

Spring 1995

# The art of living': The aesthetics of everyday life in Dorothy Canfield Fisher's novels

Anne Marie Downey

*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

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**'THE ART OF LIVING': THE AESTHETICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE  
IN DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER'S NOVELS**

BY

ANNE M. DOWNEY  
A.B., Wheaton College, 1981  
M.A., Northeastern University, 1988

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

May, 1995

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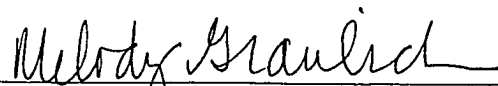
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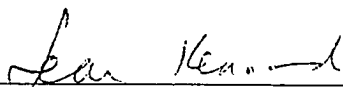
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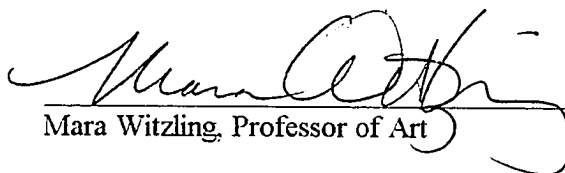
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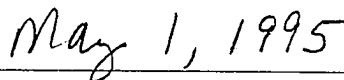
Barbara White, Professor of Women's Studies



Mara Witzling, Professor of Art



Diane Freedman, Assistant Professor of English



Date

## **DEDICATION**

To Edward James Downey

and

Cecelia Kakowska Downey,

with love and gratitude

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have given their time and energy to help me complete this project. I wish to thank the librarians in Special Collections at the Bailey Howe Library, the University of Vermont for their patient assistance; the Interlibrary Loan Office of Dimond Library at the University of New Hampshire; the Graduate School and the Center for the Humanities at the University of New Hampshire for travel and research assistance; Ida Washington, Mark Madigan, Joan Schroeter and Charlene Sexton for their expertise on Dorothy Canfield Fisher, and their willingness to share it; Vivian Scott Hixon and Bill Hixon for their hospitality and their memories of Dorothy Canfield Fisher; my fellow dissertation workshop members, especially Susan Schibanoff, Michael Pugh, Etta Madden, Lisa Sisco, Bill Sayres, Claude Caswell, Mike Reardon and Keith Jones for their thoughtful readings of early drafts of this manuscript; and Barbara White, Jean Kennard, Mara Witzling and Diane Freedman for their comments and suggestions. I owe special thanks to Melody Graulich for her encouragement in directing this dissertation.

I would also like to thank my family, especially Dr. Nancy Downey and David Downey for their good faith, humor and unique perspectives. And finally, this project would never have been completed without the support of Bob McKenna and Esme and Gilbert Downey, who helped make my everyday life artful, and who, through all my ups and downs, loved me no matter what.



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## ABSTRACT

### 'THE ART OF LIVING': THE AESTHETICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER'S NOVELS

by

Anne M. Downey

University of New Hampshire, May 1995

In 1924, Dorothy Canfield Fisher (1879-1958) wrote, "I have always conceived of everyday life as needing very much the sort of constant effort at composition -- that is shapeliness, elimination of unnecessary details, choice of details -- as any other work of art." This quotation is the epigraph to my study of five of Fisher's early novels because it reveals a central theme of her fiction: that art is the creation of a daily life that successfully negotiates the "problems of living" (Fisher's phrase) that plague modern America. The five novels that I analyze -- The Squirrel-Cage (1912), The Bent Twig (1915), The Brimming Cup (1921), The Home-maker (1924) and The Deepening Stream (1930) -- show that Fisher defines these problems as finding meaningful work and creating sustaining marriages and family lives. Her protagonists' solutions to these problems comprise an "art of living," a phrase Fisher uses to summarize the lessons her protagonists learn in their quests to shape their lives.

As I explain in my introduction, Fisher's relationship with her mother was a defining element in her artistic development. Although her mother embraced an "art for art's sake" credo, Fisher felt that art should have a social purpose. Her fiction is rich with debates about art that reenact this split with her mother. Fisher forges a connection between two different artistic processes in her fiction: the ritualized shaping of domestic life, and the rigorous training of creating high art. Therefore, I argue that her position in American women's literature is transitional because she blends two women's literary traditions, regionalism and the *kunstlerroman*, broadening their boundaries.

Throughout my study, I structure my chapters according to the domestic processes that Fisher invokes in her fiction -- carpentry, gardening and sewing -- illuminating how her protagonists combine these domestic processes with their musical careers. I also describe the social movements that Fisher was interested in -- the Arts and Crafts Movement, the Montessori method of education, Freudian psychology and daycare -- and show how they partially provide Fisher with the solutions she seeks in remodeling family life for modern America.

## INTRODUCTION

For I always have conceived of everyday life as needing very much the sort of constant effort at composition -- that is shapeliness, elimination of unnecessary details, choice of details -- as any other work of art.<sup>1</sup>

At some point in my American literature classes, I like to tell my students about my coming-of-age as a literary critic. I describe my discovery of turn of the century American women's novels: The Story of Avis (1877) by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Iola Leroy (1893) by Frances E. W. Harper, The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) by Sarah Orne Jewett, The Awakening (1899) by Kate Chopin, The House of Mirth (1905) by Edith Wharton, A Woman of Genius (1912) by Mary Austin, The Song of the Lark (1915) by Willa Cather, Quicksand (1928) and Passing (1929) by Nella Larsen, and so many others. I explain that as a group these books constitute a tradition that, prior to becoming a graduate student, I did not know existed. And, I tell them that much of the challenge and joy that my work holds for me comes from illuminating this tradition for them and considering it alongside other American literary traditions.

For example, I show how The Story of Avis tells a side of the artist's story that is missing from Henry James's artist plots. I confess that my longing for brashness in Theodore Dreiser's Carrie Meeber is satisfied by Mary Austin's Olivia Lattimore. I reveal how Charity Royall's predicament in Wharton's Summer (1917) casts a different light on the precariousness of adolescence than that shed by Huck Finn. My point in forming these pairs is not only to expand the canon, but also to remind my students that library shelves are full of other absent characters and unread authors whose perspectives are missing only until we rediscover and retell their stories.

My dissertation on Dorothy Canfield Fisher (1879-1958) represents my desire to hear one of those silenced voices speak again. As I discovered after reading her novel The Home-maker (1924) in a graduate class on marriage in American literature, Fisher had much to say about the complexities of modern American life. She published eleven novels and several short story collections. Her twelve books of non-fiction include general, sociological studies of modern educational trends and popular histories of

American heroes and of her beloved Vermont. She was a perceptive commentator on the shifts and movements of modern life, publishing numerous articles on marriage, the family and women's issues in the popular press. Because of her desire to play a role in public affairs, she served on many state and national educational boards and, as one of America's foremost women of letters, was asked to be a panel judge for the Book-of-the-Month Club, a job she held for twenty-five years. She was a popular lecturer and received several honorary degrees because of her success as a writer and a public figure. Indeed, Eleanor Roosevelt once called her one of the ten most influential women in America.

But Fisher wanted to be remembered for her fiction. As Ida Washington reports in her groundbreaking biography, Fisher wrote, "My efforts to be a good citizen . . . really should not be given so much attention that my books, to which I have given the very core of my heart and mind, should be pushed into the background" (Washington x).<sup>2</sup> Until now, however, critics who have published studies of Fisher's work have either summarized or alluded to Fisher's fiction while focusing on other areas of her career.

Washington's biography, for example, is a useful composite of the various elements and activities that made up Fisher's rich personal life and prolific career. Fisher's fiction, however, is treated as only one of those elements and therefore is not given the detailed attention it deserves. Mark Madigan's recent collection of Fisher's letters allows us to hear Fisher's colorful personal voice and read about her relationships with other writers, but her fiction is necessarily placed in the background. Joan Shelly Rubin includes an analysis of Fisher's role on the Book-of-the-Month Club panel of judges in her study of "middlebrow culture," but her focus is on Fisher's position as a cultural arbiter and not on her fiction. While several articles on individual novels have appeared, a full-scale study of Fisher's fiction has yet to be published.<sup>3</sup>

My dissertation is such a study. In these pages, I re-trace the shape of Fisher's plotlines and inspect the contours of her ideas about art and its social purpose. My project is organized around a group of five of Fisher's early works, published from 1912 to 1930, that I identify as her "art of living" novels. The phrase "the art of living"<sup>4</sup> is Fisher's own description for the ideal that she wishes to portray in her

fiction. Fisher felt strongly that fiction should have a moral and social purpose in uncovering and solving a "problem of living."<sup>5</sup> Such problems include creating a good marriage and a happy family life, finding valuable and meaningful work, pursuing spiritual rather than monetary pleasures. Fisher argues that art is the creation of a daily life that successfully negotiates these problems and the five novels that I analyze - The Squirrel Cage (1912), The Bent Twig (1915), The Brimming Cup (1921), The Home-maker (1924) and The Deepening Stream (1930) -- have this central theme in common.

I reveal my critical agenda by shaping my recovery of Fisher in this manner because, besides giving Fisher's novels the critical attention they deserve, I also re-place her in an American women's literary tradition. I argue that her position in this tradition is an important one for two reasons. First, as I demonstrate throughout this study, Fisher's argument about the aesthetics of everyday life logically places her in two late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century traditions: the women's regionalist tradition, largely rural and domestic in focus, and the tradition of the *künstlerroman* or the artist's coming-of-age plot, which traces the highly intellectual, cosmopolitan training of the professional artist.<sup>6</sup> Fisher balances both traditions in varying proportions in her novels and bridges the gap between them.

For example, in her novel of manners The Bent Twig, her protagonist's coming-of-age involves mediating between her mother's domestic, rural world and her aunt's life as a sophisticated European traveller and art collector. Fisher's regionalist novel, The Brimming Cup, shows the same mix. In this story, her protagonist has given up her career as a celebrated pianist to create a home life in a small Vermont town, and Fisher brings an artistically-trained eye to the domestic rituals that comprise the art of living in a rural setting. I argue that in balancing these two traditions, Fisher renovates them, broadening their boundaries and furthering their existence well into the twentieth century.

Secondly, Fisher participates in a feminist tradition in a unique and important way since her fictional, domestic artists are often male. Fisher's feminism is also a mix of two different lineages. Her parents, James Hulme Canfield and Flavia Camp Canfield, endorsed the late-nineteenth century feminist movement that rallied around suffrage and co-education. Dorothy benefitted from their "zeal for women's

rights" as she called it; much of her early education was achieved in Europe where her mother studied painting, and her experiences there ultimately led to a Ph.D. in Romance languages from Columbia University in 1904.

However, Fisher explained in a letter to a friend that she was "in reaction from" her parents' zeal and she rejected the term "feminist." Although Fisher's career was at least partially a result of an "equal rights" feminist tradition, Fisher positioned herself as a cultural feminist by celebrating traditional "women's work," work centered around domestic values and activities. I argue that one of her most enduring feminist statements is the fact that her male characters desire to take part in this work, too. They reject socially-prescribed roles as captains of industry or cultured men-of-the-world to create a meaningful home life and help raise their children.

Thus, Fisher fits into both feminist camps and two seemingly opposing women's literary traditions, and recent studies of women's fiction at the turn of the century have helped me to illuminate this fact, as has the scholarship on the *künstlerroman*. For example, Fisher could easily be included in Ann Romines' 1992 analysis of the "home plot" in American women's literature.<sup>7</sup> Romine's book describes the fiction of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Willa Cather and Eudora Welty as "honor[ing] women's domestic history by making it the shape of art" (293). Fisher, too, desired to make art out of domestic experience as a letter about her novel *The Bent Twig* shows: "Life is full of [domestic] details. Why can't I be smart enough to make them vital?" (Washington 74).

But Fisher also fits the pattern of the "new woman" artist that Elizabeth Ammons traces in her *Conflicting Stories*.<sup>8</sup> Fisher married later than usual at age twenty-eight, had fewer children than the norm (two), was highly educated, had a career, "a public voice" and "visible power," and "laid claim to the rights and privileges customarily accorded bourgeois men" (7). Fisher's fictional themes are similar to those of the nine women that Ammons groups together, too. She was "preoccup[ied] with the figure of the woman artist" and, as I will show later in this introduction, needed to rectify her relationship with her mother (5).



However, Fisher didn't share the "contempt for the domestic-writers tradition" that Ammons identifies as "overt" at the turn-of-the-century (126).<sup>9</sup> Ammon's point that turn of the century women writers "identified with literarily elite, mostly male writers whose work came out of the modern high western tradition of art not as business but as vocation" is well-taken and applies, in part, to Fisher (126); when asked, she cited Thackeray's Vanity Fair as an early influence. But as I will demonstrate in my conclusion, Fisher resented critics who suggested that her life as a wife, mother and grandmother somehow precluded her status as an artist. She often foregrounded her personal life even when speaking as a professional, eradicating the boundaries that define "separate spheres" for modern and contemporary women.

Fisher's work also alters the pattern of the *künstlerroman* as critics have defined it over the past thirty years. A brief overview of the scholarship on this tradition demonstrates the important differences that Fisher fashions in her artist novels. Maurice Beebe's book, Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts (1964) is widely recognized as the first major study of the form. Two feminist critics, Grace Stewart and Linda Huf, point out the gender bias of his project and reform his definition to include artist novels by women.<sup>10</sup> I would like to complicate the discussion by showing how Fisher's version of the *künstlerroman* differs from the women writers that Stewart and Huf study.

Briefly, Beebe's book describes three "interlocking themes," the Divided Self, the Ivory Tower and the Sacred Fount, that reoccur so frequently in artist fiction that "they assume the dimension of myths that may express universal truths" (6). An artistic hero only becomes himself, according to Beebe, "after he has sloughed off the domestic, social, and religious demands imposed upon him by his environment," thus creating the sense of a divided self, a man and an artist (6).<sup>11</sup>

Fisher's work can not fit Beebe's pattern because his central idea involves a self-imposed separation from domesticity in order to achieve artistic ideals. Her heroine immerse themselves in domesticity and realize their artistic ideals in their homes and communities. Beebe's analysis of Henry

James' art of living, however, is helpful by contrast, as Fisher cites James in her novels -- particularly The Bent Twig and The Brimming Cup -- as the kind of writer whose artistic life she is working against.

Beebe writes about James' "Pater-like insistence that life, when it is most meaningful, is an 'aesthetic adventure.'" The adventure requires the artist to be detached from a domestic life. "the life of doing and getting," to pursue an artistic life, the life of "being and seeing" (230-1).<sup>12</sup> For Fisher, the impure, materialist aspects of a domestic life are artful because they are balanced by the purity of spiritual intent. Thus, picking lice off a pig in The Brimming Cup, surely not fictional fodder for James, takes on great spiritual significance as Marise Crittenden teaches her son Paul how to care for an animal dependent on him for its well-being.

In her fiction, Fisher argues that a life of "being and seeing" is a life wasted, a life not lived at all. A remark about James that Fisher makes in a letter to her friend, Merle Haas, is telling. She writes.

I have just risen from my fifteen minutes allowed reading time, with a smile over a statement of Henry Canby's or maybe Henry James, in Henry Canby's comments on The Bostonians. Seems the theory is . . . that James wrote with such savage satire of the Boston reforming women, who (idiots that they were) 'wanted to make the world a better place to live in,' because he thought that they were engaged in destroying the 'sentiment of sex.' Is that a joke! As if anything could! And this fear lest the 'sentiment of sex' be diminished, from a man who, as far as the eye can see, never had a bit of it. Something like the Pope telling the world in all the modern languages all about what the relations between husband and wife should be. (Madigan 302)

Of course Fisher would resent James' treatment of reformers; she herself was devoted to many crusades, mostly in the area of education, throughout her life. But she also feels that James should be taken to task for his position as an "observer" of life who criticizes people who do something to make it better. As Clifton Fadiman writes, Fisher was a "do-gooder," and she felt that "books, good books, were not 'products' but the laborious issue of human intelligences, acts of life-affirmation that might actually influence other minds" (Madigan x). According to Fisher, James' criticism of reform on behalf of the "sentiment of sex" belies his responsibility as an artist since, for him, it is an artistic abstraction, nothing real at all.

But Fisher's fiction does not conform to the woman writer's *künstlerroman* patterns fashioned by Grace Stewart and Linda Huf, either. Stewart's book, written in response to Beebe, is organized around two central questions: "Is the mythic pattern of the artist as hero a universal one?" and "Does the mythic pattern of the artist as heroine differ?" (8).<sup>13</sup> Stewart finds that neither of Beebe's traditions fits "the womanly role of selfless involvement with and connection to others," and therefore, "the female writer must defy the cultural definition of artist or of woman if she is to remain artist and woman" (14).<sup>14</sup> Her "new mythos" identifies myths that speak more to a woman writer's experience as patterns for the *künstlerroman* tradition, particularly the Demeter/Persephone myth and its depiction of the mother/daughter relationship.

When myth figures in Fisher's fiction, as it does in *The Squirrel-Cage*, it is Ariadne's tale that is told, essentially the myth of the helpmate, rather than the story of Demeter and Persephone.<sup>15</sup> Disproving Stewart's assertion that "the female artist . . . cannot emerge in the roles society presents her" (15), Fisher proves that she can because, in her fiction, the artist stops striving to fit the western, male definition of the high artist, forging a new definition that includes her art and her domestic life.<sup>16</sup> Fisher proves that women can quest after art without leaving home; her heroine's "journey to the interior," to borrow Stewart's phrase, results in the unification of woman and artist within her own four walls.

Finally, Linda Huf's book also shows that female artist heroines have "different traits and troubles" than male heroes. Huf finds five major differences in *künstlerroman* by women: the "stalwart, spirited and fearless" personality of the heroine<sup>17</sup>, the conflict between her life as a woman and her life as an artist, echoing Stewart's split; the "sexually conventional foil," a domestic angel who defines the heroine as more passionate and serious; despotic men who drag the heroine down; and an essential radicalness that "calls for the smashing of the man-forged manacle on her sex" (10).<sup>18</sup>

Huf's characteristics do not describe Fisher's heroines, either. Certainly, the Fisher heroine is spirited, but if she feels torn "between her role as a woman . . . and her aspirations as an artist," she is able to mend the tear by stitching her artist self to her womanly role, and finds a richer satisfaction in the

sewing. The blond foil abounds in her fiction but Fisher subverts the role by characterizing her as a rather superficial seeker-after-art, a passive reader of Henry James novels and consumer of massage creams. It is her brunette heroine who plays Martha, the “Compleat Female.” And there is only one “domestic dictator” in Fisher’s fiction: Paul in The Squirrel-Cage (although Fisher goes to great lengths to show that he, too, is victimized by restrictive gender roles). In the rest of her novels, there certainly is a male muse who shares domestic responsibilities with the heroine. This characteristic is perhaps the most radical element of Fisher’s fiction, to answer to Huf’s fifth *künstlerroman* trait. But, there is no “man-forged manacle” on her heroine’s wrist, only a very equitable joining of hands.

Fisher was named after the Victorian heroine Dorothea Brooke from George Eliot’s Middlemarch (1872) and her life and work often exhibit a struggle to shake-off restrictive Victorian codes of behavior and Victorian plot structures to try on a modern identity, to tell modern stories. The tension between conserving what was valuable from her nineteenth century up-bringing and reforming those elements of Victorian culture that were repressive underlies Fisher’s fictional, social and personal endeavors, as I will show throughout this study. For example, she believed that strong family lives are crucial to personal and social well-being. In her article on “the much-debated family” (1929), she writes:

One of the strongest arguments for the belief that family life will always be with us is the fact that in spite of the material we build it of, it still endures! Sex and marriage and family life and parenthood are not ends and goals of human life. They are the best background for it we have yet discovered -- the background against which individual lives . . . seem to reach their highest development.<sup>19</sup>

Fisher’s definition of family life as “background” is key to her renovation of traditional social structures for the twentieth century. Her novels demonstrate that domesticity is a social responsibility as well as a private pursuit, and her protagonists learn that being a good mother means being a better citizen. Fisher criticizes old-fashioned family patterns by proving that separate spheres limit both men and women and hinder family relationships. She shows that women need roles in their communities as well as their homes, and that men need an expanded parental identity. By connecting private situations with public

responsibility, Fisher remodels the family structure, reshaping her mothers and fathers for the modern world.

Fisher's relationship with her own mother Flavia Camp Canfield is central to her domestic and artistic ideals, for throughout her career, Fisher revises her mother's artistic legacy. Her essay "What My Mother Taught Me" (1956) shows that Flavia, an artist herself, influenced Dorothy to choose an artistic career, but that Fisher learned early to reject her mother's definition of art.<sup>20</sup> The boundaries that separate Fisher and her mother, familiar boundaries perhaps to the student of American women's literature, divide art and domesticity. While Flavia was disdainful of domestic affairs, travelling as often as she could to escape domestic responsibility, Dorothy settled, literally and in her fiction, in territory where art and domesticity could co-habitate, and she stayed.

Flavia Camp Canfield was a breezily independent artist and feminist whose role as a wife and mother clearly interfered with her passion for art. "The best in fiction, in music, above all, in the art she herself tried to practice -- painting -- those were her true realities of life," Fisher writes in her preface.<sup>21</sup> While Fisher appreciates the "golden part" of what she "inherited from her example" -- her mother's taste for good art -- her memories are shadowed by her mother's resulting unreasonableness and irresponsibility in her domestic role, a role that Dorothy rushed to fill.

Flavia's resentment of her traditional domestic role is matched by Dorothy's bitterness about her mother's "true realities," her "conviction that masterpieces of great art are important beyond anything else in the world -- beyond taking reasonable care of one's health in order not to be a burden; beyond, far, far beyond comfort -- one's own or one's family's; beyond regret at seeing the disagreeable consequences of one's own actions weighing on other people" (xviii). The whole Canfield family was affected by Flavia's unpredictable behavior; she often left her husband and son to fend for themselves as she went off on her aesthetic adventures, telling her family, "expect me when you see me" (xiii). And while her unpredictability was "sand in the house-machinery of those left behind," Dorothy, who was often dragged along on her mother's escapades, was also affected by it (xiii).

"What My Mother Taught Me" exposes the damage and reveals Fisher's ability to pick up the pieces and arrange them into a kaleidoscopic view of art, a painting by a master here, a piece of a bedquilt there. The preface shows the development of Fisher's moral code, as her mother's negative example strengthens her convictions about moral and aesthetic responsibility.

Fisher explains Flavia as the type of person who "think[s] . . . that the only two alternatives open to us are, either to repudiate the whole idea of human responsibility, or else year by year to shut out any glimpses of the spaciousness of beauty, of poetry, of the deeper intuitions" (xxiv-xxv). While Fisher sees the "splendor" of her mother's inanimate art, she also feels the human responsibility of caring for those who share your domestic situation. She understands people like Aunt Mehetabel, the spinster artist of her well-known short story "The Bedquilt" (1906) who need the dignity implicit in the label of "artist." Throughout her career, Fisher embroiders upon this theme, a theme that is both the tear in her relationship with her mother, and the fabric with which she will make her fiction.<sup>22</sup>

"What My Mother Taught Me" links two incidents that Fisher defines as art lessons from her mother; the first takes place when Fisher was twenty and visited the Prado in Madrid with her mother, and the second in mid-life when, in a cab with her mother in Rotterdam, she has occasion to think back on that incident in the Prado. As Fisher tells it, she was a victim of her mother's whim to go to the Prado to see Velasquez's paintings, which were much discussed in turn-of-the-century Parisian art circles. It was late winter, the weather was especially unpleasant, and the "sanitary arrangements" were "of a filthiness beyond imagination" (xv). Flavia did not even speak the language but with her assertion that "[Dorothy] . . . always picks up new languages" they set off (xv).

Flavia copied the paintings, "ecstatic as a saint in prayer," and ignored the fact that Dorothy was supposed to be back for her winter term at the Sorbonne. In those long hours in the Prado, Dorothy studied the subjects she would have been taking at the Sorbonne. She also noticed the art that so enthralled her mother, one day "noting broad lines of composition," "fixed on detail" on another. One portrait particularly captured her, Velasquez's painting of a court dwarf, "Sebastian de Morra."

Fisher remembers the portrait years later in the second incident in Rotterdam when she thinks about her mother's personality and their inability to communicate:

I was young again -- crassly young -- and in Madrid, in the Prado, standing beside my artist-mother. She was lifted out of herself by the ethereal radiance of light-suffused air, presented on the nobly painted canvases. I was looking at the same pictures. I too was exalted by them. But although she was the force which had brought me there, what I saw, even in my raw youth, was not what my mother saw. (xxvi)

Her mother was moved by the excellence of line and the vividness of color, aesthetic values that Dorothy recognizes as well. But what Dorothy felt from "Sebastian de Morra" was the pain in the dwarf's eyes. Writing as an old woman, Fisher recognizes the immensity of the moment in shaping her value system and her artistic agenda. She realizes that those eyes encouraged her to tell the story of Aunt Mehetabel who is a victim of "the social code of her time which decreed that plain women without money, who did not have husbands, who had never been admired by men, were only outcasts from the normal group . . . grotesque deformities, so that to look at them was to laugh at them!" (xxvii).

A brief synopsis of "The Bedquilt" shows how this aesthetic moment is replayed in her fiction. Mehetabel is an "old-maid dependent," and although they are not unkind to her, her brother's family, the Elwells, find her "insignificant" and "invisible" (52-3). Because of her low status in her family and in society, Mehetabel is given the most boring and tedious of household tasks. Her one talent and joy in life is in piecing bedquilts.

The story focuses on one particular quilt that Mehetabel creates, a pattern so complex and artistic that she believes it was given to her by God. Mehetabel's life is transformed by her quilt. Her family finally recognizes her existence and treats her better. She is relieved of many of her old chores and is given her own work space so that she might give more time and energy to her creation. The quilt becomes one of the local "sights" that tourists visit and Mehetabel's family makes sure that she dresses better to greet these visitors.

Once Mehetabel finishes her quilt, her brother sends her to the County Fair with it. There Mehetabel never leaves the room in which her quilt is hanging, "a big bow of blue ribbon right in the

middle of it" (60). "I tell you it looked real good," she tells her family, "the supreme content of an artist who has realized his ideal" on her face (60). Here Fisher validates Aunt Mehetabel's creative processes and redefines her quilt, a practical, domestic object as art.<sup>23</sup>

What Fisher learned about pain from Sebastian de Morra's eyes enabled her "to convince people who in life hardly even noticed [Aunt Mehetabel's] existence that she shared in the human dignity of the instinct to create" (xxvii); and indeed, Aunt Mehetabel feels "part of the world at last" because of her community's recognition of her talent. The portrait of the dwarf has taught Fisher to sympathize with and tell the story of people like Mehetabel who, for one reason or another, are victims of a society that doesn't know any better. This is a theme that occurs throughout Fisher's work. For example, her novel The Home-maker explores how social constructions of "appropriate" gender behavior can dwarf the creativity of individuals and make their family lives miserable.

How the young Dorothy is affected by art, Fisher realizes in "What My Mother Taught Me," would be "irrelevant . . . even heretical" in her mother's "inner world" where art is beauty of line and vividness of color (xxviii). Her mother's appreciation of art for art's sake has shown Fisher her fictional project: to mend together an aesthetic sense with a moral one, human responsibility. Because of this memory, she then is able to expound on what she feels art ought to do: "no novel . . . is worth the reading unless it grapples with some problem of living. Beauty of description, a stirring plot, the right word in the right place . . . all these are excellent. But without that fundamental drive, they are only words--words--words" (xxviii). Fisher's responsibility as an artist lies in portraying human beings so that her readers can not only see the "light-suffused air" of art, but also feel the profound human dignity that art should portray and think about the human problems she deems worthy of fictional treatment.

I provide this examination of Fisher's preface because her fiction is rich with debates and ideas about art that reenact the lesson Fisher learned from her mother. From her earliest short stories to her mature novels, a central theme in her fiction is the artistic education of her protagonists, women at varying stages of maturity. Each of Fisher's protagonists is on a quest to find what Fisher describes as the



"art of living." They learn that a life devoted to a passive absorption of art cannot fulfill them, spiritually or artistically; an active domestic life, full of chores and responsibilities, can. This lesson is often learned beside female foils -- one of the best examples is Sylvia's Aunt Victoria in The Bent Twig -- who strive to be art by arraying themselves in elaborate dress; being artistic means "collecting" art treasures or buying the "right" furnishings for their homes. Protagonists like Sylvia learn to reject this example and embrace the aesthetic sensibilities of a domestic artist figure who practices art in practical situations -- in his or her worklife -- for spiritual reasons.

Fisher was trained in nineteenth century theories of art by following her mother around Europe and, more formally, at institutions such as the Sorbonne, the Ecoles des Hautes Etudes, Ohio State and Columbia Universities. Her protagonists, like Amy March from Louisa May Alcott's Little Women (1867), Avis Dobell from Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's The Story of Avis (1877), Isabel Archer from Henry James's The Portrait of A Lady (1881) and numerous others, often have had similar training. Sylvia Marshall in The Bent Twig, for example, is identified at one point in the novel as being at "the Pater reading stage" of her education and will later roam Europe with her Aunt Victoria.

Often, Fisher's protagonists are artists themselves, most often musicians: Sylvia Marshall from The Bent Twig, Marise Crittenden from The Brimming Cup and Matey Gilbert from The Deepening Stream are all pianists.<sup>24</sup> In the novels that deal with childhood and adolescence -- The Squirrel Cage, The Bent Twig, and The Deepening Stream -- her heroines either spend part of their formative years in Europe, or take Daisy Millerish, European "polishing" trips and strive to be well-versed in what is most fashionable in elite artistic circles. Their conflict occurs when they try to reconcile their artistic interests with a strong need for a domestic life and valuable work.

In the novels that portray mature women, we continue to see this problem played out. In The Brimming Cup for example, Marise Crittenden struggles with what she feels is the narrowness of her domestic life. As her last child goes off to school, she feels tremendous dissatisfaction with the domestic path she has followed since her marriage, and begins to regret the choice she made years ago to give up

her professional musical career. Alternately, in The Deepening Stream Matey Gilbert's music only partially fulfills her longing for a home. Spiritually wounded by an unhappy childhood, Matey heals herself by reconstructing a happy family life; the joy she feels from music is deepened as a result.

In all of Fisher's novels, the journey the heroine takes, whether literal, psychological or both, results in a deeper immersion and resulting joy in domesticity. Their professional careers as artists become a public service; for example, Marise uses her musical training to direct a community chorus. Fisher's heroines always discover a truly artful way of living everyday, by using their experience and training in "high" art to make their domestic lives richer. An important part of this formula is that they are able to contribute something to society; they act on their feelings of responsibility for making other people's lives richer as well as their own.

The responsibility of contributing something to society was a lesson that Fisher's father taught her. James Hulme Canfield was a forward-thinking educator whose democratic crusades included strengthening the public education system, co-education, and free trade. He strongly influenced Dorothy's thoughts about her duty as an American citizen, and ultimately, as an American artist. One of her father's favorite quotations was "The public business is the private business of every citizen," a sentiment that Dorothy took to heart (Washington 13). Given her belief that good fiction should have as an aesthetic purpose the exposition of a "problem of living," her novels have a motive for reform behind them. Inscribed in her heroine's quest for artful living are the various social problems that Fisher wanted to fix: equal education for girls, work based on ability rather than gender, capitalism with a conscience, race and class inequities and raising children as moral human beings rather than as commodities. Although Fisher felt that writing fiction was a private enterprise, "like falling in love," she felt strongly enough about her responsibility as an artist to include public business in her private musings. She made fluid the boundaries between public and private spheres, and advocated for an art that included the very democratic element of personal responsibility.

Fisher had other male reform mentors as well. She was greatly influenced by the philosophers of the early nineteenth century reform movements, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson whose essays are often quoted in her novels. In a 1944 letter to Richard Wright she writes, "[f]or me, a girl brought up to the innumerable, intangible, smothering restrictiveness of the late Victorian period, it was Thoreau, with his total doubt of the roles of our conventional society of capitalism, it was Emerson, looking out from his mountaintop, who gave me courage to try to be myself, not what the conventions of my time would have a girl" (Madigan 237).<sup>25</sup>

As her non-fiction on the Montessori Method shows, Fisher was able to borrow Emerson's philosophy for largely feminist purposes. For example, in writing about Emerson's comments on reform -- "Society gains nothing whilst a man, not himself renovated, attempts to renovate things about him" -- she asserts, "[Emerson] might have been writing of that smaller model of society, the family. The very latest methods in education, the dernier cri of modernity about the relation of parent to child will benefit those relations not at all, if the parent himself be not renovated" (Mothers and Children 232). Fisher overlooks the implications of the exclusive, gendered language in Emerson's passage to apply Emerson's belief in personal renovation to the mothers she is writing to and about in her book. Although she uses a gender-neutral term, "parent," and includes the traditional male reflexive, "himself," Fisher was writing to those people largely responsible for the household and the family: women. Therefore, she remodels what is a rather traditional democratic impulse -- reform -- for the modern world by including women in its processes.

Fisher's remodeling process extends to her narrative structures as well. Her earliest fiction (The Squirrel-Cage [1912], The Bent Twig [1915] and The Brimming Cup [1921]) retains many of the devices characteristic of the Victorian novel: she divides her plots into Books, includes witty chapter titles, constructs triangular love relationships, and uses the binary opposition of the two suitor convention in marrying off her heroines, or in keeping them married.<sup>26</sup> Her subject matter in her early novels, too, is Victorian; the first three novels I discuss in this study are largely concerned with courtship and marriage.

The Home-maker (1924) demonstrates a radical break from Victorian conventions, although I will show how, throughout her early canon, there are continuous ruptures in her treatment of traditional courtship and marriage plots. A good example is the doubling of the two suitor convention in The Bent Twig. Fisher provides her heroine not only with two suitors, but also with two female role models. I define the convention as doubled because each female role model has a male suitor counterpart who shares her aesthetic outlook on life; Sylvia Marshall is offered two opposing aesthetic outlooks twice in the novel, from both genders. Thus, a feminist element is inserted into an essentially patriarchal structure because Fisher empowers the mother figure as role model, even though it takes a male suitor to make the heroine realize the value of her mother's life. This is one example of how Fisher rebuilds Victorian structures in her fiction.

Fisher's version of the *künstlerroman*, then, shows women who strive to discover the art of creating good relationships, happy homes and better communities, and she occupies an important transitional position in American women's literature as a result. Fisher's fiction is full of women and men like Aunt Mehetabel, descendants of the domestic artists who people the fiction of women regionalists like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman. Her childhood summers were spent in the small Vermont town of Arlington, which became her home after she married in 1907. Arlington deepened her appreciation of artful living in a way that her mother could never understand; Flavia was always rather disdainful of the lack of polish that she believed characterized Vermonters.

Fisher's Vermont stories show her love for the landscape, her keen rendering of the dialect, and her empathy for the concerns of the people, all characteristics which clearly place her in this "tradition of the physical place" (Fetterley and Pryse xx).<sup>27</sup> In continuing the tradition, Fisher looks back to the work of nineteenth century women regionalist writers and attests to its power and importance. The literary heritage of the domestic artist was obviously an enduring one for Fisher.

However, Fisher belongs in another category of women writers as well. Like her foremother in the *künstlerroman* tradition, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and her contemporaries in the tradition, Mary

Austin and Willa Cather (both of whom also wrote regionalist fiction), Fisher wrote novels about women who would be artists and she furnishes them with European journeys, intellectual conversations, and political and social causes. As Elizabeth Ammons argues, women novelists at the turn of the century were perhaps the first group of women who could possibly conceive of themselves as women "artists" rather than women "writers," and their fiction is full of the serious task of creating women artist figures who practice "high" art.

Unlike Phelps, Austin and Cather, however, Fisher's questing artists always come home, reconciling the seemingly separate worlds of art and domesticity by using their training in "high" art in a domestic situation, or by rejecting their "high" art in favor of artful domesticity. While Avis Dobell (The Story of Avis 1887), Olivia Lattimore (A Woman of Genius 1912) and Thea Kronborg (The Song of the Lark 1915) find domesticity a frustrating hindrance to their careers as artists, Fisher's Sylvia Marshall (The Bent Twig 1915), Marise Crittenden (The Brimming Cup 1921) and Matey Gilbert (The Deepening Stream 1930) find that their musical careers are spiritually empty without the domestic component of their own homes, families and communities.

These heroines, then, find themselves living next door to Aunt Mehetabel; or, they live with her. True, Aunt Mehetabel might be hired help, but a sisterhood develops between these two kinds of artists. Lydia's maid Stashie in The Squirrel Cage becomes her only true companion and best friend; Sylvia Marshall in The Bent Twig finally appreciates and accepts the Vermont-styled domestic artistry her mother offers her; and Marise's hired help, the old Indian woman Toucle, in The Brimming Cup provides her with spiritual insight and advice. Fisher's fictional kaleidoscope is pieced together with artists from varying classes, backgrounds and training. Water images abound in her work as she creates fluidity between realms of art and classes of people. Her fiction is a bridge between the nineteenth century domestic world of the woman regionalist, and the late nineteenth and early twentieth century world of "high" art in which the crafters of the *künstlerroman* worked.

An early story, "Petunias -- That's for Remembrance" (1912) illustrates the rift and then the resolution of the two cultural sensibilities that Dorothy inherited: her mother's intellectually-based high art tradition, and the legacy of the domestic artist, handed down in part from Vermont great-aunts and uncles on the Canfield side of the family, and from nineteenth century women regionalist writers.

In the story, Virginia, a twenty-three year old woman, has come back to the Vermont valley where she spent her childhood summers on "a whim for self-analysis," a trip that Dorothy must have taken many times (20). Virginia is a well-educated and well-travelled woman who has a trained, aesthetic eye: "she compared [the landscape] to similar valleys in Switzerland, in Norway, in Japan, and her own shone out pre-eminent with a thousand beauties of bold skyline, of harmoniously 'composed' distances, of exquisitely fairy-like detail of foreground" (21). She also notices with great distaste the "meagerness and meanness" of the inhabitant's "desolate lives" (20).

Virginia is staying with the Pritchards, a local farming family. At dinner, she realizes that she and her hosts "had not the slightest rudiments of a common speech" (22). Instead of making conversation, Virginia dwells on the aesthetic errors of the Pritchard's home decor:

the pictures in the house were bad beyond belief, and the only flowers were some petunias, growing in a pot, carefully tended by Grandma Pritchard. They bore a mass of blossoms of a terrible magenta, like a blow in the face to anyone sensitive to color. It usually stood on the dining-table, which was covered with a red cloth. 'Crimson! Magenta! It is no wonder they are lost souls!' cried the girl to herself. (22)

As soon as is decent, Virginia escapes to a vacant farmhouse where she can admire the lovely landscape and forget its dull inhabitants.

There Virginia overhears a conversation between Grandma Pritchard and a neighbor and learns that the Pritchards don't understand Virginia's aesthetic sense, either. Grandma Pritchard describes their attempts at conversation:

'Italy, now . . . had she been there? 'Oh, yes, she adored Italy!'" Virginia flushed at the echo of her own exaggerated accent. "Well, we'd like to know somethin' 'bout Italy. What did they raise there? Honest, Abby, you'd ha' thought we'd hit her side th' head. She thought and she thought, and all she could say was 'olives.' Nothing else? 'Well, she'd never noticed anything else . . . oh, yes, lemons.' Well that seemed kind o' queer vittles, but you can't never tell how foreigners git along . . . and Joel he asked her how they raised 'em, and if they

manured heavy or trusted to phosphate, and how long the trees took before they began to bear . . . We might as well 'ha asked her 'bout the back side of the moon! (25)

The Pritchards are interested in learning about the everyday use of the Italian landscape, knowledge that Virginia's art lessons have not given her.

Grandma Pritchard's "old-timey story" about her great-aunt Debby also makes Virginia's distaste for the petunias seem ignorant and shallow. Debby once lived in the house which Virginia now uses to admire the view. Her whole family was struck with smallpox when she was only fourteen and she buried them all in the yard until only she and her two-year-old brother were left. Grandma Pritchard explains that Debby was sure she and her brother would die, "but she wa'n't any hand to give up till she had to, and she wanted to die last, so to look out for the baby. So when she took sick she fought the smallpox just like a wolf, she used to tell us" (31). Debby did her chores on her knees to avoid fainting, and survived.

Grandma Pritchard points out the graves of Debby and her family at the edge of the property and asks her grandchildren, who have taken time out from their berry-picking to listen, to take care of them now that she is getting older. She gives the pot of petunias to one of the children to plant on Debby's grave and tells her, "if you're ever inclined to think you have a hard time, just you remember Aunt Debby and shut your teeth and hang on" (33). To her neighbor, she says, "If there's any flower I do despise, it's petunias! But 'twas Aunt Debby's 'special favorite, so I always start a pot real early and have it in blossom when her birthday comes 'round" (33).

Virginia's art appreciation has altered as a result of this overheard conversation. After Grandma Pritchard leaves, she walks out of the house into the yard and re-sees all the landmarks that Grandma Pritchard mentioned; as in Emerson's "Nature," she "look[s] at the world with new eyes." They are no longer lines and colors that contribute to the excellent composition of the scene, but places where human things occurred, where Debby buried her family, where she harvested her and her brother's dinner on her knees, faint with fever. Virginia has learned a different aesthetic lesson, more domestic and practical perhaps than how to appreciate a painting by a master, but no less artistic. Virginia learns the same

lesson that young Dorothy learned from the painting, "Sebastian de Morra": that the beauty of a scene is only artful when it is imbued with a story of human dignity. There is a responsibility and a lesson involved in seeing this way, in remembering the trials of your ancestors and celebrating their lives by re-telling them.

The novels I examine in this study are all based on a similar aesthetic lesson. Throughout my analysis, I show how Fisher blends domestic arts -- carpentry, sewing, gardening, cooking -- with "high" art like music and painting to create her modern families. Fisher draws on various turn of the century social movements to restructure family life for modern America and to rectify her problems of living: the Arts and Crafts Movement, the Montessori Method, Freudian Psychology and daycare. These new philosophies help Fisher to emphasize the public aspect of home-making, to bridge public and private spheres. Fisher shows that the "background" of a good family life prepares individuals for the foreground of their work in the world.

For example, in Chapter One, my analysis of The Squirrel-Cage, I show how Fisher models her artist figure, Daniel Rankin, after the Craftsman ideal, an aesthetic and philosophical perspective operative in this country at the turn of the century that opposed the superficiality of art "outside the path of cultural progress" (Taylor 354). Based on the aesthetic theories of John Ruskin and his disciple, William Morris, the Craftsman ideal sparked the Arts and Crafts Movement which argued for art as a domestic, everyday experience. Rankin follows Morris's principles to a large extent, although Fisher is careful to make him more realistic than romantic; "I'm no handcraft faddist," he tells Lydia Emery, the young heroine of the novel. In this novel, Fisher shows the devastating effects of separate spheres on the Emery family and especially on Lydia, a young woman who wants education, worthwhile work and artful living but who has been denied these essentials by a social structure that defines her as decorative.

As I show in Chapter Two, Fisher's non-fiction was equally devoted to providing a definition of an "art of living." In this chapter, I demonstrate how Maria Montessori's educational experiments serve as a philosophical structure for her novel of manners, The Bent Twig. Fisher believed that Montessori



was "a new religion" which should "act as a powerful stimulant to the whole body of our thought about life" (A Montessori Mother viii). She visited Montessori's Casa dei Bambini on a trip to Rome in 1909 and was so enthusiastic about Montessori's ideas, that she published three books about her encounters with the woman and the method: A Montessori Mother (1912), A Montessori Manual (1913) and Mothers and Children (1914).<sup>28</sup>

In The Bent Twig, Fisher uses Montessori's ideas to write about a happy, self-reliant family. Montessori's philosophy helps Fisher reveal her definition of "home" as a place of intellectual and spiritual growth. The parents in this novel, the Marshalls, are truly artistic in raising their children and creating a homelife unlike the Emerys in The Squirrel Cage. However, Fisher's protagonist Sylvia Marshall is seduced by the material of fashionable living despite her worthy family "background." Sylvia's sewing projects are treated ironically here as Fisher condemns Sylvia's obsessive attention to her wardrobe at the expense of her intellectual and spiritual life.

In her regionalist novel The Brimming Cup, the subject of my third chapter, Fisher uses Freudian psychology and gardening metaphors to explore the mind and heart of her protagonist Marise Crittenden, a wife and mother who is temporarily dissatisfied in her essentially happy marriage. Fisher lovingly details the domestic rituals of her rural Vermont setting while illuminating the dangers of an old-fashioned, insular domesticity. Although Fisher is critical of Freudian ideas that define family life as oppressive and mother love as deluded, I show how his theories inspired a change in Fisher's narrative structure.

In my fourth chapter on Fisher's novel The Home-maker, I turn once again to Fisher's non-fiction on Montessori, this time focusing on the issue of daycare. The Home-maker is a naturalistic experiment in role reversal, as Fisher shows the effects on the Knapp family when Lester Knapp stays home to raise his children and his wife Eva takes a job in a local department store. Fisher's argument in this novel is for work that suits individual abilities rather than social prescriptions based on gender. However, the tragedy

of the Knapp's situation suggests persuasively that the modern family will have to alter in order to accommodate adult needs for work in the public sphere.

My last chapter shows how Fisher's connection of private and public spheres is broadened in her novel about World War I, The Deepening Stream. In the first half of the novel, Fisher's protagonist Matey Gilbert overcomes an unhappy childhood to achieve domestic artistry and construct her own happy family life. The second half demonstrates the public need of Matey's newly-honed domestic skills as she revives daily processes and rituals in wartorn Paris. Fisher's novel argues that the personal is political as she shows how family lives are ruptured and destroyed by a political process that uses war for material gain. Her depiction of family life is truly modernized with this novel, as public and private spheres are collapsed and "women's work" moves into a global context.

Finally, in my conclusion I place Fisher's "art of living" novels in the context of the two women's literary traditions I evoke in this introduction, and which I allude to throughout my study: women's regionalism and the *künstlerroman*. I also show how Fisher's desire to position herself as both artist and ordinary wife and mother has been consistently thwarted by critics who have traditionally separated domestic and artistic roles. I describe how recent critical reevaluations of the domestic tradition in American literature have helped me to reassess Fisher's contribution to American letters.<sup>29</sup>

## NOTES

1. From a letter to Zephine Humphrey, December 18, 1924 in Mark Madigan, Keeping Fires Night and Day: Selected Letters of Dorothy Canfield Fisher (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1993).
2. Ida H. Washington. Dorothy Canfield Fisher: A Biography (Shelburne, VT: New England Press, 1982). One other general biography has been published, Elizabeth Yates' Pebble in a Pool (Brattleboro, Vt.: Stephen Greene Press, 1958), reprinted in 1971 as The Lady from Vermont.
3. Ida H. Washington, Dorothy Canfield Fisher; Madigan, Mark J. Keeping Fires Night and Day; Joan Shelley Rubin, The Making of Middlebrow Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). Many of the articles that have been published deal with Fisher's fiction in comparison to other, more established writers; a critical conversation on Fisher's work alone has not developed. See for example: Mark J. Madigan, "Willa Cather and Dorothy Canfield Fisher: Rift, Reconciliation, and One of Ours," in Cather Studies, ed. Susan J. Rosowski, vol. 1 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990); Alan Price, "Writing Home from the Front: Edith Wharton and Dorothy Canfield Fisher Present Wartime France to the United States," Edith Wharton Newsletter 5 (Fall 1988): 1-5; Joan G. Schroeter, "Crisis, Conflict, and Constituting the Self: A Lacanian Reading of The Deepening Stream," Colby Quarterly 27 (September 1991): 148-60; Janice Thaddeus, "The Metamorphosis of Richard Wright's Black Boy," American Literature 57 (May 1985): 199-214; Ida H. Washington, "Isak Dinesen and Dorothy Canfield Fisher: The Importance of a Helping Hand," Continental, Latin and Francophone Women Writers, ed. Eunice Myers and Ginette Adamson, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987; William Allen White, "The Other Side of Main Street," Collier's Weekly 68 (July 30, 1921): 7-8, 18-19.
4. As far as I know, Fisher first uses this phrase fictionally in her novel The Bent Twig (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1915, p. 343).
5. Fisher expounds on this idea in her essay, "What My Mother Taught Me," the preface to her collection of stories, A Harvest of Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956). I discuss this aesthetic principle more fully later in the introduction.
6. I analyze the critical conversations that have developed around these traditions in my conclusion, showing how Fisher works both in and around them.
7. Ann Romines. The Home Plot: Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).
8. Elizabeth Ammons. Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Ammons draws on the work of historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in placing the nine women she studies.
9. Romines is persuasive that Cather ultimately didn't either, although Ammons includes Cather in her grouping.
10. Maurice Beebe, Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in fiction from Goethe to Joyce (New York: New York University Press, 1964); Grace Stewart, A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine, 1877-1977 (St. Albans, VT.: Eden Press Women's Publications, 1979; Linda Huf, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1983). Suzanne W. Jones

discusses these three studies as well in her introduction to Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics and Portraiture (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

11. "Quest for self is the dominant theme of the artist-novel," Beebe writes, "and because the self is almost always in conflict with society, a closely related theme is the opposition of art to life -- the artist-as-hero is usually therefore the artist-as-exile" (6). Given this divided state, Beebe traces what he calls two "conflicting traditions of art" which "have existed side by side for more than a century." His Sacred Fount tradition "equate[s] art with experience and assumes that the true artist is the one who lives not less, but more fully and intensely than others" while the Ivory Tower tradition "exalts art above life and insists that the artist can make use of life only if he stands aloof" (13). Ultimately, Beebe concludes that the greatest artist works somewhere between the two traditions, and the second half of his study explores these traditions in the lives and work of four major figures: Balzac, Joyce, Proust and Henry James.

12. Beebe writes that the artist must be detached from a domestic life "to be certain that his awareness is unqualified by selfish interest and acquisitive intent, for when so qualified, consciousness is impure. The artist convinced that life is an 'aesthetic adventure' must deny many non-aesthetic aspects of everyday life" (230-1).

13. Like Beebe, Stewart analyzes Goethe's Faust as emblematic of the artist myth in Western literature. Her concentration, however, is on the depiction of Gretchen rather than Faust, showing how she is portrayed "not as striving but as being -- pure, dutiful, domestic. Although order and cleanliness pervade her domicile, the shopping, scrubbing, and polishing occur, unsung, behind the scene" (112). This portrayal poses problems for women writers as artists and their artist characters because "the pro-creative, other-directed, and nourishing role of women is antithetical to the role of the artist" -- woman as quester is without precedent (14).

14. The woman artist is ever faced with this "dual dilemma," the split "between personal and social being" and the "separation of sexual and personal identity" (175). Stewart notices recurrent images of entrapment which serve as metaphors for this split in the artist novels she studies, a wide range of texts. Among them are Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, Willa Cather's The Song of the Lark, Zelda Fitzgerald's Save Me the Waltz, Mary Austin's A Woman of Genius, Virginia Woolf's Orlando and To the Lighthouse, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' The Story of Avis, and May Sarton's Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing.

15. Of the five novels I analyze, Fisher only explicitly invokes myth in The Squirrel-Cage. However, The Bent Twig can perhaps be read as a version of the Demeter/Persephone myth, although it is not my purpose in this study to do so.

16. Here perhaps is a new *kunstlerroman* pattern for the twentieth century since women writers like Eudora Welty, May Sarton and Alice Walker continue this tradition.

17. Huf proves that this trait is in contrast to the "passive, sensitive and shy" hero that Beebe finds; in other words, artist heroes and heroines swap stereotypical gender traits.

18. Huf also proves that while engaging in this fight, the heroine realizes that she has "internalized society's devaluation of herself and her abilities" so that she must battle her own inclinations as well as outside forces.

19. From "The Much Debated Family," Women's Home Companion, September 1929. Fisher wrote numerous articles about marriage and family life throughout her career which she published in the popular press. Her message remained the same: that family life will endure no matter what kinds of social changes develop.
20. Fisher's essay is the preface to her collection of short stories, A Harvest of Stories: From A Half Century of Writing published in 1956, two years before her death.
21. The choice of these words to describe her mother's aesthetic pursuits align her with Matthew Arnold, "the apostle of culture" for America at the turn-of-the-century, whose much-quoted advice about achieving one's "best" self was to study "the best which has been thought and said in the world" (Trachtenberg 155).
22. Fisher's rift with her mother echoes a larger debate about art that occurred in the late 19th Century: whether art should serve a social purpose and therefore contain a moral value, or whether its value comes from the object itself, "art for art's sake." Two leading proponents of these opposing definitions of art were John Ruskin and James Whistler. I deal with Ruskin's theories, which were Fisher's views, in Chapter One. Flavia Canfield's definition of art (in Fisher's eyes, anyway) is more closely aligned with Whistler who asserted in his well-known lecture "Mr. Whistler's Ten O'Clock" (1885): "Art . . . is a goddess of dainty thought -- reticent of habit, abjuring all obtrusiveness, purposing in no way to better others. She is, withal, selfishly occupied with her own perfection only -- having no desire to teach -- seeking and finding the beautiful in all conditions and in all times" (from Nineteenth Century Theories of Art, ed. Joshua Taylor, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987: 502-13).
23. Fisher anticipates contemporary attention to the artistry of domestic objects, as did Susan Glaspell in her play "Trifles" (1917). May Sarton's journals and novels continue this trend, as does Alice Walker's work.
24. Fisher herself was a violinist and considered a career as a musician until she developed problems with her hearing. This early disappointment might have contributed to her broader definition of art.
25. Fisher and Wright conducted an interesting correspondence surrounding the publication of his novel Black Boy (1945) which the Book-of-the-Month Club panel of judges chose as one of their monthly selections. Fisher was instrumental in Wright's revision of the novel. See Mark Madigan, Keeping Fires Night and Day for Fisher's letters to Wright and Janice Thaddeus's article, "The Metamorphosis of Richard Wright's Black Boy" for an interpretation of Fisher's role in Wright's revisions.
26. Two studies of these conventions have been helpful to me in my analysis: Jean E. Kennard's Victims of Convention (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978) and Joseph Allen Boone's Tradition Counter Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
27. Fisher's novels The Bent Twig (1915), The Brimming Cup (1921), Bonfire (1933) and Seasoned Timber (1939) have Vermont settings (the last two are not discussed in this study). Her short fiction collections Hillsboro People (1915) and Raw Material (1923) are set largely in Vermont. Two non-fiction books are devoted to Vermont: Vermont Traditions (1953) and Memories of Arlington, Vermont (1957); Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, eds., American Women Regionalists, 1850-1910 (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992).
28. A Montessori Mother (New York: Henry Holt, 1912); A Montessori Manual (Chicago: Richardson, 1913); Mothers and Children (New York: Henry Holt, 1914).

29. Fisher published her fiction under "Dorothy Canfield" and her non-fiction under "Dorothy Canfield Fisher" apparently for business reasons. In a letter to her publisher, Fisher wrote, "John and I have gone into partnership (legally I mean) in re income-tax business, under the name of 'Dorothy Canfield,' so please have checks made out to that name." As Washington shows, this arrangement continued for 10 years at which point Dorothy wrote to Harcourt, "We've given up that legal partnership arrangement which turned out to be more bother in account-keeping than it was worth" (Washington 186-7). I have chosen to use Fisher's full name in this study of her fiction since my point throughout is to show how Fisher (and her protagonists) blends her public identity as an artist with her private role as a wife and mother.

## CHAPTER I

### "THE FINISHWORK OF MARRIAGE: BUILDING A BETTER PARTNERSHIP IN THE SQUIRREL CAGE"

The home is the centre and circumference, the start and the finish of most of our lives . . . . And since we hold that our home life, just as we have it, is the best thing on earth, and that our home life plainly demands one whole woman at the least to each home, and usually more, it follows that anything which offers to change the position of women threatens to 'undermine the home,' 'strikes at the root of the family,' and we will none of it . . . . Yet everywhere about us today this inner tower, this castle keep of vanishing tradition, is becoming more difficult to defend or even to keep in repair. We buttress it anew with every generation; we love its very cracks and crumbling corners; we hang and drape it with endless decorations; we hide the looming dangers overhead with fresh clouds of incense; and we demand of the would-be repairers and rebuilders that they prove to us the desirability of their wild plans before they lift a hammer. But, when they show their plans, we laugh them to scorn.<sup>1</sup>

'We've got the rafters and joists up now; maybe before we're married, if we're good, we can get the roof on so it won't rain on us; but all the finishing, all that makes it good to live in, has got to be done after the wedding.'<sup>2</sup>

#### I. The Castle Keep of Vanishing Tradition

Dorothy Canfield Fisher's second novel, The Squirrel Cage (1912), is an attempt to remodel the "castle keep of vanishing tradition" that Charlotte Perkins Gilman would like to tear down.<sup>3</sup> While Gilman argues that economic equality between the sexes will only be achieved if women get out of the house, thereby dismantling this Victorian stronghold, Fisher is more conservative. She leaves the structure intact and suggests internal changes which would create more shared space under the roof. In this, her first novel about American marriage and family life, Fisher shows that the problems with gender roles at the turn of the century are more complex than the destruction of the "inner tower" will allow.

Fisher demonstrates that granting women a greater public role is only one part of the solution. Throughout The Squirrel Cage, Fisher condemns the social mechanisms that mold girls and boys into

one-dimensional roles as consumers and producers, respectively. She depicts a young marriage that ends tragically because the wife's public role is superficial and meaningless and the husband's private role is non-existent. Lydia Emery Hollister has been suitably educated to decorate; Paul Hollister's education has prepared him for a public role in a capitalist structure that has no room for marriage and family life. Fisher's answer to the problems of separate spheres is her character Daniel Rankin, a carpenter who has crafted a work life and a home life, a public and a private role, that infuse and inform each other.

Rankin has rejected a traditional masculine pattern to draw his own plan for artful living. Fisher models her character after the Craftsman Ideal, a turn-of-the-century aesthetic movement that was based on the Ruskinian philosophy that art could and should exist in daily life. In reconstructing women's roles in society, Fisher shows that men suffer from limited opportunities, too. While many women writers believed that getting women out of the house would solve the problem, Fisher argued that getting men in it was important as well.

The Squirrel Cage is a tale of three houses: the Emerys' house in Endbury, Ohio, a place of polished, fashionable furniture and social ambition; Daniel Rankin's simple but spiritually pleasing home in the woods; and Lydia Emery Hollister's brand new, sprawling, suburban space which she desperately, and unsuccessfully, tries to make into a home throughout the second half of the novel.

Fisher's structures are metaphors for marriage. The Judge and Mrs. Emery feebly try to buttress the Victorian structure of separate spheres, but their late-Gilded Age load of possessions, acquired as they establish a frantic pace of consumption to "keep up" with their neighbors, has cracked the foundations of their relationship. Their youngest daughter, Lydia, realizes the damage and tries to build her home according to a new plan, but her husband, Paul Hollister, is imprisoned in the old one. Rankin's home life is built on a strong spiritual and moral foundation, while Lydia and Paul's home life is built on a materialistic slab. Although Rankin shows Lydia how to craft a new pattern for the "art of living," his lesson comes too late to save her marriage to Hollister.



Fisher was crafting her own marriage and home life as she wrote this novel. In 1907 she married John Fisher, a man who she described as "the most intelligent in matters of literature of all the men I know" and "the most sensitive in the areas of art" (Madigan 34).<sup>4</sup> They were given a modest house and property at the base of Red Mountain in Arlington, Vermont, the Canfield homestead since 1763, and there established rather unconventional economic roles. Dorothy's earnings from her fiction supplied the family's income. John Fisher edited Dorothy's work and renovated their new home. The Fisher marriage was truly a collaboration; their work lives overlapped, and they shared equally their domestic space and concerns.

Fisher's protagonist, however, is unsuccessful in reconstructing her marriage because she builds alone, without her husband's cooperation, and the novel is important in Fisher's canon for this reason. Fisher shows us around the old structure so that we can see what she is trying to remodel: a marriage shoddily constructed, held together with common goods rather than common interests. Although we never see a new marriage worked out, Daniel Rankin establishes the foundation on which Fisher will build her fictional solution. He is a creative individual who believes that true art can be practiced in both his work and his home life, and he is a man who wants to help with the housework and the raising of his children. These two ideas, the art of an everyday life and the collaboration of husband and wife in achieving that life, are the rafters and joists of Fisher's house of fiction.

## II. The Right Kind of Woodwork

Toward the end of The Squirrel Cage, Lydia has been unhappily married for three years and desperately needs some education about how to remodel her empty marriage and lonely home life so that it will be more fulfilling for her and her family. Lydia realizes that her education since her marriage "consisted principally in reading the novels people talked about," and it has been terribly inadequate:

Lydia had never felt herself closely touched by reading; it all seemed remote from her own life and problems. The sexual questions on which the plots invariably turned . . . had . . . a

very subordinate place in the average American life about her. The marital unhappiness, estrangement and fragmentary incompleteness in the circle she knew . . . had nothing to do with what novels meant by 'unfaithfulness.'(280)

Lydia's musings on novelists' subjects reveal Fisher's aesthetic concerns. As I explain in my introduction, Fisher believed that the novelist has a social responsibility: to address a "problem of living." In The Squirrel Cage, she exposes the problems with American marriages, showing that husbands and wives have too little contact with each other, share too few interests, and consequently live their lives, literally and metaphorically, in separate rooms. In the late Victorian "separate sphere" mentality that this novel explores and condemns, women are concerned with home, men with work and there is little overlap.

This quotation also signals Fisher's questioning of the traditional Victorian marriage plot, a pattern she will follow and subvert at the same time. Lydia will have only one vocation in this novel, and her one important decision will be to choose between two suitors. However, Fisher's focus on Lydia's failed marriage in Books III and IV of the novel shows a rupture in the marriage narrative. As Joseph Allen Boone writes, one of the "unravelings of the marriage tradition" "attack[s] the tradition from within, exposing the dangers of its socially constructed myths by following the course of wedlock beyond its expected close and into the uncertain textual realm of marital stalemate and impasse" (19).<sup>5</sup> Throughout the text, Fisher shows Lydia trying to build against the structures which have housed her, as Fisher herself was trying to construct plots that might remedy the problems with American marriages. While remodeling family life to include valuable work for both men and women, and rich domestic lives for them as well, Fisher redefines "art" in an everyday, middle-class, American context.

Lydia also questions the artistic activities of her women's club, which is "occupied with the art of Masaccio . . . the 'latest thing' in art interests" (281). Fisher certainly knew about the world of women's clubs since her mother was an active member everywhere the Canfields lived, and Fisher herself was a participant. Flavia, in fact, credited her women's club with saving her aesthetic life, rescuing her from the "cook-stove, the chicken-coop and the crib" and providing her with art appreciation and education.<sup>6</sup> But

Fisher is struck with the chasm that exists between the art that women's clubs study and the home lives they lead as wives.<sup>7</sup>

Flavia, an aspiring painter, desired escape from household drudgery at any cost. But for women like Lydia who want to solve the problems that beset their marriages, the question that begs asking is: what place does this kind of aesthetic training have in lives that are essentially unhappy, homes with no real marriages in them? Women's clubs, Fisher implies, would do better to address the issue of how to make their own marriages and home lives more harmonious, rather than to spend their attention on the "'latest thing' in art interests" centered in Europe, thousands of miles away.

Underlying her point is a criticism about "art interests." As I show throughout this study, Fisher condemns artistic pursuits that are merely quests to be fashionable. She questions any definition of art that involves consumption or that positions people as passive onlookers or collectors. As I will demonstrate, Lydia wants real work, and wonders why "it was only women in frontier conditions . . . who could share in their husband's lives" (280-1). Fisher's conflation of art and work criticizes a social structure that confines art to the realm of the leisure class and to the "woman's sphere." Her "art of living," therefore, is a broad-based principle that speaks to issues of class as well as gender.

Fisher's thematic concerns about the social purpose of art and the meaning of work reveal her formal problems with the Victorian marriage narrative. As Boone notes, "literary revolt against the thematic limitations imposed by the novel's love ideology . . . remained incomplete as long as its social criticism operated within the structural confines of conventional plotting" (19). As I will show later in this chapter, Fisher was very dissatisfied with her novel, particularly the open-endedness of her resolution. Her inability to accommodate her message to the structure of the Victorian marriage plot demonstrates her struggle to remodel the traditional structures of the marriage narrative and of marriage itself.

In The Squirrel Cage, women's clubs are social mechanisms that contribute to Lydia's suffocation by separate spheres. However, the most dangerous disease in Endbury, Ohio, one which infects both spheres, is the materialism of the late Gilded Age. The Emerys scamper relentlessly around and around to

purchase America's endless "goods" and their social standing, hence the squirrel cage metaphor.<sup>8</sup> The family is defined in terms of their possessions; they are "prosperous, modern, sophisticated," or so they think, because they have "the right kind of woodwork in every room" (3).

When the novel opens, Lydia, the youngest Emery child at 19, seems to have benefitted from her family's prosperity since she has everything she could possibly want in terms of material goods. However, throughout the novel she learns what she doesn't have, and her family's house, which she has always thought of as sheltering, becomes suffocating.

Her parents's singular devotion to the pursuit of material wealth and social standing has prevented the growth of a morally sustaining relationship between Lydia and her parents. Her father's long hours as a lawyer and a judge have made him a rather shadowy and inconsequential presence in his daughter's life. And since "women's work" in this novel consists of shopping, redecorating and upholding social standards, Mrs. Emery is more of a business manager than a mother: she takes seriously the work of displaying Lydia on the Endbury marriage market.

Lydia has just returned from a trip to Europe, the polishing trip that so many young, leisure-class, American women took. Unlike Daisy Miller, though, Lydia has emerged from Europe unchanged -- she has learned nothing beyond what dresses to buy in Paris -- and it is American society that she has to fear. an America, Fisher asserts, as dangerous in its feverishness over material goods as Roman Fever ever was. Mrs. Emery hopes that Lydia's European "gloss" will purchase what she thinks is the ultimate triumph: a marriage proposal from Paul Hollister, one of "the" Hollisters. Lydia is treated like a commodity by her family and Endbury society, and marriage is part of the machinery of corporate America. Her beauty will buy a "suitable marriage," which will purchase another rung on the social ladder for her family. Lydia has a curious but untrained mind, and Fisher shows how her young life and marriage are strangled by the materialistic social mores that her parents have passed on to her.

Lydia's sister, Marietta, is an example of what actually becomes of a young woman as she endures entrapment in "the squirrel cage." Although she is intelligent and energetic, Marietta has become

grim and harried because her worklife consists of "keeping up appearances." The "achievement of her life," as her uncle Dr. Melton defines it, "is to give a two-thousand-a-year income the appearance of having five thousand" (57-8). Consequently, Marietta's house is an unhappy, inadequate shelter, a place where she works in frenzied dissatisfaction to "keep-up."

For example, when Lydia visits her at one point in the novel, Marietta is mending lace curtains, a domestic task she hates. Lydia thinks of all the alternatives to "spending a whole week in hot weather" mending the fine curtains, and asks Marietta why she doesn't buy new ones, or replace them with muslin curtains that would be "just as pretty." But Marietta feels that her curtains, which cost "half a month's salary" and which she and her husband can't really afford in the first place, are "the only things in the least distinctive" in her parlor. "They save the room," she explains to Lydia, ". . . from showing that there's almost nothing in it that costs anything . . . . With them at the window, it would never enter people's heads to think that I upholstered the furniture myself" (187). Marietta's domestic work, Fisher argues, is trivial, bordering on the ridiculous, because the intent behind it is to provide a false perception. Marietta is a slave to her possessions. Her work has no real value for her or anyone else except to create a facade of wealth.

Fisher's depictions of Marietta and Mrs. Emery criticize domesticity that is based on materialism. Later on in her career, she will take this critique a step further by portraying Eva Knapp from The Home-maker (1924), a woman like Marietta, who finds a suitable outlet for her considerable energy in her work at a department store; following Gilman's lead, perhaps, Fisher does finally get her heroine out of the house. But in this first novel devoted to the "art of living," Fisher concentrates on showing the "desperate, hurrying, straining routine" of her female characters' materialistic, everyday lives, a routine that traps them in their homes.

Men are trapped in The Squirrel Cage as well, in work lives that are relentless and dissatisfying. The Emerys know little of Judge Emery's work life, why, for example, he left private practice to become a judge: the "details of his professional life . . . were as remote and hidden from them as if he had departed

each morning after his hearty early breakfast into another planet" (7). His presence in the home is directed by business hours. When he shows up there unexpectedly, Marietta exclaims, "What are you doing here at this hour of the morning? . . . No self-respecting man is ever seen in his house during business hours!" (22). Self-respect for a man in this time period is wholly tied to his worklife: his role as a father requires little time or energy, and Fisher criticizes this conception of masculinity throughout the novel.

Judge Emery's only involvement with his children is to pay for the things that Mrs. Emery tells him they should have: "Thank the Lord, that's not my job!" he had often said about some knotty point in the up-bringing of the children. Mrs. Emery had always answered that she could not be too thankful for a 'husband who was not a meddler'" (84). Consequently, he knows little about his children's lives.

Fisher suggests that if Judge Emery and Lydia had a better relationship, Lydia would understand more of what she wants from marriage and her adult life. Judge Emery senses the empty place where his relationship with his daughter should be. He is wistful about the lack of connection between them, but years of habit prevent him from taking any action. Fisher consistently underlines the importance of a supportive fatherly presence in a young woman's life and highlights the tragic consequences to both lives when this relationship isn't nurtured. The Home-maker (1924) will explore the opposite situation as Lester Knapp finds his role as a father to be the most valuable work he has ever performed.

Fisher's depictions of Judge Emery's and Lydia's conversations show how painfully inadequate their relationship is. We see a series of mis-communications between Lydia and her father, one of the most poignant scenes occurring when Paul Hollister visits Lydia after her return from Europe:

[Paul] stood by her, looking down into her eyes . . . bending over her, smiling, pressing, confident, masterful . . . [Lydia] flushed and looked at her father. That unimaginative person started toward her as though she had called to him for help, and then, ashamed of his inexplicable impulse, turned away confusedly and disappeared into the hall. (96)

Because her father has never "talked to her . . . about things . . . the habit of a lifetime closed [his mouth]" (98) at the moment when Lydia needs most to hear from him. Lydia's "appealing look toward him" haunts him and when they pass each other on the stairs,

He put out his hands, but in the twilight she did not see the gesture. He had felt from her emanation of excitement, guessed that she was shivering like himself before a crisis -- and he could find no word to say. She had passed him as though he were part of the furniture . . . . "She will talk to her mother . . . ; her mother will know what to say." (98)

Fisher shows that the Judge can no longer trust his fatherly instincts because they have been inactive for so long. For Lydia, used to her father's absence, he is part of the inanimate structure of the home that has sheltered her.

But Mrs. Emery doesn't know what to say, either. She is so involved in Endbury society that she can't imagine that Lydia might not want to marry one of "the" Hollisters, or that she wouldn't be ready, at age 19, to marry at all, since that is the point of being a debutante. Lydia trusts her parents to tell her what is right for her to do; indeed, part of her pleasure in life has been "that she had always loved to be what it pleased everyone to have her [be]." Since Lydia has never been encouraged to think for herself, she goes along with what they plan for her. She wants to be a good person and a successful debutante, and she never thinks that these two aims could possibly diverge.

Throughout the novel, Fisher emphasizes that in moments of crisis Lydia can't think because she has never been encouraged to do so. One major theme is to show how devastating the lack of a sufficient education -- an education in substantial things, not just the ins and outs of society -- can be to a curious mind. Early on in the novel, Lydia realizes "It's as though -- here I am, grown-up, and there's nothing for me to do that's worthwhile" but her family doesn't seem to understand what more she could want (101).

All of Fisher's young heroines have the same problem with finding the "something worthwhile" in their lives, whether they are educated or not. Even if a woman is equipped with a good education, she still has limited choices. Sylvia Marshall in The Bent Twig, for example, bemoans the fact that if a young woman doesn't marry right away, society assumes that she will devote herself to social work, a position for

which Sylvia is not fitted. She stays in school, taking a Masters Degree in Music, and gives music lessons to neighborhood children, but believes that there must be something more for her to do.

Fisher herself must have felt this way when her parents objected to her taking a position as an assistant professor in Ohio. After graduating from Columbia with a doctorate in Romance Languages in 1904, Fisher was offered a position at Western Reserve University. Her mother was ill, however, and Fisher felt it was her duty to remain with her parents in New York.<sup>9</sup> Although she seemed to enjoy the job she took instead, "secretary" at the Horace Mann School, her education certainly qualified her for a more prestigious position. She probably understood Lydia and Sylvia's frustration with required roles very well.

### III. Rough Quarters

Two men in the novel do understand Lydia's desire for worthwhile work: her godfather, Dr. Melton, and his friend, Daniel Rankin. Dr. Melton is Fisher's social commentator, and he provides much of the sarcasm about modern America in the novel. He is an anomaly to the Emerys because of his collection of friends, "freaks" to Endbury society. Daniel Rankin is one of those freaks because he has given up a career in insurance to become a woodworker and live simply in a hut in the woods. Both Rankin and Dr. Melton are interested in the "woman question" and their debates are the intellectual foundation of Fisher's novel.

Dr. Melton has treated the various ailments of Endbury society women for thirty years, and he is disdainful of their materialistic lives. When Lydia's mother becomes ill, he recognizes her problem and tells Lydia:

I know without going upstairs that she is floored with one or another manifestation of the great disease of social-ambitionitis . . . I've taken your mother through doily fever induced by the change from table-cloths to bare tops, through portiere inflammation, through afternoon tea distemper, through art-nouveau prostration and mission furniture palsy, not to speak of a horrible attack of acute insanity over the necessity for having her maids wear caps. (56)



Dr. Melton's biting satire does not heal or even help Lydia. His work in the novel supports the social ills of Endbury's society ladies, and his personal life does not address the marriage problem: he is a bachelor whose sister keeps house for him. Dr. Melton has chosen a traditional alternative to the marriage structure, which duplicates it without the stress of marital relations. Although his wry commentary provides a critique of Endbury's social structure, Fisher shows that cynicism is useless without action.

Daniel Rankin's life and work does suggest a cure for Endbury's social ills, and he is Fisher's spokesperson for equitable roles and companionate marriage. Rankin thinks that women are only interested in "petty personal things because they're not given a chance at big, impersonal things" (108). However, his definition of "petty personal things" does not include raising children, work that he feels is too important for women to do alone. He suggests that fathers "take their full half of it. I'd have men do more inside the house and less outside and the women the other way 'round" (197-8).

Rankin's statements about domestic and public work crystallize Fisher's agenda in this novel. She reconsiders traditionally undervalued domestic work, arguing that if married life is restructured so that men have stronger roles in the home, it is only logical and practical that women work outside the home as well. Fisher's characters struggle to achieve an art of living based on balance: public and private roles for both men and women.

Daniel Rankin is an intriguing character, the first in a long line of equality-minded, domestic men in Fisher's fiction, including Austin Page in The Bent Twig, Neale Crittenden in Rough-Hewn and The Brimming Cup, Lester Knapp in The Home-maker, and Adrian Fort in The Deepening Stream. Rankin is a composite of two reform figures from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Morris. Rankin quotes Emerson throughout the novel, and his red beard, socialist ideas and desire to work with his hands signal an important affinity with William Morris and the Craftsman ideal, a philosophy that was a part of aesthetic discussions in America at the turn of the century.

Fisher draws on Emersonian ideals in shaping her character. Rankin wants to be independent and self-reliant while helping to reform society. Fisher is careful to show that he is not interested in joining fashionable movements or in romanticizing work. Rankin tells Lydia, "Oh, I know that it's the easiest thing in the world for a carpenter to turn out bad work for the sake of making a little more money every day; I haven't any illusions about the sanctity of the hand-crafts" (51). However, his rejection of the insurance business and the whole "labyrinth" of capitalism, his new life as a furniture-maker and his evocation of the Crafts Movement itself show that Fisher is at least entertaining the ideas of the movement, which pose interesting solutions to what Fisher sees as the problems inherent in capitalism. In contrast to Judge Emery, who is like a piece of furniture in his own home, Rankin makes furniture, and is the independent creator of his own everyday life rather than a cog in the capitalist machine.

The Craftsman Ideal was based on the theories of the English art critic John Ruskin and the example of William Morris, a follower of Ruskin, a poet and a designer. Eileen Boris defines it as "a reaction against . . . the growth of a bureaucratized corporate structure in the context of capitalist social relations" (xi).<sup>10</sup> Boris explains:

Ruskin and Morris inspired an organized movement dedicated to handicraft production, fine workmanship, and artistic integrity: in short, a reunification of art and labor, of artist and artisan . . . . The great majority of Ruskin and Morris followers were actually looking for an alternative way of life within the existing order, one based on the cultivation of "art" in everyday life. (xiv)

The Ruskinian philosophy certainly fits one of Fisher's central themes, the idea that business too often interferes with family life and requires sacrificing the quieter, more spiritually sustaining pursuits of living close to the land and appreciating the domestic spaces of everyday life.

The artistic life that Ruskin and Morris visualize, "a new productive order, a new sort of community with the craftsman as the characteristic citizen and craftsmanship as the core value" must have appealed to Fisher as she searched for alternatives to the consuming madness of capitalism. Ruskin and Morris were trying to create a "way of life in sharp contrast to the commercial values of the 'era of the big business,' a project that Fisher shares (Boris xi). Their idea that "arts and crafts would form the

material counterpart to a simpler, more virtuous and natural life" probably spoke to Fisher's belief that art, work and domestic life could accommodate one another, in contrast to her mother's passionate assertion that art had to come before everything.

While his name resembles Ruskin's, Rankin's physical appearance is like William Morris's since he has a beard.<sup>11</sup> And Rankin's artistic life certainly poses an alternative to the art that Lydia learns at home and in the women's sphere in her community. As Alan Trachtenberg observes about America in this time period, "culture implied leisure: those energies which did not go into the making of a living," and therefore was considered part of the female realm (Trachtenberg 142-3).<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Emery and the women of Endbury's Women's Club gather regularly to hear lectures on art, set standards for desirable goods, and complain about the servant problem. As women of the leisure class, this is their "art of living."

Rankin, however, finds artistic fulfillment in his woodworking business, in making his own meals and doing his own dusting. He makes fluid the sharply-divided, gendered spheres so prevalent in Endbury by mixing art, the woman's sphere, with work, the male sphere. The Emerys find him suspect as a result, thinking that his beard makes him look like a "barbarian" and that his socialism proves he is un-American.

Rankin's choices give Lydia a broader definition of artful living. Although her parents have spoken disparagingly about Rankin, they have hired him to make a new sideboard for their diningroom and Lydia is intrigued by his challenge to convention. He explains to her that he "couldn't see how [he] could earn [his] living at [insurance] and arrive at the age of forty with an honest scruple left" or "have any other interests than getting ahead of other people in the line of insurance" (50-1). Rankin's theories are obviously drawn from William Morris, who said in his lecture, "The Art of the People," given in England between 1878 and 1881:

I believe there are two virtues much needed in modern life, if it is ever to become sweet; and I am quite sure that they are absolutely necessary in sowing the seed of an art which is to be made by the people and for the people, as a happiness to the maker and user. These virtues are honesty, and simplicity of life. To make my meaning clearer I will name the opposing

vice of the second of these -- luxury to wit. Also I mean by honesty, the careful and eager giving his due to every man, the determination not to gain by any man's loss, which in my experience is not a common virtue. (Taylor 408)<sup>13</sup>

Like Emerson, Morris and Fisher herself, Rankin wants to use his art of living responsibly, to "help other people to occupations that would let them live a little as well as make money, and let them grow a few scruples into the bargain" (51).

Fisher's detailed description of Rankin's sparsely furnished abode, which Lydia visits early in the novel, also shows the importance of William Morris's ideas to this novel. Morris's lecture, "Making the Best of It," describes the way homes should be decorated. His main points -- to eliminate "troublesome superfluities" and to "have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful" -- are demonstrated in Rankin's domestic space (quoted in Borris 55). The firelight in his livingroom catches "the gilded lettering on the books which lined the walls, and the diamond-like flashes from the polished steel of the tools on the work-bench," the beauty of the objects coming from their utility, as Morris suggests (69).

The room also contains a friend's piano "heaped" with music, and a cello, a family heirloom, instruments that help create a community which pursues the spiritual values of an artistic life. In contrast, Lydia regrets the fact that although she had piano lessons as a child, she never had time to practice. She tells Rankin that her father wants a player piano, the ultimate useless instrument. "but Mother says they are so new you can't tell what they are going to be. She says they may get to be too common" (70). With this detail, Fisher emphasizes that music, like everything else in the Emery home, is merely a commodity.

Rankin believes that life needs to change for the men of Endbury, and asserts to Lydia, "I have to begin with reforming myself. . . I have to learn not to care about being considered a failure by all the men of my own age who are passing me by" (73). Here Fisher has Emerson in mind. In writing about reform and the Montessori method of education in her book Mothers and Children (1914), which I discuss more fully in Chapters Two and Four, she uses Emerson's words: "It is of little moment that one or two or

twenty errors of our social system be corrected, but of much that the man be in his senses. Society gains nothing whilst a man, not himself renovated, attempts to renovate things about him" (232).<sup>14</sup>

The quotation comes from Emerson's 1844 lecture to the Transcendentalist Society on the "New England Reformers." In the lecture, Emerson argues that all reform movements must start with an individual movement inward before a "union" can be created with other people: "The union must be ideal in actual individualism" (318).<sup>15</sup> Emerson lists the variety of reform movements that occurred in America in the first half of the 19th Century, exposing the problems of a piece-meal attitude towards reforming society, but believes a common good comes out of all reform movements: "a tendency to the adoption of simpler methods, and an assertion of the sufficiency of the private man" (313). Thus, Rankin's realization of his inability to offer any benefit to society without first changing his own life aligns him with Emerson's philosophy about reform. Fisher's inclusion of ideas by reformers who were interested in art and social change aligns her novel with these movements.

Lydia's visit to Rankin's home certainly reforms her. After seeing Rankin's home, Lydia asks her father, "Why can't we shut up all of the house we don't really use, and not have to take care of those big parlors and the library when you and I are always in the dining-room or upstairs with Mother, now she's sick?" (80). However, her newly-awakened attention to the aesthetics of their everyday life makes the Judge shudder: "Judge Emery had thought of the grade of society which keeps its 'best rooms' darkened and closed, of the struggles with which his wife had dragged the family up out of that grade, and was appalled at Lydia's unconscious reversion to type" (80). He is "disturbed" at Lydia's "failure to acquiesce in the normal, usual standard of values" (80).

Fisher's details about Judge Emery's everyday aesthetics are important at this point in the novel because they provide a telling contrast to Rankin, who is trying to trace a different pattern for masculinity.

The Judge's thoughts about food are a good example:

To him, as to many middle-aged Americans, the two vital parts of a meal were the meat and the dessert. The added pleasures or comforting consolations of soup, salads, vegetables, entrees, made dishes, were not for him. He ate them, but with a robust indifference. 'Meat's

business,' he was wont to say, 'and dessert's fun. The rest of one's victuals is society and art and literature and such -- things to leave to the women.'(83)

The judge is an over-worked American businessman whose career has taken over his life and separated him from his family. His natural interest in more aesthetic and spiritual pursuits, "women's stuff" in this novel, has been stifled. Dr. Melton remembers a time when Judge Emery "was sitting up till all hours reading Les Miserables, and would knock you down if you didn't bow your head at the mention of Thackeray," but his business has suffocated this finer instinct. Fisher suggests that reading good literature is food for the spirit, a staple sorely lacking in Judge Emery's diet.

Ruskin and Morris shared Fisher's concern about the one-dimensional lives of American businessmen and American tastemakers followed their lead by advocating for a simpler life and more attention to art and culture. For example, Charles Keeler writes in The Simple Home (1902):

Modern materialism demands of far too many men an unworthy sacrifice. That the wife and children may live in ostentation the man must be a slave to business, rushing and jostling with the crowd in the scramble for wealth. A simpler standard of living will give him more time for art and culture, more time for his family, more time to live. (quoted in Boris 62)

Fisher saw first-hand what business could do to American men. Her brother, Jim, was the president of a paper company while she was writing The Squirrel Cage, and her letters show that she was aware of the stress it caused him. She wrote to her mother:

Poor Jim is under a terrible nervous strain. His business is in a critical position -- businesses always seem to be! -- and while he is making a lot of money, he is making it out of his very life- blood, in the way of care and anxiety and desperate plannings and contrivings, and such physical fatigue as makes my heart ache to see! (Washington 64-5)<sup>16</sup>

Although Fisher sees a "quiet sort of heroism" about his life, she writes, "it seems to me business is all wrong when it takes it out of human beings in that way!" (Washington 64-5). Rankin represents Fisher's belief that there is another way for families to prosper beyond the confines of the capitalist structure.

Rankin's activism encourages Lydia to confess to a spiritual emptiness that comes from not having fulfilling work. She tells him, "'it's a weight on my very soul -- that there's nothing for me to look forward to -- nothing, nothing that's worth growing up to do. I haven't been taught anything -- but I know

I want to be something better than . . . But I don't even know how to get that" (112). Lydia is incoherent because, as Fisher suggests throughout the novel, she doesn't have the education to be able to express what she feels. Her desperation is apparent and affecting to Rankin, who is equally desperate to help her. He asks her to "Be Ariadne for me! Help me to find the clue to what's wrong in our lives" (112), pointing to a myth that Fisher uses as a metaphor for marriage and capitalism throughout the novel.<sup>17</sup>

There are numerous references to Ariadne's story in The Squirrel Cage. In the first half, for example, the chapter in which Lydia visits Rankin's home is entitled, "Outside the Labyrinth." In Fisher's formulation, the labyrinth is akin to the squirrel cage, the whole business of "keeping up." Lydia and Paul are the children who are to be sacrificed to the great capitalist Minotaur, although it is Paul who loses his life, a victim to the dynamos which he installs in his work.

Rankin is a later-day Theseus or perhaps an alternative to Theseus because he has the nerve to stay out of the labyrinth altogether. We can read his absence as abandonment since he allows Lydia to be coerced into marrying Hollister by her family and friends, although I think Fisher's point is that Lydia is not sufficiently prepared to make independent choices because of the way she has been raised. Dr. Melton begs for a Theseus to rescue people like Lydia: "Oh, for a Theseus to hunt down this Minotaur of false standards and wretched ideas of success! I see them, the precious youths and maidens, going in by thousands to his den of mean aspirations, and not a hand is raised to warn them" (109), and Rankin answers the call: "I think I'm proving that you don't have to go into the labyrinth -- that you can live in health and happiness outside" (109).

All Lydia knows of Ariadne and Theseus is the artwork that she saw in Europe: "There's a picture of Theseus and Ariadne in Europe somewhere --Munich, I think -- or maybe Siena" (110). Her knowledge is superficial and she is unable to draw any meaning from the myth. When Rankin begs her to "Be Ariadne for me!," she has no thread to give, and the narrative cannot be completed (112).

In using this myth, Fisher criticizes a social system that limits education for women by showing the dangers of being unprepared for the role of helpmate. She also emphasizes that marriage will only

change if men and women work together, if they provide clues for each other and serve each other as helpmates. Fisher sees both men and women at risk and visualizes marriage as an opportunity for men and women to rescue each other. Unlike Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's künstlerroman The Story of Avis (1878)<sup>18</sup>, The Squirrel Cage argues that marriage with the right partner can begin a new phase of development, and that conjoining art and marriage, and perhaps finding art in marriage, is possible.

Although Fisher explores this possibility in The Squirrel Cage, her primary focus is on depicting the forces with which a young woman has to contend in order to make an educated choice. Lydia's ability to choose between Paul Hollister and Daniel Rankin is severely thwarted by a lifetime of having decisions made for her by her parents. Her choice of the "wrong" suitor makes the novel a failed marriage plot. However, although Lydia is near death at the end of the novel, there is a promise that she will recover, and the "right" suitor is waiting in the wings. Fisher thus defies one of the traditional outcomes of the two suitor convention: "the choice of the wrong suitor is usually punishable by death" (Kennard 63).<sup>19</sup> I will demonstrate other subversions of the convention later in this chapter.

#### IV. Building The House At Bellevue

Books III and IV of The Squirrel Cage are a detailed study of the mechanics of Lydia and Paul's marriage as Fisher examines the steadfast structures that separate them and restrict their ability to build a shared life. While Lydia is trapped in the machinery of the social scene, her "workplace" as Endbury society defines it, Paul is caught in the cogs of the corporate world. Thus, Fisher shows how they are imprisoned in their separate spheres before they even say their vows.

However, because of her friendship with Daniel Rankin, Lydia begins to realize how she and Paul might escape Endbury's labyrinth of "false standards and wretched ideas of success" by following Rankin's ideas of simplifying everyday life. But Paul is unwilling to divest himself of his up-and-coming position in Endbury society. As they struggle to build a home together, their divergent visions of their



public place in society and their private roles at home prevent them from accomplishing the finishwork of marriage.

For example, as Paul supervises every phase of the building process of his and Lydia's new home, he speaks proudly about being in the "vanguard of a new movement in American life . . . the movement away from the cities." He is building their house on a suburban patch of land called "Bellevue," a new development where all the "best" people will eventually live. Paul is anxious that his 5 acres have the appearance of a "country estate" rather than the "'suburban' look which would be so fatally easy to acquire in the suburban place"; he decides not to fence in his land hoping that open property will give this illusion (167). Creating the appearance of wealth is his ruling aesthetic as he envisions their property.

Paul's blueprint for marriage matches the aesthetic plans he is developing for his "estate". He wants his marriage to be socially correct, well-maintained and admirable, and he is willing to live beyond his means in order to achieve the right appearance. As he envisions his future, "he saw a handsome, well-kept house, correctly colonial in style, grounds artfully laid out to increase the impression of space, a hospitable, smoothly run interior, artistic, homelike, admired" (167). His plan for his marriage is drawn along similar lines, as he imagines himself and his wife successfully housed in the social structure of which he has worked so hard to be a part: "He saw himself an alert man of forty-five, a good citizen . . . a good captain of industry . . . a good husband who loved and cherished his wife as on the day he married her, and protected her from all the asperities of reality" (167). He envisions Lydia as "a gracious hostess, a public-spirited matron, lending the luster of his name to all worthy charities indorsed [sic] by the best people, laying down with a firm good taste dictates as to the worthy social development of the town" (168).

Throughout his courtship and marriage, Paul tries to make his vision a reality by putting more emphasis on his and Lydia's public roles than on their private identities as husband and wife. He insists that they create the appearance of wealth by employing a cook, a presentable maid, cut glass for the table and tailor-made suits for Lydia even though it means he has to do the work "of ten men" to afford it.

Lydia wants to build a very different structure, however, and her view of marriage is based on private, more spiritual pursuits. During their engagement, she tells Paul about the emotional closeness that she wants to find in marriage: "Dear Paul, isn't that what getting married means -- to learn how to be really, really close to each other all the time. There isn't anything else worth getting married for, is there?" (168). Lydia wants a marriage that can house a "life in common" with her husband, a phrase that Fisher uses often in both her fiction and non-fiction to describe the ideal marital situation.

In creating a life-in-common, Lydia wants to share interests in books and music, the raising of their children, and their individual psychological, mental and emotional growth. She hopes that Paul, a college graduate, will teach her about all the things she is interested in learning: "Books, politics, music - . . . Why you went through Cornell. You must know about books. And you're a man, you must know about politics . . ." (172-3). After they are married, she hates the "up-keep" that she is responsible for in order to maintain their social position: playing cards, giving dinner parties and receptions, and decorating her house with the "right" things. She is anxious to find work that is worthwhile. For example, she would like to learn to cook herself but Paul rejects this idea as a "fancy" that is simply not part of the Endbury social code.

Fisher demonstrates how Paul has been socialized into becoming another Judge Emery, so wrapped-up in his induction cords that he no longer cares about books, music and the life of the mind, either his or Lydia's. Like Judge Emery, he is lost in the labyrinth of materialism, in danger of being devoured by the capitalist Minotaur. Lydia hears the creaks and groans of the labyrinth as it threatens to crash in on her fragile marriage, and, unlike her mother, she protests Paul's long work hours, the expenses they incur to entertain beyond their means, and the house itself. "I'd rather live in four rooms right over your office, so that you wouldn't have that hour lost going and coming," she tells Paul as she tries to convince him that it is more important to her to share a spiritually rich home life rather than one rich in material goods.

Fisher provides an alternative masculine role by contrasting Paul's developing maturity to Daniel Rankin's. Rankin becomes a hero in the novel because he understands the inequities between gendered, separate spheres, and tries to do something about them. As Lydia and Paul struggle to build a marriage and a home according to a pattern that doesn't fit, Rankin goes outside the walls of his already remodeled abode to try to reform the domestic work lives of his community. He employs neighborhood children as apprentices, gives them land to start their own gardens, organizes a musical group "to teach young folks how to enjoy [th]emselves without spending money" and gives night classes in carpentry (242). Rankin's ideas about community solidify as he reconstructs his life according to his own plan of what constitutes valuable work, artful living and masculinity.

From the very start of their marriage, Fisher shows the chasm that exists between Paul's worklife and their family life, a gap which Lydia tries continuously to bridge:

The next few years would be critical ones in Paul's career, and the road must be straight and clear before his feet -- the road that led to success. No one had voiced a doubt that this road was not coincident with all other desirable ones: no one had suggested that the same years would be critical in other directions and would be certain to be terribly and irrevocably determinative of his future relation to his wife. (198)

Although Lydia tries to get involved in Paul's worklife, Paul tells her that he "want[s] to leave all that behind [him] when [he] comes home. That's what a home is for!" (199). He implies that it's not morally safe for Lydia to know about what he does for a living: "It's all grab, and snap, and cutting somebody's throat before he has a chance to cut yours" (200). Although they share a home, Lydia and Paul's separate roles are tantamount to living in different rooms, and in the early years of their marriage they construct psychological and emotional walls because they have so little in common.

Like Phelps's Avis and Mary Austin's Olivia<sup>20</sup>, Lydia is a developing artist. Unlike these women, though, Lydia finds her creative work in her new roles as wife and mother. The birth of her daughter, Ariadne, is the most spiritually sustaining project she has ever undertaken and motherhood provides her with the feeling of wholeness that Avis and Olivia find in their art. It remedies "the sense of the fragmentary futility of living which had always been inarticulate, unvoiced, but intensely felt" (248). But

although her home life is her artistic life, she still cannot put together a successful marriage because her husband's views of artful living, ideas sanctioned by their social group, are so divergent from her own. The common foe for all three women is a husband who won't participate in his wife's desire to remodel the existing marital structure.

Throughout the second half of the novel, we see the space dividing Lydia and Paul grow wider. Fisher provides three trials to test Lydia's moral strength: the "servant problem," her daughter's illness, and her father's death. Although these trials strengthen Lydia's conviction that she and Paul need to change drastically the structure of their everyday life, she is alone in this assertion. Like Judge Emery, Paul is absent from home when all the momentous changes take place. Although Paul's position makes him unlikeable to the reader, Fisher shows that he is a victim of socially-constructed gender roles, too.

As my introduction suggests, Fisher constructs a sub-plot in all of her novels having to do with class differences; these plots often encompass racial and ethnic problems as well, and their resolution involves moral growth for her protagonist. The lessons these plots confer become part of the protagonist's developing aesthetic creed. In The Squirrel Cage, Lydia, who is "ardently and naively anxious to find something 'worth doing,' takes on the increasingly troublesome "servant problem" as her work since "the achievement of each day was, according to Endbury standards, to keep or get somebody into the kitchen who could serve a course dinner, even if the mistress of the house was obliged to prepare it" (199).

For most of the leisure class in Endbury, the "servants" are furnishings. Paul thinks their very competent, Irish cook Ellen is a "treasure" because she efficiently and deliciously runs the kitchen and therefore helps the Hollisters to keep up appearances. Although she is part of the household, Paul is uninterested in her character. Lydia, however, can not ignore the suggestion of Ellen's degeneracy. She senses a problem with larger, moral dimensions in dealing with her hired help, and her decisions about her relationship to her servants help Lydia to gain the courage to change her life.

Lydia finds out that Ellen is coaxing Lydia's Irish maid's nephew, a boy "just off the boat," to drink too much. The intricacies of Fisher's plot line are weak; it is not clear, for example, why Ellen

would do such a thing, or how she accomplishes it. But it sets up the first moral decision that Lydia will make on her own, and her first domestic disaster. When Lydia finds out about Ellen's relationship to the boy, she fires her the day before the Hollister's first big dinner party. Paul is furious that Lydia would jeopardize their first foray into entertaining. To him, the servants are commodities that prove their high social standing as is evident in his comment about how they will replace Ellen: "Paul told Lydia that those palpably hired-for-the-occasion nigger waiters were very bad form, and belonged to a phase of Endbury's social gaucheries as outgrown now as charade parties" (219). Lydia solves their problem by doing all the work herself and, inexperienced as she is, does it badly. Paul resents her inability to manage this important occasion and another wall goes up between them.

But Lydia's good moral sense is rewarded by the appearance of Anastasia, nicknamed "Stashie", a maid who comes to Lydia's rescue the day after the disastrous dinner party. Stashie is loyal, loving and cheerful; she is also clumsy and unkempt. Her presence in the Hollister home deepens the division between Lydia and Paul as Lydia grows to love Stashie as a member of the family, and Paul can never get beyond his disgust at her dirty apron. For much of the second half of the novel, Fisher shows how, in Paul's absence, Lydia and Stashie build a home together.

As I note in my introduction, part of Fisher's fictional project in writing novels about an "art of living" is to house domestic artists, the people from lower, rural classes that Mary Wilkins Freeman and others write about, with leisure class families. Her leisure-class women always learn something valuable about creating an art of living from these women whose lives are "simpler"; and, indeed, Lydia tells her mother that Stashie is as "well-educated" as she is, and "a great deal better woman" because of her "loving heart" (233).

Stashie is a pillar of support as Lydia raises Ariadne. When Ariadne is born, Stashie understands Lydia's belief in the sanctity of the event. When Ariadne becomes dangerously ill, Lydia goes through "an anguish compared with which the torture of childbirth was nothing" (265). Paul is away on business and although Lydia sends for him over and over, he sends back two nurses instead of coming himself.

providing only material support. Stashie, however, lives through the ordeal with Lydia. Fisher not only creates a sisterhood between these two women from different classes, but also shows the essence of family as we see the women praying together for Ariadne's recovery.

When the baby is out of danger, Lydia emerges stronger as she realizes "the sacredness of life, which was to be lived sacredly" (265). Unlike Phelps' Avis, who is wrung out from her domestic tragedies, Lydia seems to gain strength since the events prove to her that her home life needs to be changed. Like Avis, Lydia becomes more and more focused on the fact that "she must do her best for Ariadne, must make the world . . . a better place than she herself had found it" (258).

Judge Emery's death, too, proves to Lydia how shaky the Endbury marital structure is. When her father dies, it is Dr. Melton who is responsible for telling Lydia's mother about her own financial situation: "She was not the first widow to whom he had been forced to break bad news of her husband's business" (271). The Emery home is destroyed, the land divided and sold off as separate building plots, and Mrs. Emery leaves town to live with her son, her marriage structure totally dismantled.

Although Lydia, stronger and more mature as a result of her trials, vows to build a new and better relationship with Paul, she cannot convince him that the labyrinth is caving in. He doesn't understand how he can do anymore than "keep [his] nose on the grindstone every minute" (301). At the end of the novel, Lydia, like Avis, has lost her husband, who has been killed at work by making a newly-installed dynamo go faster than it was capable of going; capitalist machinery, the modern-day Minotaur, has finally devoured Paul.

Lydia, too, is near death, desperately ill from giving birth to her second child, a son. However, she is determined to give her children "a chance at the real things," and therefore she legally names Daniel Rankin as their guardian. Like Rankin, she now believes that people aren't earning livings when they work like Paul worked: "they are earning more dresses and furniture and delicate food than their families need. They are earning a satisfaction for their own ambitions. They are willing to give their families anything but time and themselves" (353).

To prove this assertion, Fisher shows how little a presence Paul was in Ariadne's life: "Once or twice [Ariadne] remarked that Daddy was away longer than usual . . . but he had never been a very steadily recurrent phenomenon in her life, and soon her little brain, filled with new impressions, had forgotten that he ever used to come back" (343). This passage is connected thematically with Lydia's feelings about her own father's death. "If I could cry," she says, "it would be because I feel so little sorrow. I do not miss my father at all . . . How should I? I almost never saw him" (275). All of the absent fathers in the novel are dead by the end, showing Fisher's desire to eliminate the problem by constructing a new model of fatherhood, glimpsed in the final chapters.

At the end of the novel, Lydia and her children are living with Dr. Melton and his sister: Bellevue, the marriage home, has been metaphorically destroyed. And Lydia has rejected the traditional family structure as well by leaving her children to Rankin's care. Although she is still very ill, Lydia has a good chance of recovery. Until that time, it is Rankin, a remodeled American man, who will "father" her children.

#### V. Minor Home Improvements

Fisher knew that her ending was problematic; she told Henry Kitchell Webster in 1916 that "the ending of The Squirrel Cage was a palpable begging of the question the rest of the book had raised" but that she didn't have "the strength or the insight enough to carry it" any further (Madigan 51).<sup>21</sup> She would have the same problem with her other re-modeling project, The Home-maker (1924). Her solution in The Squirrel Cage, which she realized was not really a solution at all, was to kill off the bad husband and replace him with someone who promised to be a better one. Given Fisher's conviction that novels should deal with a "problem of living," and presumably, pose possible solutions, the fact that she couldn't solve this one must have rankled.

Her struggle with the marriage narrative shows that she is trying to figure out fictional disruptions as well, breaking the Victorian happy-ever-after marriage plot, and eluding yet another

version of it, a version which both Jean Kennard and Joseph Allen Boone identify as "appearing with increased frequency after 1850": "one in which an initial courtship and 'bad' marriage . . . forms a preparatory stage for the rewards of true love" (Boone 97). Since Fisher never shows us Lydia's reward, her plot remains open-ended, a state which postmodern readers might admire but over which a modernist like Fisher could only wring her hands.

Most of Fisher's novels end happily. However, her two remodelling projects, The Squirrel Cage and The Home-maker, don't, which demonstrates Fisher's struggle to change a traditional structure in which she essentially believes. Her position on marriage and family is conservative: she wants it to stay, albeit with changes in conceptions of gender and work roles. The Squirrel Cage is Fisher's criticism of all the things that were wrong with American marriage and family life at the turn-of-the-century: limited education and work opportunity for women, limited family life and leisure for men, dangerously separate existences for husbands and wives, and the resulting damage to American children. Her knowledge of these problems and her desire to fix them intrudes on her ability to create a conventional, happy-ending marriage plot. She begins to posit solutions in the novel by showing the steps Lydia Emery Hollister and Daniel Rankin take in trying to fix what is broken. Their positions are heroic because they go against what their culture defines as acceptable behavior. Fisher's remodeling, then, is subtle and small. It is a matter of moving the furniture and making minor improvements in a house that is essentially stable. In the early years of her marriage and career, constructing a successful family life was very much on Fisher's mind. Fisher received \$3,000 for the serial publication of The Squirrel Cage in Everybody's in 1911. The money allowed the Fisher's to take a trip to Europe. While in Rome, Fisher visited Maria Montessori's Casa dei Bambini, and there she found another element that she would incorporate into her "art of living" agenda, in both fictional and non-fictional projects. As my next chapter shows, the Montessori Method inspired Fisher to create a fictional family life in The Bent Twig that is everything the Emery's life is not: supportive, equitable, and relatively simple in terms of material goods. Montessori's concentration on early childhood, and Fisher's own growing children, gave her the material to construct a developing



female consciousness. Sylvia Marshall, as we will see in the next chapter, will have the benefit of a healthy, nurturing family life. However, she will also have a taste for the temptations of fashionable living, temptations that define the Emery's existence, with which to contend.

## NOTES

1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relations Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution, ed. Carl N. Degler (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).
2. Dorothy Canfield, The Squirrel Cage (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1912). All subsequent references to the text refer to this edition.
3. Fisher's first novel Gunhild was published in 1907. It concerns a group of Americans travelling in Norway, reflecting a similar trip that Fisher took in 1905. Although a secondary theme of the novel is marriage, its primary focus is on the clash of cultures and Norse myth, putting it beyond the scope of this study.
4. Mark Madigan, ed., Keeping Fires Night and Day: Selected Letters of Dorothy Canfield Fisher (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1993).
5. Joseph Allen Boone, Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
6. "Mrs. Flavia Canfield, Mother of the Famous Author." in The Delineator, February 1928.
7. Fisher's parents' marriage was not a particularly good one. In a letter to Pearl Buck, she writes about the "particular shadow which darkened [her] adolescent years": "a complete lack of harmony between my father and mother . . . I remember very well how it seemed to me a burden greater than I could bear all during the time when I was growing up. Yet there was no open quarreling or dissension – just a complete lack of ability to make each other happy" (Madigan 220).
8. Fisher's original title for the book was A Suitable Marriage. Everybody's Magazine changed it for serial publication, and Fisher ended up using it as a title for Book III.
9. Fisher's father was Librarian at Columbia University.
10. Eileen Boris, Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).
11. The widely-circulated portrait of Morris at the turn-of-the-century shows him with a flowing white beard.
12. Alan Trachtenberg, The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).
13. William Morris, "The Art of the People" in Nineteenth Century Theories of Art, ed. Joshua C. Taylor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
14. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Mothers and Children (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1914).
15. Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume One (New York: William H. Wise and Company, 1929).

16. Ida Washington, Dorothy Canfield Fisher: A Biography (Shelburne, Vermont: The New England Press, 1982).

17. To briefly summarize the myth, Ariadne is the daughter of Minos, the King of Crete, and of Queen Parsiphae. She is also the half-sister of Asterius (Asterion) or the Minotaur, a bull-headed monster "which Pasiphae had borne to the white bull," and who is imprisoned in the Cretan labyrinth, waiting to devour human beings. To atone for the death of his son Androgeous, who has been killed by Poseidon's white bull, Minos orders the Athenians to "send 7 youths and 7 maidens every ninth year" to the labyrinth as sacrifices. Theseus's arrival in Athens coincides with a ninth year, and "he so deeply pitied [the] parents whose children were liable to be chosen by lot, that he offered himself as one of the victims" (Mythology 137-40).

Ariadne falls in love with Theseus, and tells him that she will help him kill the Minotaur if he will marry her and take her back to Athens with him. He agrees, and she shows him how to use the magic ball of thread that Daedalus gave to her to negotiate the labyrinth. Using Ariadne's thread, Theseus successfully makes his way through the labyrinth and kills the Minotaur. Afterward, Ariadne guides Theseus and his followers to their ships in the harbor, and they all set off for Athens. They dock on the island of Naxos, and while Ariadne is sleeping, Theseus inexplicably abandons her and sets off for Athens on his own. When Ariadne awakes, she is first grief-stricken and then angry, and "invoked the whole universe for vengeance, and Father Zeus nodded assent." Dionysus rescues her, and they marry, creating a happy and fruitful union (Mythology 137-40).

18. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, The Story of Avis, ed. Carol Farley Kessler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1985).

19. Jean Kennard, The Two Suitor Convention (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978).

20. Mary Austin, A Woman of Genius (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1985).

21. Fisher wrote to Webster because she admired his novel, The Real Adventure, which was serialized in Everybody's in 1915. Fisher liked the fact that Webster wasn't "betrayed somehow into sentimentalizing the situations, or prettifying those two splendid human beings, or smoothing over some of the difficulties of their situation," referring to the married couple on whom the novel focuses (Madigan 51). She told Webster that The Real Adventure was "The Squirrel Cage question answered" and a brief summary of the plot will reveal why (Madigan 51).

The novel explores the marriage of Chicagoans Rosalind Stanton Aldrich, known as Rose, and Rodney Aldrich. Rose is in the same situation as Lydia, although on a big-city, social scale. Rodney is a millionaire lawyer who prides himself on not taking any cases that do not interest him. His professional and personal development is more important to him than making a lot of money. At least it is until he marries Rose and they become part of the social circle to which the rest of Rodney's family belongs. In this novel, as in The Squirrel Cage, marriage confers on a couple an obligation to uphold social standards, a realization that horrifies Newland Archer in Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence (1920).

But, like Lydia, Rose feels that her marriage is empty because she and Rodney share so little. Early on in the novel, she decides to study law – the profession her feminist mother wanted for her before she married Rodney – so that she and her husband will have more in common. She finds soon enough, however, that she is unsuited for it, and before she has the chance to find something else to do, she becomes pregnant.

Like Lydia, Rose has great hope for her upcoming motherhood because finally it seems like she has a job to do. However, when she gives birth to twins, Rodney employs both a nurse and a nurse's aid to take care of them. In both novels, motherhood is a profession for which women of leisure cannot qualify. Rose, unlike Lydia, realizes just what it is she has to do, which is leave her husband and children to find a career for herself, so that she and her husband can develop a friendship as well as a marriage.

Like A Woman of Genius (1912) and The Song of the Lark (1915), the second half of the novel shows Rose's experiences in "The World Alone," trying to make a career in the entertainment industry. By the end of the novel, she has her own costuming business in New York, but her main objective has remained: she wants to gain Rodney's respect and friendship by having a life of her own. The novel ends with Rose and Rodney reconciled, although it is not entirely clear how they will work out their new life together. Unlike Paul Hollister, Rodney realizes his part in stifling Rose, and he is true to his word in fixing the situation. He offers to move to New York so that Rose can keep her business; Rose offers to move to Chicago, thinking that now that she knows what real work is, she will be able to be a good mother. In the final chapter, they seem to be forging a very post-modern commuter marriage. They both have realized what a true adventure making a real marriage is.

Fisher must have found Rose's resolve and Rodney's re-education to be the solution, and she must have admired Webster's ability to salvage the marriage plot while concurrently making changes in the structure. Rose is courageous enough to get out of the marriage temporarily to find a life for herself, causing Rodney to reexamine their relationship; he realizes that he has selfishly prevented her from growing because he kind of liked her dependence on him, even though it suffocated what was most spiritually satisfying about his work. Fisher did object to Webster's handling of the children's situation, telling him

You and Mr. Wells (see The Wife of Sir Isaac Harmon and The Passionate Friends) make me laugh with your casual waving away to a hypocritical perfect nurse with no nerves and perfect judgment about children, the fearful, tragic, distracting, and utterly fascinating problem for modern mothers of what to do with their own children . . . if somebody else brings up your children, you're no mother (Madigan 51).

## CHAPTER II

### "PATTERNS OF ADULTHOOD: FASHION AND THE FABRIC OF FAMILY IN THE BENT TWIG"

To renovate the valuable institution of the family (and one of the unconscious aims of the Montessori system is nothing more or less than the renovation of family life), we must engage upon a daily battle with our own moral and intellectual inertia, rising each morning with a fresh resolve to scrutinize with new eyes our relations to our children.<sup>1</sup>

#### I. The Montessori Method and the Fabric of Family

In her third novel The Bent Twig (1915), Fisher provides solutions to the problems that plague her characters in The Squirrel Cage (1912). In this story, the Marshall family is a fully renovated institution. Barbara and Elliott Marshall have a cooperative and equitable marriage, and both have valuable work -- Elliott is a college professor and Barbara is a farmer. They are committed to raising their children with strong spiritual and moral values and each plays a significant role in their children's lives. Consequently, there are no "separate spheres" in the Marshall household. Fisher's protagonist, Sylvia Marshall, her sister Judith and her brother Buddy all learn to play baseball, to set the table and to struggle with their studies, and they grow up to be whole, self-sufficient men and women as a result. The flawed patterns that Lydia Emery and Paul Hollister follow in The Squirrel Cage have been mended in The Bent Twig.

However, Sylvia has conflicting internal forces with which to contend. While Lydia Emery Hollister is a naive victim of a social structure that would have her be decorative and passive, clearly a product of the late-Victorian age, Sylvia Marshall is a more complex, modern character whose desire for artful living (Fisher first uses her phrase "the art of living" in this novel) becomes entangled with the artifice of the leisure class. The novel is about her discovery of this distinction, a distinction which turns on the moral responsibility that Fisher writes about in her preface, "What My Mother Taught Me."

In contrast to Lydia Emery's family life, Sylvia Marshall's is centered on artful domesticity rather than social position. Her mother's rural aesthetic makes the Marshall home a "moral hothouse" as Sylvia describes it in the second half of the novel. But Sylvia is attracted to her wealthy aunt's leisurely lifestyle and expensive possessions. Throughout the novel, Fisher draws two patterns of womanhood for Sylvia to follow: Barbara Marshall's practical, domestic aesthetic and Aunt Victoria's materialistic, art-for-art's sake credo. Because Sylvia's Montessori-esque home life emphasizes self-reliance and responsibility, she is able to make the right decisions about the patterns of living that most fit her.

Fisher intended to create a modern, psychological portrait with this novel. She wrote to her publisher Henry Holt that her project was to "tell what sort of clay [Sylvia] was made of, and into what sort of a vessel she was finally shaped by the moulding of circumstance . . . the 'plot' in the Victorian sense isn't the important thing: and the thread of the story does not run through a sequence of events but connects one phase of inner development with another" (Madigan 43). While Fisher's renovation in The Squirrel Cage (1912) is social, her point in The Bent Twig (1915) is to show the personal renovation of her protagonist. Like Daniel Rankin, Sylvia learns to reform herself using an Emersonian ideal -- as I will show, a phrase of Emerson's is important to the depiction of Sylvia's development -- and Fisher uses the Montessori method as she uses the Craftsman Ideal in The Squirrel Cage (1912): as an aesthetic and philosophical element of the modern world which helped her develop her "art of living."

Fisher visited Maria Montessori's Casa dei Bambini in 1911, and she was so impressed with Montessori's educational methods that she called Montessori's educational philosophy "a new religion." She published three non-fiction books about Montessori principles, essentially introducing the method to America: A Montessori Mother (1912), A Montessori Manual (1913) and Mothers and Children (1914).

Fisher liked Montessori's attention to the individual learning process of each child and Montessori's belief that children should have the freedom to follow their own natural curiosity and desire to learn. In A Montessori Mother, Fisher writes, "The Casa dei Bambini proves in actual practice that even the best interests of the sacred majority do not demand that powerful and differing individualities be

forced into a common mould, but only guided into the higher forms of their own natural activities" (A Montessori Mother (40).

The Montessori method advocates allowing children to participate in domestic activities as an early step in achieving personal freedom. For Fisher, this makes family life "an enlightened democracy" since it discourages the development of gender-based work distinctions. Montessori also supports Fisher's ideas about the art of living because children learn early about being active participants in the creation of daily life. As Fisher's letters show, her concentration on domesticity in The Bent Twig was part of her artistic agenda. Henry Holt complained about the plethora of domestic details in the novel, arguing that they would not "interest a good many of your readers, especially those who are going to form public opinion: for the majority of them, being men, are probably not interested in such affairs" (Washington 75). But, Fisher didn't agree. She wrote her agent Paul Reynolds, "old Mr. Holt found it [The Bent Twig] too everlastingly full of domestic details: shopping, tomato-canning, dish-washing, etc. But I didn't take 'em out to please him. Life is full of such details. Why can't I be smart enough to make them vital. I will yet, see if I don't!" (Washington 74).

Montessori provided proof that "domestic details" are, indeed, vital in helping children develop mentally and spiritually. Fisher's descriptions of life at the Casa dei Bambini, included in her Montessori books, illuminate the fictional details of the Marshall household. The young children (aged 3 to 6 years) at Montessori's Casa were using domestic "apparatus" to learn self-reliance and responsibility. For example, Fisher saw children working on wooden frames that had buttons and ribbons attached to them. The children's task was to learn how to button and un-button, tie and un-tie, until they mastered these tasks, a point in their development which the children deciphered themselves.

As they worked on the apparatus, the children discovered that the actions they were performing had a function in their personal lives as well, in that they were similar to the skills they needed to dress themselves. When they made this connection, they gained independence in knowing how to perform this task; with this independence came the responsibility for performing the task themselves.

The Bent Twig is Sylvia Marshall's discovery of how to dress herself, too. The novel is full of details about dress as Sylvia sizes up the various wardrobes offered to her --her mother's simple, domestic "uniform," her Aunt Victoria's fashionable and expensive couture, her friend Mrs. Draper's seductive parlor gowns. The Bent Twig is, in effect, Fisher's pattern for what an American family life would be like if Montessori methods were implemented at home. At the Casa dei Bambini, Fisher was amazed to find little children setting the luncheon table, carrying tureens of soup, and serving their classmates. In The Bent Twig, one of Sylvia's earliest memories is of her family making dinner together:

Father and Sylvia and Judith went out in the garden to the hotbed to pick the lettuce for supper and then back in the kitchen to get things ready. When Mother was through giving Buddy his supper and came hurrying in to help, Sylvia was proud that they had nearly everything done -- all but the omelet. Father had made cocoa and creamed potatoes . . . and Sylvia and Judith had between them, somewhat wranglingly, made the toast and set the table. (8)

The inclusion of Sylvia and Judith in the dinner-making process here accommodates the Montessori belief that if children are given responsibility, they will behave responsibly.

In this passage, Fisher also continues to show men active in the domestic sphere, as Professor Marshall divides the household chores with his wife throughout the novel; indeed, the Marshall household shows what might have resulted had Lydia Emery married Daniel Rankin. This is a sharp contrast to the domestic arrangements in The Squirrel Cage (1912) where it is almost perverse to see Judge Emery at home in the middle of a workday.

Fisher uses Montessori to prove her conviction about the importance of a father's presence in the household, a theme that she began in The Squirrel-Cage. She writes in Mothers and Children (1914),

It is a common saying that to the mother belongs all the moral training of the children. The father . . . does not take the care of them that the mother does, and hence should not undertake to decide questions relating to them. A good many modern American women are beginning to react with some violence from this unfortunate tradition and to see that an invaluable factor in the life of the children is taken away if we for any reason practically exclude their father. (36)

Fisher's belief that men have an important place in the home will be fully tested in The Home-maker (1924), but in The Bent Twig, in contrast to The Squirrel-Cage, Fisher's project is to show how the



presence of an interested father can affect a young woman's development. Sylvia's second major choice in the novel will be to decide which man to marry and, as I show in Section III, "Patterns of Manhood," Sylvia is able to make the right choice partially because of her strong relationship with her father.

## II. Patterns of Womanhood

The first half of The Bent Twig culminates in Sylvia Marshall's most defining creative act (also Fisher's most ironic passage in the novel). Sylvia tries to design a dress for a Christmas party which is to be held at the Fiske family mansion; the Fiskes are the "first family" of La Chance, the midwestern town that is the setting for the first half of the novel. Sylvia is unsuccessful in her own design attempts, but finds the "perfect" pattern on the "frontispiece of a theatrical magazine":

It was the creation of a Parisian boulevard actress, known widely for her costumes, for the extraordinary manner in which she dressed her hair, and for the rapidity of her succeeding emotional entanglements. Her name meant nothing to Sylvia. She tore out the page, folded it and put it for safe-keeping between the pages of her textbook on logic. (192)

In her quest to array herself artistically, Sylvia doesn't understand the implications of costuming herself, a co-ed from the mid-west, like a Parisian demi mondaine. The dress only creates problems for her, as I will show.

But Sylvia's creative act here is important because it demonstrates the central tension in the development of Sylvia's moral and aesthetic creed. Although making the dress is a creative act, the object misrepresents its owner so the spirit behind it is a superficial, irresponsible one, much like Marietta's preoccupation with her lace curtains. By wearing the dress, Sylvia objectifies her body instead of clothing her self, a problem that she shares with Lily Bart from Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth (1905). Unlike the young Dorothy Canfield who discerns the difference between appreciating art for its own sake or for its ability to tell a true story about humanity, Sylvia has yet to learn her lesson about the meaning of art.

Ultimately, Sylvia decides that her mother's creative domesticity is the true "art of living," and she chooses her mother's "home uniform." To contrast Barbara Marshall's "crumpled and stained apron," Fisher shows the lives of three other women whose sophisticated and fashionable wardrobes disguise unhappy lives based on material goods rather than morals: Aunt Victoria, Mrs. Draper and Mrs. Fiske.

### "A Crumpled and Stained Apron"

Sylvia's journey in The Bent Twig involves her initial rejection of her mother's aesthetic of everyday life, eventual acceptance and then immersion into that aesthetic. Barbara Marshall is a quiet, capable woman, Vermont born-and-bred and clearly the moral center of the novel. She has turned the Marshall homestead into a farm, growing the family's food and flowers to decorate their home. We also see Barbara helping her husband with his professorial duties -- at one point in the novel, she is correcting his freshmen economics quizzes --and she is a community leader, providing nursing services and gardening advice to her neighbors.

Fisher portrays Barbara Marshall's domestic work as varied, far-reaching and beautiful. She is aligned with the domestic artist figures in women regionalist's fiction of the 19th Century -- Mrs. Todd from Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) comes to mind -- although her artistic boundaries are more fluid. Barbara is college-educated and has seen the world beyond Lydford, the small Vermont village where she grew up. Her knowledge of the world beyond La Chance, and of the sophisticated realm of culture represented by her sister-in-law, Victoria, gives her domestic choice depth. Her wardrobe exhibits her choice. She prefers, for example, to wear her unfussy "home uniform" but has "one evening dress and one street dress, sufficiently approximating the prevailing style to pass unnoticed" for wearing to town (13). Her husband calls these public clothes her "disguise," emphasizing the fact that Barbara's real self lives and works at home.

Barbara is always at work in the novel, canning tomatoes, gathering eggs, gardening, etc. Fisher's inclusion of these domestic details shows an important difference between Barbara Marshall and Mrs. Emery and her daughter, Marietta, from The Squirrel Cage. Fisher suggests that the domestic sphere can provide women with valuable and satisfying work, if it is work they love and it serves a larger purpose. In her work as a farmer, Barbara Marshall has found the "something worthwhile" that Lydia Emery is searching for. We do not find expensive lace curtains at Barbara Marshall's windows because she has neither the time nor the desire to care for them. According to Fisher, Marietta's preoccupation with mending her curtains is useless work because the purpose is superficial and she hates it; it is therefore a waste of human energy and potential. A greater waste, however, is the lady of leisure, represented in this novel by Sylvia's Aunt Victoria, who, with ample means and a good mind, chooses to do nothing at all.

#### "Amber Silk and Lace"

Sylvia's other possible role model is her Aunt Victoria who is cultivated and sophisticated, with a wardrobe that enhances her polished manner. Her visits to the Marshall's home leave vivid impressions on Sylvia's young imagination, memories of her "magnificent in her lacy dress, her golden hair shining under the taut silk of her parasol, her white, soft fingers gleaming with rings, her air of being a condescending goddess, visiting mortals" (9). Sylvia dons her best clothes to go riding in the afternoons with her aunt, her mother letting her go "without comment."

Barbara's silence as she watches Sylvia become seduced by Aunt Victoria's appearance emphasizes the Montessori principles underlying the novel. As Fisher writes about Montessori, "the central idea . . . is the full recognition of the fact that no human being can be educated by anyone else" (A Montessori Mother 49). Throughout the novel, Barbara provides gentle guidance and a good example, but lets Sylvia make her own choices. Unlike Mrs. Emery, Barbara doesn't try to force Sylvia to do or be

anything; she encourages her to create her self. She nurtures in contrast to the suffocating dependence that is encouraged in Lydia Emery.

In contrast to Barbara Marshall's silence, Victoria tries to tell Sylvia how she should live (as does Mrs. Draper, as I will show). Sylvia relishes every word from Aunt Victoria's mouth, especially her assertion that Sylvia has more style than either Eleanor Hubert, a local girl of the smart set whose mother "tricks" her up in various "absurd" outfits, or her sister, Judith: "Judith is handsomer than you, but she will never have any style," her aunt tells her (45).

From one of Aunt Victoria's visits, Sylvia takes away a "picture" of her two examples:

Sylvia went more slowly, looking back once or twice at the picture made by the two women, so dramatically different -- her mother, active, very upright, wrapped in a crumpled and stained apron, her dark hair bound closely about her round head, her moist, red face and steady eyes turned attentively upon the radiant creature beside her, cool and detached, leaning willow-like on the slender wand of the gold-colored parasol. (60)

Her mother is active and creative, while Aunt Victoria is passive, content to be looked at. In contrast to Sylvia's mother, Aunt Victoria doesn't do anything but float through life on a gossamer cloud of chintz and chiffon, materials she arrays herself in but never creates. From Sylvia's youthful vantage point, Aunt Victoria's materials are more shimmery, and she longs to be swathed in her fabric. The "picture" of this passage is reminiscent of the paintings that a 20-year old Dorothy Canfield saw in the Prado, a similar, defining aesthetic moment.

The knowledge that people can live like Aunt Victoria, essentially homeless, stays with Sylvia, too, as she enters her teens. Her cousin Arnold Smith, Aunt Victoria's stepson, tells her, "We don't live anywhere. We just stay places for awhile. Nobody that we know lives anywhere" (34); they alternate their residences between winters in Paris and a summer residence in Lydford, Vermont, where Victoria, Sylvia's father and Barbara Marshall were brought up. In each place, they soak up the culture they appreciate and talk about it. They have no ties or responsibilities to a community. Their lifestyle is reminiscent of another Fisher character, Virginia, the young woman who learns an aesthetic lesson about

"summer people" and "real people" in Fisher's short story, "Petunias -- That's for Remembrance," discussed in my introduction.

The Marshalls, however, have chosen permanence and roots, living unfashionably on a rural farm, rather than renting in town like the other faculty families. The Marshalls are part of a community, and we see a varied collection of people in and out of the Marshall home in the first half of the novel. They are not the people who "matter" in La Chance society, however. We meet, for example, a music teacher who has a tendency to drink too much, and a cousin who is a devoted spiritualist, people who are like Dr. Melton's "freaks" in The Squirrel-Cage, odd characters who like to play music and talk about ideas. As Sylvia finds her Aunt Victoria's life more and more appealing, she learns to cringe at her family's lack of social distinction.

To contrast the Marshall's family life, Fisher creates a collection of other family patterns, all made of lesser cloth and unraveling at the seams. For example, in conversations between Elliott and Barbara Marshall, we learn how Victoria purchased what Elliott calls her "Olympian serenity." As a result of a lost fortune and the death of their parents, both Elliott and Victoria were left to make their own way at a young age. Victoria married a rich, older man, Ephraim Smith, when she was barely 20; Elliott says to Barbara: "You know as well as I do that she cared no more for Ephraim Smith than for the first man she might have solicited on the street" (62). When Smith died, Victoria became responsible for bringing up his son, Arnold. Their "family life" is based on Victoria's selfish whims: engaging male tutors who are dazzled by her, hiring and firing domestic help, travelling continuously to avoid any kind of domestic responsibility herself, and patterning Arnold's life after her measurements of "cultured" living.

Arnold longs for a home and a mother figure, a role Barbara fills for him throughout the novel. Fisher makes Barbara into a domestic heroine in contrast to Victoria, as the reader wishes Barbara would rescue Arnold the way she rescued her husband who was once an inhabitant of Victoria's world. Elliott tells Victoria, "thanks to my wife . . . I've discovered more substantial reasons for existence than I ever

dreamed possible in the old life" (40). Barbara has encultured him in the ways of domestic happiness and fulfilling work, and this is the life that she passes on to her children. She transforms people's lives in the novel, a characteristic which makes her very powerful. In her quest to unravel the mysteries of Aunt Victoria's life, Sylvia never loosens the tie that binds her to her mother.

"A Loose Garment of Smoke-Brown Chiffon"

Sylvia's entrance into the world of La Chance society via her attendance at the State University introduces another potential female role model in the character of Mrs. Draper. A society lady/faculty wife with independent wealth, Mrs. Draper is cut from the same cloth as Aunt Victoria, but she also has an occupation: she spends her time manipulating the love lives of the exclusive set of students with whom she chooses to get involved. She

picked out from each class the few young men who were to her purpose, and proclaiming with the most express lack of reticence the 43 years which she by no means looked, she took these chosen few under a wing frankly maternal, giving them, in the course of an intimate acquaintance with her and the dim and twilight ways of her house and life, an enlightening experience of a civilization which she herself said, with a humorous appreciation of her own value, quite made over the young, unlicked cub. (158)

Mrs. Draper's occupation in "making over" these young people is self-serving and superficial. She teases her conversation at her soirees consisting of "sex-antagonism and the hatefulness of the puritanical elements of American life" (172).<sup>2</sup>

To the students, Mrs. Draper is the epitome of sophistication. Longing for acceptance and attention, Sylvia lets her drape her maternal wing around her. Contrary to the Montessori-inspired freedom of the Marshall parents, Mrs. Draper's manner is suffocating as she encourages Sylvia to copy her "hats and neckwear and shoes and her mannerisms of speech" (158). Sylvia patterns her young, undeveloped womanhood according to Mrs. Draper's insidiously sophisticated maturity (158).

Sylvia's life changes overnight as a result of Mrs. Draper's attentions. She becomes the "brilliant young sensation of the college season," escorted by Jerry Fiske and chaperoned by Mrs. Draper to all the college functions (165). She neglects her studies and other interests to "spend long hours of feverish toil over Aunt Victoria's chiffons and silks," her aunt's cast-offs, and loses her taste for her homelife: "The home supper-table seemed to her singularly flat and distasteful with its commonplace fare --hot chocolate and creamed potatoes and apple sauce, and its brisk impersonal talk of socialism, and politics, and small home events, and music" (165-70).

The superficiality of Sylvia's new life is noted by Barbara Marshall when Sylvia happens to repeat one of Mrs. Draper's remarks about Eleanor Hubert: "Eleanor no more knows the meaning of her beauty than a rose the meaning of its perfume" (172). Barbara objects to Sylvia's new idea, trying to define without reprimand the difference between her definition of womanhood and Mrs. Draper's. She tells Sylvia, "I don't take much stock in that sort of unconsciousness -- Eleanor isn't a rose, she isn't even a child. She's a woman. The sooner girls learn that distinction, the better off they'll be, and the fewer chances they'll run of being horribly misunderstood" (172-3). Barbara refuses the metaphors for womanhood that Sylvia has learned in Mrs. Draper's parlor, and Fisher emphasizes the complexity and irreducibility of defining a whole woman. She criticizes traditional Victorian notions of women who are as innocent and naive as children, or as beautiful and untouchable as a rose.

Sylvia resents her mother for "this unsympathetic treatment of a pretty phrase" and thinks "it was not her fault if she were becoming more and more alienated from her family" (173). But after being physically assaulted by Jerry at the Fiske's Christmas party, Sylvia understands the social costs of Mrs. Draper's definition of womanhood. Sylvia is horrified at Jerry's behavior and wants nothing more to do with the Fiskes and their "material advantages." Mrs. Draper is deeply disappointed in Sylvia and rebukes her for her cowardice and naivete:

She waited for no invitation to confidence by the girl, but pounced upon her with laughing reproach and insidiously friendly ridicule. 'What did you suppose, you baby? You wouldn't have him marry you unless he was in love with you, would you? Why do you suppose a man

wants to marry a woman? Did you suppose that men in love carry their sweethearts around wrapped in cotton-wool? . . . What do you think marriage is? (222)

Mrs. Draper's manipulation is similar to the kinder, but still manipulative, ministrations of Mrs. Emery and the other women of Endbury who rally around Lydia as she becomes engaged. Sylvia, unprepared for Mrs. Draper's attack, (as much an attack as Jerry's), and unexperienced in these matters has nothing to say in her defense beyond, "He was -- horrid!" Mrs. Draper assures her that, "That's the way men are -- all men -- and there's no use thinking it horrid unless you're going into a convent. It's not so bad, either -- once you get the hang of managing it -- it's a hold on them'. . . . As long as she herself isn't carried away by it, it's a weapon in the hand of a clever woman" (223).

Mrs. Draper's imparted knowledge of men reveals a world-view where women are victims unless they use their bodies to gain power over their victimizers. Her attack on Sylvia constitutes a desertion and a betrayal, as she tries to shame Sylvia into discarding a sexless, "cotton-wool" identity for her own "loose chiffon" sensuality: "Why Sylvia, I thought you were a big, splendid, vital, fearless modern girl -- and here you are acting like a little, thin-blooded New England old maid" (222). Mrs. Draper's words will haunt Sylvia until she is offered her mother's pattern for healthy relationships between modern men and women.

#### "A Handsome, Unindividualized Black Velvet Costume"

Mrs. Fiske has not been as "clever" as Mrs. Draper, and Fisher's depiction of her shows a sad and lonely woman who dresses the part of a respected matron but who is disrespected and victimized in her husband's home. Barbara Marshall senses Mrs. Fiske's predicament when Mrs. Fiske pays a call on the Marshalls to invite Sylvia to their party. While Sylvia thinks that she could fill the shoes of this "thin, sickly woman who had so little grace or security of manner . . . with vastly more aplomb." Barbara Marshall is kind to her and Mrs. Fiske is "oddly drawn" to Barbara Marshall (183). She admires the



simplicity of the Marshall's home and tells Barbara, "I was wishing I could just stay and stay in this room" (183).

In drawing the details of the Fiske home, Fisher shows why Mrs. Fiske would want to escape. Colonel Fiske is an "old blackguard" with an equally bad private reputation and his son Jerry is following his father's pattern. Their home is opulent, full of "tributes" from Colonel Fiske's constituents, but Fisher foregrounds what is valued least in the house: Mrs. Fiske. Married at age 19, Mrs. Fiske is the Colonel's fourth wife. As one in a long line of "Mrs. Fiskes" her married identity is empty, a label as unindividualized as her black velvet costume. The glimpses we have of her at the party reveal how painful her relationships with her husband and her stepson are. When the guests arrive at the Fiske home, no one acknowledges Mrs. Fiske (except the well-mannered Sylvia) following the lead of the Colonel and Jerry Fiske: "The Colonel did not look at her, Jerry nodded carelessly to her as he passed in" (198).

As Sylvia makes polite conversation with Mrs. Fiske, who is very grateful for Sylvia's attention, we see how difficult Mrs. Fiske's marriage is. She tells Sylvia:

'It is the Colonel's hope . . . to have Jerry marry as soon as he graduates from the Law School. The Colonel thinks that nothing is so good for a young man as an early marriage . . . He -- the Colonel -- is a great believer in marriage --'. Her voice died away into murmurs. Her long, thin throat contracted into a visible swallow. (200)

Marriage is even painful to talk about for Mrs. Fiske, and although the reader is aware that this is what Sylvia is in for if she chooses to marry Jerry Fiske, Sylvia herself is so seduced by the loveliness of the furnishings and the appearance of gentility that she ignores the signs of abuse and of immorality. Sylvia finally figures out the price Mrs. Fiske has had to pay for living in this kind of luxury. Jerry Jr. has inherited his father's passion for possession, and when he gets violently jealous of Sylvia's flirtation with one of his friends, they become engaged. Like Lydia Emery, Sylvia is initially passive in the decision: Fisher's language describing Jerry as "pressing," "masterful," "confident," and "towering" matches her description of Paul Hollister's possession of Lydia in The Squirrel-Cage.

However, when Sylvia puts on the dress whose pattern she has borrowed from the Parisian actress (a dress which she hasn't shown to her family), she hesitates:

. . . with her hand on the knob, she was halted by an inexplicable hesitation about opening the door and showing herself. She looked down at her bare shoulders and bosom, and faintly blushed. It was really very, very low, far lower than any dress she had ever worn. And the fact that Eleanor Hubert, that all the 'swell' girls wore theirs low, did not for the moment suffice her -- it was somehow different -- their showing their shoulders and her showing her own. (208)

This passage is significant because, unlike Lydia before her marriage, Sylvia begins to reject the dictates of her "crowd." Sylvia's self-conscious gesture echoes similar scenes of moral consternation involving fashion in such Victorian "didactic" novels as Vanity Fair by Thackeray and Little Women by Louisa May Alcott, suggesting their influence on Fisher. With this gesture, Fisher is signalling her own belief in the British and American tradition which posited the novel as a good vehicle for moral reform. Fisher, however, disliked the term "didactic" and would rather her reader's recognize the Montessori element of self-education inherent in Sylvia's discomfort.

In an attempt to make herself feel more comfortable, Sylvia drapes a scarf around herself. But another false layer doesn't prevent young Jerry from trying to physically claim what he now identifies as his. When Sylvia enters the library where he waits, she is met by an uncontrollable, animalistic, physical passion.<sup>3</sup> Sickened by Jerry's behavior, Sylvia escapes to the safety of her room where she stuffs her dress into the fireplace, packs her things and flees. Because of the "habit of independent thought" that her parents have instilled in her, Sylvia has the presence of mind to reject what makes her uncomfortable.

Mrs. Fiske, however, is trapped and is envious of Sylvia's ability to escape. She "suddenly threw her arms about Sylvia's neck, clinging to her. She murmured incoherent words, the only ones which Sylvia could make out being, 'I can't -- I can't -- I can't!'" (215-16). Fisher shows that a woman who is bought in marriage, like Mrs. Fiske, is a prisoner in her own home, victimized by greed and wealth. Mrs. Fiske is aligned with Aunt Victoria since both women married wealthy, older men at age 19. Fisher's inclusion of Mrs. Fiske's story allows the reader to speculate on Victoria's situation, and indeed,

she seems luckier because her husband is dead. Along with Mrs. Draper, these women serve as Fisher's proof that marriages based on wealth and social position are emotionally empty, and provide nothing of substance for these women to do.

### "The Home Uniform"

Humiliated by her experience at the Fiske home, Sylvia says little to her family about what she has suffered, but Barbara senses that Sylvia has learned a difficult lesson. In a very moving scene, Barbara silently comforts her daughter by symbolically undressing her, stripping away the false fabric of Sylvia's sally into superficiality:

She set the lamp down, and with swift deftness slipped out hatpins, unhooked furs, unbuttoned and unlaced and loosened until Sylvia woke from her lethargy and quickly completed the process, slipping on her nightgown and getting into bed. Not a word had been exchanged. (217)

By the end of the first half of the novel, Sylvia, helped by her mother, has taken off her fine layers to reveal the simple, healthy, Marshall uniform which has been her undergarment all along. In a rare, loquacious moment, Barbara also alleviates Sylvia's fears about men and marriage:

'Sylvia, it's a lie that men are nothing but sensual! . . . 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 . . . when they wear very low-necked dresses, for instance. . . There's no healthy life possible without some sensual feeling between the husband and wife, but there's nothing in the world more awful than married life when it's the only common ground. (227)

In her mother's "heroic eyes of truth" Sylvia finds the reassurance that was absent from Mrs. Draper's attack and the world takes on a sheen that Sylvia hasn't seen since her entrance into La Chance society. Her home looks "strangely sweet" to her, transfigured by the comparison of the elegant but empty Fiske household (230).

The depth and complexity of creating a life that is healthy and comfortable, satisfying and joyous is revealed in Barbara's simple creed about how to structure a marriage and create a family life: "It is one of the responsibilities of men and women to help each other to meet on a high plane and not a low one . . . Family life wouldn't be possible a day if they didn't" (228-9). Mrs. Draper's pattern, the low plane of a low-necked, yellow, chiffon evening dress, cannot suit Sylvia, who is after all, her mother's daughter.

Barbara Marshall will be absent from the second half of the novel, although her spirit is dressed in a ragged shirt and earth-stained overalls in Fisher's second incarnation of a male domestic artist, Austin Page. While the first half of the novel shows Sylvia trying on various suits of clothes to determine her identity as a woman, the second half shows her redefining herself as she chooses a mate.

### III. Patterns of Manhood

Sylvia's main decision in the second half of the novel -- which man to marry -- is essentially the same decision she had to make in the first half. In choosing a man, she is once again defining herself as a woman by choosing an aesthetic code. As I explain in my introduction, Fisher doubles the two-suitor convention, each of her suitors, Felix Morrison and Austin Page, sharing the aesthetic sense of one of her female role models, Aunt Victoria and Barbara Marshall.

Sylvia is ultimately able to choose the right man for two reasons: because she has lived with her father, a man who has rejected her aunt's pattern for artful living; and because of the knowledge she gains in the first half of the novel about men who aren't "decent," men like Colonel Fiske and his son, Jerry. In this section, I will detail the patterns of manhood that Fisher draws in marrying her heroine to the right man.

Living under Victoria's roof, first in Lydford and then in Paris, Sylvia is influenced by her aunt's social mores and she falls in love with Felix Morrison, a man who fits very well into Victoria's beautifully dim parlor. Throughout this half of the novel and at significant points in Sylvia's development, we see

three different men -- Felix Morrison, Arnold Smith and Professor Saunders -- who, like Sylvia, have been caught in Victoria's web. Sylvia is finally able to be critical of her aunt by understanding what happens to men who have been appropriated by Victoria's grasp.

In shaping her courtship narrative, Fisher forms the second half of her plot after the American novel of manners. While the first half of the novel is primarily an examination of the Marshall family's rural aesthetic, infused with Montessori philosophy, the second half is furnished with sophisticated parlor talk, European journeys and the luxurious rituals of the wealthy. As The Squirrel-Cage belongs in the conversation with other novels about marriage at the turn-of-the-century, the second half of The Bent Twig compares European and American culture like the work of Henry James and Edith Wharton: indeed, Fisher invokes James in at least one passage as the arbiter of the social ideal to which Sylvia's new friends aspire.

Fisher's complexly coded world demonstrates the difficult and treacherous journey that choosing the proper mate is for the modern woman, as do James's The Portrait of A Lady (1881) and Wharton's The House of Mirth (1905). Implicit in Fisher's evocation of this section of society is a critique of the fashionable furnishings of which these novels of manners are made. In The Squirrel Cage, Fisher criticizes novels that do not portray the problems of "real" marriages. In The Bent Twig, she criticizes the artifice and the social irresponsibility of the idle rich who people the novel of manners. Sylvia barely escapes this world with her moral sense intact, as she returns home to embrace her mother's life, the life of a domestic artist.

Fisher's first-hand knowledge of the sophisticated, monied world of manners is obvious in the wonderfully-detailed observations of dress and architecture that decorate the second half of the novel. For example, at Felix and Molly's wedding, we are aware of how deeply Sylvia has immersed herself in this world as she compares dress with architecture, "bringing out the insistent tendency in both to the rococo, to the burying of structural lines in ornamentation. The cuff, for instance, originally intended to protect the skin from contact with unwashable fabrics, degenerated into a mere bit of 'trimming' which has lost all

its meaning, which may be set anywhere on the sleeve" (367). Although Fisher was not part of the old, aristocratic New York society in which James and Wharton grew up, she joins their fictional ranks with observations like this one.

But ultimately, Fisher invokes this society to condemn it and its definition of art. Her characters' conversations about aesthetics are the centerpieces of many scenes in the second half of the novel. In these scenes, her central theme becomes clear: that art is made most manifest in the natural world and in the daily lives of people who work for a living. She is disputing the ideas of artists like James, Wharton, and her mother, who believe that art resides in European museums and that the only people who can appreciate it are those with money enough to buy the experience of absorbing it, or to buy the object itself. Sylvia's art education in the novel re-enacts Fisher's own lesson about art and moral responsibility which is described in her preface, "What My Mother Taught Me," as Sylvia struggles to balance her love for beauty and luxury with her conscience, which has been formed by living with her parent's Montessori ideals of self-reliance and personal responsibility.

#### "A Loose Linen Overall Suit" and "University Clothes"

Professor Elliott Marshall's wife and children are foremost in his life, although he is equally passionate about his work as a political economist. Early in the novel, we see him donning a "loose linen overall suit" to protect his "university clothes" as the whole family cleans the living-room, a job they always perform on Tuesdays. Fisher emphasizes that Elliott's farmer neighbors see nothing odd about his participation at home, although his colleagues find it a little ridiculous, laying bets "as to whether the Professor of Political Economy would pull out of his jacket a handkerchief, or a duster, or a child's shirt, for it was notorious that the children never had nursemaids and that their father took as much care of them as their mother" (14). Fisher acknowledges the "oddness" of Professor Marshall's domestic activity

but emphasizes the practicality of a two-parent household, two people who are equally committed to raising healthy children.

While Judith Marshall is aligned with her mother throughout the novel, even as a small child Sylvia is aware that "her father's mind was more like her own" (6). Elliott recognizes Sylvia's intelligence and perception before Barbara Marshall does. When as a young child Sylvia repeats a puzzling remark by Victoria, an irony-drenched acknowledgement of the "very idyllic life" the Marshalls are providing for their children, Barbara Marshall feels that a child of Sylvia's age could not have understood the spirit in which it was said. But Elliott tells her, "I'm afraid . . . that Sylvia's very quick to take in such a significance" (11). The result of Professor Marshall's attentive understanding is that Sylvia feels she has a soul-mate in her father, a relationship that Lydia Emery sorely lacks.

Throughout the first half of the novel, we see Sylvia and her father studying together, fencing and conversing about their shared passion for music. After Sylvia and her father attend a concert in Chicago, Sylvia's first exposure to an orchestra, they silently communicate the deep, spiritual joy they both find in the music.<sup>4</sup> For Sylvia, the "father-look which had been her heart's home all her life . . . was infinitely sweeter to her now than ever before" as a result of this shared experience (143). Sylvia will sustain the spiritual joy she feels from the music and from her relationship with her father by becoming a music teacher later in the novel, replicating her father's career as a teacher.

Fisher's own relationship with her father, James Hulme Canfield, was remarkably close as well and many of the details of the father-daughter relationship in The Bent Twig are autobiographical. In fact, Fisher's interest in Montessori and education in general is a result of her father's career.<sup>5</sup> Fisher was influenced deeply by her father's belief in the democratic mission of higher education. In her article about her father, "A Librarian's Creed," Fisher quotes him as saying:

'there is no innate contradiction between scholarly learning and democracy . . . . It is a horror to think . . . that [institutions of higher learning] exist to help a part of the younger generation get into a class which thinks itself socially superior.' Flames of scorn leaped sulphurously out from the word 'socially' when my father pronounced it in speaking its vulgar presumption in pushing its way into the world of the intellect. (Washington 32)

In her depiction of Sylvia's college years, Fisher exposes the very mechanics of University social life that both her father and Elliott Marshall despise. Engineered by faculty wives like Mrs. Draper, a student's social life is largely determined by his or her class. For example, Sylvia is not asked to join a fraternity because she doesn't have a "respectable, card-playing, call-paying, reception-giving" mother or a father with a "sizeable pocketbook and a habit of cash liberality" (149).

Drawing from her father's creed about education and democracy, Fisher shows that Sylvia's early contact with a wide range of middleclass families from varying ethnic backgrounds saves her from becoming too deeply immersed in the superficial life of the leisure class:

She might renounce as utterly as she pleased the association of her early youth, but the knowledge of their existence, the acquaintance with their deep humanity, the knowledge that they found life sweet and worth living, all this was to be a part of the tissue of her brain forever. (73-4)

As she travels in more sophisticated circles, this knowledge will complicate Sylvia's ability to identify with a leisure-class definition of art.

Elliott Marshall's Emersonian ethics argue against the elitism and materialism embedded in the University's social hierarchy. Elliott has a bust of Emerson in his study and he often quotes his favorite phrase from Emerson to his children, one of Fisher's favorite phrases as well: "What will you have, quoth God. Take it and pay for it!"<sup>6</sup> As Sylvia gets older and her passion for "sophistication and elegance" matures, she begins to resent her father's favorite phrase. She explains to Judith, "it means something perfectly hateful . . . It means you've got to pay for every single thing you do or get in this world! . . . It's the perfectly horrid way Father and Mother make us do, of always washing up the dishes we dirty, and always picking up the things we drop" (107).

And this is Sylvia's main problem, of course, that she wants to have the luxuries of life without having to pay for them. Borrowing her Aunt Victoria's aesthetic, she longs to eschew the responsibility of cleaning up and would just as soon have a personal maid, as Aunt Victoria does. But her understanding of Aunt Victoria's life is superficial; she doesn't know yet, as her father does, the price Victoria has had to



pay for her fine wardrobe. This is a lesson that Elliott Marshall has learned from his wife who has shown him how to reconcile with life, how to discover "substantial reasons for existence" which he had never known as a member of the leisure class. Sylvia's acquaintance with the men who have stuck with Victoria will teach her this lesson.

"A Very Fine Panama Hat," "A White-Linen Clad Boy," "A Broken Felt Hat, Frayed Trousers and Rotting Leather Shoes"

Felix Morrison, the first of Sylvia's two suitors, is a close friend of Victoria's and is a supremely cultivated man whose life is dedicated to the pursuit of art. Morrison is an art critic who writes "aesthetic criticisms and essays," is an appraiser, and, as Sylvia's cousin Arnold says, "chief advisor to the predatory rich." He appreciates objects, as his very fine, Panama hat admits. Morrison is a true Jamesian aesthete with a cultivated voice and manner, and he believes that people who know how to live well should do so. His passion for collecting, his undefined relationship with Aunt Victoria, and his marriage proposal to Molly Somerville for reasons less than love, make him kin to Gilbert Osmond in James's The Portrait of a Lady. Morrison's professional, aesthetic opinions are very different from the aesthetic code Sylvia has learned at home. An American who is more at home in Europe, Morrison feels that America is in a transition stage, that it is "emerging from the frontier condition of bareness, and it is only natural that one, or perhaps two generations must be sacrificed in order to attain a smooth mastery of an existence charged and enriched with possession" (335-6). Morrison might be James himself here, who always felt America's lack of distinction in matters of art.<sup>7</sup> James's credo about art -- "Art makes life, makes interest, makes importance" -- defines Felix Morrison's life as well (Edel 619)<sup>8</sup>. As Sylvia explains to Morrison, her parents's aesthetic code has nothing to do with his ideals of possession: "[They] kept representing to me always that the best pleasures are the ones that are the most important to folks -- music, I mean, and Milton's poetry, and a fine novel -- and, in Mother's case, a fine sunset, or a perfect rose, or things

growing in the garden" (268). In the real world of her aunt's drawingroom, Sylvia finds that this representation is false because most people don't really care about those things at all: "Why, I find that people don't give a thought to those "best pleasures" until they have a lot of other things . . . money -- position -- not having to work -- elegance" (286-9). Fisher shows Sylvia struggling to separate herself from her family's values, and Morrison aids her in that struggle.

Felix understands what Sylvia objects to in her mother's philosophy as in his cultivated world Barbara Marshall is assessed as being "very fine! Possibly a small bit . . . grim?" (267). But although Sylvia thinks that she and Morrison are falling in love, she learns her second lesson about the economics of luxury living (her first being in the Fiske home) when she finds out that Felix has proposed to the very wealthy Molly Sommerville. Sylvia blames her naivete on the "fatuous idealism" of her family although she also blames Felix: "Felix had sold himself for money as outright as ever a woman of the streets had done" (285). Fisher connects this remark to Elliott Marshall's feelings about Aunt Victoria, defining both characters as prostitutes, commodifying themselves on the marriage market. However, instead of seeing the kind of moral problem this commodification poses, Sylvia calls it an aspect of the "real" world, part of a code which she is just beginning to decipher.

Fisher continues to shroud Morrison in sheets of Jamesian references as a conversation about wedding presents invokes another novel about the rituals of the wealthy, The Golden Bowl (1904). Sylvia and Aunt Victoria give the couple a leather car-case, a present intended primarily for Molly, and Morrison objects that there is no present specifically for him. Sylvia tells him that he is not to have a present, "guiltily conscious that she was thinking of a certain scene in 'The Golden Bowl,' a scene in which a wedding present figures largely" (365).

In this scene, Charlotte Stant and the Prince, formerly lovers, shop for a wedding present for Maggie Verver, the Prince's fiancée. And certainly, Sylvia's position here is similar to Charlotte's. She has stepped aside to give Molly a chance at Morrison as Charlotte does for the Prince; although they love each other, neither has any money so a marriage is impossible. Money in The Golden Bowl is understood

by everybody except Maggie to be a force greater than love, which, Sylvia realizes with disgust, is Morrison's conviction as well.

With their unvoiced communication about the novel -- Morrison quickly tells Sylvia that he has a new volume of Henry James that he would like her to look at, signalling to her that he has fathomed her thoughts -- Sylvia shows Morrison that she knows she has been thrown over for wealth. In this scene, Fisher demonstrates that Sylvia has fully entered the complexly coded, Jamesian world where objects represent, and transcend, human relationships, a situation which Fisher has criticized as immoral in "What My Mother Taught Me".

Fisher continues to criticize the world of possessions as her depiction of Felix and Molly's Fifth Avenue wedding emphasizes the spiritual emptiness of a ritual that is merely another opportunity to display wealth. Again, Sylvia is vaguely disgusted by it. Noticing the woman in the pew in front of her, she sees that her body "was covered with as many layers as a worm in a cocoon. There were beads on lace, the lace encrusted on other lace, chiffon, fish-net, a dimly seen filmy satin, cut in points, and, lower down, an invisible foundation of taffeta. Through the interstices there gleamed a revelation of the back itself, fat, white, again like a worm in a cocoon" (366-7). All of Fisher's fashionable details demonstrate a suffocation by fabric, by material wealth, with no spiritual content at all. Like Newland Archer as he watches his own wedding ceremony take place, Sylvia begins to be disgusted by the manners and customs of the "tribe" whom she has adopted.

Sylvia's relationships with her cousin Arnold and her father's young assistant, Professor Saunders, provide her with further opportunities for disgust as she unravels the threads of her aunt's life in society. Both men are tied to Victoria and are leading worthless, dissipated lives as a result. Early in the novel we see Arnold, a likeable, lonely, 10-year-old boy, struggling to get out of his white, linen suit (which Victoria insists he wear) so that he can play with the Marshall children, who are dressed in cotton rompers. To Judith's disgust, Arnold doesn't know how to untie his shoe laces since Victoria employs a maid to dress and undress him.

Arnold has a strong, rebellious spirit which Victoria continuously quells, and as he gets older, he finds an outlet for it in various acts of self-destruction: smoking too many cigarettes, drinking too much alcohol, and creating disturbances at every boarding school he attends. In the second half of the novel, Arnold's life is in pieces and he has no strong, family tie with which to thread them together. Although he doesn't blame Victoria, who he thinks is "one of the nicest people in the world . . . if you don't need her for anything," Sylvia can only come to the conclusion that Arnold would have fared much better if he were her mother's son (474).

Professor Saunders, too, has been victimized by Sylvia's aunt: in portraying Victoria's (and Mrs. Draper's) relationships with men, Fisher is showing how both men and women are guilty of using each other for indecent purposes. Once a promising professor, Saunders gave up his career at the University to become Arnold's tutor. Since we see this incident through Sylvia's young eyes, the full picture is not revealed although it is evident that Professor Saunders was led to believe that Victoria was interested in him personally, hence his decision to give up his career at the University for Victoria and her stepson.

Sylvia meets Professor Saunders years later in Paris, as she is trying to decide if she wants to marry Felix Morrison or Austin Page. He is homeless, dressed in rags and addicted to morphine. He warns Sylvia to get away from Victoria before she "turns you into a woman like herself," a woman who "takes life" (419). Saunders lists the other men he knows who have done desperate things to unite themselves with Victoria, Felix Morrison's name among them. "It's the Sahara sands of her egotism into which we've all emptied our veins," he tells her (422).

Felix Morrison, Arnold Smith and Professor Saunders have all been woven into Victoria's web. Indeed, Felix confesses to Sylvia that Victoria warned him to leave her alone since it was Victoria's intention to engineer a marriage between Sylvia and Arnold. And it is Victoria who explains to Sylvia the necessity of Felix's marriage to Molly: "Felix hasn't a cent more than he needs for himself. If he was going to marry at all, he was forced to marry carefully" (285). She reminds Sylvia, "[you need] a rich soil for your roots, too, if you're to bloom out as you ought to" (285).

As the plot unravels, Sylvia discovers traces of her aunt's fingerprints on all of the men who are a part of this world. However, Austin Page, her other suitor, although a member of this fashionable set, is clothed in a very different wardrobe, one very familiar to Sylvia.

"Ragged Shirt Sleeves and Faded, Earth-Stained Overalls"

Austin Page has been raised in the same world that Felix Morrison inhabits, but he has a very different aesthetic outlook as the imagery that surrounds his character shows. While we only find Morrison in the "darkened living-room" of Aunt Victoria's house, waiting to hear Sylvia play the piano or to engage in aesthetic conversations with her, Fisher places Page in natural surroundings, in the good, clean air of the Vermont mountains. Sylvia meets him while he is fighting a forest fire and throughout the novel he is always dressed in workclothes.

Page is 32, a graduate of Columbia University, and is very wealthy although his chief moral dilemma in the novel is dealing with the guilt he feels from inheriting his father's money. His father made millions in Colorado mines, and Austin can't quite live with the fact that his leisure is paid for by men with dirty faces who do dangerous work underground. Although he used to collect 16th Century mezza-majolica pottery under Morrison's direction, Austin has since given his collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art because, as he says, "the connection between my bright-colored pots and platters [and] the status of the coal-miner [became] a little too dramatic for my taste" (350). His relationship with Morrison has become strained since then and their differences are most apparent in the possessions they choose to value.

Page's passion is his Vermont pine plantation, and throughout the second half of the novel we see him working the land, like Barbara Marshall. He has refused to keep his plantation a "rich man's plaything" by devising ways to make it a "paying thing", to make a business of it, "enough to occupy a man for his lifetime and his son after him, if he gives it his personal care" (328). Like Barbara Marshall,

and Daniel Rankin before her, Page is Fisher's spokesperson, advocating an aesthetic principle that involves making good use of time, materials and money, and that takes into account future generations.

And, as always with Fisher, this aesthetic must be tied to a moral principle which Page demonstrates when he asserts to Sylvia that the "modern ferment of . . ."social conscience" or "civic responsibility" isn't a result of the sense of duty, but of the old, old craving for beauty" (342-3). In contrast to Morrison's opinion of the lack of American taste, Page thinks that Americans are trying to forge a new creed, are "fumbling toward an art of living . . . to achieve a life that's happy and useful and causes no undeserved suffering to the untold numbers of other lives which touch it -- isn't there an undertaking which needs the passion for harmony and proportion?" (343). Here, Fisher is invoking the passion for reform that defined the Progressive Era and valorizing it by calling it "Art."

Austin is disdainful of the Jamesian "ideal" of Morrison's crowd, as he tells Sylvia. "That's what they try to be like --at least to talk like James people. But it's not always easy. The vocabulary is so limited." Aunt Victoria is appalled: "Limited! . . . There are more words in a Henry James novel than in my dictionary!" "Oh yes, words enough!" replies Austin, "but all about the same sort of thing" (336). Austin's comment is reminiscent of Fisher's dictum about why novels should be written in the first place, set out in "What My Mother Taught Me." Novels are just "words -- words -- words" unless they have the fundamental principle of trying to solve a problem of living behind them. Obviously, Fisher doesn't feel that James meets this requirement.

Austin's love for the land reminds Sylvia of her mother, and they indeed share a similar belief: that natural beauty infused with a moral sense leads to spiritual well-being. This is beauty that no one pays for. While Morrison helps Sylvia to forget her family life, Page constantly reminds her of it. She notices, for example, that he resembles her father's bust of Emerson. This is a convention in Fisher's fiction, the "right" suitor often characterized as a brotherly, or familial, presence.<sup>9</sup> And certainly, Sylvia and Austin's courtship is much different than Eleanor Hubert and Jerry Fiske's, or Lydia Emery and Paul

Hollister's. Out of a spiritually suffocating drawingroom, Sylvia's relationship with Austin begins in space, on equal footing, as they view one of his favorite places on Hemlock Mountain:

Beneath her, above her, before her, seemingly the element in which she was poised, was space, illimitable space. She had never been conscious of such vastness. she was abashed by it, she was exalted by it, she knew a moment of acute shame for the pettiness of her personal grievances. For a time her spirit was disembarassed of the sorry burden of egotism, and she drank deep from the cup of healing which Nature holds up in such instants of beatitude. Her eyes were shining pools of peace . . . . (310)

True art is that which takes us out of ourselves, rather than wrapping us in layers of ego. The fluidity of high art and domestic or natural art is demonstrated in Sylvia and Austin's first meeting, as Austin's view reminds Sylvia of the "blessedness of Beethoven": "The valley is a legato passage, quiet and flowing; those far, up-pricking hills, staccato; and the mountains here, the solemn chords" (310). Austin answers, "and the river is the melody that binds it all together" (311). Here, Sylvia gets a glimpse of her mother's country and hears the music that she and her father love so well.

In another symbolic scene, Sylvia and Austin wash in a mountain brook, a cleansing that is similar to the scene in which Sylvia's mother strips off all of Sylvia's false layers. Sylvia feels "cleansed to the marrow of her bones, as though there had been some mystic quality in this lustration in running water, performed under the open sky" and she sees the same shining world that she saw when her mother gently guided her into revealing her self (304).

Like Barbara Marshall's assessment of Eleanor Hubert, Austin's aesthetic code extends to a critique of the social value of an ornamental woman. As Sylvia admires Molly's competence in helping to fight the Lydford fire, Austin explains,

'Molly's spirit oughtn't to have taken up its abiding place in that highly ornamental blond shell, condemned after a fashionable girl's education to pendulum swings between Paris and New York and Lydford. It doesn't fit for a cent. It ought to have for habitation a big, gaunt powerful man's body, and for occupation the running of a big factory.' (301)

Here, Austin recognizes Molly's spirit instead of merely appreciating her "blond shell". Fisher shows throughout the novel that an ornamental woman is an empty house, a body that has no useful work to do, and therefore has no abiding beauty.

Page's belief about the "art of living" leads him into making perhaps the most significant decision of his life, a decision that will force Sylvia to examine her life as well. As Sylvia enjoys an exquisite lunch in her aunt's Parisian diningroom, the mail brings an American newspaper which informs her that Austin has donated his money to "finance a program of advanced social activities including mothers' pensions, a raise in wages, improvement in public schools, the building of libraries etc., etc" (411). In a letter to Sylvia, Page professes his belief that "an honest man cannot accept an ease founded, even remotely, on the misery of others," and he asks her to begin his new life with him.

Although Sylvia and Austin's relationship starts on that high plane where Barbara Marshall says men and women should meet, Austin's millions have caused Sylvia's intentions to sink to a much lower plane. Throughout her courtship with Page, Sylvia has calculated what would most impress Austin. For example, when Austin invites her and the rest of her Lydford family and friends to view his farm, she dresses the way she calculates Austin would like to see her, refusing to wear a "lacy, garden-party toilette of lawn and net"; instead, she dons a simpler costume, closer to her mother's "home uniform," a "cloth skirt and coat, tempering the severity of this costume with a sufficiently feminine and beruffled blouse of silk" (323).

Aunt Victoria admits "by an eyeflash to Sylvia that the girl knew her business very well" since Sylvia is the only woman present dressed appropriately for a sojourn to Austin's pine plantation; and "there was not, of course, Sylvia reflected, the slightest pretense of obscurity between them as to what, under the circumstances, her business was" (324). Sylvia's business is Lily Bart's business, and Mrs. Emery's in The Squirrel-Cage, the commodification of her body on the marriage market. Although she might be dressed like her mother, Sylvia's secret with Aunt Victoria connects them in an enterprise with which Sylvia's mother would have no part.

And ultimately Sylvia will have no part of it either although it is not Austin Page who finally persuades her to abandon her aunt's world. While in Italy with Felix and Victoria, Sylvia learns that her mother is ill. She rushes home but Barbara Marshall dies before Sylvia can get there. Without her



mother's presence and her pattern for artful living, Sylvia is bereft until she realizes that she can duplicate her mother's life.

Sylvia deals with her mother's death by borrowing her mother's steadfast behavior. She throws herself into domestic activity to ease her pain and keep her family together, finding work to be the real "positive good." Her father is suffering mentally from his wife's death, ignoring his physical needs in a delirium of grief. Sylvia takes care of him, and keeps herself physically busy, weeding her mother's flowerbeds and clinging to what she remembers of her mother's "pleasures" in life.

And she clings to Austin Page as well, the one person in her aunt's world who appreciates her mother's aesthetic enough to trade his wealth for it. Austin lives in her mother's country, both literally and figuratively, and Sylvia tells Arnold how Austin's decision about his business has affected her:

'it's a great golden deed that has enriched everybody -- not just Austin's coal-miners, but everybody who had heard of it. The sky is higher because of it. Everybody has a new conception of the good that's possible. And then for me, it means that a man who sees an obligation nobody else sees and meets it -- why, with such a man to help, anybody, even a weak, fumbling person like me, can be sure at least loyally trying to meet the debts life brings.' (469)

Like young Dorothy Canfield, Sylvia has learned how living artistically must encompass a moral sense if beauty is to be present at all. She has learned that she must pay for what she wants, the truth of her parents's Emersonian ethic finally resounding within her. On her way to Austin's farm, Sylvia thinks how "he had always brought out from her the truest and best, finer and truer than anything she had thought was in her, like a reflection from his own integrity . . . how her mother would have loved him!" (479) and it is the image of her mother's "gallant figure," a mythic emblem in the landscape, who encourages her to go to meet Austin and her future.

"A Magnificent Tapestry"

Ida Washington has aptly called The Bent Twig "a magnificent tapestry of lights and shadows, of colorful scenes and people, where, as in masterpieces of the medieval weaver's art, all peripheral material contributes to the clearer understanding of the central figure" (73). I find it to be the best of Fisher's early novels, the central text in the development of her ideas about the "art of living." Fisher continues to use these ideas throughout the rest of her career as I will demonstrate in Chapters Three and Four.

In The Bent Twig, Fisher elucidates the problems of living that beset a young woman growing up in the early years of the twentieth century, a project that she began in The Squirrel-Cage. As late twentieth century readers, we can only see Sylvia's choices as being very limited. But choosing her mother's way of life over her Aunt Victoria's, and Austin Page over Felix Morrison is certainly liberating for Sylvia; these are, indeed, choices that Lydia Emery could not make.

Although Sylvia, unlike other turn-of-the-century heroines, has a career -- after graduating from college, Sylvia earns a masters degree and teaches music -- she shares Isabel Archer's and Lydia Emery's dilemma about what to do next. She

stopped short, finding herself in company with a majority of her feminine classmates in a blind alley. 'Now what?' they asked each other with sinking hearts. . . She practiced assiduously, advanced greatly in skill in music, read much, thought acutely, rebelliously and not deeply, . . . and watched the clock. (234)

Like Wharton, Fisher hints at the fact that social patterns dictate that marriage is still the only viable option for her heroines; Lily Bart agrees with Lawrence Selden that marriage is her "vocation" and asks, "What else is there?" (House of Mirth 11).<sup>10</sup> Wharton's subtle handling of the problem in The House of Mirth and other novels such as Summer, I think, is a stronger indictment of gendered work roles than Fisher is able to make. Fisher is never able to fully reconcile her belief that women need more significant work options with her strong commitment to a traditional family structure, although I will discuss one of her fictional solutions, as posed in The Home-maker, in Chapter Four. In The Bent Twig, Fisher suggests the dilemma, and then bypasses it altogether.

She does solve one of the problems that she poses in The Squirrel-Cage, however, by showing how the Montessori method can teach parents how to educate their children to be responsible and self-reliant people beginning early in their lives. But although Sylvia has more education than Lydia Emery, she still has the same problem to work out: how to construct a life that is both aesthetically and morally satisfying. Fisher continues to use Emerson's essays as philosophical structures that support this balancing act.

In The Bent Twig, Fisher describes in artful detail the world her mother inhabited, drawing on her own experiences in Europe with her mother, and on her exposure to the aesthetic ideas of the people who comprised her mother's circle. The scores of well-off Americans who travelled to Europe after the Civil War for a "superior" education in art interested Fisher throughout her career. As she writes about an "aesthetic" character that she creates in Rough-Hewn (1922), this "type" is "the sort of last-generation American woman, like Mrs. Wharton, who (so it seems to me) takes Europeans with a funny, prayerful certainty of their innate superiority. This American woman would consider that it was the opportunity of her life to become 'cultured' and would do her pathetic, silly best to be like what she considers European women to be" (Madigan 90).

Fisher inherited her father's distaste for any kind of distinction based on class, and believed that, beyond manners and customs, people are much the same everywhere. She enters the conversation of the American novel of manners in order to critique Wharton's compunction, as well as the objectification of women and the conspicuous consumption that she found in these novels, an enterprise that I think Wharton shares. But Fisher takes her criticism a step further than Wharton (and Henry James, who served as a mentor to both women) by ennobling a rural, American aesthetic, one that she learned about firsthand in the Vermont homes of her great-aunts and uncles. Fisher knew both worlds intimately, and therefore her perspective is unique and enlightening.

The Bent Twig is a *künstlerroman* because Sylvia's quest involves negotiating between two different patterns of living artfully: a commodity-driven pursuit of the "almost lost art of living," to

borrow Felix Morrison's phrase, and a spiritually-based ideal of the artistry that is in the natural world and that is inherent in daily processes. Although Sylvia is a professional musician in the novel, Fisher chooses not to concentrate on this aspect of her life, a choice that opposes Willa Cather's choice in her 1915 *künstlerroman*, The Song of the Lark.

Fisher chooses to portray her heroine's quest for artistry as a search for the secret of balance that her mother knows, a way to be artistic and not self-conscious, to be an artist and a citizen. This was Fisher's search as well. Because her artistic code included public responsibility, she took time away from her fiction to participate in various social causes, which became part of the fabric of her professional life. As in The Squirrel-Cage, it is a male artist figure who aids the heroine in this endeavor, although in The Bent Twig Fisher provides a strong female role model in Barbara Marshall. It is significant, though, that Sylvia doesn't adopt her mother's way of life until it is pointed out as being ideal by Austin Page; even then, it isn't until her mother dies that Sylvia fully appreciates it. Then, Page's renunciation of his own materially-based life for the spiritually-based artistry that Barbara Marshall practices becomes overwhelmingly significant for Sylvia. Fisher's especially close relationship with her father, and her conflicted relationship with her mother, seem to suggest one possible reason for the strength and goodness of her male characters; her supportive, domestic husband is, perhaps, another.

Fisher's next novel, The Brimming Cup (1921) will take up where The Bent Twig leaves off, as Fisher explores what happens to someone like Sylvia once she renounces her aspirations to "culture" to settle in a quiet Vermont valley. The almost mythic Barbara Marshall will take on more human proportions as Fisher's first full treatment of motherhood, complicated by her interest in Freudian analysis, becomes a compelling, psychological portrait of the "inner processes" of a mature woman's mind.

## NOTES

1. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, A Montessori Mother (New York: Henry Holt, 1912, pgs. 121-22).
2. Sexual politics are overt in this novel and will be in The Brimming Cup (1921) as well. As I discuss more fully in Chapter Three, Fisher's reading of Freud greatly influenced her stylistic choices as she began to move increasingly inward in the depiction of her protagonists's psyches, and began to write more openly about sexual relationships.
3. When Sylvia enters the library where Jerry waits, she is met by an uncontrollable, animalistic, physical passion. Fisher's description of Jerry in this scene is extremely sexual for 1915, as Sylvia

was enfolded in muscular arms, she was pressed closer and yet closer to a powerful body, whose heat burned through the thin broadcloth, she was breathless, stunned, choked . . . His stiff cuff caught on the edge of her dress, and his sleeve slid up – it was his bare arm against her naked flesh. He gave a savage, smothered gasping exclamation, pressed his fingers deeply into her side, still kissing her passionately, her neck, her shoulders, burying his hot face in her bosom. (209)

As I discuss in Chapter Three, Fisher's openness is probably a result of having read Freud. I also think that it was Fisher's intention in her early novels to write as honestly as she could about the experiences of young women at a marriageable age. Here, she is proving Barbara Marshall's point that women who are "unconscious" of their motives run the risk of being "horribly misunderstood." Fisher argues that if women are to be "new" women, thereby losing the restrictiveness of the code of "true" womanhood, they must be written about as participants in the adult world of work, responsibility and sexuality.

4. Fisher will create a similar relationship between Matey Gilbert and her father-in-law in The Deepening Stream (1930). Both relationships have passion for music as a basis.
5. Canfield began his career in education as a professor of political economy (like Elliott Marshall) at the University of Kansas. He went on to accept prestigious, administrative positions at midwestern universities: the chancellorship at the University of Nebraska, and the presidency of Ohio State University. He finished his career as the Librarian at Columbia University.
6. Several years after The Bent Twig was published, Fisher wrote to Alfred Harcourt enclosing a review which she felt finally recognized the point of the story. She writes, "the review is really very intelligent, and is the first one to pick out that saying of Emerson's as being the key-note of the story, the one which it is built around" (Washington 79).

The quotation is from Emerson's essay on "Compensation" in which he writes about a sort of spiritual system of checks and balances that exists in nature and in the "condition of man": "Every excess causes a defect; every defect an excess. Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good. Every faculty which is a receiver of pleasure, has an equal penalty put on its abuse . . . For every grain of wit there is a grain of folly. For every thing you have missed, you have gained something else; and for everything you gain, you lose something" (58). Emerson emphasizes how it is impossible to "halve" anything, since the nature of the universe is dual, and part cannot be separated from part: "Pleasure is taken out of pleasant things, profit out of profitable things, power out of strong things, as soon as we seek to separate them from the whole. We can no more halve things and get the sensual good, by itself, than we can get an inside that shall have no outside, or a light without a shadow" (61).

Emerson might have been advising Sylvia herself in his advice that "the Exclusive in fashionable life does not see that he excludes himself from enjoyment, in the attempt to appropriate it" (64).

7. A famous passage from his study of Hawthorne, for example, shows what James felt America could not offer to a novelist by way of inspiration: "No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentleman, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins: no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities, nor public schools – no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class – no Epsom nor Ascot" (from Leon Edel, Henry James: A Life (New York: Harper and Row, 1985, p. 247).

8. Edel, Henry James: A Life.

9. Fisher is drawing on her own experience in choosing the right man as she told her friend, Celine Sibut, that John Fisher reminded her of her brother, and was as good a man as her brother was. But I also think that this is one of Fisher's tactics in remodeling the Victorian marriage plot and the convention of a woman marrying her "master." I would argue that Fisher is doing here what Joseph Allen Boone does with Emily Bronte's use of sibling metaphors, which is "promot[ing] . . . relationships . . . that serve as alternative models to the hierarchy and polarity prevailing in marital ideology" (Boone, Tradition Counter Tradition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, pgs. 215-16). As I show in Chapter Three, Fisher also seems to be interested in downplaying the role that sexuality and physical passion play in marriage. She demonstrates in The Brimming Cup (1921) that while physical passion runs its course, shared interests and common goals, the fundamentals of family, endure.

10. Wharton, Edith, The House of Mirth (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

## CHAPTER III

### "'DIVINING INNER PROCESSES': MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, MUSIC AND MANURE IN THE BRIMMING CUP"

But fiction -- that's more like falling in love, which can't be done by will-power or purpose, but concerns the whole personality, which includes vast areas of the unconscious and subconscious, as well as those processes within the control of purposefulness. This element of the unknown puts into the writing of fiction an element of the uncontrollable. And fiction written without the whole personality is not fiction (that is, recreated human life, interpreted), but only articles or statements in narrative form.<sup>1</sup>

I'm a gardener . . . and I know a thing or two about natural processes. The thing to do with a manure pile is not to paw it over and over, but to put it safely away in the dark, underground, and never bother your head about it again except to watch the beauty and vitality of the flowers and grains that spring from the earth it has fertilized.<sup>2</sup>

#### I. The Night-Blooming Cereus

In Part One of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's 1921 best-seller The Brimming Cup, her protagonist Marise Crittenden introduces her new neighbor Ormsby Welles and his friend Vincent Marsh to "a rite of the worship of beauty which Ashley, Vermont, has created out of its own inner consciousness" (97). She takes them to the Powers' farm where several of her neighbors have gathered to watch the blooming of Nelly Powers's cereus plant, an ugly cactus which "puts forth a wonderful exotic flower of extreme beauty" once a year (98).

Marsh is a millionaire and a cultivated, fashionable man of the world like Felix Morrison of The Bent Twig. He is incredulous that the talented and beautiful Marise tolerates life in a backwater like Ashley. His presence has deeply affected Marise, exacerbating her own depression about the dullness of her domestic life, her aging face and the routine of her marriage. She is defensive and slightly sarcastic. Then, when she defines Ashley's "peculiar sense of beauty" for him and explains how the cereus infuses the inner lives of Ashleyites:

When the bud begins to show its color [Nelly] sends out word to all her neighbors to be ready. . . . For days, in the back of our minds as we go about our dull, routine life, there is the thought that the cereus is near to bloom. . . . And all up and down this end of the valley, in those ugly wooden houses that look so mean and dreary to you, everywhere people tired from their day's struggle with the earth, rise up and go their pilgrimage through the night . . . for what? To see something rare and beautiful. (98)

In The Brimming Cup, Fisher focuses on domestic, community ritual, placing the novel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century tradition of women's regionalist fiction which "tells complex truths about the satisfactions and dangers that domestic ritual has meant in female lives" (Romines 9).<sup>3</sup>

The Brimming Cup is about the beauty and drama of rural life, a life rooted in history and made artistic by cultural traditions that provide continuity and permanence. According to Fisher, in 1921 there were two dangers to negotiate in living this life, two extremes: a modernist threat to traditional family structures, represented by Vincent Marsh and his Freudian banter; and an "old-fashioned" insularity and single-minded concentration on the domestic sphere, represented by Nelly Powers. The novel traces Marise's path as she avoids these pitfalls, conserving her rural, domestic legacy while re-shaping it for the modern world. With this novel, Fisher shows that creating a successful domestic life is a public act because it is a way of taking responsibility for contributing to society.

Fisher's novel is actually a hybrid of the woman's regionalist tradition and the strain of modernism that shows "new women" attempting to define themselves outside of their roles as wives and mothers. Like Kate Chopin in The Awakening (1899), Fisher portrays the painful, inner journey along untrodden paths of extramarital sexual desire and despair about aging. However, unlike Edna Pontellier, Marise never actively strays outside the gate of the family garden; she only thinks about abandoning the old, well-plotted symmetry of her family life for the wild green fields of impermanence and sexual pleasure, the green meadow that Edna wanders through "idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided" the summer she meets Robert LeBrun (Chopin 18).<sup>4</sup>

But Marise's seduction is a mere marsh in comparison to the depths of Edna's longing for sensuality. Unlike Edna for whom "the present alone was significant," Marise has respect for the past and hope for the future, personified by her old relatives and her young children. Marise's ability to reflect on



her past and recognize it in her house, her garden and her self assures her of a happy future. She acts rationally, sensibly and practically in finding her way out of her "mazes of inward contemplation" (Chopin 15).

The Brimming Cup is full of Marise's inner debates about the role sex should play in marriage as well as conversations with her friends about Freudian ideas that question the "givens" of marriage and motherhood. As Brad Smith notes in "Dorothy Canfield Fisher: The Deepening Stream," Fisher was "one of the early students of Freud" (234).<sup>5</sup> Fisher told Smith in an interview: "'I'd been reading him a good deal -- his own works, not those about him. I began them as soon as they appeared'" (234). Most of Freud's major works were available in English by 1917, four years before The Brimming Cup was published and his footprints are all over the novel: flipping through the pages, one's eye is caught by such Freudian terms as "repression," "sub-conscious," and "depression," and such phrases as "on the edge of the unconscious," and "at the edge of consciousness."<sup>6</sup>

Fisher uses Freudian ideas like she uses the Craftsman ideal in The Squirrel-Cage and the Montessori method in The Bent Twig, as a modern philosophy that might help her correct a "problem of living"; in The Brimming Cup, the problem is how to maintain a commitment to marriage and motherhood when tempted by an attraction to another person and a different life. However, although Fisher engages Freudian ideas and vocabulary as a useful language to talk about "inner processes" she ultimately rejects this language as the only way to think about inner dilemmas involving desire. As Marise notes metaphorically in the second epigraph to this chapter, some desires are better left unhandled. As Fisher will show, the whole, mature individual can rake through the roots of these desires herself and become stronger as a result. In true Emersonian fashion, the protagonist in Fisher's fiction is always able to rely on her or his own individual strength and self-control.

However, like the Montessori idea of molding behavior which Fisher adapted in shaping her character Sylvia Marshall, Freud's ideas inspired Fisher to change her fictional technique as she examines the landscapes of her characters' inner selves. Marise's contemplation of the opening of the cereus, for

example, is like a portrayal of someone internalizing a Georgia O'Keeffe portrait: "she saw nothing, felt nothing but the opening flower, lived only in the incredibly leisurely, masterful motion with which the grotesquely shaped protecting petals curled themselves back from the center. . . . there before them, revealed, exultant, the starry heart of the great flower shimmered in the lamp-light" (101). Marise's odyssey into the flower here symbolizes the larger journey she will take into her own psyche as she questions her commitment to her marriage and family life. The physical makeup of the cactus, the spines and fleshy pads, symbolize the sexual undertones of the plot as does my epigraph about the manure pile. The "starry heart" of the flower is a symbol of Marise's soul.

Like the Bowden Family Reunion in Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896), the novel that Romines identifies as "the American ur-text of domestic ritual," Fisher's community ritual surrounding the blooming cereus is a "celebratory combination of domesticity and art that breaks down the accustomed barriers between the two" (Romines 68). In this novel, Fisher focuses on animate art that brings a community together, demonstrating a different aesthetic from the image of art appreciation that we see in her preface, "What My Mother Taught Me." There, her mother sits alone in front of a framed, inanimate object, lost in her own ability to appreciate it and oblivious of other humans around her, especially her daughter. She is entirely self-absorbed in contrast to the community that celebrates the cereus together. Fisher counters two, early twentieth century, elitist definitions of art in this novel: the idea that art is a collection in a museum, and that life in an American village is both artless and oppressive.

In her depiction of another domestic ritual, an Ashley "aboriginal folkdance," Fisher proves her belief that rural, domestic life will survive the modernist plague that threatens the very roots of the domestic tradition, although it won't remain unchanged. Fisher goes into great detail in telling the history and procedures of the dance, depicting the "calling off" and describing the music that accompanies it, literally preserving it in her fiction. Marise's explanation about children's roles in the ritual shows the

tension between highbrow intellectual perceptions of the rural family and folk celebrations of family life.

Marise tells Marsh,

If I answer you in your own language, I'd say that it's because their households are in such a low and lamentably primitive condition that they haven't any slave-labor to leave the children with, and so bring them along out of mere brute necessity. If I answer you in another vocabulary, I'd say that there is a close feeling of family unity, and they like to have their children with them when they are having a good time. (145)

Marise's rejection of Marsh's "language" mirrors Fisher's own rejection of Freud, and throughout the novel, Fisher presents these two pictures of rural family life, throwing up Freudian threats to marriage and family in order to shoot them down.

Fisher felt that she was doing two innovative things in this novel: trying a new technique and telling the story of a happy marriage. The technique is certainly new for Fisher and was, perhaps, innovative for American literature in general: she told her publisher, "I don't remember ever reading [a novel] constructed like it" (Madigan 93).<sup>7</sup> Throughout the novel, Fisher shifts her point of view from character to character although Marise's consciousness has the largest share of the chapters. She also plays with collapsing chronological time in The Brimming Cup. For example, she shows what is going on in two different households as a thunderstorm, a metaphor for marital trouble, threatens the valley; the thunderstorm alerts the reader that the two situations overlap. Fisher's motive in creating these techniques is to limit the author/narrator's control of her reader's perceptions and to make her reader's reactions to her characters "more vivid and real" as she described it (Madigan 93).

In her letters to her publisher, Fisher was excited about her technique, although she admits to him, "I have gone to the heights of enthusiasm for this idea, and down to the depths with doubt of it" (Madigan 93). She explains that her idea grew out of a conversation with a friend who told her that ordinary people seemed "dull compared to those in books." Fisher's experience is the opposite -- "the most casual grocer's boy living, brought me a deeper sense of humanity than any character on the page of a book" -- and she devises her method to try to remedy this faulty perception on the part of her readers (Madigan 93).

Fisher describes her innovation in the following lengthy excerpt from a letter to Alfred Harcourt, worth reprinting since it captures her intent:

The method I worked out is this: with the exception of the introduction, each chapter presents happenings in the narrative told entirely from the point of view of one or another of the characters, never from the author's; and each chapter is meant to be a revelation of what lies under the surface of that particular character. I have tried to make a glass door through which the reader looks into the heart and mind of one and another of the men, or women, or children in the story, so that, once for all, he knows what sort of human being is there. From that time on, it has been my intention to leave the reader to interpret for himself the meaning of the actions of that character, without the traditional explanations and re-iterated indications from the author. (Madigan 93)

Consequently, we are given portrayals of the inner lives of Marise Crittenden, her husband Neale, her daughter Elly and son Paul, Ormsby Welles, Vincent Marsh, Nelly Powers and Marise's childhood friend, Eugenia Mills. Although this technique is useful for other modern writers because it displays the fragmentation of modern life, for Fisher the point is a humanist one: to make her readers understand the similar motivations and processes that lie beneath every human being's surface.

Like the cereus ritual, this is communal art: different characters's perceptions create the story just as Fisher and her community of readers piece it together. The point is not to depict isolation, as other modernist writers like Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson do, but to show how each flower contributes to the harmony of the garden. It is clear, then, that Fisher's novel is a hybrid of two traditions: her content belongs to the nineteenth century women's regionalist narrative which focuses on the artistry of a rural community; her form, which fragments the central consciousness, is an early strain of modernism.

Fisher's other innovation is her depiction of the trials of a relatively happy marriage. She wrote to Alfred Harcourt, "Now I had in mind for several years (submerged by the material difficulties of our war-time stay in France) the idea of trying to write a novel which would deeply and truthfully analyze and depict a successful marriage. Why is not that a legitimate subject for portrayal in serious fiction as well as all the varieties of unsuccessful ones?" (Madigan 93). The bulk of the novel is devoted to Neale and

Marise's separate confusions and their conversations about the problems in their marriage which are brought about by the presence of Vincent Marsh and the "new ideas" that he introduces.

## II. A Living Plant

At the end of The Brimming Cup, Neale and Marise Crittenden accompany Eugenia Mills, Marise's fashionable friend, to the Ashley train station. Eugenia has completed her annual stay with the Crittendens and is setting out on yet another trip around the world, her destination to be, perhaps, Java, which she hopes won't be too "commonplace." Marise realizes that "this was the end of Eugenia in her life" and Neale comforts her by asserting that "'she's a cut flower in a vase, that's beginning to wilt, and you're a living plant'" (385-9).

Throughout the novel, Fisher uses plant and garden images to characterize Neale and Marise's eleven-year marriage and the fertile family life that has grown from it: by contrast, the people who eschew such permanence and tradition are "cut flowers," as I will show in a subsequent section. While the floodtide of physical love has ebbed in the Crittenden's marriage, Fisher shows that the solid ground underneath, their shared interests and "life-in-common," has a greater beauty. She exchanges the water images that open the novel, which characterize Neale and Marise's engagement, for earth images as Marise rediscovers the joys of continuity and permanence. Both sets of imagery -- the fluidity of sexuality and the subconscious, and the solid ground of family ties and day-to-day living -- operate throughout the novel.

Neale's description of Marise as a "living plant" and his appreciation of her domestic artistry make him Fisher's spokesperson for her "art of living" agenda, following in the footsteps of Daniel Rankin and Austin Page. In Chapter XII, "Heard from the Study," Neale thinks:

It wasn't only over the piano that Marise had a mastery, but over everybody's nature. . . . That's what he called real art-in-life. Why wasn't it creative art, as much as anything, her Blondin-like accuracy of poise among all the conflicting elements of family life, the warring instincts of the different temperaments, ages, sexes, natures? Why wasn't it an artistic

creation, the unbroken happiness and harmony she drew out of these elements, as much as the picture the painter drew out of the reds and blues and yellows on his palette? (204)

Marise's ability to assess accurately what her children and her neighbors need is as much art as her well-executed Beethoven sonata. In Fisher's artistic formulation, music and motherhood mesh as daily, domestic ritual for while Marise's domestic artistry provides a home for her family, she finds a home for herself in her music.

While playing a Chopin sonata early in the novel, Marise thinks that music "took you in to worship quite simply and naturally at the Temple's inner shrine: and you adored none the less although you were not 'breathless with adoration,' like the nun: because it was a whole world given to you, not a mere pang of joy; because you could live and move and be blessedly and securely at home in it" (62). This view of art as comfortable and secure is very different from the picture of Flavia Camp Canfield who sits "ecstatic as a saint in prayer" in front of Velasquez's paintings. Music is a constant in Marise's everyday life, like gardening and cooking.

Marise has learned to scorn professional art, preferring the transformations art can effect in ordinary people's lives. Art for her is the music made by her village chorus. "the hearty satisfying singing-out, by ordinary people, of what too often lies withering in their hearts" (55). Here, high art becomes community ritual and Marise is a morally responsible artist, according to Fisher's code, because she alleviates her neighbors's problems of living by providing them with an artistic outlet. As Marise tells Vincent Marsh, Eugene Powers "suffered a great injustice some six or seven years ago, that turned him black and bitter, and it's only since he has been singing in our winter chorus that he has been willing to mix again with anyone" (58).

But although Marise is sure of the value of music, she is not as confident about the other aspects of her domestic work. The most vital parts of the novel are the chapters where Fisher explores Marise's inner thoughts as she goes about her daily life, elucidating the larger questions a woman might ask herself as she performs the smallest domestic task. In her process of revealing Marise's feelings about both her personal crisis and the global crisis that occurs in post-World-War-I world, Fisher participates in "the

literary representation of domestic ritual" which "allows writers to scrutinize their characters in the most social and the most inward and private of moments" (Romines 8).

Thus, in the chapters specifically devoted to Marise's "inner processes" -- for example, Chapter VIII, "What Goes On Inside: Half an Hour in the Life of a Modern Woman," Chapter XV, "Home Life," and Chapter XXV, "Marise's Coming-Of-Age" -- Fisher shows Marise cooking a pot-roast, weeding an onion bed and helping her younger son dress as she simultaneously tries to make sense of her life as a woman, a mother, a wife, a musician and an American not only in her own home and community, but also in a global context. As Romines argues, while ritual is "inherently social," domestic ritual "has also often been the medium in which women worked to distinguish themselves as distinctively gifted housekeepers, as artists. Looking at the literature of domestic ritual, we see the idea of the individual, which American culture has privileged, being tested in the context of an on-going traditional culture, that of housekeeping" (Romines 14).

On a personal level, Marise is tired of the very artistry that Neale appreciates: "She felt herself to the point of exhaustion by the necessity always to be divining somebody's inner processes, putting herself in somebody else's skin and doing the thing that would reach him in the right way" (250-1). As Marise soothes her younger son, calculating what most would take his mind off a minor injury, she finds herself measuring her life according to Vincent Marsh's yardstick, realizing that she "expended enough personality and energy on this performance to play a Beethoven sonata at a concert" (247).

Marise is plagued by Vincent Marsh's "new psychology" about marriage and motherhood as the following list of questions shows:

Was her love for the children only an inverted form of sensual egotism, an enervating slavery for them, really only a snatched-up substitute for the personal life which was ebbing away from her? Was her attitude towards her beloved music a lazy, self-indulgent one, to keep it to herself and the valley here? Was that growing indifference of hers to dress and trips to the city, and seeing Eugenia's smart crowd there, a sign of mental dry-rot? Was it a betrayal of what was alive in her own personality to go on adapting herself to the inevitable changes in her relations with Neale . . . ? (225)

These questions place Marise in a specific historical context, at a time in America when modern psychology was discovered by the popular press and, as Fisher suggests, was assessed by ordinary Americans. As these questions indicate, the modern, psychological interpretations of marriage and motherhood are a foreign threat to the sanctity of Marise's domestic rituals. As she tells Neale, "there are things so sacred, so intimate" that "to have some rough hand laid on them, to have them pulled out and pawed over and thought about . . . sets me in such a quiver!" (235).

On a global scale, Marise's concern for America's part in a post-World-War-I world is "a muted arpeggio accompaniment to the steady practical advance of her housekeeper's mind" as she helps her youngest son dress himself:

It took a lot of moral courage to read the newspapers in these days. As she read, her face changed, darkened, set . . . "The treaty muddle worse than ever. Great Britain sending around to all her colonies asking for the biggest navy in the world. Our own navy constantly enlarged at enormous cost . . . Italy landgrabbing. France frankly for anything except the plain acceptance of the principles we thought the war was to foster. The same reaction from those principles starting on a grand scale in America. . . . [S]uppose this reactionary outburst of hate and greed and intolerance and imperialistic ambitions all around, means that the "peace" is an armed truce only, and that in fifteen years the whole nightmare will start over.' (125-6)

Marise's depression about the post-World-War-I world and her fear for her family's and her country's future show that she is engaged in a much larger sphere than a traditional, woman's domestic sphere and her musings blur the boundaries between public and private life: this is a project that Fisher continues in her novel The Deepening Stream as I demonstrate in Chapter Five.

Ultimately, Marise is able to solve her dilemma about her passion for Vincent Marsh versus her commitment to her marriage by taking an honest look at herself. Marise's internal dialogue, as critic Brad Smith argues, shows that Fisher's novel has "a moral center": "It assumes that men [sic] can look into themselves and examine their motives however ugly and can -- sometimes at least -- surmount them by strength of character" (238). As my first epigraph to this chapter shows, Fisher found the structure of Freud's theories to be helpful; an artist sowing the seeds of fiction is not always in complete control of what grows. However, as her preface, "What My Mother Taught Me" clearly proves, Fisher believes an



artist's sense of moral responsibility is the most important element of her identity. This is an element of the personality of which one is always in control.<sup>8</sup>

In perhaps the most interesting chapter of the book, "Marise's Coming-Of-Age," Marise performs an almost sacred, domestic ritual in calling up her youth to ultimately lay it to rest and achieve maturity. Her cousin Hetty dies and Marise must put her tumultuous feelings about Vincent Marsh aside as she sits with Hetty's body. Hetty has been a continuous, maternal presence in Marise's life and now Marise's "last tie with the past" is gone: Hetty was "the last person . . . for whom she was still the little girl she felt herself now, the little girl who had lost her way and wanted someone to put her back in the path" (295-6). Unable to sleep, Marise wanders through Hetty's house, a house she has known intimately and which is a maternal structure that "watche[s] over her entry into another part of her journey" (339). Fisher is reverent toward the domestic spaces that form our psyche as Marise wanders through Hetty's attic like the child she once was, sitting on the old trunk that contains parts of both her and Hetty's past.<sup>9</sup>

As she sits there, Marise sees

the endless procession of parents and children passing before her, the children so soon parents, all driven forward by what they could not understand, yearning and starving for what was not given them, all wrapped and dimmed in the twilight of their doubt and ignorance . . . . Her humbled spirit was prostrate before their mystery, before the vastness of the whole, of which she and her children were only a part, a tiny, lowly part. (344)

Fisher's language here is reminiscent of Lydia Emery's recognition that motherhood makes her part of a larger existence. Fisher's "home plot" is "an effort to respond to, replicate, continue, interrogate, and extend the repetitive rhythms of domestic life, which emphasize continuance over triumphant climax and often subordinate the vaunted individual to an on-going, life-preserving, and, for some women, life-threatening process" (293). An affair with Vincent Marsh is averted and Cousin Hetty's death is seen as a natural process. Her life and spirit will be regenerated by Marise, and her daughter Elly after her.

Marise is performing a "ritual enactment" in Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi's words as she sits on Cousin Hetty's trunk, both woman and child, reflecting about her past, making sense of her present and trying to integrate her future. She becomes "a player in a scene far older and larger than her individual

self. No longer does she participate in profane historical time; instead, she is participating in mythic time" (quoted in Romines 6). Fisher makes this point very clear when, earlier in the novel, Marise's daughter, Elly, sits on the same trunk to reflect on her life.<sup>10</sup>

But Marise's journey is not only spiritual and mythic. Here she is ready "really to think . . . not merely to be the helpless battle-field over which hurtling projectiles of fierce emotions passed back and forth" (339). She realizes that her nature is domestic and creative because she doesn't want to be "one of those who sat afar off and were served with the fine and delicate food of life, and knew nothing of the unsavory process of preparing it" (342). Marise has learned the lesson that all of Fisher's domestic artists learn, that "life had made her into one of the human beings capable of feeling that responsibility, each for all," for righting the balance of the "disharmony" that resulted from some people "having more than [their] share while other people ha[d] less than theirs" (342). In this passage, we hear echoes of the moral responsibility that Fisher writes about in "What My Mother Taught Me."

Marise's two choices take on the properties of living plants and cut flowers. The life that Vincent Marsh offers to her is "the shape of a glorious, uprooted plant, cut off from the very source of life, its glossy surfaces already beginning to wither and dull in the sure approach of corruption and decay" (343). Her other choice is her family life, a "heritage" that is "alive and rooted deep" (343). Marise's motherhood, according to this interpretation, is not a selfish, shadowy, sexual desire but the desire to give her children "all that lay in her to give." Marise gives birth to a deeper meaning of motherhood as a result of this realization: "something so wide and sunflooded that the old selfish, possessive, never-satisfied ache which had called itself love withered away . . . It was as solemn as a birth-shout to her . . . she was one mother then, she had become another mother now" (345-6).

Looking into the old trunk which contains her childhood toys, Marise realizes that to succumb to Vincent Marsh would be to return to a childish conception of love: "he could take take her, in the strength of her maturity with all the richness of growth, and carry her back to live over again the fierce, concentrated intensity of newly-born passion which had come into her life, and gone, before she had had

the capacity to understand or wholly feel it" (348). Her challenge is to think of her history and of herself as "a symbol of modern woman who must make the gestures appropriate for [her] part" (351).

Marise decides that she won't give up what has been rooted in her to become the cut rose. All of the phrases about sex that have been running through her head all these months defy the fullness of a mature married life. Only living for physical pleasures, she thinks, would be like "hav[ing] her horizon again limited by a dollhouse" (356-7). In choosing a life that is enriched by the savor of the years and rejecting the return to youth that her passion for Marsh would grant her, Marise crosses a threshold into middle-age. As Jewett expresses so beautifully at the conclusion of The Country of the Pointed Firs, "So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end" (159).

As a result of her odyssey, Marise is able to agree with Marsh's damning assessment, that she is "too old" to go away with him. By the end of the novel, she is able to say to Eugenia, "It is a pity you never married . . . There is a great deal of happiness in the right marriage" (383). Marise looks forward to the life she will have over the winter, to raising her children, to the music lessons she will give to the children in the valley, to her Ashley chorus and the new one that she will start in North Ashley. In the vignettes of her homelife that close the novel, Marise finds "a curious new savor in her domestic duties." Art and domesticity are united as Marise's marriage, like her music, becomes "a whole world given to [her]" in which she could "be blessedly and securely at home" (403).

### III. The Flower of the Nation

Fisher continues to portray male domestic artists in the chapters she devotes to Neale Crittenden's consciousness. However, Neale's domesticity is different from the homespun socialism of Daniel Rankin or the cooperative housework of Elliott Marshall. Unlike either of these men, Neale does not perform household duties in the novel. His creativity is devoted to his lumbermill which provides him with work that he loves and contributes significantly to the economic survival of the valley. In her portrayal of

Neale, Fisher accomplishes two things: she changes her depiction of the American businessman from a tired, overworked, unhappy victim to a strong, energetic, civic-minded hero and continues her theme that valuable work is a necessary good. Neale tells Ormsby Welles that the American businessman is "the flower of the nation," and Neale's joyful industry in contrast to Welles's relief from years of cut-throat drudgery shows the emergence of a kinder, gentler form of capitalism where profit is a lesser motive than quality of life (although Fisher will qualify this view of capitalism, and debate its merits, in her novel The Home-maker, the subject of my next chapter. In The Deepening Stream, which I discuss in my fifth chapter, she will endorse this kind of capitalism once again).

Fisher sets up several conversations about the mill between the Crittendens and their new neighbors. Her purpose in detailing the mill's procedures is consistent with her desire to reveal the artistry of domestic spaces. For example, early in the novel Marise explains that the mill manufactures "backs of hairbrushes, wooden casters to put under beds and chairs" and "rollers for cotton mills" (41). Fisher's identification of the products manufactured in Ashley calls to mind Lambert Strether's refusal to name the item produced at the Newsome's mill in The Ambassadors (1903), "a small, trivial, rather ridiculous object of the commonest domestic use" that is rather "vulgar" (40-1).<sup>11</sup> By actually listing the common, domestic items manufactured at the Crittendens' mill, Fisher counters James's assertion that there is anything vulgar about manufacturing products which provide a living for people who would otherwise have to leave their homes.<sup>12</sup> Her list echoes other lists of domestic activities and objects, like the names of the domestic spaces that Ormsby Welles finds beautiful: "The Eagle Rock Woods. The Dug-Way. The Burning. Deer Hollow" (41). These are places that the Crittendens and their neighbors know as intimately as their own homes, and Fisher acknowledges the poetry of the language that Ashley people create to describe them. Detailing the workspace in the valley is part of this same aesthetic.

Neale explains his idea of obtaining wood "without spoiling the future of the forests, drying up the rivers and all that, and have it transformed into some product that people need in their lives" (131). He is proud of his creativity and intellectual ingenuity: "it's a sort of plain everyday service, isn't it? And

to do this work as economically as it can be managed, taking as low a price as you can get along with instead of screwing as high a price as possible out of the people who have to have it, what's the matter with that as an interesting problem in ingenuity?" (131). Fisher contrasts Neale's enthusiasm with Mr. Welle's bitterness about his lifelong experience with business, "the grim determination on the part of a strong man to give his strength to 'taking it out of the hide' of his competitors, his workmen, and the public" (165); Ormby Welles might be a retired Judge Emery or Paul Hollister, had either one survived to actually retire.

This concept of business is very foreign to Mr. Welles who has come to Vermont to escape "to the only other reality, the pleasant, gentle, slightly unreal world of women . . . and children and gardens" (165). His perspective of gendered spheres is an old-fashioned one in contrast to Neale and Marise's lives, and Fisher proves here that women's regionalist fiction after the first World War became modern in the attempt to transcend such definitions.

In the sections that explore Neale's inner life, we find that, like Marise, Neale has also recently had an emotional reckoning which has occurred outside the pages of the text. Neale is absent from the first 150 pages of the novel, away on business in Canada. During his trip, Neale is tempted (as Marise is tempted by Vincent Marsh) to hop a steamer that is boarding for China, re-experiencing a lifelong desire to see the world. Like Marise, Neale "dug for . . . his deepest and most permanent desires, and when he had found them, he'd come home with a happy heart" (214). While Fisher's plot is primarily about Marise's coming-of-age, Neale has already experienced his, figuring out that what one needs to do with "permanent desires" is to "dig [them] under the ground and let [them] fertilize and enrich" one's life (214).

Fisher equates Neale's worklife with his family life by showing that it has the same satisfying sense of permanence. Neale wants "the sureness of it, the coherence of it, the permanence of it, the clear conscience he had about what he was doing in the world, the knowledge that he was creating something, helping men to use the natural resources of the world without exploiting either the natural resources or the

men" (213). His worklife and his family life fit him and "the tramp-steamer to China . . . showed herself for the shabby, sordid little substitute for a real life she would have been to him" (214). Fisher's gendered language describes the steamer as a potential lover, connecting Neale's temptation to Marise's.

Fisher dilutes the drama of Marise's dilemma by showing Neale's similar desires, and reinscribes her ideal of a companionate marriage, the marriage that Lydia Emery wanted so much and couldn't achieve; Marise and Neale truly have a life-in-common. And while Neale knows that he could persuade Marise to stay with him by "play[ing] on her devotion to the children, throw[ing] all the weight of his personality, work[ing] on her emotions" or even by "act[ing] the ardent, passionate young lover again," he believes that "what is deepest and most living" in Marise must "go on living" (337). With these words, Fisher echoes the promises that Neale made to Marise in "The Prelude" at the height of their passion for each other. She shows that a real marriage can weather all storms and passionate floods because it is built on solid ground.

#### IV. Cut Flowers

Fisher presents two cynical moderns who see life as chaotic and impermanent, and whose purpose in the novel is to threaten the rootedness of the Crittenden's marriage. Vincent Marsh and Eugenia Mills are rich, single people who have a propensity to travel in pursuit of ephemeral, sensual pleasures and are cut-off from permanence, both literally and ideologically.

Marsh spouts ideas he attributes to George Bernard Shaw, Freud and "Mrs. Gilman" about the hostility harbored by the younger generation for the older, about how "children in a marriage are like driftwood left high on the rocks of a dwindled stream, tokens of a flood-time of passion now gone by," and how mother love is "the enervating hot-house concentration on [children] of an unbalanced, underdeveloped woman who has let everything else in her personality atrophy except her morbid

preoccupation with her own off-spring" (106-7). Vincent's last name suggests the shallowness of his perspective, but Marise is drowning in her physical attraction to him.

Marsh is an emissary from the "big world," where "there are only people who don't have to work, who have plenty of money and brains and beautiful possessions and gracious ways of living, and few moral scruples" (56); indeed, he might have stepped right out of Aunt Victoria's drawing-room. Marsh is a millionaire, like Austin Page, but as he tells Neale, he reaps the benefits without having to sow the seeds:

I did try to hook on, once or twice years ago -- to find out something about the business that my father spent his life in helping to build up, but it always ended in my being shoved out of the office by a rather irritable manager . . . I never was able to make any sense out of it . . . Once in awhile, touring, I have come across one of our branch establishments and have stopped my car to see the men come out of the buildings at quitting-time. That's as close as I have ever come. (157)

Fisher suggests that Marsh's lack of meaningful work contributes to his moral lassitude. Marsh believes that Marise has "outgrown, like a splendid tropical tree, the wretched little kitchen-garden where fate had transplanted her" and thinks that he can persuade her to roam the "big world" with him, unbounded (185-6). He is handsome, well-dressed and quick-witted but Marise (and the reader) ultimately feel sorry for him because his cynicism cuts him off from any kind of simple happiness.

Marsh's purpose in the novel is to try to create trouble in the two marriages that are portrayed, Neale and Marise's and Nelly and Gene Powers's, by confidently asserting that marriage is outdated: "what a ghastly prison marriage was . . . a thing as hostile to the free human spirit as an iron ball-and-chain" (147). But Fisher shows that this belief is a symptom of a much larger sickness: "A thousand ugly recollections poured their venom upon him from his past life. Life, this little moment of blind, sensual groping and grabbing for something worth while that did not exist, save in the stultification of the intelligence. All that you reached for so frantically, it was only another handful of mud, when you held it" (147). Marsh's garden is a true modern wasteland: "With a bitter relish he felt sunk deep in one of his rank reactions, against life and human beings. Now at least he was on bed-rock. There was a certain hard, quiet restfulness in scorning it all so whole-heartedly as either stupid or base" (149).

In depicting Vincent Marsh, Fisher is exploring the post-World-War-I, pleasure-grabbing of the Jazz Age, showing that beneath a *carpe diem* attitude lies a despondent uncertainty about the stability and security of American life. As Marsh watches Ashley citizens dance, he thinks,

There they were dancing, those idiots, dancing on a volcano if ever human beings did, in the little sultry respite from the tornado which was called the world-peace . . . How soon before it would break again, the final destructive hurricane, born of nothing but the malignant folly of human hearts, and sweep away all that they now agonized and sweated to keep? (149)

As I discuss in more depth in Chapter Five, Fisher experienced the war first-hand. The Brimming Cup was the first novel she wrote after having spent two years in war-torn France, working for the relief effort. She undoubtedly had her share of cynical moments, as Marise's reflections on the "treaty muddle" might suggest, but this novel shows that rural life for her was not only artistic, but sustaining and meaningful enough to want to keep on living. Marsh's inability to see the beauty and meaning of everyday life leaves him hopeless in a world ill-equipped to inspire anything other than defeat.

Vincent and Marise continuously spar about what can be defined as beautiful, their conversations on aesthetics reminiscent of similar dialogues in The Bent Twig. Marsh is infuriated when he sees Marise dressed in "a short skirt, rough heavy shoes, and old flannel shirt" to help Ormby Welles put in his peas. Marise tells him, "if we are ever going to succeed in forcing order on the natural disorder of the world, it's going to take everybody's shoulder to the wheel. Women can't stay ornamental and leisurely, and elegant, nor even always nice to look at" (89). But, for Marsh, women are art. He tells Marise that the only help she can give people is by giving them beauty, and he continually recognizes women's resemblances to paintings. For example, when he sees Marise and Nelly Powers talking together at the Ashley dance, he thinks, "It was Brunhilda talking to Leonardo da Vinci's Ste. Anne" (134). His aesthetic requires being cut-off from life, framed, beautiful for a moment in time rather than gathering beauty from age and history, a definition of art that is reminiscent of Flavia Camp Canfield's perspective as portrayed in Fisher's preface, "What My Mother Taught Me."

At the cereus gathering, all Marsh sees is "a handful of dull, insensitive, primitive beings, hardened and calloused by manual toil and atrophied imaginations" (103). He argues that the only reason



they attend such gatherings is because "there aren't any movies in Ashley, or anything else" and assumes that they would "infinitely prefer a two-headed calf or a bearded woman to your flower. The only reason they go to see that is because it is a curiosity, not because of its beauty" (103). In retaliation, Marise quips that if he had been an ancient Greek, "and had stood watching the procession going up the Acropolis hill, bearing the thank-offering from the field and loom and vineyard" he would have seen "dullness and insensitiveness as well" (104).<sup>13</sup> Marsh's inability to read the cereus ritual shows the full scope of his modern temper, his desire for new theories and sensations and distaste for tradition.

After all their verbal sparring, the significant encounters between Marise and Marsh are silent, meaningful glances that are loaded with sexual tension. But although they eventually share a passionate kiss and Marsh pleads with Marise to "let yourself go in this flood that is sweeping us along," Cousin Hetty's death interferes with Marise's passion, and she is able to think rationally about her life and her marriage. Marise ultimately disagrees with Marsh that "the passion of a man and a woman for each other" is "the only honestly living thing in all our miserable human life" (288). Once Marise works through her dilemma, once she has "come of age," Marsh no longer has any power over her. Wounded, he can only childishly call her "a thin-blooded coward" and retreat to New York and the "big world" beyond.

Eugenia Mills is a combination of Felix Morrison and Aunt Victoria from The Bent Twig. Marise describes her as "the embodiment of sophisticated cosmopolitanism, an expert on all sorts of esoteric, aesthetic and philosophic matters, book-binding, historic lace, the Vedanta creed, Chinese porcelains, Provencal poetry, Persian shawls" (53). But Eugenia is unproductive: her chief preoccupations are her travel schedule and the preservation of her fading physical beauty.

Marise thinks that Eugenia has "made herself into one of the rarest and most finished creations." but Fisher contrasts this private "milling" with the lumber mill that Neale runs and which employs and supports many of the Crittenden's neighbors, and with Marise's varied domestic life. While Eugenia reclines "upstairs" in private chambers, applying massage cream and making plans to attract Neale,

Marise is "downstairs" in the kitchen dealing with children who need help with a lice-infested pig, a question about ant life and a piano lesson. Eugenia's self-involvement is targeted as an empty, valueless way-of-life and a delusion of sorts, since Eugenia has long been in love with Neale, a feeling he does not share.

Eugenia practices Freudian therapy and initiates conversations about it, a clue to Fisher's own reticence about Freud since Eugenia is apt to pick up anything that is deemed "fashionable." As Fisher wrote to her agent, with Eugenia she wanted "to make fun of the people who take up radicalism as they did ping-pong, or dancing, because it's the fashion" (Madigan 88). Eugenia thinks Marise should have her recurring dreams about being "in some rapid motion" psychoanalyzed, forcing Marise to admit that she has never consciously experienced this feeling. Eugenia's actions here are subtly malicious because her motive is to make sure that Vincent Marsh knows that Marise's marriage is not totally fulfilling.

Eugenia and Vincent's conversations about Freud make them members of the same "big" world that Marise has forsaken for her "narrow valley." Eugenia asks Marsh, "What do you suppose Freud would make of such dreams?" and Marsh answers, "Why, it sounds simple enough to me. Americans have fadded the thing into imbecility, so that the very phrase has become such a bromide one hates to pronounce it. But of course the commonplace that all dreams are expressions of suppressed desires is true. And it's very apparent that Mrs. Crittenden's desire is a very fine one for freedom and power and momentum" (210). Instead of participating in Eugenia and Vincent's intellectual theories about her psyche, Marise asserts her domestic identity: "I'm a gardener . . . and I know a thing or two about natural processes. The thing to do with a manure pile is not to paw it over and over, but to put it safely away in the dark, underground, and never bother your head about it again except to watch the beauty and vitality of the flowers and grains that spring from the earth it has fertilized" (211). Thus Freud, an intrusion in Marise's domestic life, is tossed onto the compost heap, broken down and subsumed by the domestic rituals of Marise's everyday life.

Eugenia's inner processes are concentrated on attempts to stave off the natural aging process:

"She let her head and shoulders and neck droop like a wilted flower-stem, while she took into her mind the greater beauty of a wilted flower over the crass rigidity of a growing one . . . . When she felt her face calm and unline again, she put on a little massage cream, to make doubly sure, and rubbed it along where the lines of emotion had been" (256-7). Her concentration is on making herself into a "beautiful thing," like the objects she meditates about, sharing Marsh's aesthetic: that beauty is inanimate and framed, cut off from the rhythms and processes of the natural world.

Eugenia tries to avoid thinking about anything that might cause a deep emotion which might become etched in her face. To calm herself, she reads, sews bits of rare and valuable lace which she collects, contemplates her new hat and thinks about how much nicer her smooth, white hands are than Marise's brown, work-roughened ones: "What a revelation it might be to Neale, how a woman could make everything she touched exquisite, to Neale who had only known Marise, subdued helplessly to the roughness of the rough things about her, Marise who had capitulated to America and surrendered to the ugliness of American life" (259).

To further quiet her emotions, she tries Vedanta breathing exercises which were taught to her by a Yogi, and Freudian psychology which "bring[s] the desire up boldly, letting yourself go, unresisting" (264). As Eugenia "lets herself go," she imagines Marise running away with Marsh and divorcing Neale. She sees herself rescuing Neale and roaming the world with him, sending the children away to a good boarding school. Eugenia's projects and plans are pitiful because she is so far removed from the everyday life that is going on around her. She is deluded in thinking that Neale admires her; in fact, her gestures and conversations are "deadly" to him in contrast to the life he finds in Marise.

Marise never know the full extent of Eugenia's betrayal, but she does realize that she has outgrown Eugenia. In her newfound maturity, she notices that Eugenia's customary "gesture as she goes through the world" is to pull her clothes around her so that they won't get soiled. She thinks, "To look like that, she must care for looks more than anything else. What can she know about any real human feeling"

(383). And, in fact, Eugenia knows very little as her unsuccessful plans involving Neale and Marise show.

Ormsby Welles is a third example of a "cut flower." He has led a life of sacrifice, slaving away in the office of Marsh's father's electrical business for thirty years so that he could support an invalid aunt. It was a dismal life as Fisher draws it, cut off from a home, children, plants and any kind of permanent connection to other human beings. Welles is excited about finally having a domestic life: "'his house,' his own house, with bookshelves, and a garden. How he loved it all already!" (31). He learns about gardening from Marise as they form "a real bond" in their passion for gladioli, and becomes quite attached to Paul, Marise's oldest son. Welles reminds me of Jewett's William Blackett, a man who has done his duty by taking care of a handicapped mother and who, long past middle-age, looks forward to a domestic life of his own. Like Jewett, and perhaps Louisa May Alcott before her with her portrait of Professor Bhaer, Fisher "expand[s] the exclusivity of traditionally domestic women's culture" (Romines 89).

However, as Paul and Mr. Welles watch the men from the valley go to their work at the mill, Welles feels a twinge of "wistful envy" for those who have useful work to do. This regret foreshadows the decision that Welles will ultimately make to move to Georgia to help a cousin who is teaching "in a school for Negroes." His cousin's letters to him about the everyday, disrespectful treatment of black people in the South make "a very painful impression" on Mr. Welles's mind. He tells Marise, "one of the small things she told me . . . is that Southern white people won't give the ordinary title of respect of Mr. or Mrs. or Dr. even to a highly educated negro. They call them by their first names, like servants. Think what an hourly pin-prick of insult that must be" (112). Welles reflects on this fact and others like it, cruel ruptures in a well-mannered, domestic code of simple civility.

The information for this plotline came from Fisher's friend, the poet and novelist Sarah Cleghorn who held a similar position in a school in Georgia. Fisher was concerned throughout her career about the treatment of African Americans in this country and often inserted a sub-plot having to do with racial discrimination in her fiction. In 1921, she wrote to W. E. B. Du Bois that although her new novel is about

an intimate personal problem in the life of a Vermont woman and her husband . . . I wish never to lose a chance to remind Americans of what their relations to the Negro race are, and might be, and so into this story of Northern life and white people. I have managed to weave a strand of remembrance of the dark question (Madigan 95).

Fisher characterizes her "strand" as

a sort of indirect, side-approach, a backing-up of your campaign from someone not vitally concerned in it personally, except as every American must be, which I hope may be of use exactly because it is not a straight-on attack, but one of a slightly different manner (Madigan 95).

Other novels contain similar strategies in evoking the race problem without providing any solutions. For example, in The Bent Twig, Sylvia and Judith Marshall are exposed to race prejudice when their classmates discover that two new students, the Fingal sisters, are "tainted" with African-American blood. Ultimately, these sub-plots are weak strands in Fisher's tapestry.<sup>14</sup> Fisher gives Mr. Welles's decision some solemnity by showing how it affects Paul who thinks, "I guess I know who I want to be like when I grow up." But Mr. Welles's abandonment of the new home that he has grown to love so well seems like a cruel twist, his desire for a domestic life left ungratified once again. Perhaps this plotline is Fisher's concession to the idea that productive modern lives can be lived without a domestic center, with a broader, social commitment as the focus. However, her handling of Mr. Welles's decision makes the reader more inclined to agree with Vincent Marsh's modern assessment of Welles's personality: "Mr. Welles suffers from a duty-complex, inflamed to a morbid degree by a life-long compliance to a medieval conception of family responsibility" (143-4).

#### V. The Big Pine

Fisher explores another troubled relationship in The Brimming Cup, Nelly and Eugene Powers' marriage. This sub-plot shows the limitations of an "old-fashioned" domestic life -- the Powers, like the Emerys in The Squirrel-Cage (1912) are confined to separate spheres and lead unbalanced, one-dimensional lives. The big pine that looms over the Powers's house, and which ultimately buries both

Nelly and Gene Powers, is a complex symbol that speaks of preserving the past while not being overshadowed by it.

Fisher spends the most time analyzing Nelly's character, devoting a chapter to "The Soul of Nelly Powers." Nelly is a mix of two nineteenth century heroines. Jewett's Sylvie from "A White Heron" (1886) and Chopin's Adele Ratignolle from The Awakening (1899). Like Sylvia, Nelly has moved to rural Vermont from West Adams, a milltown in Massachusetts, and she can only think "with pity of her sisters, mill-hands in West Adams still, or married to mill hands" (267).

As a wife, Nelly closely resembles Adele Ratignolle. She is large and blonde, a goddess of the hearth. Her chapter is full of the domestic chores that make up her day: churning butter, feeding the pigs, cleaning and sewing. Nelly's work completely satisfies her. She thinks that nothing is better "than giving people or animals what they liked to eat," or sewing "in a room all nice and picked-up . . . know[ing] the housework was done" (266-7). Unlike Madame Ratignolle, Nelly is so fulfilled by her work that her relationship with her husband has become a "bother":

Now, when there were three children and another one coming, and the house to be kept nice, and the work done up right . . . it seemed as though they'd ought to have other things to think about beside kissings and hugging . . . he never could settle down, and be comfortable and quiet with her, like it was natural for old married folks to do . . . She liked Gene all right, only she had her work to get done. (268)

Fisher shows that a great misunderstanding has grown up between these two individuals who are leading one-dimensional lives. While Nelly is passionate about her work and ambivalent about her husband, Gene's only passion is for Nelly; unlike Neale, he has nothing else that sustains him.

Gene is afraid that Nelly is having an affair with Frank Warner, a neighbor who has made clear his attraction to her. He is consumed by jealousy, showing up at home in the middle of the day to check up on Nelly; Neale even sees him hanging over the ravine one day, anxiously watching his own house. Nelly neither appreciates Gene's love for her nor comprehends his jealousy. When he "glowers" at her over Frank Warner's visits, she becomes even more confused about male behavior: "She should think any man would be satisfied to come in, right in the middle of the morning like that, without any warning, and

find his house as spick and span as a pin, and the butter churned and half the day's work out of the way . . . it would really be lots nicer if there were only women and children in the world" (275). Fisher shows that Nelly's life has become so focused on her housework that she can only interpret her husband's behavior in terms of her own domestic code, a language that Fisher sees as limited. Nelly's identity is formed by her house and her children; unlike Marise, she has nothing to connect her to a larger community and her worldview is limited by the boundaries of her own yard.

The pine is a symbol of the misunderstanding in the Powers's marriage. Like Jewett's pine tree in "A White Heron," it has a history. It was planted by Gene's great-grandfather and he has great respect for this living part of his past. Nelly, however, hates the "pitch-piney smell of it" and the way it makes her house damp and dark. Again Fisher suggests that Nelly's singleminded domesticity is selfish. When Gene agrees to cut the tree down, partly to atone for the sin of murdering Frank Warner, none of the Powers's domestic space belongs to Gene anymore. In chopping down the tree, he not only destroys his past, but he also kills his domestic autonomy.

Certainly one way of reading the scene where Gene chops down the tree is to identify it as a castration, which, given Fisher's evocation of Freud throughout the novel, makes sense: indeed, Marise thinks "it was as though he were cutting off his own strength, cutting off one of his own members to please his wife" (373). But Gene is also surrendering all of the domestic territory to Nelly, reinforcing old-fashioned separate spheres which are no longer adequate in the modern world.

The connections between Fisher's main plot and her sub-plot are weak and therefore she seems to contradict herself. She celebrates domestic ritual in this novel, pointing out the artistry inherent in rural lives, and shows that sexual passion is secondary to the domestic life-in-common that a couple creates. Through this lens, the reader sees Nelly's domestic life as very beautiful, and her feelings about her relationships with her husband and Frank Warner seem to be good and practical. Fisher's sub-plot shows that certain aspects of nineteenth century domestic tranquility had to be ruptured in order to accommodate the encroachment of the modern world. In 1886 Jewett's *Sylvia* could still preserve her rural paradise.

staving off the industrious young man from the outside world by keeping the secrets of her domestic space. In 1921, Fisher shows that those secrets must be shared and the domestic territory enlarged to accommodate the men who need to work there, too.

As Romines proves about the writers she studies, their success in writing about domestic ritual "released them, at least partially, from domestic responsibilities. None of [these] writers . . . married or single, could conceive of herself as 'just a housewife'" (293). As I have shown about Fisher's married life, she and her husband John shared their domestic responsibilities and Fisher always had hired domestic help as well. Fisher knew that for women to be whole human beings and to create marriages that could be considered true partnerships, they had to have a life outside of their roles as mothers and wives. Fisher's pine, then, the outmoded domesticity of the nineteenth century, must be cut down and cleared to provide a more modern view.

#### CONCLUSION

The Brimming Cup was described as "the other side of Main Street" in a review by William Allen White in 1921<sup>15</sup> and Fisher's reverent tone for the art inherent in community ritual is quite different from Sinclair Lewis's satiric portrayal of Carol Kennicott's houseparties and pretensions to "culture." Although Fisher wasn't intentionally responding to Lewis's ideas about small-town America, she clearly has a more positive perspective on the village life that Lewis sees as oppressive. She read Main Street (1920) after she published The Brimming Cup, and she told her publisher Alfred Harcourt that

Mr. Lewis takes a rather superficial view of human problems, but knows how to write a mighty good novel . . . You can imagine how violently I protest from much of his thesis and how naive I find his idea that a geographical change could achieve anything." (Washington 169)

And, indeed, in response to Vincent Marsh's assertion that Marise must miss the "big world" in which she so evidently belongs, Marise responds, "don't you find that your world everywhere is about as big as you are?" (55). Unlike Lewis, Fisher tries to show in The Brimming Cup that human beings have an innate



capacity for transcending the limitations of their environment. As Ida Washington notes, Fisher rejects a major characteristic of naturalism, which asserts that people are manipulated by their environment, to embrace an Emersonian spiritual triumph over both environment and ego (Washington 110).

Fisher gives voice to a nineteenth century rural ideal in The Brimming Cup as she does in later novels such as Bonfire (1934) and Seasoned Timber (1939). However, critics have mistakenly cast her and her work as "old-fashioned" as a result. For example, Joan Shelly Rubin writes that with The Brimming Cup, Fisher

established her modern credentials by facing sex squarely and refraining from conventional moralism [but] . . . adhered, at base, to an older outlook. Not only did she ultimately repudiate the idea that sexual repression was always harmful, she never questioned, as her modernist contemporaries relentlessly did, the meaningfulness of human existence or the efficacy of personal action . . . Her forays into a post-Freudian, post-Darwinian world led her back to the safety of rules and principles, of social order and domestic tranquility. (128)<sup>16</sup>

Rubin overlooks the fact that Fisher is participating in an on-going tradition that didn't die with the advent of World War I, but which is a vital part of twentieth century American literature and a part of modernism. As Ann Romines states, "the theories that have determined the American literary canon have taken little notice of texts by women that focus on women's domestic lives" (11). In her assessment of Fisher's work, Rubin excludes domestic art and ritual from the definition of modernism.

Fisher continued to write about domestic ritual in an experimental manner in her next novel, The Home-maker (1924). Her later novels will include experimental elements, but none of them break with conventional narrative patterns as much as The Brimming Cup does. And while she continues to use Freudian ideas in later work, she never fully endorses his theories. As she wrote to a member of the Woman's Day staff in 1945 about "sex-fulfillment": "I think a considerable amount of nonsense is talked about that, and I don't think it plays such a large part in human life as moderns excited by the recent freedom really to say something about sex, seem to feel" [quoted in Rubin 347]. Although she will use Freudian terminology to explore other characters's psyches, she ultimately contends that with a strong will and great honesty, her protagonists can overcome their shadowy desires.

Fisher's novel provides one answer to the questions that Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse ask at the end of the introduction to their 1992 anthology on American Women Regionalists<sup>17</sup>: "to what extent does the tradition of regionalism actually emerge from the ideology of separate spheres, and to what extent did it fail to survive the dissolution of that ideology early in the 20th Century" (xix). Fisher's fiction, I think, shows that regionalism emerged from and actually transcended the ideology of separate spheres, a conclusion which is contrary to Fetterley's and Pryse's answer.

In their anthology, they place Willa Cather's 1932 short story "Old Mrs. Harris" as regionalism's swan song. Their inclusion of Cather's story as finale to the collection suggests that with women's increasing access to greater opportunities in fulfilling their ambitions beyond the confines of home and community (like Vickie Templeton's admission to college), regionalism died: "Cather suggests that the values of community, empathy, nurture, and rootedness that characterize the fiction of the regionalists pose a clear danger to Vickie Templeton's developing female self. . . . For Cather, the story of Vickie's move outside the home beyond female community, and into the larger, male-dominated world of the university represents the road of development for women of her generation" (595-6). But as Fisher's fiction shows, many women who travelled those same roads found a path back to the female communities that supported them. The difference -- and it is an important difference -- is that men joined them. As Ann Romines asserts about modern women writers who write about domestic ritual<sup>18</sup>, Fisher "postulate[s] a life in which boundaries between public and private spheres and between male and female spheres become elastic, permeable, or perhaps even non-existent" (294). My next chapter on Fisher's novel The Home-maker shows the ramifications of this modernist twist to depictions of domestic life.

## NOTES

1. From a letter, Dorothy Canfield Fisher to Anna Pettit Broomell, 1944 quoted in Ida Washington, Dorothy Canfield Fisher: A Biography (Shelburne, Vt: New England Press, 1982, p. xi).
2. From Dorothy Canfield Fisher, The Brimming Cup (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1921). All subsequent references to the novel are from this edition.
3. Ann Romines, The Home Plot: Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).
4. Kate Chopin, The Awakening, ed. by Margaret Culley (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1976).
5. Smith, Bradford, "Dorothy Canfield Fisher: The Deepening Stream," in Vermont History 27 (July 1959): 228-39.
6. Nathan G. Hale, Jr., Freud and the Americans: The Beginnings of Psychoanalysis in the United States, 1876-1917 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).
7. Two critics of Fisher's work have noted her innovation. Brad Smith names her device the "internal dialogue" and calls it "a forerunner of the stream of consciousness and an outgrowth of the Puritan, New England conscience" (238). Joan Shelley Rubin believes Fisher was a forerunner of Faulkner, noting that in one part of The Brimming Cup, Fisher "experimented with a technique that Faulkner would later employ more skillfully in The Sound and the Fury: it retold the same story from different characters' vantage points in order to emphasize the subjectivity of perception" (128); Mark Madigan, Keeping Fires Night and Day: Selected Letters of Dorothy Canfield Fisher (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1993).
8. Fisher's emphasis on Marise's personal responsibility keeps Emerson's spirit alive while refuting an interpretation of Freud that might have suggested to moderns that a human being's moral sense is meaningless in the presence of the id.  
 While Joan Shelley Rubin sees Fisher's "emphasis on introspection and analysis" as giving The Brimming Cup a "Freudian tinge" because Marise faces her "innermost desires" instead of repressing them, Marise is hardly participating in Freudian analysis without the guide of an analyst (127): indeed, Eugenia Mills is the character who practices Freudian psychology, as I show later. Brad Smith's assessment that Fisher "had a strong enough mind to assimilate what Freud had to say" without "grinding out imitative Freudian case histories in the guise of fiction" comes closer to the mark especially given Fisher's propensity to air modern ideas without fully endorsing them, as I show with the Craftsman Ideal in Chapter One (234).
9. In his well-known phenomenological study of domestic spaces, The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard establishes the house as a "topography of our intimate being" (xxxii). Bachelard argues that "by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms', we learn to abide within ourselves" and shows that in the house "memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening" (5). In this scene, Marise can live in her past and imagine her future. The attic is a significant space to her because it is associated with the solitude of her childhood, a space Bachelard identifies as creative: "even when we no longer have a garret, when the attic room is lost and gone, there remains the fact that we once loved a garret, once lived in the attic" (10). In opening the trunk, Marise is entering "the dimension of intimacy" in Bachelard's terms, a space that is infinite and that can serve as a dwelling place.
10. Fisher devotes a chapter to Elly's perspective, a fine portrait of a sensitive, young girl who, as Marise says, is "strangely compounded . . . with her mysticism and her greediness and her love of beauty all jumbled together"

(99). Elly's chapter continues a project that Fisher started with her juvenile novel, Understood Betsy (1917) and Fisher broadens her concentration on the inner lives of children in her novel The Home-maker (1924), as I show in Chapter Four.

Fisher shows how Elly's youthful contemplation of the passage of time foreshadows Marise's coming-of-age: "It was like a procession, all half in the dark, marching forward, one after another, little girls, mothers and little girls, and then more . . . what for . . . oh, what for?" (75). Fisher's point here is to show how Marise's childhood self, echoed in Elly, is called-up and then subsumed into her newly-formed adult identity. Elly's emotional make-up is similar to Marise's: "She felt as though she were carrying a cup, full to the brim of something. And she mustn't let it spill. What was it so full of? Aunt Hetty's peacefulness, maybe" (77). From this description, the reader realizes that Marise has let her fullness spill, the fullness one feels from being part of a family and a tradition. It makes sense, then, that Marise must return to her past, to remember herself as a little girl in order to replenish this feeling.

11 Henry James, The Ambassadors (New York: Penguin Books, 1903, reprinted 1978).

12. James's name also comes up in a conversation that Marise has with Vincent Marsh about the "cultivation" of Europeans vs. Americans. Marise tells Marsh:

I always envied Henry James the conviction he seems to have had, all his life, that Europeans are a good deal more unlike other people than I ever found them . . . I never could see that people who lived in the Basses-Pyrenees are any more cultivated or had any broader horizons than people who live in the Green Mountains. My own experience is that when you actually live with people, day after day, year after year, you find about the same range of possibilities in any group of them. (53)

13. Fisher's placement of the cereus ritual in a classical context is reminiscent of Jewett's narrator's similar recognition of the Bowden Family Reunion in The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896): "We might have been a company of ancient Greeks going to celebrate a victory, or to worship the God of harvests . . . We were no more a New England family celebrating its own existence and simple progress; we carried the tokens and inheritances of all such households from which this had descended, and were only the latest of our line" (100).

14. Fisher has the same problem with another marginal figure in The Brimming Cup, Marise's domestic help Toucle, an elderly Native American. Toucle is a part of Fisher's project of creating a sisterhood between the immigrant or marginal female population who form the domestic working class and the middle class women who hire them. But although she and Marise live quite companionably together, if a sisterhood exists, it is not revealed.

Toucle is an independent and mysterious presence and Fisher never quite succeeds in integrating her into the shape of her story. Her character is stereotypical by contemporary standards; for example, she has a "capacity for monumental silence" which "gives her very occasional remarks an oracular air" (43-4). The reader understands that she is supposed to respect Toucle's knowledge; Fisher provides these cues since whenever something important happens, Toucle is the oracular presence that announces it to the community; for example, she tells the Crittendens that the cereus is about to bloom, and she finds Frank Warner's body and alerts the community. But we never get to know much about her.

15. White, William Allen, "The Other Side of Main Street" in Collier's Weekly 68 (July 30, 1921): 7-8, 18-19.

16. Joan Shelly Rubin, The Making of Middlebrow Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

17. Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, eds., American Women Regionalists, 1850-1910: A Norton Anthology (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).
18. Ann Romines, The Home Plot: Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).

## CHAPTER IV

### **"'A JOB YOUR SIZE': GENDER, WORK, SHOPPING AND 'THE HOME-MAKING INSTINCT' IN THE HOME-MAKER"**

What I am always struggling so hard and so imperfectly to express is the poetry and tragedy and profound fundamental importance of the simple recurrent human relationships of daily life.<sup>1</sup>

[T]here is less difference than has been assumed between the superior creative elite and the rest of humanity . . . Their [the elite's] attitude is only more strongly colored than most people's by the creative instinct which everybody has to a greater or less degree. Artists and intellectuals have it in a larger proportion than others. But there is irrefutable evidence that the seeds of it live, waiting for a chance to grow, in most men and women. If the seed is there, what springs up from it can be increased by the right kind of environment and opportunity. And environment and opportunity are within our power to create.<sup>2</sup>

#### I. Shaping Raw Material

In Part Two of Fisher's 1924 best-seller The Home-maker, Jerome Willing, the young, energetic owner of Willing's Emporium hires Evangeline Knapp, an efficient housewife, to be a "stock-girl" in the Ladies Cloak-and-Suit department. Willing has a hunch that with good training on his part and hard work on hers, Mrs. Knapp might be the store superintendent for whom he has been searching. Like Neale Crittenden in The Brimming Cup (1921), Willing finds creative work in hiring the right people and managing them effectively. "Creative work --," he thinks to himself, "it always comes back to that if you were going to do anything first-rate. You took raw material and shaped it with your own intelligence. If only she might be the raw material!" (131).

Eva Knapp shares Willing's conviction about the importance of creative work although her role as a home-maker doesn't provide her with it. The novel is about her discovery of a job that suits her, a discovery that she makes literally by accident; as I show in my next section, her husband Lester Knapp

has a similar experience. In The Home-maker (1924), Fisher twists the thread that strings her early fiction together by complicating the role of the domestic artist. Unlike Lydia Emery in The Squirrel-Cage (1912), Barbara Marshall in The Bent Twig (1912) and Nelly Powers in The Brimming Cup (1921), Eva Knapp loathes the "woman's work" that is her socially-sanctioned "duty." Although Fisher continues her thesis about the importance of a creative domestic life in The Home-maker (1924), she demonstrates that the "home-making instinct" is not a gender-based trait and argues that men and women need work that fits their personal abilities.

Like The Squirrel-Cage (1912), The Home-maker (1924) shows the tragic consequences of inflexible social codes that do not take the needs of the individual into account. Lester Knapp, like Daniel Rankin, possesses the true "home-making instinct" in the novel but he is not the rebel that Rankin is. He fails consistently to do a good job in the accounting department at Willing's Emporium, but he trudges along in it because as a man in modern America it is his role to support his family. Both Lester and Eva are forced to perform jobs they hate because of their gender. When Lester is crippled trying to put out his neighbor's chimney fire they both get a chance to change their lives.

Fisher's novel is an experiment in role reversal. While Lester's patience with his children and his interest in their moral and emotional development make him a truly talented home-maker, Eva is a "titan forced to tend a miniature garden." Her formidable energy and her frustration with the small details of home-making make her detrimental to her children's welfare. The novel poses the question: if a woman is better equipped to work outside the home, who will take care of the children who need the love and attention that, according to social attitudes, only their mother can give?

Fisher's solution is, at best, inadequate. Although Lester is a much better parent than Eva, his role as home-maker is achieved at great cost as I will show. But Lester's misfortune allows Fisher to present two feminist arguments in solving this "problem of living." First, as in her earlier novels she argues for the value of domesticity, criticizing social attitudes toward domestic work. Lester thinks,

Why, the fanatic feminists were right, after all. Under its greasy camouflage of chivalry, society is really based on a contempt for women's work in the home. The only women who

were paid, either in human respect or in money, were women who gave up their traditional job of creating harmony out of human relationships and did something really useful. bought or sold or created material objects. As for any man's giving his personality to the woman's work of trying to draw out of children the best there might be in them . . . fiddling foolishness! (312)

Lester certainly brings out the best in his children. Fisher shows that Helen, Henry, and Stephen Knapp have the potential to be happy and productive people but that the right homelife is crucial in nurturing their gifts. By detailing the children's behavior under first Eva's and then Lester's care, Fisher shows convincingly the effects that Eva's impatience and Lester's support have on their sensitive personalities. Fisher's use of a shifting point of view in this novel, a narrative strategy she began with The Brimming Cup (1921), is very effective in creating sympathy and respect for the Knapp children.

Secondly, Fisher raises the issue of daycare as a possible solution to the home vs. work dilemma. While Fisher proves that gender should not be a determinant in proper parenting, she also shows that there are tremendous personal consequences in Lester's decision to stay at home. Fisher demonstrates that Lester has talents that would be very useful in the public sphere, and suggests that his self-esteem might be greatly improved if he had the right job. Although Lester rejects daycare, believing that "you could not hire a parent," Fisher gives voice to the issue, and therefore puts it in play as a possible social remedy.

## II. A Different Pattern

In The Home-maker we see three modern women who create different patterns for their home and work lives, Eva Knapp, Nell Willing, Jerome Willing's wife, and Lester's cousin Mattie Farnham. Eva struggles to make a good homelife for her family, but it is not work she loves: "How she loathed housework! The sight of a dishpan full of dishes made her feel like screaming out. And what else did she have? Loneliness; never-ending monotony; blank, gray days, one after another, full of drudgery" (47).

Nevertheless, Eva is determined to do her duty. Her obsession with keeping her house clean and her children well-behaved is neurotic, and Fisher's interest in Freud, which I discuss in Chapter Three,



plays a part in this novel, too. The entire Knapp family has physical disorders that stem from their repressed feelings toward Eva: Lester and Henry are chronically dyspeptic, Helen is exceedingly nervous and Stephen has an uncontrollable temper that causes him to fly into physical rages.

Eva, too, has a bad case of eczema and the psychological effects of performing work she hates are evident in her hysterical eruptions. For example, after Eva has spent much of her day trying to get the grease stains off her kitchen floor, Henry spills grease yet again while carrying the meat platter to the kitchen. Eva's reaction is out-of-proportion to the crime: "with the effect of a clap of thunder shaking them to the bone, came a sudden rending outburst of sobs, strangled weeping, the terrifying sounds of a hysteric breakdown" (36).

Like Sylvia Marshall's dressmaking in The Bent Twig (1915), Eva's real creative work lies in her ability to re-shape old, worn-out pieces of clothing or furniture; this is work for which she has great passion and in which she takes immense pride. For example, early in the novel she "feast[s] her eyes" on the sofa she made-over for the Knapp's living room: "Could anybody recognize it for the old wreck which had stood out in front of the junk-shop on River Street all winter! She had seen its lines through its ruin, had guessed at the fine wood under the many coats of dishonoring paint. Every inch of it had been recreated by her hand and brain and purpose" (44).

Eva can envision all the dimensions of large, difficult problems and engage her energies in solving them. Fisher demonstrates this ability and the societal restrictions that prevent Eva from using it early in the novel when Eva comes up with a solution for her parish's problem with poor, sick children. Eva impresses the Ladies Guild members and her clergyman, Mr. Prouty, with the variety of suggestions she makes, so much so that Mr. Prouty asks her to chair the committee. Eva responds, "'I'd love to! . . . I see it all!" but has to decline because her "first duty is to [her] home and children" (63). Mr. Prouty and the Ladies Guild members give "lip service," too, to this "aphorism" and Fisher establishes a choral voice that upholds social standards, a powerful voice that drowns out Eva and Lester's small protests and that resounds throughout the novel.

Perhaps the most moving aspect of Fisher's novel is Eva's transformation from a bored and frustrated housewife to a fulfilled businesswoman. Although it is easy to hate Eva early in the novel for her tyrannical dominance over her children, the reader is affected by the eagerness with which she takes up her new position at Willing's Emporium. Fisher devotes several pages to Eva's new responsibilities and to her enthusiastic conversations with Jerome Willing about her job. When Willing offers her material to read on retail selling, Eva's "reserve vanished in a flash. Her strongly marked, mature face glowed like a girl's . . . 'Oh, are there books written about the business?' she cried eagerly. 'things you can study and learn?'" (150).

Eva's business mode is moral and kind. Early in the novel, we learn of her concern for her neighbors -- she has "the deepest sympathy for their struggle to arrange in a decent pattern the crude masculine and crude childish raw material of their home-lives" (57-8). Eva brings this same concern to the department store every morning. For example, as she examines the mauve, home-spun suit that has recently arrived, she thinks how "it would be a real comfort to a woman who had just begun to feel sad over losing her youth" (158). Her thoughts immediately go to Mrs. Warner, one of her customers who "had so pathetically longed for that bright green sport sweater. This would satisfy her wistful, natural longing for pretty things and yet be quite suitable for her age" (158). Here, Fisher tempers the previous scathing criticism she makes of women who love to shop and wear nice clothes in The Bent Twig (1915). She shows that there are emotional comforts in having the "right" things and demonstrates Eva's kindness in helping a customer.

Eva learns all of her customer's names and their economic circumstances and takes a sincere interest in finding for them the right clothing at a price they can afford. Although Lester Knapp provides plenty of criticism about the lure of the department store for American women as I show in my next section, Fisher recognizes that some people might find satisfactory work there, work that can solve a problem of living. Eva has "so much sympathy for women struggling with the problem of dressing themselves properly at difficult ages" and the talent to help them overcome this difficulty (158).

Working in the public sphere is good for Eva. Fisher shows her newly-found independence and peace-of-mind as she breakfasts by herself at a cafeteria downtown. There she has time to think about her workday, a luxury she never experienced at home: "She loved this tranquil taking possession of the day's work" (155). The cashier notices how Eva has embraced her new role as she "folded her morning paper and put it under arm with the exact gesture of any other business-man" (154).

And once Eva begins working outside her home, all of the physical and psychological manifestations of doing work she loathes disappear. Eva has little time or energy for domestic details and therefore she is no longer obsessive about the way her home looks or the way her children behave. By the end of the novel, she is making twice as much money as Lester ever made at Willing's, enabling them to buy a car, to contemplate moving to a better neighborhood and to plan to send their children to college. But more importantly, we see scenes of the Knapps enjoying their time together, playing whist, for example. Because Eva is no longer solely responsible for raising her children, a job for which she has no patience, she can appreciate them as human beings. Their family life is healthier as a result.

As Eva scans her morning newspaper, she admires the work of another businesswoman, Nell Willing. Nell is responsible for all of the advertising for Willing's Emporium and Fisher shows how she has arranged her worklife and family life to best suit her needs. Nell is a transformed Nelly Powers. While Nelly's domestic powers ultimately limit her, Nell's willingness to change with modern times broadens her domestic identity to include a role in the public sphere.

Unfortunately, we never get inside Nell's head. The reader gets most of her information about Nell from Jerome's musings about his life and work and from the few scenes that Fisher depicts in the Willing home: Fisher might have felt that having Nell called a "sure-enough businesswoman" by a man, and by her husband at that, might confer more authority on her characterization. In showing Nell and Jerome's worklife, a life they construct together like other couples in Fisher's canon -- Barbara and Elliott Marshall and Marise and Neale Crittenden are examples -- Fisher emphasizes again the necessity of a companionate marriage.

Early on, we see that the Willings' relationship is more successful than the Knapps' for several reasons: they both have work that they love, they share the same business so they have a lot to talk about and they have financial security, giving them the freedom to do what they want. Nell is college-educated and has undergone the same apprenticeship as Jerome; they both worked for Burnham Brothers department store before they took over Jerome's uncle's business. Like Marise Crittenden, Nell understands and shares the pressures and problems of the business and throughout the novel, Fisher shows that Nell has "as good a business head as Jerome" (133-4).

In one of Jerome's chapters we learn that Nell has forged a very modern solution to the work vs. home dilemma, a solution that Jerome supports. Nell took time off from her career to raise their two children and has now resumed her work at the store, albeit in her own study at home. Jerome thinks,

It had been asking a great deal of a real, sure-enough businesswoman like Nell to give it all up for Kinder, Küche and Kirche. Nell had been willing, had been happy, had loved having babies, had made them all happy. But now the children were both going to school it stood to reason she'd find time hang heavy on her hands, whip-stitch that she was. And life in a small town was Hades if you didn't have lots of work to do in spite of the big lawns and comfortable roomy homes. As far as that went, life anywhere was Hades if you didn't have a job your size. (131-2)

With money and the support of her husband, Nell has been able to get around the societal restrictions that imprison Eva. As Virginia Woolf would later advise, Nell has her own work space at home in which she designs her advertising campaigns. This solution allows her to capitulate to social strictures about a woman's place in the home and still do the work she loves. Nell manipulates them again when we see her smoking a cigarette but being careful to shut the curtains so that no one can see her from the street. Nell's actions here, I think, match Fisher's own conservatism about women's roles which she demonstrates in the non-fiction articles I examine in my conclusion: Nell does what she wants without making too much of a point about it.

The Willings have successfully arranged their family life to accommodate their individual needs and interests as well as fulfilling their obligations to their children. After Lester Knapp is crippled, Jerome Willing tells Eva that he and Nell are "more than willing to help her in any way to reconstruct

their home-life" and their last name perhaps symbolizes their openness to non-traditional arrangements (125); Lester interprets Jerome's "will" more negatively as I show in my next section. But because of Jerome's willingness to hire Eva, her success in her new job and Lester's re-arrangement of their domestic life, the Knapp's family life becomes much happier and healthier.

Mattie Farnham's rather sloppy home-making provides a counterpoint to Eva's obsessive efficiency and shows another rupture in Fisher's domestic artistry plot. Mattie is Lester's relative -- the children call her "aunt" -- and is also a member of their community. Early in the novel we hear Mattie trying to persuade Eva to leave her housework in the middle of the day to go for a ride in the Farnham's new Buick. In another scene, Lester and the children run into Mattie in the delicatessen one evening where she is hastily buying food for dinner: "I put Frank and the children to setting the table while I tore over here," she explains to them rather sheepishly (25).

Matty is cheerful and fun-loving, and although she acknowledges that Eva is "an example to us all," her ambivalence about her housework elicits cooperation from her family: like the Marshalls, the Farnhams all take responsibility for household chores. The atmosphere in the Farnham home is friendly and comfortable, a sharp contrast to the tension that reigns at the Knapps'. The one scene set at the Farnhams shows that Mattie's children are the most important part of her home-making: "She always laid down her work and all thought of it and hastened to give the returned wanderer a hug and kiss and run an anxious eye over his aspect to see what had happened to him during his day out in the world" (261).

Because of her ambivalence about the trivial aspects of domesticity and her recognition of the truly important things that happen at home, Mattie is the ideal reader of the Knapp's situation. She watches the Knapp's new pattern unfold and it changes her thinking about traditional arrangements: "Everything in her head had shucked together different, like when you look in a kaleidoscope and give it a shake, and there's a new design" (263). Mattie's creative thinking reflects what Fisher asks of her reader.

### III. "The Home-making Instinct"

Like Daniel Rankin in The Squirrel-Cage, Austin Page in The Bent Twig, and Neale Crittenden in The Brimming Cup, Lester Knapp is Fisher's advocate for domestic artistry in The Home-maker. Unlike these other characters, however, Lester does not have the power that comes from radicalism, money or owning and running a business that he loves. Lester is a lost soul, a person who has missed his opportunity for pursuing the work that fits him. We learn that he once wanted to be a professor but that he left the University to marry Eva and now he doesn't possess the ambition or energy to change his life. By all social standards he is a failure because he doesn't have the will or desire to succeed in business and make as much money as he can for his family.

Fisher is very critical of this conception of masculinity, echoing the argument she makes for a renovated manhood in The Squirrel-Cage (1912). Men are as subject to societal constraints as women are, Fisher argues, and she redeems Lester's weaknesses by showing what a superlative father he is. Although Lester regains the use of his legs by the end of the novel, his decision to stay in his wheelchair shows how much he is crippled by public opinion. The reader sees his creativity in the home and his success with the children, but we know that his community will go on identifying him as "that broken reed of a Lester Knapp," in Mrs. Prouty's words.

If Eva is energetic and active, Lester is thoughtful and introspective, and he provides us with most of the ideas in the novel. He feels that Jerome Willing's store, and capitalism in general, perverts the true meaning of the "home-making instinct":

[W]hat sickened Lester was the unscrupulous exploitation of the home-making necessity, the adroit perversion of the home-making instinct. Jerome Willing wanted to make it appear, hammering in the idea with all the ingenious variations of his advertising copy, that home-making had its beginning and end in good furniture, fine table-linen, expensive rugs . . . God! how about keeping alive some intellectual or spiritual passion in the home? How about the children? Did anybody suggest to women that they give to understanding their children a tenth part of the time and real intelligence and real purposefulness they put into getting the right clothes for them? (77)

While for Eva, Jerome's willingness to give her a job is a life-saving act, for Lester, the imposition of Jerome's will on the women of the community is despicable.

Fisher never explores the effect such an ideological difference might have on Eva and Lester's relationship. Lester feels that he is "bound and gagged by his inability to make money" and therefore keeps his thoughts about Jerome Willing to himself. There is actually a surprising lack of physical and emotional intimacy in Lester and Eva's marriage (especially in comparison to Marise and Neale Crittenden's relationship in The Brimming Cup), which makes it seem imbalanced. But this, of course, is Fisher's point: that social restrictions based on gender create deep psychological divisions in people and in their relationships with each other. This is a pattern that Fisher began with her depiction of the Emerys in The Squirrel Cage (1912).

Part Three of the novel is devoted to Lester's home-making instinct. After he loses his job at Willing's Emporium, Lester decides to commit suicide, making it look like an accident so that he can leave Eva and the children a substantial amount of insurance money. However, he is unsuccessful in his venture. When his neighbor's roof catches fire, Lester sees his chance and braves its iciness with pails of water in each hand. His subsequent fall from the roof damages his spinal cord and he becomes confined to a wheelchair.

His children give Lester a reason to live. Before his accident, his subjection to the clock never gave him time to know his children. Now that he has long, uninterrupted hours in which to probe their minds and hearts, he begins to realize what a powerful role being a good parent is, a concept that is terrifying to him. He realizes that much of what is wrong with Stephen who has heretofore been the "problem" child is that neither he nor Eva ever gave him any conception of his own self-worth or autonomy.

For example, Eva used to steal Stephen's teddy bear in order to wash it, a practice which Stephen deeply resents and which makes him feel powerless. Lester realizes that "the conception of trying to understand Stephen's point of view had been as remote from their minds as the existence of the fourth

dimension" (178). He tells Stephen that he has "the right to have the say-so about [his teddy bear]" and resolves that he will "start in to make Stephen feel . . . that he, even a little boy, had some standing in the world" (179). This process changes Stephen's behavior. Like Eva, Stephen is transformed from an angry, frustrated person who makes other people's lives miserable to a creative, loving soul who believes in his own self-worth. And Lester discovers worthwhile work.

Throughout the rest of the novel, we see Lester's creativity in parenting and home-making. Although he is physically handicapped, the quality of Lester's intellectual attention to his domestic pursuits gives his "home-making instinct" great dignity and the small tasks which comprise his daily life are a balm to his spirit. Lester shapes the raw material of his housekeeping into creative spaces. For example, "a blessed healing solitude lay about Lester as he sat in his wheel chair in the sunny kitchen peeling a panful of potatoes," his son Stephen playing quietly nearby. The repetitive task of peeling potatoes allows Lester's active mind to roam and he thinks that he should be feeling great humiliation about wearing a gingham apron and doing women's work. Lines from John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress come into his head and in the safe space of his kitchen, he repeats them outloud, something he could never do in his office at Willing's Emporium:

He that is down need fear no fall,  
He that is low no pride,  
He that is humble ever shall  
Have God to be his guide,  
I am content with what I have  
Little be it or much . . .

Stephen asks if it is a story that Lester is repeating and while Lester finishes peeling the potatoes, he tells Stephen the story of Pilgrim's Progress, finding in "the old story stuff to interest a modern little boy" (189). Lester is moved by the depth of Stephen's interest, thinking "how exciting it was . . . how absorbing to see those first impressions of power and courage touch a new human soul. And when it was your own little boy . . . to share with him one of the immortal fine things created by the human spirit!"



(190). Lester's gift for teaching is evident in this passage and the reader becomes aware of the real tragedy of Lester's life.

Lester's story arouses Stephen's curiosity and he begins to ask his father questions, a communicative act that the quiet, brooding little boy has never performed before. By the end of the chapter, we see a subtle but a very deep change in both Stephen and Lester. Stephen is beginning to form a meaningful relationship with his father, the first of his young life, and Lester is beginning to reconcile with and make the most of his situation: "For both of them the kitchen was ringing with the bright brazen shout of victory. Men thrive in the Valley of Humiliation" (192).

Lester sparks his children's imagination and they begin to build creative lives. Late in the novel, Fisher shows an example of the kind of play that Lester's attention has fostered as she details a railroad that Stephen is building. The child's burgeoning creativity is apparent in "the tiny fairy-world of small, tree-lined, pebble-paved roads, moss-covered hills, small looking-glass lakes, white pasteboard farm-houses with green blinds, surrounded by neat white tooth-pick fences, broad meadows with red-and-white paper cows and a tiny farm wagon with minute, plumped-out sacks, driving to the railroad" (203). The ingenuity that Stephen displays in his playlife under Lester's care is quite different from the angry rages that Eva provoked; under her care he was as likely to kick his toys down the stairs as actually play with them.

Fisher presents a more public assessment of Lester's new life when Mattie Farnham visits to see how the Knapps are getting along. Summarizing their situation, he tells Mattie, "here at the house we've shuffled things around into a new pattern, and we're getting on" (195). He explains that he is having fun with the housework and demonstrates the industry he has made of it when he shows her "one of the patented inventions of the Knapp Family Incorporated": newspapers spread on the kitchen floor in order to catch grease spills, Stephen's invention (197). He also explains how he learned to make cream sauce and darn socks from books about home-making, countering the idea that it is not legitimate work by pointing out that it is a field of study.

Mattie is shocked, bewildered, and a bit pitying about Lester's position. In his defense, Lester conceptualizes the main point of Fisher's novel: "Do you know what you are saying to me, Mattie Farnham? You are telling me that you really think that home-making is a poor, mean, cheap job beneath the dignity of anybody who could do anything else" (199). Here, Lester criticizes social estimates of the value of domestic work.

Lester is as successful in drawing out his shy and nervous 13-year-old daughter as he is with Stephen. Helen has inherited her father's poetic nature. At the beginning of the novel, we see Eva constantly "at" Helen, criticizing her for the way she makes her bed, how she eats her potatoes and how she wrings out the dishcloth. Eva thinks, "there didn't seem to be anything to Helen! With the exasperation which passivity always aroused in her, Helen's mother thought of the dumb vacant look on Helen's face that evening when she had tried to show her how to perform a simple operation a little less clumsily. Sometimes it seemed as though Helen were not all there!" (48).

While Eva is baffled by Helen's dreamy nature, Lester reveres it: "He always felt like taking off his hat when he thought of Helen" (223). As Lester and Helen learn to cook together, he helps her shape all the ideas she has jumbled up inside. For example, Helen feels comfortable enough to recite one of her own poems to Lester. She thinks to herself, "talking to Father, when they were alone together, was almost like thinking aloud, only better, because there was somebody to help you figure things out" (213). She explains to him how bewildered she often feels by her own thought processes and asks, "'Do you ever get going like that? One idea hitched to another and another and another; and you keep grabbing at them and can't get hold of one tight enough to hold it still?'" (215). Fisher's talent for expressing a child's point of view is evident here and throughout the novel, causing the reader to sympathize with and respect the Knapp children's feelings. Fisher realizes her intention of writing about "children's rights" in these sections, an intention I discuss in my conclusion to this chapter.

Lester, of course, sympathizes with Helen's predicament and tells her that it's a good idea for people like them to go to college, an idea Helen would never think of on her own. In one meaningful

conversation over a bowl of inexpertly broken eggs, Lester has helped Helen to envision a future. Lester's expertise in home-making has little to do with keeping the house clean or cooking perfect meals. Instead, his domestic processes are an accompaniment to the real creative work of giving shape to his children's amorphous thoughts and dreams.

Lester and Eva fit their new roles like pieces in a puzzle. Eva is promoted and her enthusiasm about the store only deepens: "It was wonderful to be really useful in a big thing!" she thinks (256). And Lester's new life seems like a rebirth to him: "Since he had died and come back to this other life, he took everything and himself, too, more simply, with little concern for the presentability of the role he was to play. If, honestly, that was the sort of nature he had, why rebel against it?" (251). Concomitant with the developments in their worklives is a new appreciation for each other. At the beginning of the novel, Eva bitterly wonders why Lester can not "do as other men did, all other men who amounted to anything, even common laboring men -- get on, succeed, provide for his family" (49). By the end, she appreciates the finer points of Lester's character: "No woman could have better reason than she to trust the delicacy, the warm loving-heartedness, the self-control, the innate decency of a man" (282). And Lester realizes what a prison their home must have been for Eva: "How much better Lester understood his wife after those few months of observing her in a life that suited her than after fourteen years of seeing her grimly and heroically enduring a life that did not . . . What she thought was her duty had held her bound fast in a death-like silence and passivity" (221).

Therefore, when Lester suddenly regains the use of his legs, both Lester and Eva feel bitter resistance instead of joy. They conclude separately that they can not keep their new pattern because public opinion will be turned against them. Eva thinks,

"The place for a mother is with her children -- '. How many times she had heard that -- and said it. She was a bad woman to rebel so against it. And it would do her no good to rebel . . . Someone had to stay home and keep house and take care of the children and make the home. And if Lester were cured he couldn't. No able-bodied man could do such work, of course . . . What would people say? They would laugh. They would make fun of the children. And of Lester. And of her. (290)

Lester doesn't want to go back to his old life, either: "it kept him from his real work, vital, living, creative work, work he could do as no one else could, work that mean the salvation of his own children" (303). Although Lester realizes that the "complacent unquestioned generalization, 'the mother is the natural home-maker'" is a "juggernaut" for them, like Eva he is unwilling to buck social conventions. "Every unit in the whole society," he thinks, "would join in making it impossible, from the Ladies' Guild to the children in the public schools" (309). Although he becomes even more contemptuous of himself than before, Lester decides to fake his illness, with the complicity of Eva, Mattie Farnham, and his doctor who all know about his decision but never discuss it with each other.

The last image in the novel is of Stephen running joyfully to Lester when he learns that Lester will not, in fact, be leaving home to go back to work. But of course, the ending is not a happy one. The Knapps will continue to build a more successful life and the children will benefit from having a real home-maker raise them. But at the center of their family life is a shameful, dishonest compromise, albeit one that they felt forced to make by the dictums of their society. Fisher's ending is meant to be practical and realistic. It is in keeping with her knowledge about the average American mother whom she writes about in her non-fiction, writing that I discuss in my conclusion to this chapter. "Few women," she writes, "are born radicals, and fewer still are trained to any sympathy with ideas that clash with tradition."

Although Fisher makes a strong statement against daycare in the novel, it is also clear that there really is no other healthy option for the Knapps. Lester wonders if it would be possible for both he and Eva to work:

Now that he had lived with the children, now that he had seen how it took all his attention to make even a beginning of understanding them, how it took all of his intelligence and love to try to give them what they needed, spiritually and mentally . . . no! . . . you might be able to hire a little intelligence, enough intelligence to give them good material care. But you could never hire intelligence sharpened by love. In other words you could not hire a parent. And children without parents were orphans. (305-6)

Including the possibility of daycare might have been a ploy on Fisher's part to get people to talk about daycare, to get used to such an idea: the non-fiction essays that I analyze later in this chapter bear me out

on this point. But in her novel, Fisher wanted to show that raising children is worthy, creative work, fulfilling for the right person; to have Lester reenter the marketplace would require developing a domestic discontent which is not her point. Fisher's argument about the "art of living" in this novel is that men can be successful parents.

Besides, she has already given voice to the perfect resolution: Mattie Farnham asks Lester why he doesn't consider going back to school to pursue the teaching career for which he is really suited. But Lester, who has little self-esteem left, especially in terms of his performance in any kind of institution, answers, "I'd make a mess of what they want in a school just as much as at the store. What makes you think colleges want teachers who love literature? They want somebody who can make young people sit still and listen whether they feel like it or not . . . I'd be just a dead loss at it the way I always am" (267). Lester can't envision being successful at home and at work and Fisher suggests that his uncharacteristic lack of imagination is a result of being forced into a one-dimensional role.

As in the ending of The Squirrel-Cage (1912), Fisher's conclusion leaves the door open for better solutions to come. Until then, the solution that has characterized her canon throughout her career will have to suffice: valuable work that satisfies the basic need for creativity for both men and women, whether it is found in the home or in the public sphere.

#### IV. Fisher, Feminism and Davcare

Fisher's letters show that with this novel perhaps more than her others she wanted to effect social change. She told William Lyon Phelps that she wanted this shorter novel "to be like a knife-thrust at the heart of the reader" and she wrote to Alfred Harcourt that "if only people will find it interesting enough to disagree about violently, they may do some real thinking" (Madigan 110-4).<sup>3</sup>

The form of her novel reflects her desire that it be a "knife-thrust." The Home-maker is half the size of her earlier novels, a spare, modern work confined to one family, a few neighbors, a few buildings

and a relatively short period of time<sup>4</sup> Fisher's style is sparer as well. Gone are the extended metaphors and the copious details that pack her previous novels. Instead, Fisher chooses one or two details to illuminate an aspect of one of her characters's psyches.<sup>5</sup> As Willa Cather notes about Tolstoi in her well-known essay "The Novel Demeuble" (1936), Fisher's details are carefully chosen to illustrate her characters' emotional make-up.<sup>6</sup> In The Home-maker, Fisher strips her novel of the "furnishings" that she provides in her earlier fiction (in The Bent Twig, for example), a method that Cather recommends in her essay. Her shifting point of view, which she initiated in The Brimming Cup (1921), works well with this motive since her psychological portraits are completely foregrounded.

Fisher's characters are also molded from different material. She does not emphasize the 19th Century, Emersonian ideals of independence and self-reliance in the face of public opinion as she has in earlier stories.<sup>7</sup> Eva and Lester desire to be good parents and citizens but they are ill-equipped and unwilling to go against the grain of the social fabric of their small-town life. As in the ending of The Squirrel-Cage (1912), outside forces ultimately decide the Knapp family's fate, although in this novel, there is no Daniel Rankin to point out a superior solution. The elimination of this role gives the novel a more realistic tone and places the work in the tradition of naturalism.<sup>8</sup>

Fisher felt that The Home-maker was misunderstood by critics and the public because many of the reviews called it a feminist novel. She told Alfred Harcourt that "it should be taken as a whoop not for 'women's rights' but for 'children's rights.'"<sup>9</sup> It is true that the thoughts and needs of the Knapp children are a central part of The Home-maker (1924). But Fisher's comments about her intentions here, like her comment to Helen Taylor about her parents' feminism and her own negative reaction to their "extreme zeal for 'women's rights,'" are misleading for the novel has a very strong feminist message. Given women's domestic position in society during Fisher's career, it really was impossible to separate the rights of women and the rights of children, as Fisher recognizes with her Montessori book, Mothers and Children (1914).

In fact, Fisher was continuously interested in portraying and solving "the social pressures, invisible and tyrannical, which the United States puts upon its women and girls," as she describes it in a 1946 letter to Margaret Mead (Madigan 252-3). Fisher wrote to Mead to congratulate her on an article she had recently published in Fortune Magazine entitled, "What Women Want," and to send her her recent book, Our Young Folks (1943). The book contains a section that Fisher wanted Mead to read entitled "Something About Girls" since, as she told her, "it represents my struggle to get something said in the sake of the universal ignoring (so it has seemed to me for many years) the real problems of American women" (Madigan 252). She tells Mead, "I've been struggling with this problem since before you were born I think, and have felt as though I were talking down a well, as the old saying goes. I never seem to get anybody to listen at all -- or at least to take any action on what I've said" (Madigan 253).

Fisher began to write about women's issues in a non-fiction format with her essay "Maternity No Longer A Profession for Life" (1914). She told Henry Kitchell Webster that "no magazine would touch" her essay "with a ten foot pole, because they thought it too outspoken and grim, although goodness knows I thought I had kept it as mealy-mouthed and unfrighting as words could be!" (Madigan 53); the essay was eventually published in Mothers and Children (1914). When analyzed together, "Maternity No Longer A Profession for Life" (1914), The Home-maker (1924) and "Something About Girls" (1943) show a rather depressing historical moratorium on daycare, a central issue of feminism then and now. As Fisher complained in her letter to Mead, apparently no one would listen enough to do anything about the problem.

In "Maternity No Longer A Profession for Life," Fisher suggests that daycare will eventually be a necessity in American life, and she tries to convince her readers that pre-school age children can be taken care of by professional teachers and daycare workers, allowing them to seek careers outside the home.<sup>10</sup> Her conservative, "mealy-mouthed" approach as she calls it would not allow her to strongly advocate for it; instead, she brings it up as a future possibility.<sup>11</sup>

Little social progress is shown twenty-nine years later in "Something About Girls" as Fisher notes that daycare is still an "unresolved question," although she herself shows some progress in finally calling it a "solution."<sup>12</sup> She asks, "An unresolved question remains: what is to be done by young mothers during the infancy and young childhood of their sons and daughters? . . . Will the solution be in having nursery schools and kindergartens for several hours a day, a part of the public school systems, anywhere?" (211). Ultimately, she shies away from any sweeping conclusions, asserting that individual families will have to work out their own best solutions, but that she suspects it will be a combination of all of these possibilities: women working, more active participation by fathers in raising their children and daycare.

Her novel The Home-maker (1924) is, in fact, her portrayal of an individual situation and the Knapps choose two of these possibilities: Eva works and Lester takes care of the children. Although daycare is suggested in the novel, Fisher works around it by proving that Lester's true creative work lies in raising his children; she leaves it up to her audience to realize that Lester should have valuable work in the outside world, too. She might have hoped that her readers would understand, by implication, that women in the home need that same freedom.

Given her belief in small, incremental changes, Fisher probably felt that this alteration in the pattern of family life was enough for the American public to handle. Analysis of "Maternity No Longer a Profession for Life," The Home-maker and "Something About Girls" shows that Fisher believed that fiction was the more powerful vehicle for social change: there is nothing "mealy-mouthed" about her depiction of a family suffering under a restrictive social environment. With The Home-maker, we see how in a modern, unfurnished format, Fisher still proves that the novel can achieve a didactic purpose and at least begin to solve a problem of living.

In her eighth novel, The Deepening Stream (1930), the subject of my last chapter, Fisher returns to the quest for domestic artistry that she patterns in her previous novels. However, her domestic artists no longer stay at home. In The Home-maker, Fisher relieves the "social pressure" on her female



protagonist by moving her out of the home into a business career, both preserving and criticizing separate spheres. In The Deepening Stream, she connects public and private spheres by depicting domesticity on a global scale. Fisher demonstrates that when home plots are ruptured by the violence and chaos of a world war, human beings survive by reviving domestic processes.

## NOTES

1. From a letter to Edith Wyatt, September 21, 1924 in Madigan, Keeping Fires Night and Day: Selected Letters of Dorothy Canfield Fisher (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1993).
2. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Our Young Folks (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943, p. 271).
3. Fisher was shocked to learn that The Home-maker actually mimicked real life situations. She told Alfred Harcourt that one such story

just raised the hair on my head . . . a woman in Massachusetts wrote me wildly that she would give her life if I had only written the book earlier, for her husband committed suicide last winter . . . an artist with no business ability, trying to make a living for her and her six children . . . she said, 'I understand now after reading The Home-maker so many things I never dreamed of before etc. etc.' Rather horrifying, I found it. (Madigan 114)

Although Ida Washington suggests that Fisher might have been portraying parts of her own domestic life because she did not show her husband any of her early drafts of the novel (a common practice in the Fisher home), Fisher's horror seems to prove that she was creating an experiment with this novel and not writing from any personal experience. In fact, a diary that Fisher kept during this time shows that John Fisher actually helped her create the ending of the novel.

4. The novel is almost claustrophobic in its confinement to the minds of the characters and the insides of a limited number of buildings: the Knapp home, the Farnham home, the Willing home, Willing's Emporium which has as its motto the "home-like store," the rectory of the church and the church itself as a spiritual home. None of these buildings is distinctive in contrast to Fisher's earlier penchant for examining interiors in great detail. There is very little attention to the landscape, either, unlike the romanticized descriptions of Ashley, Vermont in The Brimming Cup. In fact, neither the town nor the state is even named in The Home-maker. Fisher's implication is that Lester and Eva's situation can occur in any home, anywhere in the United States.
5. For example, the Dover eggbeater that she utilizes in the second half of the novel becomes a symbol of Stephen Knapp's whirling curiosity and creativity as well as an example of Montessori self-reliance: Fisher devotes several pages to describing Stephen's struggle with and eventual mastery over this common kitchen utensil.  
Fisher also uses the eggbeater in her non-fiction Montessori books as an example of how a common kitchen item can help children develop problem-solving skills. As with her novel The Bent Twig, her fiction and non-fiction overlap in this novel.
6. Cather writes that although Tolstoi furnishes his novels with the material things he loves, they are "always so much a part of the emotions of the people that they are perfectly synthesized; they seem to exist, not so much in the author's mind, as in the emotional penumbra of the characters themselves" (reprinted in Scott, The Gender of Modernism, 55).
7. The only reference to Emerson is a rather offhand thought of Lester's as he watches Stephen conquer the egg-beater: "It felt as though he had been reading some Emerson. Only it was lots better than any Emerson!" (244).
8. Many American women writers have written similar naturalistic experiments. As early as 1861 Rebecca Harding Davis shows how environment can squash an artistic nature in "Life in the Iron Mills," and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) is another famous example. Fisher's contemporaries were

examining repressive social situations as well. For example, Edith Wharton's novels Ethan Frome (1911) and Summer (1918) analyze brilliantly how an artistically arid environment can work on the vulnerabilities of desperate people.

Fisher's novel has a scientific tone to it at times, another characteristic of naturalism. Early in the book, Eva's chronically-dyspeptic son Henry vomits up a cookie that he ate surreptitiously and which his sensitive stomach cannot handle. The efficient Eva inspects the vomit with no apparent revulsion to try to understand what made Henry ill. Fisher's novel has somewhat of the same rational inquisitiveness. Her inclusion of this relatively inelegant detail aligns her with a more modern, realistic tradition although it is still in keeping with her portrayal of the vital details of everyday domestic life.

9. Late in 1924 Fisher wondered if the book jacket could be changed since she felt that "the screed on the jacket . . . did a good deal of harm, with its feminist color, and may have contributed really to the misunderstanding of [the nove] . . . it does make me sore to have it so idiotically misunderstood, when the meaning is if anything too plainly inscribed all over it" (Madigan 117-18).

10. To summarize the essay, Fisher argues that a biological mother does not necessarily make a real mother and she cites all of the women she knows who, for one reason or another, are "amateurs" at the profession of motherhood, anticipating her character Eva Knapp. She shows, for example, that medical advances have made the presence of a trained nurse in the bedroom of sick child a much better choice than the presence of the child's mother. Women spending less time in the home, Fisher decides is not a threat to family life. In researching the history of the family unit, Fisher realizes that it is flexible: it bends, but it does not break, a point which she will demonstrate in The Home-maker. For those women who are truly gifted at raising children, Fisher argues that a new profession will be available:

Will not the children of the world ultimately be gathered together in small groups for most of the day, cared for by scientifically trained mothers-by-choice, who benefit not only their own little ones but the whole of the human race by their natural fitness for the undertaking? And they will have among the children under their care sons and daughters of their own flesh and blood. Why not? (285)

Fisher feels it is only natural for women to follow their traditional work into the public spaces where it is now being performed and her tone is a reassuring one: no one need fear that women will compete with men or lose their femininity or break the back of the family unit.

11. One of the most striking points about this essay is the fact that, according to Fisher, most women regret the loss of their domestic identities (Eva Knapp does not). So much of the literature that has been recovered from this time period is about women struggling to emancipate themselves from domestic, patriarchal chains. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's body of work is an example, and so are the *künstlerromane* that I name in my introduction, such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's The Story of Avis (1877) and others. Although Fisher's rhetoric makes women sound a bit behind-the-times, she does not characterize women as victims of patriarchy in this essay. According to her, it is up to women to accept the fact that other jobs await them and to change their lives accordingly.

12. In both non-fiction texts, Fisher is practical rather than theoretical, a rhetorical position she took in addressing the general audience for whom she chose to write. Fisher was an intellectual herself but as I show in my introduction, she liked to identify herself instead as an average mother who preferred "plain folks." Her ability to converse in both worlds made her able to translate the complicated theories of sociologists and

feminists into plain terms. She made a career out of this ability not only in her non-fiction but also in her career as a public speaker.

## CHAPTER V

### "LONGING TO BE AT HOME': DOMESTIC TRANSFIGURATION

#### IN THE DEEPENING STREAM"

After all, I suppose you get harmony and equilibrium in life as in everything else by keeping what you have in proportion, more than by having such a lot. And harmony and equilibrium are maybe what last you best, in the long run.<sup>1</sup>

Consider what the position and function in human life of the normally capable, normally conscientious woman generally is. In one capacity or another, most women feel an especial responsibility for human relations, for creating and maintaining decent, endurable, if possible enjoyable, co-operative and creative relationships between the people around her. It is in this field that she feels an intimate, inescapable personal responsibility . . . the thing which penetrates to the very quick, like a thorn driven under a fingernail, is her success or failure in creating a liveable degree of harmony around her.<sup>2</sup>

We women did not consciously help in the political movement which has drawn our country together into one commonwealth, because we did not consciously help in any political movement. Now that we have time and strength and education to understand what goes on in the big world, do not let us fail to do our share in the bigger rapprochement between all the races and all the nations of the globe.<sup>3</sup>

#### I. A Domestic Frieze

In Part Two of Fisher's eighth novel The Deepening Stream (1930), Adrian Fort, a would-be artist turned small-town banker, shows his wife Penelope "Matey" Gilbert Fort how the view from their house (built below street-level) to the street "made a long moving many-colored band or frieze, sharply defined below by the empty green plane of the lawn and above by the dense foliage of the elms" (163-4). Whenever they glance up from their domestic chores, "there was a new design, a new composition to look at" (163-4).

Toward the end of this section, Matey, a very tired new mother, looks up to see a scene "heartbreaking with beauty": "This was her world, her corner of life . . . but transfigured as if it and she had been carried up to another new, unthinkable dimension" (165). She tells Adrian, "Now I know what heaven will be . . . the same,

the same as life, and yet transfigured . . . all glory . . . like something you've heard on the piano played by the whole orchestra" (165).

Matey's connection between domestic and musical transfiguration here signifies her successful re-creation of family life. In the first half of the novel, Matey is emotionally crippled by her parents's tense relationship and music is often her only refuge; art is her home as it is Marise Crittenden's in The Brimming Cup (1921). But here her home becomes art as Matey's glance at her world is transfigured by love. The scene duplicates Fisher's description of her own art lesson in the Prado where she sees beyond line and composition to the human suffering portrayed on Velasquez's canvas.

Fisher continues her thesis about the art of everyday life in this novel, but her "problem of living" is worked out on a larger scale: in the landscape of a world war.<sup>4</sup> She actually presents two problems -- reconciling with an unhappy childhood, and dealing with war as a "mistake men make" rather than as "an indictment of the universe" (388) -- and shows how they are of a piece, connecting personal with global disharmony. As she told Fred Lewis Pattee in 1930, the "element which [she] meant to be fundamental" in her novel was:

the encounter in Matey's youth with evil in the shape of disharmony between her parents, which was a real preparation for her for the later encounter with cosmic disharmony. Conquering one, coming to understand it as a part of a bigger whole, really strengthened her for the later part of a bigger whole, really strengthened her for the later test . . . That was, to me, the base of the story. (Madigan 157)

While in her other novels the resolution of the protagonist's personal problems comprises the plot's climax, in this novel Fisher goes further by exploring how this resolution operates in the world outside her protagonist's domestic environment.

Matey solves the emotional problems she has inherited from living in her parents's home by the end of Part Two. In Part Three, she brings her strength of character and her newly-honed domestic skills to refugees in Paris whose domestic lives have been destroyed by war. Fisher proves that reviving daily processes is the first step in healing spirits that have been broken by desperate circumstances. "Woman's work," then, is not only valuable in creating a home but also crucial in re-building a nation.

Fisher hints at the broader dimensions of artful domesticity in her previous novels. Barbara Marshall's neighbors, Marise's chorus and Eva's customers benefit from the artful domesticity they each bring to their community, and Marise's ruminations while performing her domestic tasks extend to a global community. But in The Deepening Stream, these hints become a major theme as Fisher brings her ideas about the "art of living" into a global arena.

## II. Company Manners

In Part One of The Deepening Stream, Fisher details the Gilberts' transient, dysfunctional family life, showing how Jessica and Morris Gilbert's marriage is a constant battle for intellectual and cultural supremacy. Like the Knapp's dilemma in The Home-maker (1924), the Gilberts' problem is a secret that they keep "beneath the smooth surface of company manners," and Fisher explores the devastating emotional effects on Priscilla, Francis and Matey Gilbert.

The Gilberts are a faculty family who live the life that the Marshalls reject in The Bent Twig (1915). They live on Faculty Row, entertain the "right" people and wait for the call to a better university and a bigger salary. The Gilberts move several times to accommodate Morris Gilbert's career as a professor of French; we see them in France, where they spend summers and sabbatical years, in Logan Bluffs and Hamilton, small towns in the midwest, and in Corinth, a town in upstate New York. Although Logan Bluffs feels like "home" to Matey, it is "rolled up out of her life" "like a painted scroll" when they move (53). Consequently, she gets used to impermanence and insecurity, and learns "the capacity to shut parts of life off from other parts, to live in pieces" (15).

But far worse than the Gilbert's transience is the family baggage they take with them. Morris Gilbert is kin to Felix Morrison and Vincent Marsh, an educated, cultivated person who speaks perfect French, tweaks his moustache while denigrating the inferior taste of his family and friends, and shows off intellectually. His family learns to support his egotistical showmanship:

How they played up to Father's unvarying tactics about travel-talk! They leaned forward as though it were the first time they had ever heard him do it, listening intently, while . . . he skipped lightly about over European travel routes, dismissing with a neutral word everything with which any guest claimed familiarity, until by elimination he found some town or chateau or gallery that was his alone. (70)

Fisher shows how Morris's poisonous ego seeps into his relationships with his family, particularly his marriage.

Jessica Gilbert is a society lady/faculty wife like Mrs. Draper in The Bent Twig (1915) who takes up a new and fashionable project every time the Gilberts move: art classes in one city, drama in another, committee work in yet another. Fisher depicts her as rather a weak person who latches on to various "intimate" friends who support her work and whom she uses to gain respect from her husband. Morris only sneers at Jessica's attempts to "get her share of importance": "He gave the impression that Mother's work was all very well in its naive way, but was after all a little absurd" (80). Fisher's criticism of Jessica's personality is tempered by the venom of Morris's "amused tolerance." The reader sympathizes with Jessica's frustration, her emotions ranging from "baffled bewilderment" to "undignified fury" (80).

But both parents draw their children into their marital war and Fisher shows how each child develops a strategy to deal with Jessica and Morris's battles, continuing the portrayal of the emotional life of children that she began in The Home-maker (1924). Priscilla is most damaged by her homelife. As the eldest, she feels responsible for "smoothing things over" and Matey learns the language of "company manners" from Priscilla: "Her sister went right on using the same replies that Matey had always heard her use when people said those . . . things about their perfectly lovely home . . . She smiled brightly back at them with her company face, murmuring in her company voice one of the company formulas, 'Oh, you're very kind,' or 'How nice of you to say so'" (28).

As a result, Priscilla grows up to be a very nervous teenager, and like the Knapp children, she is affected physically by the tension in her home, becoming thin and pale. Priscilla fights back by filling her life with activities, taking up tennis, developing a busy social life and staying away from home as much as possible. Her relationships with her family members are superficial as a result. Matey loves Priscilla and longs to tell her what is in her heart, but Priscilla's habit of company manners carries over into their sisterhood. Priscilla's



"broken spirit fear[ing] emotion of any kind" (69). When Priscilla leaves home for good to teach high school in another city, her advice to Matey is to "keep busy" (69). Matey's older brother Francis deals with his parents' situation with humor, laughing at and shrugging off what he terms their "scraps." But Fisher shows that underneath his sense of humor is an apathy that goes very deep and a skewed moral sense similar to the moral lassitude of the Fiske men in The Bent Twig and Vincent Marsh in The Brimming Cup. For example, in assessing one of his parents's situations, Francis

found nothing but comedy in Mrs. Whitlock's swallowing Father's hook . . . in their intimate exclusive atmosphere of apostle and disciple of culture which turned the tables on Mother with a delicate absurd poisoned irony. Francis had always thought Mrs. Whitlock a fool (he thought most people fools) and no worse a one now that she so naively surrendered to his father's transparent tactics. (70)

Nothing seems very valuable to Francis, and he becomes rather shallow. Throughout the rest of the novel, we see him playing politics and social games like his father, marrying for money and using people, including Matey, to get ahead.

For a long time, Matey is protected from her parents's warfare by her own childishness and her siblings. But as Priscilla and Francis leave home and Matey develops into a sensitive and perceptive young woman, she, too, learns to read her parents's conflict into their daily interactions:

If it was Father who asked about [her] geography lesson and if he asked it in a certain harsh voice, Matey knew he had not come out on top. If it was Mother who spoke about brushing teeth with a certain resentful heat in her tone, Matey guessed that she had once more been made to seem of less importance than Father. (19)

Matey tries to escape her family, finding refuge in the piano and her fox-terrier Sumner whose honest eyes and loving presence "[bring] comfort to her daily life" (81). But she is very affected by the emotional turmoil in her home, and learns to define all interactions and pursuits in superficial terms: "In her heart she thought that probably all lives were encased like hers in company manners very different from the feelings underneath, and suspected that poetry and religion and romance and all the rest of it were also only different kinds of company manners" (84).

Two episodes will sustain Matey as she begins her adult life and cause her to question the company manners she has learned at home: the year spent with her French friends the Vinets, and the night her father dies. One sabbatical year in Paris, Matey takes piano lessons from the wife of one of her father's old students, Madame Vinet. The Vinets have four children whom they educate at home, and arrangements are made for Matey to take her lessons with the Vinet children, Henri, Mimi, Ziza and the baby Paul: "Matey thus became for this year and a half almost a Vinet instead of a Gilbert" (40). Fisher shows that Matey's exposure to a different pattern of family life gives Matey the intellectual and emotional strength to work and create.

In this family setting, Matey learns the pleasures of disciplined work and art, inextricably bound in the Vinet household: "It was hardly one of Matey's most comfortable years, perpetually tuned up as she was to an incredible standard of serious behavior, good manners, and hard work . . . . But it was a memorable one, bringing into her life permanent new elements -- new interests, new ideals" (46). Art in this novel becomes a spiritual home for Fisher's protagonist as Matey learns to pour all of her emotion and sensitivity into music and the piano: "Some of the pages she played in those years came to seem to her like living things, like persons -- only much more sure and unchanging than persons" (59). And clearly, the Vinets serve as a surrogate family, for "alone among her cast-off homes, the Vinet menage remained more than a shadowy memory" (76).

Her father's untimely death from blood poisoning, too, gives Matey a hint that there are depths to the surfaces of company manners. At her father's deathbed, Matey glimpses a dimension of her parents' relationship that she never imagined was there. As her father slowly loses his strength, his dependence on his wife and his pitiful cries to her deeply affect Matey who is filled with "the immensity of this new knowledge of more between Father and Mother than she had ever guessed" (90). As Matey gathers together the pieces of her life, the subject of my next section, the knowledge she gains from these two episodes will be important connecting points.

### III. Family Connections

Part II of the novel takes place in Rustdorf, a small town in upstate New York that is the Gilberts' ancestral home. Matey's parents are both dead, her siblings scattered, and she has been living in boarding houses while teaching French at a midwestern university.<sup>5</sup> Although her Aunt Tryntje remarks to Matey that she and her siblings "sound like an independent, successful set of modern young people, well prepared to take care of yourselves in the world . . . as though you were getting whatever you wanted out of life" (105), beneath her exterior of modern independence, Matey is lost, homeless and apathetic. One of her unheard responses to Aunt Tryntje is, "I should say that the matter with me is that there is nothing I want very much to do" (106).

But Matey's trip to Rustdorf changes her life dramatically for here she finds the family she needs and pieces together her fragmented self; Fisher continues her portrayal of the goodness of rooted, rural life in this novel, a theme she began in The Bent Twig and developed fully in The Brimming Cup. Matey comes to Rustdorf to claim an inheritance from her Aunt Connie, who has been dead for several years. Aunt Connie's money becomes significant for three reasons: it reminds Matey of her earliest memory, a memory of transfiguration the essence of which she will repeat in Rustdorf as an adult; it causes Matey to reclaim Connie's life story, which Matey often heard her father use callously to demonstrate his devastating wit; and, it enables Matey to perform the most important work of her life, as she brings her newfound domestic artistry to the refugees in wartorn France.

Prior to this visit, Matey's knowledge of Rustdorf came from Morris Gilbert's contemptuous lips. Like Vincent Marsh in The Brimming Cup, Morris's modern, sophisticated sensibilities are offended by rural America, and he says about Rustdorf, "Rip Van Winkle might have been its first mayor. If he came back today, he'd be reelected -- unanimously. To speak grandiloquently, it is the ancestral seat of my family and my wife's. To speak realistically -- the most torpid pool of stagnant humanity to be found on this continent" (25-6).

Morris's re-telling of Connie's history is equally as biting as he shapes her life into a self-serving performance. As Morris tells it, Connie was a bitter, frustrated woman who "hat[ed] the human race in general

and her relatives in particular" (26). Connie wanted to be a doctor but her family "'fell into fits, and told her to get herself a husband and some babies'" (26). She retaliates by staying single and outliving them all, but by the time she inherits money enough to do what she wants, she is too old to pursue her dream. Morris's story is tinged with his and Jessica's disappointment at not being remembered in Connie's will.

But Matey remembers her one visit to Rustdorf quite differently. She was four years old and was sent to Aunt Connie because there was sickness in the Gilbert home. Connie was kind to her and they shared a revelation: green stems that filled the flower beds one day turned into brilliantly-colored tulips the next. Aunt Connie named the experience "incredible" and Matey's four-year-old brain realized that "it meant that something you hadn't thought possible was really so" (4). A 24-year-old Matey feels this way again as she discovers her roots in Rustdorf and a domestic happiness she had not believed achievable.

Adrian Fort, Sr. owns the bank that holds Matey's inheritance, and is a distant relative of the Gilberts: as Matey learns, just about everybody in town is related to each other. Fort, his son Adrian, Jr. and his aunt Katrintje or Tryntje are Quakers (a faith Matey will learn to appreciate) and lifelong residents of Rustdorf. As they show Matey around town and detail her history for her, her transformation begins. As she tells Adrian, Jr., "I've never known any place very well. Nor people either. The only other people who seem to reach back into my past and sort of connect together the different parts of my life are a family of friends in Paris" (110). Throughout this section, Matey uncovers one connection after another, all links in a chain that comprise her heritage.<sup>6</sup>

Fisher's details about the Fort home, a true moral stronghold, provide a striking contrast to the falseness of Matey's family life. Like Barbara Marshall, Adrian Fort, Sr. has raised his son on strong moral principles and healthy living. Early in this section, we see a poignant scene between father and son as Adrian, Jr. tells his father about a momentous decision. Adrian has recently returned from Paris where he was fulfilling a lifelong dream to be a painter. There he discovers that his talent is not as vast as his desire, and he returns to Rustdorf to join the family savings bank.

Adrian, Sr.'s conversation with his son reveals three themes that characterize all of the novels I have analyzed in this study: a parent's interest in their child's moral and spiritual development, which Fisher focuses on in The Bent Twig and The Home-maker; a remodeled masculinity, developed in The Squirrel-Cage and The Home-maker, and the importance of valuable work that contributes something to the community, an element of all of Fisher's novels.

Adrian, Sr. hears the bitter resignation in his son's voice as he tells him, "better be a good savings-bank cashier than a mediocre artist," and the reader sees the inner reaction of a dedicated father: "Within his father's heart rose a cry of desperate sympathy, of passionate unresignation, or reckless uncounting devotion -- he ached with longing to spend his all, his life that was no longer of any use to him, so that his boy should have what he wanted" (117). Adrian, Sr. is like Lester Knapp here, willing to sacrifice anything for his son's happiness.

Adrian, Sr. tells his son that "there are worse things than living in Rustdorf" and implicit in his evocation of modern masculinity is Fisher's criticism of gender stereotypes. He says, "It's the fashion nowadays to maintain that a man can't be sure whether he's alive unless there are guns going off around him, and some weaker person to knock down once in a while, and a new woman every week or so . . . . But as a matter of unobserved fact, there are several varieties of men, and we Friends usually belong to one of the variants" (118). Fisher continues her portrayal of men whose challenges lie in creating an artful domestic life and shows that this definition of masculinity is a heritage.

Like Austin Page and Neale Crittenden, Adrian, Sr. believes in a work life that is infused with moral responsibility, another ideal he hopes to pass on to his son. About his bank, he says,

It's always been rather a satisfaction to me, and perhaps it will be in the long run to you, that nobody makes any profit out of our kind of a bank, only salaries. To be in a business that doesn't make profits for anybody, only just decent wages for work done, I've found it tranquilizing. It keeps out of your life -- your own personal life, that is -- the uneasiness about the real source of profits. You can be dead sure that you have not, without meaning to, put your hand into somebody else's pocket. (119-20)

Fisher's belief in capitalism with a conscience, then, which she portrays in Daniel Rankin's carpentry business in The Squirrel-Cage and Neale Crittenden's mill in The Brimming Cup is voiced in this novel as well.

After Matey marries Adrian, Jr., Adrian Sr.'s fathering skills become important to her, too. While her relationship with her own father never developed beyond "company manners," a very deep intimacy, beyond words, grows between Matey and her father-in-law.<sup>7</sup> She thinks about Adrian, Sr., "he just hasn't any company voice" and appreciates his Quaker habit of "not saying anything unless he means it" (127-9). Their shared passion for music furthers their relationship: "she slipped . . . into the dual personality which she and her father-in-law were creating, became little by little . . . more of a Quaker herself. She leaned more consciously on his capacity for musical attention, far riper and firmer than hers" (169). Adrian, Sr.'s capacity to love and his ability as a listener contribute to Matey's creativity, as a human being and as a musician: "Together they worked out small delicacies of interpretation, the sum total of which transformed their music into something richer than Matey had ever dreamed it could be" (170). Matey's native talent is enriched by her harmonious family relationships, a discovery that Marise Crittenden makes, too.

Although Aunt Tryntje is not a mother figure, Matey benefits from the domestic knowledge that Tryntje bestows. Tryntje's knowledge of Rustdorf history changes the way Matey sees her house and the surrounding landscape. Tryntje tells her,

the locusts around the house came from Long Island. All the English families planted locusts as house trees. They were thought more elegant than forest trees. The elms in front are of course part of the regular street planting that New Englanders did wherever they settled. The big beech here was planted right after the Revolution by one of the LeRoy cousins back from the war . . . . The willow was planted in 1835 by Madeleine Ter Bosch -- she was thy great-grandmother's cousin, Matey -- because weeping-willows were in fashion then. She'd been down to visit relatives in New York and they were all working weeping-willows in crewel. She brought back the slip from there. But she died before it ever amounted to anything. (185-6)

For Matey, the trees become "living personalities" and she feels a kinship with them as she, too, takes root in Rustdorf. The trees, her house, her relationship with Adrian, his family and her neighbors are permanent and will never "disappear or fade into the background with a move to another town" (150):

The certainty that she would be looking out on this very sky and these very trees to the end of her days deepened her present with overtones of her past and future, making her peaceably one with the old woman she would grow to be, as she was with the adolescent she had outgrown. She felt herself not only a part of Adrian, of the child she had, of the child who was coming, but a part of the piled-up old stones that had sheltered so many other families like hers, part of that old humanized piece of earth, full of root treasures, left there like the traits in her own personality by her predecessors in life. (186-7)

Matey's moments of connection multiply throughout this section. Like Marise Crittenden in the attic scene that defines her coming-of-age, Matey becomes a whole, mature woman by holding out her hand to the girl she once was.

Fisher shows Matey connecting the pieces of her life as she goes about her daily domestic tasks, a narrative strategy similar to Marise's anxious, internal debates in *The Brimming Cup* (1921). However, unlike Marise's ruminations, Matey's thoughts are about the physical and emotional satisfaction she has gained in marriage as it, too, becomes a connector: "for her, sex had not been the ignoble concession to animality that the older generation by word and gesture and ugly grimace had led her to expect. It had been the foundations of the bridge over which she and Adrian had crossed the unplumbed salt estranging sea of human isolation" (179). Matey's marital happiness causes "a great moment of conversion to life and faith in it" and everything inside her springs to life as a result. She feels a new, deep appreciation for the physical world that she barely acknowledged before, a new savor in poetry and music, and a new tenderness for her childhood self, the "wistful little Matey with her dog" (133). As I show in Chapter Three, Fisher was determined to prove that portraying happy marriages was a legitimate fictional topic. In this novel, she continues to prove that marriage can enrich women's lives, providing them with valuable work and a sense of self-worth; Matey is a fictional sister to Barbara Marshall and Marise Crittenden.

Because of her newfound domestic happiness, Matey is anxious to reestablish connections with her siblings, especially with Priscilla whom she longs to tell about her revelation at their father's deathbed. However, although Matey fantasizes about finally "[pouring] out her heart intimately and naturally to her much-loved sister," they can not seem to escape their past, which "loom[s] darkly between them" (122-5). When Priscilla visits Rustdorf after hearing of Matey's engagement, she tells Matey, "I'd always taken it for granted you and I would never marry" (126). Fearing for Matey's safety as she takes a "step forward in that trackless dark," a step Priscilla is desperately afraid of, she offers to have Matey come and live with her: "We could keep house together" (127).

Fisher's portrayal of Priscilla shows how crucial a healthy family life is. Although Priscilla's outward appearance speaks of her status as a successful career woman, her emotional needs are not being met and therefore she has to re-create a family life, even if it is a flawed pattern. While visiting the Forts the summer that Matey has her first child, Priscilla nicknamed "Petella," Priscilla announces that she will marry Peter Russell, an elderly widower with four daughters and the Fort's neighbor. Matey is stunned by Priscilla's decision, not understanding why Priscilla would want to give up her career to take care of another woman's children, or to be "house-mates" with Peter; as Priscilla tells Matey, their relationship is to be a marriage in name only. But Fisher suggests that only by creating a harmonious family life can a woman achieve any degree of emotional maturity.

Francis visits, too, when he hears of Matey's engagement and announces his own plans to marry a wealthy woman whose father is a "senior partner of the law firm where he was employed" (131). Francis's company manners are perfectly polished and he seems to make his "usual brilliantly favorable impression," although his superficiality is not lost on either Adrian (132). In public, Francis is "so appreciative" of Rustdorf in Aunt Tryntje's words, but in private, Francis tells Matey, "pull out of this hole! You'll suffocate, used as you are to the university crowd . . . . The whole place fairly reeks with stagnation" (132). His words echo Morris Gilbert's feelings about Rustdorf, and Matey realizes that he has learned to be as false as her father. Although Francis tries to persuade her to return to Pittsburgh with him where he can introduce her to all the "right" people, his visit causes Matey to push up her wedding date.

By the end of this section, Matey has achieved domestic happiness as she "relaxed still more, leaning with all her weight on the fabric, firm at last, of life around her, partaking effortlessly of the sun's dynamic force, of the rooted strength of the trees, of the children's young affection, of Adrian's love" (196). She finally feels the sense of peace that was missing from her parent's home. However, when war ruptures the domestic lives of the Vinets, the Forts decide that they cannot stay encased in their own domestic bliss. With the Fort's decision to participate in relief work in France, Fisher shows the larger, moral dimensions of domestic artistry.



#### IV. "At the Rear"

Newspaper reports of troops assembling on France's borders intrude on Matey's domestic world, turning her happiness into indignation, denial and then resolve. Matey is maddened by her neighbors's unconcern -- they think, "how thankful we Americans should be to have no connection with all that" (205) -- but Fisher's purpose in Part Three of her novel is to show that we are all connected.

Suffering with their own "horrible inaction," Matey and Adrian gain a new understanding of Aunt Connie's life as they pace back and forth outside their house, trying to decide about their role in this global conflict:

they walked out toward the world and turned back toward the children, over and over, up and down the old flagstones of the old path . . . feeling as never before the meaning of [Aunt Connie's] frustrated life. 'She must have walked up and down here, right up and down this very street, as raging to use herself to some purpose as we are now. But all alone!' (213-14)

Fisher simultaneously gives value to Aunt Connie's solitary life while reaffirming companionate marriage as the Forts recognize Aunt Connie's frustration and vow to do something together to heal it. Adrian thinks that he should go to France alone to become an ambulance-driver, but Matey convinces him, that there is woman's work to be done in a war-torn country, too. She tells Adrian:

'Madame Vinet hasn't any money to live on . . . . And we have Aunt Connie's. She writes in every letter of being swamped in trying to help destitute refugees -- with nothing but the clothes on their back -- half crazy some of them -- all women and children and old men. That's woman's work. Why should I wallow here in safety and comfort any more than you?' (213)

With the Fort's decision to go to France together, Fisher shows that marriage will not prevent either Matey or Adrian from finding valuable work but will make that work easier and more sustaining.

Fisher also proves that the Fort's moral obligations as citizens encompass and broaden their parental roles. Although Adrian objects initially to including the children in their plans, Matey responds, "'they're your children as much as mine.'" asserting that both parents are obliged to raise their children, a point which Fisher makes in all of her novels. And Adrian, Sr. voices the larger dimensions of a parental role during a global conflict: "'Perhaps when they grow up, to know that they did not stand in the way of a generous-hearted action

of their parents' but shared it will be no disadvantage . . . It will be a sorry day . . . when getting married and becoming a parent puts an end to being a member of humanity'" (221).<sup>8</sup>

Once in Paris the Forts are quickly immersed in the reality of war as Adrian goes to the front and Matey and the children create a life "at the rear." Matey barely recognizes Madame Vinet who is thin, decrepit and desperate. Henri Vinet is at the front, the young man Matey knew as the baby "Polo" is dead, Ziza and her children have been missing since their village was wiped out, and Mimi remains in her destroyed village, struggling to keep her husband's factory intact and determined to maintain her sons's inheritance. Fisher's narrative is comprised of a chronicle of Matey's everyday life in Paris and the "round-robin" letters she sends home to Rustdorf.<sup>9</sup>

Matey takes over the work Madame Vinet has been doing, keeping an open house for homeless soldiers on furlough and using Aunt Connie's money to buy food and supplies. Fisher details daily life in a country torn apart by war, the "long shopping expeditions to buy cigarettes, chocolate, and other things" for packages sent to the front, "the visits to the men in hospitals, the endless standing in line in bureaux of one kind or another, the trips to remote parts of Paris in answer to requests from soldiers at the front for help to their families" (238). She displays both the difficulty and the importance of maintaining a domestic space for people who have been victimized by violence, the simple processes of daily life reawakening and re-humanizing broken spirits

Fisher proves that Matey's children, Petella and Adrian, III, nicknamed "Brother," do their part for the soldiers that come there to rest just by being children: "Matey often thought the children were of more use to these embittered, enduring men than all the rest of them put together, with their packages of wool socks and cigarettes and chocolate" (243). Thus Fisher argues that rather than protecting children from reality, parents should allow them to share in it, thereby developing a sense of responsibility and usefulness. Her Montessori platform is expanded here to include good citizenship.

Matey has been strengthened by her early experiences with hate and her subsequent healing process so that she has the desire and endurance to help others want to live again. Her work with refugees demonstrates this: "Refugees were always nerve-sick, either half crazed by their sense of injury or, more often, deadened and

starved into an incredible apathy, so that you needed, Matey sometimes thought, not only to provide food for them, but almost to put it into their mouths" (241). Matey has to perform this work in her private life, too, for Adrian is damaged emotionally by the war. On his first furlough, Adrian tells her, "It might have been better for us if we had never been born . . . and hadn't brought two more human beings into the world" (257). Fisher shows that, unlike Adrian, Matey is able to keep a hopeful perspective throughout the duration of the war, feeling sorrow in her worst moments, but never despair:

That day . . . when she sat in the hospital beside a dying man, taking his messages for his children, and on leaving him had passed between two ghastly rows of wounded men, fixing their death-shadowed eyes on her – when she had come out into the street, she had leaned against the hospital wall unable to stand, weeping all the tears of her heart. But they had been tears of sorrow, not of despair. (257)

Matey's strength comes from knowing that love and hate co-exist, a lesson she learned at her father's deathbed.

Matey uses the solutions that healed her own loneliness and pain to help others. For example, when Ziza finally shows up at the Vinet apartment with two frightened and malnourished children, Matey is strengthened by their need:

She lay awake . . . on guard against the powers of evil which had eddied blackly in through the door she had opened to the fugitives. Lying in her bed, the frail unknown scrap of humanity beside her, Matey felt the despair and terror brought in by the victims filling the darkness as if with swooping silent bat-wings. She had no fear of them now, nothing but the steadfast certainty that she had grown to be stronger than they. (263-4)

Ziza's son is so afraid that he spends the night crouched in a corner under a bed, and Matey is bewildered about how to help him until she remembers Sumner, the fox-terrier who taught her about unconditional love. Fisher's account of the little boy's relationship with the puppy is very moving as the child is re-humanized by his feelings of responsibility and love for the little dog.

Fisher includes historical details of the war, giving dates and naming battles, weapons and politicians, but her focus is always on the personal history of this one group of people who struggle to survive in an apartment in Paris.<sup>10</sup> She transforms the historical chronicle of war into vivid, personal pictures:

The winter came on [1916], the dreadful winter, the coldest of the war, the coldest known in France for a generation, fantastically cold, so that blood froze instantly on wounds, so that as the

grim days dragged on, Matey sometimes felt as though even the sun had given up, defeated, and they were all left on a freezing planet to die slowly of the cold – those who were not cutting each other's throats. (271)

Matey's experience and assessment of the cold gives a historical detail a human dimension that sparks the sympathy of the reader. And, the reader appreciates Aunt Connie all the more because it is her money that keeps Matey's coterie warm throughout the devastating cold. Fisher's emphasis on Aunt Connie's legacy and the use Matey makes of it convinces the reader of the efficacy of "woman's work" in a global context.

When the war advances to its "American phase," Matey is able to predict it again because of a personal experience: her letters from Francis, previously full of reprimands about her foolishness in getting involved, are now full of "hot enthusiasm for the cause of the Allies and great indignation against the Germans" (272). He writes to her:

'We are at war with a race of beasts and barbarians who are proud of their beastliness . . . and that's the thing to keep steadily before our minds. They must be exterminated if the world is ever to know peace and civilization again. How do you expect to keep fighting spirit up if people at the rear undermine the morale! It's the least noncombatants can do, to support the Allies morally. Your own country is rousing itself, let me tell you.' (284)

In her evocation of the "American phase," Fisher details the enthusiasm of the converts to the Allied cause through Matey's sober eye. Again, personal experience supplies the truth. Matey knows that Ziza escaped the German occupation of her village with the help of a German sentry. Matey never doubts the humanity of the German people, and begins to wonder about American attitudes.

Fisher's descriptions of the American relief effort are fascinating for the critical perspective she provides. For example, her characterizations of American relief workers and soldiers show young people who are a bit too excited about "getting to the front." She portrays a young woman from Iowa who works in one of the large, American, charitable organizations and subtly shows that while Americans in general are good-hearted, their reasons for being in Paris are more about fashion than conviction.

The young woman is instrumental in organizing the funding for a children's refugee home, Matey's idea, and she comes to the train station to see the children off bearing toys and gifts. While she is moved by the children's plight and happy that she spent her money on them rather than the "permanent wave" she had initially

planned to buy with it, Fisher is critical of her reasons for being in France. The young woman says to Matey, "I've got to get a move on . . . or I'll miss a swell time. Another girl and I have got to know two dandy fellows – in the Marines, both of them lieutenants. We've got a date with them at Maxim's tonight . . . This is the life!" (299). As in her previous novels, Fisher criticizes conviction based on fashion; like her depiction of Eugenia Mills's Freudian psychotherapy, Fisher shows that this woman is in Paris because it's the "latest thing to do."

Fisher depicts the American war machine as big business on a grand scale: "Aladdin built his dream palace no more rapidly than . . . American war relief organizations leased huge buildings and filled them from top to bottom . . . with typewriters, steam radiators, roll-top desks, telephones and self-possessed ladies in khaki uniforms, ready to bind up the wounds of war on a large scale" (291). But while the American organizations are efficient, they are not always human. Matey's refugee home is instituted with startling speed, but when the home no longer fits into the reorganization of the department that established it, the children are sacrificed to bureaucracy. Again, the personal element is emphasized. Matey notices that Mrs. Whitlock, her parents' "intimate friend" from Hamilton, is on the board. By seeking her out and enlisting her help, Matey is able to keep the home open thereby rescuing the children from a cold Parisian winter. This episode causes Matey to be even more suspicious of American motives.

While American power and money in Paris signals that the war is drawing to a close, Fisher shows that it also means a distortion of the initial purpose of the war, and a betrayal of the common men and women who died for it. Again, this is information that Matey discerns from personal experience. When her brother Francis comes to Paris as a member of the Peace Commission, Matey recognizes company manners in a global, political context. At a dinner that Francis hosts for his high-powered friends (Mrs. Whitlock among them), Matey is his guest-of-honor, but not out of any sincere respect. Like Morris Gilbert, Francis uses Matey for his own ends.

For example, when he introduces his sister, Francis makes much of Matey's commitment to France, thereby making himself look good. He repeats to each guest, "My sister and her husband have been in France in relief work since the spring of 1915. She has given her entire fortune to help the cause of the Allies" (331). The Francis who thought it ludicrous for Matey to sacrifice her own health and happiness for an ideal now uses

Matey's experiences for his own gain: "With a gesture he presented Matey to them as a war exhibit, her thinness, her old remodeled dress, her plainly dressed hair, her lack of jewelry. Matey realized that far from wishing her to appear in an elegant toilette, it would have spoiled his effect. It was, she thought, the first time that Francis had ever been proud of her" (334-5).

Francis's dinner proves to Matey that it is time for the Forts to go home for she cannot bear to be in Paris when the women of France realize that their husbands, sons, fathers, brothers and lovers have been sacrificed for material gain:

Around her the women in black still trustingly waited for President Wilson to perform a miracle. She could not go on living with them, knowing what lay in the future. She had seen it being constructed around Francis's dinner table. If she could only get home and be far away from them, as slowly, slowly these women with their vain hope came to learn what she knew now – that they had been fooled, that nothing at all would come from their sorrow except a firmer grip by the Francises of every nation on what they wanted! (337)

Fisher proves here that the personal really is political and that there is a connection between domesticity and government. Her novel evokes sympathy for "the multitude of home-keeping women who never before had perceived the deadly closeness of the link which binds them and their personal affections to the impersonal problems of the rulers of governments" (350). But it also warns women everywhere that domestic security is an illusion subject ultimately to the political ends of the government in power. Fisher's novel is also, perhaps, an invitation to women to step outside their own backyards. Although she does not suggest that Matey will have a role in politics, she broadens Matey's work role in Part Four, as I will show. She also proves that traditional "women's work" has a place in the public sphere and that the survival of humanity depends on it.

#### V. Conclusion: The Home Front

Back in Rustdorf, Adrian, Jr. wages his own war with despair. Fisher shows that now it is his life that is in pieces. He tells Matey, "I'm going right ahead with what I've been doing – trying in my small, futile way to pick up a few pieces in this mess of a world" (361). Matey understands his despair and thinks.

'The war has made him feel about all the world as I did about Mother and Father before I knew -- knew that there was so much more' . . . This time she did not ask herself shyly and humbly whether it was perhaps childish and silly to reason thus from small to great, to interpret the world's catastrophe from her own small experience. (388)

Fisher re-states her thesis here, showing that Matey's interpretation of her world connects private and public spheres. And, as she thinks about how to help Adrian, Matey has another transfiguring moment: "She had . . . fallen awake, knew again the startled waking to complete vision out of the half-sleep of ordinary life, as she had known it once as a little girl at a concert, once as a young wife" (391). Matey realizes that her husband needs her organizational abilities as he prepares to take over his father's role at the bank and she decides to accept Adrian, Sr.'s offer to her of her husband's old job. As Adrian, Sr. argues, "There was nothing picturesque about the job at the bank, just plain useful work. But really useful . . . with a depth to it that didn't show in the flat surface statement that it amounted to no more than helping people hold on to their money" (381). It is the perfect job for Matey who is used to the depths of valuable, useful work, and Fisher emphasizes that Matey's new role will extend beyond her family to her community, like Barbara Marshall, Marise Crittenden and Eva Knapp.<sup>11</sup>

By the end of this novel, Fisher's protagonist has experienced the full range of Fisher's "problems of living," which I have analyzed throughout this study. Matey has suffered the consequences of a repressive upbringing, like Lydia Emery. Unlike Lydia, she emerges with great strength, and like Sylvia Marshall and Marise Crittenden, she learns how to blend art and domesticity into a satisfying whole. And like Eva Knapp, Matey finds a place for her work in the world outside her home. But while in The Home-maker domestic and public worlds remain distinctly separate, in The Deepening Stream, Fisher's message is one of connection.

Fisher bridges all her worlds in The Deepening Stream. She shows the mature Matey reaching back to the wounded child she once was, understanding and absorbing the pain that was caused by her parents's mistakes. She connects Matey's separate worlds of music and home, bringing art to her re-creation of family life. She demonstrates how the valuable work that women do in private, domestic situations has a use in the world outside the home. And finally, she creates a global community, showing that in extreme situations of violence and chaos, we must remember each other's human dignity. This is the lesson the twenty-year-old Dorothy

Canfield learned from a painting of a court dwarf. This is the message that she communicated to her readers the rest of her life.

Fisher's form in The Deepening Stream reflects her content. Her earlier novels are composed of the same themes, but in each she strikes a certain chord over and over: marriage in The Squirrel-Cage (1912), manners in The Bent Twig (1915), domestic ritual in The Brimming Cup (1921), work in The Home-maker (1924). In The Deepening Stream (1930), she discovers the secret of harmony, all four parts given equal time and none sounding over the others. The Deepening Stream is a confident fugue, and in creating it, Fisher becomes an accomplished composer.



## NOTES

1. Dorothy Canfield, The Deepening Stream (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930, p. 118-19).
2. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "Women and War," The Christian Herald (December 1942: 25-6).
3. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "The Biggest Thing To-Day," Woman's Home (October 1918: 23).
4. Ida Washington has called The Deepening Stream Fisher's "most autobiographical novel" and she draws many autobiographical connections in her chapter on the novel. Indeed, the similarities between's Matey's life and Fisher's go deep. In the first half of the novel, Matey's problems at home echo Flavia and James Canfield's relationship. The setting in the second half, Paris during World War I, is drawn from Dorothy and John's experiences there from 1916-1919.
5. Fisher's details here actually mimic a work situation that she was offered. After attaining her Ph.D. in Romance Languages in 1904 from Columbia University, Fisher was offered a position as Assistant Professor of French at Western Reserve University (now Case Western Reserve), the same university at which Matey teaches. Fisher declined the position because her parents wanted her to stay in New York with them.
6. Matey's discovery of her roots reflects Fisher's own love for her Vermont heritage.
7. This element of Fisher's plot is autobiographical as well, as Fisher's relationship with her father-in-law was very close. As Ida Washington notes, when Dr. Fisher died in 1926, Fisher wrote to Alfred Harcourt, "I'll miss Dr. Fisher more than I can say. He has been a father to me, as tenderly, as wisely as it is possible to conceive, ever since I lost my own father. Few people have had two such fathers! I ought to be content with a memory which will always stand in the way of any mean conception of human beings" (99). Both Dr. Fisher and John Fisher were Quakers, like Adrian Fort Sr. and Jr.
8. This was an issue in the Fisher's decision to go to France as well. As she wrote to her French friend Celine Sibut, she had a lot of trouble convincing her family and friends that bringing their children, Sally and Jimmy, to France was a good thing. She told Celine, "When I say that we believe in giving our children an ideal which is as important for them as a childhood completely free of danger, they think I am mad" (Washington 86).
9. This is another autobiographical detail as Fisher kept her family informed with "round-robin" letters to her family. These letters are contained in the Fisher Collection at the Bailey Howe Library, University of Vermont.
10. Fisher's novel is part of a tradition of fiction about war by women writers which has not, to my knowledge, been fully developed. For example, Melody Graulich argues that Alcott's Little Women (1868-9) and Phelps's The Story of Avis (1877) are Civil War novels. Willa Cather and Edith Wharton also wrote about World War I; for comparisons between Fisher and these two writers, see Mark Madigan, "Willa Cather and Dorothy Canfield Fisher: Rift, Reconciliation, and One of Ours," in Cather Studies, ed. Susan J. Rosowski, vol. 1 (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) and Alan Price, "Writing Home from the Front: Edith Wharton and Dorothy Canfield Fisher Present Wartime France to the United States," Edith Wharton Newsletter 5 (Fall 1988): 1-5. Fisher wrote about the war in two collections of sketches and short fiction: Home Fires in France (New York: Henry Holt, 1918) and The Day of Glory (New York: Henry Holt, 1919).
11. In this novel, daycare is assumed as Matey joins the working world beside her husband. The children will be in school much of the day, and "since [Adrian, Sr.] had been obliged to have a nurse-housekeeper since Aunt Tryntje's failing in strength. Rebecca was free to give all her time to the younger Forts" (381).

## CONCLUSION

Dorothy Canfield Fisher was a prolific and passionate writer whose career illuminates the intersection where women's regionalism, the *künstlerroman* and the modern world meet. Like Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, Fisher wanted to preserve the rural, domestic values that were increasingly under attack in modern America, and empower traditional women's roles in American society. And, like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Mary Austin and Willa Cather, she wanted to write about women as artists, creating a professional, public space for herself and her female protagonists. Her greatest contribution to American literature is her theory about the "art of living," the combination of art and domesticity that she puts forth in the novels I analyze throughout this study.<sup>1</sup>

Because Fisher shapes her fiction around this theory, she is a transitional figure in American women's literature. While she follows the patterns of her foremothers like Jewett, Phelps and Freeman, her combination of art and domesticity alters these patterns. Fisher creates a new genre, the story of artistic domesticity, or domestic artistry, and, I would argue, becomes a foremother herself to twentieth century women writers who write about the same blend. May Sarton, Eudora Welty and Alice Walker among them.

Fisher's domestic men are arguably the most important element of her art of living novels for they define the difference between her work and other women writers' *künstlerromane* and regionalist plots. Her domestic male artists are, in fact, the reason that Fisher could create stories of happy marriages, a fictional theme she very much wanted to construct, as I show in Chapter Three, and one that is noticeably absent from American literature of this period. An examination of other turn of the century *künstlerromane* and regionalist plots demonstrates this difference.

In artist plots by women at the turn of the century, a common assessment of the marriage problem involves the narrowness of the men who love the artist heroines. This is the supposition that Fisher starts with in her first novel about art and marriage, *The Squirrel-Cage* (1912). Fisher's

exploration of the separate spaces of Lydia and Paul Hollister's marriage is similar to the explorations undertaken by Phelps, Austin and Cather in their novels about art and marriage, The Story of Avis (1877), A Woman of Genius (1912) and The Song of the Lark (1915). At issue in all four novels is the division of work and home life. In The Squirrel-Cage, Lydia would like to blur the boundaries of separate spaces, while Avis Dobell, Olivia Lattimore and Thea Kronborg want separate rooms, artist's studios where they can work uninterrupted, but that are still part of a domestic floorplan.

All four artist plots collide with the Austenian courtship and marriage narrative because their heroines end up single, living in homes without marriages in them (other people's homes in Fisher's and Phelps' novels). For example, in Phelps' novel<sup>2</sup> the space that separates Avis Dobell and her husband, Philip Ostrander, is the artist's studio that Philip insists he wants Avis to have. Its construction is slow in coming, however, because Avis is preoccupied first with decorating their home, and then with the nursery. Philip forgets the ideals of mutual individuality with which they began their marriage, and expects Avis to take charge of their domestic life, work she has always despised. Like Lydia Emery, Avis builds alone.

Consequently, she has little energy for her once-promising painting career: "She was stunned to find how her aspiration had emaciated during her married life. Household care had fed upon it like a disease" (206). Her marriage founders as Philip becomes increasingly incapable of providing for his family, first because of his temperament and then because of ill health. By the end of the novel, Avis has lost her husband, her son and her talent as a painter, and has moved back to her father's house to raise her daughter alone. Although Avis senses that art and marriage should be able to coexist, she has not learned how to craft such a combination and she can only hope that "it would be easier for her daughter to be alive, and be a woman, than it had been for her," the daughter who she has named "Wait" (247).

Olivia Lattimore, the heroine of Austin's *künstlerroman* A Woman of Genius,<sup>3</sup> has the space that Lydia Emery thinks would better suit her marriage: a few rooms over the Men's Clothing Store where her husband, Tommy Bettersworth, is employed. Like Avis, Olivia wants to find a way to be Tommy's wife

and to express her talent, "a genius for tragic acting"; in fact, her marriage is a necessary shelter since acting is not considered to be a "respectable" profession for a woman.

But Olivia has to knock down many social barriers in order to be a success in each sphere, and she ultimately discovers that it is only possible to succeed in one sphere at a time. Olivia has to reject her mother's code of True Womanhood to be a good actress because she must desert the private sphere to perform on the very public stages of the midwest. She can not meet the marital codes of the midwest, either: "The point of departure of course was that I didn't accept the Higglestonian reading of married obligations to mean that my whole time was to be taken up with just living with Tommy" (97). And, like Lydia and Paul Hollister, Olivia and Tommy have different visions of their married life. Olivia soon realizes that they do not even share a similar taste in wallpaper.

Like Phelps and Fisher, Austin kills off the bad husband so that her heroine might rebuild her future. After Tommy dies, Austin's novel is dedicated to Olivia's career and rise to fame; the novel is similar to The Song of the Lark in this respect. We see Olivia in various temporary structures, depressing cold-water flats and cheap hotels, as she pursues her profession with no family life to sustain her.

But marriage -- how to be married and professionally fulfilled -- continues to be the main question that the novel poses as Olivia becomes more and more accomplished and famous. When she becomes reacquainted with her adolescent flame, Helmeth Garrett, the same spatial problems present themselves even though he is the "right" suitor. Olivia desperately wants to marry Helmeth, but he can not envision a family life with enough space for a house and a stage: "I'm not accustomed to thinking of the stage as being the sort of thing that belongs in a family," he tells her (268). And Olivia can not imagine herself "meeting him at the door every night . . . in the sort of garment that . . . went by the name of house gown" (283).

By the end of the novel, Olivia has her own home on the Hudson and is considering marriage to her longtime friend and colleague, Jerry McDermott. Although Olivia realizes that marriage to Jerry would not be "the vision and the dream" that marriage is supposed to be, Jerry says "it would be

company," and Olivia thinks that she and Jerry "might solve the problem of how to keep our art and still be happy" (293). Austin, like Fisher, concludes her novel with the possibility of a marriage in which husband and wife share significant work and a sustaining domestic life, but she is never able to envision it enough to fictionalize it.

Cather's The Song of the Lark<sup>4</sup> is not about marriage as much as it is about pursuing a professional career as an artist, but her message about Thea Kronborg's singleminded dedication to her art and her lack of a domestic life is telling. Although Thea is deeply impressed with the domestic inspirations of her home, her community and the Colorado landscape (and later, the Native American landscape), she realizes that in order to be true to her artistic nature, she must "leave them all behind some day" (64). Thea uses her early love of domestic processes and people as artistic inspiration, but she herself becomes art in the coldest, deadest sense possible. She tells her friend, Dr. Archie, that an artist's work "becomes your personal life. You are not much good until it does. It's like being woven into the picture. It takes you up, and uses you, and spins you out: and that is your life" (347). Thea's expression of the knowledge of all that life back in Moonstone, staged, costumed, choreographed and bought by audiences, is an institutionalized definition of art, in contrast to the living definition in Fisher's novels. Unlike Fisher's protagonists, Thea becomes framed, restricted by her own artistic nature.

Fisher's Lydia Emery is a developing artist, too; in her new roles as wife and mother she finds many opportunities for creative work, and the birth of her daughter Ariadne is the most spiritually fulfilling project she has ever undertaken. A great change takes place in Lydia as motherhood causes her to "[outgrow] the sense of the fragmentary futility of living which had always been inarticulate, unvoiced, but intensely felt" (248). But although her home life is her artistic life (unlike Avis' and Olivia's home lives), she still cannot put together a successful marriage because her husband's views of artful living, as sanctioned by their social group, are so divergent from her own. The common foe for all of these artist figures is a husband who will not participate in his wife's desire to remodel the existing marital structure.

Women regionalists, too, had trouble envisioning domestic situations with happy marriages in them. Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896)<sup>5</sup> is a domestic love story between a world-weary, female narrator and an almost mythical healer/mother figure, Almira Todd. However, all of the relationships between men and women in the novel have been prevented or destroyed by betrayal or death, and the marriages that once existed were not "what either one of us wanted most," as Mrs. Todd admits about her marriage (17).

For example, Mrs. Todd's cousin, Joanna Todd is "crossed in love," as Mrs. Fosdick says, and exiles herself on Shell-heap Island where she creates a hermitage, a fortress that protects her from other potential suitors. In fact, all of the other residents of Dunnet Landing live solitary lives on metaphorical islands. Elijah Tilley lives alone in what amounts to a shrine to his dead wife. Here, he repents his "dreadful thoughtless[ness]" as he learns about the lonely married life his "poor dear" endured, how "the time seemed long to her" as she waited for him to return from the sea. The narrator, who wishes for a companion early in the novel, discovers her own loneliness on Shell-heap Island: "In the life of each of us, I said to myself, there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness: we are each the uncompanioned hermit and recluse of an hour or a day" (75).

Although the novel ends with William Blackett's marriage to Esther Hight, they are both "touched with age and gray with the ashes of a great remembrance" (126). They have been courting for forty years, and are used to seeing each other once a year; their lives have been spent apart. As the narrator writes, "I am not sure that they acknowledged even to themselves that they had always been lovers; they could not consent to anything so definite or pronounced but they were happy in being together in the world" (127). The promise is that the rest of their lives will be spent in marital happiness, but a companionate marriage is beyond the scope of the novel, and it is a relationship that we are never shown.<sup>6</sup>

While Fisher's The Squirrel-Cage shows the same problem with companionate marriage, in her later novels she recasts her husbands as helpmates who assist the protagonist in discovering the "art of living." Her protagonists do not connect with their mothers, reflecting Fisher's own aesthetic problems

with Flavia Canfield, but rather with a man who appreciates and/or practices domestic artistry. For example, in The Squirrel-Cage, Lydia Emery is prodded into and primed for an unwanted marriage by her mother, sister and debutante friends, the "women's sphere" in the novel. By the end of the story, her mother has moved away, she is disowned by her society friends, and her future is clearly tied to Daniel Rankin, the only person in Endbury who knows how to construct a domestic life.

While Sylvia Marshall embraces her mother's rural aesthetic by the end of The Bent Twig (1915), Barbara Marshall is sacrificed in the process. Her death is one cause of Sylvia's reawakening; Austin Page's appreciation of Barbara Marshall's life is the other and Barbara Marshall's legacy will be carried on by both Sylvia and Austin. Indeed, it is only when Sylvia sees her mother's life through Austin Page's eyes that she realizes its value. Even in The Brimming Cup (1921), perhaps Fisher's most domestically idyllic novel, the mother figures, Cousin Hetty and Nelly Powers, die while Marise's relationship with her husband deepens. Although Marise will continue to carry out her "home plot," her life will be more like Neale's, with a strong public component. One of the last images of Marise in the novel is of her walking home alone through the snow, triumphant after a particularly energizing rehearsal with her community chorus.

And in The Home-maker (1924) and The Deepening Stream (1930), Fisher's protagonists emerge from their home and their woman-identified pursuits to find work in traditionally male worlds. Eva Knapp leaves the Ladies Guild behind to join the Willings' modern world of shared work, while Lester becomes the spokesman for and practitioner of "women's work." Matey Gilbert joins her husband at the Savings Bank -- Adrian needs a business partner as much as he needs a wife -- while Matey's sister Priscilla, a repressed and unevolved woman throughout the novel despite her career, stays at home. Matey's relationship with Adrian continues to grow and broaden, but her relationship with her sister is limited by Priscilla's emotional paralysis.

Fisher's home plots send a modern message about domesticity at the turn of the century, for while she proves that home and family life are elemental for both men and women, she also shows that

eventually people must encompass a broader sphere into their personal lives. Fisher lived what she advocated. After marrying John Fisher in 1907, the Fishers left New York and their blossoming writing careers to create a home on Red Mountain in Arlington, Vermont, the ancestral Canfield homestead. Dorothy's letters show that she was busy trying to meld art and life in her new situation.

For example, she tells Henry Kitchell Webster that her life since her marriage, "has been (so outsiders think), fairly well diversified, with baby-bearing and tending, writing, house-keeping, gardening, lecturing, etc. etc." She adds to another letter, "(I always clean house down to the ground after I've finished a novel)" (Madigan 100). And in a letter to her agent, Paul Reynolds, she admits that she has no desire to join a writer's guild because she doesn't "care a rap about 'associating personally with people of my craft' liking plain folks as a rule a good deal better" (Madigan 41). John Fisher supported Dorothy's desire to be both artist and ordinary woman; as more and more of first her stories and then her novels were accepted by publishers, Dorothy supported the family, and John was apparently content to be both her editor and collaborator.

But although Fisher forged an Artist/Woman conjunction, critics didn't buy it. William Lyon Phelps's 1933 assessment of Fisher's talent<sup>7</sup> expresses a common critical stance toward Fisher:

Her faults as a writer usually arise from a superfluous elaboration of mere language, from a concentration on ideas so intense that the manner of presentation suffers and from an invincible desire to leave the world better than she found it. In other words, *she is a woman first and an artist second* [emphasis mine]. But her very devotion to her daily duties as wife and mother, her sympathy for all sorts and conditions of men and women and children, make her realistic novels more truthful. And she does know how to write. (8)

According to Phelps, Fisher's insistence on being involved in "womanly" pursuits like raising a family, tending a home and garden, and working for her community (often global in scope), prevented her from achieving the status of "artist."

Another example is Grant Overton's opinion in The Women Who Make Our Novels<sup>8</sup>: "Her abilities as a novelist are so considerable that readers of her novels can only selfishly regret her roundedness as a woman, teacher, publicist, and official." He realizes that this "roundedness" is a matter



of "personal temperament," but laments that it "involves the sacrifice of the possibility of the highest place as an artist" (61-2). Overton assumes the position of general reader in this comment, a reader who apparently knows that Fisher's work suffers from her desire to achieve other things, more domestic and public-spirited in scope, which are, by definition, outside the realm of "art."

A final, more contemporary example (1992) of this consistent split of woman/artist in Fisher scholarship is Joan Shelley Rubin's description of Fisher's "characteristic stance" in rating books as a Book-of-the-Month Club judge,<sup>9</sup> a position Fisher held for 25 years. Rubin recognizes that "Fisher maintained, rather than challenged, woman's domestic sphere" and "was always preoccupied with what might be called women's issues, not only in her books but in the way she presented herself to her audience" (132). Her stance of "average woman first, writer second," Rubin feels, resulted in "a constriction of her audience's opportunity to acquire the aesthetic perspective and the genuine self-possession that Fisher herself exemplified" (133). In other words, Fisher's insistence on identifying herself as a wife, mother and grandmother first, and a writer second, undercut her authority as a critic.

Rubin believes that "Fisher's self-image was at odds with the critic's obligation to shape taste" (133) even though she finds that Fisher "adhered to a conception of literary and personal integrity that perpetuated ties among culture, aesthetic standards, morality and discipline" (130), and that Fisher was the most conscientious of the 5 judges, Rubin asserts, "approach[ing] the structure and language of fiction with rigorous attention to accuracy of imagery, unity of plot, and consistency of character portrayal, condemning books that seemed 'soft and arranged' while praising others exhibiting 'sincerity' and 'authenticity'" (130-3).

Embedded in these three similar assessments from different historical moments is a fascinating interplay between definitions of art, constructions of gender, and authority. In Fisher's life, there was no reason why she couldn't be one of the "ten most influential women in America" and a housekeeper, wife, mother and grandmother; critics have supplied and deepened the split. Fisher certainly did perpetuate her image as an "ordinary American woman," but all indications are that she did so because she enjoyed being

one; she was proud of the fact that she was a particularly creative cook, and had a flair for dress. She didn't see how her existence as a domestic artist separated her from her work as a writer.

Fisher was fully aware of how her "image" as ordinary wife and mother played out in academic circles and critical conversations, as is evident from the following summary of a written conversation she had with Joseph Firebaugh in the journal The Educational Forum in 1951.<sup>10</sup> The Forum published an article authored by Firebaugh about using Fisher's novel The Deepening Stream (1930) to teach morals to his students at an all-male preparatory school. Firebaugh describes the novel rather neutrally, as "a novel concerning domestic tranquility; a novel about a woman, by a woman; a novel filled in its later chapters, with the joy of maternity and wifehood," although he can't resist including a comment made by one of his colleagues about the novel as "Marcel Proust written up for the Ladies Home Journal" (284).

Fisher was asked to respond to Firebaugh's article, and her remarks are published at the end of it. She is bitter in her irony. The Marcel Proust remark reminds her of her own academic career:

Up from the fifty-year-ago past, entirely unchanged rose the genial colleague, the Ovid-among-the-Goths professor as I remembered him, still delighting in a wise-crack which in a few neat words proved two things: -- that he knew the latest fashion in European circles, and that, by definition, any writing must be contemptibly poor if acceptable to a large number of American readers. (295)

She thinks that Professor Firebaugh has "courage" in teaching a novel "written from the viewpoint of the kind of woman on whom the young men in his classrooms had, until recently, considerably depended for understanding and help in growing up" (296). She acknowledges that Firebaugh "protects himself from the Scoffers by comments to prove that he knows as well as they do that the book is not so hot from a literary point of view" but, in an even more ironical tone, acknowledges his as doing

pioneer work . . . by publicly admitting in his classrooms that it is not beneath the dignity of American men -- well, not so very much beneath their dignity -- to read books written from the position in society of the kind of women for whom happiness or misery depend upon their relations with their husbands and children. (296)

Fisher thinks that it is a sign of the times that "even erudite college professors . . . feel a certain responsibility for helping to raise the level of general American taste, even among women who take care

of babies and cook for their families" and adds, "(Do you notice? I do, that there is still an oddness in putting together on a printed page the two ideas of literary taste and women who cook and take care of babies. The look of them in the same paragraph still seems to invite a wise-crack-sneer from a genial colleague)" (296).

This conversation demonstrates to me that Fisher knew exactly why she was popular with general audiences, and why she was ignored by the literary critical establishment in this country during her long career. It was quite simply that domesticity was a facet of modernity that Modernist critics forgot or ignored or condemned; somewhere between the great exodus to the city and the evolution of the "new" woman, it became unfashionable to write in any positive way about Home. But the rest of the country remembered, and loved her depictions of "average" women and men trying to negotiate the increasing complexity of modern life.

It remained important to Fisher her whole life to reach those women and men in farm kitchens and middle-class suburban homes across the country who were her biggest fans. She accepted local, small-scale invitations to speak as graciously as she accepted more powerful, national opportunities; she seemed as pleased to give out the library award at the Public Library in Rutland, Vermont, as she was to serve on the Board of Howard University with Eleanor Roosevelt. I imagine that she would say it was because they were both for good causes, causes that she believed in; I think she would say that it was her responsibility as an average American woman who also worked as an artist.

## NOTES

1. I would like to qualify this statement by suggesting some of the other areas of Fisher's career that need to be excavated. For example, studies of her non-fiction, her educational activities and her short fiction are needed. Fisher published six other novels that I do not include in my analysis: Gunhild (1907), Understood Betsy (1917) (a juvenile novel), Rough-Hewn (1922), Her Son's Wife (1926), Bonfire (1933) and Seasoned Timber (1939). All of these works deserve an in-depth look, and certainly the novels that I do analyze here deserve other interpretations beyond my limited focus. Fisher's experience with French culture and literature is another area for further study, as is her tenure on the Book-of-the-Month Club panel of judges.
2. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, The Story of Avis, ed. Carol Farley Kessler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1985).
3. Mary Austin, A Woman of Genius, afterword by Nancy Porter, (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1985).
4. Willa Cather, The Song of the Lark (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).
5. Sarah Orne Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories, preface by Willa Cather (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1956).
6. Mary Wilkins Freeman is another regionalist writer who had trouble portraying happy marriages. Her short stories, like "The Revolt of Mother" and "Old Woman Magoun," are often about women's struggles to wrest domestic space and rights from men who have staked their claim to all of the rural territory, public and private, that defines Freeman's settings. Because Freeman's genre is the short story and my focus is on Fisher's novels, I do not wish to draw connections between them here, although I do feel that Fisher's short fiction owes much to Freeman's influence.
7. Phelps, William Lyon. "Dorothy Canfield Fisher," in The English Journal, Vol. XXII, No. 1, January 1933: 1-8.
8. Overton, Grant. The Women Who Make Our Novels. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1928, reprinted 1967.
9. Rubin, Joan Shelley. The Making of Middlebrow Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.
10. Firebaugh, Joseph J. "Dorothy Canfield and the Moral Bent," in The Educational Forum 15 (March 1951): 283-298.

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  - . Raw Material. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923.
  - . The Home-maker. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1924. Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1983.
  - . The Deepening Stream. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930.
  - . Bonfire. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1933.
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