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

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8 I would thus be somewhat more reluctant than Roberto del Valle Alcalá to ascribe to Iris a “sustained rejection of the subaltern position accorded to working-class women,” or to posit that she “embodies an attitude of refusal which in large measure corroborates the paramount importance accorded by revolutionary feminists like Federici to reproduction as the strategic axis of the class struggle” (203).
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).