

Form Follows Feeling: Emotional Truth and Experimental Structure in B.S. Johnson's The Unfortunates

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For B.S. Johnson (1933-1973), a central preoccupation as a writer was the challenge of authentically capturing emotional truth within the novel form. *The Unfortunates* (1969), an experimental novel conceived as a collection of unbound pages, emerges as an exploration of personal loss: the narrator's grief for a deceased friend. Simultaneously, Johnson was driven by the idea of transforming the novel genre, which he perceived as stagnant and weighed down by predictable narrative conventions and worn-out literary clichés. Through the unconventional structure of *The Unfortunates*, Johnson challenges established narrative principles and offers a radical reimagining of how grief and emotional experience can be represented in literature. Building on Johnson's own stated objective to 'show how mind works', this paper will address the emotional landscape of the narrative: exploring the protagonist's affective navigation through traumatic loss, analysing narrative techniques for representing emotional responses, and investigating the potential emotional and cognitive impact on the reader. Drawing on cognitive narratology (Hogan 2011; Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021) and embodied and enactive approaches to emotion (Damasio 2000; Colombetti 2013), I demonstrate how Johnson moves beyond cause-and-effect relationships to construct a pattern of feeling that gives the narrative its coherence. The novel's loose pages create recurring circles of memory that don't follow a chronological or causal logic, but rather an emotional one, engaging the readers' cognitive mechanisms for processing both narrative and affect. Through close reading, I analyse how Johnson uses the perceptual concreteness of sensory and imaginative impressions to create textual cues that guide readers' engagement with the text. This cognitive-affective approach reveals how narrative coherence can be achieved through the interplay of mental processing and emotional patterns rather than through purely causal links. The paper demonstrates that Johnson's experimental form functions as both a cognitive map of grief and an invitation to embodied understanding, offering new insights into how narratives can make events emotionally accessible to readers while engaging their cognitive capacities in meaning-making.