

**Jay A. Hamm, Bethany L. Leonhardt, Rebecca L. Fogley and Paul H. Lysaker, “Literature as an Exploration of the Phenomenology of Schizophrenia: Disorder and Recovery in Denis Johnson’s *Jesus’ Son*.” *Medical Humanities* 40. 2 (2014): 84-89.**

Jay A. Hamm and his co-authors argue that Denis Johnson’s 1992 short-story cycle *Jesus’ Son* offers “a rich, nuanced first-person view into schizophrenia that is not accessible through quantitative research” (84). Justifying their method by citing a number of studies which suggest that fiction may enable readers to develop “empathy” and “skills in ethical reflection” (84), the authors aim to show that *Jesus’ Son* “adds depth to our understanding of the phenomenology of schizophrenia” (84). The article details three “deeply intertwined” aspects of the “phenomenology of psychosis,” which are represented in Johnson’s stories, before arguing that they can together be conceptualised as a “partial collapse” of the processes which constitute “synthetic metacognition”; that is, the “mental processes” which enable a person to “form complex mental representations of him- or herself and others, to think about his or her own mind and those of others and to use this information to adaptively deal with life’s challenges” (87).

The first aspect of this “interruption of self,” or “interruption of being,” is *fragmentation* (87). Hamm and his co-authors argue that both the structure of *Jesus’ Son* – comprising “disjointed short stories rather than a single coherent narrative” (85) – and its representation of the protagonist’s experience and self-perception contribute to the sense of fragmentation the book conveys. The textual evidence they cite tends to focus on the disruption of linear chronology, for example, in the opening lines of the first story, “Car Crash While Hitchhiking.” The authors then argue that the protagonist’s “subjective interpersonal field” is represented as “ever-changing, comprising poorly understood, amorphous others” (85). Johnson makes it difficult, they suggest, for the reader to discern characters’ roles and relationships, and this creates the sense of the narrator’s “amorphous interpersonal field” (85). Incidentally, Hamm and his co-authors choose to refer to “a single unnamed narrator-protagonist” (84), rather than acknowledging that in the story “Emergency” the narrator acquires the soubriquet “Fuckhead,” which another character, Georgie, tells him is “a name that’s going to stick” (Johnson. *Jesus’ Son: Stories*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. 84).

The final component of the “interruption of self” or “interruption of being” represented in *Jesus’ Son*, which the article argues can be conceptualised as a failure of “synthetic metacognition” (Hamm, et al. 87), is “loss of agency” (86). In the story “Dirty Wedding,” the authors contend, the protagonist’s “motives and decisions remain outside of his awareness” (87). They cite lines from “Work” to illustrate how “*Jesus’ Son* positions the reader in the vantage point of the protagonist who is moved through life without agency” (86). The focus on point of view in this section of the article suggests the possibility of deeper narratological or stylistic analysis than that actually undertaken by the authors.

The article argues that the “collapse of metacognitive functioning [...] culminates in the third to last story” (87), and that the final two stories “offer a glimpse of what the process of recovery from schizophrenia might look like.” The narrator shows “evidence of higher forms of metacognitive processes,” consistent with the fact that “growth in metacognition is linked with subjective and objective

elements of recovery” (88). There is a risk that the type of argument advanced in this article becomes circular. The text is said to offer an insight into schizophrenia (and recovery) because it represents symptoms which are documented in scientific literature as belonging to that condition. But what if the narrator’s perceptions only conform to the actual phenomena experienced by people with schizophrenia in those specific respects, and depart from it into fictional invention in every other? We can only grant the text authority to tell us about schizophrenia to the extent that it conforms to established knowledge.

The answer to such a criticism, of course, lies in the article’s methodological assumption that fiction offers a “rich, nuanced first-person view” unavailable to “quantitative research,” without the reader having to establish its “truth-value” (84). Humanities scholars will welcome this recognition of the power of narrative fiction; but in seeking to emphasise ways in which *Jesus’ Son* might enlist the reader’s empathy for its protagonist, and by extension for others who share his symptoms, the authors make very particular and tendentious selections of which passages to read and which to overlook. There is no mention, for example, of the closing paragraphs of “Two Men,” in which the narrator holds a gun to a woman’s head: “You’re going to be sorry,” he tells her (Johnson 31). The reader is not told what happens next.

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