5 “People Still Living in the Derelict Houses”: Realism, Class, and the Fragile Body in Pat Barker’s *Union Street*

According to Michal Peled Ginsberg and Lorri G. Nandrea, the realist novel focuses on “the prosaic world of the everyday, of the common man, of the home and its cares” (246) – which is not a bad description of Pat Barker’s *Union Street*, except that the latter tells the story, not of the common *man*, but of seven *working-class women* and their daily struggles during the economic crisis of the early 1970s.¹ The relation between realism, class, and gender will thus be central to the discussion that follows, and the body as a common ground for human vulnerability and finitude will help us connect these issues with the problem of home as physical shelter. This is particularly important because the body has been given relatively short shrift in the four preceding chapters; it features briefly in chapter one, in the discussion of Ishmael’s few moments of bodily comfort – for example, when he shares a bed with Queequeg – but on the whole our embodied nature as human beings has not been an explicit theme. This will be redressed in the analysis of *Union Street*, a realist text that pays close attention to the materiality of working-class homes.

And yet, as a literary form, realism has frequently been associated, not with men and women from the lower orders, but with the rise of the middle class and, therefore, a decidedly bourgeois outlook (e.g. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 138; Watt 48). More specifically, Nancy Armstrong has shown that, whereas initially bourgeois novelistic discourse was directed against the aristocracy, from around the 1830s it turned instead to the industrial working class as the “target of moral reform” (20). If we accept this assessment, then it no longer comes as a surprise that, by the mid-nineteenth century, the British novel should have been “deeply biased against reflecting a working-class perspective on society” (Haywood 3). It would also be consistent with Terry Eagleton’s claim that realism is “the form *par excellence* of settlement and stability” (*Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* 147), as well as with Franco Moretti’s assertion that the nineteenth-century novel rested on the twin pillars of bourgeois existence and con-

¹ I would like to thank Simone Heller-Andrist and Rahel Rivera Godoy-Benesch for their comments on the first draft, as well as Sarah Chevalier for her feedback on this chapter.
servative beliefs (*The Bourgeois* 94). Catherine Belsey sums up this view of realism as a form that cannot prove truly unsettling for us today because, “however harrowing the events of the story, [...] the world evoked in the fiction, its patterns of cause and effect, of social relationships and moral values, largely confirm the patterns of the world we seem to know” (47). Stable, familiar, and reassuring: it is a view of realism as the discourse of the status quo.

There are, however, critics who disagree with this assessment, both on historical and on more theoretical grounds. Perhaps the most important historical objections come from scholars who have explored the cultural function of realist fiction in colonial settings. Derek Hand, for example, suggests that realism in pre-independence Irish fiction was not conformist, but in fact signified a revolutionary attempt to challenge centuries of colonialist misrepresentation (130). More generally, Neil Ten Kortenaar maintains that realism has often served “anti-colonial and subversive purposes” because it “located the truth of society in the untouchable, the coolie, the slave, the criminal, and the colonized” (1303). Turning to more theoretical objections to the idea that realism is necessarily conservative, we may cite the dramatist Lorraine Hansberry, who insists that an “artist creating a realistic work shows not only what *is* but what is *possible* – which is part of reality, too” (qtd. in Carter 32; original emphasis). Hansberry, in other words, maintains that realism is not limited to things as they are – as does Henri Lefebvre: “the negative and the possible are just as ‘real’ as the positive real” (319). Indeed, for Pam Morris, these two characteristics of realist narratives – their ability to bridge global socio-cultural divides, and their power to discern alternatives to the present as part of reality itself – together constitute the “inherent utopianism” of the form (*Realism* 162). This leaves us with two starkly opposed views of realist fiction: either as a conservative discourse, or as emancipatory and even utopian.

Perhaps the best strategy is for us to assume that realism can serve both conservative and progressive political ends, and that a realist text like *Union Street* is inevitably marked by the genre’s contradictory history: its historical association with bourgeois values, as well as its formal impulse ceaselessly to widen the social range of artistic representation (Cobley 79; Pam Morris, *Realism* 3). We will begin the discussion of *Union Street* by examining closely how the text establishes a parallel between dilapidated buildings and derelict, homeless human bodies as the material signs of economic crisis. These physical signs of dereliction also find an analogy in *Union Street*’s fragmented textual structure,

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2 The French original runs: “Le négatif et le possible sont aussi ‘réels’ que le réel positif” (31).
though at the same time the text uses several discursive means to unify its narrative segments, thereby creating a dialectical tension between unity and fragmentation that, in turn, correlates with the contradictory pulls of female solidarity and intra-communal strife depicted in the story. We will see that one of the strongest unifying features of *Union Street* is a complex array of symbols that not only allow us to address the question of female identity, but also to reflect on realism as a literary mode (e.g. with mirrors appearing as problematic bearers of truth, or eyes linked to alienating as well as more beneficent kinds of vision). Indeed, it is through its use of intricate symbolical clusters, as well as by paying close attention to the fragile human body and its basic need for physical shelter, that *Union Street* appropriates and critiques the form of literary realism – in particular its long-standing equation of home with bourgeois domesticity. In so doing, *Union Street* works toward a truly progressive realism which never loses sight of the material condition of the working class, while at the same time exploring the symbolical forms of belonging that are specific to laboring human bodies.

**Things Fall Apart: Dereliction and Fragmentation**

Set in an unnamed Northern English industrial town in the early 1970s, *Union Street* evokes the well-established literary topos of the tightly-knit working-class community – only immediately to subvert it. As John Brannigan notes, for instance, the title *Union Street*, “seems to promise the intimate neighbourliness, shift-work routines, and cheerful endurance common to the popular, often nostalgic, imagination of working-class life” (14). However, the cozy warmth radiating from such familiar images is immediately dispelled by *Union Street’s* opening sentences: “There was a square of cardboard in the window where the glass had been smashed. During the night one corner had worked loose and scraped against the frame whenever the wind blew” (1). A makeshift cardboard cover barely keeps the elements at bay here, and Brannigan rightly notes that the smashed window of the opening scene is only “one of a number of images of exposure, of the lack of the protective shell that ‘home’ should represent” (19). This also explains the frequent use in Barker’s text of the word *derelict* to describe the community’s built environment: the “whole place was derelict,” with “derelict streets,” and rows of “derelict houses” (27, 64, 216; see Brannigan 18). From the very beginning, *Union Street* thus focuses our attention on the dilapidated condition of physical structures that ought to provide shelter and a sense of security, and in doing so the text highlights the concrete effects on people’s homes of such seemingly abstract processes as economic downturns and recessions.
The destructive effects of an economy in crisis are not, however, limited to buildings and infrastructure in Barker’s text. Rather, the narrative continually emphasizes the deleterious effects of deprivation on the human body. Indeed, *Union Street* uses the same word, “derelict,” for both the neglect of the built environment and bodily harm, as if to underline that ultimately they result from the very same causes:

[By the river,] a whole community had been cleared away: the houses waited for the bulldozers and the demolition men to move in, but they never came.

[... S]till the houses stood. Officially empty, but not in reality. [...] 

[...H]owever carefully you trod sooner or later glass crunched under your feet or a sagging floorboard creaked and threatened to give way, and instantly [...] hidden life revealed itself, if only by a quickening of the silence. Tramps. Drunks. [...] These were not the drunks you meet wending a careful path home to the safety of hearth and bed. These were the hopeless, the abandoned, the derelict. (60)

An entire community has been “cleared away,” we learn here, but the “derelict” remain, without a home that would provide “the safety of hearth and bed,” and “abandoned” like the crumbling houses in which they seek shelter. Naturally, these “derelict” bodies will seek shelter anywhere, even in a public library (supposedly the home of cultured minds):

They were dirty. They picked their noses and rolled the results between thumb and forefinger, making a pellet hard enough to be flicked away on to the floor. They made noises. They made smells. They were afraid. For the assistants in the library, lads and lasses in their late teens, had power over them and they knew it. They had the power of banning people from the library, of withholding warmth. So sandwiches were consumed furtively, a bit at a time. And those who were compelled to talk to themselves, thrashing out some unending internal feud, tried to do so quietly, though they did not always succeed. (223)

Books are sheltered, in other words, while human beings live under the continual threat of expulsion: this is one illustration of Walter Benjamin’s well-known dictum that there is “no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (“Eduard Fuchs” 124). The poorest members of the society depicted in *Union Street* are shown to be out of place in both senses of the term: they have no place of their own, and they are perceived as incongruous and improper wherever they go.

In fact, if the “derelict” appear as dirty in the description cited above, then this is not exclusively a realistic rendering of their outward appearance (though it is that, as well). Rather, they also appear as dirty because dirt, in Mary
Douglas’s famous definition, is simply “matter out of place” (Purity and Danger 44). More specifically, Douglas maintains that the systematic classification and ordering of matter always involves a “rejection of the inappropriate elements” – and this is, precisely, why the “derelict” are described as dirty in Barker’s text. The “derelict” are characterized both by their abject, unruly corporeality – they pick noses, make noises, emanate smells – and by the frequent occurrence among them of mental disorder (which, incidentally, is indeed more prevalent amongst the poor because of the greater physical and social stresses to which they are exposed; see Ritter and Lampkin 37); they are both material bodies and the symbolical, ‘dirty’ excess that accumulates at the margin of the social system.

The very language used to describe these ‘dirty misfits’ in fact emphasizes that people in a society who do not matter in some ways threaten to become mere matter. If we look, for instance, at the verbs in the passage describing the “derelict” in the public library, we find them shifting from the active voice (“picked noses”) to a darkly humorous mock-active (“made smells”) and, ultimately, to the passive voice (“sandwiches were consumed,” “were compelled to talk to themselves”). Admittedly, the pattern is not perfectly consistent, as the final two verbs in the passage return to the active voice (“tried,” “succeed”). At the same time, we need to bear in mind that the first of these two final verbs refers to the attempts on the part of the “derelict” to effect their own effacement by drawing as little attention to themselves as possible (“tried to do so quietly”), while the second appears in conjunction with a negation (“did not always succeed”). Much as is the case with the mock-active phrase “made smells,” in other words, the agency that ultimately remains for the “derelict” is in fact a kind of non-agency, forced upon them by their lack of power and material resources. In Union Street, that is, people as well as houses end up “abandoned,” “derelict,” and – literally as well as figuratively – falling apart (Brannigan 17).

To some extent, this disintegration of minds and matter in Barker’s text finds a parallel in Union Street’s structural fragmentation. Critics frequently refer to the book as a novel (e.g. Haywood 145; Hitchcock 55), and this label also appears....

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3 See Lucy Gallagher’s essay “‘He Had Always Believed That There Were Two Sorts of Women’: The Female Body, Dirt, and Domesticity in Pat Barker’s Union Street” for a highly illuminating discussion of how ideas about gender affect the cultural construction of bodily fluids as dirty.
on the front and back covers of various editions. Moreover, the fact that the text’s subdivisions are numbered from one to seven (and even labeled “chapters” in some editions) serves to emphasize whole-text coherence and thus to strengthen the association with the genre of the novel. In fact, however, Union Street is divided into seven stories that can easily be read independently of each other (unlike the chapters – particularly the later ones – of a typical novel; see Fordham 142; Kirk 612). Forest Ingram has proposed the label short-story cycle for texts of this kind, which he sees as poised somewhere between, at one extreme, the typical novel with its tightly interwoven plotlines, and, at the other extreme, collections or anthologies of entirely unrelated stories (14). For Ingram, it is thus the individuality of the stories in terms of plot that separates the short-story cycle from the novel, while short-story cycles differ from a ‘mere’ collection of tales in the way in which they highlight “bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole” (19; see also Dunn and Morris 1).

In other words, while the individual sections of short-story cycles usually lack any overarching coherence in terms of novelistic plot, such texts (e.g. James Joyce’s Dubliners or Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio) tend to be unified by other means, including the use of a common setting and a symbolically significant ordering of the individual units (Dunn and Morris 13–15). And indeed,

4 Union Street is, for example, referred to as a novel on the back cover of the edition used for the present study. In addition, the generic label appears prominently on the front cover of: Pat Barker. Union Street & Blow Your House Down. New York: Picador, 1999. The German equivalent of the label novel, Roman, appears on: Pat Barker. Union Street. Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 2001.

5 The sections are explicitly labeled as chapters in: Pat Barker. Union Street & Blow Your House Down. New York: Picador, 1999. In the edition used here, they are numbered in Roman numerals, from I – VII.

6 Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris have noted the astonishingly wide range of generic labels that have been proposed for the kinds of texts that Ingram describes: “story cycle, short story cycle, multi-faceted novel, story novel, paranovel, loose-leaf novel, short story composite, novelle [sic], composite, short story compound, integrated short story collection, anthology novel, modernist grotesque, hybrid novel, story chronicle, short story sequence, genre of return, short story volume, and narrative of community” (4; original emphasis). While readily conceding that “terminology is hardly the most important factor in genre identification and theory,” they themselves express a preference for the term composite novel, for three partly related reasons: (a) the term composite novel highlights the “kinship to the novel, the modern era’s predominant literary genre”; (b) it emphasizes the “integrity of the whole”; and (c) it lacks the emphasis on “a circular path, a return to the beginning” that is implied in short-story cycle. I will, however, retain the term proposed by Ingram, only adding a hyphen to distinguish ‘short-story cycles’ from ‘short story cycles’ (i.e. story cycles that are short).
the seven stories in *Union Street* are each set in the same Northern-English industrial town, as well as named after progressively older female characters:

I. **Kelly Brown** (an eleven year old girl);

II. **Joanne Wilson** (not yet twenty, unmarried but pregnant);

III. **Lisa Goddard** (married to an unemployed man, and pregnant with her third child);

IV. **Muriel Scaife** (mother of two teenage children);

V. **Iris King** (about fifty years old, and mother of three daughters);

VI. **Blonde Dinah** (a prostitute roughly sixty years of age);

VII. **Alice Bell** (seventy-six years old, and very frail).

Thus, if in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* the character Jacques speaks of “the seven ages of man” (2.7.140–166), then the sequence of stories in Barker’s text can be said to comprise “the seven ages of woman” (Rawlinson 20), from the onset of puberty through pregnancy and motherhood to old-age and death (see also Jolly 241). John Fordham may thus be oversimplifying matters when he regards the lack of any overarching plot coherence in *Union Street* as indicative of the “breakdown of working-class social coherence” (142; see also Kirk 612), since he neglects the countervailing elements of unity in Pat Barker’s short-story cycle.

In fact, one of the key debates regarding short-story cycles centers precisely on what the genre’s characteristically contradictory pull toward both unity and fragmentation implies for its representation of community. For Ingram, each short-story cycle’s various strands “draw the co-protagonists […] into a single community,” to the extent that this community becomes the “central character” in such texts (22). Similarly, for J. Gerald Kennedy the experience of the interdependence of individual units that characterizes short-story cycles “poses a provocative analogy” to the basic structure of community (194). Rocio G. Davis, finally, notes that the passage “from individual stories to the whole […] also marks the shift from the individual to the community” (24). At the same time, however, both Davis and Kennedy caution against an overly confident emphasis on unity and wholeness; rather, Davis sees the genre as characterized by a “struggle between cohesion and fragmentation” (17), and for Kennedy the glimpses of connection afford only “a partial and problematic view, ordinarily achieved by the suppression of […] fissures and incongruities” (J. Gerald Kennedy 196–197). We are, in other words, confronted with three possible assessments of how the short-story cycle represents community: for Ingram, it is a form that gravitates toward communal unity; for Davis, a genre enacting a struggle between unity and fragmentation; and for Kennedy, a type of text in
which the semblance of communal unity will, on closer inspection, always turn out to be founded on the suppression of gaps and fissures.

In the discussion of *Moby-Dick* in chapter one, we already encountered Rick Altman’s idea of multiple-focus narratives, and it is illuminating to regard a short-story cycle like *Union Street* as one particular instance of this type of tale. Altman distinguishes multiple-focus narratives both from dual-focus narratives (which alternate “between two groups whose conflict provides the plot”; 55) and single-focus narratives (which follow a single individual on his or her narrative quest; 189). Moreover, Altman notes that a multiple-focus narrative often looks like a single-focus narrative at first, but then turns out to consist of a series of independent single-focus narratives that it juxtaposes to each other both to critique the single-focus system as such (254–256) and to “posit a level of unity beyond that of single individuals” (248). Further, while according to Altman dual-focus narratives revolve around conflicts over space and single-focus narrative around development in time, the multiple-focus form encourages readers to seek out the abstract, conceptual links between the narrative units (what Altman calls the “*tertium quid* of conception”; 269). Multiple-focus narratives – and, by implication, short-story cycles – thus do not allow the reader to remain comfortably immersed in the time and space of the multiple-focus world, but encourage a more meta-textual frame of mind instead (e.g. the “search for a hidden pattern”; 277). If we add to this Altman’s conviction that “[m]ultiple-focus narration is the form of the little people” because it emphasizes collective, rather than individual, significance (281), then his analytical framework seems more than apt for a text like *Union Street*, in which dilapidated buildings and textual fragmentation complement the narrative’s focus on the homeless, the “derelict,” and the condition of the working-class.

**Female Solidarity, Strife, and Surveillance**

*Union Street* focuses in particular on the daily struggles of working-class women, so perhaps we ought to begin our quest for the *tertium quid* of multiple-focus conception by examining the text’s depiction of female solidarity – which turns out to be sadly lacking even between women from the same family. For instance, just as *Union Street* opens with an emphasis on the crumbling physical structure of the Brown family home, the first interaction between female relatives that the text depicts is conflictual rather than harmonious. When the eleven-year-old Kelly is disturbed by the cardboard cover scraping over the sill of her smashed bedroom window, she turns over, still half asleep, and inadvertently throws an arm across the face of her sister Linda, with whom she shares a bed. The latter complains, understandably: “I wish you’d watch what you’re doing. You nearly
had my eye out there” (1). The two sisters then keep bickering for a while, and soon their mother joins the fray, contributing to the atmosphere of conflict: “For God’s sake, you two, shut up! There’s some of us still trying to sleep” (3). Indeed, familial tension remains high throughout the first pages of Union Street, with Kelly showing no attempt at disguising from the mother her hostile attitude to Arthur, Mrs. Brown’s latest lover (5). More generally, conflicts between mothers and daughters abound in Union Street: there is a heated exchange between Lisa Goddard and her mother about whether or not she should leave her husband because he beats her (112); there is Muriel Scaife, who suffers from “a conflict of loyalties between her mother and her husband” (141); and there is a frightful fight between Iris King and her daughter Brenda, during which Iris physically assaults Brenda, calling her “a little whore” (184). In addition, we are told that, for the most part, Muriel Scaife has had a rather strained relationship with her sister-in-law (154–155). Likewise, Alice Bell is well aware that it would spell the end of her son’s marriage if “he might one day have to offer her a home” because her daughter-in-law is dead set against it (236). The family, in short, is far from a bastion of female solidarity in the world depicted in Union Street.

The wider community of working-class women, moreover, is not a reliable source of solidarity either. According to Sarah Brophy, one symptom of distance rather than solidarity between women is the “gossip that forms the undercurrent of the community” in Barker’s text (32). The shopkeeper Doris, for example, is eager “to share her outrage” about Mrs. Brown’s supposedly scandalous love life with Iris King, who listens “avidly” to this latest bit of gossip (9–10). Distance is not limited to gossip, moreover, for we learn, too, that someone like Maureen Sullivan, who has “a houseful of kids but no husband,” is respected for managing to eke out a living – “respected but avoided” (94; emphasis added). We also find Elaine Watson picking on her mentally retarded co-worker Lillian, with two of Elaine’s friends, Barbara and Karen, excitedly watching the show, and Joanne Wilson the only one willing to intervene (91–93). There are, to be sure, some positive counter-examples as well, such as Iris King often taking care of other people’s children (196), or the women from the community immediately offering their help when Alice Bell’s health begins to deteriorate (236). Nevertheless, there is little in Union Street that would allow us to draw a straightforwardly idyllic picture of solidarity between its female characters.

This becomes particularly clear if for a moment we shift our attention from the notion of gender to race and ethnicity, as in the second section of Union Street racism clearly hampers female solidarity. In this section, we learn that Joanne Wilson – like many other women from the community – works at the
local cake factory. We are also told that “[n]obody liked it” when Big Bertha, a woman from the West Indies, starts working at the factory because she is “the first coloured worker there”; Elaine Watson in particular complains about Big Bertha’s “nigger stink” (81), abusing and bullying her until one day Bertha has had enough and hits Elaine “full in the mouth” (83). Though the other women never approved of Elaine’s aggressive behavior – which gossip attributes to the fact that Elaine’s eldest sister had three children “to a nigger” (82) – they also refrain from taking Big Bertha’s part, either before or after her violent confrontation with Elaine. Indeed, the women are “horrified” by Big Bertha’s actions because “[m]en fought, sometimes man and wife fought, but violence between women was unthinkable,” so that “[m]ore even than the colour of her skin,” the ferocity of Big Bertha’s attack confirms her as “an outsider amongst them” (82). Big Bertha, who for the longest time silently endured Elaine’s cruelty, is thus left to fight on her own, only to be accused of unwomanly (and indeed, uncivilized) behavior when she eventually defends herself.

The name Big Bertha is significant in this context because it adds a layer of historical depth to this episode of contemporary racism by creating a strong intertextual link to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (Troy 9). According to Pam Morris, one long-standing problem for the relation between feminism and racism has been white feminists’ assumption that they can speak for all women, irrespective of race (*Literature and Feminism* 165). However, this assumption is particularly problematic in Britain, where the development of feminism was influenced profoundly by the country’s involvement in imperial endeavors (Burton 2; Midgley 1; Parry 38–39). In literary studies, arguably the best-known instance of this kind of entanglement is the character of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, the madwoman in the attic of Rochester’s mansion who, according to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s classic analysis, serves “as Jane’s dark double,” acting out the white protagonist’s secret desire and, through her melodramatic death, paving the way for the novel’s happy ending (360). We can thus say, with Simone Heller-Andrist, that “the formation of Western female individualism in *Jane Eyre* proceeds at the expense of Bertha” (212) – a circumstance famously critiqued in Jean Rhys’s appropriation of *Jane Eyre* in her 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The fact that *Union Street* features a West-Indian character named Bertha thus links the seemingly local conflict between white women and a “coloured” co-worker to the long-term historical conflict between feminism and racism. Together with

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7 This, incidentally, may be an ironic reference to the famous phrase “Then let them eat cake,” erroneously attributed to Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, as a response to the idea that the poor lacked bread. (The phrase in fact comes from Rousseau and was uttered by an unidentified “grande princesse”; see Ó Gráda 196.)
the conflicts between members of the same family and between women in general, the focus on racism as a critical issue thus serves to challenge any starry-eyed visions of female working-class solidarity as simply a given. Instead, we are confronted once again with both unity and fragmentation: moments of neighborly help and solidarity that alternate with episodes of tension and even outright hostility.

As Sarah Brophy rightly notes, in *Union Street* the character of Iris King in many ways epitomizes this tension between solidarity and female conflict. Iris, Brophy argues, in some ways plays “the stereotypical role of indomitable working-class mother,” as Barker’s text in fact makes quite explicit:

[Iris] mothered half the street. Kelly Brown and the Scaife children, Lisa Goddard’s little lads – they all knew and loved their Iris. [...] And she sat with women in labour. Even laid out the dead, though there wasn’t as much call for that now. [...] All this was meat and drink to her. She loved life [...] and took it for granted that life included old age, suffering and death. (*Union Street* 196)

Iris is mother to “half the street” (a role complemented by the fact that she works “full-time as a home help”; 185), so that one may be tempted to see her as the very model of solidarity and domestic care. In addition, Iris plays an important structural role in *Union Street*, as she is mentioned in each of *Union Street*’s seven stories and therefore appears as the “embodiment of connectedness in the narrative” (Brophy 33). And yet, we have also seen that Iris “avidly” participates in communal gossip (10), and that at one point she physically assaults her sixteen-year-old daughter Brenda for being pregnant (“I’ll murder the little bitch”; 184). We learn, too, that Iris is highly judgmental of women who, like Mrs. Brown, fail to live up to her supposedly more respectable housekeeping standards (39). It is thus safe to agree with Brophy, who deems it impossible to regard Iris as an exclusively admirable character (33).  

Brophy also rightly observes that in *Union Street* the most troublesome aspects of Iris’s character are related to her experience of growing up in a deeply troubled, ‘broken’ home. Abandoned by her mother when only six weeks old, Iris grew up with her father “in a series of boarding houses,” some of which “weren’t much better than brothels and some of them were brothels”; her father paid a “long succession of women to look after her” – with many of the women failing
to do a good job (187). Living in Wharfe Street, the poorest part of town, Iris was so ill fed that she depended on vendors at the marketplace for free food (187–188), and later, when she was in her teens, Iris’s father used to beat her often (189). Though Iris has since worked her way up to a respected position in Union Street, she knows that Wharfe Street is “still in her” (186), and that her repeated bouts of depression – “a blackness she linked in her mind with those early years” – are unlikely ever to cease (195). It is, moreover, due to the total lack of safety during childhood that Iris falls “in love with the idea of marriage,” which she associates with the one thing she had never really had: “A home” (189). It is precisely the respectability of her home – this “home that she had toiled and sweated to create” (195) – that Iris now wants to protect at all cost. Accordingly, when Iris urges her daughter Brenda to have an abortion, this is only in part because she wants to avoid her being “stuck” with a baby for several years (201). Another important motive is that Brenda’s ‘stupidity’ poses a threat to Iris’s reputation in the community: a reputation that matters “more to her than anything else” because it is “the measure of her distance from Wharfe Street” (196; see also Brophy 33–34; Lucy Gallagher 42).

It is important to be clear about the extent to which Iris’s understanding of respectability corresponds to ideals of domesticity that are bourgeois in origin. Nancy Armstrong has shown that, in the eighteenth-century conduct books which were so vital to the rise of domestic fiction, one key characteristic of the ideal bourgeois female was that she was able to regulate her desires in order to allow her husband to accumulate capital: “Self-regulation alone gave a woman authority over the field of domestic objects and personnel where her supervision constituted a form of value in its own right” (81). As one conduct book quoted by Armstrong puts it, a woman who does not possess these virtues will be “incapable of perceiving her chief happiness to center at home,” and will instead “sally forth in quest of adventures”; such a woman prefers to put herself on display and be seen, rather than be vigilant and supervise her household – and it is this, Armstrong avers, that constitutes such a woman’s crime (77). Regulation of desire and an economy of vigilance and supervision: it is a fitting description for Iris King, who censures Mrs. Brown for going out pubbing and neglecting her household duties; who is livid at her own daughter’s “fucking and going on” (184), as well as “bloody sure” that sexual pleasure is not natural (198); and who, with her vigilant gaze, surveys and censures the entire community of female ‘malefactors.’

Of course, to say that Iris has internalized a particular ideology of middle-class domesticity is not to suggest that her views are entirely wrongheaded. For instance, though thoughts of respectability are an important motive for Iris, an-
other reason why she wants her daughter Brenda to have an abortion is simply that the sixteen-year-old girl does not even “earn enough to keep herself” (200). This may appear like a brutally materialistic assessment on Iris’s part, but it is difficult to dismiss her concerns as merely a kind of delusion, for the link between single motherhood and poverty had been a depressingly constant feature of twentieth-century British life (e.g. Kanji 131). Moreover, if we bear in mind that “single mothers became a political debating point” in Britain in the late 1970s (McNeill, Blundell and Griffiths 48) – i.e. only a few years before Union Street was published – then it is reasonable to assume that readers would have recognized Iris’s fears about her daughter’s economic well-being as justified, especially given that the willingness to provide welfare support to single women was decreasing under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher (Kanji 132). In Union Street, Iris is thus correct in assuming that Brenda is likely to descend into poverty if she decides to keep her baby and raise it as a single mother: “The primary motivation for Iris’s self-improvement has always been her desire for her daughters to have a better life than she did, and it is this that Brenda’s pregnancy also undermines” (Lucy Gallagher 44).

However, rather than displaying any anger at the systemic conditions that render this scenario probable in the first place, Iris blames her daughter for what she sees as an exclusively individual failure – and this is the ideological point: for Iris, it is only her daughter’s unregulated desire, and not at all the conspicuous lack of societal support, that constitutes an act of both economic and moral stupidity. Her daughter’s ‘domestic’ failure thus remains privatized in two senses: hidden, as far as possible, from the gaze of others, and explained only as a private and never as also a public issue: bourgeois ideology at its best (or worst, depending on one’s political outlook). Iris, in short, thinks exclusively within the framework of things as they are, and her particular, conservative brand of respectable domestic realism fails to envision any possibility of social change.

Significantly, Iris’s very name intimates that she has internalized a class-based ideal of respectability and domestic womanhood. We have seen the extent to which Iris is in thrall to a bourgeois ideology of domestic respectability that is curiously at odds with her working-class status. If, therefore, we bear in mind

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9 According to one survey, the overall poverty rate in the UK increased from 6% in 1979 to 11% in 1995, with the poverty rate among single mothers rising even more markedly, from 11% to 28% (Huber and Stephens 299). Matters were in many ways even worse in the USA, where the overall poverty rate rose from 17% in 1979 to 19% in 1994, with the poverty rate among single mothers increasing from an already staggering 42% to 49% (Huber and Stephens 299). Similarly, in a survey of Switzerland in 2010, of all forms of households, it is single parents – and particularly single mothers – who are at the highest risk of being poor (Guggisberg, Müller and Christin 18–20).
that in Britain the middle class and the aristocracy have historically been far more closely allied than elsewhere (e.g. Kocka 20), and that in the course of the nineteenth century even the aristocracy began to represent itself on the basis of the “model of middle-class domesticity” (Nancy Armstrong 74), then it seems eminently appropriate for Iris’s last name to be “King”: the patriarchal pinnacle of the ruling order. Moreover, if Iris’s family name points to the issue of class, her function as guardian of respectability is aptly expressed in her first name, “Iris,” which among other things refers to the part of the eye that controls the amount of light reaching the retina and thus hints at the panoptic power of Iris’s ever watchful, relentlessly judgmental, disciplinary gaze.

Admittedly, the link between the name Iris and the Foucauldian concept of the panoptic gaze may seem far-fetched at first sight, but it ceases to do so once we realize the pervasive emphasis on eyes in *Union Street*.\(^\text{10}\) The word *eye* appears at least once on no fewer than 96 of the 265 pages of the Virago Classics edition of *Union Street* – a remarkable 36 % – and in many of these cases, vision and sight are quite directly associated with power, panoptic or otherwise. There is, for instance, Lisa Goddard who, after losing her patience and hitting her three-year-old son in the supermarket, “raised her eyes and found a young girl staring at her,” looking on silently, passing judgment (109). There is also Richard Scaife, twelve years old and afraid to be seen too often together with his mother because people might otherwise think of him as a “[b]it of a pouf” (141). And the examples could be multiplied at will: Big Bertha blowing out smoke that gets “into Elaine’s eyes” (91); parents keeping “an eye” on their children (142); or Iris King’s sister Laura, recently institutionalized and treated for schizophrenia, having “staring eyes” that unsettle almost everyone, including the elderly at the old people’s home where she is now employed (178). In each of these cases, the gaze involves a sense of violation or power struggle, thus providing us with a solid figurative basis for interpreting Iris’s first name as linked to her ambivalent role as panoptic matriarch of *Union Street*.

*Identity and the Eye of the Beholder*  
Precisely because eyes, sight, and the gaze are continually linked to the notion of power in *Union Street*, they are also related to the construction and maintenance of identity. We find one negative image of this correlation in the scene in which Iris King and Brenda, her daughter, are confronted with the sight of Brenda’s aborted baby:

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\(^{10}\) Michel Foucault develops his ideas about panopticism in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). The key effect of panoptic power is to induce in the subject “a state of conscious and permanent visibility,” which will in turn serve to discipline the subject’s behavior (201).
At the last moment she [i.e. Brenda] looked down and – “Eyes!” Iris said, putting a hand over her daughter’s face, as the bag of membranes bulged out and burst.

“I didn’t see it, Mam,” Brenda said. “I mean I just caught a glimpse ...” She stopped.

“I didn’t see it.”

“Didn’t you, love?”

“No. No, I didn’t see it.” (215)

Trying to repress the fact of the baby’s potential humanity and selfhood, Brenda convinces herself that she never actually saw “it” – which implies that looking at the baby would constitute an act of human recognition. This same link between sight and recognition is apparent when Kelly Brown is approached in a local park by a man who, she soon realizes, “had been watching her a long time” (14). Though Kelly is disconcerted by the intensity of the man’s stare, it also exerts an inexorable power:

He looked at her so intently. Other people – her mother, Linda, the teachers at school – merely glanced at her and then with indifference or haste, passed on. But this man stared at her as if every pore on her skin mattered. His eyes created her. And so she had to go with him. She could not help herself. (16)

As readers, we may shrink from the image of Kelly’s only just pubescent body exposed to the gaze of a much older man, “whose eyes created her.” At the same time, the passage makes clear that the gaze and vision are not inescapably threatening, alienating and objectifying; looking at others can also be a sign of recognition, and the narrator suggests that it is precisely the lack of such recognition from those closest to her that renders Kelly vulnerable to other, more dangerous kinds of visual exposure (Brannigan 20).

Put in more philosophical terms, *Union Street* creates a tension between vision as alienation and what Kelly Oliver has called the look of love. From Hegel through Sartre and Lacan, Oliver contends, there is a long philosophical tradition that regards the gaze as an inherently violent intrusion:

[S]ight only serves to remind us of the abyss separating us from others. In these theo‐
ries, vision creates a sense of lack, castration, or alienation, the sense of being cut off from the world, or being alone. [...] W]hat we see when we recognize ourselves in or against the other is the distance between us that alienates us, not only from others but also from ourselves [...]. (63)

Against such an exclusive focus on the alienating gaze, Oliver posits a look of love devoid of mastery and domination – a conception she derives from readings of Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as from feminist philosophers like Julia Kristeva, bell hooks, and, in particular, Luce Irigaray:
Irigaray’s suggestions about the possibility of loving looks turn Sartre’s or Lacan’s anti-social gaze into a look as the circulation of affective psychic energy. The gaze does not have to be a harsh or accusing stare. […] Loving looks nourish and sustain the psyche, the soul, as well as the body. […] the caress, and the look as caress, do not fix an object for a subject, but open a realm in which the two remain two but cannot be separated. (71)

While at times Oliver’s prose may be overly mellifluous, she remains convincing on the key point that there is not merely one kind of look; if there is a harsh stare that threatens us with symbolic castration, then by contrast the look of love – the “look as caress” – promises recognition and fulfillment. It is in this light that we must read a terrible scene in Union Street that depicts the death of Muriel Scaife’s beloved husband John, whose eyes, the narrator emphasizes, “rolled about, frenzied and unseeing” (163, emphasis added): unable ever again to offer the look of love to his terrified wife and son (163).

Importantly, in Union Street, the objectifying gaze of mastery and domination is figured as non-seeing and thus death-like as well. For instance, when Iris King learns of her daughter’s pregnancy, she is for a moment “literally blind with rage” (181) – and shortly afterwards she physically assaults her daughter (184). Perhaps the most forceful expression, however, of the link between the alienating gaze and bodily harm is Union Street’s association of non-seeing with rape.

The stranger who watches Kelly in the park does not actually hurt her at that point in the story; he even protects her from a flock of geese who suddenly attack the girl when she is feeding the birds at the lake (17). However, when Kelly leaves to meet her friend Sharon at the nearby fun fair, a sense of menace remains, and several times Kelly feels that she is being watched by the man, “dressed all in black as he had been in the park” (19–20). Increasingly panicked and queasy, Kelly leaves the fairground and soon finds herself doubled up, vomiting in the gutter – where suddenly she realizes that the man from the park is standing next to her: “Again she had the feeling that he had been there a long time” (22). Though the man promises to show her the way to a bus stop from where she can get back home, he in fact leads Kelly into an abandoned, derelict part of town. Here, Kelly feels exposed “like an insect crawling over an eyeball” (28), and when she ultimately finds herself trapped in a blind (!) alley, she turns around to look into the eyes of the man who approaches her, finding that “there was nothing there that she could reach”; she “closed her eyes, because his glazed

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11 As John Brannigan has noted (77), the appearance of a man in black at the fun fair is one of many correspondences between Union Street and Pat Barker’s fourth novel, The Man Who Wasn’t There.
In a classic essay on mainstream cinema, Laura Mulvey claims that the Freudian notion of scopophilia – the pleasure associated with “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (587) – is a constitutive feature of the male gaze that structures the position of spectators in such films. The man rapes Kelly, and climaxing in “a final, agonised convulsion,” he looks at her afterward “as if he hated her more than anything else”; indeed, Kelly sees the thought “form in his eyes” that he could simply kill the object ‘tainted’ by his own lust (29–30). The man, however, refrains from further violating the girl, and with neither lust nor hate left to sustain the alienating gaze, he can no longer bear to look at her, his eyes skittering about “like ants” when Kelly tries to make eye contact (32). The castrating, annihilating, objectifying gaze, and the inability to offer the look of love: it is difficult to imagine a more harrowing juxtaposition of these two conflicting ways of seeing.

*Union Street* makes it clear that one consequence of the alienating gaze, as opposed to the look of love, is a fundamental kind of homelessness – both in Kelly’s case and in the story of Alice Bell. Kelly, after being raped, believes that she “was what had just happened to her. It was between the man and her” – and “he was … nothing!” (32). Later, Mrs. Brown will find Kelly determined to avoid the mother’s concerned look (43). Conversely, other people will find themselves avoiding Kelly’s “eyes of a curious naked amber: an animal’s eyes” (46). Kelly, that is to say, is no longer able either to bestow or to receive the look of love; she is alienated from everyone else, and accordingly the “street was her home now” (48). The story of Alice Bell appears radically different at first sight. For the seventy-six-year-old woman, who unlike Iris used to be better off in the past (234–235), there are two main fears left in life: a pauper’s funeral and the Workhouse (233). These fears explain why Alice, who has recently suffered an incapacitating stroke (245), is terrified by her son’s suggestion that she move to the nearby “Home” (i.e. a home for the elderly):

“But I don’t want to go there.”

“Oh, you’ll soon settle in.” […]

“The Workhouse.”

“It’s not the Workhouse now. In your day it was. It’s all changed now.” (257–258)

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12 In a classic essay on mainstream cinema, Laura Mulvey claims that the Freudian notion of scopophilia – the pleasure associated with “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (587) – is a constitutive feature of the male gaze that structures the position of spectators in such films.
Ironically, the Home – which used to be that dreaded place, the Workhouse – is in fact an unhomely space that signifies the fundamental loss of control and belonging for Alice: “Her home. They were taking it away from her” (260). Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling underline that homes, as sites of memory, continuity, and self-determination can become increasingly important for the elderly as their ability to move becomes restricted (114). And indeed, we learn in Union Street that, for Alice, everything in her home “was steeped in memory” (260) in this house that over the years has become “almost an extension of her own body” (234). John Brannigan thus rightly insists that, for Alice, there is a strong equation between a certain idea of home and her sense of identity, which explains why “Alice clings to what her home symbolizes […] long after it has ceased to afford her the comforts of a home” (32). Or, as Alice herself sees it: “The dirt and disorder, the signs of malnutrition and neglect which to them were reasons for putting her away were, to her, independence” (260). It is this last symbolic refuge of Alice’s self-determination that is being taken away on the recommendation of a social worker who, like Alice’s son and daughter-in-law, fails to see how important her home is for the old woman: “She now understood the full indignity of rape. That man [i.e. the social worker], the expression in his eyes when he looked at her. The not-seeing” (260). If in Kelly’s case rape undermines her sense of belonging, then in a kind of inverted mirror-image, for Alice it is the loss of the home that feels to her like rape. Moreover, in both cases, there is a refusal by others to recognize the needs and desires of someone who is unable to defend herself: a kind of “not-seeing” that reduces other human beings to mere objects.

A seemingly random episode in Union Street suggests that this kind of not-seeing is related to a worldview in which human beings are seen as mere means, and not as subjects who deserve to be regarded as ends in themselves (cf. the discussion of slavery in the chapter on Absalom, Absalom!). We have seen that Iris King’s sister, Laura, has “staring eyes” and was recently treated for schizophrenia (178). When asked by Mrs. Sullivan, Iris explains the reason for Laura’s temporary institutionalization:

She was cleaning for this old man and one day she just took it into her head to set him on fire. One minute he was sat in his armchair, next he was up in flames. Or rather the chair was. He wasn’t badly burned but […] at that age the shock could have killed him. I said when I went to see her, I said, What d’ y’ want to do that for, Laura? She just turned around and said, Why not? He was no use. (179)

If others become mere means in a larger process – human resources, as it were – then there is no reason for them to continue existing as soon as they cease to
be of use. It is an extreme view, and explicitly associated with mental illness in Barker’s text. However, as Laura’s inflexible stare is similar in kind to the un-seeing looks in both Kelly’s and Alice’s stories, the political point is, arguably, that there is a larger, social problem underlying Laura’s individual illness: a social system that consistently regards humans as means to ends, to be discarded if they cease to be ‘useful.’

**A Common Vision**

The parallels between Kelly’s and Alice’s stories are emphasized further in a meeting between the two characters that is told twice in *Union Street*, the first time from Kelly’s perspective. Crucially, for Kelly this meeting revolves around the possibility of regaining a sense of home and belonging. At the end of *Union Street*’s first section, on a cold late-winter day, Kelly is walking through the park – the very place where she first met her rapist – and is startled by the sight of the setting sun “obscured by columns of drifting brown and yellow smoke. A brutal, bloody disc, scored by factory chimneys, it seemed to swell up until it filled half the western sky” (64). Experiencing an odd “sensation of moving outside time,” Kelly walks further into the park:

> Then a murmuring began and mixed in with it sharp, electric clicks, like the sound of women talking and brushing their hair at once. The noise became louder. She climbed to a ridge of higher ground and there at the centre was the tree, its branches fanned out, black and delicate, against the red furnace of sky. By now the murmur had become a fierce, ecstatic trilling, and when she looked more closely she saw that the tree was covered in birds that clustered along its branches as thick and bright as leaves, so that from a distance you might almost have thought that the tree was singing. (65)

It is a disturbingly beautiful vision, to which we shall return shortly. For the time being, however, the key thing to note is that Kelly does not find any consolation in it because she cannot “break out of that room inside her head” in which she is caught together with her rapist (65). As dusk settles, the lights go on in the houses bordering the park – “Homecomings,” the narrator notes – and this is the very moment when Kelly notices what at first seems to her “nothing but a heap of rags” on a park bench in the cold February air (65–66). Soon, however, the girl discovers that there is an old woman wrapped tightly in these rags, peering back at Kelly “evidently unable to see her properly,” her “eyes milky with cataract” (66). Kelly asks the old woman whether there is anybody expecting her “back home” (67), to which the woman replies that she has come here to end her life, freezing to death on this bench in the park – an idea from which Kelly tries to dissuade her:
“At least in a Home you’d get your meals.” She paused. Then burst out, “And they’d see you were warm. They’d see you had a fire.”

“Is not the life more than meat and the body more than raiment?”

She wasn’t quoting. She had lived long enough to make the words her own. (67)

The old woman’s biblical reply (cf. Matthew 6:25; KJV: “Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?”) resonates with Union Street’s general themes, for while the text continually highlights that home must begin with material security, it also acknowledges that this in itself is not sufficient. Accordingly, though Kelly knows that she could disregard the old woman’s wishes and get ‘help,’ she accepts the woman’s claim to a modicum of agency and respect as a subject. “I won’t tell anybody,” Kelly says to the old woman, and if the look of love, according to Oliver, “does not pry or gaze, but caress” (69), then it is significant that the girl now reaches out and touches the old woman’s hand (Union Street 68). Kelly stays with the old woman until her eyes are closed, “in sleep, or unconsciousness, or death,” and then steps away from the bench, out of the park, and back into the streets of her community: “She was going home” (68–69) – and for John Brannigan, this conclusion to Kelly’s story suggests that the girl “resigns herself” to what her imperfect home has to offer (24).

However, while resignation does play a role in the section’s conclusion, it is arguably not the imperfect home to which Kelly resigns herself, but to the notion of human frailty and mortality as such – which makes a crucial difference in political terms. The idea that Kelly’s encounter with the old woman prompts the girl for the first time to confront her own mortality is explicit in Union Street: “[F]or the first time, she found it possible to believe in her own death. There was terror in this, but no sadness” (67). We have seen that Kelly’s traumatic experience of rape leads directly to a kind of homelessness on her part. Now, however, it is the realization that human life as such – not only her own – is vulnerable and exposed to suffering that makes it possible for her to regain some sense of value, to imagine herself as part of, rather than outside, the community, as well as to recover a concern for the others who live around her (Brophy 37).

Crucially, resigning oneself to the idea that human life is fragile and provisional does not mean the same as condoning the kind of violation and dereliction that we find everywhere in Union Street. Rather, it implies that such injustice can only be remedied if first we are willing to face the full terror of human frailty, and the full extent of present suffering, without resorting either to fatalism or despair (“There was terror in this, but no sadness”). Or, in the words of Antonio Gramsci: “It is necessary to create sober, patient people who do not despair in the face of the worst horrors and who do not become exuberant with every
silliness. Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will” (172). Not resignation to the broken state of these working-class homes, then, but a remorselessly clear view of things as they are: human frailty and mortality, the depth of economic privation, as well as the variety of conflicts that exist between working-class women, whose “discordant” voices Kelly hears on her way home (68; see Brophy 37). Realism, in other words, which in turn must serve as the starting point for any progressive politics worthy of the name.

Such a reading helps explain why the implications of the meeting between Kelly and the old woman are so different from the latter’s point of view. The old woman, who remains unnamed in the first section of *Union Street*, is, of course, Alice, who in the text’s seventh and final section experiences a moment of vision similar to Kelly’s. The description of Alice’s vision repeats parts of Kelly’s almost verbatim, and it is therefore worth quoting at length:

[A] murmuring began, as of the wind through summer trees or waves unfurling on the shore [... When Alice] looked at the skyline she saw that one tree stood out from the rest, its branches fanned out, black and delicate, against the red furnace of sky.

[... ] At first, it seemed to be bare like all the others, though with a jaggedness of outline that suggested not winter but death. By now the murmur had become a shout, a fierce, ecstatic trilling; and when she looked more closely, she saw that the tree was full of birds, clustering along its branches, as thick and bright as leaves. And all singing. But then, as she came closer still, as her white hair and skin took on the colours of blood and fire, she saw more clearly, and in a moment of vision cried. It isn’t the birds, it’s the tree. The tree is singing.

The light was unbearably bright, bubbling in every vein, shaking her heart. She could not bear it. She shrunk, she fell back. [...]

But there was a child there, now, a girl, who, standing with the sun behind her, seemed almost to be a gift of the light. [...] Then it was time for them both to go.

So that in the end there were only the birds, soaring, swooping, gliding, moving in a never-ending spiral about the withered and unwithering tree. (264–265)

Shrinking away from her overpowering experience, Alice finds Kelly “almost to be a gift of the light” – as if the girl herself were a symbol of solidarity and the continuation of life. Phrases from Kelly’s vision (e.g. “By now the murmur had become a shout, ecstatic trilling”) are echoed very closely in this passage (“By now the murmur had become a shout, a fierce, ecstatic trilling”), which can be seen to suggest that the meaning of the vision is the same for both Alice and Kelly.

Critics have generally assumed that this is the case, though there is disagreement as to the political implications of the two characters’ shared moment of
vision. For Peter Hitchcock, for instance, the meeting between Kelly and Alice is “a strong statement on the sisterhood of class” (56). In a similar vein, Roberto del Valle Alcalá interprets their encounter as a moment that highlights the “irreversibility of resistance” (204), rather than as “a concession of defeat or confirmation of women’s victimhood” (205). John Brannigan, by contrast, is hesitant, arguing that *Union Street*’s conclusion serves, not “to transcend the bleak depiction of dereliction presented throughout the novel, but to signal the possibility of an imaginative transformation of the structures which produce these material conditions,” thus compelling us “to conceive of the functions and forms of ‘home’ and community anew” (33; emphasis added). Sarah Brophy likewise holds that the final union between Kelly and Alice “is more emblematic than it is political” (36), and Margaretta Jolly even wonders whether such visionary moments in Barker’s work, which appeal to the body and spirit rather than the mind, might also imply that “material change and rational agency” are no longer feasible (236). The debate, in short, is reminiscent of the more general debate on realism as a form, questioning as it does whether the final moment of vision in *Union Street* carries with it a genuinely utopian impulse, or whether it merely serves imaginatively to dissolve the text’s tensions in a politically void symbolic gesture.

What is lost out of sight in this debate is that, from the point of view of Alice, there really is not much hope left at the end of Barker’s work, beyond imaginative consolation. We learn, for instance, that after Alice’s stroke “it was obvious that the situation could not continue” – obvious “even to Mrs. Bell herself, though she would not admit it” (252). Later, when Alice tries to see herself “through a stranger’s eyes,” she finds it “no wonder they wanted her put away,” and thinks of herself as “[r]ubbish. Ready for the tip” (259). This, accordingly, is Alice’s crucial insight: “She searched among the wreckage for some fragment of hope, but there was none. Her life would not renew” (260). From Alice’s own, single-focus perspective, in short, there truly is no hope left, only imaginative consolation. However, seen from the multiple-focus perspective of *Union Street* as a whole, the emphasis of Alice’s insight shifts: “Her life would not renew” (emphasis added) – but others’ lives might, including Kelly’s, who thanks to her vision of the tree filled with birds is “alive with hope” when she finds Alice sitting on the bench in the park (67).

Put more abstractly, we may say that solving the interpretive puzzle posed by the meeting between Kelly and Alice involves a shift in focus from its meaning within the two separate stories to its significance for the reader as he or she reconsiders the text as a whole. Paul Ricoeur is one critic who has commented on the effect of symbolism on the reader, and a key point he makes is
that symbols involve what one could call communicative excess: a symbol “says more than it says” and therefore “invites us to think, calls for an interpretation” (The Conflict of Interpretations 27–28; emphasis added). Franco Moretti in fact has made an intriguingly congruous suggestion, arguing that whereas ‘pure’ narrative is syntagmatic – in the sense that it concentrates on the relentless forward-flow of events (i.e. ‘What comes next?’) – symbolic scenes could be called paradigmatic because they entail an “urge to classify,” and hence a more analytical attitude (i.e. ‘Where does this fit, in the larger scheme of things?’; Way of the World 158). If this is the case, then the symbolism of Union Street’s ‘twice-told’ final scene constitutes a kind of wake-up call, akin to Slavoj Žižek’s provocative advice in his book On Violence. There, Žižek suggests that too often a “fake sense of urgency” pervades contemporary discourses on violence and humanitarian crises – an urgency that is fundamentally anti-theoretical in that it discourages us from inquiring into the underlying causes of such crises: “There is no time to reflect: we have to act now” (5–6; original emphasis). However, Žižek continues, it may sometimes be more productive not to let oneself be drawn into the flow of current events, and instead to pause and reflect. In a similar vein, Union Street’s symbolical conclusion serves to redirect readers’ attention, away from the forward-movement of the plot, and toward that tertium quid of conception which, according to Rick Altman, constitutes the crucial interpretive quest of multiple-focus readings in general.

**Female Identity: Birds of a Feather**

Ricoeur’s ideas imply that symbolism may lead to a kind of alienation effect, making it impossible for readers to feel too comfortably at home in the fictional world of the text. Instead, symbols force us to examine the text from a certain critical distance – as exemplified by the discussion in this chapter of the symbolical role of eyes, sight, and visions in Union Street. If we now shift our attention to another figurative leitmotif in Barker’s text – birds – we must therefore bear in mind Yuri Lotman’s point that, in the case of symbols, to stop and think means at least two different things: on the one hand, to consider the symbol’s “cultural memory” as it runs “vertically through the whole course of human history,” and, on the other, to examine the network of symbolism as it is established and developed in one particular text (86). Put differently: though we must follow the general trajectory of symbols as they have historically migrated from one text to the next, we also need to find out how, precisely, these symbols are deployed in the particular text under study.

Starting with the symbolism of birds in cultural history in general, one key point for us to note is simply the wide array of meanings associated with avian
imagery. Most dictionaries of symbols agree that in various cultures birds are linked to the soul, poetic inspiration and flights of fancy, as well as to prophecy: the winged messengers between Heaven and Earth (Cirlot 25; de Vries 47; Ferber 26; Lurker 773; Ronnberg 238). If we add to this Juan Eduardo Cirlot’s description of the Tree of Life, with birds perched on the tree’s branches representing the souls of the faithful (27), then we are immediately reminded of Union Street’s final vision of hope and renewal. Another component of this first cluster of symbolical meanings is that birds are frequently associated with freedom, or at least the desire for it (e.g. Ronnberg 240), pointing to a sense of possibility, transformation, and transcendence that forms part of the cultural memory stored in avian imagery. Moreover, a second cluster of avian associations revolves around femininity (e.g. de Vries 47), with the egg as a symbol of creation and regeneration (de Vries 158), and words like chicks even used colloquially to refer to girls or young women (OED). 13 Evidently, this gendered history, too, would render birds an appropriate symbol for Union Street and its focus on the lives of seven women. Meanwhile, a third and final cluster of associations relates birds to the notion of community and home, both because many birds build nests and because migratory birds leave but also always return home (Ferber 26, quoting Lévi-Strauss; cf. Ronnberg 238). In short, we have three clusters of symbolical associations – transcendence (or at least the longing for it), an association with femininity, and the link to the concept of home – that all seem admirably suited to Union Street.

However, at the same time we need to bear in mind that there is a complex and contradictory history of symbolism associated with individual birds (e.g. the albatross, the dove, or the eagle). 14 In this regard, the most basic observation to be made is that, in Union Street, the more ‘aristocratic’ birds – the eagle, nightingale, and owl, for example – tend to be missing (with the exception of swans, which appear twice; 16, 98), while the more common and ‘homely’ birds (geese, sparrows, and seagulls) take center stage. And once we think about it, this is not really surprising, as it ensures that the text’s avian symbolism does not clash too forcibly with its realist aesthetic. It would, in other words, put a rather significant strain on the reader’s willing suspension of disbelief to include soaring eagles and singing nightingales in the Northern-English industrial setting of a text like Union Street.

13 chick, n’t, 3b (OED Online, 3 August 2017; 2nd 1989).
14 A fuller list would include the albatross, cock, crow, cuckoo, dove, eagle, falcon, goose, hawk, lark, nightingale, owl, peacock, pelican, raven, sparrow, stork, swallow, and swan (see Ferber 27–28; Lurker 774; cf. Ronnberg 244–261).
This last point also leads us away from the more general cultural history of avian imagery to its particular use in *Union Street*, where birds appear in each of the seven sections (either as symbolical objects in the fictional world, or on the level of discourse, as metaphors and similes), and where there is a clear tendency for figurative fowl to be linked to female characters – though the connection is not entirely unequivocal. This becomes readily apparent from a (selective) survey of the many examples from *Union Street*’s seven sections:

1. When feeding “the ducks and geese and swans” at the lake in the park, Kelly Brown is attacked by the geese (17). At one point after having been raped, Kelly is tempted to kill an injured bird (63–64). Kelly is also moved, however, to find Alice Bell’s throat “as vulnerable as a bird’s,” and later a group of women talking in front of a factory gate seem to her to make “a sound like the starlings had made” (68).

2. Near the lake in the park, Joanne Wilson tells her boyfriend Ken that she is expecting his child, and shortly after some geese and swans “begin sailing towards them in search of food” (98). Later in the story, Joanne confesses to a friend that sex with her boyfriend was brief and disappointing: “A sparrow couldn’t ’ve farted quicker” (104).15

3. Lisa Goddard remembers that her husband once talked about the “bloody seagulls” that seemed drawn to the factory where he used to work (“a pest”); sometimes, a dead seagull would drop from the sky like a stone – killed, presumably, by the toxic fumes emanating from the factory’s chimneys (121). Later in the story, Lisa gives birth to a baby daughter, to whom at first she does not feel any emotional connection. Eventually, however, Lisa manages to accept the baby daughter as her own; she then walks to the hospital window, carrying the girl in her arms, and sees “patches of trapped sky. Shadows of clouds and birds drifted across them” (139).

4. When Richard Scaife tells his father that he is reading a book about birds, he shows him the picture of a heron. The father, John, replies half-jokingly that this kind of knowledge is useless because “round here” there are no herons: “Only sparrows and starlings. And seagulls” (157). The father then points to a photograph in the newspaper of a woman posing naked and adds: “Only birds I ever fancy are in here” (ibid.).

5. Iris King, who is angry with her sixteen-year-old daughter for being pregnant, accidentally breaks an egg when working in the kitchen (201) – which

15 If we take into consideration that the Greeks associated sparrows with fertility, which is why in the Middle Ages sparrows could also be linked to unchastity and fornication (see Lurker 774), then the image Joanne uses becomes even more humorously apt.
seems doubly significant, given that the word ovary appears several times in this section of Union Street (205, 209). In addition, Iris uses the word “cock” (i.e. a male fowl) as a term of endearment for her daughter (217) – a usage derived from the word’s metaphorical meaning as one “who fights with pluck and spirit” (OED).16

6. George Harrison uses the phrase “hawking it” (OED: “to carry about from place to place and offer for sale”) to refer to Blonde Dinah’s continuing to prostitute herself even at her advanced age (225).17 George later has sex with Dinah, also spends the night with her but in the morning leaves before Dinah wakes up, feeling invigorated and encountering some birds on his way home: “Seagulls screamed and dived in the air above the river. And one detached itself from the rest to fly under the steel bridge; wings, briefly shadowed, gleamed in the restored light” (231).

7. Birds feature both in Alice Bell’s mysterious vision (264) and in the very last sentence of Union Street, “soaring, swooping, gliding” around a “withered and unwithering tree” (265).

There are at least three things worth noting here. First, while it is possible to unify the various instances of avian imagery under the single umbrella term birds, we could also choose to emphasize difference: seagulls as opposed to sparrows, herons, or geese, for example. Second, though some images convey a sense of liberation (Lisa seeing birds drifting across the sky after finally finding an emotional connection to her baby daughter; a seagull whose wings gleam in “restored light”; or the birds we find “soaring, swooping, gliding” in the text’s final sentence), others create an atmosphere of threat and oppression (Kelly being attacked by geese, but also herself tempted to kill a bird; seagulls falling dead from the sky; and Iris breaking an egg). Third, it is true that most of the images are related to female characters, yet some at least include a male perspective (Richard’s father referring to women posing naked as birds; George Harrison thinking of Dinah as “hawking it”), and at least one instance is quite clearly directed at a male character (Joanne likening sex with her boyfriend to a sparrow farting). In fact, if we accept that Iris King is in thrall to a patriarchal, middle-class ideology, then it is peculiarly apt that she is the character who uses a term of endearment for her daughter – “cock” – that derives from the aggressive fighting spirit of a male bird and is also a slang term for penis. At any rate, given the strong, but not entirely straight-forward link between femininity

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16 cock, n¹, II.8 (OED Online, 3 August 2017; 2nd ed. 1989).
17 hawk, v¹ (OED Online, 3 August 2017; 2nd ed. 1989).
and birds in *Union Street*, Ricoeur’s notion that symbols invite us to stop and think appears more pertinent than ever.

Perhaps what these somewhat equivocal clusters of identification imply is that female identity is best conceptualized along the lines of what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls “family resemblances.” According to Wittgenstein, when we look at a given category – for instance, the various kinds of objects we refer to as games – then we will find it impossible to determine a set of features shared by all the items belonging to this category. Instead, what we find are various degrees of relatedness – “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” – and for Wittgenstein this kind of relationship is analogous to the network of resemblances that links members of the same family to each other (i.e. some have similar noses, others have similar ears, etc.; 36°, § 66). Interpreting the figurative pattern of birds in *Union Street* in the light of these ideas, we can thus surmise that it is impossible to find one single set of characteristics that truly unites all women. Rather, there is a fuzzy set of features that signify femaleness, and each individual woman will share some (but not, as a rule, all) of these features. This not only makes it possible for two particular women to have virtually no characteristics in common and yet still remain associated with the category of woman as such; the fuzziness of the set also allows for its boundary to remain porous and permeable, so that one or several of the characteristic features of womanhood could, at the same time, be part of the fuzzy set that defines masculinity or manhood. In other words, if in *Union Street* the female characters are subliminally presented as ‘birds of a feather,’ then the complexity of the text’s avian imagery also suggests that this does not at all imply an essentialist reduction of womanhood to a single core that stands in stable, binary opposition to manhood or masculinity.

Before proceeding to a third cluster of symbols in *Union Street* – mirrors, this time – let us take stock of the argument so far. We have seen that, in Barker’s text, the precarious state of the built environment finds a parallel in the “derelict” state of human bodies, as well as in the fragmentation of the text into semi-independent stories. Moreover, *Union Street* places strong emphasis on the conflicts between women, whether from the same family (e.g. Iris King physically

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18 Wir sehen ein kompliziertes Netz von Ähnlichkeiten, die ineinander übergreifen und kreuzen” (36; § 66).

19 The notion of fuzzy sets has recently come to great prominence in the study of literary genres (e.g. Marie-Laure Ryan 28. See also Michael Basseler on genre in general and the short story in particular (58), as well as Terry Eagleton on the genre of tragedy, which he sees as constituted “by a combinatoire of overlapping features rather than by a set of invariant forms or contents” (Sweet Violence 3).
assaulting her daughter because the latter has violated the rules of sexual respectability) or between women in general (with racism as one particularly violent conflict). At the same time, like other short-story cycles, *Union Street* balances these elements of fragmentation with various kinds of unity: a common setting (i.e. a Northern English working-class community); the ordering of individual stories to depict the lives of progressively older women; and what we could call figurative leitmotifs. Of these leitmotifs, eyes serve as symbols that highlight the opposition between an alienating, objectifying gaze and the look of love as a sign of intersubjective recognition. Both ways of seeing, therefore, are related to the constitution and maintenance of individual identity. By contrast, birds serve as a complex figure of collective female identity and, more generally, of communal belonging – which is one reason why they feature so prominently in the moment of vision that connects the stories of Kelly Brown and Alice Bell, who as victims of the non-seeing, objectifying gaze had both become isolated and, indeed, homeless.

*Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Reflection, Representation, and Realism*

Turning to a third symbolical cluster in *Union Street* – mirrors – we briefly need to revisit the problem of individual identity because, in Barker’s text, mirrors are shown to affect one’s sense of self through their ability to reflect the human body. Joanne Wilson, for instance, who has recently found out that she is pregnant, at one point examines the reflection of her naked body in a mirror:

She stood, pressing her hands fearfully against the still flat belly. No sign there at least. But her shoulder, her arms, her breasts! Blue veins showed up all over them, as intricately linked as the branches of a tree; all leading down to the nipples which themselves were bigger and browner than they had been a month ago. Some yellowish stuff had dried to form a crust over the skin. […]

Her body, from childhood so familiar, had become frightening. It occurred to her that it looked like another human face, with nipples instead of eyes, a powerful, barely-human face. By comparison, her real face seemed childish and unformed.

She was afraid. ‘What the hell am I going to do?’ she asked that other, inhuman face, which was aware of no problem. (72)  

Note that the image of veins as similar to “the branches of a tree” is also used when Alice Bell examines her body in the mirror: “Silver branches spread out across her belly, springing from the sparsely-rooted hair. A tree in winter” (261). The metaphor is yet another link between the community of women and the symbolical tree of life that appears in Kelly’s and Alice’s moments of vision.
As was the case with the “derelict” in the local library, the description here focuses on the body as unruly matter: veins simply “showed up,” together with some unidentifiable “yellowish stuff.” Moreover, though Joanne’s belly is “still flat,” she knows that her body will soon betray the signs of her pregnancy to others, as if the body had a will entirely of its own. The supposedly supreme ego thus suddenly finds itself disturbingly powerless, lacking the sense of control that would enable it to feel at home in the body, which indeed appears like an alien, second self in the passage: “a powerful, barely-human face.” In confronting Joanne with the sight of her body, the mirror thus forces a reassessment of her own identity; though her “real face seemed childish and unformed” when compared to that “other, inhuman face,” she must somehow integrate the new knowledge forced upon her by the body into her conscious identity. The body thus constitutes the locus of the unconscious, which itself “is aware of no problem,” but which through its symptoms and effects exerts a fearful pressure on our disturbingly fragile egos, whom the mirror confronts with reflections that may clash with our mental images of ourselves.\footnote{In psychoanalytic discourse, the key terms used to refer to our own self-image would be the ideal-ego and the ego-ideal, in connection to the super-ego (e.g. Felluga 142; Lacan, “Remarks on Daniel Lagache’s Presentation” 562; Žižek, How to Read Lacan 79–80). In Jungian psychology, the key terms would be shadow and persona (e.g. Hopcke 13–16; Stein 106–109).}

We can in fact find the same mechanism at work in a different scene in Union Street as well, and ultimately the text highlights that it is impossible for individuals to escape the truth-telling function of the mirror. Kelly Brown, who in the aftermath of being raped has taken to roaming the streets at night, at one point in Union Street secretly enters the Victorian house of a well-to-do family who, Kelly speculates, have left the house for a short trip (51). Kelly explores the unfamiliar rooms and is particularly fascinated by the parents’ bedroom. Though she knows that a “man slept there too,” to Kelly the room’s “flesh-coloured satin” and its “pink, flabby cushions” make it “a temple of femininity” (53). Suddenly, however, the girl is arrested in her exploration of this ‘foreign’ middle-class home when she sees her reflection in the bedroom mirror:

She looked as wild and unkempt as an ape, as savage as a wolf. Only her hair, glinting with bronze and gold threads, was beautiful. […] But she looked bad. She peered more closely in the glass and saw that the pores of her nose were bigger than they had been, and plugged with black. When Linda [i.e. Kelly’s older sister] used the blackhead remover little worms of white stuff came wiggling out of the unblocked pores. Sud-
denly, Kelly hated the mirror. On the man’s side of the bed was a heavy ashtray. She picked it up and threw it [...] against the glass. (54)

Once again, the mirror here appears as the harbinger of an unwelcome truth: ostensibly of Kelly’s looking “bad,” but perhaps more importantly of the fact that she is a young girl on the verge of sexual maturity – for this is, arguably, the significance of the comparison to her older sister Linda, whose symbolic role as a biologically mature female is made clear on the very first pages of *Union Street*, when Kelly finds her sister’s bloodied sanitary pads in a bottom drawer: “She looked at the hair in Linda’s armpits, at the breasts that shook and wobbled when she ran, and no, she didn’t want to get like that. And she certainly didn’t want to drip foul-smelling, brown blood out of her fanny every month” (3). Even before the rape, in other words, Kelly felt decidedly uneasy about the prospect of her body changing into that of a ‘grown woman.’ Now, after the rape, Kelly’s reaction to the reflection of her developing body is telling, for not only does she try and break the glass; she eventually fetches a pair of scissors and begins to cut off her hair – the only thing about her that still looks beautiful – in a desperate attempt to suppress her violated female body by making herself look boyish. Oscar Wilde, in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, wrote that “[t]he nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban, seeing his own face in a glass” (3), and there is a sense in this passage, too, that Kelly’s ‘animal’ rage (she is “unkempt as an ape, as savage as a wolf”) is tragically misguided – against herself, and against the mirror as the medium of a certain kind of truth, rather than against the man who raped her. It is, perhaps, for this reason, that, by smashing the mirror, Kelly only ends up “trapping [...] her shattered face” in it (54): the image of a fragmented self that the mirror truthfully reflects.

Crucially, it is not only reflections of the pubescent and the pregnant body that pose a threat, or at least challenge, to a stable sense of female identity, for in *Union Street* mirrors also reveal unpleasant truths about psychological and physical health as they affect the ageing body. Muriel Scaife, for instance, who has just lost her beloved husband, refrains from looking into her bedroom mirror because “it could show her only what she most feared to see: a woman, white-faced, sodden, and alone” (176). Similarly, when Iris King stands “in front
of the mirror to tie the scarf around her head you could see that she wasn’t well” (180). In both these cases, middle-aged women’s reflections in the mirror have the power to reveal that something is amiss. Most brutally, however, the mirror reveals the truth about her mortal and, indeed, dying body to Alice Bell:

Her hands came up. She hid herself from the mirror. For years she had avoided looking into it: the head it showed bore no relation to the person she thought she was. Inside herself, she was still sixteen. She had all the passion, all the silliness. Still there behind the gray hair and wrinkled skin. Now the dislocation between what the mirror showed and what she knew herself to be, was absolute. She would have liked to break the glass. (225)

While Alice tries to hold on to an ideal, timeless image of herself as she used to be (“the person she thought she was”), the mirror mercilessly confronts her with the truth of her impending death.

We can restate these crises of identity provoked by mirrors in more philosophical terms as conflicts between idealism and realism. Idealism, according to Pam Morris, “gives primacy to the consciousness, or mind or spirit that apprehends” rather than to the material world, and in aesthetic theory it has long been associated with art as an “intimation of timeless ideals” (Realism 50–52). In the scene where Alice hides herself from the mirror, it is precisely such a timeless ideal that is challenged by the mirror’s truthful reflection of things as they are, not in the mind that apprehends, but in the world of objects, to which the human body belongs. And realism, for Pam Morris, derives precisely from an “acceptance that the objects of the world that we know by means of our sensory experience have an independent existence” (Realism 49–50). Accordingly, one aim of realism as an empiricist epistemology is to destroy idealist illusions about the world, and it is significant that, in Union Street, this process may lead to denial or, once again, feelings of rage, with Alice’s desire to break the mirror reflecting Kelly’s earlier desire to destroy the source of unwanted truth.

It would, however, be misleading to frame realism’s “refusal of anodyne fantasy” (Eagleton, The Event of Literature 72) in exclusively destructive terms, as merely the destruction of idealist falsehoods. This becomes clear if we focus on the dual meaning of the word representation (Haywood 3). Just as political representation has historically been limited to certain groups (as a rule, property-owning men), aesthetic representation for centuries tended to exclude supposedly unseemly and low subject matter. The stuff of realism, by contrast, “is not selected for its dignity and nobility” – that is, it attempts to include all kinds of things, people, and experiences – and thus implies a truly democratic politics (Pam Morris, Realism 3).
In Union Street, the willingness to represent ‘unseemly matters’ is demonstrated forcefully in the chilling description of the abortion that Iris King’s daughter has decided to undergo. As the doctors at the hospital refuse to perform the abortion, Iris and her daughter depend on the help of Irene, who lives in a run-down house on Wharfe Street. The procedure ends up taking much longer than Iris expected, and it ends with a description of the aborted fetus: “The baby clenched his fist feebly, lying on the floor of the lavatory with the News of the World spread over him” (215). Significantly, the newspaper here does not ‘cover’ the appalling event in the sense of reporting on it, but instead ‘covers it up’ and hides it from view. This, arguably, is a symbolic way of suggesting that certain kinds of events are not represented in the newspaper media. Accordingly, if one key function of the media in a democratic society is to represent the events that matter, and thus to provide the necessary input for public debate and political decision-making, then the image of the News of the World covering up the aborted child may imply that the contemporary press is not fulfilling its function properly. This, in turn, may explain why newspapers frequently remain “unopened” in Union Street (132), serving instead as blankets, padding, or fuel (4, 60, 232), as if the content of print media were entirely disconnected from the reality of life in a working-class community – the very kind of life that Union Street, as a realist text, attempts to represent.

At the same time, Barker’s text does not simply oppose its own, supposedly more truthful realism to the failures of contemporary mass media, for Union Street at least hints at the potentially productive role of the media in general, and television in particular. To be sure, there are critical comments here, too: George Harrison, for instance, at one point says that people were “better off” when they did not have TV and had to make their own amusement instead (227). And yet, there is also a scene in which Kelly, having switched on the TV because her mother and sister are out, finds herself fascinated by a news report about sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland:

[T]here was this young man, this soldier, and he was lying in a sort of cot, a bed with sides to it, and he was shouting out, great bellows of rage, as he looked out through the bars at the ward where nobody came. What caught her attention was: they’d shaved all his hair off. You could see the scars where they’d dug the bullets out. His head was like a turnip, a violent turnip, where they shot the bullets into his brain.

The cameras switched to gangs of youth throwing stones. But his eyes went on watching her. (47–48)

Kelly, traumatized by the experience of rape, is suddenly confronted with an image to which she can relate: a violated body filled with rage, which provides
a mirror-image to Kelly’s own situation as well as a model for future behavior, for as we know she, too, will later cut off her hair until her head is “shorn” (54). An identification with the situation of others is thus one of the positive potentials that mediated images harbor. Admittedly, there are other positive functions that remain unexplored by Kelly (though as readers we are free to speculate, for example, that the troubles in Northern Ireland and the situation of working-class communities in Northern England may not be as unrelated as they appear at first sight). At any rate, the key point is that Union Street acknowledges the media’s potential to bring politics home in both senses of the term: to cross the divide between public and private, and to help the audience understand the world in which they live. In principle, then, such ‘daily mirrors’ can have an emancipatory function, even if contemporary practice may at times be found wanting.

And of course, mirrors have long served as symbols for the truth-telling function of art as well – “to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature” (Hamlet 297; 3.2.21–22) – and in particular of realist representation. “As a true reflector of external reality,” Robert C. Holub observes, “the mirror is quite obviously the central image of realist aesthetics” (206–207). At the same time, however, Holub reminds us that realism only ever offers the “illusion” of faithfully reflecting the world (102), and one simple reason for this, Pam Morris notes, is that “words function completely differently from mirrors”: they force the writer to order and select (Realism 5). The error in positing a one-to-one correspondence between fiction and reality is thus, according to Terry Eagleton, to regard “fiction as a mirror rather than as a work” (The Event of Literature 218); the literary work ought “to be seen not as a reflection of a history external to it, but as a strategic labour” (170).

In the light of such observations, the emphasis on the truth-telling function of mirrors in Union Street suddenly threatens to seem embarrassingly naïve.

This impression of naivety may become even stronger if we remember the role of mirrors in Lacanian accounts of identity formation. Elisabeth Bronfen has succinctly summarized Lacan’s ideas about the role of mirrors in this process (see also the chapter on Moby-Dick):

We recognize ourselves only through reflections, notably the images we fashion for ourselves, or the way we see ourselves reflected in the eyes of others. Yet as Jacques Lacan notes in his seminal essay on the mirror phase in psychic development, […] the

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24 See Pam Morris on George Lukács’s useful distinction between “realism and the reassuring consensual convention of actualism” (Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Worldly Realism 8–9).
act of recognizing oneself in a mirrored image is always inscribed by a misrecognition, for the image we see has undergone a double fracturing. It is not only an inversion of the figure it mirrors, but it returns to the subject only by a detour through an intermediary, namely as a representation. It thus harbors a disjunction between body and image [...]. (207; see Lacan, “The Mirror Stage” 78)

Two points are worth highlighting here: on the one hand, the importance of the body as the visible sign of the self, and, on the other hand, the element of disjunction between the body and the image formed on the basis of the reflection of one’s body in the mirror. Indeed, Sean Homer likewise emphasizes the importance of the body in the Lacanian mirror stage, for it is the reflected image of the body as “a total form” which, according to Homer, sustains the infant’s developing sense of mastery over the body (25). The key element of misrecognition lies, in other words, in the fantasy of a self that is not only unified, but also master in its own house: in full control of its own body. If this is so, however, then the use of mirrors in Union Street is not, after all, entirely naïve, for we have seen that one function of mirrors in Barker’s text is precisely to reflect back an image of the body as unruly matter that the ego repeatedly finds impossible to master.

**Unspeakable: Reflections on the Limit of Discourse**

While mirrors symbolize the possibility of recognizing the truth, Union Street nevertheless acknowledges that there are certain limits to its project of representing the real through the use of a fourth cluster of recurring symbols: gaping, spluttering, and speechless mouths. “Death,” Terry Eagleton insists, “is the limit of discourse, not a product of it” (The Idea of Culture 87), and we need to bear this in mind when examining how Barker’s text depicts the death of Muriel Scaife’s beloved husband, John:

She [i.e. Muriel] ran back into the living-room and there was John, blood gargling from his mouth. Above the black hole his eyes rolled about, frenzied and unseeing. The flow of blood seemed to have stopped. [...] He was choking on the blood. She began pulling out huge clots of it from his mouth. [...] Her fingers found a thick rope of blood, twined round it, and pulled. The clot slid out of his mouth, with the sound of a sink coming unblocked, and after it flowed a frothy, bright-red stream of blood, looking almost gay against the blackness of the other blood. (163)

If, as argued previously, the horror of John’s unseeing eyes is related to the loss of intersubjective recognition – the look of love gone forever – then this is complemented here by the frightening image of a human being silenced by his
own blood: the body, our most intimate home, as at the same time the cause of suffering and, ultimately, death. It is surely no coincidence that Alice Bell, after her stroke, likewise experiences a profound sense of horror at “the sounds that glugged out of her mouth” – sounds which only slowly regain “some resemblance to speech” (245); indeed, even after Alice has recovered to some extent, when she is excited “her speech went altogether” (246). Scenes such as these, with their emphasis on mouths straining but failing to speak, are best understood as an engagement with the paradox of the unspeakable: to try and express what is in fact impossible to say. In theoretical terms, we would thus be confronted with the Lacanian Real as that which signifies the limits of signification (Homer 83).

This attempt to express the unspeakable surfaces repeatedly in Union Street, and if death constitutes one limit of discourse in Barker’s text, then another is the fact of sexual difference. As Laura Mulvey has pointed out, sexual difference serves a key function in a patriarchal symbolic order: “The paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world [... I]t is her lack that produces the phallus as symbolic presence” (585). From a patriarchal point of view, in other words, women can only serve as that constitutive absence that enables the symbolic order to function. Mulvey’s comments help us unravel the meaning of a scene in Union Street in which George Harrison, after having had sex with Blonde Dinah, decides to inspect the sleeping prostitute’s naked body:

She was lying with her legs apart. [...] He had never actually seen it before. It was funny in a way. You spend your whole boyhood thinking about it, wondering what it’s like; but when you finally get it you don’t really see it.

Almost against his will, he knelt down until it was on a level with his face. The lips gaped, still dribbling a little milky fluid. And there it was. A gash? A wound? Red fruit bitten to the core? It was impossible to say what it was like. (230–231; original emphasis)

The fact that George Harrison refers to Blonde Dinah’s genitals only as “it” already indicates that he lacks a precise expression to refer to the object that has aroused his curiosity. In addition, the term “lips” to refer to Dinah’s labia, as well as the use of the verb “gaped,” further intimate a sense of the unspeakable, as if Dinah’s vulva were a gaping mouth, dribbling fluid, but remaining stubbornly silent. As the passage continues, this sense of something that is impossible to say slowly combines with an undercurrent of violence (“gash,” “wound,” “bitten to the core”) – and of course this makes sense within a patriarchal logic that posits women as the sign of lack and castration. Moreover, we
25 Roberto del Valle Alcalá also argues that, in Barker’s novel, the two extremes of rape and prostitution frame the “circumscription of life itself within the axis of capitalist accumulation. While rape embodies the most direct and extreme form of primitive accumulation, prostitution […] represents the proletarianization of women’s reproductive labor power” – even as sexuality remains a site “also of resistance” (199).

However, if womanhood as such is unspeakable within a patriarchal framework, then motherhood and the maternal may constitute a related, even more fundamental limit to discourse. According to Julia Kristeva, “the abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal,” but also, on the other hand, with our earliest attempts to release the psychological hold of the maternal (Powers of Horror 12–13; original emphasis). Paradoxically, then, the womb as our earliest home simultaneously figures as deeply unhomely in our psychic imaginary: the site of primal repression. It is thus hardly a coincidence that, in addition to death and sexual difference, the moment of birth also figures as well-nigh unspeakable in Union Street. In the case of Lisa Goddard, for instance, the protracted pains of labor ultimately render her inarticulate: “as the day wore on speech became too much of an effort” (128).

In a similar vein, in the course of her abortion procedure Iris’s daughter Brenda grips “the head of the bed, mouth wide open, lips stretched to splitting, like the other lips between her legs” (215). Lacan’s Real and Kristeva’s abject thus feature as limits to discourse and representation in Union Street. Sarah Brophy describes Pat Barker’s texts as “[n]either realist novels nor psychoanalytic case studies, but partaking of and revising both genres” (25). However, if one agrees with Terry Eagleton that the achievement of Freudian psychoanalysis lies in providing us with “a materialist theory of the making of the human subject” (Literary Theory 141), then it is perhaps better to say that Union Street uses the insights of one materialist lineage of thought – psychoanalysis – to complement and reinvigorate that older materialism implied in the empiricist epistemology of realist aesthetics.

26 The fact that realism has not always succeeded in staying true to this materialist project should not lead us to posit that it is an inherently idealist genre.

The Body and Labor

The embodied nature of human existence is a necessarily central materialist concern, and we have seen that the body as unruly matter features prominently
throughout *Union Street*. Indeed, Margaretta Jolly argues that, in Barker’s work more generally, the body functions as “the visible face of psychological and social unreason” (235). In *Union Street* the best starting point for a detailed discussion of this claim is the relation between the female body and labor. More specifically, we can begin to understand how social pressures affect individual subjects by focusing on how *Union Street* exploits the dual meaning of labor as signifying both ‘work’ and ‘giving birth.’ This, for example, is how Barker’s narrator describes the increasing intensity of Lisa Goddard’s labor pains:

> There was something mechanical about their strength, their remorseless regularity. She felt them as extreme heat, as though she were being forced to stand too close to a furnace, to watch the door open, slowly [...].
>
> This rhythm went on hour after hour for most of the day until her whole being was subdued to it. (128)

The act of giving birth is couched here in language associated with industrial labor (“mechanical,” “regularity,” “furnace”), and John Brannigan rightly notes that such images indicate the extent to which factory work extends “into the mental and emotional life of the community” (26). The public, material conditions of working-class life appear, in other words, as powerful forces in the shaping of these characters’ supposedly private interiority.

In this way, *Union Street* incorporates the Marxian notion that alienated labor affects human beings in their totality, including in their relations with one another. We can see this, for example, in a scene in which Joanne Wilson tells her unsuspecting boyfriend that she is pregnant. Ken, though far from pleased at the news, assures Joanne that they are “in it together” (99). However, when subsequently they have sex in an underpass, Joanne realizes that something is amiss:

> Ken was panting, and thrusting into her as though he hated her, grinding and screwing and banging hard enough to hurt. She was afraid for the baby and immediately knew what he was trying to do: he was trying to screw it out of her. She went cold, pressing herself back against the wall, but he fastened onto her with a terrible, monotonous power.
>
> There was something exciting in being used like this, in giving way to this impersonal, machine-like passion. (101)

Just like Lisa Goddard’s labor pains, sex here is drawn into the sphere of industrial labor (“grinding and screwing and banging,” “monotonous power,” “machine-like passion”), setting up a parallel between capitalist production and biological as well as social reproduction. The same, moreover, is true for an earlier
scene, in which Joanne, while working on the conveyer belt in the local cake factory, is trying to decide whether or not to keep her baby:

She began the sequence of actions that she would perform hundreds of times that day. It took little effort once you were used to it and [...] it could be done almost automatically.

Almost. But not quite. Now that she was alone – for in this roaring cavern of sound each woman was alone – she wanted to think about Ken, she wanted [...] to work out exactly how she was going to tell him about the baby. She couldn’t do it. Each half-formed thought was aborted by the arrival of another cake. (85; original emphasis)

In terms of content, the passage makes clear that Joanne’s working conditions affect her entire being, both interrupting her process of thought and isolating her from other women (with such isolation from others being a key effect of alienated labor for Marx). At the same time, the phrase “to work out” emphasizes that thinking itself is best conceived as intellectual labor, with Joanne’s material surroundings thwarting her potential for mental creativity, and her thoughts continually “aborted” like unborn children (Rawlinson 27).

The relationship between creation, (re)production, and alienation is, however, as Susan Brophy has noted, illustrated most forcefully in the case of Lisa Goddard and her struggle emotionally to relate to her new-born daughter. Early on in Lisa’s story, we learn that she barely manages to make ends meet because her occasionally violent husband is out of work and tends to spend far too much money on drink. It is difficult enough, under such circumstances, to take care of two little boys, and the mere idea of soon giving birth to a third child is virtually impossible for Lisa to bear: “She did not want this baby” (112); indeed, “[w]hen she first learned she was pregnant she had asked for an abortion,” but the “doctor had told her there were no grounds” (132). Lisa, in other words, is neither provided with sufficient resources to take good care of the baby, nor legally granted control over her pregnant body. In this sense, it is entirely fitting that Lisa at first fails to recognize the baby as her own (133); to use Sarah Brophy’s words, “Lisa is alienated from the baby, the product of her body and labor” (31). There is, in short, nothing natural or automatic about feelings of motherhood in Union Street, as Lisa finds to her dismay.

The political point here is that motherhood as such also ought be appreciated as cultural and, indeed, physical work. Kath Woodward, following feminist theorists like Adrienne Rich and Luce Irigaray, insists that motherhood “involves more than carrying a foetus and giving birth, although the stresses, strains and joys of delivery should not be underestimated”; more particularly, while “at some point there has to be a woman’s body,” motherhood is an eminently cultural
concept (128) – as evidenced, for example, by the fact that societies expend an enormous amount of regulatory fervor to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothers (131). This latter fact also documents that the supposedly natural phenomenon of motherhood is in many respects the result of (self-)discipline and work. Lisa Goddard, at any rate, is aware of the extraordinary effort that motherhood involves: “It took her all her time to cope with Kevin and Darren, whom she loved. How would she manage to care for this baby for whom she felt nothing?” (136). Under conditions of alienated labor, even such seemingly foundational and unshakeable social relations as the one between mother and daughter may thus slowly wither and die.

Crucially, it is the idea of common labor – in the sense of shared suffering and struggle – that ultimately allows Lisa to overcome her alienation from the baby daughter. Lisa experiences the first “stab of recognition” when one of the Sisters working at the hospital gives the baby a bath:

Seeing it, red and howling, struggling in the nurse’s hands, Lisa thought, Yes. And when it rose from the bath with dark and streaming hair the pain was so extreme that she had to turn aside; she could not bear to look.

The feeling vanished. But it had given her hope. The time she spent simply staring at the baby increased. And then, one day, as she was changing its nappy, she found a smear of blood on the cloth. [...] Her heart contracted with fear. (137)

Seeing the baby struggling against adversity, Lisa for a brief moment recognizes something of herself in the daughter’s pain. Margaretta Jolly is thus right in insisting that the body is also “a figure of hope” in Pat Barker’s work (235), as it is in part the recognition of common suffering that serves as the basis of identification with others. Moreover, Lisa’s “fear” for the baby’s health arises as a by-product of the labor of caretaking that she devotes to her daughter’s physical needs, as only the act of changing the baby’s diapers makes it possible for her to discover the potentially worrying “smear of blood.” To her relief, Lisa learns from a nurse that it is common for female infants to ‘menstruate’ at some point after being born: “All the female hormones in your blood get across to her, you see. Then when they stop, she starts to bleed” (137). And it is at this moment, after having both recognized herself in the baby’s suffering and worked for the infant’s physical well-being, that Lisa finally manages to accept the child as hers: “My daughter” (139; original emphasis).

But, one might object, is this not a misguided attempt once again to reduce femininity to women’s reproductive and maternal functions? This kind of biological reductionism has, after all, been a strong tendency at least since the Age of Enlightenment (Outram 89–90), and women’s supposedly natural role as the
bearers of new life has frequently been used by men to deny them various rights (e.g. the right to vote and full citizenship; see, for example, Frevert 424–425). Ian Haywood is one critic who has raised such objections to the depiction of women in Union Street (146), but Margaretta Jolly insists that these criticisms fail to do justice to the complexity of Barker’s text:

[The] “feminine experience” of the body is problematized through its performance of unconscious social desires of class and sexuality. [...] A critique of “biological reductionism” [...] ignores the fact that within the societies in crisis that Barker explores, biological questions of physical survival – “stoicism,” recovery, or simply birth itself – are fundamentals that must not be underestimated. For the poor, ill, or war-torn, the birth of new life and physical resistance are not necessarily “reductive” so much as astonishing. (242; original emphasis)

Rather than shying away from the body altogether, that is to say, Union Street uses those problems of human existence that arise from our embodied nature – birth, the need for sustenance and shelter, sexual difference, labor, and death – as a starting point for the recognition of commonality.

Moreover, Union Street does not posit such recognition as inherently comforting, but instead acknowledges that it may at times be downright frightening. This becomes clear in a harrowing scene that takes place right after Kelly’s rape. When the rapist, after violating Kelly, wants her to leave as quickly as possible the girl refuses, not wanting “to go home yet” (30). Instead, Kelly demands that her rapist treat her to a drink at a nearby restaurant, threatening to shout for help if he refuses to come with her. Soon, we thus find the two of them – victim and perpetrator – sitting at the same table in a fish-and-chip bar whose walls are “lined with mirror-tiles,” so that wherever Kelly looks, hers and the man’s eyes meet:

[A]s she continued to stare, she saw a slight movement, a crumbling almost, at the corner of the lids. Something was happening to his face. It was beginning to split, to crack, to disintegrate from within, like an egg when the time for hatching has come. She wanted to run. She didn’t want to stay there and see what would hatch out of this egg. But horror kept her pinned to her chair. And the face went on cracking. And now moisture of some kind was oozing out of the corners of his eyes, running into cracks that had not been there a minute before, dripping, finally, into the open, the agonised mouth. She watched, afraid. And looked away. But that was no use.

From every side his reflection leapt back at her, as the mirror-tiles filled with the fragments of his shattered face. (33)
Here, once again, we find the close attention to bodily matter so characteristic of Barker’s prose: slight movements on a face, moisture oozing out of the corners of the man’s eyes, and cracks forming where previously there had been none. In addition, the scene evokes each of the four symbolical clusters we have discussed: the image of something terrible hatching out of an egg (evoking the symbolism of birds); the emphasis on eyes, staring, and the desire to see (or not to see); the presence of mirrors and reflections; and, finally, the man’s gaping mouth as yet another figure of the unspeakable. The terrible knowledge implied in all this is that even the rapist cannot ultimately be excluded from the common humanity that, for better or worse, we all share. And, understandably, Kelly tries to avoid and repress this knowledge, so that when later in the story her mother begins to cry the girl tries hard not to acknowledge Mrs. Brown’s pain: “Her mother’s face, crumbling, reminded her of The Man. She could not allow herself to feel pity” (59). The recognition of commonality can, in short, be a terrifying thing indeed, as Kelly learns in *Union Street*:

His face remained. And would be there always, trailing behind it, not the cardboard terrors of the fairground, [...] but the real terror of the adult world, in which grown men open their mouths and howl like babies, where nothing that you feel, whether love or hate, is pure enough to withstand the contamination of pity. (57)

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple,” says a character in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (258), and it is precisely this realization which marks Kelly’s entry into “the real terror of the adult world” (*Union Street* 57). Accordingly, if the common nature of the human body figures as a sign of hope in Barker’s text, then once again it is not because our shared embodied nature effortlessly leads to solidarity, but because the body serves as a starting point from which community can be built, actively, as a difficult and wearisome kind of labor (Waterman 7).

**Common Women, Common Men: The Body of Domestic Fiction**

To explore further the idea that the body may serve as a common ground for the construction and maintenance of community, we need to return to the problem of female solidarity in *Union Street*, which is acknowledged as a complex task through the text’s repeated reference to distorting mirrors. Significantly, mirrors at times distort reality to such an extent in *Union Street* that it becomes difficult even to interpret the reflected image. For instance, while giving birth, Lisa sees her face reflected in a steel surface so heavily curved that the mirror-image becomes “too distorted [...] to register anything so messily human as fear” (126). At the same time, however, Barker’s text does not simply conflate
distortion with misrepresentation. When Kelly and her friend Sharon Scaife attend a fun fair, for example, they meet Joanne Wilson – the protagonist of the second section of *Union Street* – at the “entrance to the Hall of Mirrors,” a fairground attraction where the reflection of one’s body is distorted in various ways: “Sharon Scaife, who was plump and suffered for it, had found a mirror that showed her long and stringy as a bean” (19). This moment is significant for at least two reasons. First, though the mirror clearly distorts, we must also note that Sharon in fact prefers the ‘false’ image to her real, “plump” self: “I quite like it” (ibid.). The text, in other words, acknowledges that distorted images can have a kind of utopian dimension, with the reflection hinting at an alternative to the present that is, or may be, preferable for the subject. Second, the scene is important because the Hall of Mirrors functions as a *mise en abyme* of the relation between the individual stories in *Union Street*, with each of the seven sections serving as a distorted reflection of – and indeed, on – the other six (hence the presence of Joanne Wilson, the protagonist of the second section, at the entrance of the hall of mirrors). Mirrors, in short, are the bearers of three complicated and interrelated truths in Barker’s text: about the importance of the body (as well as ideal or idealized images of it) in the formation of identity; about the productive side of distortion (i.e. its potentially utopian dimension); and about the relation between the individual and the collective.

This latter point, incidentally, is the reason why figurative mirrors pervade the text of *Union Street*, serving as symbolical explorations of the commonality of women. For instance, at one point we find Kelly’s mother looking at her daughter, startled to find that “we’re alike”: “There, in the lines of nose and chin, was her own face, glimpsed in a *distorting mirror*” (58; emphasis added). Similarly, for Joanne Wilson suddenly “every older woman became an image of the future, a reason for hope or fear” (94). More abstractly, Lisa Goddard’s story mirrors Kelly’s and Joanne’s when Lisa reminisces about running through the park as a girl or working at the cake factory (113) – scenes with which we as readers are already familiar from the first two stories, but which now return in distorted shape in the third section of *Union Street*. The point is, then, that though each of these female figures is different from the other, they are nevertheless alike in some ways, as even George Harrison recognizes when he looks at the sleeping prostitute Blonde Dinah and realizes with a start that Dinah resembles his wife:

She looked like Gladys lying there, her mouth open, a wisp of hair shaken with every breath. It disturbed him. She ought not to look like Gladys. He had always believed that there were two sorts of women: the decent ones and the rest. He felt that they should look different, for how could you tell them apart, how could you remember
they were different, if every sag, every wrinkle of their used bodies proclaimed that they were one flesh? (230)

George would like to think of all prostitutes as common, in the sense of being low and distinct from ‘decent women,’ but seeing his wife’s body mirrored in Blonde Dinah’s instead forces upon him a realization that they have much in common. Put differently, if there is a double meaning to the term representation – one political and another aesthetic – there is also a similar double meaning to realism’s focus on ‘the common’: an attention to what is considered low and unseemly, but also, at the same time, an emphasis on what is shared, on our common nature as embodied beings.

This commonality in various ways explicitly extends beyond girls and women in Union Street, to include boys and men as well. We have already seen that even the man who raped Kelly cannot be entirely abjected from the human community. Moreover, there are several moments of mirroring between male and female stories in Barker’s text. For example, if Kelly Brown is disconcerted by the changes of her pubescent body (3), the same is true for Richard Scaife, whose “nose and ears seemed to have grown out of proportion to his face,” and who does not know “what to do with his hands and feet” (140). Similarly, if Muriel Scaife and Alice Bell do not like to see their reflection in a mirror because it reveals unwelcome truths (176, 255), George Harrison for his part no longer goes to the public library because he, as a retired husband unwelcome at home and without enough money to spend all his time at the pub (221–222), hates to encounter the “derelict” who truly have no home left: “George was horrified to realise that the fear on everybody else’s face was reflected in his own. He left at once and never went back” (223; emphasis added). In other words, George avoids reflecting on the “derelict” as mirrors to himself in order to avoid the unpleasant truth that, at some level, he and these smelly, homeless humans are, in fact, profoundly alike.

Perhaps the best way to start bringing together the various strands of the argument in this chapter is to address the criticism that some commentators have leveled against Union Street regarding its depiction of men. Ian Haywood, for instance, complains that for the most part men are depicted as violent and threatening, with sympathetic males either “inert” (Muriel Scaife’s dying husband), ready to “undergo a feminist conversion” (George Harrison recognizing that his wife and Dinah are alike), or sexually unthreatening (146). The example

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27 For an illuminating discussion of these two distinct meanings of the word common (i.e. what is shared vs. what is low) as they are contrasted in Great Expectations, see Pam Morris, Dickens’s Class Consciousness (108–109).
Haywood gives for a sympathetic but ‘sexually unthreatening’ man is Joss, a close friend of Iris, who is ready to help Joanne Wilson when she needs him. However, Joss is also growth-restricted, leading Joanne to observe that he would be “a husband in a million, if only his arms and legs were the normal length” (Union Street 74). For Haywood, Union Street’s portrayal of men is thus overly limited and, ultimately, unfair. In fact, however, the depiction of the men in each of these cases is equivalent to the portrayal of women because of the Union Street’s strong focus on the effects of, and limits imposed by, the human body: illness and death for John Scaife (presumably due to toxic fumes he inhaled at work), ageing and retirement for George Harrison, and restricted growth for Joss.

Pat Wheeler is thus right in claiming that in Barker’s novels “you cannot understand one gender in isolation from the other” (128). Barker herself, moreover, has eloquently defended herself against the charge of demonizing men:

I don’t think I’m making a judgment about the two sexes, in the abstract, as it were. I think I’m writing about a scene in which the heavy industry which employed mainly men, and on which so many men from the working class relied for their sense of identity, is what’s going. And the essence of the social changes in the book is the collapse of the men’s identity. The women seem to be far more resilient in the face of this particular type of social change because they have their two roles in the home and outside it. The men seem to me to be very vulnerable to it. I think this is why [...] the men sometimes seem weaker than the women. (qtd. in Moseley 40)

According to Barker, the double-burden traditionally imposed on working-class women – wage labor as well as work in the home – suddenly becomes a resource in a situation of chronic unemployment and deindustrialization, as unlike the men’s, the women’s sense of worth is not dependent on one single scene of action. At the same time, the fact that the “derelict” who live on the margins of society are depicted in Union Street as anonymous beings of indeterminate gender suggests that, when pushed to extremes of deprivation, the shared fragility of the human body even transcends the division of gender. It is therefore the intersection of gender and class, rather than gender alone, which determines Union Street’s portrayal of men and women.

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28 See also Roberto del Valle Alcalá, who notes that “Union Street is replete with male figures who have somehow deviated or been displaced from traditionally productive roles (as waged laborers and family breadwinners),” which results “in a general landscape of crisis which is not only punctuated by relative material poverty, but also by a radical disturbance of the sexual division of labor” (201).
If the body serves as the crucial site where this interaction between gender and class is negotiated and exposed, then this has to do with the repression of the body in more traditional forms of domestic realism. Consider, for instance, what Nancy Armstrong writes about the role of the body both in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century female conduct books as well as in domestic fiction of the period:

A woman was deficient in female qualities if she, like the aristocratic woman, [...] aimed at putting the body on display [...]. For a woman to display herself in such a manner was the same as saying that she was supposed to be valued for her body and its adornments, not for the virtues she might possess as a woman and wife. By the same token, the conduct books found the laboring woman unfit for domestic duties because she, too, located value in the material body. [...] By implying that the essence of woman lay inside or underneath her surface, the invention of depths in the self entailed making the material body of the woman appear superficial. (75–76)

Middle-class, female domesticity is thus defined through a double negative: neither the spectacularly attractive, ornate body of the aristocratic lady, nor the material body of laboring women; instead, middle-class femininity involves an attempt “to subordinate the body to a set of mental processes that guaranteed domesticity” (Nancy Armstrong 76). Gender, class, and a particular vision of home, in short: these form the bedrock of English, bourgeois realism (together with certain assumptions about race and ethnicity, as acknowledged in Union Street through the story of the West Indian Big Bertha).

Synchrony, Diachrony, and the History of Class

Union Street focuses on seven working-class women, and it pays particular attention to the home and the body: to how it labors, to how vulnerable it is. However, in addition to this thematic concern, we also need to bear in mind the formal features discussed in this chapter, as they are the key to understanding Union Street’s attempt at finding an adequate way to represent class. Crucially, all of these formal features can be seen as revolving around the relation between synchrony and diachrony. For instance, in the individual stories of Union Street, we have what Rick Altman calls single-focus narratives, i.e. storylines which mainly proceed from one event to the next: individual diachrony. But individual diachrony is not good at representing community, as Hans-Georg Gadamer acknowledges when he talks about subjectivity and its relation to history as a collective experience:

[H]istory does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident
way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a
distorting mirror. (278)29

The focus of subjectivity is a “distorting mirror” – and it is only by trying to
take this distortion into account that we can understand the full extent to which
we as individuals are shaped by, to which “we belong to history.” Union Street
acknowledges this very problem in its use of distorting mirrors as a symbol.
Moreover, we have seen that the text’s symbolism (birds, eyes, moments of vi‐
sion, gaping mouths, and mirrors) constitutes a paradigmatic, analytical inter‐
ruption of the narrative’s syntagmatic flow – which is in fact another way of
saying that narrative emphasizes diachrony, whereas symbolism tends towards
synchrony.

While an emphasis of synchrony over diachrony is relatively unusual in Eu‐
ropean fiction, it is not uncommon in narrative traditions that emphasize the
collective rather than the individual. The classic Chinese novel, for instance,
tends to have as its protagonist not an individual, but a group or collective, and
Franco Moretti sees this as the reason why such novels continually attempt to
minimize narrativity (“The Novel” 168): “[W]hat really matters is not what lies
‘ahead’ of a given event, as in ‘forward-looking’ European prose, but what lies
‘to the side’ of it: all the vibrations that ripple across this immense narrative
system – and all the counter-vibrations that try to keep it stable” (“The Novel
169–170). Synchrony as opposed to diachrony, in other words: a focus on the
collective, and an exploration of the social system. And this, we have seen, is
what the multiple focus of the short-story-cycle format allows Union Street to
achieve, with the text indeed showing how one event – Kelly being raped, for
instance (29) – ripples across the narrative system only to reappear, obliquely,
in the story of Muriel Scaife (149). Or, to give another example, in section two
we find Joanne Wilson remembering how she saw Lisa Goddard at the super‐
market, “weighed down with kids and shopping, pushing her belly in front of
her like another self” (94); later – another narrative ripple – we learn that Lisa
remembers seeing a “young girl” (Joanne?) watching her in the supermarket
(109). Union Street is replete with such narrative ripples, which signify a move
away from the individual life trajectory, towards the community and the social
system.

29 “In Wahrheit gehört die Geschichte nicht uns, sondern wir gehören ihr. Lange bevor
wir uns in der Rückbesinnung selber verstehen, verstehen wir uns auf selbstverständ‐
liche Weise in Familie, Gesellschaft und Staat, in denen wir leben. Der Fokus der Sub‐
jectivität ist ein Zerrspiegel” (Wahrheit und Methode 261).
And yet, there is a catch, because arguably what one loses by focusing on the social system are the very notions of causality and agency. Frederic Jameson writes about the relation between synchrony, diachrony, and causality:

[I]t is as though the ever greater accumulation of facts about a given period (very much including our own) determines a gravitational shift from diachronic thinking (so-called linear history) to synchronic or systemic modeling. It is a shift that can be measured [...] by the increasing frequency of attacks on causality [...]. (Archaeologies of the Future 87)

The key point, for Jameson, is that this shift from diachronic thinking to synchronic or systemic modeling tends to affect our ability to conceive of alternative developmental paths:

Diachronic causality, the single string of causes, the billiard-ball theory of change, tends to isolate a causal line which might have been different, a single-shot effectivity (even an ultimately determining instance) which can very easily be replaced by an alternate hypothesis. But if, instead of this diachronic strand, we begin to posit causality as an immense synchronic interrelationship, as a web of overdetermination, a Spinozan substance made up of innumerable simultaneously coexisting cells or veins, then it is harder to object some causal alternative: all causes are already there [...]. (Archaeologies of the Future 88)

Increasing synchronic complexity thus comes at the cost of agency: “[W]inner loses, as Sartre liked to put it: the more airtight the synchronic system laid in place all around us, the more surely history itself evaporates in the process, and along with it any possibility of political agency or collective anti-systemic praxis” (Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future 89). This is in fact already implied in Franco Moretti’s description of the synchronic narrative system of the Chinese novel, where we find vibrations and counter-vibrations that keep the system stable – and perhaps this systemic paralysis explains why John Brannigan believes that it is Kelly Brown’s “fate to live out the lives of all the women depicted in Union Street” (27; emphasis added).

Given the conditions depicted in Union Street, stability – i.e. continuing deprivation, the permanence of crisis – is of course the last thing that is needed, and one may now begin to wonder whether the text’s attempt to avoid the domestic fiction’s ideological pitfalls have merely entangled it in a different kind of realism that, despite everything, proves to be a form of the status quo. To this pessimistic conclusion, we might object that Union Street’s realism is highly self-reflexive, in the sense of interrogating and exposing its own discursive limits. Think, for example, of the text’s use of mirrors as figurative leitmotifs:
realism is a bit like a mirror – but how do mirrors work? How, in other words, do mirrors relate to individual identity, to life and the body, to truth? Or think of the gaping, speechless mouths in *Union Street*: What are the things that remain impossible to say? Does the unspeakable constitute not only a limit to discourse, but also its condition of possibility (in the sense of anchoring meaning in a hypothesized Real that must always remain just outside the reach of language)? Take, finally, the third symbolical cluster, eyes and vision: Who looks at whom, and with what purpose in mind? Is it the distanced, objectifying, alienating gaze, or a look of love that serves to connect and bind people together? Mirrors, mouths, eyes – reflection, telling, showing: in other words, the well-known literary critical problem of narrative perspective.

And narrative perspective is a vital issue in this context because the realist novel has so often been accused of adopting a middle-class point of view on working-class lives. John Brannigan has aptly summarized Raymond Williams’s comments on the problem: “[O]ne danger with realist representation of the working class is that it risks exercising a class division in its very form, between the ‘us’ of the narrator and reader, and the ‘them’ of its subject” (29). Brannigan has also shown in detail, however, that *Union Street* strives to avoid such narrative distance by two related means: first, by seamlessly shifting back and forth between a more objective narrative position and the subjectivities of the individual characters, thus avoiding the potentially solipsistic perspective of one single character (29–30); and second, by avoiding a narrative point of view that is superior to the characters’ collective perspective, with the narrator instead using an idiom that “is never far from the ways in which the characters might describe their own experiences,” and with the limits to the narrator’s knowledge corresponding, roughly, to the limits of collective communal knowledge (hence Blonde Dinah, the prostitute who lives on Wharfe Street, cannot become the main focalizer of section six, whereas George Harrison – who lives on Union Street – can; 30). The narrator in *Union Street* is thus not “an omniscient being hovering over the story” (Brannigan 28), and against accusations that *Union Street*’s realism provides us with a cripplingy limited view, the text’s eminently self-reflexive qualities may serve as a first line of defense. The trouble, however, with this defense is that self-reflexivity is also a kind of irony that merely allows one to have one’s cake and eat it (Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* 177): one admits, in a meta-comment, that realism is limited and problematic – but one nevertheless continues to adhere to its conventions.

30 As Roberto del Valle Alcalá rightly notes (206), Barker would place the topic of prostitution at the center of her next novel, *Blow Your House Down* (1984).
A much stronger line of defense is that *Union Street* does not stop at constructing a more complex but potentially paralyzing synchronic system out of its individual, diachronic narratives. Instead, it takes this narrative system and tries, as it were, to fold it back into a diachronic trajectory, thus preparing the ground for a historical analysis of social class. To fully appreciate this idea, we do well to bear in mind E. P. Thompson’s point that class is a thoroughly historical phenomenon; class is not a structure or category, but something that happens (9):

If we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men [and women] over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions. Class is defined by men [and women] as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition. (11)

Accordingly, *Union Street* does not follow the history of one individual, but at the end of each section stops time, tracks back to another individual, starts again, moves forward slightly, backtracks again: a synchronic multitude of individual experiences, encapsulated in separate stories – but arranged in a meaningful sequence, from the youngest to the oldest woman, which reintroduces diachrony into the narrative because humans, as historical actors, have memories.31

It is for this reason that the older women in *Union Street* are so important, as each new section adds, not only a new systemic ripple (associated with synchrony), but also an additional layer of memories (i.e. diachrony), reaching back further and further into the past, with Alice – a committed socialist (241) – serving as a veritable repository of memory: “There wasn’t much she’d learned in the Depression that still made sense in the seventies. And yet. She was poorer now than she’d been then. And worse housed. Then, she’d had a lovely little Council house” (242). Economic crisis, in other words, is nothing new for Alice, but she remembers that in the past there was adequate public housing – as there is not in her present. We have seen that newspapers for the most part remain unread in *Union Street*, but this is not the case with Alice, who follows the “continued reports that the miners were about to go on strike” (239). Remembering,

31 Jonathan Sperber, writing about the European revolutions of 1848, argues that general theories of revolution tend to neglect “the role of memories and experience in human events”: “What made 1848 different from 1789 was above all that in 1848 people remembered what had happened in 1789 and acted on those memories, thus creating a different outcome” (271). Memories, in other words, can lead to different historical outcomes.
following the news, engaging in political arguments with Mrs. Harrison (also elderly, but from a country background and a Tory; 241): Alice, the oldest woman in the text, most explicitly adds not only a layer of memory, but also an awareness of history and politics to Union Street’s narrative system.

Let us, one final time, re-examine the key points. In effect, the argument presented in the preceding paragraphs is inspired by Mark Rawlinson’s comments on the relation between synchrony and diachrony in Union Street:

[Union Street cues us] to start making sense of the diachronic or historical patterns in the lives which are opened to view by the narrative’s synchronic snap-shots of female experience. It also points us, ironically, to all that divides the individuals who live check by jowl in the street [...]. (21)

However, while Rawlinson argues that the women’s lives are “synchronic snap-shots,” the seven sections in fact constitute individual diachronies that Union Street juxtaposes with one another in order to create a higher-level, collective synchrony. To avoid the potentially paralyzing stasis that tends to characterize such synchronic systems, Union Street then re-introduces diachrony – but a diachrony of a different order, which is only present in a virtual or symbolic space: as the memory of individual characters (particularly Alice Bell), and in the ‘chronological’ movement from the youngest to the oldest female character that we as readers can see and interpret. A collective diachrony, in short: the collective history of class, derived from a domestic realism that takes seriously the implications of the fragile human body and its need for shelter as a precondition for home and a sense of belonging. It is with these findings in mind that we may now turn to the exploration of memory, myth, and collective identity in Jeffrey Eugenides’s The Virgin Suicides.

32 Incidentally, anyone interested in cinematic adaptation as brazenly ideological rewriting might want to start with Martin Ritt’s Stanley & Iris (1989). Ritt’s film is – ostensibly – based on Union Street and tells the story of Iris (played by Jane Fonda!), who works in a factory and, there, meets Stanley, who cannot read (i.e. who is based on Muriel Scaife’s husband, John). The film in effect turns Barker’s account of the struggles of a Northern-English industrial community during the economic crisis of the 1970s into a story of individual upward mobility in the United States under Ronald Reagan, with Iris teaching Stanley how to read, and the two of them eventually getting married and moving to a nicer neighborhood.