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.

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

[...] however 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.3

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,

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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). Rocío 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