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)20

---

20 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.21

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-

21 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).
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.22 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.23

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

---

22 Note that John Brannigan (21) also associates Kelly’s rage with Caliban’s.

23 This is not to say that Lucy Gallagher is wrong in suggesting that Kelly’s violence, her “dirtying of herself and her environment is actually a step toward her recovery” (49). It is merely to emphasize that the truths contained in mirrors are not always welcome, at least not initially, and may trigger strong ‘defense mechanisms.’
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 naive.

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