that there is some transcendent connection – possibly with the ones who have escaped the loom (which may be Ishmael’s poetic way of referring to the souls of the departed, as opposed to us mortals who “may be overheard afar”).

Just like his earlier rhetorical maneuvers, Ishmael’s remolded image of the “Loom of Time” thus expresses his deep yearning for a transcendental sense of belonging. At the same time, the idea that communication with God is entirely impossible, and that the transcendent weaver will neither cease his work nor ever react to human supplications must make us wonder how we could possibly know anything about this absent being. Moreover, it is telling that Ishmael introduces the problem of social alienation (i.e. the textile workers who are isolated from each other by the noise of the “material factories”) only to shy away from it, as if afraid of the “villainies” that we might detect if we remained undistracted by transcendental re-imaginings.46

**Visions of Home: Labor, Equality, and the Question of Gender**

In *Moby-Dick*, the transcendental home remains out of reach, even as Ishmael refuses to relinquish his desire for it; time and again, this sole survivor of the Pequod’s disaster uses all the rhetorical means at his disposal in an attempt to retrieve some grander meaning from the wreckage of his life at sea. Just like Ahab, in other words, Ishmael is unable to let go of Moby Dick; the specter of the whale continues to haunt him, and significantly he ends his tale, not on a note of hope and belonging, or with a scene of joyful homecoming, but instead as merely “another orphan.”

It is remarkable how fundamentally absent home is in *Moby-Dick*. Both Ahab and Ishmael come from a ‘broken’ home (i.e. Ahab’s mother was mad, while Ishmael’s stepmother treated him badly – and we know virtually nothing about their fathers). Indeed, this lack of parental care may have something to do with the two characters’ desperate attempts in later life to cling to the idea of a transcendent father (benevolent or malicious, as the case may be). In Ahab’s case, things are made worse through the experience of trauma, and neither the power nor the solitude and isolation that come with the captain’s office are likely to improve his condition, for while the former tends to foster a narcissistic sense of grandeur, the latter shuts Ahab off from human interaction (including therapeutic storytelling). In effect, Ahab as a character constitutes a study of the pathologies inherent in Emersonian self-reliance, and it is only when Ahab, the

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46 My argument is similar to Christopher S. Durer’s, who maintains that “the notion of the grand programme [of Providence] is present at the beginning, but is being corroded, undermined, and finally dismissed” (253). While Ishmael tries to emphasize the presence of God, the contradictions in his argument end up undermining his case.
ship’s master, encounters Pip the ‘slave,’ who suffers from a similar condition, that the captain tentatively begins to re-establish a sense of belonging – a development that is tragically cut short when the Pequod finally meets Moby Dick. Ishmael, meanwhile, is in some ways merely a good-humored conformist, but if we pay close attention to his rhetorical shifts, we find that in fact his textual contortions constitute discursive attempts at home-making in the face of a deep sense of alienation. Crucially, though Ishmael’s alienation may be rooted in some fundamental human condition (e.g. existential trauma or a human subjectivity that is necessarily based on lack), it is the lack both of financial resources and of any other kinds of interest that drive him away from a place that, given these circumstances, simply does not feel like home. Perhaps it is Ishmael’s ardent desire finally to belong – to have a well-defined place in the world – that stops him from even contemplating civil disobedience as a means to prevent Ahab from abusing his power. Tragically, the Pequod’s calamitous journey will leave Ishmael with such a mutilated sense of self that even his own narrative spins out of control, despite all his attempts to weave a discursive home out of the manifold strands of his story.

And yet, there are two brief moments in Melville’s novel when Ishmael feels at home in the world, and both of these are strongly homoerotic. One of these two moments occurs, as we have seen, when Ishmael squeezes his co-workers’ hands, filled with such an “abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling” that he wishes to tell them: “let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness” (323). For one thing, we may note that Ishmael here alludes to a passage from Shakespeare’s tragedy Macbeth, in which Lady Macbeth is afraid that her husband may be “too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness,” and thus unable to seize the throne (1.5.16). From the reader’s point of view, this reference to a canonical text conveys an intertextual sense of home at the very moment when Ishmael, too, feels that he belongs. At the same time, while the original metaphor thrives on associations of milk with motherhood and nourishment, Ishmael’s use of the word “sperm” (ostensibly as a short form of spermaceti) adds to the image a decidedly masculine and sexual twist, leaving the familiar phrase strangely altered.47 Byron R.S. Fone has suggested that “Melville constructs a fictional world in which the primary characters are outcasts from the land-locked world of (hetero-)sexual morality” (52), and perhaps Ishmael’s alteration of the canonical text constitutes a stylistic correlative to the novel’s revision of supposedly given moral codes.

47 At this point, one is almost obliged to point out that, in Melville’s novel, a group of sturdy men join forces in order to extract sperm from a giant (Moby) Dick.
At any rate, the only similarly homely moment for Ishmael occurs much earlier in the novel, when he shares a bed with Queequeg at the Spouter-Inn in Nantucket. At the end of their first night together, Ishmael wakes up to find “Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner,” so that an observer could have “almost thought I had been his wife.” At this point, Ishmael’s sensations are still “strange” rather than pleasant (36; ch. 4), but his vague sense of discomfort has clearly faded by the second night:

How it is I know not; but there is no place like a bed for confidential disclosures between friends. Man and wife, they say, there open the very bottom of their souls to each other; and some old couples often lie and chat over old times till nearly morning. Thus, then, in our hearts’ honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg – a cosy, loving pair. (57; ch. 10)

Ishmael and Queequeg are like a “cosy, loving pair,” and every once in a while Queequeg affectionately throws his legs over Ishmael’s because the two are now “entirely sociable and free and easy”; indeed, Ishmael loves to have Queequeg smoking by his side because the latter seems to be “full of such serene household joy” (57 and 58; ch. 11). In the comfort of a bed he shares with another man, Ishmael thus feels just as much at home as in the common labor of squeezing sperm with his equals on board the Pequod.48

These, then, are the glimpses of a utopian vision in a novel otherwise suffused with homelessness: equality and intimacy, shared work and bodily comfort – a home in this world rather than the next. In Ishmael’s case, bodily comfort happens to mean physical contact with other men, and it may well be that he fails to feel at home in his native land because there is no real place there for same-sex relationships:

Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, [...] by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country [...]. (323; ch. 94)

Ishmael cannot imagine a real-life counterpart to his homoerotic “conceit” or “fancy,” and instead believes that “man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity” by settling for a conventional home shared with “the wife.” In a world where women are considered to be the natural

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home-makers, Ishmael is evidently unable to imagine an everyday home with another man at his side. It is therefore important to be clear about the limited nature of these visions of belonging. On the one hand, Moby-Dick’s utopian vision of equality and intimacy – of shared work and bodily comfort – transcends the divisions of gender because in theory both men and women can engage in common labor, and both men and women are able to heed the needs of other desiring human bodies. On the other hand, the utopian moments that are actually depicted in Melville’s novel are shared only between men, and Ishmael as a narrator is unable to understand them as anything but fancies: pleasant, perhaps, but necessarily fleeting and insubstantial. In other words, unlike Emerson’s self-reliant man, Ishmael and his ideas ultimately remain within the boundaries dictated by custom.

This latter point also explains why Moby-Dick ought properly to be understood not as a downright rejection of Emerson’s ideas, but as a complex and searching critique. What Melville’s novel does reject, through its portrayal of Ahab, is Emerson’s belief that self-reliance as such is synonymous with spiritual isolation, and must always involve the will to dominate and sacrifice others. At the same time, Moby-Dick suggests that Ishmael is far too willing to accommodate to the status quo because he is afraid of standing apart, or appearing in any way as different from others. The point of the novel’s critique, in short, is that isolation from others is neither splendid nor an end in itself, but only, at times, a tragic necessity when faced with widespread communal injustice – and it is this that Ishmael fails to grasp. Moby-Dick thus confronts us with two very different male figures, both of whom remain transcendentally homeless. Melville’s women, meanwhile, stay behind on shore, as absent characters who merely serve to symbolize the conventional home. To overcome this ideological deadlock, we must now turn to George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss, where a female character takes center stage.

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49 See Steven B. Herrmann for a Jungian reading of Melville’s “portrait of same-sex marriage” (65).