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 vision, gaping mouths, and mirrors) constitutes a paradigmatic, analytical interruption 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 European 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 supermarket, “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.

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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 cripplingly 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.

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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.32 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.

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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.