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The Wages of Virtue: Consumerism and Class Formation in Fannie Hurst's Back Street

Scholars today could argue that history typically excludes the achievements of dominant cultural figures such as George Gershwin, Ernest Hemingway, and Marlon Brando in the discussion of noteworthy historical events. Indeed, because of their innovative artistic achievements, cultural figures have had as much to do with shaping the period, in which they lived, as political figures and movements of the day. Most certainly, readers of this comprehensive collection of short stories will agree that the prolific writer Fanny Hurst should be included among these cultural leaders, for the stories in this collection reflect not only the lifestyle and attitudes of middle-class New Yorkers and citizens of the Midwest from 1909 to 1939, but, in language and image, illustrate the quotidian world of women’s lives in America.

The technological and medical advances which affect the average citizen are perhaps most interesting to some readers: the stories are ordered chronologically and thus one can follow a thread which depicts the protagonists’ quality of life. For instance, the stories between 1909 and 1919 reflect the popularity of dance halls, the prevalence of tuberculosis, the novelty of the automobile, and the prevalence of boarding houses; the stories between 1920 and 1939 describe the advent of cinema and plastic surgery. Most striking, however, is the way in which these stories portray the various stages in women’s lives. Hurst recounts how mothers with numerous children struggle to make due with their meager budgets, how young women work long hours as sales clerks of department stores, and how older women struggle with the reality of imminent poverty and loneliness. To be sure, although these stories reflect an independent women working outside the home, most are, in fact, unable to support themselves. In only one story—“A Boob Spelled Backwards”—does a woman live in conditions befitting her ambitions and express a drive to improve her living conditions through her own means. In this narrative, she shows her assertiveness by breaking her engagement to her fiancé of five years to marry a man who is serious about marriage. In the work place, however, women are ignored when it comes to job promotions and high-paying positions are awarded to their male colleagues, who do not work any harder than their female counterparts.

Thus, it is apparent that the women in these stories only have one means of promoting themselves, and that is through their ability to attract a man for eventual marriage. To achieve this goal, an older woman, such as a friend, an aunt, but most often, a mother, serves as a key figure to present her daughter to society in hopes of finding a
young man from a good family and with a promising career. If this goal is not met, a
drop her future is bleak, for she must then rely on another woman, either a sister, a niece,
colleagues, or the mother herself, with whom she can share her low income to live out her
days as a spinster. The blind aunt in the story “White Goods” exemplifies this situation,
for she is frightened that her niece, with whom she lives, will marry a rich man who wants
nothing to do with her. The story “Sob Sister,” depicts a woman who is no longer young
enough to marry, so she finds a lover who supports her until she is older and no longer
slim and attractive. Her lover then abandons her when he finds a younger, more suitable
woman to marry. To be sure, women are commodities to many of the men in these stories,
for the wealthy men use their girl friends and mistresses to promote themselves until they
have lost their value.

For Hurst’s female characters, it was important not only to be small and frail, so
that their men feel strong and competent, but also to convey their need to be protected.
The women in her stories show signs of weakness when they become frustrated and are
often depicted as teary-eyed or crying. Terms of endearment, such as “peachy,” “little
mother,” and “sweetness,” give the impression that these feminine figures are helpless
creatures in need of a son, a lover, or a husband to protect them. The consumer culture of
the day is also apparent: women discuss buying frilly dresses, ribbons, and furs at length
with the goal of making the most of their good looks which they know are ephemeral.
Thus, working class women spend their meager salaries on clothing, make-up, and
accessories so that their futures are somewhat easier as married women.

To the reader of this collection, it may become apparent that the narratives often
have similar themes, with similar conclusions, but the stories written after 1920 show
more variation. For example, “Forty-Five” depicts two American flappers in Paris,
mother and daughter, whose goal is to be fashionable and, thus, look as young as possible.
Unfortunately, the mother cannot keep up with her daughter and, because of a face lift, she
loses her original beauty and eventually the man who was attracted to her because of her
unique facial features. In other stories, Hurst portrays unhappy married life as a positive
alternative to living alone. No stronger is the case made for marriage than in “The
Brinkerhoff Brothers,” in which Henry spends his life envying his brother’s marriage to a
woman who is less than perfect. Increasingly, the later stories take the reader to the
Midwest, where Hurst describes life in rural and urban areas. Her versatility is
demonstrated by her accurate depiction of Christian immigrant families, as well as her
imitation of the language and mannerisms of Jewish families of New York.

Few of this writer’s narratives feature men as protagonists, perhaps because Hurst
experiences a special kinship to these women, in whose lives she demonstrates so much
insightfulness. And although there are few photographs and films remaining which depict
the lives of these women, her accurate descriptions act as snapshots of the history and
society of early 20th century America.

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