

COPING STRATEGIES IN PAT BARKER'S UNION STREET

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by

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## ABSTRACT

Not much critical attention has been paid to the writings of Pat Barker, a British working-class novelist who has published five novels since 1982. This scarcity of critical response may be due in part to a lack of reading strategies with which to adequately address the issues presented in these works. Critics and theorists who have approached Barker's writing have had difficulty engaging it because they either find Barker's unapologetic working-class realism to be incompatible with the reading strategies they are used to applying to realist texts, or they have read Barker's novels specifically to find utopian examples of working-class women's resistance and community.

This study focuses on Barker's first novel, Union Street, for it exemplifies her early work: the concerns voiced in this novel are also addressed in both Blow your House Down and The Century's Daughter. My approach is to read this text dialogically in order to be able to hear and analyse the women's voices as they struggle within and against a series of oppressive patriarchal and class discourses.

The study demonstrates that community is an ambivalent



space for the women of Union Street, for although they find comfort within it, it internalizes and reinforces many of the discourses which act to oppress both the women and the community as a whole. We can also see how limited the choices of possible discourses of resistance are (and how difficult it is to produce new, less oppressive discourses), both for the women of Union Street and for actual working-class women like them. In response to these limitations, the women voice and enact strategies which may not ultimately help them to speak their resistance, but do help them to cope with their oppression.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

For those who are unfamiliar with Pat Barker, some brief introductory information may be of interest. She was born into a working-class family on May 8, 1943 in Thornaby-on-Tees, England. She was raised by her grandmother in a crumbling house. They "survived on national assistance, while Pat's mother, who lived nearby, worked as a cleaner to support her children by a second marriage to a man too ill to work" (Fairweather 21). She attended the London School of Economics and Political Science, where she received her B.Sc. in 1965, and taught school from 1965 to 1970.

Her writings include Union Street (Virago, 1982; Putnam, 1983), for which she won the Fawcett Prize, Blow Your House Down (Virago, 1984), The Century's Daughter (Virago, 1986), The Man Who Wasn't There (Virago, 1989), and Regeneration (Dutton, 1992). In 1982 she was named one of Britain's twenty best young writers by the Book Marketing Society. Little scholarly work has been done on Barker to date, despite the positive reviews that her novels have received. Sources of critical work include: interviews of Barker by Donna Perry (1991) and Eileen Fairweather (1982); a general article containing a small section on Barker by

Lyn Pykett (1987); an article published in Sweden by Ola Larsmo, entitled "En bla plasthink: Om Pat Barkers realism," in Bonniers-Letterara-Magasin, Sweden (1986 Feb), 55:1, 44-47; and a chapter called "Radical Writing" in Peter Hitchcock's Dialogics of the Oppressed, appearing in 1993.

During her apprenticeship as a writer she took a writing course with Angela Carter, who encouraged her in her writing about working-class subjects. Before that, Barker had been writing mainly about the kind of middle-class setting that she experienced as an adult. The experience with Carter led directly to the writing of Union Street. According to Barker, for the writing of Union Street she drew "very massively on [her own] experiences in growing up [in a working-class community], although it's not an autobiographical work" (Contemporary Authors 40).

Barker presently lives in Durham, England, with her husband and two children.

## INTRODUCTION

In his chapter entitled "Is Literary Transgression Stupid?,"<sup>1</sup> Keith Booker writes that "the notion that literature can be genuinely transgressive in a political sense has risen from anathema to apotheosis" (3) within the academy in recent years. His pessimism is perhaps warranted for, as we will see, unless it is gone about self-consciously, the act of theorizing texts as politically transgressive can unintentionally silence the text. However, the recent attention that academics have paid to the interrogation of dominant discourses of class and patriarchy strikes me as a very hopeful sign, for it indicates a growing awareness of political issues on the part of a group which has much power within our culture when it comes to transmitting information to students, to each other, and sometimes directly to the public at large. If we believe, as Alan Sinfield does, that

Stories transmit power: they are structured into the social order and the criteria of plausibility define, or seem to define, the scope of feasible political change (25),

then we can see that the power of story is in its reception

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<sup>1</sup>Booker concludes that literary transgression is not, in fact, stupid.

- in the work of fiction's ability to make new discourses plausible in the mind of the reader. If we are interested in inciting political change both within and outside of the university, a study of fiction can help us to identify those discourses (of class, patriarchy or race) which must be resisted or contested.

However, as I discuss in chapter one, there is a central problem in the way literary texts are approached by readers, who tend to bring a set of assumptions and expectations to works of fiction and often expect or even force texts to conform to these assumptions. This can result in textual misreadings or misrepresentations. Many readers find theory to be helpful in forming their readings of texts. But what if a theoretical approach does not yet exist which can address a certain kind of text, as is the case when speaking about the work of Pat Barker? Adhering too closely to prefabricated theoretical frameworks in these cases is dangerous, for the theory can become a technology which moulds the reception of text - perhaps even by assigning it a reading in which it is seen to support those structures that it actually speaks out against.<sup>2</sup> As I will

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<sup>2</sup>Every reading is "theoretical," whether we refer directly to theoretical texts or not. However, critics, (myself included) must try to be as self-conscious as possible about how the assumptions we bring to reading texts can influence our readings. Trying to read openly and self-consciously is an important part of my own reading strategy,

show in chapter one, there exists no single theory that explicitly addresses working-class and feminist concerns as Barker presents them in Union Street. Nevertheless, I do find that the work of the Bakhtin circle, with its emphasis on the importance of the utterance context and on the dialogic exchange between consciousnesses, can inform my reading strategy by helping me to hear the complexity of the voices collected in Barker's work. This reading strategy corresponds with my interests in the text, which lie not in defining Barker's writing as working-class based on literary distinctions of genre or the political affinities and socioeconomic circumstances experienced by the writer in her past or present, but in the possibility that working-class literature may communicate to us important information about the lives of working-class women. Further, in this chapter I will demonstrate that working-class fiction, and in particular that by Pat Barker, can be read as constructing its own theories about the effect of different discourses on subjects within society. My focus here is on Union Street, which presents the same issues and concerns that later appear in Blow Your House Down and The Century's Daughter. I believe the reading strategies presented here can address these two later novels.

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but I acknowledge that even my own self-conscious reading contains my own hidden assumptions.



Chapter two opens with a look at the role of the community to see how it functions as both a site of encouragement and repression, in order to help form an understanding of the contexts that these women speak in and through. I am interested in finding out what avenues for coping, resistance, and social critique are open to the women of Union Street, and how the women see and communicate their activity along these avenues. The chapter entitled "Kelly Brown," which presents the speech of many community members, provides one of the most complex renderings of the community and of the many individuals who comprise it. The chapters entitled "Joanne Wilson" and "Alice Bell" provide corollaries and points of disagreement with Kelly Brown, and help to provide a more diverse view of the possibilities of the women's existence and resistance on Union Street. However, we must keep in mind that many of Barker's characters are restricted both socially and financially, and their resources for resistance and for coping are limited.

Barker's text does not provide us with a lesson in resistance so much as examples of what must be resisted, both within the text and in the "real" world. Barker's text may not depict subversion so much as incite it by making readers aware of and able to act upon problems in society. People, not characters, need to be subversive. Ultimately, resistance must happen outside the literary text.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Call and Response: Debating A Theoretical Framework

An analysis of some of the reviews of Barker's early novels reveals that many reviewers lack the experience and the critical tools to adequately interact with working-class writing by women. This lack leads to a multiform resistance to the kind of work that Barker produces. In order to understand this resistance, we must look at the ways in which how we read and what we expect from what we read are conditioned, for this conditioning creates a barrier to a dialogic creation of meaning.

Dale Bauer tells us that authoritative, interpretive paradigms of reading are shaped by various communities of readers, including critics, which, by "threat of exclusion and misuse of power... determines what the community will or will not countenance, what it can (or cannot) incorporate onto its theoretical ground" (xi). The purpose of this chapter is to find a critical framework which will adequately address Barker's working-class and female concerns as they are presented within the novel. However, it is important to look at past readings of Barker to see how readings of working-class literature are influenced by

discourses from outside the working class. When the small but powerful group of reviewers, professors and critics who influence what books will be read and taught (and therefore bought) use genre and class-specific interpretive strategies which do not address the concerns of a novel, they can negatively influence the reception of that cultural product. The works which do not neatly interface with these reading paradigms either cannot be addressed at all and so are ignored or excluded from discussion, or find that they are being resisted. This is not to say that critics are opposed to Barker's work. On the contrary, many have commented on the power of her prose and the authenticity of her dialogue, and praised her feminist sensibilities. In fact, many reviewers have lauded Barker's work precisely for her frank portrayal of working-class life. What is important, though, is that their analysis seldom moves beyond this congratulatory nod and into an in-depth interaction with her work. This reluctance to thoroughly engage the working-class novel mirrors people's reluctance to acknowledge problems of poverty or violence against women in society.

We can see this critical resistance at work in Hermione Lee's review of Union Street. Lee, unable to assimilate the "grim details" of the work, concludes that the "result is a serious, well-meant, gripping set of case histories, but not a novel" (Lee 30). Implicit in her

reading is the sense that the actual lived experience of the working-class women in Barker's work is not appropriate subject-matter for a novel and that Union Street, because of its unsparing depiction of hardship, is perhaps more suited to readers of sociology or of crime reports. It is unclear whether Lee's discomfort lies mainly in the verisimilitude of these "grim details" themselves, or in the inappropriate placement of these details within the genre of the novel.

Barker's third novel, The Century's Daughter, which has many similarities to Union Street, engendered a similar response. It is telling that Paul Driver begins his finally positive review by invoking the words of Henry James, who states that "the air of reality... [is] the supreme virtue of the novel - the merit on which all its other merits...helplessly and submissively depend" (James, in Driver 24). Driver then goes on to say that "unfortunately ... [Barker's is] a consciously 'working-class' fiction whose claim to reality-status might be found off-puttingly vehement" (Driver 24). As Peter Hitchcock points out: "one should ask just how often the 'reality status' of consciously *bourgeois* fiction is questioned" (DQ 217n). Middle-class society is uncomfortable with admitting the existence of a reality different from their own and is unwilling to dialogue with working-class discourses. The problem, then, is that Barker's discourse of realism, which

unflinchingly and unromantically depicts these women's struggles, is too real - too consciously and deliberately working-class. The lived experience of the characters is often emotionally difficult to read, and Barker does not spare us in her depictions of the violence that touches these women or of the harsh economic conditions they endure. Driver's proposed corrective to this off-putting realism is that Barker "might...have allowed herself more leavening elements, even a dash of something operatic, to reduce the risk of dourness" (26). That this dash of the operatic would have been incompatible with the tenor of the work does not seem to concern him. Operatic touches, with their reliance on artifice, exaggeration and melodrama, would undermine the power of Barker's understated writing style. Realism, for Driver, is the supreme virtue - but only if it depicts a reality that confirms his expectations and beliefs of what his society is like. He is willing to sacrifice the purity of realism - by admitting a dash of the operatic - when the reality presented is one that he would prefer not to admit exists. Driver's invocation of James and his references to opera give us insight into his critical practice. They indicate that perhaps his assumptions about realism as technique and the novel as genre may not allow him to enter into dialogue with or produce meaning out of Barker's texts.

Other reviewers have resisted Barker's insistent realism by dismissing it as being boring or trivial. In the 1986 Times Literary Supplement Isabel Scholes wonders "if anyone could have mattered less" than Liza, the main character of The Century's Daughter, whom she describes as "an unstoppable bore" who trivializes larger issues such as "the disintegration of working-class culture" (1168). Scholes desires to see depictions of strong, serious Working-class characters directly and consciously engaging with the "larger" issues and problems of working-class existence.<sup>3</sup> What Scholes fails to recognize is that Barker is writing, at least in part, about the reasons why working-class women are often not engaged in improving their own lives. Working-class women must concern themselves with the daily problems of surviving poverty and oppression. Paying attention to so-called trivial matters may be a strategy to help them cope in situations in which they have no hope of gaining power. Again, the critic rejects the portrayal of a reality which conflicts with his or her desires and expectations. This does not mean that that reality is not valid. In Barker's case, much of her writing springs from actual lived experience. She tells us: "I write about what

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<sup>3</sup>Toril Moi identifies this reading strategy as originating in some early Anglo-American feminist theory, wherein readers strove to find and "identify with strong, impressive female characters" (Sexual/Textual Politics 47).

I see happening in depressed regions...I use women I know," herself included (in Perry 237).

The "reality-status" of the books is not the only problem for reviewers. For Driver, the project itself "inescapably" risks a "caricaturing treatment of its subject" (24). He writes that this "danger of involuntary caricature [is] incurred by the genre (working-class novel)" (26). And although he maintains that Barker, by and large, avoids this pitfall by keeping her "moral passion...suitably in check" (26), he still finds himself distanced from the material in the book wherein particular working-class and feminist world views are articulated. In his review he focuses his attention not on Liza but on Stephen, her male social worker. Although Driver seems amenable to the working-class project, he turns away from the main character and her struggles. This indicates a class and gender bias which comes through in his reading strategy and prevents him from engaging with important issues in the work. If readers and reviewers focus on the male, middle-class experience found in a text that centres on the voicing of the multiple meanings of being female and working-class, then it follows that these female voices are not yet being heard.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Stephen, the social worker, is not a representation of oppressive power within the novel, but instead forges a bond of understanding and a friendship with Liza which is remarkable for its understanding in the face of all their

Reviewers are unwilling to change their expectations when confronted with a discourse that challenges them. This echoes Barker's own belief that these working-class "women are highly articulate, but their problem is that nobody is listening to them" (In Pykett 72). The question is, how can we develop strategies to help us hear these voices by entering into an exchange with Barker's text?

Not only "mainstream" reviewers, but also professional academics who are self-conscious literary theorists bring their own desires and expectations to their readings of fiction. Politically motivated theorists tend to read texts they regard as "subversive" so that those texts subvert oppressive social structures in the way favoured by their preferred theory. As a result, critics may not be sensitive to different forms of resistance, or those problems that make resistance difficult, that are not accounted for by their theories.<sup>5</sup> For Patricia Yaeger, informed by Bakhtin's theories of dialogism, the "dialogic

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differences.

<sup>5</sup>My point here is not that critics looking at fiction should not use theory. Different theories obviously provide us with valuable insights into reading and resistance. My point is rather that certain critics' personal and professional investment in theory causes them to privilege the theoretical approach over the critical object, resulting in readings which impose issues on the text that are not of primary concern, or which fail to deal with issues that are.



tendency of languages to interact with one another is the source of textual liberation ...[making the literary text] the place where this work of preserving cultural hegemony is undone" (255, my italics). Here, we can see that "textual liberation" is expected to the exclusion of all other fronts of liberation. "Liberation" seems to come about as a result of the voicing of "resistance" on the part of the author or her characters. It is unclear what form this resistance takes and in what way, if at all, this resistance can extend outside the pages of the novel.

Lyn Pykett, informed by a feminist and class-consciousness, writes that Barker's realism is a useful tool (73) in that it allows us to hear the "story of a struggle, of familial and class conflict, of individuals who are in perpetual danger of being obliterated by oppressive surroundings and economic conditions - in fact by history itself" (74). For Pykett, Barker's work attempts to "create a new way of looking at life," offering a new and tentative order based on the "vision of at least the possibility of holding together the fragments [of community]" (74). The desire here is for a narrative in which the women find relief or support within the community which becomes an, at least partially, emancipated space wherein the women collectively attempt to ward off those forces which threaten to obliterate them. This desire results in a reading which

ignores the fact that the attempts at community formation in Barker's novels are extremely problematic, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter.<sup>6</sup>

Taking up Pykett's discussion of community formation, Peter Hitchcock devotes an entire chapter, entitled "Radical Writing," to discussing Union Street and The Century's Daughter in his book Dialogics of the Oppressed. He writes:

The social relations that conjoin to produce oppression...are not the monopoly of the lives of working-class women; nor is the language used to communicate these relations. Barker's point is to suggest, however, that the specific struggles of such women have received scant cultural expression, and even less cultural critique, and that this requires a little more than a tactical reorientation of writer and reader: it needs an alternative culture of writing and reception (65).

Hitchcock believes that in order to be read adequately, Barker's novels need to be received within a prefabricated theoretical framework. The problem here is that, as Pykett notes, the novels attempt to "create a new way of looking at life." That is, they themselves seek to create the "alternative culture of writing and reception" that Hitchcock says must preexist them. Hitchcock assumes that a fictional work is something which one must apply theory to,

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<sup>6</sup>It also remains to be seen what comfort an academic's vision of community in a novel can offer to the actual working-class women whose lives are similar to those of Barker's characters.

rather than something which can posit its own theories. This need not be so. For Bauer, possibility lies in the act of reading fiction in that we can "come to think in terms of experiences different from [our] own<sup>7</sup>...[by] listening to the refracted speech of the author and entering into the dialogue which constitutes the novel" (160-1). This dialogue can create, independently of a preexisting theoretical framework, its own theories of reading or resistance. In applying literary theories to fictional works, especially those which are produced from within and depict different contexts from their own, critics need to be more conscious of their assumptions and more sensitive to aspects of the work for which their theory fails to account.

Hitchcock looks to Bakhtin, who, in his later work attempts to

disarticulate...theory, particularly in relation to abstraction and the false opposition between theory and practice...it is precisely because dialogism disrupts the discrete discursivity of the institution in which theory is regaled (the university?) that a different notion of action emerges (DQ 15).

His notion of action entails writing and theorizing about traditionally excluded cultural products. Doing so will act as an "institutional fix," challenging "institutional logics" to eventually "meet with subaltern desire" (18). He

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<sup>7</sup>In this quotation Bauer uses text from Wolfgang Iser's The Implied Reader (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974, P.282).

further writes:

it is hoped...that by opening the walls of academia to knowledge from below the walls themselves will fall. The new political arena this suggests may well have broader social implications (22).

I have two points to make about Hitchcock's argument.

First, Hitchcock assumes (perhaps incorrectly), that it is the desire of the subaltern subject to enter into an, albeit changed, academic or institutional structure which privileges types of knowledge, cultural products and values which have little or no relation to the historically developed forms of cultural exchange of these subjects.

Second, he is unable to account for the problem of how this "knowledge from below" will enter the walls of academia in order to crumble them. It seems unlikely that this knowledge will ever be anything but mediated through the work of privileged academics, academics who, for all their good intentions, are hemmed in by those walls and subject to its whims and trends of academic history.<sup>8</sup> In this way,

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<sup>8</sup>For example, one must write the sort of article or book (or Master's thesis) which is publishable given the current intellectual climate in order to further one's career, get tenure, etc. This can mean that certain papers with subversive content cannot be written or, if written, will not be acknowledged by periodicals or conferences. Or, the institution can allow these works to exist, with the intention of domesticating these voices and subsuming their threat. Booker writes that due to the rapid institutionalization of subversive critical approaches such as Marxism and feminism, these discourses have virtually "become an official mode of discourse in the academy (where it has become almost totally unacceptable not to sound subversive), while the academy

this knowledge or critique is not coming directly from the "subaltern subject," but is constructed by an academic reading which takes the form a discourse which the subaltern subject herself would find alienating. Thus Barker's fiction about uneducated working-class women in England is explained through the discourses of privileged male theorists such as Habermas and Raymond Williams. Here, subaltern subjects are not given the opportunity to speak for themselves. To his credit, Hitchcock is aware that academic theorizing can "indeed be part of the problem in the production of hegemonic epistemological formations" (22-23), but does not know what to do in order to avoid this himself.

Patricia Yaeger, in her work Honey-Mad Women, focuses on "moments of liberation" within women's texts. To this end, she begins "a public narration of women's emancipation from dominant codes" (239). However, we must ask who these women are whom she wishes to emancipate. The women she uses as examples include such writers as Mary Wollstonecraft, Christina Rossetti, and Emily Dickinson, all of whom are materially privileged, although they do, of course, experience oppression under patriarchy. Yaeger's utopian metaphor of the honey-mad woman assumes privilege;

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itself has remained remarkably unchanged" (9).

only women who do not have to worry about getting bread can spend their time being honey-mad. Yaeger writes that she is interested in "women at play...because they address the moments of pleasure in women's writing and point toward moments of oral glee" (329). I will not deny the importance of celebrating the exuberant moments in texts written by women. However, Yaeger seems to ignore the concerns of a large number of women who are in desperate need of a discourse of emancipation. For although Yaeger refers throughout her book to *women's* emancipation, it seems clear that she means specifically the emancipation of middle to upper-class white women.

The women in Barker's novels have no access to honey: their energies are absorbed in working for bread. In some ways, writing about so-called emancipatory strategies within the context of Barker's work would be both questionable and naive in that it would merely satisfy the writer's desire for justice and a happy ending, while effectively denying the real material, social and political struggles that are happening outside the academy. Also, the instances of so-called emancipation that the women in Barker's books (and working class women throughout the world) experience are generally small and not materially significant enough to impact their lives in any real way: they fail to shield these women from the many violences they

encounter, to ease their worries about paying the rent, or to give them a small rest from their labours. By passing off these instances as "emancipation," we as critics may be, despite our good intentions, seeking another way of allowing ourselves to think that things are all right, or at least getting better - and ultimately allowing the various systems of domination that are in place to remain unchallenged.

Both Hitchcock and Yaeger engage Bakhtin's theory in a way that results in utopian readings of literary texts.<sup>9</sup> However, Bakhtin's work need not be applied in this way. Instead, the openness of his thought can be an aid in acknowledging the political complexity of a work of fiction without necessarily forcing the text to bow to the concerns of a prefabricated technology. Of course, Bakhtin did not specifically engage feminist or class issues within his work, but many feminists have written about the cultural and political utility of the conjunction between feminism and dialogism.<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin can help critics with political concerns by giving us a theory of language as social discourse which can help us to start to hear and to understand the speech of marginalized groups, including

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<sup>9</sup>I will discuss in greater depth Hitchcock's utopian reading of Union Street in the next chapter.

<sup>10</sup>These include Bauer (1988), Herrmann (1989), Hitchcock (1993), and Yaeger (1988).

working-class women.

For Bakhtin, meaning is produced between ourselves and the story, and our own and each other's responses and revisions. He writes that when an other's

ideological discourse is internally persuasive for us and acknowledged by us...possibilities open up. Such discourse is of decisive significance in the evolution of an individual consciousness [which]...awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it (DI 345).

This change of consciousness brought about by the interweaving of one's own words with an other's can help to explain the means by which the plausibility of a story or discourse can change or be contested. Instead of placing discourses in opposition to each other, which could lead to the pushing of certain voices to the margins, Bakhtin's theory of dialogism allows those voices to contest other more powerful voices by creating a semantically open field of possibilities in which a struggle occurs among "various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values" (DI 346). A dialogue with Barker's text may transform the reader's consciousness of the workings of patriarchal and classist discourses in his or her own life, thereby empowering him or her to question



those discourses.<sup>11</sup>

The Bakhtin circle's insistence on examining the historical and social contexts and the contingent ideologies within which a work or utterance is produced can also provide a useful method of inquiry for the reader interested in understanding class or gender issues. As Volosinov writes:

Every ideological sign - the verbal sign included - in coming about through the process of social intercourse, is defined by the *social purview* of the given time period and the given social group (21).

By focusing our attention on the social purview which informs an utterance rather than on the utterance as an independent and self-contained entity, we can avoid overly simplistic readings. In the case of Barker's Union Street, paying attention to the historical and social context in which her characters articulate their lived experience can help us to realize the complexity of that experience. For example, discourses of patriarchy and class prejudice are present in working-class communities and can be internalized by working-class subjects, resulting in their partial complicity with their own oppression. Dialogism can facilitate a reading in which these different and often

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<sup>11</sup>Barker's work depicts few of these transformations of consciousness, but awareness of how oppressive discourses impact upon others can transform the consciousness of the reader. It is not only through providing positive examples of resistance that a text can be subversive.

conflicting discourses which form the consciousnesses of the different characters of Union Street can be identified and their effects upon the lives of those characters assessed. In turn, the understanding that can be gained from these dialogues can inform and enable a reader's strategies of resistance in the real world, for it is here that social emancipation must take place to be effective - not in the literary text.

Theorists who see Barker's work as a "lesson in the discourse of resistance" (Hitchcock DO 66) are denying the complexity and difficulty of the situations she depicts. Often, the furthest measure of progress possible for the women of Union Street amounts to a millimetre's movement against a mountain of oppression. This can hardly be called resistance. At the same time, I am convinced that looking at these movements, however small, is important. We can see that the ways in which the women of Union Street attempt to minimize their own suffering has both negative and positive consequences for their own emancipation from gender and class oppression. They employ what I will term "coping strategies," which give the women a temporary measure of comfort but effect no change in society due to their underlying complicity with discourses of patriarchy and class oppression. There are also instances of actual resistance in which the women are able to form a social

critique which they can then try to articulate. However, the women in Barker's text are mainly concerned with survival, and only have limited energy for working against patriarchal and class oppression. They therefore cannot be expected to provide unproblematic models of resistance for the reader whose desire is for such positive examples.

An example of Barker's awareness of working-class women's complicity with their own oppression can be found in her reply to an interviewer's query about the importance of women's friendships in her novels, wherein she states that she is:

surprisingly ambivalent about that. If you look at what women...are doing for one another, there is support, but it is support for the status quo...Women who are [for example] tremendously supportive of a woman who is being battered, giving support on how to deal with it, are not helping her get out of it. There's a stoicism without any idea of what the alternatives are (Perry 241-242).

In other words, the women are doing what they can given the limitations of their resources. They are coping. The term "coping strategies," although lacking the excitement and glamour of "emancipatory strategies" or even "contestatory practices" (Hitchcock WC), seems to be the most honest articulation of the efforts of these women within their socio-political milieu. And although the term does not satisfy critics' demands for a "theory of resistance" (Hitchcock DO 12), it is truer to Barker's work and can

result in an awareness of exactly what discourses are limiting resistance within the context of working-class women's lives.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Union Street: Coping with Despair

Union Street, Pat Barker's first novel, is a collection of interweaving statements and ruminations on the lived, material conditions of a particular social and economic community of working-class women living on or near Union Street in an unnamed steel city in the Northeast of England during the 1970s. The book consists of seven chapters - each named for and mainly concerned with presenting the thoughts of a figure within the community.<sup>12</sup> The chapters are arranged so that at times their subject matter and chronology overlap, giving us the opportunity to hear the street's polyphony of speech as the women comment on everything from the changing status of women in England to the actions and statements of their neighbours. Characters who are peripheral in one chapter are central in the next. This arrangement is particularly effective as it

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<sup>12</sup>Women's voices by far outweigh those of men in this work. However, the speech of men is not ignored. In the section on Blonde Dinah the point of view is not that of Dinah at all, but of George Harrison instead. This fact could have interesting implications, for all the other chapters are spoken by the women that they are named after. The only discernible difference between Dinah and the other women in this book is that she is a prostitute.

provides the reader with a seemingly unmediated way into the heart and thought of the community. By placing working-class women at the centre of the narratives, Barker provides us with examples of a range of experience which we may not have had access to in the course of our own lived or read experience, "counteract[ing] both the working-class hero syndrome of much proletarian fiction and also the preponderance of writing about bourgeois women" that has been the norm in British fiction (Hitchcock 55).

This narrative structure focuses attention on the individual voices of the women who live on Union street, as well as on how these voices resound within and against their community. The community, which is not homogenous or unified, is a conflicted space in that it internalizes and is complicit with external discourses of patriarchal and class domination while at the same time it tries to provide support for its members in opposition to these discourses. Throughout the book, it is apparent that the community is a place which encourages inertia as much as resistance.

Peter Hitchcock's chapter "Radical Writing" begins to trace what he sees as the intergenerational solidarity and intersubjectivity of the women of Union Street against gender and class oppression. In his opinion, community cohesion provides these women with the support they need in order to speak various degrees of social critique, and

provides us as readers with "a lesson in the discourse of resistance" (66). He writes that Barker "shifts the question of political solidarity from the limits of individual expression to the voices of collective subjectivity" (56). And although Hitchcock acknowledges the fact that even community relations are overdetermined and constructed, the idea of community as being a sheltering and supportive locus of resistance still underlies his prose.<sup>13</sup> He assumes that the points of positive community interaction are the most valuable in a study of resistance and resistance-forming. However, I would say that Barker's work actually shows us the limits of individual expression and resistance within a community whose appearance of solidarity masks a complicity with oppressive ideologies. Barker's text is filled with near misses, and examples of stratification and distance - points at which community breaks down or actually acts to make resistance more difficult. Rather than giving us a lesson in resistance, Barker's work shows us what must be resisted.

In her book entitled Feminist Dialogics, Dale Bauer points out that there are dangers in placing oneself within a community which, in its anxiousness to domesticate and

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<sup>13</sup>Although I have specific problems with Hitchcock's interpretation of Barker, I find his work on working-class writing in general to be thoughtful and insightful.

incorporate dissenting voices in order to silence their threat, "may drown out one's voice the moment one agrees to enter it" (Bauer x). Bauer's analysis shows that within a given community women may be "essentially ignorant of each other as women," and that they may allow the anger that they feel at the constraints of patriarchal or class oppression to be displaced and vented on each other "rather than the cultural system by which they have been defined" (x).

Within communities there may be an inability (be it due to a lack of information, time, or energy) to read their social and political contexts in ways that look beyond the immediate lived conditions of its members. Barker herself, when asked about the violence that appears in her work, has stated that "in isolated pockets of total depression people turn on each other" (Perry 242) rather than on those structures of power which stand against them. As we saw in chapter one, if a community has limited resources for the support of its members, the community may have to turn its energies toward helping each other cope rather than toward changing society. This kind of support is genuine and important, but often does nothing to challenge oppressive structures of power, and in is an unintentional form of collusion with the status quo. In this case, women help each other survive within the existing social structure and so support that structure instead of changing it. Bauer's



reading strategy, which is helpful in this situation, is to look at the "point of contradiction between the alienated female voice and the interpretive community anxious to incorporate and domesticate [and silence] that voice" in order to see in which cases the community allows resistance or helps to smother it.

A good place to examine Hitchcock's utopian assumptions about community as a positive space is to look at how it reacts to the rape of Kelly Brown. After Kelly finally tells her family what has happened to her, Mrs. Brown looks to the community for support:

She needed a woman to talk to, but in all this sodding street there wasn't one of 'em you could trust. They'd all turned against her, because since Tom left there'd been other men in the house. Jealous cows. And how they'd talk! Coo and sympathise, oh, yes. But talk. She could hear them now, 'Well, what can you expect, leaving the bairn alone half the bloody night? You know where *she'd* be, don't you? Out boozing at the Buffs with that Arthur Robson. Eeeee! (35).

A number of voices speak through this section of text. The paragraph begins with the speech of the narrator who is informing us of Mrs. Brown's need, but Mrs. Brown's voice almost immediately takes a central place as she expresses her displeasure ("this sodding street") with the workings of her community. As well, Mrs. Brown also anticipates and gives voice to the responses she thinks she will get from the other women on the street. Although Hitchcock

concentrates on "register[ing] solidarity in [the] speech" of the women of Union Street, it is obvious here that community speech can be divisive and can discourage those who need support from seeking it.

The speech of the community is not a purely working-class discourse concerned with the emancipation of women, for it often incorporates discourses of those in power. Their speech is a polyphony which even embraces words and ideas which act in direct opposition to the community's emancipation or resistance. In the case of Mrs. Brown, she finds herself being pulled both by the community which has internalized patriarchal discourses about the place of women and by her own lived experience. For example, the poverty of her household is extreme - it is usual for the family to go without food, and her daughters' bedroom window is broken and patched with cardboard which has come loose, letting in the cold winter air. Having a man and his earnings in the house would contribute a great deal to the family's well-being. And how is Mrs. Brown supposed to find a partner to share her life, house and expenses while at the same time staying at home to take care of her daughters? Singles around Union Street go to the local bar, and babysitters are a luxury that cannot be afforded.

One response of the community to Kelly's rape is to judge Mrs. Brown as a failure according to patriarchal

discourses of motherhood. When Mrs. Brown goes to Iris King for support after hearing the news, we see that her predictions of the community response were correct. As Iris makes tea for her neighbour who is weeping on her sofa, her thoughts become clear:

Now she was no longer faced by the sight of Mrs. Brown's misery she was more inclined to withhold her sympathy and make judgements. Her bairn! Where had she been when it happened? (38).

Despite the women's shared experience of motherhood and poverty, Iris shows little empathy or solidarity with Mrs. Brown. Instead, Iris's response is the same as that of the police, who "had blamed her for it. They hadn't said much but you could tell. The one with the moustache had been looking right down his nose" (38).<sup>14</sup> The police communicate their general attitude of blame towards both Kelly for roaming the streets at night and her mother for not being at home to watch her daughter. This attitude is shared by Iris, who does her fair share of looking down her nose at Mrs. Brown, in the form of levelling "a single glance of disapproval for the messy room and the unwashed hearth" (39).

This is not to say that Iris offers no support to

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<sup>14</sup>The her in question here seems to be Kelly, for she is the last subject named. But the paragraph in which this information is relayed presents us with Mrs. Brown's thoughts jumping from one topic to the next, and she herself is the last "her" mentioned.

the Brown family. She helps Mrs. Brown cope with the situation by giving comfort and tea, and by listening to the story. As well, the community as a whole does what it can, despite some confusion as to what course of action to take:

Nobody knew how to react...You couldn't very well ignore it. And yet to come right out with it...In the end they behaved as if the child had been ill...they gave comics and sweets, they clucked, they fussed...After a decent interval they left her alone...[but] Behind the family's back they talked (45).

A community may harbour many biases that exist outside the community and may thus be complicit in perpetuating them within the community. Offering emotional support after an incident occurs does not have the same effect as organizing for change, like offering to babysit or lobbying for increased financial support for single mothers. In this way the women, to borrow a term from Bauer, "misread" their culture and their needs as women and mothers within it.

However, we must be wary of forcing these already overworked women to accept more tasks, for they do not have the time to take on other burdens such as babysitting the neighbourhood's children. Neither do they have the education, contacts or financial resources to begin lobbying for political change. My point here is that often they do not acknowledge that some or any fundamental change is needed; their struggles take place within oppressive social and political systems without their questioning them. As

Dale Bauer has said, "the interpretive conventions by which the community operates...are often exclusionary and androcentric" (ix). These interpretive conventions are brought into sharp focus in the community's practical equation of Kelly's rape with an illness, naturalizing the event and thereby denying that it is something that has a social cause in attitudes toward women. The community is unable to produce a discourse that would voice resistance to the structures that allow rape. As we can see, Barker presents us not with a "lesson in resistance," but an example of the kind of misreadings which must be resisted.

Exchanges between Kelly and Mrs. Brown offer further evidence that even within the mini-community of the family, there is still much that works counter to solidarity and understanding. After Mrs. Brown is informed of the attack against Kelly, the way she sees her daughter changes. Prior to being told of the attack, Mrs. Brown sees Kelly as she always has - as her "bairn." Afterwards, Mrs. Brown, expecting some fundamental change in her daughter, tells herself that Kelly looks the same as always (41) but then goes on to notice the skimpiness of Kelly's too-small nightdress (41); a "blue-white, slightly 'off'-looking" tone to her skin; her "white, smooth, childlike and yet not sufficiently childlike shoulders" (42); her nipples, which "seemed to demand attention" (43); and a "grubbiness [which]

in this altered situation was no longer childish dirt... [but] looked sluttish" (43). It takes an act of violence to alert Mrs. Brown that her daughter is leaving the so-called carefree world of children and entering into the frightening and dangerous world of adult women. However, the attitude expressed by the police as they looked down their noses - that somehow she deserved it, her childish dirt being easily transformed into the dirt of sluttishness - bleeds into Mrs. Brown's thoughts.

The community creates Kelly through the eyes of patriarchal discourses of power, just as The Man did before he raped her, when "His eyes created her" (16). In the same way, unrelated to the actual incident, but only to Mrs. Brown's knowledge of it and her figuring of it through patriarchal values, Kelly has become "dirty." Suddenly, in her mother's eyes, Kelly's clothing is no longer worn and too small, but revealing,<sup>15</sup> and her skin has taken on the cast of something that has spoiled - reminding us of patriarchal discourses about the purity of women. Her body becomes strangely eroticized. For Mrs. Brown, and indeed for the entire community, Kelly's body now represents that

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<sup>15</sup>It is not clear if the nightdress is too small and worn because Mrs. Brown is not able to afford a new one, but the novel's depictions of the family's extreme poverty suggests that this is the case. In other words, Kelly is not intentionally wearing revealing clothing.

of a "sick" or "spoiled" woman, and becomes almost vocal in its challenge, as embodied in her nipples which demand attention, "like eyes in her chest" (43) that one can't avoid being confronted by. Mrs. Brown interprets these signs in almost the same way as do the police. Suddenly Kelly is sluttish, and if she wasn't before, she has been made so.

We are never told precisely why Kelly does not come forth immediately with the details of the attack, except that fear is a major factor in her reluctance. Although it is "a comforting line of thought" (38), Mrs. Brown cannot believe that Kelly was frightened into silence by threats of violence made by The Man. It may be that she feels Kelly's silence is a rejection or distrust of family and community bonds. Attributing Kelly's silence to fear of violence from outside the community can mask the fact that the reaction of the community itself (its laying of blame, its naturalization of the rape) gives Kelly a reason to keep silent. What comforts Mrs. Brown in seeing Kelly's fear as being caused by an outside source is that this way of thinking exonerates the community from being part of the reason for Kelly's silence.

Whether Kelly is rejecting community or not, the event affects her deeply, so much so that at the time she does not have the language to express it: "Kelly looked

around for help...It seemed necessary to say something but the words would not come...Kelly turned and ran" (34). She would of course be aware that the community's main response to hearing about her anguish would be verbal, and that their questioning and their telling and retelling of the story as if it were their own would seem as invasive as the police examination of both her story and of her body during which:

She tried to tell them about that moment in the fish and chip shop when the grown-up man had started to cry. But they weren't interested in that. They wanted her to tell them what had happened in the alley behind the boarded-up factory. And they wanted her to tell it again and again and again (57-58).

Here, Kelly is repeatedly sexually victimized by the police's demand that she retell her story, which is received with a mix of perverse curiosity and even titillation. But Barker does not allow her prose or her characters to lean toward stereotypes. Instead, she allows Kelly an astounding complexity and astuteness, as is evidenced in her interpretation of the rape and the information she wants to communicate about it. She attempts to describe what is important for her about the attack - and what gives her the most fear - that being her glimpse into

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).

However, the story that she is most interested in telling is



not one that the others want to hear. For them, the details of the specific and forbidden act performed in the alley have more power to define than do the things Kelly learns about people as a result of that act. It is easier for the community to define Kelly as a victim than to think about the society (of which they are a part) that victimizes her. But for Kelly, it is what she learns after the attack about the world she is about to enter, rather than her experience of physical violation, which frightens her the most. Here, Barker is exposing frightening social structures so that we can have a clearer idea of just how far-reaching attempts at resistance must be in order to change them.

Fear produces a sort of numbness in Kelly and further distances her from a community in which she already experienced only a peripheral belonging. This numbness acts as a barrier which protects Kelly from Mrs. Brown's responses to Kelly's ordeal, which although characterized mostly by great pain and love, are contaminated by pity and disgust.<sup>16</sup> When confronted about her silence, Kelly responds by "screw[ing] up her face with the effort of not listening. [Her mother] was off. There was no stopping her now" (44). Mrs. Brown, rather than waiting for answers, merely spews a monologic mass of questions, anticipating no

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<sup>16</sup>Here again we see Barker's talent at exposing the complexity of a character's response to her lived situation.

response, for the process of asking is what is important to her at that moment. Using only the meanings she has been able to produce for herself, she misreads her daughter by being unable to see Kelly's complexity as a thinking subject who can experience and understand more than just physical pain or some stereotypical version of sexual violation.

If the distance between mother and daughter exists on the verbal level, then that distance is only intensified on the level of gesture. The support and connection that each wants to project or to feel cannot, at this point at least, be expressed either physically or in words:

They looked at each other. Each at that moment expected, and perhaps wanted, an embrace.

Mrs. Brown could smell her daughter. Was it her imagination or was there, mixed in with the smell of unwashed child, another smell, yeasty and acrid? There couldn't be. After all, three weeks! And yet the smell repelled her.

If only she could have reached out and held her daughter. The childish bones jutting through the off-white skin might have reassured her that what she felt was merely sympathy and outraged love, not a more complex mixture of fascination and distaste for this immature, and yet no longer innocent, flesh (44-45).

Dominant discourses of women's purity inform Mrs. Brown's readings of Kelly's situation and influence her on a physical level by producing an imagined smell which leads to a physical revulsion for touching her daughter. This revulsion correlates to a moral disgust at Kelly's so-called impurity. These feelings are made complex by Mrs. Brown's

intense love for her daughter. Here, Barker insists on revealing complexity and refuses to comply with critics' desires for easy answers.

Mrs. Brown is at a critical junction in the forming of her own ideology. She is wrestling with a series of previously internalized and believed authoritative discourses which determine both the terms and the value of so-called "innocence," and the eroticization and distrust of female body and its sexuality against this new situation in which her love for her daughter demands that these ideas be rethought. Rethinking this situation will encourage if not necessitate the reassessment of a wide range of societal assumptions, including those held by the working-class community, in order to determine which of them will remain internally persuasive for her and which are no longer credible. However, the externally persuasive discourses of bourgeois patriarchy, as communicated through the police for example, remain internally persuasive for Mrs. Brown, for she does not seem to have the tools or the community support to resist them. This lack of communication and understanding-forming problematizes the linguistic community posited by Bakhtin wherein "norms are always in flux, always open to renegotiation as those conventions are called into dialogic conflict" (Bauer xii). Although the community is forced to look again at the relative status of Kelly and

Mrs. Brown as well as its stance on violence against children and the correct conduct of mothers, this activity does not necessarily lead to a reassessment and change. The community allows authoritative discourses of power to exist unchallenged within themselves, even though challenging the assumptions that make them complicit with the police, for example, would perhaps lead to a more effective system of support and community cohesion.

KELLY BROWN

In Union Street there are women, like Kelly, who are able to form a critique of their community and the culture at large in spite of the opposing discourses they may encounter. Kelly's position within the novel is unique, for not only is she working-class and female, but she is also a child verging on young womanhood. In this way, she is at greater risk of abuse, having had less experience and less physical, monetary, and social power than others within the community. But at the same time, being in between ages allows her to exist outside of certain expectations, especially of the conduct and "place" of women within her society, and the dependence on men that this construct of womanhood assumes and depends upon. Because she is outside these expectations she can, to a degree, work at recreating

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herself in opposition to gender-based cultural norms.<sup>17</sup>

Kelly's experience of what it means to be a woman and to be working-class causes her to rethink her position in her neighbourhood. She exists simultaneously outside and inside the community, and the distance she feels allows her to form a critique of the community and of womanhood that, already begun before she is attacked, gains focus and power. Barker does not allow the attack itself to be the definitive factor in the building of Kelly's critical consciousness, which would place the locus of power in The Man. Instead, the rape becomes an event which helps Kelly bring her past observations together into a more coherent and workable cultural critique.

Despite her young age, or perhaps because of it, Kelly has a remarkable knowledge of the status of women in and around Union Street, and this knowledge of what it means to be a woman is intertwined with her knowledge and experience of poverty. According to Peter Hitchcock, "the middle class and males are the great others of these particular working-class women's existence" (DO 63),<sup>18</sup> and

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<sup>17</sup>As I have already shown, however, after Kelly's rape the community (and in particular her mother) begins to impose the patriarchal construct of "womanhood" on her. This section is meant to show how Kelly rejects this.

<sup>18</sup>Barker herself refers to these women as "the working-class within the working-class" (21) in an interview with Eileen Fairweather appearing in The New Statesman.

Kelly seems to have an intuition of this reality. She refuses to accept her mother's relationships with men, despite her knowledge that having another working adult in the house could mean less economic hardships for the family. She resists any kind of alliance with her mother's partners, knowing from past experience what the risks for her family are when these relationships do not lead to an official union. While her mother is willing to attempt to form a relationship with and a dependence on a man, Kelly is wary of doing so. Her gestures and the tone of her voice leave no room for misunderstanding between her and Uncle Arthur, and she erects boundaries the first time they are left alone with each other:

Arthur sat down, glancing nervously at Kelly. He was afraid of being alone with her. Kelly, looking at her reflection in the mirror, thought, how sensible of him (11).

For Kelly, maintaining a distance is an effective method of protecting herself from the feelings of hurt and abandonment that emotional attachment to these men has so far brought her.

To create the right impression for Arthur, Mrs. Brown wears her best work clothes around the house and speaks in a voice which adopts the accent, vocabulary, and tone of the middle class. As Peter Hitchcock points out, Mrs. Brown's equation of "male with middle class (by

assuming this purported speech she hopes to appeal to men)" (DO 63) is a practical one, for in relative economic terms, working class men, and especially single ones, experience their working-classness much differently than do Mrs. Brown and her daughters. Mrs. Brown tries to assume the discourse of the middle class housewife, suddenly becoming concerned about cooking bacon for breakfast, doing the dishes, and making sure that Kelly's face is wiped before she goes to school, saying: "You're not going out like that, showing me up" (10). Kelly, however, is an astute reader of the meanings of this attention, knowing that it does not necessarily stem from concern for her or the family's appearance within the neighbourhood. Instead, she knows that "All this was Arthur's fault. She'd never have bothered with breakfast or face-washing if he hadn't been there" (11). Mrs. Brown's strategy is one of alliance-forming as a means of coping with material hardships and her relatively low status in the community due to her family's extreme poverty and the lack of a man in the house, which is definitely important in this community. Kelly, on the other hand, sees this strategy as unworkable, because the adopted discourses of the middle-class housewife can not address the Browns' lived experience. She knows that her mother's relationship with Arthur, although it brings a pseudo-middle class civility to their family relations, actually produces

more poverty for the family and a decrease in their status within the community; to keep up appearances, expensive food like bacon must be bought to feed Arthur, serving to further overextend the family's credit at the neighbourhood store, and to set the neighbour's tongues against Mrs. Brown (9).<sup>19</sup> Kelly rejects the position of woman as dependent on man, whether this dependence be economic or emotional, but this rejection is possible for her because she is not yet directly confronted with the responsibilities of being a woman, such as having to provide for a family.

For Kelly, dependence on males is linked to the female physiology that she is in dread of developing, as well as the ways in which "woman" is constructed within patriarchy and the class system. For example, Kelly finds herself revolted by both the changes to her sister's body and her new interest in young men. And although this exchange begins as Kelly's critique of Linda's lack of proper hygiene, it quickly becomes infused with a double meaning:

'What would you know about it?'  
'I know one thing, I'll take bloody good care I never get like it.'  
'You will, dear. It's nature.'  
'I don't mean that.'  
Though she did, perhaps. She looked at the hair

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<sup>19</sup>The community is in cahoots with patriarchy in that it places blame on the women for not staying at home and allows men like Kelly's father, Wilf and Arthur the freedom to leave.



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).

Here, Kelly wants to avoid the onset of puberty, the physical manifestation of a change which will also effect a correlative shift of her status in society. Although she is not at this time cognizant of the full extent of these changes, she can still see that the body of a woman can be a hindrance, sporting as it does armpits that will need to be shaved, breasts that wobble so you can't run as quickly, not to mention the trouble and disgust caused by menstruation.

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The maturation of Kelly's body will act as a signal for the community to impose the idea of "woman" on her, with its attendant social roles and problems, as exemplified by the status of her mother, Iris, Lisa, Joanne and most of the other women on Union Street.

Patriarchal discourses of "woman" posit the female body as violable and disposable. Kelly reads this in an exchange which takes place between her and her mother, in which Mrs. Brown narrates a story about seeing a female impersonator. For the finale of his act, the man

ended up sticking pins in his tits...[which] were...balloons!' The word 'balloons' burst out of her mouth like a cork, ugly sounds and cries came glugging after it...Her breasts, only too obviously flesh, shook as she cried. Kelly looked away to avoid seeing them" (59).

For the man on stage, the breasts are merely balloons which, in the face of his act of penetration, are destroyed. For the women in the audience, and especially for Mrs. Brown who has just been "packed in" by Arthur, they become a symbol of a cultural attitude which defines women as violable and disposable. A lack of respect for the female body is reflected in the choice of the word 'tits' that Mrs. Brown uses, as an internalized voice of misogyny seeps into her expression. For Kelly, her distrust of the female body is cemented, especially by the allusions to penetration and the appearance of the word "balloon," which also appears during her rape. The woman's body is vulnerable to the male's prodding (to rape, as well as to other forms of male control), and makes the woman vulnerable as a subject.

Elsewhere, representations of breasts also appear alongside acts of violence and invasion. However, in the following example, as Kelly attempts to gesture toward resistance, she herself becomes the violator of women's bodies because she is unable to escape the discourses of patriarchy which structure her thoughts. When Kelly breaks into the house by the park, she enters the master bedroom. In this "woman's room, [this] temple to femininity," (53) she finds the bed, covered in "flesh-coloured satin," and "big, soft, delicately-scented, plump, pink, flabby cushions" which she equates with "the breasts and buttocks

of the woman" who slept there. This representation of perfumed and pampered middle-class femininity has little in common with her own and her mother's altogether less glamorous lives, where makeup is used by her mother as a means of faking control and happiness - a facade that seams and cracks as it is unable to contain her mother's all too real grief (59). Kelly's desire to maintain a distance from and a power over this seductive and privileged body, with its satin skin and the nearby make-up which adorns it, causes her to "thrust her finger deep inside the pot [of eyeshadow] for the pleasure of feeling the cream squirm" (53). Here, Kelly acts out her rejection of the patriarchal construct of woman in an entirely patriarchal way - by raping this construct and making it squirm, as she herself has been made to squirm. Kelly provides an example of an approach that needs to be resisted, rather than an example of successful resistance or emancipation.

Kelly is, although not consciously, aware of the ineffectuality of her gesture, for it reinforces her violability as a woman, which she is reminded of by her reflection in the dressing-table mirror. Kelly destroys the mirror, for it shows her her "beautiful" and feminine hair, and her pores, newly enlarged and plugged with black, which call to mind her already changing body. Reading long hair as a signifier of womanhood, Kelly cuts off her hair in a

gesture that she hopes will postpone her transit into the community of women. This gesture does not go unnoticed on Union Street, the inhabitants of which interpret it as "an act of rebellion" (46), which challenges both basic community assumptions and the community itself. It seems to them that:

They had offered sympathy and been rejected. What they could not know was that in their own eyes when they looked at her she saw not sympathy but an unadmitted speculation...Dimly they sensed an inner transformation that paralleled the one they saw. But they did not try, or hope, to understand it. She was accepted in Union Street as her mother was not. But for the moment at least, she had moved beyond the range of its understanding (47).

The limited range and hierarchy of discourses available to the community prevent it from understanding Kelly's attempts at social critique. Kelly's critique can't be seen as resistance, for it only has a temporary and illusory effect. It is more of a coping strategy, because it can only work to address her immediate needs.

#### REVOICING THE MAN: DISCOURSES OF AUTHORITY AND SAFETY

Kelly still clings to a desire for a father figure, despite the fact that the power relations that characterize this relationship are the same ones which form the locus of Kelly's criticism of the social construction of womanhood.

However, the attention she receives from The Man<sup>20</sup> is unlike any other that she experiences: "[he] stared at her as if every pore in her skin mattered. His eyes created her. And so she had to go with him" (16). His eyes re-create her within his own discourses of power and authority that allow him to take on the positions of father and of rapist. The intensity of his gaze creates the appearance of a nurturing father/daughter relationship, the seeming reality of which is augmented by the park setting where Kelly and The Man observe a young father holding the skirts of his daughters as they lean over the lake to scatter crumbs to the ducks. Kelly and The Man replicate this action, during which her fantasies change this stranger into "her father behind her on the path...holding on to her skirt" (16). Kelly is unaware of the uneasy link between paternal acts of protection (not wanting the daughter to slip), and the potential to see the situation as erotic (the girl leaning over, the upheld skirt revealing her thighs). And although Kelly's doubts about this man continue to resurface, she cannot resist his attentions: "he began wiping her mouth with his handkerchief, which he first dampened with

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<sup>20</sup>The attacker's name is never revealed. Because of this and the women's variform situations of vulnerability, The Man becomes conflated in their minds with any man who holds power over them, and also with men's sexual activity. For example, Mrs. Brown cannot help but link The Man with both Arthur and her ex-husband.

spit...[and] she found it pleasant to be taken care of" (23). The difference is apparent between the face wiping her mother makes her give herself at home (to impress Arthur), and this man's close attention. Kelly reads his gesture into her hopeful fantasy, and his actions find corroboration in his words which seem to be calculated to address her dream.<sup>21</sup> But in the following exchange we can see how the interlocutors are creating their own, not a shared, meaning from the dialogue. It begins with the comment of a woman who sees The Man bent over Kelly, who has just been sick near the fairground gate:

'Poor Bairn...Best place for her is in bed.'  
 'We won't be long out of it...I suppose we *had* better think about getting you home.'  
 But there was something Kelly needed to get straight. 'That woman. She thought you were me father.'  
 'And I didn't say I wasn't?...Perhaps I wish I was' (24).

Neither the woman nor Kelly, both of whom misread the relationship, hear the allusion to The Man's intent as he changes the pronoun from "her," a girl who should be in bed sleeping, to "we," two persons in bed having sexual intercourse. Of course, this change of pronoun is not strange within an exchange between two speakers, one of whom is in a position of authority. This kind of usage does not

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<sup>21</sup>This fantasy is pre-given and constructed for women in patriarchal society.

seem sinister to the woman and the girl who are nevertheless misreading the relative positions of the speakers in this exchange. And of course, Kelly's misreading is encouraged by The Man when he acknowledges, although not seriously, his potential role of father.

Kelly finds no available avenue for resistance during her attack. She finds that no language is possible in relation to this other. In the factory yard, The Man becomes transformed into a conglomeration of every voice of authority that Kelly has come in contact with.<sup>22</sup> In the face of this she finds herself speechless:

She tried to think of something to say. Incoherent memories of other confrontations, with teachers or policemen, jostled together in her mind. If you thought of the right thing to say and said it quickly enough, sometimes they would let you off. But she couldn't think of anything (28).

Here, Kelly searches her memory for a similar situation in her past that will help her formulate a response to this terror. However, the words and gestures of past contexts cannot be called into this present one. Her speechlessness translates itself into memories of childhood punishments as

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<sup>22</sup>The situation is complicated by the issue of class. His status as upper or middle class is indicated by his dress of a "light- coloured jacket, and fawn trousers," (23) which seemed formal to Kelly, and the childhood grudge he still carries against the children who lived on the streets near the steelworks "who played hard, fast, ruthless games, the girls as tough as the boys and always more humiliating because you were supposed to be able to beat them" (25).



she is raped, further linking The Man's acts with fatherhood, authority, and discipline.

However, Kelly does find cracks in this monologic wall of authority after the attack. What at first begins as a plea against abandonment (still casting The Man in the role of father) quickly turns to a realization that their relation to each other has changed. Finding that her repetition of the phrase "Don't leave me here" induces fear in the man (30), Kelly sees that a shift has occurred in the power relations between them. It must be noted here though, that Kelly is not aware of the entirety of or even the reasons for this shift. But as she tries to "place [what happened] in the context of her life" (32), including the jokes told by adults and what she had seen and heard of her mother's activities, things begin to make sense to her, although not yet in a complex or integrated way. In The Man's mind, Kelly's voice gains a new resonance and power after he commits his acts of violence against her, for if she raises her voice against him, he will be punished. Kelly has a glimmering of this knowledge, and she allows him to feel his fear, but she is interested mostly in making him live up to his obligations as the father he said he wished he was. She demands to be looked after - to be fed and given tea, and he has no choice but to comply. However, she finds that he can buy food and drink, but he can no longer



keep up the paternal facade:

She tried to make him look at her. She needed him. He was all she had. But he did not want to look. His eyes, small and reddish-brown, skittered about like ants in a nest (32)...[then she saw that his face] was beginning to split, to crack, to disintegrate from within...moisture of some kind was oozing out of the corners of his eyes, running into the cracks that had not been there a minute before, dripping, finally, into the...agonised mouth" (33).

The gaze which constructs her as a sexual object refuses to construct her as a daughter figure. Kelly cannot read his gesture of crying. She does not know exactly what the tears mean, for they could be tears of apology for the rape or for tricking her emotionally, tears of guilt and disgust at his actions, or tears of fear or of frustration for momentarily having to be held accountable in this way. Regardless, The Man's face cracks, literally breaking apart the image of the father and protector. Kelly tries to turn away in order not to see this breakage, but she cannot cease to be confronted by it, for "From every side his reflection leapt back at her, as the mirror-tiles filled with the fragments of his shattered face" (33). Here, the mirrors not only refract this current incident of breach of trust but also, by reproducing the image on every wall and from every angle, they alert Kelly to the same potential in the world outside this relation.

Kelly comes to see the need to form new strategies to protect herself from future harm. She works toward

independence by distancing herself from her community to rid herself of the need to be taken care of and by spending more and more time walking the streets, becoming an anonymous form in a boy's t-shirt. She notes that girls generally "didn't get the cane very often [because] Girls did as they were told" (50). As we have seen, Kelly has experienced confusion or pain when she has listened to what she has been told. Because of this, she begins to question the speech of those who would try to tell her what she must do "for her own good." A practical example of this occurs when she passes a woman who is walking home alone

in the middle of the road as Kelly had been taught to do. The idea was that if somebody - a man - leapt out at you, you would have more time to run away. Her lips curled. It was a bit late for that! She looked at the woman with contempt. The real defense was to be one of those who leapt (48).

Here, Kelly has formed an astute critique of traditional knowledge given to women which does nothing to change the social or material reality of women's lives. Instead, it is complicit with those patriarchal assumptions which construct our society as dangerous for women. Of course, Kelly cannot abolish patriarchy, so she copes within its structure in the best way that she can, and that is by becoming "part of the shadow" (49). However, Kelly is still firmly placing her resisting/coping strategies within patriarchal structures by figuring herself as one who leaps. In this way, she still

acts as the violator, as she did with the pot of eyeshadow on the woman's dressing-table.

Kelly's life as a shadow affords her many opportunities to lash out against her lack of personal power within her society, and although these instances bring her some measure of comfort, she finds them ultimately unsatisfying. In one such incident, Kelly breaks into her school after hours to find herself "in the Headmaster's chair" (55), that seat of power from which the Headmaster dispensed punishments to those students, including Kelly, who skipped class or made trouble. In this seat, she makes the important discovery that it is fake - "not leather at all, but plastic," (50) and that it shreds easily under the paper knife she finds in the desk (55). After this symbol of authority is revealed to be a sham, those patriarchal and class structures it represents are weakened for Kelly. It is then possible for her to bring her body into an articulation of its outrage at her attack and into a counterattack of its own:

A lifetime of training was against her and at first she could do nothing but grunt and strain. But finally there it was: a smooth, gleaming, satiny turd...It reminded her of The Man's cock, its shape, its weight (55-6).

Reverse  
role { Her excrement becomes a penis, the symbol of power in  
patriarchal society, and she uses this penis against the  
Headmaster through the violation of his office. The lack of

alternative discourses causes her to figure her resistance within a patriarchal mode, demonstrating that she still sees that the only way of having power in her society is to have some sort of phallus. However, she has some intimation of the limits of this form of resistance, which in itself cannot satisfy her. And so she writes the words "PISS, SHIT, FUCK. [on the board of her classroom] Then, scoring the board so hard that the chalk screamed, the worst word she knew: CUNT" (56). Here, Kelly again reiterates her rejection of the female body as it represents that which is violable. Kelly has not yet been able to form a coherent (for herself or others) account of her feelings or her critique of society, and her frustration, which is evident in the way she flings herself at the blackboard, writing with such force that "the chalk [breaks] on the final letter" (56) tearing her nails down to the quick as they dragged across the board, works against her. Her acts of resistance and transgression are motions toward this reconception, but for the moment, she must cope by making do with "the pain and the taste of blood which soothed in some small measure the aching of her "tight...unappeased flesh."

JOANNE WILSON

Not all women living on Union Street have the opportunity and extra-community perspective that Kelly has

to form a social critique. Once the girls of this community become women (as indicated by their ability to bear children), they face increased pressures from both internal and community-voiced structures, sometimes reinforced by violence, which speak to deny their own thoughts and desires. These women are faced with a lack of available discourses with which to voice their resistance, and an inability, caused by their material conditions and community resistance, to make new discourses which would be more appropriate to their needs. Because of this, the childbearing years become a time of especially difficult struggle for women.

If we accept Dale Bauer's formulation that knowledge leads to resistance, which then leads to power (xiii), we can see that this lack of knowledge in the form of practical experience and examples of resistance makes the women's struggle to find new places within their community and to make sense of the competing discourses which surround them difficult, if not impossible. For Joanne Wilson, an eighteen year-old who lives with her mother and works on the assembly line in a local cake factory, the transition to woman/motherhood is characterized by a loss of ability to voice or gesture towards a social or cultural critique. Joanne is surrounded by examples of women who lack practical experience, community or familial support, visions of other

women who have been able to speak against oppression, and even a knowledge of the ways in which their bodies work (how babies are made and how pregnancy can be avoided).

The women of Union Street lack a discourse with which they can communicate to each other a practical knowledge about how to control their fertility. When Joanne tells Ken, her boyfriend, that she has become pregnant, he is incredulous, asking:

'Did you try anything?'

'Like what?'

'I don't know! Pills.'

'Where from? You might know where to get things like that - I don't. And if you're thinking about hot baths and gin...it doesn't work...And in the second place, we haven't got a bath, you daft bugger' (98).

Here, the reader does not know whether Ken is speaking about trying to avoid getting pregnant or to trying to terminate her pregnancy. But it is obvious that Ken assumes Joanne has both a working knowledge of forms of birth control and access to them, which includes money to buy them, a doctor to prescribe them, and the privacy to store and to take them. He also assumes that the prevention or termination of pregnancy is her sole responsibility. But as Joanne tells him, her lived material conditions<sup>23</sup> make it impossible for

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<sup>23</sup>She lives in such close contact with her family that nothing can be hidden from them - especially not her pregnancy, which her mother is aware of before Joanne is ready to tell her: "The way we live she knows I'm late before I do" (98). Joanne's mother would therefore also know if Joanne



her to either take the pill or enact folk cures to induce a miscarriage.

Examples of the education young women receive from their mothers and peers are either non-existent or follow the theme of the exchange between Iris King, who herself was forced into a marriage due to an unplanned pregnancy, and her daughter Sheila:

'...Five minutes of pleasure and a lifetime of misery. How often have I said that to you?'  
 'I don't know, Mam. I've lost count.'  
 'But it's the truth, isn't it?'  
 'For [Brenda] it will be' (198).

Iris's advice is to abstain from sexual activity, her belief being that Brenda "knew enough to keep her knees together. That's all you need to know" (198). Yet, it may have helped Brenda to have known a bit more. The teaching of abstinence, while perhaps effective in some instances, seems horribly inadequate in this community, judging from the sheer numbers of young women who, generation after generation, find themselves both sexually active and pregnant at a young age. Here, the community of women fails its daughters because it has no discourse (of resistance to pregnancy and to the competing, dominant discourses which make the women feel that they cannot say no to sex) to pass down to them. The discourses that convince young women to

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were taking birth control pills, and probably would not approve of the practice.

Struggling  
 to choose  
 can they  
 no to sex

have sexual intercourse do not come into dialogue with their mother's experience and knowledge of the consequences of these actions.<sup>24</sup> This helps to create the conditions in which unplanned pregnancy and forced marriage can happen again and again.

The attitudes and practices of the medical community make finding a discourse of resistance difficult for these women.<sup>25</sup> It is clear that the medical establishment does not interest itself in teaching women about preventative measures or making these measures readily accessible. It also retains the power to decide whether or not a woman can have a legal abortion. For example, one doctor finds that "there were no grounds" (132) for Lisa Goddard's abortion, despite the fact that Lisa has her hands full with two very young sons already, still hasn't recovered physically from her last birth because she cannot get the rest that her doctor repeatedly orders, and is struggling (without medical help) with depression, poverty, and a husband who is unemployed and who beats her. Another example is that of

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<sup>24</sup> Iris King has to marry her husband, Ted, because of an unplanned pregnancy, unfortunately finding out that Ted will beat her almost as badly as her father had. But then "she'd have married anybody, just to get out" (189) of having to live with her father, from whom the beatings were so severe that she'd been hospitalized.

<sup>25</sup>The attitude of the medical community is informed here by both class and gender bias.



Iris King's fifteen-year-old daughter, Brenda, who is denied an abortion because her pregnancy was too far advanced, and/or because she did not tell her doctor the truth about the pregnancy. As Iris believes: "He says he can't do her. But he's only saying that out of spite. She didn't tell him, you see. And of course he was livid" (210). In the novel, the medical establishment acts as a monological force which will not speak to the concerns of working-class women,<sup>26</sup> and which does not acknowledge the material conditions of these women when making decisions which will affect them greatly. The indifference of their doctors ensures that these women will not get the reliable information that they need to use in their own lives, and to pass on to their daughters.

Despite the evidence that surrounds them, the young women of Union Street still deny the possibility that their lives will be like those of their mothers and neighbours. Joanne thinks that she will be able to choose a different way of life, but because there are no other discourses

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<sup>26</sup>We can see this when Lisa Goddard goes to the clinic for her checkup. Since her last child she has had trouble with her blood pressure, swollen ankles, and depression. However, instead of addressing these problems in the context of her life and her responsibilities, they instead assume that she has the luxury of being able to rest and "take things easy." She cannot speak up about her home-life or her depression for fear that they will force her to be hospitalized, which would leave her family unattended.

available to her, and because she is not aware that she needs to find any, she has no effective means to speak or enact that choice. Consequently, she will live under the same conditions and restrictions that the others have had to. As Joanne says: "She had thought it would never happen to her; her marriage would be different" (100). The older women, who have seen the similarities in the lives of the area's mothers, daughters and granddaughters have an astute understanding of women's lives in the community. The following exchange between Mrs. Harrison and Joanne as they discuss Joss's mother, who at fourteen bore a midget and was forced to endure her father's mistreatment of that child, is revelatory:

'Course she had to do as she was told.'

'Why?'

'Well, you did in them days.'

'I wouldn't shove my bairn in the back kitchen for any man.'

Mrs. Harrison was taken aback by the sudden passion of this outburst. 'You don't know married life.'

'It's different nowadays.'

'Aye, is it? You'll find out it's not as different as you think' (79-80).

Here, we can see that Mrs. Harrison naturalizes the conventions of marriage and sees no possibility for changing that institution, which acts as an instrument of patriarchal of control. In this way, the community is complicit in supporting a way of structuring these women's lives, positing marriage as an inevitable and unquestionable evil.

Father goes to  
Joss's night

Another way in which community complicity plays a part in creating conditions which lead to pregnancy is by placing the blame squarely on the young women who become pregnant, and by identifying them as stupid. It is a community tradition to place the derisive prefix "Soppy" (stupid) before their names.<sup>27</sup> Joanne sees herself at the same time as she sees the face of Soppy Lil, the butt of local jokes, realizing that: "It was 'Soppy Jo' now. God, she needed her head looking at" (106). This is the supreme ambivalence of the community, which on one hand helps to maintain the conditions in which women become pregnant by discouraging the formation of a discourse which would enable these women to say "no" to sexual intercourse and by expecting young women to fit into traditional roles of wife and mother, yet also derides these women for adopting these roles. But it is not only the community which is to blame here. Joanne's material conditions, particularly the assembly-line work she does, contribute to an actual wearing down of her capacity for critical thought by filling her mind with useless images which seem to crowd Joanne's own thoughts out of her head. When Joanne imagines her "soppy" face and the face of Soppy Lil, they are quickly "replaced by a long line of cakes" (106), reminding Joanne of the way

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<sup>27</sup>Joanne, Brenda, Lil, and Lisa are all called "soppy" in this novel.

the job induces a kind of stupor in which "after a while not only speech but thought became impossible" (85). Here, her work makes the thought that is needed for resistance difficult. As she says: "that was the worst of the job. You could be away from it for hours...but the minute you closed your eyes: there were the cakes" (106).<sup>28</sup>

After Joanne learns that she is pregnant, and therefore is connected through motherhood to the community of women on her street, "every older woman became an image of the future, a reason for hope or fear" (94). It is telling that as she looks around her, she sees far more reason for fear than for hope. Maureen, for example, is a woman who works at the cake factory with Joanne. Maureen cannot leave her job at the cake factory because "she had a houseful of kids and no husband" (94). The strain of constant work and personal deprivation has taken its toll on Maureen's<sup>29</sup> body. Just looking at Maureen gives Joanne "a

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<sup>28</sup>Note the following example of the way in which factory work becomes a lulling force which quashes thought:

If any of them had been asked what they thought of this arrangement, the answer would probably have been 'Terrible'. Yet they continued to abide by it. It was easy; it required no thought (90).

<sup>29</sup>Unlike all the other women who work with her, and despite the fact that we are explicitly told that she is not starving, Maureen eats the cake and weak tea that is supplied by her employers. Maureen is an example of a woman in the community who unquestioningly accepts her lot and who sees no need for resistance. Most of the other women see the act of being served this cake as an affront.

sense of oppression" (94) which has no specific object, and turns her mind to Lisa Goddard, a woman not much older than Joanne herself. Joanne sees Lisa at the point of breaking down, unable to manage her children in the grocery store, "weighed down with kids and shopping, pushing her belly in front of her like another self" (94). Here, the body can be seen as a visual record of the struggles that these women are enacting. Motherhood changes Lisa's life and responsibilities so much that she herself becomes, to a degree, effaced. Until her responsibilities in rearing her children are over, her own self and her concerns must, like those of Maureen, disappear. Joanne can see this happening to her own body, which, even in this early stage of pregnancy, is changing:

Her body, from childhood so familiar, had become frightening. It occurred to her that it looked like another face, with nipples instead of eyes, a powerful, barely human face. By comparison, her real face seemed childish and unformed (72).

Joanne's body sprouts a face that speaks in a language she cannot completely understand. This language is powerful in that it cannot be denied - it does not need Joanne's understanding or agreement for it to continue. Joanne's face, on the other hand, suddenly becomes dwarfed, unformed, and voiceless.

Joanne has been taught to expect and to want the life of a homemaker, and indeed she has had no real

experience of women who have led other kinds of lives. And yet, at the same time as she has internalized these expectations, they are not wholly persuasive for her - she finds them possible and perhaps even inevitable, but at the same time she feels, although vaguely, that they are undesirable for her:

she'd be leaving the bakery now...He mightn't let her work there after they were married. Wouldn't suit his ideas a bit. Nor his mother's. Instead there'd be a house...Housework. And, eventually, a baby. Well, that was what she wanted. Wasn't it? (106).

Here, Joanne demonstrates a knowledge of what her life with Ken and his middle-class family will be like. She initially accepts this, but as she thinks through the list of her future duties, her voice takes on a new accentuation. It seems as if she is trying to convince herself that this is what she wants, all the while fighting against this feeling until the final question, which allows her doubts to surface. These doubts, however, lack a specificity and cohesion that would allow her to take action to change her situation.

Joanne's chapter ends on a despairing note - that she is powerless in the face of what is happening to her. In Joss's front room she finds a space in which she can momentarily escape her future. As she tells him:

'I like it here. I wish I didn't have to go.'  
Even the baby, which all day long she had 'felt'

How to  
go back  
to nest

as a hard nodule of fear, seemed to melt away inside her, to float and merge with the peace and safety of this room.

She said, more wistfully now, 'I wish I didn't have to go' (106).

The repetition of the wish moves from the first spontaneous communication of feeling toward a more thoughtful assessment of her situation and its limitations. It is clear that at this point in her life, Joanne cannot find a discourse with which to formulate an active form of resistance, no matter how desperately she would like to. Instead, she chooses to cope - to try and live with and through the situation she is in without inciting change. Joss and Iris note Joanne's ambivalence, stating that Joanne "was in two minds...Right up till the end" (219) when she got married. Here, Joanne is at the axis of competing discourses: that of the community, which is acting to make her accept the dominant discourse of motherhood and marriage (and in particular, marriage to a man with legs of normal length), and her own material reality and desires (which may include falling in love with a midget). Joss and Alice have little hope for Joanne in her struggles, however:

'Poor kid.'

'Oh you don't want to worry about Joanne. She'll give as good as she gets.'

'Aye, but it's no life, is it?' (219).

## ALICE BELL

Alice Bell, like Kelly, lives outside the responsibilities of childrearing and marriage, and this position helps her to identify and voice her own forms of resistance to the discourses of poverty, dependence, government, and confinement which threaten to overcome her. It is because of her status as an outsider that she is able to enact her strategies of coping and resistance. However, this resistance comes in the form of compromise, as she must figure her resistance within discourses which are acceptable in society, for she depends on her community and her government for financial and physical help:

the 'pancrack' she had to submit to: there was no choice...Every six months she received a visit from the social security people...the humiliation of these visits, the posh voices, the questions, the eyes everywhere, only strengthened her determination to preserve her independence at all costs (233).

For Alice, "independence" means being able to pay for her own funeral, to retain ownership of her house which had become like an extension of her own body (234), and to exist on her pension. In order to save for her funeral, she must take money from her already inadequate social security check. This means suffering both hunger and cold, but this suffering is worth it for the independence she feels it brings her.

After Alice suffers a stroke, her family finds it



necessary to make arrangements to move her into a home where she can receive the care that they and Alice's neighbours cannot provide. Although Alice is violently opposed to being placed in a home, she finds that her protestations are not being heard by her family and by representatives from Social Services. When the representative of Social Services comes to decide whether or not she can live independently any longer, she finds herself faced with the impossibility of dialogic exchange with him. As she says:

She knew now the full indignity of rape. That man, the expression in his eyes when he looked at her. The not-seeing. And she could see no way out, except to submit, to accept herself at his evaluation. To give in (260).

Like Kelly during her rape, Alice faces a moment during which she cannot speak to or against a monologic force - this being the impersonal bureaucracy of the Social Services. As it did for Kelly, this experience propels Alice into a reformulation of her position within the community, out of which comes a gesture of resistance. However, Alice's situation is complicated by the difficulty she has speaking<sup>30</sup> now that she has lost control over certain facial muscles, and by her embarrassment at this loss of control. This makes her reticent - she is afraid that her inability to communicate will indicate a

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<sup>30</sup>Kelly, too, has trouble speaking while she is being raped.

correlative inability to take care of herself. At the same time, she knows that it is of the utmost importance that she speak out against her future "incarceration."

Unfortunately, the government employee can not hear her or her struggles. He objectifies her by addressing his comments to her son and his wife, and only speaks to her indirectly, as if he had already judged her and found her unable to cope with life on her own. Alice can find no discourse with which she can reach this other, and her family, who want to rid themselves of the responsibility of caring for her, do not help her to find one.

Her first reaction to this is to "accept herself at his evaluation. To give in" (260). However, as she rethinks her situation, reasserting her dread of the "workhouse" and remembering her past successes (in the form of having been able to save just enough to pay for her funeral expenses), she begins to allow new possibilities for resistance to enter her mind:

At intervals questions bubbled to the surface of her mind. What am I doing? Where am I going? But more faintly now as the unnamed and unadmitted purpose gathered strength (261).

Here we see one side of an internal dialogue which is only barely acknowledged by Alice consciously. But as her plan of resistance becomes more possible, her questions grow less insistent. The fact that her purpose goes unnamed and

unadmitted reminds us that this is a compromise - a coping strategy and not an indication of the way she had originally hoped her life would end. It also could refer to the Christian taboo against suicide that Alice cannot hear if she is to make this final gesture.

Alice thinks that those witnessing her final climb up the hill to the park where she will end her life must see it as a "triumph of the will" (262), or, perhaps, a lesson in resistance. However, she interprets her gesture of suicide differently:

Willpower could not have moved her crumbling body from the bed, let alone driven it out in this cold. She who had lived all her life by willpower alone had ended by setting it aside, to wait passively (262).

To her, this is not active resistance because it is a compromise. And although this new plan helps her to retain some of her autonomy, it is still not ultimately satisfying for her. As she tells Kelly: "There's no other way. They're trying to take everything away from me. Everything. ...Well, this way they can't. That's all" (68). Here again we see the power of Barker's writing as she gives us a clear picture of the complexity of the decisions that must be made by the women of Union Street. It is terribly painful for Alice to make this compromise, but since it is the only form of resistance open to her, she must accept it. However, she takes comfort in the presence of Kelly, who joins her on the

bench during Alice's final moments:

At first she was afraid...Then - not afraid. They sat beside each other; they talked. The girl held out her hand. The withered hand and the strong hand met and joined. There was silence. Then it was time for them both to go (265).

Hitchcock reads this scene as a mutual recognition which is "formed around the [shared] concept of a threatening 'they'" (56-7), and an acknowledgement of the women's prior loneliness. He interprets their exchange of words and touch as a celebration of the kind of community solidarity which helps these women to figure an effective resistance against those oppressive discourses which threaten to overwhelm them. And although this may be true to an extent, we have seen that the resistance these women have articulated will not yield them deliverance from that which oppresses them, but rather is a way of coping within these patriarchal and class structures. Hitchcock fails to see that although these women have more success than do others in their community when it comes to coping, their success is possible largely because they find themselves to be outside community expectations and responsibilities, not because of the influence of community support. In practical terms, Kelly's gesture of solidarity and her promise that she will not tell anyone where Alice is (68) helps Alice to forget her fear as the cold takes hold of her, and gives her comfort as she acts out this final gesture of compromise.

## CONCLUSION

The structure of Union Street reinforces the textual depiction of the complexity of the women's struggle within and against community. We are presented with a vision of the community as a whole (the name "Union Street" denoting a street of unity), which is then divided into chapters named after individuals, rather than groups of people or collective concerns. The strongest link between these chapters is in the meeting between Alice and Kelly. But Kelly and Alice cannot be said to be forming an alternative community, for their time together is fleeting and is punctuated by a final separation - Kelly continues to roam, and Alice gives up her life. Barker's writing does not allow our own desires for a kind of utopian figuring of resistance to construct these women's lived conditions or their range of responses within them. Instead, the power of Union Street is in its honest articulation of working-class women's lived experience and in its ability to theorize community as an ambivalent space, giving us a greater understanding of the complexity of the struggles faced by these women.

Barker's writing is significant in that it does not

pretend to present the reader - be s/he a working-class woman looking for a women's tradition of working-class writing or an academic attempting to theorize emancipation - with an uncomplicated and unproblematic vision of working-class existence and resistance. Instead, Barker shows us the conflicting class and patriarchal discourses which shape her characters' lives so that we can see how limited the choices of possible discourses of resistance are, both for the women of Union Street and actual working-class women like them.

Barker writes within a tradition she describes as depicting working-class women as "little more than lays, drabs, nags and wing-clippers" (in *Fairweather* 21), and which, judging from these adjectives, sees women only as they relate to (and hinder) men. However, Barker's prose deliberately focuses on the lived experience of these women in order to allow us to hear them voice their struggles which are seldom, if ever, so fully represented within literature. It is up to us as readers to listen to those voices so that we can see the ways in which we, too, are complicit in their oppression. It is only in this way that we can articulate our own resistance outside of the literary text by questioning the discourses of power which allow oppression to remain unchallenged.

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