to orphaned existence: moments of common endeavor and bodily comfort in which the question of transcendence is suspended in favor of a home in the here and now.

**Alienation and Home-Making Practices**

The problem of homelessness and alienation proves central to Ishmael’s narrative from the very beginning – and Ishmael provides us with notably contradictory explanations for his sense of ‘unbelonging.’ Looking back, as a narrator, to the time before he joined the Pequod’s crew, Ishmael attempts to explain his fateful decision to go to sea. At first, Ishmael’s light-hearted tone suggests that this decision was entirely incidental: “[H]aving little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world” (18; ch. 1). However, we can reasonably doubt whether Ishmael’s decision is indeed based merely on the whim of a moment, both because he in fact admits to a lack of financial resources (“little or no money”) and because the phrase “nothing particular to interest me on shore” barely conceals a fundamental sense of isolation: Ishmael has no interest on shore – neither financial, nor intellectual, nor emotional. There is, in short, nothing and no one there who could make him want to stay. Ishmael’s subsequent remarks confirm that we are dealing here with an underlying problem:

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off – then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. (18; ch. 1)

Ishmael’s use of the word “whenever” in this passage reveals that a profound sense of alienation is a recurring problem in his life, and that his going to sea is a rather desperate attempt to prevent himself from committing random acts of aggression against innocent bystanders (“methodically knocking people’s hats off”). His genial tone should thus not seduce us into underestimating the extent of his crisis of unbelonging.

The idea that Ishmael’s sense of alienation is more fundamental than it appears at first sight is confirmed by his very name, which constitutes an intertextual link to biblical exile. According to the bible, Ishmael is one of the sons of Abraham, and God prophesies before his birth that Ishmael’s “hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him” (Genesis 16: 12). The name Ishmael is therefore, as Wadlington Warwick observes, “a synonym for
alienation between the name-bearer and all other men” (141). Moreover, the phrase Melville’s first-person narrator uses to open his tale – “Call me Ishmael” (emphasis added) – sounds as if we were not given the narrator’s real name, but instead a pseudonym chosen “for patently symbolic reasons” (Warwick 141; see also Eagleton, How to Read Literature 23).

Like the deceptively light-hearted passages discussed above, the narrator’s name thus indicates that all is not well between him and his fellow men.

At the same time, it is possible to read the choice of the name Ishmael as one instance of what Samuel Kimball calls Ishmael’s desire to “make a narrative home of homelessness” (541): to mitigate his own sense of alienation by refracting his experience through the stories of others. Sigmund Freud, for instance, suggests that comparisons and analogies have the capacity to reduce unfamiliarity: “[W]e compare the less familiar with the more familiar, […] and use the comparison to explain the item that is more difficult and unfamiliar” (The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious 202; see Punter 90).

Accordingly, if the name is indeed a pseudonym adopted by Melville’s narrator, then the implicit comparison between his own experiences and the familiar biblical story of Ishmael may be read as an attempt symbolically to reduce his sense of isolation. Perhaps more importantly, however, the intertextual reference serves to reduce unfamiliarity on the part of the reader – at least, that is, if we assume “that writer and audience possess a common knowledge” (Warwick 141), for the allusion only has this effect for those who are familiar with the biblical narrative. This, in turn, reminds us of the double-edged quality of intertextual home-making practices, as those readers who are unfamiliar with the biblical narrative may end up feeling excluded from the novel’s implied readership (see introduction).

Examining further the biblical parallel established in Moby-Dick, we find that both the novel’s narrator and the biblical Ishmael are treated badly by their step-mothers, which may imply that there is a link between alienation in later life and the lack of a stable childhood home. In the biblical account, Abraham’s wife, Sarah, at first proves unable to bear children, and so Abraham “went in
unto Hagar,” Sarah’s maid, who eventually gave birth to Ishmael (Genesis 21: 16; KJV). Immediately there is strong tension between Sarah and her maid, and when many years later Sarah miraculously gives birth to Isaac, she urges Abraham to banish Ishmael and his mother: “Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son” (Genesis 21: 10; KJV). Initially Abraham is reluctant, but when God assures him that he will protect Ishmael, Abraham complies with Sarah’s wish to have Ishmael removed from the community. The relationship between Sarah and her stepson can thus hardly be called particularly loving. Similarly, in *Moby-Dick*, the narrator recalls that his stepmother “was all the time whipping me, or sending me to bed supperless” (37; ch. 4). This, in turn, explains the narrator’s choice of metaphor later in the novel, when he speaks of a “step-mother world, so long cruel – forbidding” (405; ch. 132). Never fully at home even as a child, Melville’s Ishmael remains unable to belong in later years.  

The resulting desire to “make a narrative home of homelessness” (Kimball 541) explains, among other things, why Ishmael is so interested in the character of Perth, a blacksmith, whose alienation from society, too, is connected to a broken home. Ishmael introduces Perth, whose function on the level of plot is relatively marginal, with a detailed account of the story of his life. Formerly an “artisan of famed excellence,” with a “youthful, daughter-like, loving wife, and three blithe, ruddy children,” Perth becomes fatefully addicted to alcohol and eventually goes bankrupt, with his wife and children dying in abject poverty (368–369; ch. 112):

Death seems the only desirable sequel for a career like this; but Death is only a launching into the region of the strange Untried; it is but the first salutation to the possibilities of the immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored; therefore, to the death-longing eyes of such men, who still have left in them some interior compunctions against suicide, does the all-contributed and all-receptive ocean alluringly spread forth his whole plain of unimaginable, taking terrors, and wonderful, new-life adventures … (369; ch. 112)

Forever estranged from the “equally abhorred and abhorring, landed world” (369; ch. 112), Perth seeks refuge in the oblivious infinity of the “all-receptive ocean” – partly because of “some interior compunctions against suicide.” This latter point is important because Ishmael, too, has felt tempted to end his life,

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8 McLoughlin, by contrast, argues that Ishmael’s biblical name links all sailors to outcasts” (61).

9 Later in the novel, Perth forges a new harpoon for Ahab shortly before the climactic chase of Moby Dick (370–372; ch. 113).
but opts for going to sea instead, as a “substitute for pistol and ball”; “With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship” (18; ch. 1). Both Perth and Ishmael, then, are trying to escape from the memories of broken homes, and going to sea is an attempt to prevent aggression not only against others, but also against themselves: a truly Freudian sublimation of a seemingly implacable death drive.

Of course, in Freudian psychoanalysis, the death drive is not merely the bane of unhappy individuals with difficult pasts, but a universal condition of human life. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that Ishmael – after initially portraying his urge to go to sea as merely an incidental, individual problem – suddenly suggests that all humans necessarily suffer from a similar sense of alienation. Ishmael at first remains relatively cautious, asserting only that “almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean” (18; ch. 1, emphasis added). However, he quickly abandons any such show of circumspection, suggesting instead that man’s mysterious attraction to the ocean is an inevitable by-product of human selfhood as such:

Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. (19–20; ch. 1; emphasis added)

Gone are such guarded phrases as “very nearly” or “almost.” Instead, Ishmael now claims that all of us (“we ourselves”) share Narcissus’s fatal attraction to watery reflections.

Ishmael’s theory thus has strong affinities with Jacques Lacan’s account of the development of subjectivity. Lacan describes the mirror stage as an irreversible process of subject-formation through alienation:
The mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation – and, for the subject caught up in its lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an ‘orthopedic’ form of its totality – and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. (“The Mirror Stage” 78)

Lacan is a notoriously difficult thinker, but Pam Morris has provided an excellent paraphrase of his argument regarding the mirror stage and its role in the formation of the subject:

According to Lacan, at the mirror-phase of the infant’s development, it achieves a joyful perception of itself as a unified being, physically separate and independent from its surrounding world – an image of itself such as it might indeed see in a mirror. This recognition of a specular image offers a wholly desirable self in contrast to the infant’s actual state of total dependence, uncoordinated motor skills, and boundary uncertainty between itself and the world. It is, however, misrecognition, since self can never be identical to image. Thus the narcissistic desire for a unified self initiated in the mirror stage and pursued throughout life is always for a phantasy, for the imaginary ego-ideal. This first splitting of the subject into a perceiving self and a self as imaged is repeated in the next phase of development – entry into the Symbolic Order. A sense of individual subjectivity is constituted with the acquisition of the first person pronoun singular, but as with the specular image there exists an unclosable gap between the ‘I’ who speaks and the ‘I’ which is the subject of that discourse. These two phases of development, the mirror stage and entry into language, constitute the subject’s sense of self as an autonomous individual, but, since this image is an imaginary ideal, the subject is decentred and driven always by narcissistic desire after the unified ego-ideal it can never attain. (Dickens’s Class Consciousness 4–5)

As Morris observes, the Lacanian subject is decentered and driven by narcissistic desire, and Sean Homer rightly argues that Lacan defines the ego as “the effect of images” – a function of “misrecognition; of refusing to accept the truth of fragmentation and alienation” (Homer 25). All humans, in this view, are alienated, and in a sense the ego’s work is to disguise this fact from the subject. The mystifying work of the ego in turn renders it necessary for exceptionally insightful individuals – such as Lacan or Ishmael – to draw our attention to the hidden fact of alienation as a universal human condition. In short, while Ishmael initially portrays his decision to go to sea as merely his own individual problem,