

Looking For That Feeling:
Narrative Omissions in *Jesus' Son*
by
Jordan Mae Schroeder

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Denis Johnson, in his collection of short stories, *Jesus' Son* (1990), creates an overall theme of salvation while presenting a series of stories devoid of it. In *Jesus' Son*, Johnson paints a picture of a chaotic and possibly godless universe; life and death are observed with a deadpan tone, the imagery is seemingly senseless, and time is fluid. The result is the creation of humorous yet disturbing verbal, cosmic, and dramatic irony, which implies that the world is profoundly comic and tragic. The world within these stories lacks order, yet the narrator, Fuckhead, stumbles through it looking for acceptance and genuine human connection. Johnson's narrative strategies within these stories and throughout the collection result in its unexpectedly moral conclusion. Johnson hands the reader a series of nightmares and says, essentially, "You deal with it." At the end of the first story Fuckhead directly addresses the reader, "And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you." And what can the reader do with that?

Chapter One describes how Johnson characterizes Fuckhead's world as chaotic through drug use and memory distortion, enabling Fuckhead to avoid acknowledging the tragic nature of his world. Chapter Two analyzes narrative omission, briefly comparing *Jesus' Son* to Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*, and demonstrating how violence and mortality are simultaneously present yet unaddressed. Chapter Three explores how holes in the narrative create irony, and how Johnson's use of strangely poetic imagery and metaphors complement the stories' irony. It is through irony, and more importantly through the humor that irony provides, that Johnson is able to present complex themes concerning mortality, salvation, and death without actually saying anything conclusive about them. Chapter Four and Five establish that the collection as a whole operates differently than the individual stories on a thematic level. The collection as a whole provides a comic arc that the individual stories, while possibly contributing to, ultimately lack. It is through the collection's progress from chaos and ignorance to beauty and finally to acceptance that Denis Johnson creates a collection of short stories that forces the reader to do interpretive work long after the reading is over. Had Johnson's collection not progressed from the tragic to the comic, the possibility of Fuckhead's salvation at the end would be disingenuous if not entirely lost.

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Introduction

Jesus' Son by Denis Johnson (1990) is a collection of short stories following the life of the narrator, Fuckhead, over an indeterminate number of years. Fuckhead is more screw up than criminal, with a history of drug addiction and alcoholism. Although *Jesus' Son* has been lauded by critics as doing something profound, no one seems able to articulate what that is. I argue that what is profound and distinct about these stories has to do with Johnson's narrative strategies, and more specifically, narrative omissions, because it is the holes in the narrative that lead the reader to multiple interpretations. I am asking how rhetorical devices present the theme of a fallen world in a way that is comic, grotesque, and ultimately haunting. How is tension created in these stories and how does the tension lead the reader to any sort of conclusion? This thesis examines how thematic complexities, including the problematic nature of the world, of knowledge, of time, and of the self, are constructed with striking stylistic precision in *Jesus' Son*.

The narrative strategies in *Jesus' Son* can be defined as imagery, metaphor, symbolism, time, tone, humor, irony, and omission. Omissions or holes can be found in a lack of verbal communication between characters, an indifferent tone, a lack of imagery, gaps in time or action, and the use of different types of irony. How does creating spaces in this collection of stories, leaving certain symbols, emotions, and actions at odds with one another, move the reader; how is what is suppressed and omitted from a story paradoxically still there? How can I address the unknown or unheard?

A character's attitudes or thoughts may remain unarticulated, just as tone, narration, and imagery may be minimal, but what is omitted is nevertheless present, even if the absence only serves to demonstrate the author or narrator's inability to communicate. Omissions indicate a communicative struggle, and just by indicating a difficulty, omissions no longer become omissions. The very act of omission should make the reader ask, "Why has this been excluded?" Hence, unspoken thoughts and images are not omissions or silences in a text, but rather holes or apertures. Holes create the implication of tunnels and passages which have the potential to lead the reader to multiple meanings or conclusions as opposed to abandoning him in literary purgatory. Holes are not a new or unusual literary occurrence. So, what makes Denis Johnson's use of this technique in *Jesus' Son* different than Ernest Hemingway's or Tim O'Brien's use of narrative omission in *In Our Time* or *The Things They Carried*?

This thesis briefly compares *Jesus' Son* to Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* because narrative omissions in all three collections raise questions of consciousness, existence, and the nature of the world. These authors fill the holes in their stories with ironies that make the reader laugh, cry, or do both at the same time. They use omission to portray God as the ultimate ironist, creating a universe where there is no truth or where the truth exists but can never be found, or they make statements about meaning while suggesting the world is meaningless. I hate to use a term as vague as "truth," but that is what these authors are trying to achieve, a basic understanding of why the world is the way it is; what sacrifice is or what salvation means. All three authors provide narrators who search for answers to abstract questions about what it means to be human, and the questions are never answered. O'Brien's and Hemingway's collections end with the idea that the characters can save their lives with a story. Of course, these collections never reveal any distinct truths, but they hint and end

with the possibility of them. It is as if Hemingway and O'Brien are telling the reader that if their collections kept going, if they had more time, they would tell the reader everything. Unlike, *In Our Time* or *The Things They Carried*, *Jesus' Son* seems to end with an optimistic conclusion and the feeling that the world has worked itself out. If all three collections have narrative holes, why is *Jesus' Son* the only collection to end with a feeling of conclusion? The question then becomes, how does Denis Johnson use narrative omission, and how does leaving things out become conclusive?

Paradoxically, where there is a lack in one area there is overabundance elsewhere, just as when one sense fades other senses become stronger to compensate for its loss. For instance, if a character is too traumatized to express emotion, the author may compensate for the hole in the narrative with imagery. The imagery might be melancholic or horrific or ironic. It should show or make the reader feel what the character's emotions would have told him. In *The Art of Subtext*, Charles Baxter insists that "the best interests of a story are served when the subtext is as congested as possible. The emotions and meanings in the story go off in every possible direction and remain in the mind long after the story is over" (64). Baxter's suggestion that an abundance of sensations is better than one direct message is not as radical as it may seem.

If one were to follow Viktor Shklovsky's logic, then the purpose of art is to "impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known." Thus, the technique of art is "to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, [and] to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (Shklovsky 16). If the goal of art is to prolong the aesthetic experience by defamiliarizing the object, then holes in the narrative are essential to artistic expression.

Omissions are provocative, they create possibility and allow room for interpretation, and unless the reader is looking for a bedtime story, they become an essential aspect of literature.

“Emergency” is one of the most anthologized stories in *Jesus’ Son*. Fuckhead tells the reader that “Emergency” will reveal something about his character, which has been difficult to grasp due to his erratic behavior. However, the story ends with the suggestion that Fuckhead is a screw up who destroys lives or that Fuckhead knows more than he is letting on. The story supports two different conclusions and the reader must make a decision. In the gap between the connections the reader is asked to make and the difficulty in making them the reader is asked to feel something. In making interpretative decisions the reader shares the confusion and anxiety of the narrator.

Narrative omissions in *Jesus’ Son* have a greater significance on the meaning of the text as a whole. *Jesus’ Son* is a collection of inconclusive short stories filled with tragic events. However, when read together, the collection ends in hope. An entirely new outlook, tone, and theme are introduced when these stories are read as a collection. Holes in the text permit multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations. The contradictions that remain in the text create irony, and irony lends itself to the collection’s overreaching comic arc. I am interested in how Johnson is able to present a series of inconclusive stories filled with turmoil that, when taken as a whole, develop a narrative arc that concludes in salvation. This thesis explores *Jesus’ Son* in terms of how holes in the narrative ironically lead the reader to some sort of conclusion.

Chapter One: Avoiding Tragedies

“What about the breaks? You get them working?”

“The emergency brake does. That’s enough.” (Johnson 48)

At times, reading Denis Johnson’s *Jesus’ Son* is like being in a car with no brakes. In the collection’s third story, “Out on Bail,” Fuckhead and his friend, Jack Hotel, overdose. After buying and splitting some heroin, Fuckhead goes home to his dirty apartment and passes out. Two hours later he wakes up to find his girlfriend and a Mexican neighbor standing over him, “doing everything they could to bring [him] back” (40). Hotel wanders off to a rooming house at the end of Iowa Avenue.

The people around [Hotel], all friends of ours, monitored his breathing by holding a pocket mirror under his nostrils from time to time, making sure that points of mist appeared on the glass. But after a while they forgot about him, and his breath failed without anybody’s noticing. He simply went under. He died.

I am still alive. (42)

Jesus’ Son is littered with tragic incidents: a deadly car crash, murder, suicide, abortion, and drug overdose. All of these events force the narrator to confront what it means to be human, to be mortal. However, that does not make the collection a tragedy. A story can be filled with tragic events and end with humor, whereas tragedies end in tragedy. A tragic hero with a tragic flaw will meet a tragic end, and Fuckhead is definitely not a tragic hero, at least in the Aristotelian sense. For the most part, Fuckhead is a relatively intelligent average guy, albeit with rather exceptional observational skills. He is not deeply flawed, evil, noble, or even an

outstanding fuck up. Yet his ordinariness, his basic humanness (the very absence of a name gives Fuckhead a universal quality) is what makes the events in these stories tragic. The events are tragic because they put death on display and make Fuckhead aware of his demise, something he continually tries to avoid looking at. Fuckhead says “I am still alive,” not “I am alive,” because after Hotel dies he realizes life is temporary. In this collection death is not tragic. The tragic condition is certainty of death, a terrible state of awareness, the knowledge that when you leave this world, you do so alone.

In the collection’s first story, “Car Crash While Hitchhiking,” Fuckhead presents a more acute sense of awareness, a recognition of mortality that he manages to deny in many of the other stories. Catching a ride with a family from Marshalltown, Fuckhead knows they will have an accident somewhere just outside of Bethany, Missouri. Fuckhead tells the reader: “I sensed everything before it happened. I knew a certain Oldsmobile would stop for me even before it slowed, and by the sweet voices of the family inside it I knew we’d have an accident in the storm” (4). The family in the Oldsmobile has a head-on collision with a man heading west. Fuckhead observes the man while he bleeds to death, describing his “rasping, metallic snores” and the way “[the man’s] blood bubbled out of his mouth with every breath” (8, 9-10). Portraying violence and death as inevitable, like another logical occurrence in a predictable series of events, results in an opening story that is more graphic than others in the collection that otherwise possess a comparable amount of violence. As Fuckhead watches the man die, he says, “I looked down into the great pity of a person’s life on this earth. I don’t mean that we all end up dead, that’s not the great pity. I mean that he couldn’t tell me what he was dreaming, and I couldn’t tell him what was real” (10). The great pity is the sense of inevitable isolation, a loss of communication and the feeling of human connection. Was the dying man trying to say

something through all of that bubbling? It is not the proximity of death in this story that makes it especially tragic. Many of these stories include a dead body; it is the fact that Fuckhead *knows* and gives death greater recognition. Death plays a more prominent role in the first story of a collection that uses an overall comic arc to create a hopeful ending. Throughout the collection, *knowing* limits Fuckhead's actions because he usually feels afraid of death and afraid of being alone, or he uses drugs and drinks to avoid *knowing* and then feels guilty. When the dead man's wife arrives at the hospital at the end of the story she is unaware that her husband is dead.

Fuckhead describes her reaction:

Down the hall came the wife. She was glorious, burning. She didn't know yet that her husband was dead. We knew. That's what gave her such power over us. The doctor took her into a room with a desk at the end of the hall, and from under the closed door a slab of brilliance radiated as if, by some stupendous process, diamonds were being incinerated in there. What a pair of lungs! She shrieked as I imagined an eagle would shriek. It felt wonderful to be alive to hear it! I've gone looking for that feeling everywhere. (11)

What gives the woman power over Fuckhead? The woman does not know her husband is dead, so she has not been forced to come to terms with mortality. She did not watch the blood bubble out of her husband's mouth, and she does not know that he died alone in an ambulance on the way to the emergency room. Her shriek makes Fuckhead feel wonderful because, for now, he is alive. After Hotel dies in "Out on Bail," Fuckhead claims, "I was overjoyed not to be dead" (40). Fuckhead thinks the woman's shriek is wonderful because he wants to be in the presence of that kind of vitality. The woman's shriek is the opposite of the silence and death Fuckhead is

afraid of. Possibly, the woman's shriek is wonderful because it is a primal expression of the most basic human emotions, and these are emotions Fuckhead relates to, or wants to relate to.

For Fuckhead, it is best not to be too aware, not to reach any conclusions or any absolute understanding of how the world works. How does Johnson avoid conclusion? How does the author allow Fuckhead to circumvent any concrete realization about the horrific nature of the universe? He hands his narrator a bag of heroin and a bottle of liquor. Johnson distorts time by presenting a narrator addicted to drugs and alcohol. In "Car Crash While Hitchhiking," in the course of an afternoon Fuckhead catches a ride with a traveling salesman. Together they "[eat] up a bottle of amphetamines" (4). Later, a college man "[stokes] his head with hashish," and throughout the adventure Fuckhead has been drinking liquor, most likely bourbon (5). In "Emergency," Fuckhead swipes pills from the hospital where he works, and in "Out on Bail," he steals a dead tenant's Social Security check to pay for heroin (70). However, this is not simply a collection of stories about drug use, and even as an addict Fuckhead is, at times, surprisingly insightful. The drugs act as a narrative mechanism. Combined with the use of first person narration, the drugs create a hallucinatory pacing and instability of time that results in a world where glorious and sometimes terrifying insights last only for a moment. Drug use as a narrative device uses two seemingly antithetical strategies with the same result. One, they provide Fuckhead with poetic license and beautifully distorted visions. Two, they limit Fuckhead's vision by providing him with a sanctuary of perpetually blurred reality. Either way, the drugs distract him and the reader from the tragic by presenting something beautiful, or they emphasize his limited understanding of the Divine, forcing the reader to do some of the interpretive work. The following passage from "Emergency" will show how Fuckhead's visions can lead the reader to multiple interpretations.

We bumped softly down a hill toward an open field that seemed to be a military graveyard, filled with rows and rows of austere, identical markers over soldiers' graves. I'd never before come across this cemetery. On the farther side of the field, just beyond the curtains of snow, the sky was torn away and the angels were descending out of a brilliant blue summer, their huge faces streaked with light and full of pity. The sight of them cut through my heart and down the knuckles of my spine, and if there'd been anything in my bowels I would have messed my pants from fear. (81)

What does Fuckhead's observation tell the reader? Not much at first. As it turns out, Fuckhead is actually looking at the screen at the drive-in. The passage says something about what it means for a character to see in the collection, and it indicates Fuckhead's search for a cosmic connection, an understanding of the Divine that would remove his nagging feelings of isolation. There are two interpretations of this passage. In one interpretation the passage is sheer description and does not hugely complicate Fuckhead's character. On the other hand, the vision of the Divine suggests Fuckhead perceives something more than reality.

Even if Fuckhead's observation is simply visual it is still valuable. In *Crack Wars*, Avital Ronell asks, "What do we hold against the drug addict? That he cuts himself off from the world, in exile from reality, far from objective reality and the real life of the city and the community; that he escapes into a world of simulacrum and fiction. We disapprove of hallucinations...We cannot abide the fact that his is a pleasure taken in an experience without truth" (102). I will refer to Fuckhead's hallucinations as visions because visions imply perception and although Fuckhead may not see something as it is, he can feel something. Hallucinations indicate a loss of perception. Drug use does not make Fuckhead delirious; the images he sees and the feelings he

has are vivid, but maybe inaccurate. Hallucinations do not provide truth, but visions can provide anything from real insight to nothing at all. Fuckhead uses drugs to escape reality, but sometimes the truth creeps in.

If Fuckhead's experience really is simply truth-less vision, then the reader is left with a moment in which their breath is taken away. This moment is the narrator's insight into the miraculous, yet his observation is not epistemological. It is very much grounded in physical beauty because he is describing what he sees on a movie screen, although the actual description is abstract. Possibly, whether or not the passage says anything definitive about the existence of God or the purpose of life is less important than the aesthetic beauty of a world with or without answers. Fuckhead's world exists in a state of contradiction; he can see death in life and life in death, pleasure in pain and pain in pleasure. Leaving the dualities unresolved does not deprive the story of meaning. In "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire claims that "simplicity enhances beauty! Which is equivalent to a truth of an altogether unexpected kind: that which does not exist enhances that which exists" (297).

A more literal interpretation of Baudelaire's claim provides another reading of the passage. If what does not exist enhances that which exists, what is missing from this passage? Why would Fuckhead's vision only consist of physical description? Again, Fuckhead does not provide epistemological observations. Fuckhead's vision is surreal and spiritual, but Fuckhead does not address it. Fuckhead's friend, Georgie, tells Fuckhead it is a movie screen, and Fuckhead merely replies, "I see. I thought it was something else" (80). If Fuckhead is looking for some Divine order, why is he so afraid? Why are the angels streaked with pity? Why does Fuckhead express fear when it seems he is about to make a spiritual connection? It is possible that the angels represent false hope. The Divine is present, but it does not stop any of the

accidents, deaths, or violence Fuckhead witnesses. These stories are filled with traumatic events, yet most of the characters who survive the ordeals in the first half of the collection remain unchanged. At the end of “Emergency,” none of the characters are dramatically transformed. After having a vision of the Divine Fuckhead ends up more lost than found. Drug use enables Fuckhead to avoid addressing any of these issues while simultaneously emphasizing to the reader that they are unaddressed. The absence of resolution is generative because the fragments of Fuckhead’s observation cannot be combined into a whole. The reader is left to meditate on Fuckhead’s vision and participate in the narrator’s anxiety.

The confused nature of Fuckhead’s world is also due to the unreliability of his memory, which, like drug use, contributes to the collection’s hallucinatory pacing. It is not entirely clear whether all of these stories are told from Fuckhead’s sober perspective at the end of *Jesus’ Son* or if they are told while he meanders down the road to recovery. Either way, when the narrator reflects on his experiences he attempts to recreate past sensations. It does not matter if Fuckhead’s memories are from five days ago or ten years ago, the result is the same because it is not about when something took place, but how it felt. Fuckhead’s narration of miraculous events without any consistent chronology creates the impression of a temporal structure not of the real world but of *his* world. *Jesus’ Son* is a collection of Fuckhead’s memories, and the reader is never entirely sure how accurate they are. Sometimes Fuckhead has no clue what time it is or in what order events have occurred: “And with each step [his] heart [breaks] for the person [he] would never find, the person who’d love [him]”—then he remembers he has a wife at home who loves him, or later that his wife has left him and he is terrified, or later that he has a beautiful alcoholic girlfriend (37). Sometimes Fuckhead thinks yesterday is today and today is tomorrow. The reader wonders if Fuckhead mistakes illusion for reality. Fuckhead makes reality unstable

because he simply cannot remember or because recalling feelings of isolation is too painful. If Fuckhead is always looking for a place to belong in a world that does not seem to fit together (how can birth and death be made acceptable?), it is only fitting that even his memories do not fit together. If the world does not provide coherence, why would Fuckhead? A consequence of the stories' past tense is that hindsight is always twenty-twenty, and the narrator's knowledge, his hyperawareness and sensations, and the predictions he makes in the past all become questionable. In "Car Crash While Hitchhiking" Fuckhead knew the family would have an accident. The narrator's assertion of "knowing" creates the impression that Fuckhead can tell the reader about life, about epistemological truths. But can he? In "Emergency," Fuckhead recalls an adventure with Georgie but then wonders if "maybe that wasn't the time it snowed" (84). Ironically, confessing his unreliability enhances Fuckhead's credibility. He alternates between moments of the unconscious and moments of awareness, which creates the impression that time is fragmented. The reader has to decide what to believe.

Johnson provides Fuckhead with another way to escape the world. The author employs an emotionless tone, implying Fuckhead's indifference. If the narrator knows the family will have an accident, why doesn't he stop them? Fuckhead claims he just does not care: "And I piled my sleeping bag against the left-hand door and slept across it, not caring whether I lived or died" (4). In his fallen world, salvation is conditional, and the narrator is not going to bother with it. Fuckhead's disinterest in the family's well being emphasizes his feelings of isolation. He is separate from other people. When Fuckhead knows they will have an accident it is as if the family is fated to crash, yet Fuckhead has the agency to walk away from the accident. Fuckhead's agency is ironic because what Fuckhead really desires is a fate or purpose of his own, although hopefully it is a better one.

If Fuckhead is isolated from the world, can it hurt him? Yes and no. Fuckhead is afraid of being alone and he is afraid of death because death is a permanent state of loneliness. In “Dirty Wedding,” Fuckhead notices a young black girl “all messed up on skag. She couldn’t keep her head up. She couldn’t stay out of her dreams. She knew: shit...nothing mattered except that we were alive” (98). When Fuckhead uses drugs or remembers inaccurately, he does not have to face the car accident or Hotel’s drug overdose. Like the girl, Fuckhead cannot stay out of his dreams, all that matters is that he ignores death and feels alive. However, by separating himself from mortality Fuckhead separates himself from other people. Unawareness of life’s tragic nature is preferable for survival, but people connect through shared plight. The wife in “Car Crash While Hitchhiking” shrieks because she is overwhelmed with shock and grief, yet Fuckhead wants to be in the presence of those feelings.

The creation of chaos facilitates Fuckhead’s rejection of reality. In the individual stories, Fuckhead’s unconscious created world is more acceptable than the real world because it makes violence and death abstract. Violence and death can become abstract because drug use and memory distortions create holes in the text. Thus, the consequences of violence can be avoided. As soon as the narrator reaches for a possibly painful revelation the story ends, and suddenly he is on a bus or in a hospital or in the middle of the desert. When Fuckhead leaves these holes the reader assumes the responsibility of filling them with an interpretation of what has occurred. However, leaving holes only calls attention to what has been ignored, which tells the reader more about Fuckhead’s unsettling world. The holes can bring the reader closer to Fuckhead, and at the same time, if they cannot be filled, push the reader away. The stories where the reader is disconnected from Fuckhead tend to be more tragic than the stories where Fuckhead and the reader are close. Johnson’s use of irony allows interpretative flexibility and the holes are placed

in the text where more than one interpretation would fill them. The ultimate goal of the chaos created through drug use and unreliable memory is to show that Fuckhead cannot deal with this world. There is something wrong with the world when feeling alive simply means you are not dead yet.

Chapter Two: Holes in the Stories

Drug use and unreliable memory, devices used to obscure Fuckhead's world, also punch holes in the narrative. In an unstable world the narrator must limit his observations in order to avoid statements of universal truth or Divine revelation because nothing can be accurately discerned in a distorted universe. As a result, the stories in *Jesus' Son* replace the narrator's meditations with detailed imagery that strays into the fantastic. For instance, in "Dirty Wedding," Fuckhead describes a man he follows off the train: "his chest was like Christ's. That's probably who he was. I could have followed anybody off that train. It would have been the same" (97). The paragraph ends and Fuckhead gets back on the train. Aside from Johnson's poetic descriptions, the dialogue and the reflections of the narrator are short because after all, "If you don't know the whole truth, you might as well keep whatever you have to say short" (Baxter, *Sudden Fiction* 22). Because narration is limited, there are no "prolonged agonizing reappraisals, disquisitions on psychology, and few epiphanies" (Baxter, *Sudden Fiction* 21). So how does a series of stories characterized by omission and psychological evasion convey meaning to the reader?

In *Jesus' Son*, ten of the eleven stories end without a conclusion; they are cut short with lines like "It was there," "But if they did," and "You're going to be sorry." The abrupt discontinuation of the text pushes the reader to develop his own understanding of Fuckhead's world, but it also leaves the reader with Fuckhead's sense of alienation, a feeling increased by Fuckhead's disconcerting direct address to the reader at the end of "Car Crash While Hitchhiking": "And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you" (12). The use of "you" emphasizes the reader's otherness. Johnson achieves a delicate balance of bonding and separation between the narrator and the reader. The reader is close enough to the text to

understand why certain realizations are left out, but also far enough away to think for himself. Lengthy narrative or authorial explanations would remove the need for individual thought and ultimately limit the reader. The author should provide his reader with enough information to understand why there is a hole in the story. Understanding requires knowing what event or emotion should fill the hole and why that emotion or event has been ignored.

The way Johnson uses narrative omission in *Jesus' Son* is similar to Ernest Hemingway's use of omission in *In Our Time*. Johnson's and Hemingway's stories use comparable narrative holes to achieve similar ends. In fact, "John Updike compared Johnson's writing to the Jayne Anne Phillips of *Black Tickets*, Thom Jones, Raymond Carver...and 'the gleaming economy and aggressive minimalism of early Hemingway'" (Power). Like Hemingway, Johnson's stories imply rather than portray violence and limit the narrator's expression of emotion. Yet, both Hemingway's and Johnson's stories can feel complete without providing resolution. Hemingway's artistic style emphasizes hiding most of a story's detail within subtext and implication. As he describes his Iceberg Theory in *Death in the Afternoon*:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader...will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of the iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. The writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.
(192)

Again, the stories in *Jesus' Son* are working similarly to Hemingway's collection of short stories. Hemingway divides his stories into two parts: one which contains the truth, but which the

narrator is unwilling to share directly, and one which is accessible to the reader, but which only hints or provides an incomplete, partial view of the story. Johnson's stories also provide two parts: one which contains the truth that Fuckhead cannot stand to face, and one which is accessible to the reader but complicated by irony and fantastic imagery. Hemingway's narrator, Nick Adams, leaves revelations out of the story because he is repressing them, as does Fuckhead. However, Johnson's fantastic imagery allows Fuckhead to fill the gaps in narrative that Hemingway leaves open.

In *In Our Time*, Hemingway characteristically omits emotions, leaving behind small pieces of dialogue and narrative, which create tensions between what is stated and what is left out, what is formulated and unformulated in the text. In the collection's first story, "Indian Camp," Nick Adams is looking at violence. He is looking at the body of a man who has committed suicide: "the blood pool where his body sagged the bunk" (21). Nick is physically watching death, but he is not seeing or completely describing it. It is unnarratable. In the end Nick's father cannot tell the reader why very few men and hardly any women kill themselves, and he cannot tell Nick if or why "dying [is] pretty easy" (21). "It's pretty easy, Nick. It all depends" (21). Depends on what? It seems Nick's father has made some profound statement about life and death: death is hard, sometimes, maybe, well it depends. Nick is unaware of the significance of his circumstances. Conversely, it is also true that Nick knows more than he wants the narrative to describe. Here is a working example of Hemingway's iceberg theory. Nick tells the reader that there is something unnarratable about these events. The reader has a sense that the events in this story are of greater and more terrible consequence than he even wants to know.

When Fuckhead is working in the emergency room at a hospital, he discovers Georgie, the orderly, "running over the tiled floor of the operating room with a mop," although the floor is

clean (69). Fuckhead asks Georgie what he is doing and Georgie replies, ““Jesus, there’s a lot of blood here”” (69-70). Georgie is making a statement about mortality. Fuckhead listens but he does not comment. The story immediately moves on to another time, possibly later that evening, when Fuckhead is again hanging out in the E.R. with a nurse. There is something unnarratable about Georgie’s revelation, and Fuckhead summarizing or analyzing it would undermine its terrifying significance. Fuckhead and Georgie know more than they can explain, and Johnson communicates what that is through the irony and imagery.

Hemingway presents an ethos of narrative control, of absolute knowledge—whatever is left out is intentionally omitted. For Hemingway, and for Johnson, the performance of knowing is more important than actual knowing. At the end of “Indian Camp,” it is impossible for the reader not to grasp the irony at the end of the story: the story’s presentation of death and the horror of it, only reflected on momentarily by Nick as he and his father row away from it on a serene lake. What Hemingway leaves out is successfully communicated to his reader. *Jesus’ Son* is a series of Fuckhead’s reflections, but Fuckhead chooses not to analyze or dwell on the stories’ implication of death. It is important to note that Hemingway’s writing does not depend on an ambiguity of description, and neither, for the most part, does Denis Johnson’s. In fact, Johnson is more poetic and detailed than Hemingway in his descriptions. Fuckhead describes disturbing experiences of drug overdose, emergency room visits, and horrendous car accidents in detail. Any ambiguity in Hemingway’s or Johnson’s stories, resulting in incompleteness, is created by the narrative. There is, however, an additional source of absence in *Jesus’ Son*. When Fuckhead personally commits a violent act it does not receive the same narrative attention as all of the other instances of violence in the text. Other moments of violence in the text show visual consequences, like the car crash in “Car Crash While Hitchhiking.” In the later story, “Two

Men,” Fuckhead is about to beat up a drug dealer’s wife when suddenly the story ends with him holding a gun to her head.

Rarely in *Jesus’ Son* is Fuckhead physically violent. However, at times the narrator’s use of violence provides another sort of hole in the text. It is Johnson’s lack of conclusion, Fuckhead’s inability to stop looking and the simultaneous impossibility of narration that involves the reader in the narrator’s violent acts. “Here the narrator is concerned less with assaulting his audience’s pieties than with challenging us to gain a clearer perception of the story than the one that he has told” (Parish 28). Essentially the author will ask the reader, “What do you do in a situation like this” (Johnson 17)? The reader may be appalled by the narrator’s potential for violence in “Two Men,” but he can share Fuckhead’s feelings of exclusion and the mystification that led to it. Throughout the story Fuckhead feels like a stupid failure, he is afraid a man named Caplan is coming to shoot his legs off, and when he threatens a man at the end of the story Fuckhead says, “The feeling that he was afraid of me was invigorating” (31). That sense of fear is relayed to the reader, but the reader never finds out if Fuckhead follows through on his threat. Fuckhead carries a gun, but “it wasn’t as if [he] would actually have used it” (16). *Jesus’ Son* is a series of stories about a narrator who is constantly trying to make sense of things, but the physical violence, a result of frustration that comes when things simply do not make sense, is removed. There are holes in these stories, and the purpose is to make the reader share the confusion and anxiety of the narrator.

Again, the reader is involved in the narrator’s violent acts when the act of violence seems, for the most part, unmotivated, and when the act itself is ambiguous—when there is a hole in narration. The reader feels responsible because he is the one filling in the hole with his interpretation of the violent act. The violence that is excluded from *Jesus’ Son* is essentially an

extension of the psychological holes, such as the unnarratable concept of death, which I have suggested is embedded in the text. Unlike *In Our Time*, *Jesus' Son* omits acts of physical violence only when they are implemented directly by the narrator. Fuckhead has no problem describing a man with a knife in his eye, but he cannot tell the reader his motivation for beating a woman. In "Two Men," Fuckhead breaks into a drug dealer's house, sees a woman, and tells her to get on the floor. He pushes the side of her face into the rug, puts a gun against her temple and tells her, "You're going to be sorry" (31). The reader does not have to sympathize with Fuckhead. Johnson's goal is to provide a story that portrays Fuckhead's attempts and inevitable failures to resolve essential painful realities about life that cannot be resolved.

Analogous to Nick, Fuckhead's brief epiphanies involve physical descriptions, but something about his out-of-body experiences is always left out. For instance, I will refer back to "Car Crash While Hitchhiking," when Fuckhead describes a car that has been broadsided, "smashed so flat that no room was left inside it even for this person's legs, to say nothing of a driver or any other passengers" (8). Again, this story is especially graphic. Immediately following the description of the smashed car, Fuckhead talks about life's great pity: "that [the dying man] couldn't tell [Fuckhead] what he was dreaming, and [Fuckhead] couldn't tell him what was real" (9-10). The narrator cannot tell the reader. It is the same way the narrator cannot explain what he feels when the woman screams upon hearing of her husband's (the driver's) death at the end of the story; although he has "gone looking for that feeling everywhere," Fuckhead does not explain what that feeling is (11). An important difference between *In Our Time* and *Jesus' Son* is that by Hemingway's final story, "Big Two-Hearted River," the Iceberg Theory stops operating the way it did in the first several stories.

Hemingway, like Johnson, creates narrative omissions by leaving certain symbols, emotions, and actions at odds with one another. In “Indian Camp,” dramatic irony functions successfully, signifying something the character has chosen to repress. Essentially, irony foregrounds problems of the characters’ inability to make sense of their own lives, so Hemingway omits what the characters’ cannot face. Again, this is precisely what Johnson is doing. However, dramatic irony only works successfully when the reader knows what is being omitted; he knows something that the character does not. In “Indian Camp” contradictions between what Nick Adams observes and concludes are apparent enough to demonstrate a hole in the character’s judgment that the reader can identify. In the final story, “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick chooses not to know anything. He experiences happiness and fear, thrill and disappointment, all at the same time. In “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick returns from war and goes camping. The reader is made aware that war has emotionally damaged Nick. The problem is that Nick is too damaged. Unlike Fuckhead, the reader does not know the type of world Nick is looking for. Nick “did not feel like going on into the swamp,” but “there were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp” (211, 212). Nick reminds himself that he is happy, but his pack (his emotions or memories) is “too heavy.” Nick does not know what he feels or why he behaves the way he does. In “Big Two-Hearted River” Nick is no longer looking or seeing the world, and he refuses to respond to a conflicting one. Dramatic irony cannot emphasize the limited nature of human understanding if the narrator makes a conscious choice not to recognize what he supposedly misunderstands. Fuckhead tries not to respond or not to be too aware of a conflicting world by abusing drugs and alcohol. However, there are still moments in *Jesus’ Son* where Fuckhead is aware. In “Indian Camp,” Nick’s escape is a failure to make a realization, while in “Big Two-Hearted River” the realization has been made, life is cruel and death is

inevitable, but Nick chooses not to acknowledge it. Denial becomes a conscious choice not a misunderstanding. In *Jesus' Son*, denial is a conscious choice for Fuckhead in the first several stories, but by the last story, "Beverly Home," Fuckhead finds a new home and learns to accept the world he is in even if he does not understand it, even if life is cruel and death is inevitable. Johnson does not use Hemingway's Iceberg Theory perfectly, but it works just as well throughout *Jesus' Son* as it does in "Indian Camp," and it works better in *Jesus' Son* than in "Big Two-Hearted River." What it comes down to is *Jesus' Son* simply has more detail. Unlike Hemingway's narrator, Fuckhead never stops looking at death and accidents, although looking is not the same as comprehending.

Chapter Three: Holes Filled with Irony

The holes Johnson creates in the collection's narrative conform to Hemingway's Iceberg Theory. Within the narrative, the holes can take many forms. Lisa Block de Behar, in *A Rhetoric of Silence and Other Selected Writings*, emphasizes the significance of verbal silence or "the suspension of the voice because words are not articulated, not uttered, but are nevertheless present" (1). Whereas Charles Baxter, in *The Art of Subtext*, describes the suggestiveness of a deadpan tone: "Tonality takes you from what has literally been said down there, to the realm of shadowy implication" (93). Holes become apparent where there is a lack of verbal communication between characters, an expressionless tone, incongruent images, or gaps in time or action, all of which are used by Johnson. I have already discussed how holes operate on the level of psychological evasion, as Fuckhead's coping mechanism. However, the holes also operate on another level. Although the holes push the reader towards certain conclusions, as opposed to infinite interpretations, by allowing multiple conclusions to exist and contradictions to remain, Johnson fills the stories with irony. The absences that create irony have a greater significance on the meaning of the text as a whole. Irony enables humor, which makes the collection's hopeful ending acceptable.

What do I mean when I say irony? The simplest way to describe irony is provided by Jerome Stern in *Making Shapely Fiction*. Stern explains that irony "refers to the discrepancy between appearance and reality, surface and depth, ignorance and knowledge. Discordance, disagreement, incongruity, difference—all are aspects of irony and all create tension" (148). Fiction needs tension. The tension in *Jesus' Son* exists in the space between an event that proves disturbing, astonishing, or both, and a lack of emotional response indicated by what remains unsaid, unheard, or unseen.

The collection uses dramatic irony when Fuckhead is admitted to the Detox Unit at Seattle General Hospital. While insisting to the examining physician that there is nothing wrong with him, Fuckhead listens to the box of cotton balls on the counter scream. Or when Fuckhead describes his beautiful alcoholic girlfriend who will make him happy forever and who he is sure will never leave him. Situational irony occurs when Fuckhead, who does not care if he lives or dies, is the only person to walk away from a car wreck. The most significant form of irony in the text is cosmic irony. Fuckhead's intentions and expectations are constantly juxtaposed alongside another order of fate beyond his predictions. It is an irony of situation, or an irony of existence; Fuckhead's understanding of the world will always be undercut by some other meaning or design beyond his control. There is no better way to portray a world abandoned by God than through irony because it can work as a mode of detachment or connection and can affirm and contradict beliefs. If the use of irony in *Jesus' Son* is successfully communicated it creates a connection between the author and the reader, or if the irony is misunderstood it distances the reader. This use of irony works well with a collection of stories that emphasizes the narrator's difficulty in communicating and desperation to communicate with others. The multiple interpretations encouraged by irony emphasize the fact that communicating is always difficult. Irony also distances or connects Fuckhead to the world he is in. Irony detaches Fuckhead from the world because it removes the direct expression of emotion, but it can also indicate that Fuckhead is extremely emotional and hence he needs to be detached to survive. Fuckhead's detachment may be inherent or chosen. Cosmic irony is widespread in *Jesus' Son* because it occurs when values are placed or when one attempts to consign values to a chaotic world. The purpose of irony is to emphasize the rift between what is and should be and between what one wants and what one

gets. There is a Yiddish proverb, “If you want to make God laugh tell him your plans,” and this is the type of joke Johnson is telling (Porter).

Irony is not the only literary device that requires the reader to infer meaning. Metaphor and symbolism do similar work. However, symbolism in *Jesus’ Son*, for the most part, fails to work or works ironically. The distortion of symbols makes sense in a collection of stories where inference of meaning, which simultaneously offers the possibility that there is none, is more important than any direct association with a meaning. The dualities in *Jesus’ Son* include life and death, the comic and grotesque, or seeing and not seeing. Half of the pair always insinuates an idea of the other, the same way what is omitted from a story actually becomes what is emphasized. The use of extended metaphors throughout the stories contributes to the discrepancy between what Fuckhead sees and feels and what is actually there. Fuckhead describes a dirty home that glitters like cheap jewelry and the tang of evergreens stabbing him (41, 80). I will examine Johnson’s use of imagery, metaphor, and imperfect symbols that help demonstrate Fuckhead’s ignorance while suggesting his knowledge of the world and something beyond it. They also allow Johnson to indicate the existence of meaning without having to disclose what that meaning is.

In a short story, an image has to present an entire experience in order to illuminate something beyond itself. Like a photograph, the image should cut off a fragment of reality, but the fragment should have a suggestive quality that opens up a more ample reality. The imagery in *Jesus’ Son* creates a sense of texture and sets a certain tone. The imagery is often a result of an internalized vision found in the narrator’s consciousness. In “Work,” Fuckhead describes spending the afternoon in bed with his first girlfriend:

Our naked bodies started glowing, and the air turned such a strange color I thought my life must be leaving me, and with every young fiber and cell I wanted to hold on to it for another breath. A clattering sound was tearing up my head as I staggered upright and opened the door on a vision I will never see again: Where are my women now, with their sweet wet words and ways, and the miraculous balls of hail popping in a green translucence in the yards? (64)

Fuckhead compares the experience to birth. Later he describes a bar as a railroad club car run off the tracks into a “swamp of time” awaiting a wrecking ball (65). The reader could easily dismiss Fuckhead’s descriptions as meaningless hallucinations or maybe reduce them to an author playing with language. Although it is fairly clear in the passage above that Fuckhead is looking at a snowstorm. Johnson is trying to provide his reader with a sensation instead of a description, and it makes sense that Fuckhead has trouble communicating exactly what he is looking at when the difficulty of communication is a theme throughout the collection. The imagery is not abstract because the narrator uses drugs. At first glance, the reader might accept the bizarre imagery because the drug use makes it seem more appropriate, but ultimately the reader should realize that abstract imagery is more effective in establishing a connection between him and the narrator. Fuckhead struggles to perceive the world and so does the reader.

Johnson also uses incongruous imagery as a defamiliarizing strategy. In “Car Crash While Hitchhiking,” Fuckhead travels under “Midwestern clouds like great grey brains [leaving] the superhighway with a drifting sensation and [entering] Kansas City’s rush hour with a sensation of running aground” (5). In “Dundun,” Fuckhead describes a dead soybean crop: “wilted cornstalks were laid out on the ground like rows of underthings...It felt like the moment before the Savior comes. And the Savior did come, but we had to wait a long time” (51). Does the

juxtaposition of clouds and brains or cornstalks and underwear create or enhance the meaning of the story? What are these images doing? They make the reader pause.

They are unusual, comic, and poetic descriptions that engage the reader and add a surreal quality to the stories. Also, these images do, indirectly, add meaning. Johnson has a talent for generating metaphors that upend the reader's expectations without becoming overly extended. Johnson makes communication between author and reader more complex through irony and imagery, but not impossible. The images in these stories seem as purposeless and disconnected as the events in them. However, it is important that the events seem purposeless because they are the actions of a narrator attempting to figure out what his purpose is, a narrator who is looking everywhere for a feeling. Walking home in the desert, Fuckhead says, "I'd run right up on one—one small orange flower that looked as if it had fallen down here from Andromeda, surrounded by a part of the world cast mainly in eleven hundred shades of brown, under a sky whose blueness seemed to get lost in its own distances" (141). The purpose of Johnson's defamiliarizing strategy is to slow the reader's perception. Once the reader's perception is slowed, he stops to consider a flower looking like an object from another planet, or a cloud that looks like a brain, and hopefully he reaches the conclusion that a cloud described as a giant brain is not that strange.

If the reader is anything like Fuckhead, then he is wandering through these stories finding the people and situations he encounters terrifying and ridiculous. When Johnson makes unusual connections he asks the reader to make them too. When the reader sees the connection between underwear and cornstalks, intimacy develops between author and reader, and that is the same intimacy Fuckhead is looking for. How is meaning generated in this world? It does not matter. All seeing is struggling to see properly, and as long as the reader feels connected to the author he can create his own way of seeing and his own meaning. Fuckhead reaches a similar conclusion

at the end of the collection. Beverly Home is a home in two ways. It is a home for people who are deemed unfit to participate in society, and it is also a home as in a place where Fuckhead connects and belongs. Fuckhead will never properly see or understand the world, but he can find a connection to it.

Symbolism, a mode of representation which would seem to lend itself to a collection of stories filled with abstractions, is difficult to find in *Jesus' Son*. Because symbols require a well established association between the object and what it represents, they have the potential to become meaningless in a text where creating incongruity is a thematic goal. Symbolism has the potential to express great significance, but part of the stories' message is that there is none. Like the collection's imagery and metaphors, the symbols extend beyond what they would typically signify. In "Car Crash While Hitchhiking," Fuckhead claims to know every raindrop by name. The reader may expect the raindrops to be something more than precipitation, but the raindrops do not support a melancholic image of Fuckhead or serve as a symbol of revitalization. The narrator walks away from the accident as indifferent as he was going into it. Fuckhead says, "I sensed everything before it happened. I knew a certain Oldsmobile would stop for me even before it slowed, and by the sweet voices of the family inside it I knew we'd have an accident in the storm" (4). At most the rain sets the mood for the accident. The story ends with Fuckhead imagining he is in a forest: "It was raining. Gigantic ferns leaned over us" (12). The repetition of rain at the beginning and end of "Car Crash While Hitchhiking" leaves the reader with the feeling that, like Fuckhead, he has not gone anywhere. The rain is not operating as a symbol. Like some of the imagery, it just creates sensation. Sometimes rain is just rain. In *Jesus' Son*, symbols are no longer working or they become ironic symbols; either way they emphasize that the collection will not provide any great gesture towards a specific meaning.

Claiming to know every raindrop by name is one of the first things Fuckhead does, and it begins the collection with the playful suggestion that Fuckhead is either all knowing or confused. The reader quickly learns that Fuckhead is not all knowing. The title *Jesus' Son* leads the reader to assume Fuckhead is going to stand for something more than the average guy. How is Fuckhead Jesus' Son? Fuckhead has very little to do with Jesus. If anything, Fuckhead undermines any religious implication because he is characterized as someone lacking a structured belief system. It requires a colossal stretch of the imagination to see Fuckhead as a Jesus figure. Like Jesus, he stumbles through a world of ridiculous people, but it becomes apparent to the reader that Fuckhead is also one of those ridiculous people. Right and wrong do not matter to Fuckhead as long as he feels accepted by others. The fact that at the end of the collection Fuckhead finds acceptance by helping others is an odd, comic, and hopeful twist to an otherwise dark collection of stories. The title of the book actually refers to Lou Reed's song "Heroin," which is more about a drug rush than a revelation. Johnson's irony undermines symbolism. The author dares the reader to attach any significance to Fuckhead and Fuckhead's world. This idea is reinforced when the collection ends with a symbolically ironic setting.

At the end of *Jesus' Son*, Johnson leaves his reader in the desert. Throughout the collection Fuckhead travels through Chicago, Iowa, and finally ends up in Phoenix. The text does not provide any details as to where he is exactly, and landscapes are largely ignored, until the last story. And even in the final story, "Beverly Home," Fuckhead does not describe the scenery far beyond the extent of cul-de-sacs, burning heat and varieties of cactus "producing tiny blossoms out of their thorns" (141). For most of the collection the reader has the vague impression that he is somewhere in the Midwest, so even when the descriptions of the desert landscape are brief they are impossible to ignore. The desert imagery is significant because it

symbolizes that Fuckhead is nowhere. In “From Pilgrim to Tourist—or a Short History of Identity,” Zygmunt Bauman describes the desert as “a land not yet sliced into places, and for that reason it [is] the land of self-creation.” He suggests that “you do not go to the desert to find identity, but to lose it, to lose your personality, to become anonymous” (20). There is something about the desert where nothingness is waiting to become something, or meaninglessness is waiting to be given meaning. Apparently this desert, this place without places, is the place for Fuckhead. The horizon presents Fuckhead with a hope for tomorrow, because being lost also means he is free or unbound by past deeds, habits, or conventions. If Johnson’s goal is to upset a reader’s expectations or to present the difficulties of knowing where one is in the world, one strategy would be to present the reader with imagery that defamiliarizes what he is looking at. Another would be to provide a normal image and have the image simply mean nothing, or in the case of the desert, signal nothingness. Or, have the image signal opposite and irreconcilable ideas. Has Fuckhead gone through all of these horrible adventures to end up nowhere, as in no better and no worse off than he was in the first story? The desert could be a clean slate for Fuckhead or signal an epiphany. But what is the epiphany?

The difficulty of seeing is a continuing theme that binds these stories together. Seeing, in *Jesus’ Son*, means the ability to see tragedy and accept it, something that Fuckhead refuses to do. One of the collection’s most anthologized stories, “Emergency,” is filled with ridiculous people, some who can see, some who cannot, and some who refuse to see. The problem is that everyone is in a state of emergency because eventually everyone will die, and the tragedy is that they will die alone. Dying alone does not necessarily mean physically alone, but it implies that when death comes no one can do anything to save anybody else. The difficulty of seeing is especially prominent in “Emergency.” “Emergency,” begins in a hospital where Fuckhead is working.

Fuckhead finds the orderly, his friend Georgie, doped up on pills he has stolen from the cabinets, mopping the already clean floor of the emergency room. Georgie looks over at Fuckhead:

“Jesus, there’s a lot of blood here,” he complained.

“Where?” The floor looked clean enough to me.

“What the hell were they doing in here?” he asked me.

“They were performing surgery, Georgie,” I told him.

“There’s so much goop inside of us, man,” he said, “and it all wants to get out.”

He leaned his mop against a cabinet.

“What are you crying for?” I didn’t understand. (70)

Georgie has realized what Fuckhead denies, that eventually the human goop will come out, eventually everyone will die. I want to emphasize that in this passage Fuckhead is sober and Georgie is high, reiterating the idea that drug use in *Jesus’ Son* is only a narrative device. Sobriety does not determine who can and cannot see. Drug use just allows Johnson’s imagery to stray into the fantastic when Fuckhead chooses not to see. If Fuckhead is going to look elsewhere, he and the reader may as well have something interesting to look at, although the imagery contributes much more to these stories than eye candy. The idea of seeing should not be taken literally. Fuckhead witnesses a car accident, a murder, a friend’s overdose and a number of other gruesome events, but he does not necessarily see them.

The fact that Georgie sees the blood only reiterates the fact that Fuckhead cannot see. However, Fuckhead is not the only character with vision problems. In the middle of the story, when Georgie and Fuckhead are still working the night shift at the hospital, a man comes in to

the emergency room with a knife sticking out of his eye. The man, Terrence Weber, has been stabbed by his wife in his sleep for seeing something he should not see. He saw the lady next door sunbathing. It is significant that the violent stabbing occurs when he is asleep. The story does not discuss the violence of the act or the wound. Instead, it exchanges violence for comedy. There is a hole in the text and Johnson fills it with irony. Terrence informs the nurse that the stabbed eye is his good eye, since his other one is made of something artificial. Surprisingly, Terrence can see just fine, but he cannot make a fist out of his left hand. Of course it is easier for a man to face life when he is watching the lady next door, as opposed to staring at a bloody car wreck. The doctor on duty, having been called over to examine Terrence, “peeked into the trauma room and saw the situation: the clerk—that is, [Fuckhead]—standing next to the orderly, Georgie, both of [them] on drugs, looking down at a patient with a knife sticking up out of his face” (73). The doctor asks Fuckhead, “What seems to be the trouble?” (73). The doctor choosing not to see, if only momentarily, what is probably a tragedy waiting to happen is comic. The point is that seeing in the text is subjective. Who is really seeing? It depends. Sometimes seeing is ironic and sometimes it is not.

What does Fuckhead see? Basically anything that Georgie does not. After leaving the hospital together, Georgie hits a mother rabbit with his car, pulls out a knife (taken from Terrence’s eye), cuts her open, and scoops out the babies inside, proudly declaring, “We killed the mother and saved the children” (79). Fuckhead changes the subject. Georgie hits the rabbit by accident; he does not see her in the road, although Fuckhead does. Georgie, “with a look of glory on his face,” confronts death. The rabbit is pregnant, which suggests the cycle of death being a part of life or life being a part of death (79). This is not the first time Georgie sees death. He has already cleaned the imaginary blood off of the floor, and although Terrence does not die,

the knife in his brain and the fear of possibly killing him immobilizes the doctor. Georgie merely pulls the knife out. Yet, just because Georgie sees death does not mean that he understands it and it does not mean that he can see everything. He does not see the rabbit or recognize Terrence when he leaves the hospital. Fuckhead even asks Georgie at one point if he is completely blind. It is possible that Georgie accepts death with confidence because he does not understand it.

Again, what does Fuckhead see? Fuckhead sees what he wants to see. Fuckhead and Georgie continue to drive around, finally stumbling upon what Fuckhead first believes is a military graveyard. Fuckhead has a vision of angels descending out of the sky. It seems like some terrifying magnificent Divine intervention. Moments later Georgie cries out, "It's a drive-in man!" Fuckhead is looking at a movie screen in a snowstorm (81). Why does Fuckhead readily see angels descending? Because Fuckhead wants some force to descend from heaven and make everything in the world okay. He needs something to assure him he is not alone. When he realizes his mistake, he simply says, "I see. I thought it was something else" (81).

After Fuckhead sees Georgie cut open the rabbit or realizes the angels are not coming, there are holes in text where the reader expects an emotional response, but Fuckhead only gives concise replies. It is the silence that communicates Fuckhead's difficulty in being forced to accept something he cannot understand, and the silence says a lot more about fear and sadness than words could. When seeing is impossible, the story focuses on incongruous imagery, and disconnected imagery emphasizes a lack of communication between the narrator and reader and the narrator and other characters. Seeing is related to communication. Georgie stands over Terrence Weber and tells him, "Your face is dark. I can't see what you're saying" (72). Seeing for Fuckhead is more closely related to understanding than it is for Georgie. Fuckhead tells the reader that Georgie says something that explains the difference between them. A friend of

Fuckhead's, Hardee, asks Georgie what he does for a living. Georgie replies, "I save lives" (88). Fuckhead could be implying that Georgie is delusional whereas he is aware. Fuckhead knows Georgie does not save lives. Another possibility is that Fuckhead believes he ends lives and Georgie saves them, which is likely considering later in the story Fuckhead accidentally sits on and kills the baby rabbits. What can the reader conclude about Fuckhead when he is compared to Georgie, a man who hours earlier, while hacking up a rabbit with a stolen hunting knife, cried out, "I should've been a surgeon" (78)?

Everyone is born to die; that is the painful cosmic irony of the human condition. The situational irony is that Georgie, who is completely out of his mind, can see what others cannot. The situation is not ironic when the reader realizes that seeing can mean acceptance. Georgie can accept what others cannot. If seeing corresponds to understanding, then Fuckhead is correct when he suggests Georgie is blind. Johnson does not tell the reader what seeing means. Fuckhead is blind, Georgie is blind, and at one point in the story they are both blind. There are not unlimited interpretations of what it means to see, but Johnson definitely leaves room for debate.

"Emergency" ends after Fuckhead and Georgie pick up a hitchhiker named Hardee. Hardee says he has been working on a bee farm. When Fuckhead asks, "Do those things sting you?" he replies, "Not like you'd think. You're part of their daily drill. It's all part of a harmony" (87). Despite how unsettling some of its moments are, one of the themes in "Emergency" is harmony. This is quite a statement at the end of a story where nothing seems harmonious. But after the story's rampant cosmic, verbal, and situational irony, it is the only ending that fits. It is ironic that tension between birth and life generates harmony, and Georgie embraces the irony. Georgie accepts life and death. By agreeing with the universe, Georgie feels a connection to

other people which is something Fuckhead has been unable to achieve. The situational irony that surrounds Georgie communicates to the reader a clearer picture of Georgie as a character than the reader has of Fuckhead. Seeing Georgie is crazy is more effective than telling the reader he is crazy. However, the irony and comedy associated with Georgie also make him more of a caricature than a person. Fuckhead pushes the reader away when he separates himself in the first story from “you, you ridiculous people” (Johnson 12). Georgie shows the reader he is one of those ridiculous people and the reader can only respond by laughing. The irony and the comedy that characterize Georgie communicate to the reader the impossibility of fully understanding him. Knowing Georgie can never be fully understood actually brings the reader to a conclusion about his character. Comedy brings conclusion, even if the conclusion is that the reader understands that he will not understand. In “Emergency,” Fuckhead tells the reader “[he] felt the beauty of the morning. [He] could understand how a drowning man might suddenly feel a deep thirst being quenched. Or how a slave might become a friend to his master” (Johnson 85). Like Nick’s father in *In Our Time* it seems like Fuckhead has just said something profound. The world is beautiful because it is horrible? Is his observation funny, or sad, or both? Johnson leaves the reader with several interpretations. The reader thinks at some point he will understand, that eventually Johnson will tell him, but Johnson never does. Georgie provides humor in realizing the impossibility of understanding. End of story. The reader does not know what to make of Fuckhead. If the reader is going to reach a conclusion in the last story Fuckhead has to see life’s tragedies and create humor like Georgie, and he does.

Chapter Four: Creating Comedy

Although *Jesus' Son* presents tragic events, the collection is not a tragedy, and ironically it is tragedy that facilitates the collection's comedy. If comedy is associated with hope and misery is associated with tragedy, then ultimately *Jesus' Son* is a comedy. But how exactly is comedy created in these stories?

The simplest answer is tension. In the introduction to "*Comedy: Meaning and Form*," Christopher Fry claims that "the human animal, beginning to feel his spiritual inches, broke in onto an unfamiliar tension of life, where laughter becomes inevitable" (3). The tension Fry indicates is inevitable isolation and death. Essentially, we laugh to keep from crying. Laughing does not indicate an inability to grasp the tragic nature of life. If anything, laughing indicates realization; we realize that we can never make sense of why death and isolation are inevitable. The human laughs at his inability to understand everything, or as Fry defines it, his inability to "get acclimated to being created," because being created is the beginning of destruction (4). Hence comedy is the result of a perception of perception; comedy results when the reader perceives he can never organize his world. Each story is about Fuckhead's struggle to properly perceive the world, and by perceive I mean to understand the world, to find a sense of purpose and his place in it. The problem of perception is the same problem of seeing mentioned in Chapter Three. The ultimate realization Fuckhead achieves at the end of the collection is that he will never fully see the world. In the end, Fuckhead understands that he cannot understand. Fuckhead is going to see like Georgie; he is going to accept without understanding.

There is a tension of *knowing* that Fuckhead does not know and that the reader does not know everything that is at stake in these stories. Fuckhead eventually finds his place at Beverly

Home, but only after he accepts all of the ridiculous people and their horrible deformities and stops trying to comprehend why God would let them live that way. Hence, Fuckhead never fills in and the reader never receives an explanation as to what exactly would fill the holes in the text and make everything that Fuckhead witnesses, all the horrible people and the terrible things they do, make sense. Whatever explanation there might have been escapes full and lasting perception. In the collection's final story Fuckhead looks at life and death. He does not try to explain them; he just observes that they mingle together.

In Beverly Home there is a hallway that curved until it circled back on itself completely and you found the room you'd first looked in on. Sometimes it seemed to curve back around in a narrowing spiral, shrinking toward the heart of it all, which was the room you'd begun with—any of the rooms, the room with the man who kept his stumps cuddled like pets under the comforter or the room with the woman who cried, "Lord? Lord?" or the room with the man with blue skin or the room with the man and wife who no longer remembered each other's name....But I felt about the circular hallway of Beverly Home as about the place where, between our lives on this earth, we go back to mingle with other souls waiting to be born. (150-151)

If tension creates comedy, what creates tension? Irony has the power to clarify meaning or create ambiguities. It provides the reader with multiple interpretations, and by supporting multiple interpretations irony allows tension and contradiction to remain in a text. Irony loans itself to humor because by not supplying one specific meaning it supplies many meanings, and comedy is the realization of the impossibility of understanding exactly what irony is trying to communicate. We laugh when we cannot know, and we fear when we think we should know. Of

course some ironies leave more room for interpretation than others, and irony is not always funny. There are different types of comedy in these stories, comedy that makes the reader laugh and comedy that gives him hope. The possibility of understanding and the doubt that irony creates simultaneously generates hope. The collection ends with a story that engenders hope but does not necessarily leave the reader laughing. Fuckhead finds a place for himself at Beverly Home, and that is an optimistic ending. It is ironic that Fuckhead finds his home among insane people who live in a fallen world when he has been looking for God and a rational world. The fact that Fuckhead's final home works out, in the sense that he becomes useful and connects with people, makes the collection more optimistic than if Fuckhead would have become sober and joined a respectable community.

Again, the last story does not have to leave the reader laughing for the collection to be a comedy. Even when Fuckhead is off the streets recovering in a rehab center, people are not necessarily getting better. "Not all the people in Beverly Home were old and helpless. Some were young but paralyzed. Some weren't past middle age but were already demented. Others were fine, except that they couldn't be allowed out on the street with their impossible deformities. They made God look like a senseless maniac" (139). What does the reader make of a story that ends with the narrator surrounded by characters such as "a man named Frank, amputated above both knees, who greeted [Fuckhead] with a magisterial sadness and a nod at his empty pajama pants," or another man who "had a congenital bone ailment that had turned him into a seven-foot-tall monster." "His hands were eighteen inches long. His head was like a fifty-pound Brazil nut with a face" (141, 139)? These stories' horrific images point toward tragedy, in the Aristotelian sense that they arouse either pity or fear. In "Poetics," Aristotle claims tragedy should "represent actions capable of awakening fear and pity; for our pity is awakened by

underserved misfortune, and our fear by that of someone just like ourselves,” but the story is not about pity or fear (72). There is a hole in the story because the reader is not told how he should feel about the patients at Beverly Home, and Fuckhead increases the reader’s uncertainty by describing them in a matter-of-fact tone. Fuckhead tells the reader, “You and I don’t know about these diseases until we get them, in which case we also will be put out of sight” (139). Should the reader pity or fear these people? Fuckhead’s response is to simply embrace them. Fuckhead does not understand why the patients are deformed, but he stands in the hall “greeting everybody and grasping their hands or squeezing their shoulders, because they needed to be touched, and they didn’t get much of that” (139). The story becomes especially hopeful because Fuckhead accepts pity and fear and can still have feelings of joy and belonging.

According to Northrop Frye’s essay, “The Mythos of Spring: Comedy,” “the upward movement is the comic movement, from threatening complications to a happy ending and a general assumption of post-dated innocence in which everyone lives happily ever after” (162). It is precisely the tragedy within these stories that creates the collection’s overall comedy. One has to go down to come up. The threatening complication in *Jesus’ Son* is inevitable death and isolation, but the need and desire to accept the world and all of its contradictions and deformities creates a community. However, Frye is describing comedy in the classical sense of the term. It is useful to look at the definitions of comedy and tragedy from Karl Jaspers’ point of view in his essay, “Basic Characteristics of the Tragic,” to understand the “peculiar predicament of modern tragedy since the Enlightenment” (68). Jaspers claims that tragedy is linked to time, that it is “an awareness of the transitoriness of things,” specifically, “the actual events leading up to death” (65). According to Jaspers, tragedy occurs when reality is wholly and decisively felt. The transitoriness of things and threatening complications are the same in *Jesus’ Son*, both ideas

indicate alienation and death. To simplify, for Jaspers and Frye, tragedy is the awareness of threatening complications. Which begs the question, is comedy an escape from reality? Not quite. Fuckhead's refusal to see in these stories is not what directly creates the comedy. It is the refusal to see that creates the holes in the stories and the irony that fills the holes, which has the potential to create comedy. Irony has the potential to move the reader or a character away from the awareness of threatening complications. Beverly Home is not an escape from reality. At Beverly Home people are openly a mess. It seems Beverly Home would be a tragic place to end up because the threatening complications, alienated broken people, are walking around shouting and cursing at each other. However, people can exist in reality and still be unaware of the world's threatening complications. There are two ways to be unaware, simply not knowing or choosing not to address something. The unawareness at Beverly Home, for Fuckhead, is the latter. As long as people choose not to address how hopeless they are, there can be a comedy, and there can be hope.

Comedy and tragedy are not wholly exclusive: "perhaps the most important discovery in modern criticism is the perception that comedy and tragedy are somehow akin, or that comedy can tell us many things about our situation even tragedy cannot" (Fry 18). When readers confront a hero who, in his best moments, is tragically foolish or flawed, they have, "in short, been forced to admit that the absurd is more than ever inherent in human existence: that is, the irrational, the inexplicable, the surprising, the nonsensical—in other words, the comic" (Fry 20). Fuckhead is so stoned in the first chapter he thinks he knows every raindrop by name, and because of the first-person narration he is the reader's most reliable source. To add to the absurdity, Fuckhead is always a fuckhead, and sometimes he is worse than a fuckhead. It is implied that he beats a woman and he contemplates raping another. Yet because the collection is a comedy he becomes

a fuckhead instead of a threat, and fuck-headed-ness is something that can potentially be overcome. As Robert Corrigan says in the introduction to *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, “The constant in comedy is the comic view of life or the comic spirit: the sense that no matter how many times man is knocked down he somehow manages to pull himself up and keep on going. Thus, while tragedy is a celebration of man’s capacity to aspire and suffer, comedy celebrates his capacity to endure” (3).

Chapter Five: Salvation and Conclusion

Can there be redemption without resolution? If resolution means understanding, and the closest anyone in these stories comes to understanding is by realizing the impossibility of understanding, is there resolution? And if there is no resolution can Fuckhead be redeemed? Throughout the collection, Fuckhead vacillates between hallucination and sobriety, and as Georgie points out in “Emergency,” after Fuckhead crushes several baby bunnies to death, he will always be a fuckhead:

Georgie asked, “Does everything you touch turn to shit? Does this happen to you every time?”

No wonder they call me Fuckhead.

It’s a name that’s going to stick.

I realize that

‘Fuckhead’ is going to ride you to you grave.

I just said so. I agreed with you in advance, I said. (84)

The first several stories leave little hope in the way of Fuckhead’s redemption: “In *Jesus’ Son*, the qualities of healing, redemption, and Fuckhead’s inarticulate yearning for such, war against the qualities of meaninglessness,” but when the stories are viewed in combination with each other, healing and redemption prevail (Farrin 134). The individual stories conclude with Fuckhead stoned and standing in the rain, but at the very end of the collection Fuckhead is sober and holding a steady job. However, morality does not prevail at the end of these stories or the end of the collection in the sense that Fuckhead and the reader learn some sort of lesson. Fuckhead is sober, but he has not necessarily improved morally. He has not completely conformed to society’s acceptable standards of behavior. Is Fuckhead saved? (Pollack)

It seems contradictory to have salvation without learning some sort of lesson. How is Fuckhead saved if he does not morally improve? Well, in some ways he does improve. There are small signs of his salvation that come from his actions and the setting at the end of the novel. First of all, he is sober, so there is immediately a suggestion of improvement. The reader also senses improvement because, as Fuckhead claims, “I was in a little better physical shape every day, I was getting my looks back, and my spirits were rising” (160). Also, Fuckhead is writing. He is reflective and he has found something useful to do. Towards the end of the collection, Fuckhead observes a fight between a Mennonite couple while he is peeping through their bedroom window. After the couple argues, the husband “put an end to the argument by getting down before her and washing her feet” (156). I stated earlier that *Jesus’ Son* had little to do with Fuckhead as a Christ figure. The incident between the Mennonite couple is one of the few moments of biblical reference in the collection. However, the incident is less about God and more about the relationship between two people. When the husband washes his wife’s feet it represents a fresh start for their relationship. Johnson could not provide a stronger image of forgiveness.

Of course in many ways Fuckhead does not improve. He is peeping in on the Mennonite couple, trying to catch a glimpse of the woman naked. Ultimately, Fuckhead’s salvation is not the goal of this collection of short stories. The reader is presented with a narrator who is smart and somewhat extraordinary but also despicable and violent. Fuckhead says “we all believed we were tragic, and we drank. We had that helpless, destined feeling. We would die with handcuffs on. We would be put a stop to, and it wouldn’t be our fault. So we imagined. And yet we were always being found innocent for ridiculous reasons” (39). The incongruity of the forgiveness at

the end of *Jesus' Son* and the lack of remorse throughout the individual stories is undeniably comic.

As a comedy, this collection of short stories can move toward a happy ending, toward an absurd salvation, but, again, the salvation is not merely about Fuckhead. As Frye explains in “The Mythos of Spring: Comedy,” “comedy usually moves toward a happy ending, and the normal response of the audience to a happy ending is ‘this should be,’ which sounds like a moral judgment. So it is, except that it is not moral in the restricted sense, but social” (167). The reader’s and Johnson’s concern is not with Fuckhead’s moral salvation, but rather the reader looks for a “glimpse of an ideal state of affairs which [he] knows to be better than what is revealed in the play, and which it recognizes as like that to which the action leads” (Frye 171). The end of the collection is surprisingly optimistic; Fuckhead finds a place for himself in the world and does something useful. The reader of *In Our Time* is looking for the same ideal, but Hemingway never lets him have it. Nick Adams never tells the reader what the ideal world would be like. In the last line of the collection, Fuckhead claims he has found a place “for people like us” (160). In these stories, salvation means not facing the world alone.

Is Fuckhead saved? It appears he is, but Johnson never directly tells the reader. Fuckhead does not have to be saved in the sense that he becomes a better person for there to be a moral ending. According to Frye, as long as Fuckhead is integrated into the community there is a moral ending. But why does Johnson constantly undermine the idea that Fuckhead has become an honorable person? If the ideal social situation gives the collection a moral ending, why can’t Fuckhead just become an ideal person? Throughout the collection the reader looks for progress in Fuckhead’s moral character. Farrin explains in *Contemporary Men and Their Stories*, “The peak in Fuckhead’s positive qualities either occurs in “Steady Hands” where Fuckhead compares

favorably with Bill in the Seattle Detox Unit...or early in “Beverly Home” when Fuckhead’s feelings of alienation wage their final war against the possibility of redemption, when he witnesses the Mennonites’ argument” (142). Yet even in the last story, during Fuckhead’s peak of positive qualities, the reader finds Fuckhead peering in the bathroom window of the Mennonite woman with “thoughts of breaking through the glass and raping her” (Farrin 143). Farrin admits Fuckhead’s redemption is wavering throughout the stories, but Farrin’s first explanation for the wavering as a mere consequence of the stories being part of the postmodern genre is inadequate. Saying *Jesus’ Son* ends on a positive note because it is postmodern and the goal of postmodernism is to provide the unexpected neglects the idea that Johnson has to end the collection on a comic note because that is the direction the stories were headed in all along.

Farrin’s suggestions of eloquence and appetite are more applicable to *Jesus’ Son*. Why make Fuckhead such a fuckhead? According to Farrin, “the wavering, the tease and frustration, the building of an audience’s appetite, happens in fiction through plot and eloquence” (133). Farrin’s idea is inspired by Kenneth Burke. In “Psychology and Form,” Burke claims:

Form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor; and the adequate satisfying of that appetite. This satisfaction—so complicated is the human mechanism—at times involves a temporary set of frustrations, but in the end these frustrations prove to be simply a more involved kind of satisfaction, and furthermore serve to make the satisfaction of fulfillment more intense. (3)

The process of wavering creates meaning. Burke defines “eloquence” as occurring when “the presence of one quality calls forth the demand for another; rather than one tangible incident of plot awakening an interest in some other possible tangible incident of plot” (7). Essentially,

eloquence is the idea that to have light there must be dark or to have hope requires the possibility of despair (there would not be hope without wavering). The comic requires the tragic. In order to have redemption the story must have a sinner, and if the idea of redemption is supposed to continue in the mind of the reader perhaps the character should never be fully saved. Johnson is going to make the reader do the work.

I argue that there are additional reasons besides eloquence and appetite that necessitate the existence of an eternally imperfect narrator. Frankly, if Fuckhead were to become a saint, no one would listen to him. Johnson presents his reader with a social moral at the end of the book when Fuckhead realizes that in a world that describes God as senseless or nonexistent there is still a place for everyone. In order to present this moral, without subduing the stories into a cookie-cutter lesson: “the world is beautiful and everyone has a purpose,” or maybe “understanding and acceptance is always possible in this world,” Johnson has to put in a few car accidents.

In “What We Talk about When We Talk about Theme,” Eileen Pollack claims the best way to write about theme is to do so indirectly; “Like the name of God, meaning is best referred to indirectly, with a curse” (28). Pollack insists that a moral should be delivered in an offhand way so it does not seem sanctimonious, and the best way to do that is to juxtapose a moral with profanity and brutality. Tim O’Brien is particularly fond of this technique. In his story “How to Tell a True War Story,” the narrator describes his platoon coming across a baby buffalo. First they offer it rations, but eventually they start shooting it to pieces.

[Rat Kiley] stepped back and shot it through the right front knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again, and Rat took careful aim

and shot off an ear. He shot it in the hindquarters and in the little hump at its back. He shot it twice in the flanks. It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. (79)

In the story, one of the platoon's members, Rat Kiley's best friend, has recently been killed. As O'Brien claims, "We had witnessed something essential, something brand-new and profound, a piece of the world so startling there was not a name for it," and O'Brien cannot tell the reader what that is (79). Johnson and Hemingway do not present the same degree of violence that O'Brien does, but all three authors are trying to show how insane the world can be. O'Brien tries to give an explanation for why the world is that way or why people behave the way they do, whereas Johnson does not. However, is saying Rat Kiley has lost his best friend an adequate explanation for the violence O'Brien describes?

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. (79)

The truths about war are contradictory. The most effective way for O'Brien to present his moral or emotional conclusion is to have Rat Kiley shoot a baby buffalo to death. Later the author admits that all these stories and dreams are about "Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story" (246). It is Tim trying to make life and death acceptable, but if he did not throw in a dead buffalo, if the narrator did not contemplate "all the ways [he] might die," or "all the things [he] didn't understand," the emotions would never come across (76). If the story is going to present a

moral, it should kick someone's head in for emphasis. Do not explain the moral to the reader; make him feel it (Pollack).

“It is of course quite possible to have a moral comedy, but the result is often the kind of melodrama that we have described as comedy without humor, and which achieves its happy ending with a self-righteous tone that most comedy avoids” (Frye 167). Johnson avoids a self-righteous tone by filling the individual stories with tragedies. In comedy, “one feels that the social judgment against the absurd is closer to the comic norm than the moral judgment against the wicked” (Frye 168). Once again, the moral is not about the narrator; it is about the world. It's best to keep the moral a little vague, a little morbid, and a little disturbing, because how could one possibly convince the reader or make and justify a judgment about the entire world?

The movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another. Frye explains that in the end a new society will crystallize around the hero and that is the point of resolution in the action, “the comic discovery, anagnorisis or cognito” (163). But in the end it is not society that changes. Frye's analysis does not apply perfectly because Fuckhead is simply the protagonist instead of the hero, and he acclimates to society as opposed to society crystallizing around him. In the end, Fuckhead is living in a place where a man grabs him by the shirtfront and says things like, “There's a price to be paid for dreaming.” It is a place where most “people were far enough gone they couldn't bathe themselves” (151, 139, 140). People are “completely and openly a mess” (140). Yet, the messiest place in society is the best place for Fuckhead because nobody understands the world or can be understood. Society has not changed, but finally the narrator has found a place that appeals to him, and he dutifully attends AA meetings, looks for work, and produces the facility's newsletter. The narrator says it all in the final lines:

Sometimes I heard voices muttering in my head, and a lot of the time the world seemed to smolder around its edges. But I was in a little better physical shape every day, I was getting my looks back, and my spirits were rising, and this was all in all it was a happy time for me. All those weirdos, and me getting a little better every day right in the midst of them. I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us (160).

The collection's final lines oppose what Fuckhead says in the first story: "And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you" (12). Who is "you" and who is "us"? "You" refers to ridiculous people and "us" includes "all those weirdos," but it is possible that while "you" excludes the reader, "us" includes him in addition to the ridiculous people and the weirdos. The last line suggests that not only is there a conclusion, but that the reader is part of it. Frye claims that comedy concludes with an "invitation to the audience to form part of the comic society" (164). The use of "us" is the collection's final comic act, a sweeping gesture of inclusion. Frye goes on to say that the "resolution of comedy comes, so to speak, from the audience's side of the stage," and that the "final society reached by comedy is the one that the audience has recognized all along to be the proper and desirable state of affairs" (164).

The collection ends with comedy, leaving Fuckhead literally embracing the absurd, and the reader, like Fuckhead, understanding that he will never understand everything that is going on in these stories. Johnson leads the reader to this conclusion and the overall comic arc pulls these stories together. Fuckhead's salvation may seem slightly abrupt at the end of *Jesus' Son*, but there is also something winning and earnest about it. At the same time, Fuckhead's salvation is not a total surprise because these stories were headed in a comic direction all along. The collection has a conclusion because Fuckhead finally feels he belongs; he has overcome

obstacles of rejection and alienation. But why is Beverly Home the “proper and desirable state of affairs?”

Again, it is slightly ironic, even quirky, that the messiest place is the place for Fuckhead. However, “the society emerging at the conclusion of comedy represents by contrast, a kind of moral norm, or pragmatically free society. Its ideals are seldom defined or formulated” (Frye 169). The people Fuckhead lives amongst at the end of *Jesus’ Son* are not much different than the people Fuckhead encounters throughout the collection. However, Beverly Home offers a vision of a shared community, which is an improvement from Fuckhead’s earlier isolation. Fuckhead’s salvation is more than ironic. It is real, and it is a conclusion in the sense that it is moral. Fuckhead is not dead; he is actually improving. In the end, a collection of small dark stumbling stories add up to create a comedy. Maybe the conclusion is that there is no ideal state of affairs, or the ideal world is one where you stop looking for the ideal world. The collection ends with a feeling of resolution, but Johnson does not necessarily directly provide one. As long as Fuckhead finds community the story has a moral or conclusion or an ending. Johnson does not need to formulate the moral for the reader. Narrative omissions should lead the reader to feel or see the comedy at the end of the collection, whether or not Johnson spells it out for him.

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