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.27

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.

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).