familiarize individuals with a wide range of different story templates, which they can then use as cognitive resources when it comes to narrativizing their life experiences – an ability that is widely held to be a crucial factor in maintaining mental health (e.g. Engel et al., Narrative in Health Care). Conversely, the reiteration of negative stereotypes in fiction may have averse emotional effects, particularly on those who already suffer from a precarious sense of belonging (witness, for instance, Maggie’s complaint in The Mill on the Floss that women who are “dark” like her always lose out against their “light-complexioned” rivals – a conventional pattern that Eliot’s novel repeatedly associates with racist prejudices against ‘darker’ races; The Mill on the Floss 270; bk. 5, ch. 4; see also the discussion of Victorian views of gypsies in chapter two).

At the same time, we ought to be wary of overestimating the power of fiction to avert the tragedy of suicide (or any other real-life tragedies, for that matter). In Mrs. Dalloway, for instance, a quotation from Shakespeare’s Coriolanus repeatedly provides Clarissa Dalloway with a sense of consolation – but the very same passage fails to prevent Septimus from committing suicide. In a similar vein, the group of boys in The Virgin Suicides try to console the Lisbon girls with rock songs played to them over the phone, but hopeful lyrics prove insufficient in preventing the sisters from taking their lives. Likewise, though the recognition of shared suffering constitutes a vital element of emotional support – e.g. for Ahab and Pip in Moby-Dick, or for Alice Bell and Kelly Brown in Union Street – the varied outcomes in each of these cases suggest that other factors play an equally decisive part. Indeed, the argument in chapter four regarding Absalom, Absalom! suggests that therapeutic storytelling has the power to alleviate the symptoms of unbelonging, as well as to alert us to the roots of this condition, but that long-term improvement may require more than continual narrativization – including a willingness to engage in, and fight for, material changes to communal homes. Fiction, in short, has the power to console, to raise our awareness of hitherto unsuspected dimensions of human experience, and even to instill us with utopian hopes for a better and more homely future. Nevertheless, in the final analysis it is collective human agency – and not narratives of belonging alone – that will change the world and, perhaps, make it a more hospitable place.

**Home-Making: Imaginary Solutions to Real-Life Contradictions**

Let us take stock. The first section of the conclusion focused on genres as fields of knowledge that intersect with one another in literary texts, in a manner that is akin to an individual’s multiple and potentially conflicting ties of loyalty and belonging. We then turned to suicide as an extreme expression of unbelonging,
and though fiction may at times serve to alleviate alienation, it is also crucial to retain a realistic sense of the limits of fiction’s transformative, therapeutic power. This latter point, in turn, requires us to reexamine the claim made in the introductory chapter that fictions are best understood as home-making practices. What the discussion of suicide forces us to state more clearly is that fiction constitutes an attempt to enhance our sense of belonging. More precisely, the fictional compromise tries to provide us with imaginary solutions to real-life contradictions – which not only leaves open the possibility that the form of a particular fictional compromise may be entirely unconvincing, but also acknowledges that even the most accomplished imaginary compromise may fail to have any palpable effect in a given real-life situation. Fiction is a home-making practice, and like any such practice it may very well fail. At the same time, this does not reduce the heuristic value of fiction for cultural analysis, as it is the formulation of a particular problem, rather than the success of its imaginary solution, that tells us most about historical pressures and cultural needs.

In the case of Moby-Dick, for instance, one key contradiction that the novel attempts to resolve is the clash, in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, between a political culture embracing the value of individualism, and social pressures on a steadily increasing fraction of the population toward economic dependence and conformity. More precisely, cultural ideals of independence and the free individual’s pursuit of happiness conflicted sharply with the reality of increasing social inequality, the spread of standardized industrial production, and the concomitant disciplining of a growing workforce engaged in semi-skilled wage labor: “a form of dependency that seemed to contradict the republican principles on which the country had been founded” (McPherson 23). In terms of its story, Moby-Dick rejects the sovereign individualism of Ahab (who dies at the end of the novel), and instead sides with the conformist wage-laborer Ishmael (who survives the disaster to tell the tale). In terms of discourse or style, however, few literary texts are as idiosyncratic and non-conformist as Moby-Dick, and we can therefore say that the novel’s form salvages the very ‘extremist’ individualism that it rejects on the level of the story. In this way, Moby-Dick attempts to have its cake and eat it: a (more or less) elegant imaginary solution to an intractable real-life problem.

The distinction between story and discourse also allows us to understand how The Mill on the Floss tries to reconcile a Victorian ideology of progress with a political system built on the so-called respect for tradition. On the one hand, the mid-nineteenth century constituted a period of relief in Victorian England: “the huge debts left by the wars against the French had not proved crippling, the working classes had not revolted, the Chartist movement of the 1830s and
1840s had collapsed” (Colin Matthew 8). In addition, the hitherto fitful – and possibly negative – development of workers’ living standards first stabilized and then began to improve in the course of the 1850s (e.g. Floud et al. 162–163; Hoppen 78–79); the concept of ‘evolutionary’ (as opposed to revolutionary) progress “came to permeate every aspect of Victorian life and thought” (H.C.G. Matthew 523). However, British political culture was at the same time deeply averse to change, dominated by an aristocracy that was not only the richest in Europe (Osterhammel 1068), but that had also been able to maintain a socio-political position that was nearly as strong as it had been a hundred years earlier (Niedhart 39–40). More generally, a ‘respect for tradition’ was as strong a force as the belief in scientific and moral progress, and it is this conflict that lies at the heart of The Mill on the Floss. On the level of the story, Eliot’s novel aligns itself squarely with the forces of progress (e.g. Stephen Guest), and either kills off or condemns to a childless, ‘barren’ existence all the characters who cling to the past (Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver, Maggie, Tom, and Philip). On the level of discourse, however, the narrator’s nostalgia belies the story’s endorsement of progress, and while the story’s ‘reality principle’ works steadfastly and remorselessly towards Maggie’s extinction, the novel’s discourse increasingly abandons any signs of ‘mature’ ironic distance toward the female protagonist. It is a strained compromise, to be sure – but a compromise of sorts, nevertheless.

If The Mill on the Floss revolves in part around the conflict between faith in progress and respect for the past, then a key conflict in Mrs. Dalloway is the clash between, on the one hand, the freedom from interference, and, on the other, the freedom to belong. Woolf’s novel, we saw in chapter two, revels in the experience of urban anonymity even as it associates modernist fragmentation with illness, trauma, and the continual misreading of some of its characters by others. More precisely, on the level of the novel’s story it is Clarissa and the other members of the Dalloway circle who appreciate most fully the freedom of moving through the imperial city, while Septimus and Lucrezia are the characters who feel most isolated and beleaguered amongst London’s teeming multitudes. At the same time, the sections focusing on the Dalloway circle are stylistically more conservative (i.e. closest to the model of classic realism), while the sections revolving around Septimus and his wife embrace most fully the urban aesthetics of modernist fragmentation. Put differently, on the level of the story the Dalloways are associated with the pleasure of solitary urban wanderings (i.e. the freedom from interference), while the story of Septimus and Lucrezia revolves around the lack of human connection (i.e. the freedom to belong). Stylistically, however, it is the sections centering on the Dalloways that emphasize connection and coherence in point of view, whereas Septimus and Lucrezia’s
perspective appears in free-floating combination with various and contiguous others. This chiastic structure creates a sense of formal balance – and thus attempts to reconcile, in imaginary form, the class conflict between the small social set of the Dalloways and the multitude of perspectives associated with Septimus and his Italian wife.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the real-life problem that only too clearly confronts the United States of the 1930s is the seemingly intractable history of racial conflict. And yet, while Faulkner’s novel pits against each other conflicting interpretations and elaborations of this traumatic past (e.g. Miss Rosa’s and Grandfather Compson’s), shuttling back and forth from one level of time to another, its breathless, interminable sentences provide the novel with an underlying and unified stylistic rhythm. Using the terms developed in chapter four, we could say that the stylistic technique of uncanny narration, used throughout the novel, serves to reconcile the story’s conflicting interpretations of the past, as each of the characters appears equally burdened by the novel’s onerous syntax. However, the novel’s thematic insistence on the crushing weight of history is in some ways mitigated by the ease with which the narrative shifts from one temporal level to the next. If, in short, Faulkner’s story presents us with characters locked in historical conflict, the novel’s discourse flows like one great single stream across periods and individuals, counteracting the story’s centripetal forces.

In *Union Street*, the conflict between fragmentation and unity is important, too, but here it revolves more specifically around the conceptual nexus between human agency and class. On the one hand, the novel continually insists on the extent to which its working-class characters are the victims of social circumstances, determined by environmental forces far beyond their individual control. On the other hand, *Union Street* tries to overcome its protagonists’ entrapment in a single, overarching social structure by breaking its story up into seven discursively discrete segments that, taken together, provide us with a synchronic panorama of simultaneously independent and interconnected lives. At the same time, the novel tries to reintroduce a sense of diachronic movement because an emphasis on synchrony threatens to dissolve history and, along with it, any room for human agency (i.e. if there is no horizon of temporal progression, then it is difficult to see how one could possibly construct a better future). As discussed in chapter five, *Union Street* attempts to overcome this potential deadlock by arranging its seven stories in such a way that its more or less synchronic ‘story-time’ is combined with a discursive ‘life-time’ progression from Kelly Brown, the youngest character, through to the oldest, Alice Bell. Barker’s novel thus imaginatively opens up a space for historical transformation – at a time
when the real-life industrial working-class of Thatcherite Britain was all too evidently in disarray (Marwick 153: “The overriding economic fact was the shrinkage of Britain’s industrial base”; cf Harris 112–115).

*The Virgin Suicides*, finally, attempts to reconcile two conflicting interpretations of American history in the second half of the twentieth century. According to the first of these interpretations, the postwar years up until, roughly, 1963 not only saw the United States at the height of its economic power; the period was also a time of social stability and a broad political consensus directed against the evils of Soviet communism. Over the next decade or so, this consensus fell apart, as ‘special interest groups’ supposedly precipitated the country’s material and moral decline, resulting in the culture wars that continued to cripple U.S. political culture in the early 1990s. According to a second, competing narrative, the 1950s were a period of mind-numbing conformism and widespread oppression of women, ethnic minorities, and everyone who could be considered ‘deviant’ or ‘queer.’ It was only in the 1960s that the new social movements began finally to challenge these hegemonic structures, leading to landmark civil rights legislation and culminating in the exposure of government corruption from Vietnam to Watergate. The economic downturn of the 1970s then paved the way for a resurgence of the political right, which remained in power until January 1993 – and thus until the beginning of the year in which *The Virgin Suicides* was published. While in the first narrative, identity politics appears as one symptom of what went wrong with the country, in the second it constitutes the very foundation of the nation’s social and political progress. At the same time, the early 1970s feature as a negative watershed in both these conflicting narratives, and it is precisely at this point in time that the Lisbon sisters take their lives. The key traumatic event of Eugenides’s novel is thus linked to a moment in U.S. history that symbolizes a kind of negative consensus. Moreover, while the characters who remain traumatized by these events are male, white, middle-aged heterosexuals (i.e. the social group most strongly associated with the first historical narrative), their representation as a group is formally analogous to the wounded collective subjectivity that underpins the projects of identity politics commonly linked to the second interpretation of the nation’s history. In this way, *The Virgin Suicides* proposes an imaginary solution to the U.S. culture wars, which in real life were (and still are) far from abating.

Admittedly, none of the fictional compromises outlined above will hold up to critical scrutiny, as it is always possible to detect imbalances, contradictions, and questionable assumptions that undermine or at least problematize the imaginary solution that a given text proposes. However, to unravel a fictional compromise tends to require a considerable amount of time and interpretive effort. If one