LOOKING FOR A PLACE IN THE WORLD: FUCKHEAD'S EXISTENTIAL QUEST IN DENIS JOHNSON'S JESUS' SON

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LICENCIATURA EN LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS

2022

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Trabajo de grado presentado como requisito para optar por el título de Licenciado en Lenguas Extranjeras

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For Grandpa, who taught me how to love (books)

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Abstract

Jesus' Son narration has been greatly analyzed to evoke the main character's psychological and emotional frame of mind. However, little has been written about the main character in terms of his motivations and concerns. Following a New Criticism approach, this essay seeks to demonstrate how Fuckhead's narration provides a lens into understanding his existential quest. The analysis includes elements such as Fuckhead's narrative mechanisms and focuses on the role of spirituality and the search for meaningful human contact in the narrator's existential crisis, collapse, and recovery.

Keywords: Jesus' Son, Denis Johnson, New Criticism, narrative mechanisms, existential quest.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Mom, Dad, Sister, Grandma and Grandpa, whose spiritual and material support made this journey easier.

This project has been possible thanks to Professor Tim Keppel's support, patience, advice, and confidence in me. His offer to write a literary essay was a challenge that I gratefully accepted, and I am happy I did. Close reading a literary text is a wonderful experience that allows us to learn about the craftsmanship of writing while discovering ourselves in the process.

Thanks to Marcela, whose notes, comments, and messages were from great support in the writing of this essay.

Introduction

Jesus' Son (1992), the first collection of stories by Denis Johnson presents, in a fragmented narrative structure, the fall and recovery of a heroin addict known as "Fuckhead." The eleven stories of the book are narrated by this character — whose actual name is never revealed — and revolve around fatal tragedies, surrealist hallucinations, criminal misadventures, and the troubled life of drug addicts in a chaotic rural America. The most remarkable element of the collection is its seemingly disjointed narrative that mirrors the erratic mental states of Fuckhead while also creating a linked universe founded on shared locations, recurrent characters, and repeated circumstances.

Great attention has been given to the book's language and images to evoke the character's psychological and emotional frame of mind. However, little has been written about the main character in terms of his motivations and concerns. In that context and following a New Criticism approach, this essay seeks to demonstrate how Fuckhead's narration provides a lens into understanding his existential quest. First, the essay will examine Denis Johnson's employment of narrative mechanisms such as symbolism and omissions. Then it will explore the book´s major themes, such as spirituality and the frustrated search for meaningful human contact. Finally, it will consider Fuckhead´s existential crisis, collapse, and recovery process.

Denis Johnson

> "Write naked. That means to write what you would never say.
>
> Write in blood. As if ink is so precious you can't waste it.
>
> Write in exile, as if you are never going to get home again, and you have to call back every detail" (Wright, 2017)

The quote belongs to Denis Hale Johnson, an American writer who was born in Munich, Germany, on July 1, 1949. For him, writing was never considered a job, it went beyond that. In a conversation he had with Deborah Treisman, Fiction Editor at The New Yorker, Johnson affirmed, "No, no! If it was work, I wouldn't do it. I'm really just lazy. If I wasn't getting paid for it, I'd still do it, and, you know, I'd be really broke" (Treisman, 2017). Writing was not about money, but about craftsmanship. "There's a surface tension to the words," he told Deborah Treisman, "It is an illusion, and you can poke at it once, and then after that you're just poking the ripples" (Treisman, 2017).

Johnson began to write at a young age. In 1968, while he was an undergraduate at the University of Iowa, three of his poems were published in the *North American Review* (Harry Ransom Center, n.d.). Just a year later, when he was only nineteen, *The Man among the Seals* (1969), his first book, a collection of poetry, was published. From then on, his repertoire grew to include five collections of poetry, eight novels, two novellas, two collections of short stories, three plays, and a collection of essays. His works were acclaimed by the public and the critics; he was awarded the Lannan Fellowship in 1993 and a Whiting Writer's Award in 1986. His novel *Tree of Smoke* (2007) won the National Book Award in 2007.

In 1971, Johnson earned a M.F.A. in poetry and fiction from the Iowa Writer's Workshop. Later, he taught creative writing in multiple colleges, universities and even at the state prison in Florence, Arizona (Harry Ransom Center, n.d.). He also worked as a correspondent for renown

magazines and reported on civil wars in West Africa and the Middle East, as well as chronicling eye-catching events in America's backcountry.

Jesus' Son, his first collection of short stories published in 1992, brought him recognition and turned him into a "cult writer" in American culture. The book was born from desperation, both literary and economic. Although he did not write only to earn money, debts had to be paid. After his second divorce and in debt to the IRS, Johnson sent his agent a batch of his drug-ridden "memories" from his days as an addict. To his surprise, *The New Yorker, The Paris Review*, and *Esquire* bought some of those pieces (Moore, 2003). Acknowledging the potential of these stories, Johnson wrote several more and pitched a collection to Jonathan Galassi, then editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, who accepted the idea and published the thin book (133 pages) with a title inspired by a line from Lou Reed's song, "Heroin."

Denis Johnson died of liver cancer on May 24, 2017, at his home outside of Gualala, California. His second short story collection, *The Largesse of the Sea Maiden,* was published posthumously as a reminder that even beyond death his words will remain an important part of American literature.

Denis Johnson's Bibliography

Poetry
• The Man among the Seals (1969) • Inner Weather (1976) • The Incognito Lounge (1982) • The Veil (1987) • The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium Assembly (1995)
Novels
• Angels (1983) • Fiskadoro (1985) • The Stars at Noon (1986) • Resuscitation of a Hanged Man (1991) • Already Dead: A California Gothic (1997) • Tree of Smoke (2007) • Nobody Move (2009) • The Laughing Monsters (2014)
Short Story Collections
• Jesus' Son (1992) • The Largesse of the Sea Maiden (2018) (posthumous)
Novellas
• The Name of the World (2000) • Train Dreams (2002)

Plays
• Hellhound on My Trail: A Drama in Three Parts (2000) • Shoppers: Two Plays (2002) • Soul of a Whore and Purvis: Two Plays in Verse (2012)
Nonfiction
• Seek: Reports from the Edge of America and Beyond (2001)

Antecedents

In a 2002 interview with Janet Steen, then the literary editor at *Details* magazine, Denis Johnson listed *The Catcher in the Rye* (J.D. Salinger, 1951), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Mark Twain, 1876), and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Mark Twain, 1885) as the books that influenced him to become a writer: "*Tom Sawyer* was the type of book —and *Huckleberry Finn*— [that], when I was a kid, I immediately began imitating" (Steen, 2018). Johnson pointed out that what those books "have in common with *Jesus' Son* is that they speak to the experience of the youthful soul" (Steen, 2018). He acknowledged that *Jesus' Son "*has the same kind of flavor" as Salinger's novel (Steen, 2018).

However, the major influence in Denis Johnson's writing was Leonard Gardner. When he was 18 or 19 years old, he read Gardner's first novel *Fat City* (1969) and was so fascinated by it that he wanted to write a book like that himself: "Between the ages of 19 and 25 I studied Leonard Gardner's book so closely that I began to fear I'd never be able to write anything but imitations of it, so I swore it off" (Johnson, 1996). Johnson never revisited the book until his first novel (*Angels, 1983*) was published. Upon rereading it, he saw that Gardner's influence on his writing was undeniable: "I'd taught myself to write in Gardner's style, though not as well. And now, many years later, it's still true: Leonard Gardner has something to say in every word I write" (Johnson, 1996).

From story writing legends from the American literature like Ernest Hemingway, Flannery O'Connor and Raymond Carver (Giraldi, 2013) — Johnson's teacher and drinking companion at the Iowa Writers Workshop — to even cross-continental writers like Issac Babel, the many voices that influenced Denis Johnson are noticeable in his works, especially in *Jesus' Son*. His poetry had an even broader range of influences: "My ear for the diction and rhythms of poetry was trained by — in chronological order — Dr. Seuss, Dylan Thomas, Walt Whitman, the

guitar solos of Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix, and T.S. Eliot" (Italie, 2017), and as with Gardner's novel, Johnson acknowledges that these poets who he admires the most and admired the earliest (I still admire them) have something to say in every line I write" (Italie, 2017).

Just as Denis Johnson was influenced by many great poets and writers, he eventually became an influence as well. His knowledge, experience, and understanding of the craft of literature resonated in the minds and hearts of his students (Literary Hub, 2017) and his work has impacted many recent writers:

> "[Johnson's] themes, his style, and his tone are increasingly recognizable in the work of newer authors, from the short stories of Laura van den Berg to Justin Taylor's fiction, Susan Steinberg's *Spectacle*, and most notably, Claire Vaye Watkins' dig into the dark side of the American west, *Battleborn*" (Diamond, 2014).

Though never a best-selling writer well known outside literary circles, Denis Johnson's importance in the history of American literature is remarkable, in large part on the strength of his masterwork, Jesus´ Son.

New Criticism

The New Criticism is a literary criticism theory that revolutionized the teaching and understanding of literature in the first half of the twentieth century. Born as an opposition to the then dominant biographical-historical criticism which claimed that the interpretation of a literary text must be based on the study of an author's life and times to determine their "authorial intention," the New Criticism proposed that the text must be studied in itself for it is a "*timeless, autonomous (self-sufficient) verbal object*" (Tyson, 2006, 137) containing all the necessary elements for its interpretation. In that sense, all interpretations should be based solely on the literary language of the text and on the context created by the relationships between its formal elements.

New Critics advocate for a "close reading" of the literary language of the text, which is to say, a thorough analysis of its images, symbols, metaphors, rhyme, point of view, and other formal elements, and the system of relationships that operate within the text without taking into account any other elements outside its boundaries. For the founders of New Criticism, the form was inseparable from the content and meaning because the "literary artifact was primarily a system of language. In it, language operated in a different way from how it did elsewhere, being governed by a different set of rules" (Matterson, 2006, 174). This theory posits that all the formal elements of a text are arranged in a way that creates a theme, the unified meaning of a work, that contributes to producing an aesthetic experience. The *organic unity*, the complex relationship between the elements of a literary work, is the criterion by which the text should be judged.

This essay builds on the fundamentals of New Criticism to interpret *Jesus' Son* since a major part of the book's meaning lies heavily on its form. In that regard, *Jesus' Son* is an autonomous literary object containing all the formal elements to be analyzed, interpreted, and understood. Any other approach that takes into consideration Denis Johnson's life and times as

sources of interpretation would fall into an *intentional fallacy* — "the mistaken belief that the author's intention is the same as the text's meaning" (Tyson, 2006, 136) — and fail in its attempt to let the book "speak for itself." Ultimately, the job of a critic is to find the textual evidence that validates their interpretation and arrange it in a way that elucidates the meaning of the literary work.

Looking for A Place in The World: Fuckhead's Existential Quest in Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*

Jesus' Son narrative style is, at least, particular. Omissions, misunderstandings, symbolism, and temporal and thematic jumps, among other elements make the collection's narrative an interesting object of study. However, merely focusing on the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of the narration is to ignore its potential to be a tool to observe, analyze, and understand Fuckhead's — the protagonist and narrator's — decadence and recovery derived from an existential crisis. This essay seeks to demonstrate that beyond its shallow deficiencies the narration of *Jesus' Son* relates the testimony of a quest for answers undertaken by a man full of concerns about the meaning and nature of his identity in relation to spirituality, death, relationships, purpose, and a sense of belonging to the world.

Several critics who have studied *Jesus' Son* agree on the relevance of the narrative style of the collection as a clue to understanding it. In their studies, they consider Fuckhead's narration paradoxical (Sinno, 2005), tragicomic, dynamic, ironic (Schroeder, 2012), hallucinatory (McClure Smith, 2001), but, above all, they agree that the main character's narration is unreliable (Shepard, 2018). This unreliability stems from several inconsistencies found throughout the story in terms of chronology, characters, and facts (Sinno, 2005) and is a clear indicator of the troubled state of Fuckhead's mind. "Troubled," for the purposes of this essay, should be understood as a disorganized or confused state of mind that impedes the comprehension of reality.

One example of a major inconsistency in *Jesus' Son* can be found in the collection's first story, "Car Crash While Hitchhiking." In this story, Fuckhead seems to foresee a fatal accident*:* "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" (3). This quote, far from portraying Fuckhead as a character with supernatural

abilities, is the reader's first glimpse of the narrator's chaotic understanding of the world. Indeed, as Fuckhead states, a car crash does occur in the story. Nevertheless, his "knowledge" of the situation soon disappears after the accident. "'What happened?' 'We had a wreck,' he said. 'The baby's okay,' I said, although I had no idea how the baby was" (6). Confusion clouds Fuckhead's mind to the extent that he finds himself incapable of even differentiating death from life ("'I can't tell who is [dead] and who isn't,' I admitted" (7)) and, with that, his "ability to see the future" in fact reveals a deep misunderstanding of the reality.

Fuckhead's prophetic declaration can be explained in two different ways: as a result of an altered state of mind due to drugs abuse, and as an example of the narration deficiencies (Sinno, 2005) of a troubled mind. The first approach becomes obvious as Fuckhead confesses being "something less than conscious, thanks to the first three of the people I've already named—the salesman and the Indian and the student—all of whom had given me drugs" (3). Under the effects of hashish, amphetamines, whiskey, and speed, Fuckhead's "abilities to see the future" can be understood as a deep time confusion where the past becomes the future in a blurry hallucinatory present ("I knew every raindrop by its name" (3); "And yet I dreamed I was looking right through my eyelids, and my pulse marked off the seconds of time" (5)). The role of drugs in Fuckhead's chaotic understanding of the world is evident, but, although important, it is not enough to fully explain it. That is where the narration deficiencies resulting from a troubled mind can provide further insight into this question.

The translation of life events grasped through a troubled state of mind related in the form of written words leads to narrative deficiencies where details are omitted, confused, interchanged, or simply made up. Discussing the reason behind the chronological jumps on "Emergency", Jim Shepard asserts that "some urgent part of the story's emotional stakes —and thematic heart— is taking place in that unspecified point in the present from which the narrator is speaking"

(Shepard, 2018, 559). This implies that between the “present” where the actions take place and the “present” where Fuckhead narrates those actions, there is an unknown time lapse in which constant drug abuse and physical and psychological violence may have interfered with Fuckhead’s mental processes, thus contributing to the deficiencies of his narration. The car crash situation, for example, can be considered a narrative deficiency where the chronology of the events is disordered, but many of the stories that compose the book also provide similar situations that increase unreliability in Fuckhead’s narration while also revealing Fuckhead’s chaotic understanding of the world.

An example of context confusion — and as such an example of a narrative deficiency — is Fuckhead’s misunderstanding of the situation in the first part of “Out on Bail”. In this story, Fuckhead starts his narration introducing Jack Hotel “in an olive-green three-piece suit, with his blond hair combed back and his face shining and suffering” (29). They are drinking at the Vine with other people in a kind of farewell party as it seems that Hotel will be found guilty of armed robbery and convicted to a long time in prison:

> He'd looked in his lawyer's eyes and fathomed that it would be a short trial. According to a legal math that only the mind of the accused has strength to pursue, he guessed the minimum in this case would have to be twenty-five years (29).

But then, a couple paragraphs later while introducing Kid Williams, a former boxer, a realization punches Fuckhead in the face: “And then, as if to twist my life even further, I realized that all the celebrating that afternoon hadn't been Hotel's farewell party after all, but his welcome home” (31). Fuckhead’s confusion extends further as he cannot fully understand what is going on around him. He does grasp some information (a party for Jack Hotel) but misses on comprehending all the details of the situation. Still more, even when Hotel himself explains to Fuckhead how he has been acquitted, Fuckhead seems to be unable to understand what Hotel is

talking about: “That had been the meaning of the conversation I'd had with him that afternoon, but I hadn't understood what was happening at all” (32). Fuckhead’s state of mind is troubled enough as to being incapable of processing all the information around him as it comes. This leads to serious misunderstandings such as this one and, as such, to narrative deficiencies when trying to narrate the situation.

One of the most striking examples of narrative deficiencies in *Jesus’ Son* happens in the sixth story of the book, “Emergency”. In this story, after working a shift in the hospital emergency room, Fuckhead and Georgie, an orderly, both under the effects of various pills, get lost along the highway. When it begins to get dark, they wander around in the falling snow until they reach an “open field that seemed to be a military graveyard, filled with rows and rows of austere, identical markers over soldiers' graves” (66). Soon, Fuckhead witnesses a unique scene where “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” (66), that terrifies him to the bone: “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” (66-67). However, as soon as Fuckhead builds this scene with his narration, Georgie destroys it as he cries out “It’s the drive-in, man! […] They’re showing movies in a fucking blizzard!” (67). The “grave markers” Fuckhead saw were actually the speakers and the “huge angels” were in fact the movie actors on the big screen. But even with that information, Fuckhead seems unable to get beyond his first impression: “‘The drive-in…’ I wasn’t sure what these words meant” (67). This situation can be considered a narrative deficiency as there is a deep context confusion along with a strong emotional effect on Fuckhead (fear) that leaves him in a state of shock. Also, it is not Fuckhead himself who notices the lapse, but Georgie, and that explains why it is so hard for Fuckhead to emerge from his

hallucinatory state and understand the reality of the moment; it takes time and the physical proximity to the drive-in for him to start making sense of it.

Although Fuckhead's deficient narration could be seen as a detriment to the stories, merely focusing on its unreliability would be to ignore its value in comprehending Fuckhead and his deep existential needs and concerns. In fact, Fuckhead's narration is key to analyzing his disorientation and bewilderment. In other words, it reveals his perceptions and perspectives of the situations around him and, as such, it opens a window into his motivations and the nature of his fears, desires, and problems. Elements such as narrative lapses, abstract descriptions and hallucinatory metaphors make the narrative of *Jesus' Son*'s unique while also transforming the book from merely a collection of anecdotes, the recounting of a junkie's drug-fueled adventures to a profound testimony of a man who has embarked on an existential quest. "I was certain I was here in this world because I couldn't tolerate any other place" (34)), Fuckhead claims in "Out on Bail." This sentence encapsulates his frustration but also his hope of finding a meaning in his existence in the world.

Throughout the narration, Fuckhead conveys a series of concerns about his own and the others' identities, the way the world seems to work, and the meaning and nature of spirituality, death, and relationships; altogether, they are the expression of the deep existential quest that Fuckhead is embarked on. Incapable of fully understanding the world around him, Fuckhead finds himself in a constant quest for answers to questions he might not even be able to articulate, searching for a purpose to his aimless, nomadic life. Ultimately, *Jesus' Son* is the narration of a man's struggle to find his place in a frightening, chaotic world.

Fuckhead's concerns are not always explicit in his narration. They are often veiled by the layers of metaphors and abstract, hallucinatory descriptions. In that sense, and keeping in mind that Fuckhead's narration is permeated by his emotional state, it is important to not read those

passages as mere “poetic imagery,” but to scrutinize their symbolic nature in pursuit of clues or patterns that allow for a better understanding of Fuckhead’s inner world.

A subtle, recurring metaphor in the book that portrays Fuckhead’s sense of alienation can be found in the story, “Car Crash While Hitchhiking.” Fuckhead catches a ride with a salesman from Texas to Kansas City. There, he finds a Volkswagen driver who takes him beyond the city limits, where he is picked up by the family from Marshalltown who takes him on the Interstate through western Missouri where they finally have the fatal accident. What is remarkable in this journey is that, first, Fuckhead keeps jumping from car to car because he does not feel comfortable with any of the people (“As soon as we slowed down, all the magic of travelling together burned away” (4), says Fuckhead when he and the salesman arrive to Kansas City); and second, he never states his destination; he simply allows himself to be taken from one place. This example conveys Fuckhead’s need to keep moving without knowing where exactly he is going, or with little hope of finding a comfortable place to stay: “I piled my sleeping bag against the left-hand door and slept across it, not caring whether I lived or died” (4).

Another example of this metaphor occurs in “Happy Hour.” After a series of disappointments, Fuckhead is riding around Seattle on the bus “for three or four hours” (99) until he is scolded by the Jamaican driver: “‘You can’t just sit on the bus,’ she said, talking to me in her rearview mirror. ‘You’ve got to have a destination’” (99). He decides then to get off at the library, but he would have never gotten off if the driver had not confronted him. Finally, in “Dirty Wedding,” Fuckhead rides a train through the neighborhoods and past the platforms for an undefined period of time. When the train stops due to a problem with the doors, Fuckhead says, “We were delayed,” and adds ironically, “those of us who had destinations, anyway” (78).

The metaphor of travelling without a destination is not easily noticeable because, one, it might not be directly expressed (as in “Car Crash While Hitchhiking”) or, two, it might consist of

merely one or two sentences (“Happy Hour” and “Dirty Wedding”). What it is noticeable, however, is a common factor among all the references: they all seem to rise after Fuckhead has faced a distressing situation. It could be something superficial such as in “Happy Hour” where Fuckhead is looking for a girl he is in love with (though his love is not reciprocated) and loses almost all his money by trusting some people to buy him Taiwanese marijuana, or something more serious such as in “Dirty Wedding” where he takes his girlfriend Michelle to an abortion clinic but then is thrown out after he makes a rude remark. In “Car Crash While Hitchhiking,” Fuckhead is feeling despondent and pessimistic (“At the head of the entrance ramp I waited without hope of a ride. What was the point, even, of rolling up my sleeping bag when I was too wet to be let into anybody's car?” (3)). This common factor conveys two significant characteristics of Fuckhead and his narration: First, distressing situations trigger Fuckhead’s concerns about his place in the world, and second, Fuckhead tries to mask his concerns under a layer of ironic detachment.

In “Dundun,” Fuckhead uses this strategy of misdirection twice after McInnes —who was “accidentally” shot by Dundun— dies in Fuckhead’s car on their way to the hospital. When he and Dundun realize McInnes is dead, Fuckhead says: “For a moment I fell asleep, right while I was driving. I had a dream in which I was trying to tell someone something and they kept interrupting, a dream about frustration” (41). In this case, his dream about frustration is not because of not being able to “tell someone something” but because of him not being able to help McInnes and save his life. The interruption he mentions in his dream happens to be death, the ultimate interruption of life, but Fuckhead prefers to avoid mentioning it directly.

Several lines later, Fuckhead gives a vivid description of his environment, “the skeleton remnants of Iowa” (41):

> Glaciers had crushed this region in the time before history. There'd been a drought for years, and a bronze fog of dust stood over the plains. The soybean crop was dead again, and the failed, wilted cornstalks were laid out on the ground like rows of underthings. Most of the farmers didn't even plant anymore (41-42).

This description, and similar descriptions found throughout the collection, might seem hallucinatory or surreal because it is loaded with poetic imagery and symbolism. To understand its function in the story, it is necessary to contextualize it. As mentioned, McInnes has just died in Fuckhead's car. Fuckhead is troubled by this situation, as he manifests through the reference to his "dream." The description of the place also works as an expression of his distress about McInnes' death. The atmosphere he conveys in the paragraph is somber and cold; it refers to the deserted air of a plantation which has been abandoned or destroyed by frosts. The dead soybean crop and the wilted cornstalks are markers of that scenario. The presence of death, of the end of life whatever its form might be, is everywhere. "All the false visions had been erased," Fuckhead states in a vague reference to his loss of hope after his efforts to save McInnes are "interrupted." By the same token, the description of this place can be a projection of Fuckhead's interior being: wilted, abandoned, alone in the face of death.

Examples like the aforementioned are common in *Jesus' Son* as Fuckhead tends to avoid talking directly about his concerns. Schroeder argues that "*knowing* limits Fuckhead's actions because he usually feels afraid of death and afraid of being alone" (Schroeder, 2012, 7). Ignorance is bliss, and as such, Fuckhead is always trying to avoid *knowing*, to avoid realizing and accepting the tragedies that happen to him or people around him.

In "Dundun," Fuckhead seems deeply concerned about the death of McInnes. Due to his tendency to evade unsettling situations, Fuckhead tries to distance himself from the scene by expressing abstract descriptions of his surroundings. According to Schroeder, "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" (Schroeder, 2012, 26). In sum, Fuckhead's use of symbolism and abstract imagery has two contradictory functions on his narration: it works as a method of evasion to avoid *knowing*, but at the same time, it is a way of conveying what Fuckhead is feeling. It is as if the more he tries to hide his emotions, the more the reader can feel them.

By understanding the indirect way in which Fuckhead communicates, or tries to communicate, his feelings and worries, it becomes easier to notice his constant struggle to find answers to his concerns, or at least to discover clues that could shine a light on his doubts about how the world works. In that sense, the many references to spirituality in Fuckhead's narration become relevant as they unveil Fuckhead's growing internal discomfort and the unsatisfactory answers he receives from his approach to religion and God as the first source of calm and peace on his existential quest.

Any discussion about the relationship between Fuckhead and spirituality in *Jesus' Son* should start in the very title of the book. The collection of stories takes its name from the lyrics of Lou Reed's song "Heroin" ("When I'm rushing on my run/And I feel just like Jesus' Son" (Reed, 1967)) which are used as the book's epigraph. However, as Derbyshire points out, associating the collection directly with religion because of its name "is problematic because it is based on a demotic assumption about language, and it does not take into account the tendency of poetry to move into metaphor" (Derbyshire, 2015). Indeed, rather than filling the collection with a religious tone, the title, following the symbolic tendency of the book, denotes Fuckhead's mundane state of the son who wants to reach his father's sacred state but fails to do so. It is the expression of his continual but unsuccessful attempts to transcend his imperfect human condition.

References to God and religion in the stories reveal Fuckhead's perspective and relationship to spirituality. He maintains a questioning, albeit ironic interest in religious purpose and the afterlife. In one scene, after being kicked out of the abortion clinic in "Dirty Weeding," Fuckhead encounters a group of Catholics that "splashed holy water on my cheek and on the back of my neck, and I didn't feel a thing. Not for many years" (77-78). Here, when he states he "didn't feel a thing," he is not referring to feeling the water on his body, but to feeling the "touch" of religion in at least two ways. First, he feels no regret over the abortion performed on his girlfriend. "I know they argue about whether or not it's right," he says, "This wasn't about that […] It was what the mother and father did together" (84). Fuckhead does not seem to care about the role of religion in the decisions he makes, but rather sets himself apart from that moral framework to lead the discussion towards an individual (in this case, a couple's) responsibility in the fact. Second, the lack of feeling refers to Fuckhead´s general numbness toward life which cannot be countered by spirituality.

Another example of Fuckhead's frustrated search for spiritual meaning occurs in "Emergency" when Fuckhead and Georgie, both under the effects of pills, discuss where they will go after their shift. Georgie, in a desperate tone, says he wants to get closer to religion ("I want to go to church […] I'd like to worship. I would […] I need a quiet chapel about now" (63) while Fuckhead suggests instead a diversion through entertainment: "Let's go to the county fair […] They have these injured hawks and eagles there. From the Humane Society" (63). Here, there is a contrast between Georgie´s longing for spirituality as a "coping mechanism" compared to Fuckhead's choice of a more secular diversion. It shows his preference for the imperfection of nature over the perfection of the sacred: an injured bird, incapable of flying freely, is more interesting to him than the silence and comfort of a chapel. Likewise, his avoidance of seeking a deeper view of his existence comes in part from his disoriented state. "After a while you forget

it's summer," he says, "You don't remember what the morning is. I'd worked two doubles with eight hours off in between […] Georgie's pills were making me feel like a giant helium-filled balloon" (62-63).

Fuckhead's ironic detachment from religion can be seen in his questioning of God. Describing the chronic patients in the hospital he works as old and helpless, young but paralyzed, or demented, he notices that "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" (116). Another reference to God occurs in the story "Dirty Weeding" when Fuckhead has a fleeting conversation on the train with a "dear little black child maybe sixteen, all messed up on skag[1]" (81). Noticing how high she is, Fuckhead asks her for some heroin. The girl tells him she does not have any and then laughs. "She laughed like God" (81) Fuckhead thinks. For Fuckhead, God is not unique and perfect; instead, he could be any person who knows that "nothing mattered except that we were alive" (81).

Questioning and de-mythologizing God's image might seem sacrilegious, but it is important to understand that Fuckhead is reacting to the sense of abandonment he feels. More than an act of rebellion against spirituality, Fuckhead's distant and questioning attitude is like the tantrum of a hurt child who cannot find support from his parents to help him deal with his doubts and challenges about life. And as Fuckhead is unable, or unwilling, to express those feelings directly, he conveys them the best way he can.

The more doubts Fuckhead has about religion, the more he pursues his existential quest. This interest is evident in "Dirty Wedding" when Fuckhead and Michelle arrive at the abortion clinic: "A man in dark glasses shadowed Michelle right up the big steps to the door, chanting

[1] "Skag" is a slang for heroin.

softly in her ear. I guess he was praying. What were the words of his prayer? I wouldn't mind asking her that question" (75-76). In this statement, Fuckhead is showing a genuine interest on religion and spirituality that could have been triggered by his curiosity to know how another person experiences prayer.

A related situation occurs at the beginning of "The Other Man" when Fuckhead describes his arrival to Seattle: "I'm sure we were all feeling blessed on this ferryboat among the humps of very green […] islands, […] under a sky as blue and brainless as the love of God" (87). The first element to highlight is the word ¨blessed¨ at the beginning of the quote. Its irony becomes clear when he says, "under a sky as blue and brainless as the love of God." When Fuckhead searches for spirituality as a remedy for his despair and sense of abandonment to him, he reacts with a defiant and ironic tone.

Inevitably, Fuckhead's search for some sort of meaning in life leads him to the subject of death. *Jesus' Son* narrates various violent situations that end up in fatal or near-death experiences. Although his recounting shares some of the symbolic tendency of the spirituality-related excerpts, most are told with a more direct and even explicit tone. In general terms, Fuckhead finds in death a transformative power that shines a light, however dim, on that elusive meaning for which he searches.

In "Car Crash While Hitchhiking," the first encounter with death in the collection, Fuckhead is involved in a terrible accident in which a man ends up dead. His first response is, characteristically, avoidance. "I was ready to deny everything myself now," (6) Fuckhead claims after the crash, partly because of the undeniable shock due to the accident, but mostly because he has a hard time accepting tragedies in his life. This evasive tendency has been discussed before in relation to the use of symbolism and, similarly, Fuckhead engages in lengthy, vivid descriptions about the events due to his unwillingness, or inability, to express his feelings.

When a driver stops to see what has happened, Fuckhead tries to interpret his response: “By his manner he seemed to endorse the idea of not doing anything about this. I was relieved and tearful. I'd thought something was required of me, but I hadn't wanted to find out what it was” (7-8). The accident, the injured people, and the dying man do not seem as important to him as his worry that something may be required of him, something he feels incapable of complying with. Instead of hiding his feeling under layers of obfuscating symbolism, here Fuckhead reacts with paralyzing fear and an instinct for survival.

Despite his evasiveness, there are moments when he allows his concerns and doubts to surface. When he sees the dying man hanging from the wrecked car, he reflects on what he calls “the great pity of a person’s life on this earth” (8): “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” (8). Fuckhead sees a similar mystery in the opposition of reality and dreams as he sees in the opposition of life and death. The ignorance of the meaning of death, of what happens in that eternal dream, both frightens and fascinates him, and compels him to look for answers.

The metaphor of dreaming as death also appears in the story “Steady Hands at Seattle General.” Fuckhead narrates a conversation he had with his roommate Bill while giving him a shave. Bill tells Fuckhead he was shot twice by his wives and then mentions a dream he had when he was knocked out cold from his first wife’s shot: “Every time I remember my first wife, I remember that she pulled the trigger on me, and then here comes that dream . . .” (109). Fuckhead is obsessed with knowing what the dream was about and insists three times hoping to get a description of it from Bill, but to no avail. Again, as it occurs in “Car Crash While Hitchhiking,” Fuckhead cannot get any clue about the contents of the afterlife dream or any piece of information that would help him solve the mystery.

The curiosity about what comes after death fascinates Fuckhead and not finding answers becomes a source of frustration and leads him to a disturbing realization: maybe there is nothing beyond death. Later in "Steady Hands," Fuckhead asks his roommate about his past life and Bill states that all he sees is "wrecked cars" with people who are "just meat now" (110). Bill's answer troubles Fuckhead, who asks, "Is that really how it is?" (110). He is disturbed by the thought that there is nothing special after death. Here, Fuckhead expresses both his hope of finding some meaning in death and beyond, and his fear of facing a silent void after his last breath. Bill, who has faced death not once but twice, is a character who challenges, perhaps unintentionally, Fuckhead's expectations about death. If Bill, who knows death a little better than Fuckhead, reduces it to becoming "just meat," then he is probably right. In this case, Fuckhead does not try to avoid the subject, but rather he expresses his concerns with a simple question.

These situations in which Fuckhead reflects about death are an example of a more mature approach to the narrator's existential quest. By allowing his questions, doubts, and concerns to reach the surface, Fuckhead is trying to "understand" himself better. The constant, chaotic discomfort that drives him from one distressing situation to the next, disappears long enough to offer Fuckhead the clarity to reflect on its causes. Nevertheless, this clarity is fleeting as he returns to his tendency to evade his concerns. In "Car Crash…," he tries to avoid talking to the authorities about the accident: "My secret was that in this short while I had gone from being the president of this tragedy to being a faceless onlooker at a gory wreck" (8), and even when his statement is taken, he insists that he is not part of the situation: "There was nothing wrong with me, and I hadn't seen anything, but the policeman had to question me" (9); in "Steady Hands…," he tells Bill how good his stay at the hospital is: "They're pumping Haldol by the quart. It's a playpen. […] I could see living here two weeks out of every month" (110). Any progress in

Fuckhead's existential quest, whether it is a realization, an action, or even a question, is constantly self-sabotaged, extending his discomfort due to his fear of facing the truth.

But he cannot evade the truth forever. In fact, a close encounter with death evokes a fundamental realization about (his) life. In "Out on Bail" he truly faces the power of death in people who are close to it. In this story, Fuckhead and Jack Hotel buy some heroin and split it in half. As both of them are "in a bad condition—drunk, and having missed a night's sleep" (33), they overdose. Luckily for Fuckhead, he is revived by his girlfriend and a Mexican neighbor; Hotel, alas, is not so lucky: "But after a while they forgot about him, and his breath failed without anybody's noticing. He simply went under. He died" (34). Realizing that he could have died like Hotel engenders in Fuckhead a new perspective about death and life: "I was overjoyed not to be dead. Generally the closest I ever came to wondering about the meaning of it all was to consider that I must be the victim of a joke" (34). It seems like after this close call, he starts to see life (and death) as being filled with meaning: "I had a moment's glory that night […] I was certain I was here in this world because I couldn't tolerate any other place" (34). Now his task, the fuel for his existential quest, is to find and understand that meaning.

From that realization, his fascination about death increases, but also his understanding of life as something deeper than just a "joke." In "Out on Bail" it is obvious this approach with his statement "I was overjoyed not to be dead" (34) or with his appreciation of his surroundings: "When I realized how long I'd been out and how close I'd come to leaving it forever, our little home seemed to glitter like cheap jewelry" (34). Another example of this new understanding occurs in "Steady Hands…" as Fuckhead asks Bill to describe himself for future readers of a story or a poem he is going to write. Bill does not take Fuckhead too seriously until Fuckhead says, "And you're still alive" (108), to which Bill responds, ¨Asking me if I'm alive makes you look kind of stupid. Obviously, I am" (108). But Fuckhead tries to explain his attitude towards

life by saying, “Maybe I mean alive in a deeper sense” (108). For Fuckhead, being alive is not limited to breathing, talking, eating, mere physical actions any human being can perform, but it entails a bigger purpose, an understanding of every thought and action as something powerful and important.

In this way, Fuckhead’s appreciation of life can also come from an opposition to death. In “Car Crash…,” when he is taken to the hospital after the accident, Fuckhead witnesses the moment when the dead man’s wife is notified about her husband’s death. “What a pair of lungs!” Fuckhead says. ¨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” (9). Although a first read of that excerpt might lead one to think that Fuckhead feels wonderful about other people’s tragedies, a deeper reading would be: As a survivor of a fatal accident, the widow’s cry fills him with the joy of being alive but also of being able to witness that fine line he has been searching between life and death, going right up to the edge of death to try to see what is on the other side.

For Fuckhead, death becomes the fundamental element in his existential quest. It works as a starting point for his questions and concerns related to the meaning and importance of his actions. His understanding of life as something deeper than a physical state of being is born from his fearful yet questioning relationship with death, heightened by close encounters with it. “I am still alive!” (34) he shouts at the end of “Out on Bail” as an affirmation and also a promise to claim his life and find its true meaning.

With this new perspective, Fuckhead tries to build positive relationships with other people. It is not insignificant that all stories in the collection focus on characters other than Fuckhead himself. His many encounters with lovers, acquaintances, and strangers trigger in him emotions and reflections that contribute to his quest for meaning.

An important aspect of Fuckhead´s relationships with people is the preeminent place of the women he is sexually involved with. He often refers to them in flashbacks, almost as an evasive mechanism to distance himself from an uncomfortable situation. For example, in "Out on Bail," right after a conversation in which he seems to upset Jack Hotel, Fuckhead reminisces about his love experience:

> And with each step my heart broke for the person I would never find, the person who'd love me. And then I would remember I had a wife at home who loved me, or later that my wife had left me and I was terrified, or again later that I had a beautiful alcoholic girlfriend who would make me happy forever (30).

There is something essential in Fuckhead's relationships with women that is portrayed in the previous excerpt: Fuckhead's emotional state is easily influenced by them, both in a negative and a positive way. It appears that his happiness is predicated on the presence or absence of a woman's attention and affection: if there is none, he is "terrified"; on the contrary, a "beautiful alcoholic girlfriend" has the power to make him "happy forever." But why are love and sex relationships so important in Fuckhead's life? This can be explained in two senses: one, they give him a sense of well-being, and two, they offer him the chance to be vulnerable.

Most of the references to love relationships in Fuckhead's narration have a recomforting tone. One of the major examples of this narrative tendency happens in "Work". After averting a fight at The Vine, Fuckhead says: "And then came one of those moments" (52) when a memory of his first wife comes to mind: "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" (52). Here, his description evokes a heaven-like atmosphere. Several lines later, the pleasure of the memory is reinforced as he states: "We put on our clothes […] and walked out into a town flooded ankle-deep with white, buoyant stones. Birth should

have been like that" (53). These memories fill him with a sense of well-being and happiness, but they are also suffused with nostalgia: "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?" (52). Fuckhead is a romantic whose relationships with women bring him both pleasure and pain.

Furthermore, Fuckhead's romantic relationships provide him with an opportunity to be vulnerable and to experience intimacy. In "Dirty Weeding," Fuckhead makes a subtle statement about this: "Michelle and I had our drama. It got very dreary sometimes, but it felt like I had to have her. As long as there was one other person at these motels who knew my real name" (80). Despite their thorniness, his relationships with women allow him to reveal a part of himself he hides from others. His real name, which the reader never learns, is a piece of information that only his partners seem to know.

This vulnerability can also be a problem in his relationships, however, because it can ruin the ones he has, or it can hinder the ones he wants to build. In the first case, Fuckhead acknowledges how the "real him" could have contributed to the decay of his relationship with Michelle: "Nothing I could think up, no matter how dramatic or completely horrible, ever made her repent or love me the way she had at first, before she really knew me" (76). In the second case, there is a moment in "Beverly Home" in which Fuckhead talks about his fear of establishing a deep relationship with the first woman he dated in his recovery process as he does not feel ready to open himself entirely for her:

> I was afraid to make love to her without the conversations and laughter from that false universe playing in our ears, because I didn't want to get to know her very well, and didn't want to be bridging any silences with our eyes (122).

In sum, seeing his love relationships as transcendental experiences and using them as an opportunity to be himself —for better or worse— brings relief to Fuckhead´s existential

discomfort and offers him a possible path to follow. However, as this approach makes him highly dependent on his relationships, any disruption in them leaves him in an unbearable state: “I remember loneliness crushing first my lungs, then my heart, then my balls” (45), he complains, after a fight with his girlfriend. As with other facets of his life, love relationships are both a solution and a problem for him. He is unable to attain what he needs from them: stability and a clear objective for his life.

As love relationships are not enough to satisfy Fuckhead’s need for a meaning, he also looks for answers from other relationships in his life. His acquaintances —as it is hard to affirm that any of the characters are his true friends— and even strangers elicit in Fuckhead some important reflections about himself. Pleasant and tragic situations involving other characters have an effect on Fuckhead in his quest for meaning and a clear sense of identity.

Almost all of Fuckhead’s interactions with people are unpleasant for him. Besides the obvious adverse outcomes from his “adventures” with Dundun or Jack Hotel (McInnes’ death and Jack Hotel’s overdose), there is one story that portrays how less fatal situations can still have a negative effect on Fuckhead. In “Two Men,” Fuckhead and two of his “good friends" reluctantly give a ride to a man who unexpectedly climbs into their car. When they reach the last location, they feel uncomfortable among the revelers who Fuckhead sees sophisticated, soft, and perfect. “We felt almost like stupid failures” (22), he says, and they decide to leave quickly in order to get rid of the man and that sensation of inferiority. Deep inside he wants to be with them, he is hungry for what they have: “Around these strange people I felt hungry. I smelled some kind of debauchery, the whiff of a potion that would banish everything plaguing me” (21), but he feels he cannot reach their state of comfort and invulnerability. He feels inferior to them, and that realization hurts him deeply: “The woman hurt me. She looked so soft and perfect, like a mannequin made of flesh, flesh all the way through” (22).

In Fuckhead's interaction with these characters, he finds that comparing himself to them can be a source of an intense internal discomfort. Another example of this can be found in "Car Crash While Hitchhiking." The salesman who stops to give Fuckhead a ride starts talking about his girlfriend, his family, and his many material possessions, and this subject deflates Fuckhead´s mood. "As soon as we slowed down, all the magic of travelling together burned away" (4). The salesman's pretentious discourse erases all the camaraderie they had built together ("As he kept on, I felt jilted and sad" (4)). Fuckhead's sudden change of attitude is due to his realization that, compared to the salesman, he has nothing, no love, no family, no possessions; he is just a man travelling without a destination and that thought fills him with sadness.

Scenes like that exacerbate Fuckhead's already damaged self-esteem: "There's nothing wrong with me" —I'm surprised I let those words out. But it's always been my tendency to lie to doctors, as if good health consisted only of the ability to fool them¨ (9), Fuckhead remarks sarcastically in "Car Crash…" Although his claim is related to his health, it is transferable to many other aspects of his life. His drug and alcohol addiction, his tendency to violence, and his failure to keep healthy relationships are examples of that, and he is aware of them. That explains why he feels inferior to many people—the salesman from "Car Crash," the characters in "Two Men," even Jack Hotel in "Out on Bail" ("I was envious that he could keep such a secret, and frightened that somebody as weak as Hotel should be gifted with something so grand that he couldn't even bring himself to brag about it" (29))— and why he sees himself as worthless and shameful: "I was surprised and hurt, even miserable, that he hadn't seen fit to let me in on his trouble. It seemed to foretell that these people would never be my friends" (30); "So it could only add to my humiliation—afterwards people, usually men talking to women in my imagination, would say, 'He had a gun, but he never even took it out of his pants'" (14).

Fuckhead's relationships with other people could be a source of pleasure, comfort, and a safe place to let the "real him" appear, but most often, they end up becoming the starting point of distressing situations and a blurry mirror where he sees the worst of himself. However, they allow Fuckhead to grapple with and better understand his feelings and identity.

A good example of the impact of other people on Fuckhead occurs in the story, "Work". Here, Fuckhead helps Wayne steal some copper from an abandoned house and, with the money they made from selling it, they go to The Vine to celebrate their work bounty. After several drinks, Fuckhead observes that "all the really good times happened when Wayne was around" (53), adding, "Usually we felt guilty and frightened, because there was something wrong with us, and we didn't know what it was; but today we had the feeling of men who had worked" (53). With this statement, Fuckhead admits his internal discontent and his ignorance about himself, but also acknowledges how he feels better when he is able to accomplish a goal.

Fuckhead's desire is to be productive and helpful. He makes it clear in "Dundun" when he is asked to take McInnes to the hospital: "I was happy about this chance to be of use. I wanted to be the one who saw it through and got McInnes to the doctor without a wreck. People would talk about it, and I hoped I would be liked" (39). For Fuckhead, helping others is an opportunity to receive attention and validation. From the beginning of "Work," Fuckhead is trying to be helpful to Wayne: "His hands were shaking. He couldn't lift his glass. I put my left hand on his shoulder, and with my right, opiated and steady, I brought his shot of bourbon to his lips" (46). The contrast between Wayne's shaking hands and Fuckhead's steady ones signifies Fuckhead´s promise to assist Wayne with his task. Having done his duty, despite experiencing a bad trip and fantastical visions, he feels an enormous sense of fulfillment: "Because, after all, in small ways, it was turning out to be one of the best days of my life, whether it was somebody else's dream or not" (51).

Often, however, unexpected events frustrate Fuckhead´s best efforts. His attempt to save McInnes by driving him to the hospital is thwarted when McInnes dies along the way. In "Out in Bail," he is unable to prevent Jack Hotel from overdosing on heroin. Instead of being helpful, Fuckhead's intervention often worsens the situation, even resulting in fatal consequences. Fuckhead seems condemned to harm instead of help, or at least he understands it that way. Near the end of "Emergency," Fuckhead states that "Georgie had said something that had suddenly and completely explained the difference between us" (70). Asked about his occupation, Georgie replies, "I save lives" (72). Those three words have a great impact on Fuckhead, who sees himself as someone who is incapable of saving lives. "Does everything you touch turn to shit?" Georgie asks him after he accidently kills the bunnies they have found. Fuckhead can only answer, "No wonder they call me Fuckhead" (69). In spite of his aspirations, he sees his role in the world as not that of a savior, but as a failure.

Finding himself incapable of fulfilling his purpose in life leads Fuckhead further into a deep existential crisis that, in turn, leads him to engage in risky and self-destructive behavior. His narration becomes the testimony of a vanquished man trying to make sense of his free fall into chaos.

The scene that best portrays Fuckhead's change of attitude about people happens in "Car Crash..." His willingness to help people has vanished and a cold indifference has taken its place. After the accident he does nothing to support the injured family and simply walks on past the dying man in the other car; he even takes time to observe the man and avoid all responsibility:

> The man hanging out of the wrecked car was still alive as I passed, and I stopped, grown a little more used to the idea now of how really badly broken he was, and made sure there was nothing I could do (8).

Fuckhead's attitude in this tragic scene is the opposite of the one he has with McInnes. No longer interested in being the savior, he seems resigned to uselessness and resolves to not get involved. After many disappointments and failed attempts, it seems pointless to pursue his call to help people. And he wants them to be aware: "And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you" (10).

Alcohol and heroin consumption are constant elements of Fuckhead´s decadence journey. On many occasions, they act as coping mechanisms after a distressing situation such as in "Out on Bail" when he gets drunk with Jack Hotel to deal with his frustration after a fight with his girlfriend. "Hotel had fought with his girlfriend, too," he says. "He'd walked the streets as I had. Now we matched each other drink for drink until we both ran out of money" (33). But they can also become the source of tragedies. In "Dundun," Fuckhead would not have been involved in McInnes' death if it were not for his need to score some opium from Dundun: "I went out to the farmhouse where Dundun lived to get some pharmaceutical opium from him, but I was out of luck" (37). Here, the last sentence, "I was out of luck," can mean both his not finding opium and also his involvement in the death of McInnes. In "Emergency," Fuckhead, under the effects of amphetamines, has the terrifying vision of the drive-in/military graveyard and later accidentally kills the bunnies Georgie had protected. One way or another, drugs contribute to Fuckhead's decay as they are a temporary and inefficient solution to his concerns and the source of new distressing incidents that lead him in a vicious cycle to return to drugs again.

All the physical, psychological, and emotional stress caused by this vicious cycle deflate Fuckhead's desire to find a deeper meaning to his life and he abandons himself to a deplorable self-pity: "Because 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" (32). If it is not possible for him to fulfill his purpose in life, then there is no real reason to

continue with his efforts to find a meaning. What is the point if, in the end, he would end up like many of the people he knows: helpless, imprisoned, or even dead at a young age ("I myself couldn't remember ever having met anybody who'd actually lived that long on the earth [25 years]" (29). For Fuckhead, life has lost all its magic.

Feeling lost, Fuckhead is prone to act on impulse. In "Dirty Wedding," delusional from drugs, he obsesses on a man who gets on the train just as the doors are closing. "The train had waited for him all this time, not a second longer than his arrival, not even half a second, and then it broke the mysterious crystal of its inertia" (78-79). With that idea in mind, Fuckhead finds the man especially worthy of his attention: "He sat down near the front of the car, completely unaware of his importance. With what kind of miserable or happy fate did he have an appointment across the river?" (79). Fuckhead decides to follow him.

He follows him to a laundromat in a "Polish neighborhood" where the man, realizing he has been followed, confronts Fuckhead. "You were on the E1" (80), the guy says, and those words are enough to incite for Fuckhead a sort of epiphany: "Suddenly I had an erection. I knew men got that way about men, but I didn't know I did. His chest was like Christ's. That's probably who he was" (80). Here, the erotic connotation along with the sacred reference are markers of Fuckhead's need for a guide to lead him out of this dark moment. Comparing the man with Christ is a way to justify his interest in the man and his compulsion to follow him — in both a literal and rhetorical sense — while the erection is a sign of the excitement caused by this discovery. Obviously, however, it is not the man who causes this reaction from Fuckhead, but rather Fuckhead's projection of his desperate desires: "I could have followed anybody off the train. It would have been the same" (80).

In fact, his words come true as later in the same story he lets himself be guided by a black girl to the Savoy Hotel to procure some heroin. The process is similar to the one with the Jesus

figure: Fuckhead notices the girl is on the train, he finds something interesting about her ("She couldn't keep her head up. She couldn't stay out of her dreams. She knew: shit, we might as well have been drinking a dog's tears. Nothing mattered except that we were alive" (81)), he decides to interact with her, and finally he follows her to the Savoy, "a bad place" (82) where "monsters were dragging themselves up the stairs" (82). Although Fuckhead feels disoriented ("Beautiful women in the corners of my sight disappeared when I looked directly at them. Winter outside. Night by afternoon. Darkly, darkly the Happy Hour. I didn't know the rules. I didn't know what to do" (82)), his slow but steady decadence makes him feel connected with the atmosphere of the place: "I know there are people who believe that wherever you look, all you see is yourself. Episodes like this make me wonder if they aren't right" (82). Little by little, Fuckhead is growing used to the idea of being a lost soul who belongs to decadent places. He finds in their decadence a reflection of his own and a place where he can give it free rein.

Without a doubt, the most relevant place in Jesus' Son is The Vine, a bar that first appears in "Out on Bail," and thereafter is constantly referred to as meaningful events occur there, such as Jack Hotel's welcome home party or Wayne and Fuckhead's work day celebration. Fuckhead's descriptions of the bar are focused on its old-fashioned stationary appearance: "The Vine was like a railroad club car that had somehow run itself off the tracks into a swamp of time where it awaited the blows of the wrecking ball" (53), and on the deplorable atmosphere: "The people all seemed to have escaped from someplace. I saw plastic hospital name bracelets on several wrists. They were trying to pay for their drinks with counterfeit money they'd made themselves, in Xerox machines" (30).

As with the Hotel Savoy, Fuckhead feels attracted to The Vine despite he has not always been comfortable there: "Some of the most terrible things that had happened to me in my life had happened in [The Vine]. But like the others I kept coming back" (30). One of the reasons why

Fuckhead keeps coming back to such a decadent place may be because it offers a huge range of possibilities for him, as illustrated by the fact that many of the stories of the collection begin there. The “adventures” that are born from The Vine contribute to Fuckhead’s existential quest as they become the source of challenges, questions, and tentative answers to his concerns which might have not occurred if it were not for that bar. It offers a sort of misery loves company atmosphere, a place to share with people as lost as himself, a place where liquor or drugs help diminish his distress: “The cards were scattered on the table, face up, face down, and they seemed to foretell that whatever we did to one another would be washed away by liquor or explained away by sad songs” (53).

In addition to The Vine, another place that is fundamental to Fuckhead’s existential, albeit decadent quest is Pig Alley. This bar appears in “Happy Hour,” the story where Fuckhead’s crisis reaches its epitome as he succumbs to his self-destructive alcohol and drug abuse. The somber description of this place evokes description of the circles of hell: “The cigarette smoke looked unearthly. The sun lowered itself through the roof of clouds, ignited the sea, and filled the big picture window with molten light, so that we did our dealing and dreaming in a brilliant fog” (101). The unearthly smoke, the low sun, the ignited sea, are all elements that merge to create the infernal atmosphere of the place where Fuckhead finds himself.

In fact, Pig Alley is the lowest point Fuckhead will reach on his free fall. Just as with his reference to how people see themselves reflected in others, the beings that spend their lives in Pig Alley shine a light on Fuckhead’s chaotic state of consciousness: “People entering the bars on First Avenue gave up their bodies. Then only the demons inhabiting us could be seen. Souls who had wronged each other were brought together here" (101). Pig Alley seems to be the place where the “dark side” of people extends beyond the physical limits of their body to hold themselves accountable for their internal flaws, their open wounds, and all the wrongs they have

done to others and to themselves: “The rapist met his victim, the jilted child discovered its mother” (101)). Fuckhead is no exception to this rule. His presence there among these “demons” is the maximum proof of his decadence, his loss of purpose, and his inability to make sense of the world around him. Unlike his experience in the Savoy or The Vine, he does not express discomfort at being in Pig Alley; on the contrary, it seems as though he has finally accepted his position as another lost soul who belongs to the deepest most vicious places of the world. He acknowledges (with a mix of resignation and acceptance) that “nothing could be healed” (101) because every attempt is void and senseless as there is no real intent of healing anything: “the mirror was a knife dividing everything from itself, tears of false fellowship dripped on the bar. And what are you going to do to me now? With what, exactly, would you expect to frighten me?” (101). That last sentence is a challenge for anyone who dares to question Fuckhead, but at the same time, it is a reminder for himself of how he has fallen to a point where he is unlikely to be frightened. Fuckhead has finally touched the bottom of the abyss.

As on previous occasions such as in “Happy Hour” Fuckhead returns to his vicious cycle: “I had two doubles and immediately it was as if I'd been dead forever, and was now finally awake” (101). However, his mental, physical, and spiritual state are so affected by his existential crisis that what was comforting before suddenly becomes dangerous. Near the end of “Happy Hour,” Fuckhead talks with an “uniformed nurse with a black eye” (102) who sells him a “Number One” pill, a giant capsule that looks “like an egg […] like an Easter thing” (103). “How did I do that?” asks himself, taking the Number One. ¨Sometimes I think I’m not human” (103). He ends up having seizures in the Detox Unit of Seattle General Hospital due to an overdose: “A yellow bird fluttered close to my face, and my muscles grabbed. Now I was flopping like a fish. When I squeezed shut my eyes, hot tears exploded from the sockets. When I opened them, I was

on my stomach" (10). Fuckhead's body cannot tolerate any more excess and breaks down, marking the lowest point of his existential crisis and the beginning of his recovery.

After being wheeled "through corridors in which I hallucinated a soft, summery rain" (107) and seeing vases, ashtrays, and beds that looked "wet and scary, hardly bothering to cover up their true meanings" (107), in a couple days Fuckhead finds himself in a better state thanks to the treatment he receives: "They ran a few syringes full into me, and I felt like I'd turned from a light, Styrofoam thing into a person. I held up my hands before my eyes. The hands were as still as a sculpture's" (107). Fuckhead's feeling of returning to humanity marks the beginning of his transformation, the break between trying to be and actually *being* a person. At the same time, the stillness of his hands is a remarkable symbol of the change from the blurry and trembling Fuckhead before the detox and the new steady man in Seattle General. Even more, Fuckhead's steadiness allows him to return to his original purpose of helping people: "Inside of two days I was shaving myself, and I even shaved a couple of new arrivals, because the drugs they injected me with had an amazing effect" (107). The Detox at Seattle General is the starting point for the renewed Fuckhead who regains his hope of finding a purpose.

Fuckhead gets a job at Beverly Home, an "O-shaped, turquoise-blue hospital for the aged" (116), where he is presented with an opportunity to follow his call to help people: "Also it was part of my job to touch people. […] I walked against the tide […] greeting everybody and grasping their hands or squeezing their shoulders, because they needed to be touched, and they didn't get much of that" (117). Among the people "whose eyes made me think of clouds and whose bodies made me think of pillows" (117), Fuckhead learns that being of service to people is not so difficult, just a touch is enough to help provide solace, which in turn is a solace to him: "All these weirdos, and me getting a little better every day right in the midst of them" (133).

Fuckhead´s closeness to other "weirdos" like him is the main reason why working at Beverly Home helps him with his recovery. "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" (126). The circular form of the hallway which "sometimes seemed to curve back around in a narrowing spiral, shrinking toward the heart of it all, which was the room you'd begun with" (125) represents that existential journey he began some time before and which now opens for him a set of possibilities to be born again and live a new — maybe more normal — life.

Once again he attempts to make positive, healthy connections with women. First he meets a "Mediterranean beauty" (131) who "medically speaking […] was a dwarf" (121) with "an understanding soul" (122). His relationship with this woman is of great value for him as he trusts her enough to open his heart: "I had no trouble presenting myself to her pretty much as I actually was" (122). By comparing Fuckhead's attitude with the one he had before the recovery process, it is noticeable the evolution of his understanding of relationships. His attitude with the Mediterranean woman sets a precedent for what will be one of the more comfortable relationships Fuckhead experiences on his journey. Near the end of "Beverly Home," Fuckhead meets "another woman, who was of normal size but happened to be crippled" (131). With this woman, Fuckhead will feel as safe as he has ever felt: "I liked the time we spent in her kitchen those mornings. She liked it, too. Usually we were naked. Her eyes shed a certain brightness while she talked and then we made love" (132). He begins to appreciate different things he might have not noticed before: "For the first few minutes after she got up in the morning her paralysis was quite a bit worse. It was unwholesome, and very erotic" (131-132). In sum, relationships during the recovery process allow Fuckhead to explore his most vulnerable side and better understand what he finds comfortable and beautiful.

By being close to “weirdos” and women outside the conventional concept of beauty, Fuckhead changes his focus and ceases to look for an abstract idea of perfection. Instead, he realizes that there is hope amidst the tragedy and beauty in the “unsightly” and this allows him to better understand how he can benefit from helping and interacting with other people. Furthermore, this new way of seeing people and his valuable work at a wholesome place like Beverly Home leads him to adopt a new perspective (“I was taking a new approach to life. I was trying to fit in at work. I wasn’t stealing. I was trying to see each task through to the end” (122)) and feel part of something bigger, finally a part of the world: “I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us” (133).

After so many adventures filled with fear, pain, misunderstandings, and peril, Fuckhead decides to take a more mature approach to life to find satisfactory answers to his deepest existential concerns. A recovery process that implies a detoxification and a reconciliation with people and work is the pillar of that new purpose, and although it does not completely remedy his internal discomfort, it does assuage his anxiety. After all, one of his principal needs is to try to make sense of his life. In that sense, being surrounded by honest, good-hearted people and having a satisfying job that gives him a sense of fulfillment are fundamental to him in making a fresh start: “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 a happy time for me” (133).

Jesus’ Son is the powerful narration of a man on a constant quest for a place in the world, a purpose in life, and an understanding of his existence. As part of this search, Fuckhead approaches relationships, spirituality, and death in search of answers, but meets with obstacles and setbacks that amplify his internal discomfort. His interactions with people offer him a potential path to follow, to serve as a helper, but his clumsy and frustrating attempts to be helpful convince him that he is useless as a savior. This realization leads Fuckhead into an existential

crisis which almost turns out to be fatal. Ultimately, he rebounds and begins a recovery process which will lead him on a path to renewal and hope.

Conclusion

Jesus' Son is the unique narration of a man who has embarked on an exhaustive quest to make sense of his life and his place in the world. Temporal jumps, context confusion, character overlapping, and other narrative techniques elucidate the protagonist´s mental state. Likewise, the omission of plot information and the abundant use of symbolism in the text are consistent. Far from being a detriment to the stories, these elements allow for a better understanding of Fuckhead's fall and recovery journey.

A detailed reading of Fuckhead's narration reveals his approaches to spirituality as the first source of answers and his subsequent disappointment after failing to find them. Romantic relationships and friendships bring him relief, but his dependency on them make them problematic ultimately increasing his internal discomfort. Nevertheless, Fuckhead's interaction with people helps him find the purpose of providing help for them, but several setbacks frustrate his attempts and convince him to abandon that purpose. Feeling useless and confused leads Fuckhead to a deep existential crisis that involves drug abuse to the point of putting his life at risk. A recovery process offers him the opportunity to rediscover his purpose and redefine the terms under which he will lead his life. Ultimately, Fuckhead's existential quest reaches a stable point as he finally finds his place in the world.

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