottie becomes a chronic invalid. Dids, under the influence of Mrs. Bascomb, develops into a popular young girl with her schoolmates but she still retains something of her mother's attitude toward men, that they are not to be trusted but to be used. Ralph and his mother get along with each other better under the new way of living. Ralph gets a job as a sportswriter at the local paper, something that he has always been interested in.

The invalidism of Lottie actually draws the two women in the house closer together. Mrs. Bascomb realizes Lottie had a terribly poor environment as a child and that she was a "good" girl until Ralph came along. Tortured by her conscience for the way in which she has thrust Lottie aside and contributed to the invalidism, Mrs. Bascomb tries to make amends by surrounding the daughter-in-law with every comfort. But Mrs. Bascomb grows old, and worried, and worn; her only comfort is seeing Dids a success in high school and starting out for college. The end of the story presents the final irony of Mrs. Bascomb wanting to leave her home once more and

to begin a life of her own, only to find she is the only one on whom Lottie can cling for love. Mrs. Bascomb at last turns to Lottie and accepts the situation.

* * * *

In a general way, no doubt, Her Son's Wife may read like a chronicle of family relations. It stresses a character who confronts a problem, not one who leaves the problem unsolved. But the manner in which Mrs. Bascomb chose to solve the difficulty gives one pause and caused her readers and reviewers to take opposite sides on the merits of the novel.

The main point in criticism of this novel was of course the action of Mrs. Bascomb toward Lottie in what amounted to psychic murder of that weak character. After Mrs. Bascomb makes her move with Lottie, gradually it is borne in upon her that the impelling force in Lottie's life is not really sensuality but a desperate boredom. But there really is no question about the morality of Mrs. Bascomb's action. It was a serious, deliberate wrong. The question, rather, is about the characterization of Mrs. Bascomb and her final reconciliation with Lottie at the end of the novel. There is no doubt that Mrs. Bascomb suffers remorse for her action. There is, for example, a scene in which she is observed by her son, Ralph, as she washes her hands over and over again in a Lady-MacBeth manner, attempting to remove the hidden guilt. But the main point remains. How could a person such as Mrs.

Bascomb, who has such a loathing for Lottie and who actually makes an invalid out of her, turn finally to the extent of accepting a life of companionship with her? Although there is some irony and retributive justice in the situation at the end of the story, there is sufficient warrant for the charge of sentimentality in the ending of the novel, at least.

On the whole, Her Son's Wife showed a notable increase in the novelist's powers in handling the domestic theme. Mary Ross' statement in The Nation is a significant one:

There are some novelists through whose minds, like strangely colored windows, one looks into a new world. Dorothy Canfield is not one of these. Her sympathetic gaze is fixed upon the neighbors. Her power lies largely in the friendly familiarity of the people and places of her books and her skill in invoking experiences which might have been ours (. . .) She is more anxious to tell something than to say something².

In an interview with the writer of this thesis, Mrs. Fisher mentioned that the actual source idea of the novel originated from her observations of a French family when she was living in Europe. She further observed that it was surprising to her to find this book one of her more popular ones among American readers, since it more closely followed a European pattern of narrative, with its concentration of a few characters and its tightly knit plot. At any rate, the

²Mary Ross, "A Neighbor's Novel", The Nation, issued Sept. 15, 1926, Vol. 123, No. 3193, p. 249.

transference of the plot idea to an American scene and American characters did not weaken the substance of the story and proves once more the inscrutability of the transmutation of fact into fiction. Mrs. Fisher also makes good use of the new psychology, with its teaching of the close interaction of mind and body. This helps to illuminate the traditional human relationship between mother and daughter-in-law.

Occasional references in this thesis have been made of the criticisms concerning the over-abundance of detail that the author uses in her narratives. In Her Son's Wife, however, it is fair to say that there is much detail that is full and rich and that seems, for the most part, to be worked well into the theme of the novel. Furthermore, there is in this novel a good example of Mrs. Fisher's method of using a prelude, in her opening chapters, to the full orchestration of ideas and themes that will follow. In commenting on this aspect of Mrs. Fisher's work, Edward A. Post, a Boston University professor and novel critic, said of the first chapter of the book:

Ostensibly it comprises the local color in which Mary Bascomb, the teacher, is interviewing the immigrant mothers of her pupils and in which her smugness in advising these women how to order their lives according to the austere pattern of her own life, disciplined from without (. . .) by the conventional and stereotyped Puritan formula of dignity and propriety. But every precept or idea in these interviews, we meet later on as a motif in the disintegrating house of cards that Mrs. Bascomb must surrender to the winds in order to be re-made anew (. . .) on a human plane,

built structurally from within. All her neat Puritan maxims are shown to be but a lifeless fabric of reality which brings calamity upon the person who leans upon them, instead of achieving the necessary fibers of character from within. This is Dorothy Canfield's way so as to make artistic use of every detail.

Her Son's Wife was a richer book in many ways than any previous one, but it was to be surpassed in almost every respect by her next work of fiction which was written in the last years of the decade and which was published in 1930.

THE DEEPENING STREAM

The Deepening Stream is the story of Matey Gilbert from the time of her earliest memories as a child to her marriage and experiences in World War I and her return to America. Her odyssey begins when she is about four years old, and the stream of her life experience as the daughter of a professor of modern languages; as the wife of Adrian Fort, an obscure Quaker bank clerk; and finally, as a war relief volunteer in France, is narrated with a fine insight into the web of human relations.

To anyone who is familiar with the outline of Mrs. Fisher's own career, the similarity between the life of Matey, her heroine, and the author's own life is plainly perceivable. But that is only an incidental point. In the novel is found

³Edward A. Post, "Neo-Puritanism of D. C. Fisher" in The Christian Register, August 17, 1933, p. 532.

also the fullest expression of many of the fictional themes that Mrs. Fisher had expressed in her other novels and in one sense this book contains all of them in one. In this novel, too, she turned back to the War for the first time as a source of material for her fiction.

Professor Gilbert is a somewhat dramatic but ineffectual teacher whose domestic life is, on the surface, harmonious but there is, in actuality, a constant undercurrent of dissatisfaction in it. Father and mother vie with one another for supremacy in the home. Matey has an older sister, Priscilla, who, like Matey herself, senses the tension in the family life of the Gilberts. Priscilla learns how to hide her mind from the reality of the situation. She grows up shy of men and a puzzle to her sister. Matey also has a younger brother, Francis, who accepts the situation at home for what it is, ignores it, and goes his own way. Matey, who is not a very articulate person, tries to understand the problem and finally, after much groping through experiences of her own, comes to see that, although her father and mother's life was one of rivalry, there was nevertheless a bond of love between them. This was brought out at the close of Book One in the hospital death-bed scene where Matey overhears her father call for his wife's support.

Book One also contributes a rounded portrait of the social side of this faculty family. The family is kept on the

move by the father's desire to obtain a better academic position. The Gilberts have the advantage of an occasional year abroad when the professor takes a sabbatical leave. Matey is about ten years old and spends most of the time with a French family, the Vinets. She comes to know something of the value of music and books. When the difficult period of adolescence comes and Matey turns to Priscilla sometimes for understanding, her older sister either pretends that problems do not exist or evades the issues altogether. Matey goes to college and there is another period of groping for the truths that are above and beyond those of her own experience. She is able to see through the surface glitter of sophistry of some of the professors. She is nineteen, a junior in college, when the death of her father occurs which breaks up the Gilbert home.

In Book Two Matey becomes an instructor in languages and is leading a life of routine. She arrives on a vacation in the quiet village of Rustdorf on the Hudson. One purpose of her trip is to receive a small inheritance from an aunt. After Professor Gilbert's death Matey's mother joined a sisterhood of nuns. Priscilla and Francis are making their way in the professions of teaching and business.

In Rustdorf, Matey meets Adrian Fort, a young bank clerk, and a Quaker's son. He is a sober and industrious person who, although he does not follow the Quaker tenets strictly, does have a sincere moral conviction and admires

his father's way of life. Matey tries to avoid falling in love with Adrian but finally she answers "yes" in spite of the strong protests of her brother and sister. Matey and Adrian achieve an harmonious existence in the quiet village life. Matey also comes to admire Adrian's father and his philosophy. They have a common bond, too, in their love of good music. Eventually Priscilla comes to Rustdorf and also marries. Her husband is a widower with several children, and Priscilla's contract of marriage precludes the sexual side and is intended for the welfare of the children. Francis has become quite successful as a businessman and has his eyes on the steel market as the first rumbles of World War I are being heard.

In the final part of the narrative, the peacefulness of Matey's and Adrian's life is interrupted by the growing reports of the European struggle. Their thoughts turn from their new Ford car to their friends in France, although for the most part Rustdorf does not share their apprehension. Adrian's Quaker heritage deters him from actual enlistment for combat duty, but he joins a volunteer ambulance corps. Matey and her two children leave home against the wishes of relatives and friends and go to France to join with the civilians there in war relief work. Matey begins a private crusade to alleviate hardship among the French people, especially the young children.

The Forts struggle through the four long years of

war. They witness the gradual sapping of the spiritual strength of human beings, the diseases of mind and body, the disruption of families like the Vinets, the advent of Big Bertha as well as the American forces, and at last the conference at Versailles.

When the armistice came, Adrian Fort was thoroughly disillusioned about the war effort. He questions deeply his own motives. Matey is exhausted in spirit and when she goes to Versailles to visit her brother, Francis, now an influential member of the Peace Commission, she is shocked as she views the events. There was the anticipation on the part of the French women like Mme. Vinet who expected miracles from men like President Wilson whose appearance in the parade Matey describes, "a large bony college professor's face with a pleased smile on his thin lips⁴."

The Fort family returns home in quiet desperation. They find the quiet village of Rustdorf changed not at all. The bank job is waiting for Adrian. Matey picks up the strands of family friendships and tries to realize the meaning of what has happened in her life.

She tried again. She had quite missed the core of what had happened to her, the knowledge that there is no small and great, that what Adrian had planned to do with his life, the obscure anonymous helpful work to which he had resigned them was all there was,

⁴Dorothy Canfield, The Deepening Stream, New York, Random House, 1938, p. 330.

the best there was, and gloriously enough. If she could make him see it--all those anonymous millions of human lives, each with a poor flower or two--what if you could not see the golden whole! There it was, miles and miles of beauty ever renewed.

She stopped short, shuddering away from the misshapen, clumsy metaphors which were all she could find. It was unfaith to that memorable certainty of wholeness to try to put it into speech. She had no skill with words. Had she ever yet in all her married life found a single one that would tell Adrian anything of what she deeply felt? Her years with Adrian answered that question, stood before her, beckoning her on. She walked forward again. Had Adrian ever needed words to share with her all she had learned from him? The medium for the communication of the spirit is not words but life⁵.

* * * *

The Deepening Stream, like any semi-autobiographical novel, tempts the reader into the bypaths of literary detective work but the results are never quite worth the effort. It is sufficient here, it seems, to say that Mrs. Fisher is, in this novel, obviously drawing on three main areas of experience in her own life: her childhood in a faculty family, her life in the small towns of the East, and, finally, her war relief work in France from 1916-1918.

There is a passage in the novel itself which provides an interesting insight into this point about the transmutation of real life experience into the stuff of fiction. Near the end of the war Matey becomes aware of the conversion of Mimi, a member of the anti-clerical Vinet family, to the

⁵Ibid., p. 392.

Catholic Church. Matey decides she will be tolerant of Mimi's new faith but when she is faced with the situation, she realizes she never quite understood anything of Mimi's action.

In Matey's own words:

It had found nothing in her life or experience with which to combine to create understanding. It was not true that all experience made you wiser. Here was raw material of life which she had not been able to fashion into shape⁶.

The same idea may be applied to the novel as a whole. It is not a mere transposition of events from the author's life into the novel but rather a composite of her own experience with the observed experiences of others fused together into a fictional whole.

The Deepening Stream gives the reader a good chance to see most of the themes of the earlier novels worked into one story told in much broader perspective.

There is, first of all, the awareness of the family as a source of unity and strength. Contrasted with the Gilberts disunity, we have a picture of unified family relations in the French family, the Vinets. The American family drifts from college town to college town following the whim of Professor Gilbert. The undercurrent of disharmony between husband and wife results in the three children each going his own way in search of peace in their own adult lives. The Vinets, on the other hand, are still united in a spirit of

⁶Ibid., p. 348.

family solidarity even though the ravages of war have left many scars on them. Of course Matey and Adrian's family group going to Europe together and returning, is an accentuation of how important the bonds of family life are to the author.

Although Mrs. Fisher's views on the family are really merged with her ideas on education as well, it is possible to speak of the latter as a separate category. As Matey grows into maturity she realizes the great gulf between the formal education of her school training and the knowledge she has acquired through her own experiences in life. This is paralleled, too, by the great cleavage between adulthood and childhood. There is a striking scene in Part One where the carefree, after-supper play of the neighborhood children is contrasted with the wearied inactivity of the parents as they sit and watch the children. They seem too weary to be able to do anything more than sit and smoke. In such scenes as these and others, the author shows how true education is a lifelong process and should nurture a gradual growth into a richer maturity. Education does not end with youth.

The author's ideas on education are further brought out by the contrast between Matey's schooling in America and her learning with the Vinets. Matey early discovered that there were two ways of doing things--the schoolroom way and the outside-the-schoolroom way. With the Vinets, in France,

however, Matey is imbued more with a true spirit of learning. The Vinets all love music and the studies they pursue. There seemed to be a desire to do the work as perfectly as possible and not to be merely correct in one's answers.

The Deepening Stream further exemplified Mrs. Fisher's ideas on the nature of success. ⁷In an article in The Educational Forum, Professor Joseph Firebaugh points out that Matey's father and her brother represent one aspect of "successful living" whereas Matey's way of life would seem to be a more really successful one. In Firebaugh's view Mr. Gilbert is a showman interested in the plaudits of the university circle and in keeping up a surface glamour at home with his family. Like his son, Francis, he is interested in financial success and like his son, also, he has jilted a woman for selfish reasons. Professor Firebaugh also claimed that:

One of the most unsatisfactory aspects of the novel is that Matey too often sees herself as the calm, well-balanced wife and mother, bandaging the wounds of those near to her, if not those of the world itself. Her justification, and that of her husband, is in her own eyes just that they were not successful⁸.

And Mrs. Fisher responded to this statement:

I am sure that Professor Firebaugh is mistaken in saying that such a man would be considered by the

⁷Joseph J. Firebaugh, "Dorothy Canfield and the Moral Bent", in The Educational Forum, issue of March 1951, Vol. 15, p. 283.

⁸Ibid., p. 289.

usual standards a failure, because he did not make a large fortune, do business in a big city, nor have a place in the world of power. I have a higher opinion of my contemporaries (.) My intent, long continued observation of the world around me in the United States, leads me to believe that another change is taking place among a larger number of ordinary Americans as to their idea of success. The robber baron, insensitive and materialistic, out for power at no matter what cost to others, is no longer a questioned ideal.⁹

The world of power politics is portrayed in an unfavorable light. The Peace Commission, as represented by men like Matey's brother, Francis, comes to Versailles ready to cut up the world for their own selfish and vindictive reasons. This meanness of spirit is contrasted with the generous personal sacrifices of both Matey and Adrian who give both money and physical effort unselfishly. Their inheritance had been freely spent to aid the needy and when Adrian returns to his job as a small town banker again, his motive is primarily that of service to the Rustdorf community.

Professor Firebaugh comments significantly on this phase of the novel in that it reflects economic and social ideas that were coming into prominence. He says:

One may see, in this admiration for cooperation rather than competition, for service rather than exploitation, for use rather than for profit, the ideological background of the New Deal. Published in 1930 shortly after the Great Depression had begun, The Deepening Stream must have summarized for many

⁹Dorothy C. Fisher, "Mrs. Fisher Reads Professor Firebaugh", in The Educational Forum, issue of March 1951, Vol. 15, p. 298.

their deep discontent with the direction American social and economic life had taken. It summarized the period of pre-war, war, and post-war, the hope and cynicism and despair, the inescapable, pragmatic individualistic democracy of the first third of the century¹⁰.

The Deepening Stream also provides the reader with an opportunity to see to some extent Mrs. Fisher's attitude towards religion. Matey is attracted to the Quaker sect largely because she finds a unified philosophy of life in Old Adrian's quiet views and in his manner. It is at least a welcomed change from the hodge-podge of eclecticism of her university classes, which had left her somewhat sceptical of ever finding a code that would satisfy her. The bond of mutual love of music draws Matey into sympathy with Old Mr. Fort and gradually she comes to accept in principle the integration of his religion with his daily living. Matey and Young Adrian are married in the Quaker Church though neither one actually may be considered formally as members of that religion. But both Matey and Adrian sincerely respect Old Adrian's faith. And this also seems to best represent the author's own views towards religion.

The Vinet family were rabidly anti-clerical, Voltairean free-thinkers. Matey always steered a middle course when confronted with their arguments. But religion was not a dead issue at any rate. Even in their hostility towards Catholicism,

¹⁰"Dorothy Canfield and the Moral Bent", op. cit., p. 290.

there was at least a healthy air. Matey feels she will be tolerant towards Mimi Vinet's conversion to the Catholic Faith. But when she encounters this same tolerant attitude on the part of Mimi's husband, Matey "detested it". Generally speaking, however, Matey's attitude towards religion is the same as that of her father-in-law, Old Adrian, who is her spokesman on spiritual matters and who, one suspects, may also be speaking for Mrs. Fisher on this subject. Her attitude seems to be a sympathy towards all sincere beliefs.

Finally we may profitably consider the novel, The Deepening Stream, for its treatment of World War I. First of all, it is significant that this was the only novel in which Mrs. Fisher treated of the War to any considerable extent. It seemed perhaps outside her range of interests as a novelist whose main theme was the domestic life. But in this novel it helped to complete the picture of Matey's growth into maturity.

Written about ten years after the war Mrs. Fisher's novel came out at a time when there was a surfeit of war novels for the reading public, just as a decade after World War II, there are signs that the World War II novel has reached its peak and begun to decline in interest. Mrs. Fisher was, of course, presenting a different aspect of war than any of the "lost generation" writers in that she was portraying the civilian life behind the front lines. The

description of Paris under bombardment, Matey's attempts to thwart the vagaries of bureaucratic relief organizations, the care of the widows and orphans, and the arrival of the American troops are all handled, it seems, with a fairer and saner approximation to the reality of the events than any similar book that was written within that distance of the war itself.

Here is the statement of a critic who had also been in France under the circumstances Mrs. Fisher described:

Here is a chapter of war history that not many Americans knew even in France; the conflicting shame and pride at one's countrymen as their wealth and vitality poured in to help the French civilians-- often only to help, sometimes to betray and mortify; the pitiful trust of the French that a young and unwounded nation would somehow bring light out of the shambles of the old order; the struggle to keep one's own understanding clear for sympathy without falling into sterile vindictiveness or a shallow debauch of emotion¹¹.

Several years after her novel was published, the author commented directly on the feeling of disillusionment that she had created in her chief characters.

When at the disillusioning end of the war, they return home to their unchanged old home, it is in despair. Now, it seems to them, that their sacrifice has been for nothing, that humanity is not worth sacrifices, is worth nothing.

As a rule despair is tragically a solitary horror. But this husband and wife have grown so near to each other in spirit, have so earned on each side, a complete confidence in the deepest of the other's

¹¹Terence Terwilliger, "Satisfaction in Honesty", book review in the New York Herald Tribune, issue of October 12, 1930.

nature, that they are united not divided by disaster. They face despair together, not alone¹².

But the book does not end on a note of despair. The following passage better sums up Matey's final attitude:

That the war had not shaken the bases of human life, but had only made them visible; that human beings die tragically, having no more time left to repair their mistakes, but that their deep rooted race goes on into new springtimes; that to have missed for a time the right path and to be lost in a by-path is no ground for terror; that the only danger lies in thinking one's own life is all, in not seeing the vastness of which it is a part¹³.

All in all The Deepening Stream seems the most successful novel of Mrs. Fisher. In it she achieved a full and realistic character portrayal of Matey Gilbert and through her story catches realistically, too, much of the Zeitgeist of the era. And through it all runs a characteristic human warmth and understanding. In this novel Dorothy Canfield's own stream also had deepened perceptibly.

Summary

In this chapter it has been pointed out that the author's powers as a novelist developed to their highest point with the publication of two novels written during the twenties.

¹²The Educational Forum, op. cit., p. 298.

¹³The Deepening Stream, op. cit., p. 391-392.

Her Son's Wife presented more concentrated plot construction, limiting the action and the characters to three main persons. It followed the typical European rather than the English pattern of the novel. Furthermore it was a deviation from her stress on the communal life of the village which was more in evidence in her earlier work.

The action of the narrative, in which the grandmother makes an invalid out of her daughter-in-law in order to bring up the granddaughter better, brought up the question of the author's treatment of morality in fiction. It was concluded that there is some basis for the charge of sentimentality in the ending of the story when the grandmother accepts the invalid into a close relation of friendship. The reader is left with the feeling that the severity of Mrs. Bascomb's evil action and her earlier intense feeling against Lottie is not consistent with the final outcome.

However, Her Son's Wife is in other aspects the best work of Mrs. Fisher up to that date. For example, there is its well-orchestrated handling of several themes.

In The Deepening Stream, Mrs. Fisher's powers as a novelist are seen at their fullest development. The story of Matey Gilbert's growth into maturity is presented. The reader, through the consciousness of the main character, discovers the underlying significance in the events that form a pattern in her life.

In her handling of the World War I material, the author stands apart from the other writers of the twenties who used the war as source material for their novels. Her war scenes, which deal primarily with the civilian, are treated graphically yet realistically. Her attitude toward the conflict and its aftermath, as seen through the eyes of Matey, seems like an honest attempt to evaluate the tremendous change that occurred in the nation's shift from its pre-war smugness in ignorance to the perplexities of post-war disillusionment. The final acceptance of the situation, as seen in the return of the Forts to their home to pick up the thread of their lives and their humble occupations, indicates the positive acceptance of man's human frailty.

This novel also includes many minor themes. The bond of family unity is stressed. Education is seen not as a narrow or formal process but as an organic growth in a human being as a result of all the activities of life itself. Success is measured by an honest adjustment of one's capacities to his situation and environment rather than by his financial status. The novelist's attitude to religion is seen as one of generous tolerance of the faith of others and acceptance of the frailty of human nature, and at the same time, a confidence in its capabilities.

After The Deepening Stream, Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote two more novels, neither of which surpassed this one.

CHAPTER FIVE

A FURTHER RANGE

With the publication of Bonfire (1933) and Seasoned Timber (1939), Dorothy Canfield Fisher brought to a close her work in the field of the modern novel. These two stories may be considered together in this chapter because they represent a further range in Mrs. Fisher's fictional subject matter and methods. An analysis of these two stories will reveal that the author did not place her usual emphasis on the individual person and his adjustment to his family and his environment. But instead she began to show a concern more for the problems of the whole community. Furthermore, there is exhibited in her fictional methods more similarity to some of the experimental techniques that were being introduced in the fiction of the period. Both these tendencies in her last two novels point up the fact that Mrs. Fisher was continuing to grow as a realistic novelist even at the end of her career.

BONFIRE

Once again in Bonfire Mrs. Fisher chooses a quiet New England village as the locale for her story. The focus at first is on Miss Anna Craft, the city nurse, and her brother, Dr. Anson Craft, whom she has helped to put through medical school. Like most of the characters in this story,

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the Crafts are people whose roots extend many generations back into the life of this community of Clifford. Dr. Craft is quite rebellious and sullen in comparison to his sister who shows too much dedication to her duties in aiding the less fortunate members of the village. Dr. Craft seems to resent, almost hate, his sister for the sacrifices she has made so that he might become a doctor.

Clifford, like towns of much larger proportions, also has its social strata. The more disreputable families of the community live in an adjacent area up on the mountainside, called Searles Shelf. From this region comes Lixlee, the character after whom the novel is symbolically titled. Although Lixlee at first displays a quietness and adaptability to the people of Clifford after Miss Anna had rescued her from the lawless settlement, it is not long before she inflames anyone in the town with whom she comes in contact.

The core of the story centers in the marriage of young Dr. Anson Craft to an illiterate, but wildly appealing, waif, Lixlee from Searles Shelf. Their engagement begins under quite scandalous circumstances when Dr. Craft, who has secretly been seeing Lixlee, fights off another lover and both he and Lixlee are wounded by gunshot. They marry in the hospital while Dr. Craft is recovering.

Dr. Craft had also offended the town's sensibilities with his former high-brow attitudes but much is forgiven him

because he is an excellent doctor. For a brief period Dr. Craft is made tremendously happy by his exotic wife. He revels in her unspoiled nature which seems only to live for love. This situation comes to an abrupt end, when, one evening while they were in the midst of making love, Dr. Craft receives an emergency call. When he tries to postpone the love-making, Lixlee makes an issue of the occasion and warns him that if he leaves her: "You can't treat me like dirt and get away with it. I warn you! I warn you!"¹

This act of Dr. Craft's really sets off the Bonfire which scorches many and affects practically the whole life of the village. Lixlee begins, however quietly, to play around with almost every man she has an association with, starting by having an affair with her neighbor's young husband. Dr. Craft's suspicions are aroused only very slowly as his mind is absorbed in the work of compiling medical data on angina patients. The records are most valuable because he has the opportunity to use his father's and his grandfather's notes on the same families accumulated over a long period. His secret ambition is to make an important contribution to medical research.

An important sub-plot enters the story at this point. Father Fred Kirby is the mild-mannered and inoffensive Episcopal clergyman who is handicapped by an inferiority complex

¹Dorothy C. Fisher, Bonfire, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1933, p. 212.

resulting from a facial disfigurement. He really is in love with Miss Anna Craft but considers himself too disfigured to offer her a normal marital relationship. Father Kirby is sensitive also to Miss Anna's absorption in her brother's career. Meanwhile there is growing unhappiness in Dr. Craft's domestic life.

Like a bonfire that gets out of hand and eats up the timber and all the property around it, Lixlee turns from her husband and carries on one affair after another with the men in the town. Before she is through with Clifford, the "Bonfire" leaves scarcely a life that has not been changed by her actions.

There is dapper old Mr. Lawrence Stewart, the town's richest and much-traveled bachelor. He lives all alone in his big colonial mansion except for his cat, Henrietta. In the final phase of the story Old Stewart, about sixty-five, takes on the role of saviour for Lixlee whom he believes is mistreated, and they elope to France leaving the town to clean up after the searing ravages of Lixlee.

After presenting Lixlee as the most colorful and dominating character of the book, the author seems to dismiss her at this point with the implication, at least, that she was not worth pursuing to France.

The story ends with Miss Anna Craft's life being saved from boredom by her marriage to Father Fred Kirby and

Dr. Anson Craft gets a consolation prize in Isabelle Foote, a young girl who had been secretly in love with him and who stands by him during his dejection after his wife's behavior.

Bonfire, which is one of Mrs. Fisher's longest works of fiction, stands in rather a striking contrast to all of her previous novels, both in its scope and subject matter and in its fictional method.

Up to this novel Mrs. Fisher had based her stories on certain fundamental generalizations about life, primarily an inherent belief in the fundamental goodness of the human individual in a pattern of normal development, an acceptance of and adjustment to one's environment, and the rewards resulting from this mode of experience. But Bonfire showed a distinct departure from this motif.

First of all, in its scope the story is drawn along much broader lines than any other. We see the small Vermont village not merely through the eyes of one person or family unit but more in its whole complexity and extending its roots back into the past. This novel is much more crowded with village characters who are more fully drawn and are a definite part of the story.

Just as Dr. Craft's medical practice is important because it enables him to review the case histories of his father's and grandfather's angina patients, so it seems that the novelist, too, is here symbolizing Clifford as a sort of

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human clinical laboratory where one can see the native homo Americanus in perspective.

The flow of the narrative is also conducted along more rapid lines and the story is more episodic in construction as the vicissitudes of Lixlee's career are presented.

In giving her readers the strange creature Lixlee, whose primitiveness and half-savage behavior hold a spell over all the men she meets in Clifford, Mrs. Fisher certainly was making a departure from the kind of main character that she was in the habit of creating. Lixlee's type has a definite appeal as a character. She is understandable in a type of village girl who comes from an extremely impoverished, large family. She has a strange sex appeal resulting partly, at least, from a cast in one of her eyes.

But when Lixlee lifted her head and, fixing her eyes on the nurse's, began to tell the story of her troubles, Miss Craft found her own gaze caught by what seemed a very slight cast in one or the other of the girl's dark eyes. Was it the left or the right one that had just a hint (. . .)? No, no, it was not a cast, perhaps the way the light fell. She leaned closer to see more clearly, decided it was nothing at all, caught again a faint hint of something oblique, leaned closer yet, till her own gaze drowned in the swimming darkness of the girl's velvet eyes (.)

A little later Miss Anna Craft came to the conclusion that the girl's a man-eater. One of the natural-born sirens. She all but got me going².

Whatever the intention of the author may have been, Lixlee completely dominates the greater portion of this long

²Ibid., p. 42.

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novel. And there is no doubt that she exercises the greatest influence on the lives of the other people in the novel. However, as Professor Wagenknecht puts it: "There is some room for difference of opinion concerning the complete reality of this woman³."

For one thing most of her escapades are reported in an off-stage manner. The early marital love scenes with Dr. Craft are the only main episodes that are not handled obliquely. But even if the reader considers that Lixlee is not altogether convincing as a fictional personality, she is certainly interesting enough in relationship to the villagers. It is in this aspect of the story, the effects of an evil person on the lives of others, that makes Bonfire so different than any other Canfield novel. There is not the slightest attempt to point up a moral or to propagandize a thesis in any way. When, at the end of the book, the "Bonfire" has left the village, the ones who have been scarred by her passage salve their wounds and pick up their lives from there. The final line of the novel punctuates this idea as Miss Anna is asked by her friend:

"What does life teach a person, Anna?"

"Oh, Cora, I can't make up my mind just what, just what," said Anna⁴.

³Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel, New York, Holt, 1952, p. 298.

⁴Bonfire, op. cit., p. 408.

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But what makes Bonfire the most modern of Mrs. Fisher's novels is its general fictional technique or method. The opening paragraphs, for example, resemble in style many more contemporary novels in the handling of natural background, especially in the occasional juxtaposition of lower animal life with human life in the story.

The proud skyline of the Wall was slowly drawn across the darkness, at first faintly in gray on gray, and then in transparent blue on gold. The planet that had been lording it in fire-color paled and dyed in the dazzle of white light which suddenly laid a high ceiling of brightness from the Wall to Hemlock Mountain. Down below this the Valley was still twilight dim; but the wildlife which, unsuspected of all save the Clifford dogs, nightly hunted and fed back and forth across the fields claimed by man, began a hurried retreat. Along paths well-known to them rabbits sauntered back to the brush and brambles of old clearings. Woodchucks ambled to the mouths of their holes. A deer floated like thistle down across a newly plowed field and up a wood road⁵.

At brief intervals in the story Mrs. Fisher returns to nature passages and makes special use of Mr. Stewart's cat, Henrietta, to set off the events of the story. Edward Wagenknecht defends the novelist in this experimentation.

The passages in Bonfire which are written from the point of view of Henrietta, the cat, have been denounced as nature-faking! This surely is to display a painfully defective sense of humor. The passages in question are consciously whimsical; they are done with great skill; and they form a playful and effective contrast to the realistic body of the book⁶.

⁵Ibid., p. 1.

⁶Cavalcade of the American Novel, op. cit., p. 298.

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Bonfire received almost uniformly good reviews when it first came out, including praise such as this from the New York Times:

Woven with great skill and adorned with more wit and shrewdness than Dorothy Canfield has ever before called into play, this chronicle of a Vermont village is a rich and vital story. Not the least of its charm--for the realism of Bonfire has been tempered with loveliness--lies in the sense of unity evoked by the descriptions of the Vermont countrysides, the quiet surrounding mountains, the ancient woods, the green upland pastures. In the passages inspired by her love for this native scene, Dorothy Canfield has written some of her most satisfying, and one thinks, her most enduring prose⁷.

Seasoned Timber

Six years, the longest interval between any of Mrs. Fisher's novels, elapsed between the writing of Bonfire and Seasoned Timber. The latter novel was being written during the hectic period that preceded World War II and its center of interest is in the fight that a small Vermont town puts up against a fascistic movement in its midst in the form of anti-Semitism.

The depression years, reflected in American literature by the proletarian novel, had never been the subject matter for any Canfield novel. But in her final work in the form of fiction, Mrs. Fisher combined her interest in her beloved Vermont with her awareness of world social and

⁷"Dorothy Canfield's Bonfire", in New York Times book review, issue of October 15, 1933, p. 8.

political problems. In 1936 Sinclair Lewis had written his widely-read novel of Fascism in America called It Can't Happen Here. Mr. Lewis had placed the scene of this novel in Vermont and after showing how Fascism might gain its foothold in America, he portrayed a fighting Vermont editor being unsuccessful in his attempt to fight it off. It is more than probable that Mrs. Fisher once again had Sinclair Lewis in mind when she wrote Seasoned Timber which shows a quite different kind of Vermont reaction in the fight against Fascism.

The setting for Seasoned Timber is the same as the previous novel Bonfire, the small town of Clifford, Vermont. However, none of the main characters of the new novel are borrowed from Bonfire. Occasionally, the reader gets another glimpse of somebody like Dr. Craft, his sister, Anna, and Rev. Kirby.

Timothy Hulme is the main character of the story. He is the energetic, hard-working principal of Clifford Academy which is one of those part-public, part-private New England schools with a hundred year tradition and not much more in the way of financial aid to keep it in existence. Timothy is forty-five, a widower, and lives with his eccentric Aunt Lavinia. His first marriage was not a very fortunate one and it ended early with his wife's death. His devotion to Lavinia, who had left her own husband to care for him and his brother when they were orphaned, precludes any further romance for him.

But Professor Hulme finds himself falling in love with Susan Barney, a girl of twenty-four, who comes to the Academy to teach in the primary grades. Timothy's affection for young Susan grows into a full-fledged love. Since he is a man of sensibility he does not take advantage of the young woman's inexperience by urging his suit. For her part, Susan greatly admires the learned and kindly professor and her esteem is not without some real affection.

Bit by bit, the reader becomes acquainted with a complete gallery of the Clifford townsfolk in this novel which is richer than any previous one for the diversity of character portrayal. There is old Mr. Dewey, a trustee of the school and a rugged individualist of typical Vermont vintage. Also there is Eli Kemp, an industrious boy, who is a born money-maker and who has a great amount of Yankee ingenuity. Canby Hunter, who comes into the story at mid-point, is Timothy's nephew and a rival for Susan. Canby is a young man of his own time who, of course, can offer Susan all the vigor of youth which Timothy cannot. Besides these there are many others that enliven the book.

Timothy's secret love for Susan makes up the whole first half of the novel, but plays a lesser part in the rest of the narration. It assumes a secondary place in the story when the Vermont community faces an invasion of Fascism in the form of a million dollar gift to the Academy that carries

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the stipulation that no more children of Jewish blood may be admitted to Clifford Academy.

Mr. Wheaton, a millionaire Wall Street investment man, is one of the three members of the Academy's board of trustees. He is a mid-westerner with some fancy ideas about building up the school by making it more exclusive, and he also nurses a grievance against the Jewish race. When Timothy accepts a maladjusted New York Jewish boy as a student, old Mr. Wheaton bursts into a tirade about Americanism. As Timothy listens to Wheaton talk, he thinks of the power such men have in the modern world.

There was no counting the number of noble enterprises put into Mr. Wheaton's power by money, like a club in his fist to beat down fineness and delicacy of feeling whenever he caught sight of them⁸.

The crisis is brought on by the death of old Wheaton and the publication of his will, leaving the million dollars to the school. Under provisions of the will, tuition would be increased to give the school "prestige", thus closing its doors actually to many of the town children.

Timothy Hulme and Mr. Dewey, the old-fashioned trustee, are shocked, fearful lest the money be too much for the voters of the town to refuse. Timothy announces that if the bequest is accepted, he will resign.

⁸Dorothy C. Fisher, Seasoned Timber, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1939, p. 156.

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The town begins to gird itself for the approaching battle. A two-month campaign begins. The opposition is led by the young Yale graduate who is teaching social studies at the Academy. He claims that Timothy is holding back progress by clinging too rigidly to an absolute principle that is questionable anyway. The taciturn Vermonters conceal their true convictions until election day, which provides the climax of the novel.

The various shades of opinion on the matter are neatly and expertly brought forth. The wearied campaigners are themselves surprised when an overwhelming verdict is registered against Wheaton's millions.

Things settle back to normal but the problem of keeping the old Academy going remains a tough job for Timothy. But a scheme for running a cooperative school bus program, suggested by young Eli Kemp, proves practicable and the Academy is able to keep on an even keel, at least, and even a few improvements are added.

Susan marries Canby and the novel concludes with a picture of life beginning anew for Timothy Hulme. The final result of his affection for Susan is his realization that there are many different kinds of love in the world and all are important.

"Well, Canby, when you've lived as long as I, one of the things you find out is that there are all

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kinds of love. A person has to find that out for himself. Nobody ever lets on that it's so. But it is⁹."

* * * *

Mrs. Fisher's title, *Seasoned Timber*, is reminiscent of George Herbert's beautiful lyric poem but the resemblances between the impressions of the novel and the poem are quite different. The story of lost love of an older man for a girl twenty years his junior, combined with another conflict over intellectual freedom in the community, may not seem, on the face of it, very capable of being fused into one harmonious whole. However, Mrs. Canfield's narrative skill is here used to good effect and her insight into the New England character and the rhythms of New England town life is nowhere better seen in any of her novels.

When we come to know, about midway in the novel, that Timothy Hulme's May and January romance is fated to end unsuccessfully, there is a tendency to expect the rest of the going will be all down hill. But the issue of the Academy bequest is not merely brought into the novel as an added attraction. All the way along there have been rumblings about the times being out of joint and when the crisis finally comes, Timothy's energies are transferred to the new struggle, while young Canby becomes the successful suitor to Susan Barney.

⁹Ibid., p. 480.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that Mrs. Fisher is merely portraying the Vermont scene in Seasoned Timber. A fellow novelist and a highly respected craftsman in the art, J. P. Marquand, reviewed the book in the Saturday Review of Literature and praised it for its more-than-provincial appeal.

If this is not one of the author's best books, the fault lies more with her subject than with her artistic ability. Somehow it is very difficult to put the life of a school into fiction, perhaps because all its details are so far removed from the average reader's world. Indeed, when one considers the handicap of Mr. Hulme's school, it is remarkable that Seasoned Timber ends by being a well-rounded piece of work (. . .) Through all its pages, world events call with a present day insistence, so that even a provincial town must face them, and Miss Canfield has finally brought her New England into the current of a changing time¹⁰.

It would seem that rather than showing a decline in her powers at the close of her career as a novelist, that Mrs. Fisher, rather, was attempting at least a further range and expansion of her fictional horizons.

In fictional techniques Mrs. Fisher continued to experiment as she had done in Bonfire. There is, however, one rather obvious limitation to her style in this last novel and some of her reviewers made mention of it, particularly John Mair, writing in The New Statesman and Nation, comments on her excessive use of metaphor in describing the introspections of Timothy Hulme's mind:

¹⁰John P. Marquand, "The Freedom of the Mind", in the Saturday Review of Literature, issue of March 4, 1939, Vol. 19, No. 19, p. 5.

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She apparently regards the intellect much as ascetics do the body--that is, as an instrument, indispensable, no doubt, but detached from the personality--and gives Timothy's mind a metaphorical life of its own. We are told that his mind "whipped out of its scabbard a rapier-like question, and, when he hesitated, lunged and ran him through" (. . .) Sometimes this volatile creature is in an equine mood, and we read that "Mr. Hulme's mind, trotting soberly in harness, pricked up its ears and took an exploratory look around." On another occasion it behaved like a dog and "came bounding up with a colorful hypothesis (. . .) pawed wildly about among the phrases experience had taught him"¹¹.

The foregoing exaggerated metaphors are properly criticized by Mr. Mair. But, in fairness to the author, he also puts these criticisms in their proper perspective because they were a kind of stylistic experimentation.

Miss Canfield is not a blundering amateur, but a writer of experience and repute, and her present book shows high qualities of narrative and observation. The truth is, I believe, that she is free from all self-restraint in performing what others only consider. Such lack of literary inhibition seems a common peculiarity of American writers; Faulkner possesses it about style, Hemingway about flat conversations, and Mr. Kraus and his peers about natural imagery. Perhaps it is really a good symptom in a national literature. We have to endure the Dekkers to get the Donnes¹².

Summary

In this chapter the last two novels that were written by Dorothy Canfield Fisher are analyzed.

¹¹John Mair, "Current Literature", in The New Statesman and Nation, issue of July 15, 1939, Vol. 18, No. 438 (new series), p. 90.

¹²Ibid., p. 90.

Bonfire, published in 1933, is unusual among the novels of the author because it deals with a rather worthless heroine, Lixlee, who is a product of a backwoods area of Vermont and portrays how this hyper-sexed individual marries the village doctor and brings havoc not only into his life, but also into the life of the townsfolk. The material of the novel is treated very realistically, however, and it is to the credit of the author as a realistic novelist that she was able to handle such a story which ran contrary to her usual theme of Vermont village life. The novel showed also a trend toward her growing interest in community affairs since the book predominantly concerns the effect that this woman had on the entire community life as a whole.

Seasoned Timber was the last novel to come from the pen of Mrs. Fisher. It was a very popular book and received the Book-of-the-Month Club selection in 1939.

Once again the setting was the small village of Clifford, the same locale as Bonfire. The story has an educational background in large measure, centering around the town's Academy which becomes the center of controversy involving the whole town in a struggle to prevent fascism in the form of anti-semitism from entering into Vermont life. The story line is a little weak because the plot tends to shift from a love story between middle-aged Timothy Hulme, the schoolmaster, and Susan Barney, one of the young teachers,

to a conflict involving the school itself and whether it will remain a symbol of American freedom and keep its doors open to young Jewish students at the cost of forfeiting a million dollar grant.

Just as in Bonfire, therefore, this novel reveals the author placing a stress on a communal problem and traces its effects on all the people of the community. Even further, Mrs. Fisher was undoubtedly symbolizing the wider inroads that incipient fascism was making, not only in Europe but in the rest of the world as well. Clearly the novelist stands on the side of individual freedom and was opposing the growth of fascism wherever it appeared and under whatever guise. But in doing so, she remains a realistic novelist as is evidenced in her characterization of the hero, Timothy Hulme. She makes him a rather weak but none the less heroic character. In the words of E. Wagenknecht:

If the fight for democracy is ever to be won in America, she seems to be saying, it is petty, amusing, heroic people like ourselves who must win it¹³.

The fictional style of both Bonfire and Seasoned Timber shows clearly that at the close of her career Dorothy Canfield Fisher was experimenting quite successfully with new techniques and material and at the same time maintaining a realistic approach to fiction.

¹³Cavalcade of the American Novel, op. cit., p. 299.

CHAPTER SIX

PLOT, CHARACTER AND THEME

In the foregoing chapters an attempt has been made to analyze critically all of the novels of the author in order to show her development as a writer of fiction, to examine her main themes, and to see the reaction of the critics to her achievement. Before proceeding to try more particularly to ascertain the relation and contribution of Mrs. Fisher to the growth of realism in American fiction, it is helpful at this point to sum up, under the headings of Plot, Character, and Theme, the general characteristics of the author. This will provide a clearer knowledge of her work and a framework with which to compare her with some of her contemporaries.

It is perhaps most appropriate to speak, first of all, of the general range of the novelist. It becomes quite clear after close reading and rereading of these novels that Dorothy Canfield Fisher chose to write about a limited sphere of human life. Geographically, this area of life was not so limited as was for example that of Jane Austin who never traveled much beyond her small town and wrote of the parsonage. Mrs. Fisher was fortunate in that by her birth she was free to pursue her talents as a writer and travel rather extensively. She was well-acquainted with European civilization and especially France. Although the observation is sometimes

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made that she is a regional novelist, this is inaccurate to a great extent.

¹The term range in this chapter is being used in the sense which the well-known English critic of the novel, Lord David Cecil, has developed it, namely, that part of the author's experience which can be best transmuted into fiction. Each writer has his range both as a person as well as an artist. For example, Mrs. Fisher, being a woman first, desired to lead a normal career as a mother and homemaker and therefore chose deliberately to live a more or less restricted life in the sense that even her many interests in public affairs were primarily sprung from her associations with family life and its problems. And consequently, it is safe to say that her fictional range is largely drawn from the area of domestic life. This does not mean that she would have been incapable of handling other fictional materials had her life been planned differently. Her interest in educational matters and her portrayal of university faculty life stems from the direct contacts with these experiences in her earlier life. She helps explain this point in an article which she contributed to a symposium on the creative process:

¹This idea is developed in many of Cecil's critical writings, a good example of which is Early Victorian Novelists, Bobbs Merrill Co., New York, 1935, p. 342.

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Personally, although I never used as material any events in my own intimate life, I can write nothing if I cannot achieve these very definite, very complete visualizations of the scenes; which means that I can write nothing at all about places, people or phases of life which I do not intimately know, down to the last detail. If my life depended on it, it does not seem to me I could possibly write a story about Siberian hunters or East side factory hands without having lived long among them².

Therefore, it is of course only fair to criticize Mrs. Fisher in this thesis only within the boundaries of what she attempted and within that scope to try to discover what were her failures and what were her successes as an artist, knowing beforehand that every novelist has his own limitations.

PLOT

It should be observed first of all that Mrs. Fisher wrote the greater number of her novels as serial stories for popular women's magazines before she had them published in novel form. It has been noted already in this thesis on some occasions that this probably led to imperfections in the ending of some novels. For example, in Her Son's Wife it seems that the introduction into the story, near the very end, of Lottie's father as an object for Mrs. Bascomb's sympathy was quite extraneous and tended only to pad out the story for another installment.

²Dorothy C. Fisher, "How Flint and Fire Started and Grew", The Creative Process, University of California Press, 1952, edited by Brewster Ghiselin, p. 179.

But what about the quality of her stories when it comes to the basic considerations of suspense and logically developed plot?

When it is observed that the range of Mrs. Fisher's novels is limited to an area of life that is primarily domestic, it should be understood that she is first of all not a writer of hair-raising action stories. Her plots are shaped somewhat by the material she uses. Her heroes are mostly feminine and this in turn tends to limit the scope of the action in her stories. On the other hand she has from the beginning exhibited a natural ability for narrative in the most fundamental sense of having a regard for what happens next. She weaves the pattern of her stories in a smooth flow of incident and complication from the beginning situation. Here again her natural ability in narrative along these lines was heightened by the actual practice of writing for serial publication.

As for the sources of her plots, it becomes apparent after the reading of her novels that she does not seem to be borrowing from any preconceived story lines. It would be more accurate to say that she couples lifelong observation of the behavior of people in her own class with a keen insight into the tradition of her countryside with its folkways and its legends. ³Sometimes she takes an actual situation

³In an interview with the author in May, 1955, Mrs. Fisher revealed this information.

she has observed, such as the mother-in-law involvement in Her Son's Wife. In other stories she seems more the natural spinner of yarns, for example in Seasoned Timber where the exploits of Timothy Hulme and the Vermont Academy appear to be the product of her own inventiveness, her own instinctiveness for creation of a story plot.

Thus, primarily, she uses the raw material of actually observed experience to transmute into the fabric of her fiction and this contributes to her realism.

The plots of Mrs. Fisher's novels usually present one main character whose struggle is fundamentally an emotional one with a series of involvements in which the character, usually a woman, develops a pattern of adjustment and reaches a successful resolution of the conflict. Her cast of supporting characters is not usually very large. Quite often, the main characters are the husband and wife (always with a few children) who face some problem of marital adjustment. Sometimes it is a third party in the love triangle; more often it is more of a conflict of social adjustment to community life. The Squirrel Cage and The Brimming Cup are examples of the former type; The Bent Twig, Rough Hewn, and The Deepening Stream are examples of the latter kind.

None of the novels can really be termed complicated in plot. Sub-plots are the exception rather than the rule. Incident seems to grow naturally out of incident until there is a complete unfolding of the action.

The point of view of most of the Canfield novels is that of the third person, omniscient method. That is, Mrs. Fisher chose to tell her stories in an objective manner. This seems an appropriate way of getting her stories told, for the most part, because her main concern is with the over-all process of life and growth and this is perhaps better narrated by the objective or omniscient method. Her use of the omniscient point of view varies, of course, with each particular story she has to tell. Like a true artist she considers each story a unique problem in presentation.

No two of my stories are ever constructed in the same way, but broadly viewed they all have the same genesis, and I confess I cannot conceive of any creative fiction written from any other beginning (. . .) that of a generally intensified emotional sensibility, such as every human being experiences with more or less frequency⁴.

To clarify further her use of the third person or omniscient point of view it may be observed that she generally limits the focus of narration to a central character or to the consciousness of the main character. She does not make use of the stream-of-consciousness technique as such but quite often she enters into the minds of her characters by way of interpreting to us their thoughts and feelings.

It would not be correct, however, to say that Mrs. Fisher did not experiment on the use of point of view in narration. For example, her fourth book, The Brimming Cup,

⁴Creative Process, op. cit., p. 174.

was an interesting attempt as a roving narration or rotating point of view, involving a half a dozen major and minor characters, always though, with primary emphasis on the heroine, Marise. This experiment failed in part because the author does not create sufficient interest in those characters like Vincent Marsh with whom she is not sympathetic.

Rough Hewn was a further experiment in the technique of narrative point of view. She describes the lives of the hero and heroine in separate alternating blocks of narration, leading up to their final mating at the end of the book. And in this experiment her efforts were more successful.

Later novels such as Her Son's Wife and The Deepening Stream tend to show by their contrast the variety in structure of which she is capable. The former book shows a rather tightly knit plot, with only three closely related characters and follows a rather strict pattern of unity and development. The latter novel is an altogether loosely constructed story which follows the development of the early life of the heroine and roves freely in respect to characters and incidents and setting.

One major adverse criticism in regard to plot structure which seems to be rather generally made of Mrs. Fisher's novels is that they sometimes "break" in the middle or towards the end. Both The Deepening Stream and Seasoned Timber would serve to illustrate this point. Matey Gilbert's life story

wanes in interest with the introduction of the long episode of World War I. Even though this narration in itself is interesting, somehow, it fails to unite with the rest of the book. Likewise, in Seasoned Timber the latter portion of the book dealing with the fight on the part of the town to save the Academy seems grafted on to the original main plot of Timothy Hulme's romance. In regard to this point Edward Wagenknecht states:

Her principal limitations are a style which, though always competent, is never really characteristic or distinguished, and the fact that (in spite of her specialist's knowledge of French literature), she has never really learned selectivity. Nearly all her novels are too long. Characteristically, she always wins the reader's absorbed attention in the first third of her narrative and then proceeds to bury him under masses of detail⁵.

Dorothy Canfield herself was aware particularly of the problem of detail even though she may never have been quite successful in solving it. She remarked in a letter to Miss Atwater:

Every detail has significance in life but in writing, millions of them have to be left out. For me, the elimination of them is the real problem. The details cluster so thickly in my mind, I can never understand those authors who need to "study up" a subject and keep notebooks about the details. What I need is to throw away most of what fills the notebook of my memory⁶.

⁵E. Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel, New York, Holt, 1952, p. 294.

⁶Personal correspondence of D. C. Fisher, Letter to Miss Atwater, dated May 1, 1935.

The above quotation supplies the key perhaps to many aspects of Mrs. Fisher's fiction. For her, each piece of writing was almost literally an organic whole. Every sentence was written out of the one preceding it. Consequently, one scene merges with another, one detail with another until the whole is created. For this reason the climax in her stories is not simply or distinctly achieved but rather it is the process of gradual unfolding or development usually of the character and subsequently gradual solution of the conflict.

In this regard her novels may be contrasted sharply with those of her close friend and fellow novelist, Willa Cather, who advocated the "novel demeuble", which presented suggestive detail very sparsely, simply touched it and went on. "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there--that, it seems to me, is created⁷."

Thus in the matter of plot, Mrs. Fisher always gives the reader a plausible, realistic narrative but sometimes fails to satisfy the requirements of the "well-made" novel that some modern critics speak about, even though one of her earlier models was Henry James whose influence is seen in the early writing of several of the feminine novelists of this period, such as Willa Cather, Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow.

⁷Willa Cather, "The Novel Demeuble", reprinted in Modern Essays, edited by Christopher Morley, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1924, p. 292.

In general it might be said that in the problem of structure as with other problems in fiction, Mrs. Fisher is more concerned with trying to get at life than she is concerned with the art of the novel. For her, art was but one part of her life, but by no means is it allowed to usurp all of it. Here again she would seem to be almost diametrically opposed to the attitude toward fiction of Willa Cather and others.

SETTING

Before proceeding to an analysis of Mrs. Fisher's use of characterization, it might be well to consider briefly at this point her use of setting. Here the term is used both in the sense of physical environment and location and what they generally may contribute to the story.

Mrs. Fisher in the bulk of her fiction deals with the small village of New England. Her fiction does not seem to accentuate the natural landscape but rather merges it with her treatment of the characters and their actions. One is never made too conscious of the effect that the setting has upon the characters except in the sense in which Thomas Hardy, for example, makes you aware of it. Landscape in her novels is a background for the action, never a determinant of the action. Evidence enough, again, that Mrs. Fisher is not merely a regional novelist is seen in the way in which she

can handle setting in those parts of her novels that deal with Italy and France. For example, in The Deepening Stream she describes Matey and her brother and sister on a trip in the Pyrenees in southern France.

She turned her head from one side to the other to look at the prickly stiff green bushes. Like rough sprangling branched little trees they were, millions of them, every one separate. How different genet looked when you saw it through the window of Dominique's house in Biriadou, the smooth carpet of its yellow blossoms laid like seamless silk, fitted to every roll and shoulder of the hills. You wanted to lean out from the window and stroke your hand over a mile or two of that soft gold⁸.

She is of course aware of the subtle influence that environment may have on human character. For instance, in Bonfire, she delineates very well the difference between the backward Searles Shelf people whose habits are ingrained and fostered, in a sense, by the very barrenness of the cliff area where they reside, and those who dwell in the more fertile valley.

CHARACTERIZATION

It is significant to apply the idea of range also to Mrs. Fisher's powers in characterization, the ingredient known to be an essential one for a good writer of fiction. To begin with, her cast of characters is drawn from the middle or lower-middle class social strata and they range

⁸Dorothy Canfield, The Deepening Stream, New York, Random House, 1938, p. 5.

downward rather than upward. These areas furnish the raw materials from which she chooses to build her characters.

If the question is asked whether Mrs. Fisher portrays her characters more from direct observation of experience, or from reading and her inventive imagination, it must be answered that in all likelihood she has used all of these methods but her emphasis seems to be primarily on the basis of her own direct observations of her village neighbors and other people with whom she came in contact.

Within the limits already mentioned of Mrs. Fisher's fictional characters, the reader discovers certainly no great variety of people as those who populate the novels, say, of a Fielding or a Thackeray. But within the boundaries she chooses to work, there is a pleasing diversification of human beings. It is true that nearly half of her novels center on one young woman's struggles to overcome some marital problem. These heroines are enough alike to be thought of as one dominant character type. But especially in her later novels does Mrs. Fisher show her powers of creation in such diversified human beings as Mrs. Bascomb, Timothy Hulme, Adrian Fort, Sr., and even the lynx-like heroine from Searles Shelf in Bonfire.

One particular area of fictional characterization in which Mrs. Fisher is very successful is that of childhood. All but the last two of her novels treat significantly and realistically the experience of childhood and succeed in drawing the child's character as an individual human person

and this is no small accomplishment. In successfully accomplishing this, she is doing more than adumbrating the treatment of some of the contemporary novelists of the past decade in American fiction who have at last come to realize the possibilities of portraying the importance of the child's world. Truman Capote in America and Graham Greene in Great Britain, in later fiction, have treated significantly of this phase of life.

The next point to be considered about characterization is the author's own attitude towards her various characters. Does she seem to have any special favorites and, conversely, are there some on which she tends to look with disfavor? In general it may be said that Mrs. Fisher has a definite sympathy for most of the human beings involved in the conflicts of her novels. A good example of this would be the sympathy that is felt for Mrs. Bascomb both on the part of the author and the reader even though, speaking objectively, she is quite at fault in her actions and exerts a sort of evil influence on the others in the story. On the other hand there are several instances where the author seems to betray a lack of sympathy for certain character types. One type in particular for whom she shows definite repugnance is the dilettante connoisseur of the arts. He appears as the epicurean art critic, Felix Morrison, in The Bent Twig or as the Freudian-soaked liberal, Vincent Marsh, who tries to

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break up the marriage of Marise Crittenden in The Brimming Cup. There is also a feminine counterpart of Marsh in the story. She is Eugenia Mills and is treated with a little less harshness.

Aside from these special prejudices Mrs. Fisher seems to enjoy all her characters and has general sympathy for them. At times she appears to extend too much concern for a certain character who represents an attitude toward life that she is particularly in sympathy with. An obvious example of this is her characterization of Daniel Rankin, the young socialist in The Squirrel Cage who, though a bit unreal, easily is the favorite of the author in the story.

As for the methods of presenting her characters in the pages of her novels, the author employs all the usual methods. First of all by the direct action method. Mrs. Fisher is quite successful in confronting her characters with a series of decisions that tend to bring out their human qualities as in The Brimming Cup. Sometimes her novels begin with some direct comment on the characters and their background as is the case in the well-described first few chapters of The Bent Twig where one gets a good insight into the whole Marshall family which has been transplanted from New England and this direct description helps us to understand the main characters very clearly right from the opening of the story.

Mrs. Fisher is also quite skilled in characterization through dialogue. One reason for her success might be her ear for music. At any rate she gives the illusion of reality in her passages of dialogue and there is a consistency in the manner in which each character is developed through his or her manner of speech. The only occasional drawback in this regard is the descent into volubility on the part of a character in some of the novels who tries to turn the novel into a kind of thesis. An example of this kind of thing is seen in a story like The Bent Twig when Austin Page explains his social-economic theories to the high-brow critic, Felix Morrison. At this point the novel slows up appreciably and the reader must wait until the characters are through talking before he can get on with the story.

As the omniscient author, Mrs. Fisher uses freely the liberty of entering into the characters' minds to tell us the mental and emotional reactions in order to build the story. She appears to overdo this method somewhat as a means of characterization in the sense of giving us too much detail on the intimate emotional reactions of her characters in some of the situations.

Other indirect methods of characterization are also used. For instance, she makes prominent use of the interaction of one character on another to show their growth and development. The Brimming Cup effectively uses a shifting point of view to help bring out the relationship of all the

characters to one another.

Most of the principal characters in a Dorothy Canfield Fisher novel are complex rather than simple creations. There are only a few instances where her people are transparent or one-sided. People such as Sylvia Marshall, Mrs. Bascomb, and Matey Gilbert are natures which contain some depth and breadth.

Modern critics of fiction such as Bliss Perry and E. M. Forster make a fundamental distinction about the degree of complexity of characters in fiction writing. Bliss Perry writes:

Another distinction which plays a constantly increasing role in modern fiction is that between the stationary and developing factors. Certain personages, and these not the least and congenial to the reader, remain, like Horatio in the play, constant quantities to the last. The vicissitudes of the action do not affect them. On the other hand are the developing characters who are likened without exaggeration to the river itself, constantly altering its course, accelerating or retarding its current, and never quite the same from one moment to another⁹.

¹⁰E. M. Forster makes essentially the same distinction when he calls characters like Mrs. Micawber in Dickens David Copperfield a "flat" character because her reaction to any given situation is always the same. She will always stand by Mr. Micawber and she reaffirms this constantly.

⁹A Study of Prose Fiction, Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1902, p. 108-109.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 114.

Conversely, Forster recognizes a more complete character creation in the "round" characters. His example would be almost any of Jane Austen's heroines such as Elizabeth Bennet in Pride and Prejudice or Emma, the heroine of the novel of the same name. These characters "function all round, and even if her plot made greater demands on them than it does, they would still be adequate".

Mrs. Fisher's main heroines and in a few instances her heroes are of the latter type as described above by the critics of the novel. Growth in human development is certainly an underlying characteristic in practically all of the novels without exception. Usually this growth is accomplished through some moral struggle such as Sylvia Marshall's trials of adolescence which are complicated by the particular environment of the university faculty life. She grows through many varying phases before finally emerging as an adult individual. This same quality of roundedness or growth in character might be illustrated by almost any of the novels Mrs. Fisher wrote. In The Squirrel Cage, Lydia Emery grows up in a struggle against the materialism of a small mid-western community and her character undergoes an essential change due to the very difficulties that confront her. In The Brimming Cup, Marise Crittenden's principles are tested in the trials of early marriage. She develops and learns from the moral problem in which she finds herself. Rough

Hewn develops the separate growth of two main characters, the hero and the heroine. Their characters undergo a transformation through a series of episodes that give them an opportunity to find themselves and eventually each other. The Home-Maker, although a weaker novel, likewise presents a study in the moral growth of not only the main characters, Mr. and Mrs. Knapp but also to a lesser extent, all the members of the family as well.

Her Son's Wife is perhaps the most outstanding example of how Mrs. Fisher uses a moral struggle for the shaping and transformation of human character. Mrs. John Bascomb at the outset of the story is a rather self-assured Puritan of New England stock. Mrs. Fisher confronts her with a series of shocking events that brings about a remarkable change. She becomes aware of her own insufficiency and of the dependence of human beings, one on the other. The wheel spins a full circle and Mrs. Bascomb is quite a different person than when the story began.

In the last three novels the same principle of spiritual growth is witnessed. The Deepening Stream is the story of Matey awakening to the meaning of life and this process forms the whole theme of the book. Bonfire is the one novel that is mainly an exception to the trend that has been discussed here. Lixlee, the central character of the book, really does not develop and this is because of the thwarted

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nature of her character, a creature, however, who uses her strange sexual charms to bring about a great change in a good many other characters in the story. This book, in a sense, is the opposite of all the other novels by Mrs. Fisher in that it is a study of deterioration of character whereas the other stories present a successful struggle of character with environment or with other people. Seasoned Timber returns to the familiar theme of personal development and growth. Timothy Hulme gradually learns that there are in the world many kinds of love and that what he thought was a great loss in his life, serves finally to bring about a further deepening and enrichment of his soul.

It cannot be said that Mrs. Fisher's characterizations are "typed". By this, it is meant that, although she is dealing for the most part with New England people, she avoids the creation of a merely regional prototype even in minor characters. Nelly and Gene Powers in The Brimming Cup are, in one sense, typical of the struggling, poor Vermonter, but they also come alive to the reader as honest-to-goodness human individuals. The same might be said for many other of the minor characters including the many children that brighten the pages of her novels, such as Paul Crittenden in The Brimming Cup. Where Mrs. Fisher fails to produce an individual character, usually she is unsympathetic with the person. Examples of this failure are seen in the characters of

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Eugenia Mills and Mr. Livingstone in Rough Hewn. These two characters are the foils for the main characters. They are ultra-sophisticated and are not very real. They are used merely for a simple contrast to the wholesomeness of Marise and Neale Crittenden.

In conclusion it may be said that Mrs. Fisher, in the main, passes the crucial test of any novelist, the ability to draw realistic characters.

THEME

I'm afraid I can't say more about my motive and method in fiction than I seem to myself to have been engaged in a life-long struggle to make some sense out of human life, and then to pass along to others what sense I have made. This means of course an impassioned struggle, first of all, confronted with any human situation, to see what it really means, what the implications are in human values, what underlies such and such reactions, what deep roots send up the harmless looking little tendrils that prove so hard to eliminate, why does such a personality at the impact of another give off such and such a note, rather than another. This effort is endless, of course, because of the complexity of every human situation (. . .) I want to see what's there, and I want to be skillful enough to tell honestly what I have seen. It takes skill to be honest, you know, often more than I have¹¹.

The above quotation is an excerpt from a letter sent to a graduate student in the education department at Boston University by Mrs. Fisher. The student was writing a Master's thesis about the author's life. This clear-cut answer provides

¹¹Personal correspondence of Dorothy C. Fisher, Letter to Miss Atwater dated May 1935.

a guide to the author's realistic intent in her fiction. It gives a clue to the philosophical perspective of this writer as well.

It has already been stressed in this thesis that Dorothy C. Fisher's novels depict the growth of the main characters by an accumulative process of experience. It is now necessary to look a little more closely at the philosophical import and implications behind her central ideas and to try to determine even more exactly the author's attitude towards human existence as seen in her novels. If this can be done clearly it will help to clarify and determine Mrs. Fisher's position in relation to development of the American novel.

First of all it can be truly said that the themes of her novels are not merely of regional import but partake of more universal interest. Mrs. Fisher is primarily interested in the American tradition. She is concerned with the process of American life and its effect on American people. This is true even though she herself has had the special benefits of a foreign cultural background. When she uses this European cultural experience in her novels, it is supplementary to the American themes. Her main concern is with the roots of the American middle class farmers and educators and small businessmen who live in the small communities. In other words she does not deal with the whole of American life

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and in this she shows wisdom in not attempting to go beyond her range or scope as a writer.

What then is she saying in her novels about the life of these Americans; what, to use her own words, does she make out of human life generally? What, to Mrs. Fisher, is the meaning of experience?

In giving such prominence to the idea of experience in her novels, Mrs. Fisher places herself in the midstream of the current in American fiction.

No literature, it might be said, takes on the qualities of a truly national body of expression unless it is possessed of a basic theme and unifying principle of its own. Thus the German creative mind has been actuated by philosophical interests, the French by the highest ambitions of the intelligence unrestrained by system or dogma, the Russian by the passionately candid questioning and shaping of values. And since Whitman and James, the American creative mind, seizing at last upon what had long been denied to it has found the terms and objects of its activity in the urge toward an immersion in experience. It is this search for experience, conducted on diverse and often conflicting levels of consciousness, which has been the dominant, quintessential theme of the characteristic American literary production - from Leaves of Grass to Winesburg, Ohio and beyond¹².

The term "immersion" in the above quotation seems especially to suit the experimental mode of realism in Mrs. Fisher's writing. She is most vitally concerned with experience as a process and she steeps her characters in one life situation after another. Their growth is what she is most

¹²Philip Rahv, "The Cult of Experience in American Writing" from Critiques and Essays in Modern Fiction, New York, Ronald Press, 1952, p. 232-233.

concerned with. But she is concerned with what happens to them as people. Generally, her theme and attitude toward life, then, are implicitly shown in the novels. At other times, as has already been brought out, her meaning or message is superimposed on the material by a character who explicitly conveys it to the reader.

In spite of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's fidelity in the large to actual experience and the process of life, there are written into stories moral values which are inescapable. Edward Wagenknecht alludes to her sense of values in the Cavalcade of the American Novel.

Personally I can see no reason why a fine writer (Willa Cather) should be required to be in sympathy with the mood of her time (. . .) It is much more important to be attuned to what Dorothy Canfield calls "the rhythm of the permanent" and sometimes this may even mean to be deliberately out of tune with the times¹³.

The phrase "rhythm of the permanent" quoted from Mrs. Fisher is from her last novel and it in turn is a quotation from the mouth of her main character, Timothy Hulme, the schoolmaster who was trying to characterize life in the small town of Clifford, Vermont. The full quotation reads as follows:

In Clifford, where human relations are timed to the rhythm of the permanent, there would be real danger of introducing a fitful personality like Canby's, trained by experience in the modern technique of

¹³Cavalcade of the American Novel, op. cit., p. 321.

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being casual, of never allowing enough blood into a relationship to cause bleeding when it is cut short¹⁴.

There is a certain moral dignity that runs through the pages of Dorothy Canfield's novels. For one thing there is implied throughout her work the importance of marital fidelity. In the earlier novels there is emphasis on the necessity of the husband and wife mutually aiding one another to surmount the inevitable problems that confront marriage.

A good clarification of Mrs. Fisher's treatment of moral values was made in a Commonweal review of Her Son's Wife by Mary Kolars. It is worth quoting here at some length.

Not that Miss Canfield fails either as an artist or as a moralist. But she does belong in that superior class of craftsmen whose very deficiencies are worthy of serious attention. Her Son's Wife displays the combination of traits to which The Bent Twig and The Brimming Cup have already accustomed us. There is the unaffectedly warm and generous humanity, the preoccupation with the social and practical side of morals, the ardent honesty, worthy of the very greatest respect, which prompts her, in addressing her problems, to try to disencumber her mind of all convention; and there is also what is frequently the concomitant of these valuable and enterprising qualities - a certain failure to perceive the full dimensions of any ethical canon, a certain opportunism of conclusion, a lack of the profoundest sense of the consonance between virtue and the human soul.

In other words, though Miss Canfield is deeply moral, she is not religious (. . .) Her conclusion in The Brimming Cup was orthodox whereas her conclusion in Her Son's Wife is that the end may sometimes justify the means; but in their animating philosophy the two conclusions are exactly alike. Both decisions are pragmatic - that is conditioned upon the specific circumstance alone; and both are,

¹⁴Dorothy C. Fisher, Seasoned Timber, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1939, p. 241.

of course, in their own terms, faulty and incomplete.
(.)

It is almost impossible to convey an invented morality in terms of a really satisfactory art. If the human rights of a child can be vindicated by destroying the human right of a parent, it will not be long before all rights whatsoever are treated as non-existent¹⁵.

Despite the limitations of Mrs. Fisher's moral views noted in the preceding quotation, there is nevertheless much to be said for the stress on moral values in her works. In an age when disillusionment was prominent in fiction, the novels of Dorothy Canfield Fisher show, for example, a positive faith in a good number of our democratic processes. Such novels as The Deepening Stream and Seasoned Timber realistically portray the turmoil of the times in which they were written but at the same time reflect a confidence in our democracy to work them out successfully. Especially does Mrs. Fisher hold to a confidence in the democratic educational methods and to the spirit of group cooperation. Her belief in individualism is always balanced by her belief in civic cooperation. Thus Matey Gilbert and her husband came back to America after the chaos of World War I to pick up the thread of their own lives again and to work with the community as well. "If we share life wholly, if we work together, why, whatever's in my life will be in his," said Matey¹⁶.

¹⁵Mary Kolars, Book review in Commonweal, issue of Oct. 20, 1926, Vol. 4, No. 24, p. 587.

¹⁶The Deepening Stream, op. cit., p. 392.

In the same manner Timothy Hulme, seizing the reins of leadership in the community, fights to save the Academy from anti-semitism and eventually finds the greater portion of the community stands behind him to help out.

On all of these moral problems presented in the pages of her novels, Mrs. Fisher stands four-square for a solution of them on reasonable moral grounds. At the root of these problems confronting modern man, she sees the central issue as the difficulty of "Managing large numbers without affronting human dignity¹⁷." She seems to be saying, especially in her last novel, that it is the common person, the small but decent soul who must carry on the struggle for justice in the world. And this in turn appears to be another affirmation of her inherent faith and belief in the tradition of American individualism.

SUMMARY

In Chapter Six the main tendencies of the writer, under the headings of Plot, Character and Theme, have been pointed out.

It was noted that the author's range is greater than that of a mere regional novelist. But at the same time her range is limited to certain social and economical areas of life. And domestic life is the chief area of Mrs. Fisher's

¹⁷Seasoned Timber, op. cit., p. 223.

fictional creations. She mainly writes about life she has observed and shared in. She leaves out of her stories the more intimate experiences of her own personal life.

For the most part the plots of the novels are not complex. They deal primarily with one or two main characters and a few subordinate ones. Sub-plots are the exception, not the rule. Mrs. Fisher's novels have an ordinary amount of narrative suspense but sometimes her stories fail to sustain the peak of interest engendered in the reader in the earlier chapters. This is sometimes due to the lack of unity in plot structure and sometimes due to the obtrusion of a moral or social message by one of the characters acting as her spokeswoman.

Mrs. Fisher employs exclusively an omniscient point of view as the technical means of getting her story told to the reader and the main focus is always on one of the major characters. She has sometimes experimented, however, with third person narration, for example in The Brimming Cup. She does not employ the stream of consciousness technique but does often enter freely into the mind of her characters and interprets their thoughts and feelings.

In the matter of setting, the author integrates natural background with the story effectively and unobtrusively.

In her characterizations Mrs. Fisher has a large gallery of successful realistic character portraits. She

tends to be more successful with women than with the male personages. She is also quite successful in treatment of children and has done much to promote an interest in them as human personalities in literature. She is usually unsuccessful, however, in characterizing people with whom she is not in sympathy, such as the pseudo-cultured or the poseur.

Her best creations are those characters who are developed by some inner struggle and who grow through experience with life. As a result there are but few of her important characters who may be called "typed" in the narrow sense of representing merely a class of person. Most of her personages share a common humanity.

Mrs. Fisher's novels indicate a recurring interest in experience as a main theme like many other modern American novelists. She is also concerned with traditional American ideas and concepts. She fosters these in contrast to a pseudo-culture of foreign vintage. She champions the rights of the individual and her novels always convey an atmosphere of moral dignity.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LITERARY BACKGROUNDS

The purpose of the final chapters of the thesis is to locate the work of Mrs. Fisher as a novelist within the framework of the modern American novel. The method will be a comparison of her work with other realistic authors of her own time who by reason of their similarity or contrast will help to bring into clear focus the particular mode of the realism of Mrs. Fisher and her contribution to the growth of the American novel.

In trying to assay the literary climate just prior to the period known as the modern novel in American literature (or about the 1890's) at least four general tendencies appear. In the decade of the eighties, the so-called local color writers like Brete Harte and Sarah Orne Jewett were in the ascendency. They chose to write about a certain area of the country, the one in which they were very familiar and their stories took on much of the topicality of the sections they wrote about. Typical examples of this kind of fiction were The Luck of Roaring Camp and The Outcasts of Poker Flat of Brete Harte. Harte wrote short stories rather than novels but taken together they typify the local color aspects of frontier life.

Sarah Orne Jewett is also a good example of another kind of regional fiction. She has received high praise from

her best-known novel The Country of the Pointed Firs. She chose to write about life along the Maine coast and unlike Harte's sentimentalism she uses a classical restraint and adapts her style of simple tale-telling to her material about Maine maritime folk.

This regional tendency in fiction of the nineties continued on into the first decade of the century or when Dorothy Canfield began writing. This fact is confirmed by checking the best-seller lists in the first two decades of the nineteenth hundreds. For example in 1903 appeared Owen Wister's The Virginian and in 1909 The Trail of the Lonesome Pine by John Fox. Both of these books are the work of local colorists.

These latter two novels at the same time illustrate a second general tendency that had been working in American fiction - romantic sentimentalism. In his book, The Age of Confidence, Henry Seidel Canby writes interestingly about the reading habits of the young people growing into maturity in the 1890's, the period which exactly parallels the time of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's own youth. Mr. Canby is writing about the same social class to which Mrs. Fisher belonged. He says:

I am not exaggerating, I am minimizing the reverberations of this romantic-sentimentalism (.) Something was happening to us and to our town deeper and even more significant. There was, for example, the chivalrous attitude (it was more than a pose) towards

girls, which reached its height just about the turn of the century and was literary in its origin. The decorous familiarity of the eighties was too stiff for us, but just when some frankness was entering into our sex relationship, suddenly we were whirled into a romantic atmosphere which can still be seen in articulate perfection by readers of Stevenson's Prince Otto and with the more pink clouds of sunset in Richard Carvel. We tried to see our girls as romantic beauties and ourselves as gentlemen who lived by honor. It did not last long¹.

There were many other historical-type novels in American fiction besides Winston Churchill's Richard Carvel which represented this romantic-sentimental tendency. Another notable example was Booth Tarkington's early work, Monsieur Beaucaire, written in 1900, which was a tale of a French prince masquerading as a servant in Bath, England at the Restoration period.

Through such novels as these the American reader began to be aware suddenly of his past and special interest was focused on colonial America. It was a kind of rebirth of the same romantic interest which earlier American readers had found in Sir Walter Scott.

The third general fictional tendency of the period just prior to the advent of the modern novel is known as literary naturalism. These writers are very familiar names in American literature and their important works all appear in the period from 1890 through the early 1900's. Pointing

¹Henry S. Canby, Age of Confidence, New York, Farrar-Rinehart, 1934, p. 202-203.

towards naturalism, Stephen Crane wrote Maggie, A Girl of the Streets in 1893 and The Red Badge of Courage in 1894. Frank Norris dealt with some of America's socio-economic relationships in his brief writing period and is best known for his cycle of novels McTeague, The Pit, and The Octopus. Jack London rounds out this trio of early American naturalists and is probably still the most read of the three novelists, especially his novels of the Klondike, Call of the Wild and White Fang.

A fourth and more wide-spread fictional tendency that was current when Dorothy Canfield began to write was the tendency towards realism. At this point one is faced with the necessity of reconciling many diverse concepts which are included under this general term. In order to steer a satisfactory course in the use of this term, it is necessary to follow at least some generally acceptable definition. Bliss Perry's definition of the term is workable and has been followed fairly widely by the critics. It is as follows:

Realistic fiction is that which does not shrink from the commonplace (although art dreads the commonplace) or from the unpleasant (although the aim of art is to give pleasure) in its efforts to depict things as they are, life as it is².

The truest realism, it seems, offers a broad picture of life - a picture which does not give undue prominence to

²Bliss Perry, A Study of Prose Fiction, New York, Houghton-Mifflin, 1902, p. 229.

the dramatic aspects of life or on the other hand to its ugliness, but rather includes a balanced proportion of both of these ingredients. A sort of footnote might be added to the above explanation to the effect that, historically speaking, modern-day realism, at least in reaction to the romantic way of looking at life, seems to show often a preference for depicting the lives of the humble and obscure.

Even a cursory reading of Mrs. Fisher's novels reveals that she is following in this direction of realism in so far as she treats of the lives of very ordinary people.

It is appropriate to this thesis at least to name those writers who have been most commonly associated with the term realism in American fiction. William Dean Howells is prominently associated with the rise of realism in the United States in such work as The Rise of Silas Lapham, the story of a Vermonter who rises to fame only to meet misfortune and falls from his station in life. The list of the other writers might be greatly expanded but would include Henry James and lesser known authors such as Mary E. Wilkins Freeman who gives us the beginnings of fictional realism in her stories of Vermont and New England life in novels like A Humble Romance.

For the purposes of this thesis it is necessary to focus more particularly on the nature of the realistic fiction being produced in America at the time Mrs. Fisher began to write her novels. Carl Van Doren's essay on this topic is

a helpful clarification of realism in general as well as the particular modes of American realism in the early twenties.

Realism in the United States, like realism everywhere, is a matter of the realist's intention rather than of his success or failure. He cannot be a clear window through which all reality may be seen, for the reason that reality is too vast (. . .) He must simplify it and interpret it (.)) The best that can be hoped for among those who think about realism at all is a kind of working agreement as to what is real and what is realistic (.)) The American realist has in every generation been affected by two items in the national consciousness: the knowledge that the republic originated in revolution and the confidence that its future is assured. These items, working together in the popular mind, have given Americans their peculiar combination of a theoretical belief in experiment with a practical complacency as to what has been accomplished³.

⁴Van Doren starts with such early writers as James Fenimore Cooper, and includes Hawthorne, Whitman, Mark Twain, and William D. Howells among realists in the sense of revolt. But he maintains this was not American realism in its most typical aspect until the end of the century when writers learned from the muck-rakers just how much had been generally overlooked in the way of fictional material. The later realism has been a protest and is conditioned by the facts and attitudes against which it has been directed. These in turn give it its American flavor.

³Carl Van Doren, "American Realism" in The New Republic, Mar. 21, 1923, Vol. 34, No. 431, p. 107.

⁴Ibid., p. 108.

varying connotations among the literary critics. First of all, Rev. Harold Gardiner, S. J., writing on Graham Greene, makes a fundamental point about the term realism:

To use the word accurately (. . .) we have to consider it as a genus, and apply specific differences to arrive at the species. We may have a realism that is naturalistic; we may have one that is realistic. The naturalistic realist will deny, implicitly or explicitly, the reality of suprasensible, non-material values. So far, he is not, on artistic grounds, a realist at all, for in so denying, he limits himself so that he cannot tell the whole truth. To highlight the reality of sin, for example, and minimize the reality of conscience is to cease to be a realist (.)) But there is another kind of realism--the idealistic. An author so motivated will tell the whole truth, and that will include the existence of spiritual (not necessarily religious) values. Sin may be a part of that picture, but it will never be diabolical or brutish (if such a thing were possible) sin. It will be sin as human beings commit it, and that means that there will always be some realism, however faint, that is related to the ideal, to the supernatural⁷.

The above distinctions by Fr. Gardiner point out some common sense attitudes toward the disputes between literary realists and naturalists. Another distinction might be made. It is in regard to the manner in which free will is attributed to the characters in these novels. In "idealistic" realism the characters are more or less responsible for their human actions. In the "naturalistic" realism the human being is traditionally represented as being at the mercy of his environment or some other force which renders him not responsible

⁷Rev. Harold Gardiner, S. J., "Graham Greene, Catholic Shocker", in Renascence, Vol. 1, No. 2, Spring 1949, p. 15.

as far as his actions are concerned.

Henry Seidel Canby, in writing "An Open Letter to the Realists", believes that unbridled "realism" or what some call naturalism has had its day and that the readers of the novel may look forward to works which show more imaginative power.

Naturalism, so-called, is near a dead end. Realism in general is becoming each year less imaginative, less creative. It describes, but it neither prophesies nor persuades. How long will it remain literature by any definition that is not limited to fact? Romance, which is one way, and has sometimes been the best way, of stating reality, has lain dangerously long. It will come back⁸.

Another able critic who has spent a lifetime of study of the American novel is Maxwell Geismar. In his evaluation of "Naturalism, Yesterday and Today", Geismar stresses the concept of the writer's freedom.

While he does not condone those inferior writers who merely "take momentary advantage of the whole new era of literary expression which has been opened up to them," he firmly believes that it is better "to suffer the abuses of a few than to curtail the rights of many."⁹

Geismar, for example, champions a writer such as Theodore Dreiser whom many critics have designated as a thorough-

⁸Henry S. Canby, "An Open Letter to the Realists" in The Saturday Review of Literature, Issue of May 3, 1947, Vol. 30, No. 18, p. 20.

⁹Maxwell Geismar, "Naturalism, Yesterday and Today" in College English, Jan. 1954, Vol. 15, No. 4, p. 199.

going naturalistic writer because of his materialistic, evolutionary and sometimes pseudo-scientific ideas on life. In the opinion of critics such as Maxwell Geismar, it is vitally important that we have our Dreisers and our Norrises to foster the general spirit of freedom of artistic expression. On this point he seems to be in agreement with such critics as Robert Penn Warren who held that the American novel, like the American spirit in general, has flourished on self-criticism of its institutions and its mores. These men seem to think it matters really very little whether we call such writers as Dreiser realists or naturalists.

Finally, if one chooses to consider the philosophical implications of the term realism, the complications are even more multiplied.¹⁰ Erich Hiller, writing on "The Realistic Fallacy" stresses the great difficulty that men have in arriving on any common ground of meaning for the term reality, in ever getting a clear concept of just what reality is. Between the Aristotelian and the Platonic concepts of "the real" lies a wide range of other interpretations. Hiller concludes that since any "realistic" writer is only attracted by certain aspects of reality and uses selectivity in the aesthetic ordering of his materials, the reader should be a little more modest in his claims that this or that author is a true realist.

¹⁰Erich Hiller, "The Realistic Fallacy" in The Listener, issue of May 19, 1955.

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This last view seems to have some merit especially when one considers that the novel is itself considered as a literary art form more limited than others. And even more fundamental than that is the reason that the novel deals with human individuals who are dependent, just as are the artists who create them, upon their Creator. Therefore it would seem that a true realist is one who at least has a certain humility before the vastness of reality and exhibits a proper recognition of his own and his created characters relationship of dependence upon God. The work of Dorothy Canfield Fisher falls within the scope of such a definition of realism.

SUMMARY

In this chapter an analysis has been made of the main literary trends at the time when Mrs. Fisher began to write her novels at the turn of the century. Four new literary trends were in evidence.

The first was the school of "local-color" storytellers such as Brete Harte. This school, although begun in the eighties, continued on into the twentieth century. Dorothy Canfield Fisher cannot be classified as a local-colorist because her novels transcend mere interest in a particular locale such as Vermont even though they have Vermont as their background so often.

A second school of novel writing was that of the

popular historical novel as evidenced in the work of such writers as the New Hampshire novelist Winston Churchill in a book like Richard Carvel. Dorothy Fisher exhibited no interest in writing this particular kind of novel and always told her stories from contemporary life.

The third and fourth literary schools or trends were the traditional ones of naturalism and realism. Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Jack London were cited as examples of early American naturalists in fiction along with Theodore Dreiser. With this group of writers Mrs. Fisher has very little in common, since as has been seen, she places no over-emphasis on the lower or animal side of man's behavior.

The fourth fictional tendency prevalent was that which stressed realism in interpreting life. Bliss Perry's definition was quoted as a guiding point. Carl Van Doren's essay on realism in American fiction was also cited to show the characteristics of American realism of the period. The American realist is influenced by two factors in the national consciousness: (1) a sense of the revolutionary origins of the republic and (2) a confidence in its future. Each individual realistic novelist, however, chooses his own mode of realism.

Some further clarification of the two terms was obtained in the light of statements by the noted critics, Rev. Harold C. Gardiner and Maxwell Geismar.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE POSITION OF DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER AMONG THE
FEMININE REALISTS OF THE PERIOD

Since the period of the American novel under discussion saw the advent of the feminine novelist who carried off the honors on many occasions from their masculine counterparts, it seems logical to begin a comparison of Mrs. Fisher's work with that of some feminine writers of realism of the period. The comparison and contrasts with other realists will be made on the basis of general attitude toward life as well as fictional methods and style.

The feminine novelists chosen for this comparative study with Mrs. Fisher are the following: Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather. The particular reasons for these selections, it is hoped, will be made clear in the pages to follow. The method of comparison will be the specific reference to those novels wherein the authors seem most parallel, whether in terms of their subject matter or their fictional method. And contrariwise, some novels have been used for illustration because they offer sharp contrasts.

WILLA CATHER

Perhaps the most obvious starting point in any comparative analysis of the philosophical and artistic perspectives of other women writers with those of Mrs. Fisher is

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with Willa Cather. The two writers met each other during their student days in the midwest when Mrs. Fisher's father was the chancellor of the University of Nebraska. They actually collaborated on short stories during this interval for a school publication. After college, both came to New York and wrote successfully for the new magazines which were becoming a prominent part of the literary vogue in America. The era of the "best-seller" was just beginning. The two remained close friends all during the span of Miss Cather's career as their correspondence indicates. Unfortunately, it is not permitted to quote from Miss Cather's letters on file at the Wilbur Library at the University of Vermont, but a reading of them certifies that Miss Cather, who lived more or less the life of a recluse as many artists do, did, however, cherish Mrs. Fisher's friendship and sought her critical opinion to the extent of submitting many manuscripts to Mrs. Fisher at her home in Arlington, Vermont before their publication. But there are external relationships. In their writing the two authors stand far apart in their outlook on life and even further apart in their artistic methods.

Miss Cather has explained her artistic credo in an important essay on the novel entitled "The Novel Demeuble".
Essentially she is a selective realist. She believed that

Willa Cather, "The Novel Demeuble", reprinted in Modern Essays, edited by Christopher Morley, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1924, p. 292.

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the modern novel of her day was overfurnished with too much narrative detail. What makes a narrative great, she maintained, was what was suggested and not what was actually written on the page. She chooses what she believes is the essential image, touches it lightly and thereby evokes a feeling, creates a mood. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in her famous novel of the western frontier, My Antonia!, when, for example, she ends the second book with the memorable symbolism of the old ploughshare seen against the fiery orb of the setting sun. It is a haunting scene whose significance to the story comes to the reader as it evokes a feeling for the grandeur of the pioneer days as Miss Cather envisioned them. This sort of suggestive symbolism remains with the reader long after the novel has been placed aside.

In her strong use of accumulated but meaningful detail, Mrs. Fisher has an exactly opposite narrative style. The Vermont novelist inclines to almost a kind of documentary detail in her novels, using these details to achieve a sense of the felt experience of the life process of the character that she is developing. Sometimes this is very effective as in Her Son's Wife where the details are orchestrated to form an impressive climactic effect. At other times excessive use of this sort of detailed narrative retards the story as in Rough Hewn.

In their philosophical perspectives the two novelists

are also quite at variance. Much has been written about the thematic development of Miss Cather's novels. Some are studies in the pioneering times such as O! Pioneers and My Antonia! Others deal in a study of failure such as The Professor's House and One of Ours and My Mortal Enemy. Finally there are those which treat of the historic past such as her famous Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock. In contrast to Mrs. Fisher, Willa Cather in all of her novels seems to diminish the importance of the experience of life itself. For her, the main reality is the soul or spirit. Above and beyond all experience is the reality of the soul. In this sense she can perhaps be called more "classical" in her attitude to life. Therefore, it is not surprising to see Willa Cather criticizing modern materialism, especially its science and education, as she does in The Professor's House. Professor Godfrey St. Peter in that novel stands against all the above-named material aspects of modern living. Experience is always something to be gotten over with as is the case of Claude Wheeler, the young midwestern farmer who feels impelled to volunteer to go to France in World War I, an escape from experience after his unfortunate marriage.

In direct opposition to this view of life Dorothy Canfield Fisher values experience very highly in the achievements of her characters. They grow only in and through experience. Mrs. Fisher upholds free public education in

principle whereas Miss Cather seems to satirize it along with the trend toward science.

Both authors, however, place a strong emphasis on the primitive type of courage, an endurance on the part of the farmer and laborer in their struggle to gain a living from the land. Mrs. Fisher, both critic and confidential friend of Miss Cather, offers her own hypothesis about the underlying meaning of Willa Cather's work. If true, it would tend to show both authors in closer harmony in regard to their fundamental themes.

I don't live where I can hear much of what is said in literary chat, but I can understand a legend is going the rounds which presents Willa Cather as a pale victim sacrificed to art. It is true that her art has always been first and foremost in her life, center and core of her existence; but she has sacrificed to it as much as a person who enjoys good eating sacrifices himself in eating good meals (.) I offer you an hypothesis about Willa Cather's work: that the one real subject of all her books is the effect a new country--our new country--has on people transplanted to it from the old traditions of a stable, complex civilization. Such a hypothesis, if true, would show her as the only American author who has concentrated on the only unique quality of our national life (.) For Americans (whether originally from Norway, Scotland, Poland or Bohemia) are the only people who have given to the shift from the old to the new life the stern dignity of the irrevocable (. . .) like Dante, she is the first to write in the true folk language of her country, which naturally is not understood by outsiders (. . .) She is deeply and mystically our own².

²Dorothy C. Fisher, "Daughter of the Frontier", New York Herald Tribune, May 28, 1933, p. 7-9.

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Finally the two authors can be contrasted in their personal attitude toward their artistic endeavors. As Mrs. Fisher has indicated, Willa Cather pursued the art and craft of fiction relentlessly. Mrs. Fisher, on the other hand, was content to make the art of fiction only a part of her living, a part of her life experience. And this sharp difference in attitude toward art more than any other single factor accounts for the great contrast between these two American realistic novelists.

EDITH WHARTON

The novels of Edith Wharton also offer an essential contrast to the work of Dorothy Canfield Fisher. Mrs. Wharton was born in New York of aristocratic lineage. She was educated by private tutors in several European languages. She spent her childhood and early youth in Italy and France, where she became very interested in European art and culture. She was the first woman who received from Yale an honorary Doctorate in Letters, just as Mrs. Fisher was the first woman to receive an earned doctorate from Columbia in the field of comparative literature. ³Also like Mrs. Fisher, Mrs. Wharton devoted herself to war relief work especially for displaced children.

³Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel, New York, Holt, 1952, p. 233.

Edith Wharton was both a disciple and a friend of Henry James. In novels such as The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence the resemblance between the earlier American master and the pupil is in evidence, even, for example, to the extent of similar names for characters. Like Henry James and unlike Mrs. Fisher, Edith Wharton chose to carry on the genteel tradition in American literature. She writes for instance of the romance of Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence. The novel concerns their flight from the conventions of their own society, the socially elite of New York. In this novel, as in most others, Mrs. Wharton writes more in sympathy with the older European civilization than with the American mores and herein is discernible the main contrast between her work and that of Dorothy Canfield.

Mrs. Fisher in all of her novels writes distinctly from a sympathetic viewpoint toward the American society and, furthermore, she deals with the middle and lower class Americans as has been pointed out in Chapter Six. Both writers took their work in the novel seriously, worked conscientiously and with a sense of mission and purpose.

Like Mrs. Fisher, Mrs. Wharton considered the modern novel an apt vehicle for the presentation of moral problems. What were some of the moral, social and ethical ideas put forth by Mrs. Wharton? In her novels of Newport and New York society life such as in The House of Mirth, she observed and

satirized with a keen irony the lack of real standards and values.

The House of Mirth tells the story of the sensitive heroine, Lily Bart, who, although not independently wealthy, finds herself in the center of the wealthy class of New York society. She is spiritually superior to and yet materially dependent upon the group with which she must associate to work out her life. Eventually she is ruined socially, both by her own kin as well as those who befriended her for the selfish reason that her beauty was a social asset to them. Lily Bart ends her life by her own hand.

Alfred Kazin calls The House of Mirth Edith Wharton's stricken cry.

She has accepted all the conditions of servitude to the vulgar new order save the obligation to respect its values. Yet it was in the nature of things that she should rebel, not by adopting a new set of values or by interesting herself in a new society, but by resigning herself to soundless heroism. Thus she could read in the defeat of her characters the last proud affirmation of the caste quality. If failure was the destiny of superior men and women in the modern world, failure was the mark of spiritual victory. For that is what Edith Wharton's sense of tragedy came to in the end; she could conceive of no society but her own, she could not live with what she had⁴.

It is a totally different fictional world than the one Mrs. Fisher creates. Mrs. Wharton in one sense lacks the vitality of some of the other American realists of her day

⁴Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds, New York, Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942, p. 80.

and does not seem as close to the American scene as does Mrs. Fisher. Mrs. Wharton is intellectual in her approach to life and unsympathetic to the changes which were going on at the time. Mrs. Fisher sought to find meaning in the many changes that were going on.

Edith Wharton, like Willa Cather, was more the conscious artist in her fiction. Her works are carefully constructed in regard to plot just as were those of her model, Henry James. Mrs. Fisher is sometimes weak in plot construction and is not so meticulous either in diction or in style as Mrs. Wharton.

The two authors may be contrasted in another aspect. Edith Wharton wrote two novels based on life in New England. One is the stark tragedy called Ethan Frome. The other is called Summer. The former is the only story which Mrs. Wharton wrote that has a milieu of the poorer middle classes and for this novel her background is rural New England in central Massachusetts. Ethan is married to Zeena who is a rather repulsive woman given over to hypochondria. He falls in love with the hired girl, Mattie Silver, Zeena's cousin, who lives with the Fromes. Zeena becomes jealous of them. Rather than part, the two lovers agree to kill themselves by sliding down a hill into a large elm tree. In the tragically ironic ending of the story neither is killed in their slide, but both are crippled for life and are forced to live out their lives

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under the same roof with Ethan's wife, Zeena, who now takes care of them both.

Ethan Frome, like Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska, is spiritually superior but confronted with an environment that is crushing to his soul.

It is easily observed that Mrs. Fisher's treatment of the New England character is in great contrast to that of Mrs. Wharton's who actually knew little about them from the inside and certainly was less sympathetic towards them. A similar kind of plot situation is handled by the Vermont novelist as a sub-plot in The Brimming Cup except that here it is a man, Frank Warner, who threatens to break up the marriage of Gene and Nelly Powers. In the artistic sense the situation is resolved less successfully. The husband in Mrs. Fisher's story kills the intruder and later both he and his wife are accidentally killed by a falling tree. But there is much more insight into the basic qualities of New England character in Mrs. Fisher's story. She sees both the tragic and the comic side of their life and reassures us of the essential dignity of its people. The New England of the tragedy of Ethan Frome is somewhat abstract; the New England of Mrs. Fisher's novels is more concrete.

Very much like Willa Cather and very much unlike Mrs. Fisher, Edith Wharton was a selective realist. She handles expertly the technical side of novel writing, for example,

the point of view of the narration, in flawless style. She is essentially different from Mrs. Fisher in many of her social views on life. She seems to hold to the double standard of the sexes in the sense that men are given more leniency than women in her novels and the women must always show tolerance for the men in this regard. Mrs. Fisher constantly puts forth the opposite view, that of equality between the sexes both as to opportunity and moral behavior. Mrs. Wharton clings to the view that the aristocratic classes are especially fitted for the use of wealth and money. Mrs. Fisher has always insisted in her writing that a responsibility of the wealthier classes is towards the common economic welfare. In The Bent Twig, Austin Page gives up his fortune to a socialistic experiment in cooperatives and comes to Vermont to earn his living by operating a small lumber business where he can help build a sound community.

The critic, Robert Morse Lovett, places writers of fiction into two schools and the distinction may be used to distinguish between these two novelists.

In respect to the general idea, writers of fiction may be said to belong to one of two schools, those who take such a thesis as their starting point and gather material for its exemplification, and those who find their initial impulse in the phenomena of life and in the course of their presentation disengage the theme which gives them meaning(. . .) In her own practice Mrs. Wharton shows herself to be analytic; many of her stories undoubtedly took form under the pressure of the material, the stuff of life; others, particularly her longer novels, seem

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to proceed from the theme, and she fully experienced the difficulty of subduing her material to its demands⁵.

In contrast, it may be said of Mrs. Fisher's work that she wrote primarily from the initial "impulse in the phenomena of life" and allows her theme to grow out of the material presented. Mrs. Wharton was, like Willa Cather, a selective realist. Dorothy Canfield Fisher was more content to follow the process of experience itself to let it become the substance of her art.

ELLEN GLASGOW

Ellen Glasgow was the third major feminine novelist of the period in which Mrs. Fisher also wrote her novels. Dorothy Canfield Fisher shared a somewhat similar background with Willa Cather and Edith Wharton. Like Willa Cather, Mrs. Fisher was a product of the western university which was becoming a new force in American literature. And like Edith Wharton, Mrs. Fisher was also an inheritor of European influences as a treasured part of her background. But Ellen Glasgow was a product of Richmond, Virginia and was almost self-taught in all of her education. Nor was there any cosmopolitanism in her experience. She remained in her native city and wrote about Virginia and Virginians.

⁵Robert M. Lovett, Edith Wharton, New York, Robert McBride Co., 1925, p. 53.

Many of Ellen Glasgow's novels deal with the social history of Virginia starting about 1850. Her first six novels concern its history up to the first decade of the twentieth century. Her last four novels have to do with city life. The best chance for a comparison between the two writers is to take the middle growth of the Glasgow novels which deal with Virginia country life. Here the two writers are on some common ground. ⁶And here, critics agree, are novels such as Barren Ground and Vein of Iron because these are universally referred to as among, if not actually, her best works.

In Barren Ground the heroine, Dorinda Oakley, is the daughter of a poor farmer in the Piedmont region of Virginia. She falls in love with Dr. Jason Grelock who fathers her child and then marries someone else. Like in the story of Antonia Shimerda in the Willa Cather novel, Ellen Glasgow tells of the slow regeneration of Dorinda. She marries after a while and through her iron will wrests a successful living from the soil with courageous spirit. Dorinda rids herself of her romantic delusions forever, and life remains a sort of "barren ground" for her.

Just as the other writers compared so far with Mrs. Fisher, Ellen Glasgow is also a realist as well as a great stylist. Calvinism is scored again and again, as in the novel, Vein of Iron. In this novel the heroine, Ada Fincastle, is

⁶Cavalcade of the American Novel, op. cit., p. 270.

married to Ralph McBride, the son of a Puritanic backwoods family, who deserts Ada with child and marries a wealthier girl. At the end of the novel Ralph and Ada are reunited but find they have been themselves thwarted by their heritage and early environment. Ralph, near the end of the novel, looks back over their past life in Virginia and reflects on the earlier settlers:

There's a difference (. . .) He had not only civilization, but heaven and hell, within himself. It takes conviction to set out to spoil the wilderness, defraud Indians of their hunting grounds, and start to build a new Jerusalem for predestinarians. I'm not sure (. . .) that predestination didn't conquer the land. It is a doctrine that has made history wherever it found itself.

Likewise, Mrs. Fisher in novels such as Her Son's Wife impresses on her readers the narrowness of the Calvinistic code in the lives of Mrs. Bascomb and her son. Dorothy Canfield Fisher's novels do not measure up to the stature of Ellen Glasgow in artistic achievement of plot or style. There is in Vein of Iron and especially in Barren Ground a lyrical note which, it must be said, Mrs. Fisher's never achieve. There is a mature symbolism running through Barren Ground that heightens the beauty of the novel. On the other hand, Mrs. Fisher's novels always possess a certain concreteness, a sense of felt experience. The two above-mentioned novels of Ellen Glasgow have, at times, a flavor of bookishness. Ellen Glasgow

⁷Ellen Glasgow, Vein of Iron, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1935, p. 460.

learned about life from books and from talk. Mrs. Fisher learned about life more from actual or observed experience.

There are some points of similarity, too, in these two writers. Ellen Glasgow gives many of her characters a "vein of iron" by which they struggle through experience and even defy it to rise above the limitations of their surroundings. This courage in the face of life and a rather high moral direction is not unlike that which is found in the work of the Vermont novelist. True nobility of character in both is tested by a man's contact with experience. For neither writer is morality something cheap or easy. For both, the attitude towards religion is an open-minded one. Both look with a kind tolerance toward the negro and both write vigorously in defense of the rights of women.

Ellen Glasgow wrote toward the end of Vein of Iron a passage that can be quoted as a sort of summary of her way of looking at life.

Wherever you looked, there was something waiting to destroy happiness, Ada thought as she turned away. No sooner was a shelter found for the mind or heart, than the savage elements of cruelty and injustice swept up and demolished it. Shelter and systems and civilizations were all overwhelmed in time, her father said, by the backward forces of ignorance, of barbarism, of ferocity. Yet the level would steadily rise, little by little; in the end other unities would emerge from the ruins; and the indestructible will of the world was toward life⁸.

⁸Vein of Iron, op. cit., p. 359.

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If this quotation be compared with the ending of The Deepening Stream, which is likewise viewed as a main statement of Mrs. Fisher's attitude toward life as a whole, a basic similarity can be seen. Matey Gilbert is trying to put into words what she has learned from her experience in the war and what she wants to tell her husband.

That it takes anguish to bring new life to birth; that the war had not shaken the basis of human life but only made them visible; that human beings die tragically, having no more time left to repair their mistakes, but that their deep-rooted race goes on, goes on into new springtimes; that to have missed for a time the right path, to be lost on a by-path is no ground for terror; that the only despair lies in thinking that one's life is all, in not seeing the vastness of which it is only a part⁹.

SUMMARY

In Chapter Eight the work of Mrs. Fisher is compared with some feminine realists of her own generation on the basis of their philosophical as well as artistic perspectives. Miss Willa Cather was seen as essentially a selective realist, placing a great emphasis upon the spiritual side of her characters. Mrs. Fisher's novels do not show the same selectivity and she is concerned with the temporal as well as the spiritual growth of her characters. Art for Willa Cather was her whole life's interest; for Mrs. Fisher it was but a part of her life's work.

⁹Dorothy Canfield, The Deepening Stream, New York, Random House, 1938, p. 392.

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Edith Wharton presented a picture of contrast with Mrs. Fisher. She is more sympathetic with aristocratic and cosmopolitan interests, while the Vermont novelist is more in sympathy with the lower classes and with the American way of life even though both novelists shared a background of European education.

The third major woman realistic novelist compared to Mrs. Fisher was Ellen Glasgow. Miss Glasgow was seen as a more prominent symbolistic realist and who, at times, approached lyric qualities in her novels, whereas Mrs. Fisher is more limited in her approach which is fidelity to the process of life experience itself. Both novelists share, however, the conception of character growth through struggle, high moral aims and the defense of negroes' and women's rights.

CHAPTER NINE

OTHER REALISTS

In this chapter of the thesis an attempt will be made to compare Mrs. Fisher's writing to that of the men novelists of her own generation, who, by their realistic novels show some similarities or contrasts that will be helpful toward defining the particular mode of American realism of Mrs. Fisher. The writers chosen for this purpose are Robert Herrick, Booth Tarkington, and Sinclair Lewis. The comparison will include the artistic as well as the philosophical perspectives of each of these writers.

ROBERT HERRICK

In many ways Robert Herrick has more of an intellectual kinship with Dorothy Canfield Fisher than the other novelists with whom she is being compared in this thesis. In point of time Herrick is slightly earlier in the publication of his novels. His first novel appeared in 1897 which is almost a decade before Mrs. Fisher's Gunhild. Both novelists published their last novel in the same year, 1933.

Alfred Kazin writes sympathetically of Herrick, who has even been blacklisted and unappreciated for a long period of time, but who is becoming more and more recognized. Mr.. Kazin writes:

One of the most distinguished moral intelligences in the early history of twentieth-century realism, Robert Herrick, was neither a Socialist nor a muck-raker. He made his living as a professor of English and quietly wrote a series of meditative novels on life in a commercial and acquisitive society that link him with Dreiser and Norris among the few tragic novelists of the early nineteenth hundreds (. . .) Today, ironically enough, he has too long been neglected and penalized for those very qualities of mind that make his work the most sensitive analysis of the middle class life of his time. Yet, Herrick deserves to be read and needs to be reclaimed (. . .) He had an integrity and a significant tragic imagination that lift him above most of the minor realists of the period¹.

Like Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Robert Herrick, although he used the methods of realism, also had a certain innate idealism in his novels which made him strive to uplift the cultural standards of the America he lived in. Both writers stress the quality of experience as the foremost element in the shaping of the characters of their novels. The main difference between the two in this regard is that Herrick's character creations, especially his women characters, are often less successful in life than those of Mrs. Fisher. Both draw meaning out of experience; their novels by themselves present a kind of experience instead of a story about some experience.

Herrick tells us in his own words what his philosophical outlook is: "For life is after all nothing but the

¹Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds, New York, Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942, p. 121-122.

capacity to assert a condition of inner equilibrium within the transition of external circumstances²." To the extent that he holds this may be done, he believes with Mrs. Fisher that a person can deepen and enrich his emotional and intellectual life.

In a novel like Clark's Field the price of Adele Clark's "inner equilibrium" comes at a high price. The title of this novel refers to a plot of ground in Chicago which becomes a strong force in shaping the lives of the people who own it. Adele Clark becomes, as she thinks, sole heir. She has been raised in extreme poverty and now uses her inheritance as a stepping-stone to attaining anything in life she desires. The novel is mainly about her unsuccessful marriage, divorce, and her discovery of a cousin who is also an heir. In the end, Adele sees the futility of trying to attain happiness even by giving away the money to the poor. Like Matey in The Deepening Stream, Adele grows through the experience she has met with.

Adele would go on, he believed, growing into new wisdom, slowly acquired according to her nature, and also into tranquility, friendship, love and motherhood--all the eternal rewards of right living³.

Those were the words of Judge Orcutt who saved Adele from being cheated out of her inheritance. The Judge, himself,

²"The American Novel", article in Yale Review, 1914, Vol. 3, p. 422.

³Robert Herrick, Clark's Field, Houghton-Mifflin Co. Boston, 1914, p. 478.

represents Herrick's views on the individual's responsibility to the community much the same as Judge Emery in The Squirrel Cage. Even after twenty years as a judge, Orcutt sought merely to aid the human being and to maintain a proper sense of human values beneath all the legal forms of the cases tried in his courts. In the same manner Marise Crittenden and her husband in The Brimming Cup sought to give the community leadership by their safeguarding of the individual rights of workers at the lumber mill.

Another point which Mr. Herrick and Mrs. Fisher have in common as realists is their scepticism of the formalism of the American public education system of the period. Herrick shows how the schools which Adele Clark attended failed to awaken in her any responsiveness of mind but instead succeed in making life a dull routine of classifying factual information. This same criticism of American public school education runs through much of Mrs. Fisher's work. This has already been pointed out in earlier chapters on The Bent Twig, Rough Hewn, and especially in The Deepening Stream.

Both authors satirize those people who strive for personal success in business or in any other areas of life and who attain it at the expense of others. In this regard, Herrick's attacks are made for the most part upon members of the wealthy class; whereas in Mrs. Fisher's novels it is sometimes the smaller business owner.

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An example of this would be Mr. Willing, the department store owner in The Home-Maker.

You took raw material and shaped it with your own intelligence. It would be his business, B'God! The cards were stacked for him. A prosperous town just the right size; good will and a monopoly of trade that ran back forty years. No rivals worth mentioning. He had the jump on the world⁴.

Herrick's fictional method was to criticize through either a man or a woman the conditions which forbade the free exercise of the human personality of life. For example in The Web of Life, Dr. Somers says: "It was a brutal game, this business success - a good deal worse than war, where you live up in the open at least⁵." Or again, "If the world should not be run on any less brutal plan than this creed of success, then let there be anarchy - anything⁶."

In this story Dr. Somers, who seems to speak for Herrick, has given up the woman whom he truly loves for another woman who is already married.

Both novelists were avowedly feminists. In Herrick this quality is best seen in novels like Chimes and Together. Of course, these two writers exhibit their interest in the female of the species in quite different ways.

⁴Dorothy Canfield, The Home-Maker, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1924, p. 122.

⁵Robert Herrick, Web of Life, New York, McMillan, 1900, p. 25.

⁶Ibid., p. 201.

Herrick had no desire to return to the "squaw era" to rob the "bearers of the sacred seed" of the privileges they have won. Neither did he believe that in the present stage of their development woman showed the tendency to use their privileges wisely. "Tradition has taught them for generations to work by fraud and wile, and their instinct warns them against the ideal"⁷.

In the novel Chimes, Herrick portrays Jessica Stowe, a woman of intelligence and independent spirit, caught in the web of a narrowing cultural pattern at the university where she teaches. She finally loses all of her normal emotional life.

In his Together, Herrick starts his novel where so many romantic novelists had ended theirs. His book is made up of the analysis, not merely of the marriage, of John Lane and Isabelle Price from their wedding day. Their marriage is a failure and so are all the marriages of their friends in the story. The main difficulty seems to be that the women themselves are too lazy and selfish to realize the ideal of marriage implied by the title "Together".

In contrast, most of Mrs. Fisher's novels end on the positive note. Her husbands and wives manage to pull together toward an harmonious partnership.

In point of view of style these two novelists seem to parallel each other even in their defects. Like Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Robert Herrick's novels often fail for lack

⁷Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel, New York, Holt, 1952, p. 236.

of selectivity. Books like Together seem to make their main point at the sacrifice of reader interest just as is the case with Mrs. Fisher's Rough Hewn. Both plunge their characters into vital experiences and test them by their ability to grow as a result of the experiences.

BOOTH TARKINGTON

The Gentleman from Indiana presents an essential contrast to Dorothy Canfield Fisher in his attitude towards life, although the two have some external parallels. Tarkington like Mrs. Fisher was born and received his early education in the midwest and was of New England forbears. Later he went to Phillips Exeter in New Hampshire and then to Purdue and Princeton. His great popular and financial success did not come until quite a long period after he had served his apprenticeship in writing for the magazines.

His first novel was written in 1899 and was called The Gentleman from Indiana.⁸ It is generally believed to foreshadow the two contrasting strains in the author who was to become so famous during the next two decades in American fiction. There is realism in the author's presentation of the small town in both characters and setting. He captures the friendly spirit of the midland state as well as its flat stretches. The hero is the editor of the town paper who makes

⁸Ibid., p. 246.

a stand against some of the social abuses of the day. But in his handling of the love theme, Tarkington descends from realism to sentimentalism and melodrama.

In such later works as Alice Adams, Seventeen, and the Penrod stories, Tarkington developed the sentimental strain in his art. His sentimental or romantic traits in these works have little if anything in common with the work of Mrs. Fisher. His treatment of adolescence, however delightful they have been to a large audience, appears upon closer inspection to be a rather shoddy treatment. In other words, despite his familiarity with the superficial aspects of juvenile behavior patterns, he does not take the adolescent's problems seriously. He solves none of their difficulties and his stories about them tend toward a farce, melodrama, or over-romanticized love. He worked a truly formularized plot structure and any avid Tarkington reader can spot the familiar pattern. Broadly speaking the theme is one of courtship which results in marriage; boy meets girl; they become pals; a rival young man appears; first boy gets sore; girl begins to see he loves her; the rival is overcome; and our hero asks the girl's father for her hand in marriage.

The novels of Mrs. Fisher also show a decided interest in the problems of the adolescent. In two of her best novels, The Bent Twig and The Deepening Stream, she treats of these problems at great length. But nowhere is she anything

but serious about them as human problems of the greatest importance. She is very much aware of their far-reaching results in the lives of the persons involved. The title, The Bent Twig, symbolizes the idea that a person's whole life is essentially shaped by the influences working during childhood and early adolescence. Matey Gilbert in The Deepening Stream is not as attractively drawn as either Alice Adams or Cora Madison of The Flirt, but all in all she comes closer to being a realistic human being mainly because her problems of sexual growth in life are handled more realistically.

Another point for comparison between Tarkington and Mrs. Fisher is their differing treatment of the village. The village was becoming more and more a subject of controversy in American fiction as has been noted earlier in the thesis (Chapter Two). The controversy was largely concerned with the mid-western small town which had grown up as a reaction against the growing industrialization of the larger cities. Tarkington in much of his fiction celebrated the smaller town over the large city. Fred Pattee calls Tarkington "a James Whitcomb Riley with an education"⁹. ¹⁰Actually Tarkington was associated with Riley and another poet of the middle-west, Eugene Field. These men started a trend of "boosting"

⁹Fred Pattee, The New American Literature 1890-1930, New York, The Century Co., 1930, p. 75.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 75.

the small town and hence the term "Boosterism". It was a kind of literary chamber of commerce movement which played up the more pleasant qualities of the smaller communities.

Tarkington stressed the good neighborliness and folksy environment of an ideal middle-class life. It was supposed to be Americanism at its best. No one could afford to be a knocker; everyone had to be a booster. This false optimism glossed over many of the things that the more realistic American novelist writing about village life would concentrate on. Tarkington's world left not much room for the artist's individual reaction and healthy criticism of the currents of the time.

In contrast Mrs. Fisher's novels generally reflect a more balanced position in regard to the village community life. She was a strong believer in its virtues but she did not close her eyes to some of its drawbacks. If she had, she never would have written such books as Bonfire and Seasoned Timber which include many unflattering sides of the village and its character types.

Booth Tarkington in 1915 began a series of three novels dealing with life in a large mid-western city. The three novels were later collected into a trilogy called Growth. It is on these three novels that Tarkington is usually judged as far as his social realism is concerned. These novels are The Turmoil (1915), The Magnificent Ambersons (1918) and

The Midlander (1923). Estimates of his success are pretty much uniform. One critic said:

Through his picture of these earlier generations, Tarkington expressed nostalgia for a simpler life of more true distinction (. . .) and by dating this distinction in past time, he established, of course, a more solid substructure for his implicit social defense of the Middle West, but it was the Middle West as it might have become, not as it is¹¹.

The following quotation is from a review of the most recent book on Tarkington.

Many of Tarkington's novels are broken-backed because he failed to carry his characters to a logical and realistic end. His willingness to allow romantic conclusions violated the satirical sharpness of his portraits. Thus, The Magnificent Amber-sons begins as a worthy precursor of Main Street, but, Tarkington, unlike Sinclair Lewis, could not work out his initial premise consistently. In the course of time readers will remember the final compromise and will forget the perceptive pictures of urban life in the early automobile age¹².

In contrast, Mrs. Fisher never evades any experience that naturally presents itself. Nor did she ever look upon wealth or money as a worthwhile achievement in itself. Tarkington, to the extent that he is a realist, is properly called a sentimental or a superficial realist. Mrs. Fisher probes beneath the surfaces more and reacts to life as an experience.

¹¹The New American Literature 1890-1930, op. cit., p. 75.

¹²John T. Flanagan, "A Sentimental Realist", a review of Booth Tarkington, Gentleman from Indiana, New York Times book review section, issue of Jan. 1, 1956, p. 16.

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SINCLAIR LEWIS

Sinclair Lewis affords perhaps the best opportunity for a direct comparison with Mrs. Fisher because Lewis, the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature and the great non-conformist, chiefly attacked the small town, the very thing that Mrs. Fisher championed in a great deal of her fiction.

Sinclair Lewis was born in Sauk Center, Minnesota, the town which later became fictionalized as the Gopher Prairie of Main Street. At Yale he edited the college magazine and was remembered for his eccentricity. Upon graduation he traveled extensively in the United States and worked, like Willa Cather, Dreiser, and other novelists of the period, on various editorial jobs on different magazines. Four undistinguished novels preceded Main Street which in 1920 brought fame to this satirical novelist. This book was followed by several other major works such as Babbitt (1922), Arrowsmith (1926) which won the Pulitzer Prize, Dodsworth (1929) and It Can't Happen Here (1935).

The attack on the village had begun previous to Lewis's publishing of Main Street, since such works as Spoon River Anthology by Edgar Lee Masters had appeared in 1915 and Winesburg, Ohio in 1919. Other critics like H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan had struck out at the so-called hypocrisies of the small town. These men were alarmed, not only with the

economic abuses and injustices of a political nature which they wrote about, but they satirized the spiritual and cultural side of this life as well. The short stories contained in Winesburg, Ohio include the whole cast of village characters and everyone of them was twisted mentally. Sherwood Anderson's sub-title was The Book of Grotesques. Who can forget the peeping-Tom minister or George Willard's mother and father living out meaningless lives? According to these writers there was no creative activity or spiritual growth to be had in these small towns. Intellectual life existed hardly at all. Lewis summed it all up in his expose in Main Street which has become a classic phrase in the American vocabulary just as his next novel, Babbitt, affixed a name to the "go-getter type" American businessman.

Main Street tells the story of Carol Milford, the young college graduate with high ideals of social service, who gives up her job in the city library to marry Dr. Kennicott and comes to live in Gopher Prairie. Her attempts to raise the cultural level of the town meet with complete failure. She has an affair with young Volburg and goes off to Washington with him for two years. Later she returns to Gopher Prairie and Dr. Kennicott but she is defeated by the town and surrenders to it.

Mrs. Fisher's novel, The Brimming Cup, appeared in 1921 and it was her reply to Lewis. Mrs. Fisher's heroine,

Marise Crittenden, is, like Carol, married to a husband who lacks something of the wife's zest for living. They come to live in a Vermont village, but instead of finding it unbearably dull, they discover life there is a pleasant challenge. Neale tries to bring more economic stability to the town through his ideas about proper working conditions at the mill and by a system of shared responsibility and profit at the mill. Marise not only raises a family of three children but finds time to garden, to aid the neighbors in their difficulties, and to train a village chorale, to say nothing about warding off the advances of Vincent Marsh. The one weakness of the book is that the cultured Mr. Marsh never becomes alive enough to act as a threat to Marise's happiness.

But a comparison of the two novels from the viewpoint of realism reveals Lewis as the brilliant satirist and reporter of the social scene. He pictures the idealistic person at the mercy of the crass commercialism of the day. Religion as well as the other cultural forces are despised as being hypocritical. Mrs. Fisher's views appear to be more moderate and therefore tend to be more realistic, although, it is agreed, less powerfully portrayed. She sees the hypocrisy and the narrowness, too, but she includes the positive virtues that are in Marise and her husband. Lewis often exaggerates and caricatures and falsifies. Mrs. Fisher prefers to write more simply and less sensationally than Sinclair Lewis.

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In a book such as Dodsworth the reader sees the American way of life contrasted with European culture. Although Sam Dodsworth and his friend had a university education and had acquired wealth, neither feels any confidence in his American heritage. Both Mrs. Fisher and Sinclair Lewis seem to agree that American education was too formalistic. Sam Dodsworth, like Matey Gilbert in The Deepening Stream and Lydia Marshall in The Bent Twig, had been forced through the same conventional reading course in college. Dodsworth had said, "In Yale, teachers had been obstacles which a football player had to get past in order to carry out his duty of doing something for old Yale¹³."

Mrs. Fisher's heroines usually have the stuff to overcome the handicap of a defective educational system and through the school of experience make a satisfactory adjustment to life, while the Lewis characters must come to a compromise with it.

Sam Dodsworth is persuaded by his wife to go abroad because her desire is to be with the "best people". She is most pleased when the Europeans do not take her for an American. Dorothy Canfield Fisher's novels reveal a true cosmopolitan outlook on the world, but one which at the same time always shows a pride in the American way of life.

¹³Sinclair Lewis, Dodsworth, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1929, p. 246.

Lewis wrote one novel of Vermont life which won him fairly wide acclaim. It was called It Can't Happen Here and was published in 1935. It was a fantastic story of how a dictator got control of the party ticket in the American presidential election of 1936 and proceeded to turn the country into a thorough-going dictatorship. The novel was probably meant by Lewis to be more of a political propaganda piece than even a satirical novel and because of its form of a fantasy cannot be compared too closely with Dorothy Canfield Fisher's Seasoned Timber. It is quite obvious that Mrs. Fisher was once again replying to Lewis when she uses a very similar plot situation and setting. Lewis has a small-town Vermont newspaper editor try to withstand the political dictator and the editor is crushed in the process. Mrs. Fisher gives her hero Timothy Hulme (and the Vermont town itself) a smashing victory over the forces of anti-semitism.

SUMMARY

In this chapter a comparison has been made between the realism of Robert Herrick, Booth Tarkington, and Sinclair Lewis and that expressed in the novels of Dorothy Canfield Fisher. These writers were chosen for comparison because they represented differing modes of realistic writing in the novel at approximately the same period in which Mrs. Fisher wrote her novels. Both artistic perspectives and philosophical

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perspectives were included in the comparisons.

Robert Herrick shared, more than the other writers considered, Mrs. Fisher's outlook on life. He wrote largely in sympathy with the feminine viewpoint. He traced the influence of experience on character formation. His novels are often studies of failures, whereas those of Mrs. Fisher are usually of success or adjustment to life. Both were sceptical of the American educational system because of its emphasis on factual information. Both novelists shared the artistic defect in that they were not more selective in the use of their story material.

Booth Tarkington is in direct contrast with Mrs. Fisher as a writer. His realism is blended with a sentimental and romantic touch especially in his treatment of love. This is particularly true of his handling of the adolescent characters in such novels as Alice Adams and Seventeen. Contrariwise Mrs. Fisher always treats the adolescent character and his problems in a very serious manner. She accentuates the importance of their individuality as human persons and of their growing up in a healthy mental and emotional environment.

The two writers also differ in their outlook on the life in the small town. Tarkington made many attempts to propagandize for the advantages of small-town living. He painted a rather falsely glowing picture of the village. Mrs. Fisher's novels, although they are essentially in favor of

the small community, maintain a more balanced view. Tarkington may be called more a superficial realist while the Vermont writer is never one to evade life and is always faithful to the process of experience in life.

The novels of Sinclair Lewis represent a sharp contrast with Mrs. Fisher both in their thought and in their manner of presentation. Lewis constantly satirized and attacked the culture or the lack of culture that he saw in the life of the small American towns, especially those of the mid-west. Main Street best exemplifies his attitude toward this question. Mrs. Fisher's answer to Lewis came in her novel The Brimming Cup where she uses a similar plot situation and tries to point out some of the beneficial aspects of living that one can find in village life.

Her presentation of it is that it does not entirely consist of the dullness which Lewis maintained it did. Lewis's portraits are brilliantly and powerfully drawn. Mrs. Fisher's scenes are painted with more balance and probe more deeply, perhaps, into the nature of the problem than do Lewis's satires of the surface features of society.

CONCLUSION

Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote her ten novels over a period of years roughly approximate to the second, third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. American life during this time was undergoing many drastic changes and its fiction, which reflected many of those changes, has been the object of much critical study. Yet the work of Mrs. Fisher in the novel field has been overlooked at least in the sense of any overall critical evaluation or lengthy treatment. She has sometimes been regarded merely as a popular writer. In the sense that this term is understood to mean that her writing attracted attention by its appeal to the ephemeral, the implication is emphatically not true. A closer study of her novels indicates that she wrote out of a deep conviction about the spiritual significance of the experience of life and, it must be remembered, she did this at a time when spiritual values themselves were under attack from many of the most prominent writers of the period.

Mrs. Fisher had a very rich intellectual background for her work as a writer. Her father was president of three different state universities and later was librarian of Columbia University. Her mother was an artist which led to the family spending some time in European art centers. These influences gave the novelist a good understanding of the various cultural patterns both of her native America and of

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European life as well. In her later life, as her correspondence reveals, she was on intimate terms with an amazingly large number of the leading intellectuals and world figures of her time.

A study of her writing reveals that Mrs. Fisher never shut her eyes to the unpleasant or the ugly aspects of human existence. Yet, at the same time, she did not reject the spiritual side of life. All of the above points tend to show, therefore, that she cannot be dismissed as being merely the possessor of a facile pen which captured a large audience by a few tricks of style and by catering to the tastes of her readers who were many.

It is true that some of her novels show weaknesses that were the result of rather hasty composition. She published practically all of her novels first in the form of serial fiction for the women's magazines of the day. This was a natural thing to do because this type of periodical, just coming into prominence, was doing much to promote good fiction and they gave the younger writers a ready market for their work. Furthermore, Mrs. Fisher wrote from a feminine point of view in the sense that her narratives focused on the heroine and the plots were concerned with problems that are women's.

In her earlier works, especially The Bent Twig and The Squirrel Cage, she reacted strongly to the prevailing conditions in American life. She was critical of the emphasis

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being placed on the materialistic aspects of living. She denounced the mad rush towards financial success, especially because it thwarted the creative side of man. She believed that the American society was stifling the growth of the individual human being and was denying its fulfillment.

Later during the twenties when many of the younger novelists were crying out about frustration and disillusionment with life itself, Dorothy Canfield Fisher was carrying on a search for positive and permanent values. She found her theme in the domestic life and in this area of human experience she is hardly surpassed by any other American novelist. The books which best show this side of the author are: Rough Hewn, The Brimming Cup, Her Son's Wife, and The Deepening Stream.

For her, the home is the center of a social democracy. Both the father and the mother must work together in harmony in order that there be created a healthy atmosphere for the development of the child. Mrs. Fisher is contending in her fiction that out of this harmonious relationship between parents, there overflows into the community a vital spirit of cooperation in social affairs as well. And when the individual shares his creative talents with the community, the welfare of all is improved.

A central theme running constantly through all of her fiction is the idea that significant spiritual growth

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and achievement in life comes from within and is fostered through the actual life experiences that the individual undergoes. Honest hard work is an essential requisite of a full life. Loyalty to one's self and to others is stressed and disciplining one's self is held to be a lifelong task.

Her last two novels, Bonfire and Seasoned Timber, were written in the 1930's. In them, Mrs. Fisher showed a tendency toward broadening out her theme. She became more concerned with the problems of the community in addition to those of the individual.

In the matter of style, Mrs. Fisher presents something of a paradox. At her best she is an expert craftsman who knows what a good sentence is and how to fit one situation together with the next. She has a graphic sense of detail which can evoke a scene and depict a character. The reader finds in her writing always the immediacy of felt experience. A narrative for her is an organic thing. Words and sentences fuse into the larger units of the story.

But at the same time, these admirable qualities of her writing become her chief defects. Frequently her novels become too heavy with narrative detail. It is not so much that the details are not significant in themselves but that the reader suffers from a superabundance of them. Consequently, the overall effect of the story is weakened. In short, she does not at times exercise enough of the essential

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artistic element of selectivity.

Also, it is difficult at times to separate the literary craftsmanship in her novels from what, for want of a better word, must be called the propaganda element. So intent is she on driving home to the reader her views that she is willing to sacrifice some of the finer aesthetic points of structure and form, for the sake of clinching a point of view of her own about some social or moral issue. But since she always has a pretty good story to tell and knows how to get it told, the intrusions of a thesis now and then do not destroy the narrative. She is deeply emotional and as other novelists like H. G. Wells, George Eliot, or even Charles Dickens, she does not hold back her own personal views on how life should be lived. She is a realist, but she is a realist with a distinct sense of moral values and she does not mind expressing them.

Mrs. Fisher uses primarily the Vermont scene for her background but she is neither a local colorist nor a regional novelist. Her outlook is more universal than either of those terms imply. She began to write at a time when the women novelists were coming into prominence in American fiction. Her work does not come up to that of Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow or Edith Wharton in artistic merit, but the honesty of her realism which is centered on the small American community and the domestic life of the middle and lower classes makes

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her work important in the historical development of the American novel and deserving of more critical attention than it has thus far received.

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ABSTRACT

Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote ten novels published over a period of about thirty-two years or from 1907 to 1939. Although her work received a great deal of popular acclaim during these years, there has been a noticeable lack of critical attention paid to her work in relation to the whole period in which she wrote. Yet it is obvious from a reading of her novels that she deserves an overall assessment of her artistic value and also of her place in the development of the American novel.

She began her career as a novelist amid a period of social and literary fermentation. Writers were turning more and more towards a scrutiny of existing economic and social institutions with some very critical views.

Mrs. Fisher wrote three novels prior to World War I. The first, Gunhild, a kind of idyllic romance, is not of very great importance to an understanding of the writer and stands apart from her central themes and her later development.

The other two pre-war novels, The Squirrel Cage and The Bent Twig, however, reveal her serious interest in the relation of the individual person to the American community life. Both stories are realistic in their rejection of a growing materialism which placed a premium on commercial success and social prominence which was gained at the expense of human values. The title, The Squirrel Cage, itself, is a

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caustic comment on the prevailing mores as Mrs. Fisher viewed them. In Bent Twig the author pictures successfully the academic community of one of the growing midwestern universities. In having the hero of the novel voluntarily choose a life dedicated to community welfare and service and give up a large inheritance, the author shows her own sense of values.

All three of her early novels place stress on the achievement of the individual character, based upon the process of experience.

Mrs. Fisher suspended her work in the novel for a few years during the interval of the war. She followed her husband to France and engaged in volunteer relief work among the French children and the wounded soldiers.

Returning from France she again took up the writing of novels and further developed her powers as a realistic novelist. In her next three novels she expanded her earlier themes and her writing centered on the domestic conflicts of the heroines. These works, The Brimming Cup, Rough Hewn, and The Home-Maker, stress the individual's adjustment to the life of the family and also to the life of the small New England community.

The Brimming Cup offers a contrasting, yet more satisfying, picture of the life of a small town than the Sinclair Lewis satire, Main Street, in reaction to which Mrs. Fisher wrote her story. Like some of her other novels, however, it

has its artistic failing in the sense that it sometimes labors a social philosophy too strenuously at the expense of the narrative. Rough Hewn continued her experimental methods of plot development. This novel also provides a view of both the European and American cultural environments. Mrs. Fisher treats both sides realistically and also very effectively.

The Home-Maker was a lesser artistic achievement in which the author seemed to be pointing up the thesis that neither woman nor man is suited merely by nature for any one particular career in life. In this novel, through an accident to the husband, the role of home-maker is reversed and the wife, a woman more suited to a business career than her husband, becomes the family breadwinner.

In the twenties, Mrs. Fisher wrote two novels that stand as her best achievement in fiction. These two books were Her Son's Wife and The Deepening Stream. The first was a tightly constructed, dramatic story more in the tradition of European novels and it had only three main characters. The conflict centers on a grandmother who interferes in the marriage of her son to the point of making an invalid out of his wife in order to bring up the grandchild herself. Mrs. Fisher's treatment of the moral problem involved seems to condone in part this action and leaves herself somewhat open to the charge of sentimentalism in the ending of the novel.

The Deepening Stream is generally considered to be

the author's best work. In it she presents the growth of the character of her heroine from childhood through adolescence to full maturity. Matey Gilbert finally discovers the underlying significance of the pattern of events that have shaped her life. In her handling of World War I, Mrs. Fisher makes an honest attempt to evaluate the dramatic changes that affected American life. Unlike many other of her contemporaries, she indicated a positive acceptance of the human frailties of people who were involved in that catastrophe and looked forward towards the making of a better world.

In the thirties Mrs. Fisher published her final two novels, Bonfire and Seasoned Timber. In both these stories the author showed a further range in her fictional powers. In addition to the usual stress placed upon individual human growth through the experiences of life, more emphasis now was placed on the problems of the community. In this respect Mrs. Fisher indicated a capacity for growth even at the close of her career. In her rejection of fascism in Seasoned Timber she showed herself still a realistic novelist who stood clearly on the side of individual freedom.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher's range as a creative artist is greater than that of the writer of regional novels. She chose the domestic life as the chief theme of her novels and she wrote realistically of the human scene as she observed it.

In her plots she shows the primary qualities of a

good narrative although there is sometimes lack of structural unity in some of her novels. She employs exclusively the third person point of view in her narrations. At the same time, she reveals her largely feminine point of view by making the heroine the central character in practically all of the novels. Her characterizations are for the most part realistically drawn and Mrs. Fisher was a sort of pioneer in the realistic characterization of small children in American fiction. She wrote primarily about the lower middle class community life as well as that of the lower classes, treating their common problems always with an atmosphere of moral dignity.

The two main schools of literature in America at the time when Mrs. Fisher began her career were the naturalistic and the realistic. On the evidence in her novels of straightforward treatment of both the pleasant as well as the unpleasant aspects of human life in the small American community, she clearly belongs to the latter group, the realists.

During this period in the American novel, there appeared several realistic women novelists. Among these were Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, and Ellen Glasgow. Dorothy Canfield Fisher's work is essentially in contrast to that of all three of these writers in the sense that although she is a very competent craftsman in the novel, she does not measure up to this group as far as conscious artistry is concerned.

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The above-named writers were all more selective in their realism. Mrs. Fisher's novels often fall short in this respect. Even though she was a close student of French literature, she never learned the important lesson of selectivity of detail.

Willa Cather was more concerned with the spiritual aspects of life. Edith Wharton was more in sympathy with the aristocratic and cosmopolitan cultural patterns. While Ellen Glasgow introduced more symbolism into her realistic novels.

Mrs. Fisher, on the other hand, was more interested in fidelity to the process of actual experience in the lives of her characters and with their growth in the face of the commonplace struggles of life.

Other realists of the period with whom Mrs. Fisher may be compared on the basis of their artistic and philosophical perspectives are: Robert Herrick, Booth Tarkington, and Sinclair Lewis.

Robert Herrick, more than any of the other novelists mentioned, had very much in common with Mrs. Fisher's outlook on life. Like Mrs. Fisher he was interested in tracing the process of experience in the lives of his characters. He was feministic in point of view although his novels are more negative than Mrs. Fisher's in that they are studies in failure rather than in successful adjustments to life.

Booth Tarkington shows a direct contrast with Mrs.

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Fisher's point of view. His realism is largely blended with the sentimental touch, especially in his treatment of adolescent love. Contrariwise, the Vermont novelist depicts the problems of adolescent love in a more serious vein.

Sinclair Lewis consistently shows a satirical bent in his realism. He attacked the culture, or lack of it, which he observed in the American scene. His portrait of the American small town is sharply condemnatory, although powerfully drawn. Mrs. Fisher's conception of this phase of American life is pictured with more balance and possibly with a little more depth than the surface satire of Lewis.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher cannot be regarded merely as a writer of popular fiction. A closer evaluation of her novels indicates that she wrote out of a deep conviction of the spiritual significance of life, and did this at a time when spiritual values themselves were being undervalued by a great many writers. She had a very rich intellectual background. For her the home was the center of a social democracy. Both the father and the mother had to work in harmony to provide a healthy atmosphere for the child to grow in. Out of this harmony in the home there overflowed into the community a vital spirit of cooperation in social affairs as well. The individual person must share his creative talents for the welfare of all. Honest hard work is an essential requisite for one's happiness in life. Self-discipline and loyalty were

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the admirable qualities with her. The individual man or woman must continue to grow from within in order to achieve a satisfactory adjustment in life.

As she herself has observed, there is little or no likelihood that any of her writings will stand for very long the test of time. But it is just as true to maintain that she has made an important contribution to the development of realism in the American novel.