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The Business of Living and the Labor of Love: Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Feminism, and Middle-Class Redemption

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The Business of Living and the Labor of Love: 
Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Feminism, and Middle-Class Redemption

by JENNIFER PARCHESKY

I harbor a quaint notion that books should supply people, not with ready-made nightmares, but with some encouragement and help in the business of living, and yours do just that.
—Margaret Bailey Miles

Letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, 20 Feb. 1931, Dorothy Canfield Fisher Collection, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT

SINCE THE EARLY 1980s, American cultural historians have come to a general consensus that the turn of the twentieth century marks a paradigm shift in American culture from a “culture of production”—associated with the Protestant work ethic and moral notions of “character” and self-discipline—to a “culture of consumption” that locates pleasure in the realm of recreation, identity in the public expression of “personality,” and existential meaning in the “therapeutic ethos” of self-realization (Fox and Lears x-xi; Lear 4; Susman 271-85). While debates continue about the causation and timing of this shift, scholars have generally agreed that the notions of hard work that so dominated both capitalist economics and Protestant morality in the first century or so of the republic had certainly, by the 1920s, disappeared as a functioning ideology for most Americans, retaining only a hollow symbolic significance. This is no recent discovery, however; for by the end of the 1920s many cultural commentators had advanced the premise that the foundations of American culture had fundamentally and irrevocably changed, that most Americans could no longer hope to find the primary satisfactions of life in the realm of work but were instead seeking them in new spheres of leisure and self-actualization.

In this essay I examine the analysis of and response to this sense of cultural crisis as articulated by Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who although now forgotten by most historians and literary critics was in the first half of the twentieth century one of the most influential arbiters and beloved guides of mainstream American culture. Between 1910 and the early 1950s, Canfield explored these issues in twenty-two novels and collections of stories, eigh-
teen nonfiction books, and countless lectures, reviews, and popular magazine articles. As a member of the Book-of-the-Month Club Board of Selection from 1925 to 1950, she played an even greater role in shaping both what the "average intelligent readers" of America perceived as major cultural issues and how they perceived them. Throughout this half-century of vigorous and highly public creative effort, Dorothy Canfield Fisher developed a remarkably coherent, practical, and inspiring vision of the nature and purpose of work in the modern era, a vision that was enthusiastically embraced by a predominantly but by no means exclusively female, middle-class audience. From her manuals on childrearing and adult education to her fictional representations of everyday family life, Canfield exerted a pervasive influence on how a variety of public discourses and reform movements would conceptualize the problem of work into the middle of the twentieth century. This essay seeks to interpret and assess that legacy. While most recent research on the shift from production to consumption has focused either on the working class or on the most privileged of top-level managers and professionals, my analysis of Canfield and her contemporaries suggests that the public discourse of crisis around these issues centered rather on the expanding "new middle class" of salaried white-collar workers, a privileged but by no means ruling class who had begun, rather later than factory workers, to perceive themselves as alienated from the products of their labor, devoid of control over their work conditions, and utterly insignificant in the big picture of massive corporations ruled by the few. In the terms coined by European sociologists of the 1910s and applied to the U.S. by Lewis Corey (1935) and C. Wright Mills (1951), this "new middle class" of dependent, salaried, white-collar workers had displaced the "old middle class" of small property owners (independent farmers, business owners, and professionals) whose material conditions had provided the bulwark of American liberal ideology. The expansion of this class was rapid and visible: although blue-collar or manual laborers remained a slight majority of the U.S. workforce until the 1950s, the new middle class grew from 6% to 25% of the workforce between 1870 and 1940 and the combined middle classes from 39% to 45% during that time (Mills 63). Given that the wives and older children of white-collar men were much less likely to be in the workforce than the families of manual workers, it is quite likely that middle-class workers and their dependents may have begun to outnumber working-class families somewhat earlier than these workforce statistics suggest.

1. The term is from fellow BOMC judge Henry Seidel Canby, quoted in Rubin 98. Canfield's role on the Board of Selection is discussed in Rubin 123-33 and Radway 176-301. A complete bibliography of Canfield's work is in Washington. Because she published her fiction under her maiden name and was best known to readers that way during the period I discuss, I refer to her as "Canfield" throughout this essay.

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It is even more certain that the growing percentage of white-collar families were persistently—if not accurately—described and represented as "typical Americans," the modal types of the new consumer culture. They were not only the class to which advertising agents, journalists, sociologists, political speechwriters, and other producers of cultural representations themselves belonged but also, by virtue of their disposable income, the target audiences of national advertisers and the mass media they supported (Marchand 32-38, 77-80, 189). As a result, white-collar families had a visibility in early and mid-twentieth-century popular culture that was out of all proportion to their actual numbers in the population, and the desires and anxieties peculiar to this class fraction were increasingly represented as the American dream, the national crises. Canfield, like many of her contemporaries, readily conflated the new middle class with the "typical Americans," and her assessments of and recommendations for modern life must therefore be recognized as class-specific and often flagrantly oblivious to the problems of those not privileged enough to feel the pangs of boredom and malaise experienced by middle-class paper pushers and housewives. With that caveat in mind, however, I want to suggest that for the class she took as her subjects and audience, Canfield offered an unusually prescient analysis of distinctly modern problems and some remarkably practical and, I would argue, psychologically appealing solutions for their sufferers.

Canfield's work persistently centers on the crisis created in modern American culture by the alienation of labor and the availability of increased leisure time. In an address at the University of Nebraska she contended that "75 to 80 percent" of workers now found themselves doing "work that is so endlessly repetitious, meaningless, monotonous, neither requiring nor using the higher qualities of intelligence, character, or creative resourcefulness." She argued:

If they can no longer expect to find where it used to be found, in their work, the opportunity for the exercise of such creative and living parts of their natures as resourcefulness, reasoning, imagination, capacity for growth, for skill—above all for skill—if they cannot find opportunities for the development of those qualities in their work, why they must be so trained and educated as to find those vitamins of life in the hours outside of work, as never before in the history of mankind. ("Dorothy Canfield Fisher Makes Charter Day Address")

Yet although her critique seems to apply to factory as well as office workers, it is clear that her concerns about the dangers of ill-spent leisure are targeted to a more privileged group of men and women, faced with the challenge of finding "productive" ways to use their leisure or doing "nothing but trivial, useless things like buying too many clothes, and too much furniture, like going to too many movies, reading too many Sunday newspapers, playing too much golf." Her solution might best be described as a work ethic for a new
middle class, a moral vision of purposeful activity for all the many workers who increasingly find themselves doing labor that has little visible connection to the production of specific material goods. This vision provides a philosophical foundation for interpreting the meaning and value of all labor, but particularly of the distinctive new kinds of labor that were becoming central to American culture in the early twentieth century: homemaking, white-collar employment, and the creative labor of both professionals and amateurs in writing, reading, and reflecting on the meanings of everyday life.

Canfield’s approach to this issue began in her early works on childrearing, influenced significantly by her early introduction to the work of Maria Montessori and those of John Dewey and other exponents of the emergent child study movement. Her 1916 childrearing manual *Self-Reliance* insisted upon the importance of children’s learning through “purposeful activity” and the difficulty of achieving this in a culture in which adults themselves, particularly mothers, seemed to have so little meaningful work to do. Her children’s novel *Understood Betsy* (1917) dramatized this principle, chronicling the remarkable alteration of an orphan girl moved from the hothouse environment of her maiden aunts’ home in the city, where she was sheltered and coddled and talked to about her feelings, to the gruff but wholesome environment of her cousins’ Vermont farm, where she is expected not only to dress herself and get her own breakfast but to help with the family chores. In this environment, Betsy blossoms into a healthy and confident young girl who is ultimately able to pity her coddling aunts and help other orphaned children. Canfield applied these principles in her own life, leaving behind the cosmopolitan world of her professor father and artist mother and her own Ph.D. in Romance Languages, returning with her husband to the rural Vermont home of her ancestors, where they combined gardening, raising two children, reforesting their mountainside, holding local political offices, and Canfield’s career in writing. Canfield’s essays and articles about Vermont and many of her novels and stories echo her assertion in *Self-Reliance* that rural living keeps one close to the essentials of life. “Living on a side road on the flank of a mountain in Vermont,” she noted, “we buy our milk from a neighbor.... If the cow is indisposed, we go without milk for a few days, and we aid our neighbor in the strenuous undertaking of giving the cow the inevitable linseed oil” (161). In her novel *The Bent Twig* (1915), a young woman escapes the meaningless whirl of social life by returning to such a rural community, where she meets and marries a wealthy young man who has decided to turn over his coal mines to the government and devote himself to reforestation of his family’s land. Similarly, *The Brimming Cup* (1921) depicts the struggle of a Vermont housewife tempted by a cosmopolitan suitor to leave her family and community; after weighing her options, she decides in favor of her
deeply rooted life in the community and family.

What made Canfield’s vision perhaps most remarkable was that, rather than applying theories about work and consumer culture developed in the realm of men’s activities to an analysis of women’s lives, as both Marxists and conservative champions of the “little man” had, she began from what Nancy Hartsock has called a “feminist standpoint”—a perspective that takes women’s traditional experiences and roles in the home and community as a starting point for an analysis of society as a whole. Canfield was one of the first authors to recognize the particular toll these conditions had taken on middle-class women and, even more presciently, their children. Middle-class women, she contends, “have been more rudely and suddenly thrust into bewilderingly new situations” than have men, because for them “the break with the old immediate concrete personal ways of being responsible came more suddenly than for men,” when “the work which was their contribution to society, and which they had always done inside the home, was drained out by the irresistible suction of the machine-using industrial organization of society” (“Women, Education, and Democracy” 132). The lack of traditional forms of productive work and responsibility “has taken away many of women’s older opportunities for maturing in character” (“Women, Education, and Democracy” 136). Although married middle- and upper-class women were the first to experience this expropriation and alienation of labor, she insists that men and women of all classes were facing the same problem. Recognizing the middle-class family as a site at which the relentless pressures of consumer culture and capitalist competition were wreaking deep and insidious forms of havoc, she seems to have determined that there, in the middle-class home, she would draw the front line of her struggle for resistance.

Canfield’s first major novel was compared to Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth and Thorstein Veblen’s The Theory of the Leisure Class, but The Squirrel-Cage (1912) marks the transition from an elite leisure class to a middle-class leisure society, indicting the endless struggle for material advancement and “keeping up appearances” that plagues her upper-middle-class Midwestern characters. The novel’s heroine, Lydia Emery, the daughter of an Ohio attorney and his social-climbing wife, is torn between Paul Hollister, a rising young businessman from the town’s most distinguished family, and Daniel Rankin, an educated young man who gives up a promising career as an insurance salesman for a rugged but independent life as a master carpenter. Lydia’s dilemma has less to do with the personal qualities of the two men than the choice between two models of marriage, and two entire ways of life, that they represent. The triangle serves as a mechanism for personalizing the opposition between the destructive cycle of consumer culture—in which men
work that women may consume conspicuously, while women wear themselves out trying to keep up the social appearances so necessary to their husbands' and fathers' business success—and the alternative represented by Rankin, a former insurance salesman who dropped out of the white-collar rat race to become an independent carpenter. "I didn't want to fight so hard to get unnecessary things for myself that I kept other people from having the necessaries, and didn't give myself time to enjoy things that are best worth enjoying," Rankin explains. Although he regrets that he cannot find a way to change the system itself, he reflects that "anyway, just to look at me is proof that you don't have to get ground up in the hopper like everybody else or shut the door of the industrial squirrel-cage on yourself in order not to starve" (Squirrel-Cage 51-52).

Pressed by her family and friends to marry the up-and-coming Paul Hollister, Lydia eventually acquiesces, but she continues her struggle, attempting to turn their marriage into the kind suggested to her by Rankin, as when she tries to have their new home designed without elaborate carvings so that it will require less dusting. The contradiction between Lydia's homely ideals and Paul's commitment to conventional success threatens to destroy their marriage. After the worst fight of their married life—caused by Lydia's failure to pull off a dinner party with sufficient panache—Paul rushes off to work where he is overseeing the installation of a dynamo. When a part of the machine breaks loose—possibly because of Paul's negligence in his anger—he is killed by the dynamo in a dramatic literalization of the power of industrial culture to destroy its subjects. In the novel's final crisis, Lydia, hysterical over her husband's death and certain she will die in giving birth to her second child, has Rankin adopt the children to protect them from her own fate. The novel does end on a note of hope, however, when the doctor suggests to Rankin that Lydia may yet recover, implying that Rankin will care not only for the children but for their mother as well. The villain of the piece, however, is not a person but rather what a character calls "this minotaur of false standards and wretched ideas of success!" (109). The Squirrel-Cage

2. The central role of the dynamo as the force confronted by the heroine is, of course, strongly evocative of Henry Adams' famous reflections on "The Dynamo and the Virgin," The Education of Henry Adams (1907, 1918). It is not clear whether Canfield was familiar with this work when it was privately printed in 1907; it was not elevated to fame by the Pulitzer Prize until after its posthumous publication in 1918. Whether or not Canfield was familiar with this work, her representation of the dynamo in The Squirrel-Cage differs in several respects from that of Adams. The dynamo in the novel evokes something of the same awe and fear of its mysterious power, but little of Adams' admiration. Moreover, Canfield's ideal of companionate marriage carefully eschews the idealizing of the mysterious power of Woman that undergirds Adams' concept of the Virgin as historical force. Lydia's contentment and focus in pregnancy and the early months of her child's life could be compared to Adams' description of Woman—"she was reproduction—the greatest and most mysterious of all energies; all she needed was to be fecund" (Adams 845). But Canfield carefully undercuts this idealization of maternity with the recognition that actual mothers like Lydia are not mysterious forces of fecundity but ordinary women struggling to do what is best for themselves and their children.
implies that extraordinary events and heroic measures are needed to confront the crushing cycle of middle-class life and consumption: it is only when men begin to die from overwork that people begin to recognize the costs of that life, and the break with that life requires a total break with “society.” Rankin’s “queer” decision to become a carpenter makes him a social outcast, and Lydia at the end of the novel is barricaded in her godfather’s house to protect herself and her children from the relatives who want to take care of them.

In contrast, Canfield’s *Understood Betsy, The Bent Twig*, and *The Deepening Stream* suggest that it is possible to abandon the “squirrel-cage” and still be part of a community, but only if one leaves the upwardly mobile Midwestern city behind for the acerbically tolerant Vermont village, where one is presumably allowed to be as quirky as one likes; or, more specifically, where the particular quirk of agrarian anti-consumerism is considered normal. Although several of Canfield’s other novels (*The Brimming Cup, Bonfire*, and *Seasoned Timber*) would suggest that existential angst happens in the village also, the characters in those novels find fulfillment in a renewed commitment to their communities. It is in the handful of Canfield’s novels that remain trapped in the middle America represented by small (usually Midwestern) cities, that vast arena where local community traditions are less deeply rooted, that the perilous contradictions of consumer culture are exposed most dramatically.

Canfield acknowledged that harking back to the productive labor of the small family farm was impossible for most Americans, noting early on that “there is no essential virtue in the old-fashioned home activities,” and frankly acknowledging that it would be silly for modern folk to spin and weave their own linen when a better product is to be had from a machine (*Self-Reliance* 7). Instead, Canfield argued that what was needed was to discover—or, if necessary, invent—new kinds of purposeful activity appropriate to a modern era, activities that few people in previous generations had had the leisure or opportunity to pursue. For Canfield, the only kinds of activity that could be considered truly purposeful were those necessary to sustain basic life functions and those that contributed to what she called the “work of the world,” the collective endeavor to sustain and improve society as a whole. Given that industrialization had greatly simplified the meeting of basic needs, Canfield tended to focus on the latter category.

“The work of the world,” for Canfield, included the activities of both industry and commerce that contributed to the material sustenance of humanity. Significantly, Canfield moved beyond the obsession with production characteristic of Marxist critiques of alienated labor, focusing instead on what feminists have called “maintenance work”—that vast array of activities needed not just to produce food, clothing, and shelter, but to preserve food
and prepare it for consumption, and those activities that many have associ­
ated with the “therapeutic” self-fulfillment of a consumer culture: the devel­
opment and fulfillment of individual personalities; the promotion of har­
mony in human relationships; and the enrichment and intensification of daily
life through music, the arts, education, and well-spent leisure. What distin­
guished Canfield’s approach from the promises of advertisers and self-help

gurus, however, was her conviction that such activities were valuable not for
self-actualization but for the maintenance and enrichment of interpersonal
relations.

Canfield’s ultimate reconciliation of the desire for purposeful work with
the realities of a highly organized consumer capitalism is epitomized in her
bestselling 1924 novel *The Home-Maker*. The story of an unsuccessful clerk
and a frustrated housewife who find happiness in a reversal of traditional
roles has often been described as “feminist” in its advocacy of women’s work
outside the home. I want to suggest, however, that its real radicalism lies in
its reclaiming of women’s domestic labor as the paradigm for purposeful
activity in the modern world. In the novel, Lester Knapp loathes his job as a
department store bookkeeper, suppressing a violent misery under the nervous
façade of the mild-mannered clerk: “At the thought of enduring this demor­
alizing torment that morning, and that afternoon, and the day after that and the
day after that, he felt like flinging himself on the ground rolling and shriek­
ing. Instead he pulled out his watch with the employee’s nervous gesture and
quickened his pace” (74). Meanwhile, his wife Eva drives herself to distrac­
tion trying to keep her home and children up to magazine standards of per­
fection on her husband’s tiny income. She takes her resentment out in tyran­
nizing her husband and children, and the whole family suffers from a host of
stress-related illnesses.

The novel’s unusual twist occurs when Lester is fired from his job and
realizes that, as a breadwinner, he is worth more to his family dead than
alive. A chance fire on a neighbor’s roof gives him the opportunity to leap to
his death, but he fails in this, too, and is paralyzed from the waist down.
Eva—with evident delight—seizes the opportunity to pursue a sales job at
the same department store, where she quickly proves herself and begins to
rise into the managerial ranks. Lester, meanwhile, finds a new happiness in
devoting himself to the needs of his growing children, who blossom under
his care. The novel depicts in considerable detail the exciting processes of
growth and discovery that make up the everyday life of the “home-maker.”

Surprisingly, few reviewers at the time questioned the novel’s advocacy
of woman’s work outside the home. In fact, many questioned whether such
advocacy was even necessary in “the days since women vote and lay bricks
and preach sermons and run steamboats” (Strange). Although the passage of

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woman’s suffrage had hardly led to equal opportunity for women. Canfield and many of her readers (at least in 1924) viewed themselves as living in a kind of “post-feminist” era, in which the major battles had already been won and it was up to women to take advantage of their new freedoms. One reviewer blithely asserted that “[n]o one has—at least for a good many years—questioned the ability of women to compete with men in the business world” (“Laying Siege”). The surprising confidence of this assumption, however, is qualified with a recognition that elements of the gendered status quo have not changed: “Many a business or professional woman today quits her job reluctantly to wash dishes and mend socks. But that husband and wife should actually change places is a vastly different matter. Few men would have the courage; few women would permit the disgrace” (“Laying Siege”).

The Home-Maker’s radicalism, as this review suggests, lies less in its representation of a successful working woman than in its exploration of the problem of male subjectivity in this “post-feminist” era. Many fans and reviewers argued that women’s desire to go out to work was much less troubling than the complementary crisis of the man who found white-collar work unsatisfying, difficult, or even loathsome:

The book ... pours forth a noble justification of the man recognized as an utter failure in the business world. It is an exoneration for that man whose inner being cries out against his role as the mediocre family provider, and who by his natural birthright has had bestowed upon him the gift of the spiritual craving for higher and peaceful levels that [an] ordinary clerical position never gives one. (Roast)

Lester, the reviewer suggests, is far from being the only male clerical worker both miserable in his work and unable to support his family. But Lester’s open expression of dissatisfaction, and his quiet rebellion against that life, proved quite controversial.

The novel radically confronts not only the gendering but the devaluation of domestic labor. The family’s happy solution is threatened when Lester begins to recover the use of his legs; both he and Eva assume that continuing their present arrangement would result in social condemnation. Imagining his children’s humiliation at having to admit to their friends that their father stays home while their mother earns a living, without the legitimating excuse of his physical disability, Lester comes to a remarkable conclusion.

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.... He was sure that he was the only man who had ever conceived the possibility of such a lapse from self-respect as to do what all women are supposed to do. (312)

Ultimately, Lester and Eva are unable openly to confront their community’s oppressive traditions, but they do subvert them, albeit at considerable cost. With the collusion of their doctor, Lester determines to remain in his wheelchair forever, sacrificing his independence and mobility for the sake of his
children and his calling as a homemaker; Eva tacitly agrees. What was scan-
dalous about the novel, I am arguing, is not its depiction of Lester’s failure to
be a good breadwinner—since such individual failure could be readily dis-
missed as the result of personal weakness and such stories were quite wide-
spread in that era’s popular culture—nor its depiction of Eva’s success in
business. The scandal, I contend, consists in the spectacle of a man who
“thrives” on the “humiliating” domestic duties conventionally relegated to
women, so much so that he is willing to renounce not only his patriarchal
prerogatives but even the use of his legs.

Although some women found in Eva’s story a justification for their own
decisions to work outside the home, others found in Lester’s praise of home-
making a source of support for their own activities as homemakers. Since
middle-class women were the first to face the alienation of labor and the
problem of leisure, Canfield seems to suggest, their experiences may also
illuminate the direction of potential solutions. Canfield looks to “women’s
work” as a locus of and model for meaningful symbolic and reproductive
labor, for men as well as for women, both in and out of the home. For her,
childrearing and homemaking serve as a paradigm not of pointless drudgery
but of the most essential processes of social reproduction. In the end, the
family’s problems are solved in part by a reduced standard of housekeeping
that allows Lester to spend more time and energy developing his relationship
with his children. For example, he comes up with the ingenious plan of cov-
ering the kitchen floor with newspaper during the day so that he and the chil-
dren can cook and play as messily as they like and then whisk away the evi-
dence before Eva comes home, but the novel also emphasizes that both the
children and the house are somewhat dirtier, though happier, under Lester’s
domestic regime. This approach is consistent with the advice of Canfield’s
own childrearing manuals, which advised women to give up immaculate
housekeeping and meaningless impression management in favor of spending
time getting to know their children, teaching and playing with them. Readers
seem to have taken this advice to heart. One young mother whose husband’s
business had failed during the Depression found Canfield’s Mothers and
Children a valuable guide: “It didn’t come easy at first to lay aside sewing,
cooking, etc. and ramble with them through the woods, but I’m learning, and
I’ve never been so happy in all my life.... My husband joins me in thanking
you for this piece of missionary work that you and your pen have accom-
plished in our small household” (Myers). Another wrote that the neighbors
must be scandalized by her children’s mismatched play clothes but insisted
that her sons were happier, if scruffier, that way (Jane). While such notions
may not seem terribly radical in the late twentieth century, the notion that the
emotional labor of childrearing was more important than the material condi-
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tion of the home was radical indeed during the heyday of domestic science and scientific childrearing.

Raising children, however, is in a number of ways a quite paradoxical model of productive work. Since Canfield defines growth as a natural process of the self's unfolding, parenting seems to be an inordinate investment of time and energy overseeing a process that would happen by itself anyway. Indeed, Canfield notes in her childrearing manuals that children tend to grow up just fine despite the mistakes of their parents, and several of her novels center on adult characters who ultimately mature successfully despite quite unhappy childhoods. As *The Home-Maker* demonstrates, however, the natural processes of growth are forever endangered by outside pressures that threaten to stunt or pervert it. Lester recognizes five-year-old Stephen's naughtiness as the result of a thwarted energy that otherwise might develop into a powerful adult personality. At the same time, recognizing his daughter Helen's as "a bookish, sensitive, complicated nature," he determines that she must of course go to college, but he also reflects that she needs something, perhaps athletics, to toughen her up and give her courage: "the more her intelligence was shaped and pointed and sharpened and straightened out, the better. She would need it all to cope with herself" (225). As the title of her novel *The Bent Twig* suggests, Canfield likens childrearing to agriculture, suggesting that parents (or other caretakers) can do a great deal to facilitate the process of growth both by protecting children from harmful influences—which include most significantly the enervating influences and false desires of consumer culture—and by helping to guide children's natural inclinations gently in the right direction, though she insists that no amount of guidance can change the most fundamental traits of personality, only help them develop for good rather than for ill.

Importantly, however, Canfield detaches the value to be gained from these activities from any biological essence of reproductive femininity, insisting that fathers, and even men and women who are not parents, can make profound contributions to the "work of the world" through helping children to grow—and sometimes through helping adults whose own early development was "bent" the wrong way to find ways of redirecting themselves. In *The Squirrel-Cage*, Rankin finds a purpose carpentry did not provide him in his efforts to protect Lydia's children: he actually adopts the children during Lydia's illness to ensure that they will remain with an appropriate parent. In *The Deepening Stream*, the heroine's selfish sister finds a new life by marrying a widower in order to care for his children. In *Her Son's Wife*, a grandmother devotes herself to protecting her granddaughter from what she perceives as the baneful influence of the child's own mother. In *Seasoned Timber*, Timothy Hulme's renewed commitment to his work as the principal
of a village high school helps ease his disappointment over the realization he will never have a wife or family of his own; he even takes vicarious pleasure in his nephew’s marriage to the young woman he himself loved. Rather than lamenting the lack of “productive” work for housewives, and the similarly repetitive and symbolic activities of white-collar workers, Canfield redefines the symbolic, reproductive activity of homemaking as the most satisfying and worthwhile work there is, and she measures other forms of work by that standard.

“Homemaking,” in this sense, provides a paradigm of intellectually challenging work directed toward service to and intimate connection with others. This paradigm can then be extended to other kinds of social service work, even (as in The Home-Maker) sales or (as in The Brimming Cup) running a factory that treats its workers well and provides them with a means of getting a living and enough leisure to pursue their own goals. In The Squirrel-Cage, and to a modified extent in The Brimming Cup, characters look to small-scale artisanal industry and rural “knowable communities” as a way of reclaiming productive labor and the values associated with it. In The Home-Maker, however, Canfield so thoroughly redefines the notion of work that people can be “productive” without actually producing anything—indeed, childrearing and even department store selling are represented as deeply fulfilling and meaningful work. Work is here defined less in terms of its end products than with respect to its therapeutic effects on the worker. At the same time, her insistence on the desire for “taking part in the world’s work,” for the connection through work to some larger communal purpose, makes this quite different from the sort of egocentric “self-realization” usually associated with the culture of consumption.

Indeed, in The Home-Maker, at the same time Lester is lamenting the oppressive standards of competitive consumption, Eva thrills to a different kind of challenge in her new job at Willing’s Emporium, the small-town department store whose young heir and manager is attempting to turn it into a modern palace of consumption. Eva, having “always loved shopping, anyhow,” and “thought about it a great deal, of course, from the customer’s point of view,” loves “to be on the other side and to be able to try to do what I’ve always thought salespeople ought to do … it’s wonderful!” (144). Eva sees each day of work as a fascinating adventure. Books on retail selling “she devoured as a child devours fairy-tales” (156). Eva “plunges” into the adventure of selling “with her athletic certainty of movement. And now she was in her real element, glowing and tingling, every nerve-center tuned up to the most heartily sincere interest in what Mrs. Peterson’s daughter would wear that spring” (159). Some garments represent emotional values: a mauve suit "would be a real comfort to a woman who had just begun to feel sad over los-
ing her youth. Every time she put the suit on it would be a kind, strong reassurance that although youth was going, comeliness and a quieter beauty were still within reach.... Evangeline had so much sympathy for women struggling with the problem of dressing themselves properly at difficult ages!” (158).

Eva sees selling as a service, a matter not of forcing people to buy what they don’t want but rather helping them to select what they do want, even to the point of persuading one woman not to buy a sweater that looks terrible on her. At the same time, she remains optimistic about the ultimate results. She learns the names of her customers and enjoys showing goods even to poor women who can’t afford them: “It’s as good as going to a party for them. And it gives the habit of coming to the store when they do want something” (148).

While Eva’s ethic of service dismays some of her co-workers, her employer approves of it as ultimately better for business than a hard sell. Mr. Willing and his wife, a former advertising agent who has given up her career to stay home with their children but still writes the advertisements for their store, exemplify what Roland Marchand has called the “apostles of modernity.” Willing sees himself as a “missionary” whose goal is “educating [people] to desire better things. He called that a pretty fine way of doing your share in raising the American standard of living” (121, 119). “It is not just a store to us,” Mrs. Willing tells Eva, “it is our Life Work” (256). “My idea of good merchandise, Mrs. Knapp,’ said Mr. Willing seriously, ‘is that it shall be a liberal education in taste.”

Canfield researched this part of the novel extensively with the help of her friend Elizabeth Jackson, a graduate of Lucinda Wyman Prince’s School for Store Service, “the prototype of modern store training.” Eva’s version of department store “service” illustrates in flawless detail the basic principles taught by the school; in fact, at least one “local store ... recommend[ed] in its bulletin that their clerks study Eva Knapp’s methods of salesmanship as given in the ‘Home-Maker.’”

The novel here reveals something of a split personality, for Eva’s enthusiasm for her work contrasts sharply with Lester’s previous vision of his job in the department store as a “conspiracy to force women still more helplessly into this slavery to possessions” (77-78). Along the same lines, a few reviewers objected vehemently to the novel’s honorific representation of Eva’s career:

The wife not only takes her husband’s place, but, in a manner that shows grave study on Miss Canfield’s part of the regular apostles of go-getting, with bows to Alexander Hamilton Institutes

3. *Home-Maker* 257. Roland Marchand quotes a nearly identical description of advertising as “an education in good taste” from *Advertising and Selling* (14 Nov. 1928), 18; qtd. in Marchand 138.

4. Information about the Prince School is in Benson 121. Details of Canfield’s research are in her correspondence with Jackson, University of Vermont, Box 14a.

5. Newspaper review of *The Home-Maker*, source and date not identified, Dorothy Canfield Fisher Collection, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT, Box 67, Folder 19.
and the up-and-at-’em principles of such hokum-shooters as the late Orson Swett Marden, she becomes a complete treasure to the business, a female Babbitt, it seems to me; and all of this to the infinite relish of the author. It rather makes me sick. I had no idea Miss Canfield was one of these hundred percenters. (Weaver)

But the reviewer’s conviction that Canfield herself is a booster for consumer culture must be balanced against the reactions of other readers, who read the novel largely as a critique of consumer culture. The Home-Maker’s glorification of Eva’s department store work, perhaps linked to Canfield’s fascination for the new world revealed to her by Elizabeth Jackson, seems oddly out of place not only within this novel but within Canfield’s entire oeuvre. While a few critics railed at the novel’s relish for “Babbittism,” most seemed to pay more attention to Lester’s critique of consumer culture, perhaps because his point of view is given somewhat greater authority in the novel. But what is perhaps more noteworthy than either of these alone is that these contradictory points of view are never directly confronted in the novel: Lester’s own disgust for business does not prevent him from viewing Eva’s career and the happiness it brings her with great pleasure and pride. Of course, the contradiction between the dog-eat-dog ideology of capitalism and the nurturing ideology of domesticity is precisely the contradiction on which the bourgeois nuclear family has always been based: the dominant fiction that families operate as feudal/patriarchal units within a broader context of democratic competition. Canfield has in The Home-Maker only altered the identities of the players, not the ideology on which it is based, sustaining a high-minded repudiation of consumer capitalism as a privilege of the private sphere supported by the very system it denies.

Or has she? It is important to note that Eva’s experience as a saleswoman provides a quite different perspective on the consumer universe of the department store than, say, the scenes in Sister Carrie in which Carrie is dazzled by “the lure of the material,” as “beauty speaks for itself” (Dreiser 63). This section of Canfield’s novel reveals the behind-the-scenes strategies of the department store as every bit as wonderful as Lester’s discovery of his children’s growing minds in the parallel Part III. While it is difficult to accept, given the strength of Lester’s critique of capitalism, that Canfield entirely endorses this view, the style of these passages, which represent Eva’s almost childlike joy in the new enterprise, letters from Canfield to her department-store informant that bear witness to her own fascination with what she is learning, and responses from readers make clear that these scenes cannot be read as mere satire. Instead, the department store scenes bear witness to the relationship of middle Americans to what was by that time a relatively routine set of business practices. The novel reveals the extraordinary behind-the-scenes complexity of one of the most ordinary of activities, shopping.
pleasure of these sections comes from the revelation of the mystery behind an experience carefully calculated to mystify, an elaborate performance for the benefit of shoppers. It seems to have appealed to both men and women readers, since even for those well-versed in business practices, the specific field of department store selling was terra incognita for all but a few.

Rather than imagining a flight from consumer culture—even the limited retreat of *The Squirrel-Cage*'s artisanal life or the rural Vermont communities of Canfield's other novels—*The Home-Maker* strives to reorganize emotional life within the constraints of the status quo. This is more than mere "adjustment," however, because the novel suggests a quite profound reorientation of attitudes toward consumer capitalism and an even more radical break with patriarchal ideologies. Although *The Home-Maker* rewards the Knapps with a very comfortable standard of living, it emphasizes that the starting point must be not the struggle for prosperity but the struggle to ensure some sort of purposeful activity for each member of the family, consistent with their own presumably natural desires.

Although *The Home-Maker* reveals the oppressive effects of white-collar work and "keeping up appearances" on Lester and Eva in the beginning, it ultimately suggests that such work and consumer culture are bad only if they prevent people from focusing on what is really important. What is really important, according to Canfield, is the affective pleasure of family life and the growth of children into adults who will have a chance to realize their potential. Work—the experience of seeing one's own efforts bear fruit in the world—is also intrinsically pleasurable, as is the experience of connecting intimately with others in a family or community. At the same time, she acknowledges the pleasures of consumption, both the comfort of having material needs fulfilled and the aesthetic pleasure of contemplating beautiful things. (She usually insists, however, that these desires and needs can be fulfilled with much simpler and less costly means that leave more time and energy for devotion to the former goals of productivity and intimacy.)

Canfield's strategies ultimately involve mobilizing residual values in quite new ways, recognizing that the material and social conditions of modern life make it impossible for people simply to turn back the clock and resign themselves to the good old ways. Indeed, Canfield makes it quite clear that the good old days were not necessarily perfect; she is quite optimistic that many aspects of modern society can—if properly used—make for much more rich and satisfying lives. For example, she makes it quite clear that while leisure time can be a dangerous trap, it opens up possibilities for new activity that would not be possible under conditions of unremitting toil. Education and culture do indeed serve to compensate for the pleasures formerly to be had from artisanal activity, but Canfield makes quite clear that they are also luxu-
ries from which the masses of people can only benefit because machinery and industrial organization have made possible shorter work days, longer childhoods, and far greater ease in meeting the basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Lester, confined to his wheelchair, realizes that "one of the most embittering elements of [his] old life had been the absence of any leisure when he could really think—consider things consecutively enough to make any sort of sense out of them.... Now he certainly had all the sitting down quietly that anybody could want," and he finds enormous joy and satisfaction in the ability to focus his intelligence and attention on such matters as how best to help his children (219). For Canfield, leisure is only enervating when it is not applied to worthwhile goals.

What is perhaps most radical about *The Home-Maker*, and Canfield's work more generally, is that it subordinates not only the desire for consumer goods but the desires for independence and for sexual gratification to the overriding desire for purposeful activity, for the process of work as a value relatively separate from the specific nature of its products. Canfield's characters find ongoing interest and pleasure in the process itself, without a teleological focus on the ends of their activity. In a sense, the purpose of such (re)productive activity for Canfield is the creation of new activity and purposes. Canfield's work posits the possibility of enjoying the material benefits of a consumer economy without succumbing to the emotional patterns of consumer culture, in which, as Lukacs has argued, the commodity form becomes the "universal structuring principle ... dominating, permeating every expression of life" (84-85). Canfield's fiction, and the broader social movements in which she participated, attempt to resist the reification inherent in consumer culture less by altering material circumstances than by altering attitudes towards and perceptions of them. This may seem an extremely mild approach, but if we take seriously the Marxist contention that the problem with reification is that "a relation between people takes on the character of a thing" (Lukacs 83), Canfield's effort to make visible the social relationships and labor processes inherent in (but usually concealed by) industrial production and commodity exchange is a decisive shift from the dominant trend of consumer capitalismo. Her emphasis on the process of homemaking and department store selling makes these activities visible both as work and as social relationships.

Significantly, Canfield ranks reading, writing, and other forms of educational and cultural activity as exemplars of the kind of (re)production she privileges. In the preface to her collection of short stories, *Raw Material* (1923), she defines both reading and writing not as "creation" but rather as the *production* of meaning out of the "raw material" of everyday life. Reflecting on her own pleasure in "telling herself stories" about her observa-
tions of the people around her, she notes with dismay that there are people whose eyes are too weak for the white brilliance of reality, who can only see life through the printed page, which is a very opaque object. Such people—and they are often cultivated, university-bred—will say, quite as if uttering a truism: "Of course characters in books—well-written books—are ever so much more interesting than men and women in real life." ... I have seen them turn away from a stern and noble tragedy in the life of their washerwoman, to the cheap sentimentality of a poor novel, which guarantees (as a fake dentist promises to fill teeth without pain) to provide tears without emotion. I have seen women who might have been playing with a baby, laughing at his inimitable funniness, leave him to a nurse and go out to enliven their minds by the contemplation of custard-pies, smeared over the human countenance. (15)

Borrowing the collection's title from a chapter in *Self-Reliance* in which she had advocated providing children with boxes and fabric and bits of string rather than store-bought toys, Canfield offers a collection of vignettes from everyday life about which she suggests readers should draw their own interpretations and conclusions. While the stories in *Raw Material* are necessarily pre-constructed, letters from readers suggest that many did take seriously Canfield's challenge to look for the small moments of excitement and significance, the "drama of everyday life" all around them.

Significantly, Canfield does not take intellectual work as a self-evident good, a privileged signifier of civilization and virtue. Instead, her works suggest that considerable explanation is needed to justify symbolic and cultural work as activities deserving of respect and dignity. This requires rethinking what constitutes the use value of labor—recognizing as useful those activities that create emotional and moral states that help people lead more satisfying lives and become more useful members of society. Canfield's works go to great lengths to justify this kind of activity as both socially valuable and satisfying for those who do it. In a sense, then, the most important kind of work in Canfield's universe is the reproduction of social subjects who will go on to take some sort of place in other productive or reproductive enterprises—and this reproduction also includes the "recreation" of oneself through activities that help one to grow.

The notion that readers need to learn to understand the significance of their own lives suggests a sense of alienation from their own experiences and, as Canfield describes it, "the lack of a generally recognized motive for living ... the painful moment caused by a gap between the disappearance of an old reason for existence, and the appearance of a new one" (*Why Stop Learning?* 293-94). The solution posed by Canfield's fiction is less the creation of new purposes—although a number of her characters do give up meaningless business or social activities in favor of more "productive" artisanal or social service work—than an emphasis on recognizing the intrinsic and utilitarian value of the activities in which they are already engaged, especially that of raising children and participating in community relationships.
Canfield's work and, I would suggest, that of her contemporaries in the progressive education movement served social and psychological needs increasingly felt by those members of the new middle class who felt most alienated from consumer culture and the "unproductive" sorts of labor that constituted them as a class. Fans reported that reading Canfield's fiction enabled them to find significance in everyday activities that might otherwise seem meaningless, and to feel a sense of community and friendship they found lacking in their modular suburban neighborhoods or large, impersonal offices. Ultimately, Canfield herself worked, through her writing, to produce new kinds of "modal subjects" whose desires were compatible with, but not entirely determined by, the conditions of white-collar work and middle-class consumption, and whose sense of self did not depend on older models of individuality or independence. While her contemporaries worried that middle-class domesticity and white-collar labor were trivial and meaningless, Canfield contends that symbolic work—producing the ideological structures that enable people to make sense of their lives—may be the most valuable part of the "business of living" in a complex and alienating modern world.

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