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Philosophical Perspectives on Tove Jansson's *Moominsummer Madness* through Walter Benjamin's Ideas of Play

Abstract

This study examines philosophical perspectives in Tove Jansson's Moomin novel *Moominsummer Madness* (MM, 2010 [1954]), with particular attention to the theatrical performance embedded in the narrative. These perspectives are informed by Walter Benjamin's ideas of play as metaphor. Methodologically, the article combines close reading with a bibliotherapeutic approach and literary reflection grounded in philosophy, also opening a path toward self-reflexive reading: What if life itself is a continuously unfolding act of play? In the novel, the Moomin characters — non-human beings acting in distinctly human ways — stage a theatrical performance amid a sudden flood, rendering the story metaphorical and inviting reflection on humanity and collaboration. Our interpretation moves toward the idea that theatrical performance becomes a means of survival in the midst of catastrophe. Jansson's Moomin stories resonate with Benjamin's ideas of play and theatre as a world, while also suggesting how literature may offer comfort and coping strategies, thus carrying bibliotherapeutic value. The catastrophes in Jansson's stories may also lead readers toward ethical reflection and toward literary education that includes non-human beings.

Walter Benjamin; bibliotherapy approach; Tove Jansson; Moomins; play



Introuction

Tove Jansson (1914–2001), a Swedish-speaking Finnish author and artist, created the little hairy creatures known as the Moomins and the fictional Moominvalley, a distinctive magical landscape of adventure (Westin 2014). She was born in the year the First World War began and was later deeply affected by the Second World War and Hitler's influence across Europe. In 1939, she felt a strong urge to escape reality and create something like a paradise — Moominvalley (Müller-Nienstedt 1997: 18, 19). This provides the basis for our bibliotherapeutic approach to reading the Moomin story: written words may offer relief from anxiety and generate insight.

Interestingly, many readers regard the Moomin family as philosophical. This perspective adds depth to the Moomin stories, allowing them to resonate with both children and adults on multiple levels (Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2023). Jansson's first fiancé, Atos Wirtanen, held a doctorate in Nietzschean philosophy, which may have influenced her work and contributed to the philosophical undertones present in her stories (Westin 2014; Ruin 2018). Furthermore, reading Jansson's Moomin stories through Walter Benjamin's ideas of play — as both a rhetorical and performative act, and a metaphor — offers an especially intriguing philosophical perspective.

During the war, Jansson felt depressed by the political situation and began writing fiction as a way of escaping those difficult times and expressing her inner world (Jansson 1991). Moominvalley — with its characters, distinct personalities, episodes of catastrophe that can be overcome, and broad acceptance among creatures such as the Hemulens, Fillyjonks, Hattifatteners, Snorks, Snufkin, and Sniff — may have been empowering for Jansson and may have offered bibliotherapeutic relief from anxiety. Jansson's nine Moomin novels are valuable contributions to Nordic and Scandinavian children's literature, while also appealing strongly to adult readers.

Benjamin's originality and authenticity of thought, together with his play of associations, provide an interesting and relevant framework for our research on the Moomins as a cultural phenomenon. Jansson's novel can be considered on cognitive, emotional, social, and biological levels, and the floating theatre in the novel offers a *Spielraum* — a field of action, or room for play — that also extends to the spectator. *Mise en abyme* is a French concept (Gide 1939) meaning “placed into the abyss,” often used in art, literature, and film to describe a recursive structure, or a story within a story. It refers to an

image, scene, or narrative embedded within a larger work, often reflecting or mirroring the main plot or theme. In visual art, this can be seen when an image contains a smaller version of itself, creating an infinite loop. In literature, it may describe a character reading a book within the story whose events mirror the main plot. In film, it may involve characters watching a film that parallels their own lives. *Mise en abyme* may evoke self-reflection, deepen thematic resonance, or challenge an audience's perception of reality.

As Wittgenstein observed in his *Philosophical Investigations*, the various aspects of 'play' present an intriguing subject for exploration (Wittgenstein 2009: 23, 66–77). Wittgenstein explores the ambiguity of the term 'play' within his discussion of language games (germ. 'Sprachspiele') arguing that words such as 'game' ('Spiel' in German) do not have a single defining characteristic but instead exhibit a network of overlapping similarities (Wittgenstein 2009: 66). The English word further complicates the analysis, as it encompasses meanings ranging from children's activities to theatrical performances, musical execution, and sports. We play football, play cards, play violin, play in the sand, play with ideas, play a role, play innocent, play with toys, play at being a dog, and other forms of play. Play is rewarding, especially for children, by providing opportunities to express, interact, and make sense of the world around them (Dodd et al.: 2022), thus similar to therapeutic impacts. Adventurous play offers learning opportunities that help prevent mental health problems in children (Dodd et al 2022). Play is universal, with its main motive being the pleasure it produces (Telkänranta 2015: 172). Engagement in play is an inherent aspect of human nature enjoyed by both children and adults.

Tove Jansson created Moomins

Jansson first mentions Moomintroll in her diary in 1931 (Müller-Nienstedt 1997: 14). She later began working for the politically oriented newspaper *Garm*, producing illustrations and political caricatures during the 1930s and 1940s (Westin 2014). In Swedish and Norse mythology, Garm is a mythical dog guarding the gates of Ragnarök and thus symbolizes the end of the world. As the patron figure of this satirical magazine, Garm forms an important symbolic backdrop. The Moomin appeared in the magazine as a mythical antithesis to dread and apocalypse.

Over time, the Moomin stories spread worldwide through translations, comic strips, picture books, toys, and other merchandise. Jansson also became an important cultural and political voice through her satirical caricatures addressing war, Hitler, other political figures, and broader social issues (Müller-Nienstedt 1997: 16). Although the Moomintroll first appeared as an emblematic figure in the cartoons Jansson created for *Garm*, the fully developed protagonist emerged later in her first Moomin book, *The Moomins and the Great Flood* (1945). This marked the beginning of the world-famous Moomin stories, which have since appeared in more than sixty translations and inspired animated films and numerous cultural artefacts (Moomin 2024).

The nine Moomin novels repeatedly engage with themes of catastrophe and survival. Part of the enduring appeal of the Moomins lies in their calmness, solidarity, and friendship, qualities that have made them classics of Scandinavian and Nordic children's literature while also giving them strong resonance for adult readers. In a related vein, Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" (2012) reflects on the deeper purposes of fantasy —

healing, escape, and consolation. Jansson illustrated Tolkien's *The Hobbit* in 1961 and admired his works for their unsettling qualities (Westin 2014), which suggests a broader affinity with forms of fantasy that offer profound meaning to readers of all ages.

Benjamin's ideas of gestures and Jansson's play

Tove Jansson and Walter Benjamin, though emerging from different intellectual traditions, both explored memory, exile, and the transformative power of art. Through the Moomin stories and her adult fiction, Jansson examined existential themes with gentle optimism, whereas Benjamin, in works such as *The Arcades Project* (2002) and *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (2006), approached history and childhood through a fragmented, melancholic lens. Both resisted fascism — Jansson through anti-war satire and storytelling, and Benjamin through Marxist critique — yet while she sought refuge in artistic creation, he saw art as shaped by history and technology. Their shared fascination with childhood, storytelling, and the fleeting nature of experience makes them unexpected yet profound interlocutors in twentieth-century thought.

In his essay "What Is Epic Theatre?" (Benjamin 2014: 154)¹, Benjamin presents the stage as a space in which events unfold in such a way that the audience no longer sees merely "board flooring, which means the world," but rather a deliberately arranged space of exposition. In this conception, the audience is not a passive mass of hypnotized spectators. Instead, it becomes a gathered public whose responses place demands on the stage. Benjamin (2014) emphasizes the importance of gestures and argues that epic theatre should make use of them by interrupting action at decisive moments. The delaying effect of interruption, together with the episodic nature of the framing, transforms gestural theatre into epic theatre by shifting attention away from emotional immersion and toward intellectual engagement, thus encouraging audiences to think critically about the world around them, particularly through a Marxist lens (Benjamin 2014: 155). In this way, theatre becomes not merely entertainment but also a form of social and political reflection.

This interpretive emphasis on juxtaposition, interruption, and montage in Benjamin's writings (2014) aligns closely with our reading of Jansson's *Moominsummer Madness*. Such interruption is effectively realized in the novel's embedded theatrical performance, where the audience ultimately laughs at coincidences and disruptions that were never intended to occur. There is no stable script that can fully govern the play; instead, surreal disorder generates confusion, and genuine creativity comes to the fore. As Benjamin notes, the more interruptions there are, the more gestures emerge (Benjamin 2014: 155). The task of epic theatre is not to develop action smoothly, but to reveal the conditions underlying it. These conditions may point to a particular milieu, even to a return to the "naturalistic world," while still preserving an awareness of theatre as theatre and of play as a self-conscious form (Benjamin 2014: 156).

Within the story of *Moominsummer Madness*, theatre becomes a concrete means of collective survival, compelling everyone to adapt to new perspectives, heightened danger, and collaborative forms of action. In line with Benjamin's ideas, the audience

¹ The analysis of specific situations, events, and the behavior of characters in Jansson's prose/epic theater may appear short, thus there wasn't enough space left in the article for further discussion on this topic. The same applies to the questions of genres.

may experience confusion, yet also delight, while watching the performance. The novel produces a striking effect: spectators may wonder whether what they are witnessing is really happening or whether it is simply part of a carefully written play. In the background stands Moominpappa, the author of the script, watching in disbelief as events unfold in unexpected ways. This is characteristic of Jansson's satirical and multidimensional style. Epic theatre, as Benjamin argues, does not simply reproduce states of being; rather, it reveals them by interrupting the course of events (Benjamin 2014: 157).

Epic theatre may be understood in relation to technical forms such as radio and cinema, in that "the audience must be able to 'enter' at any stage of the performance" (Benjamin 2014: 158). In Jansson's novel, this principle is reflected in the Moomins' play: Little My rushes onto the stage to bite the actor playing the lion, shouting that everyone should speak normally rather than in hexameters. A similar form of "entering" occurs when the audience itself storms the stage and begins eating the theatre tickets, which turn out to be edible picnic food (MM, 118–119). This is a striking and deliberately surprising moment.

In epic theatre, complicated antecedents should be avoided, and each scene must possess episodic value in addition to its contribution to the whole (Benjamin 2014: 158). Benjamin compares this to radio, where the listener may turn the receiver on or off at any moment; epic theatre achieves a similar accessibility on stage (Benjamin 2014: 158). In this sense, the whole novel offers multilayered possibilities for understanding a wide range of personalities, coping strategies, interactions, and psychological and philosophical perspectives. All this unfolds during midsummer night, filled with extraordinary episodes: the usually tranquil Snufkin becomes rebellious, Moomintroll and the Snork Maiden are chased by a police officer, twenty-four orphaned children are rescued and find new homes, and many other meaningful events reveal that all sentient beings are vulnerable in their own ways, yet that solutions remain possible.

Benjamin (2014: 186–192) places great value on the child's gesture and on its close relation to both creative and receptive forms of interference, as well as on the central role of improvisation. He argues that children's gestures develop across various forms of expression, including prop-making, painting, recitation, music, dance, and improvisation. Improvisation forms the basis from which signals and signaling gestures emerge (Benjamin 2014: 186–192). In *Moominsummer Madness*, the audience of the Moominvalley performance includes the creatures living in the valley across a wide range of species, ages, and temperaments. Performance may take the form of an outburst arising from tension (Benjamin 2014: 190–191), after which the manager or director steps aside. Benjamin suggests that no pedagogical intellect can foresee how children combine the gestures and abilities they practise into surprising variations that become a theatrical whole, allowing inventive variation to take control.

From the perspective of education, performance involves a radical release of play (Benjamin 2014: 190–191). Performance is thus an intense source of pleasure in educational work. Benjamin recalls that the children's kingdom resembles the role of carnival in adult culture: hierarchies are inverted, and the highest becomes the lowest, as when lords serve slaves (Benjamin 2014: 191–192). On the stage of performance, children become those who teach, while educators are called upon to attend carefully. Benjamin continues by suggesting that new energies and new sensitivities emerge in

such moments, often beyond the leader's control or anticipation. The wild release of children's fantasy introduces them to a childhood shaped by play (Benjamin 2014: 191–192). We may also describe fiction in carnivalesque terms: the protagonist plays the role of a hero or heroine until being drawn back into a cyclical order (Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2023). Gestures shift and are interrupted, opening other dimensions of story, play, and plot. This recalls the productive role of chaos in every creative act. Without chaos, there is only mediocrity; without the courage to endure disorder, no new order can emerge.

When Moominvalley is flooded, a new law of survival and adaptation becomes evident. This interruption occurs at the very beginning of the story, when the rising water gradually displaces everything ordinary and familiar. The creatures of Moominvalley must accept the altered conditions, adjust to drifting on the water, and try to survive. Then comes the floating theatre stage, where new insights become possible (see Campbell 1990). If we consider this transformed order and the perspectives brought about by sudden change, we may also think of global environmental change, climate change, Europe reshaped by recurring crises, and people attending this global “outdoor theatre,” perhaps without much opportunity to speak or to reach a wider audience, yet still able to communicate through gesture. The purity of emotion is constitutive of gestural theatre (Benjamin 2014: 189, 193). In *Moominsummer Madness*, the open theatre within the story also evokes the roots of open-air theatre and gesture-based performance. One of the most important tasks of such theatre is to translate events into a language of gestures; theatre can thus become a constellation of gestures that enables varied forms of experiment.

Gestural semiotics may be interpreted as pointing to Roland Barthes's “reality effect” (1986: 141–148), in which seemingly trivial details in literature serve to strengthen the illusion of authenticity and realism within the narrative. In the context of Brechtian ideas as interpreted by Benjamin (1973: 197), we may consider the disillusioning force of gestures and their contribution to the anti-immersive power of Jansson's writing as central to her playful engagement with readers. By incorporating such deliberate and self-conscious gestures, Jansson not only disrupts the seamless flow of the narrative but also invites readers to engage critically with the text and to recognize, question, and reflect on the constructed nature of literary reality. This technique aligns with Brecht's concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or “alienation effect,” which seeks to prevent the audience from becoming overly emotionally absorbed in the story and instead encourages a more analytical and reflective stance (see Levin 2019). Through this lens, Jansson's work may be understood as a sophisticated interplay between fiction and reality, in which the boundaries between the two are constantly negotiated and redefined, enriching the reader's experience and deepening engagement with the narrative's underlying themes.

Research design and method

When reading a story, we may experience a double awareness of the events described, seeing them in childlike and non-childlike ways, meaning that the story is more than it says. The bibliotherapy approach has many forms, from writing and reading to dramatizing and storytelling. We may experience things like relating to fictional characters

and episodes, and at the same time realize that this story is also telling something about me and my life situation, or what I have experienced. This is the key reason why stories are universally needed (Suvilehto, Aerila & Kerry-Moran 2019). When we concentrate on this kind of method of reading a story, as in this research, we may call it a bibliotherapy approach (Suvilehto 2008; 2019).

In his conversation with Gustav Glück and Kurt Weil, Benjamin talks about the character of Mickey Mouse, how he still exists and “shatters the hierarchy of a human being,” even though stripped of everything resembling a human (Benjamin 1984: 140). The basis for the popularity of these films is simply that the audience recognizes their own lives in them (Benjamin 1984: 141). This is also what happens in Moomin stories and in the story of MM, and how we may find ourselves in that story, with emotions and with the characters involved in the episodes, so universal and fantastic.

Results

A volcanic eruption on a nearby island interrupts the tranquility of Moominvalley Midsummer, because of which the water rises and eventually covers the entire valley with houses and dwellings, like a tsunami. For the inhabitants of the valley, this meant a complete change in everyday life. When their homes go underwater, they get submerged — everyone in the valley must focus on coping. The Moomin family's house is rocking under the pressure of ever-rising water, but at this point, the inhabitants stay indoors just to watch and wait to see what happens next, and everyone's reactions are original: Moominpappa feels refreshed by this experience — now things begin to happen — and calmly he lights a candle. The always outspoken and quick-witted Little My ominously raises the issue and asks if this is the end of the world. Mymble's daughter, who is responsible for Little My's upbringing, replies to My: “At least,” said Mymble's daughter. “Try to be nice if you can, because now we are all going to heaven soon.” “Heaven?” repeated Little My. “Do we have to go to heaven? How do you get out of there?” (MM, 20). The attitude of the Moomins is that the end of the world could come at any moment, but before that everyone must remain operational. The characters must eat, sleep, discuss, and solve the challenges that come their way. Moominhouse's unique inhabitants and the different creatures of Moominvalley each have their own ways and attitudes to cope. Jansson presents different characters as Benjamin's gestures “on stage,” which is life itself in the moving theatre.

Moominpappa sets the alarm clock at seven in the morning because he wants to see what the morning looks like, but before that, he must sleep well. Through this attitude and gesture, he shows exemplary calmness and preparation for the future; thus, “the whole world had changed” (MM, 23). Looking from the upper window of the Moominhouse, they witness with their own eyes how jasmines, lilacs, the bridge, and an entire river are out of sight, trees are growing out of the water, and the tops of the mountains have shattered into island chips (MM, 23). Water has also taken over the lower floor of the tower-like Moominhouse, and the view is bizarre when Moominpappa looks at it: “I've often thought that sometimes you should look at your rooms from the top and not always just from the floor” (MM, 23). With such flexible thinking and a change in perspective, the characters in Jansson's theatrical story make gestures and collaborate one chapter at a time and one set of characters at a time (13 chapters) in different stage

scenes. This prismatic lightning of perspectives — how everyone is concentrating on different things in times of catastrophe — is fascinating. Toft is an interesting character: “If only we could *understand* how it all happened, the big wave would seem quite natural” (MM, 27). There is Misabel, who focuses on her own emotional world, for whom grief is a familiar companion and the fear of abandonment is always there, and for whom the catastrophe and the floating theatre are also good for her well-being and for finding an actor inside this depressed personality.

When Moominmamma, the exemplary mother, sees her kitchen and furniture floating in the water from the rooftop perspective, and Moomintroll swimming in the kitchen to get breakfast, she just says that it is terribly crazy and bursts into laughter (MM, 24). And as Müller-Nienstedt (1997: 11–14) states, the mother as a figure is essential; Moominmamma is the incarnation of security, stability, and love.

The sea, as an archetypal symbol of the unconscious, includes the idea that both a skeleton and a treasure are in the depths just waiting for someone to come and find them. The role of dreaming about water while sleeping is to connect the unconscious and conscious for the restoration of the psyche, as Rönnerstrand (1992) argues. Water, sea, darkness, night, depth, obscurity, shadows, and mirror images are unconscious layers of the psyche (Rönnerstrand 1992: 97, 100, 103). Winnicott’s (1991) theory of potential space states that the creative process occurs within the creativity that emerges when individuals collaborate with an open mind. There are Moomins doing theatre together, and the creative chaos that reigns all the time—the water rises, the theatre drifts, the characters do not understand, Moominpappa writes his own script, and the audience laughs at absurd sitcoms.

There is always something Jansson had read or felt inspired by. Jansson’s MM has obvious references to Shakespeare’s famous play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1891), where the summer night with its lights and joys as a feast transforms from the ordinary to the unexpected, where invisible things happen — moving towards magic, towards another reality. One summer night becomes the background for longing, attachment, care, and energetic experiences.

Towards the theatre

Moominpappa likes changes whenever he has the opportunity, and the first thing he notices is something unseen drifting from the sea, which they do not yet recognize, but whose appearance he welcomes — there would be a place to live during the flood. “I feel like we’re going to survive” (MM, 32), says Moominpappa, to which Moominmamma replies that of course they will, and she continues: “I sit here waiting for our new home. Only rascals do badly” (MM, 32). She has a real attitude of trust.

What follows is a description of the theatre building, where, in accordance with the Moomin stories, tension factors also begin to emerge. The floating theatre building with two golden faces, one crying and another laughing, is something that Moomin creatures have never seen before: “a semicircular room opened, filled with darkness and cobwebs” (MM, 32, 34). This episode is like a jubilant invitation to the ‘ship of fools,’ a satirical allegory of a community that drifts on a ship full of fools behaving madly and viciously. This metaphor of a chaotically controlled ship is famous in Plato’s (1999) work *Republic*, which shows that the state needed philosophers at its helm. The ship

of fools is an allegory about a ship with a dysfunctional crew. The allegory is intended to represent the problems of governance prevailing in a political system, not based on expert knowledge (Plato 1999).

For Benjamin, the art of epic theatre aims to produce astonishment rather than empathy. Instead of identifying with the characters, the audience is educated to be astonished by the circumstances under which they function (Benjamin 1973: 147). This is happening during Moomins' play, even though Moominpappa is trying to keep control and stick to the manuscript — but the play takes its own way, scene by scene, with astonishing circumstances, not planned or intended. The audience enjoys this. Benjamin concludes: "The task of the epic theatre, according to Brecht, is not as much the development of actions as the representation of conditions" (Benjamin 1973: 147). The conditions in this floating theatre are surprising, even though the whole building is like a *ship of fools*, and what is a "truly important thing is to discover the conditions of life" (Benjamin 1973: 147), which in MM is the catastrophe and how to cope with these environmental changes. Benjamin's example, called *alienation* (*Verfremdung*), occurs by creating interruptions of happenings, and this is obvious in Moomin play. Jansson had a habit of reading, as do Moomins in stories and cartoons, novels, non-fiction, poems, and fairy tales. One of Jansson's inspirations was Rudolf Erich Raspe's *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1785), which was based on stories told by Karl Friedrich von Munchausen. The plot has exaggerated and fantastic episodes, which are obvious in MM as well as in Jansson's other novels.

In accordance with the untragic hero and interruption, we discover the appearance of the quotable gesture, the didactic play, the actor, and theatre on a dais. Concentrating on the questions that are raised by the audience, it is not the hero who is needed, but the 'common man' or the 'thinker' that can be viewed as a 'wise man,' the undramatic quality of a character. Regarding didactic play, epic theatre is meant for both actors and the audience, where every spectator may become a participant (Benjamin 1973: 148).

About the actor

As Benjamin states (1973: 149), epic theatre moves in spurts, like the pictures in a film follow one after another. The basic form is that of a shock, in which well-defined situations collide. Songs, captions, and lifeless conventions set off one situation from another. This brings about intervals that, if anything, impair the illusion of the audience and paralyze their readiness for empathy. These intervals wait for spectators' critical reactions to the actions of the players and to the way in which they are presented (Benjamin 1973: 149). Thus, the actor does not aim to create empathy but to act and express it. The most open-minded approach to epic theatre is to think of it in terms of "putting on a show" (Benjamin 1973: 150) — and this is exactly what the MM play is about: what better way to cope through a catastrophe than to make a piece of theatre! Epic theatre also allows tiny little noticed actions called "filling in of the orchestra pit" (Benjamin 1973: 150) — like, in the MM theatre house, the whisperer's booth becomes a food warehouse.

Maybe when Jansson was reading Oswald Spengler's book *The Decline of the West* (1918) and about the collapse of civilization, she was impressed so that later she would

include something of these ideas in her imaginary work of *Moomins and the Great Flood*. To prevent anxiety and broader mental health problems, children need opportunities to play adventurously and take risks in their play (Dodd et al. 2022), which is what Moomin characters do all the time.

Conclusions

We have been concentrating on philosophical perspectives in Tove Jansson's theatrical play in the novel *Moominsummer Madness*, perspectives derived from Walter Benjamin's ideas of play as a metaphor. To answer research questions about the characteristics of non-human creatures in Moomin stories and how characters in action represent Benjamin's ideas of play and playfulness, we found at least two reader positions activated. Both are taken seriously by the importance of childhood reading, children's literature, play, and the fantastic period of childhood when thinking about creativity, imagination, and the powers of nature, and how many simultaneous images may speak to us in one instance, when we read the Moomins. Dymel-Trzebiatowska (2016: 59) and Weinreich (2000: 101) emphasize how adult readers carry the child within them, and when reading a children's story, this inner child actualized is a type of nostalgic reader. This kind of nostalgia might generally be connected to children's literary universe in general (Weinreich 2000: 101). An adult reader may be conscious of the subtle layer of meanings hidden under the story. This is a distinctive quality of children's literature. A play in a Moomin story is not just a play but a double universe; thus, it can be a metaphor for life, of our existence, also the picture of our inner life with its variations of feelings, fears, attitudes, ideas of companionship, and how to adjust and cope with the sudden challenges. Moomin stories have biographical elements from Jansson's own life, even though she didn't write her Moomin stories intentionally to depict her life circumstances. She was young at the time she began to create Moomin stories and comic strips. There are facets of her experiences, her readings, and her inspirations and thoughts — of course — why else would she have become such a phenomenon with Moomins and Moominvalley, the paradise lost, we so eagerly want to pop into, even for a short moment.

After the dangers in MM, Jansson assures us that nothing dangerous could happen anymore (MM, 131). Like Fallone (2024), we may ask if catastrophe is the only possible horizon as a solution to the present challenges (Fallone 2024 citing Benjamin: 477, 491). In MM we find hilarious and extraordinary episodes, and the play included in the storyline as an opportunity to set the forces to unite. We agree that the genre of dystopia exists in many Jansson novels, such as MM, not the force of destroying living creatures, instead of sticking together and fighting against harsh circumstances without losing hope.

When thinking about catastrophism, the turbulent events of the first two decades of the 20th century, we realize that the catastrophe of our time is climate change. It is not surprising that Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) enjoyed remarkable popularity in his time, and it is impossible to discuss the decadency and catastrophism of those years without mentioning *The Decline of the West* (1918). However, what literary works need to be addressed in our time? Are Moomins powerful enough or influential to make an impact? If Tove Jansson were living our time, what might be her story now? When the

underwater volcano wakes up a giant flood, as happens in the Old Testament, and in MM, there appears this floating theater (in the Old Testament, it is Noah's ship with animals, e.g., Plato's ship of fools) to be the Savior. In MM, the floating theater shows its two-sided faces, such as closed spaces (walls and rooms) and open spaces (the environment around the space has three walls and without a roof). In the center of the story, the building as a place, and the theater as a concept, enables disintegration, deformation, metamorphosis or remodeling, and fantastic adjustment of the Moomins and the whole society of Moominvalley amidst catastrophic times. Through the process of surviving the catastrophe, one can return to a renewed life situation, just as in the myth of Mircea Eliade's (1992) *The Eternal Return* and the *Thousand Faces of the Hero* of Joseph Campbell (1990) in the mythical depiction of the journey.

The global fame of Moomins has inspired also academics to explore the Moomin phenomenon through various lenses, like environmental studies (Jacques 2014), tourism (Amey 2023), psychology (Tirkkonen 2019), and critical approaches (Laakso 2011; Österlund 2002). Within these academic discussions, the concept of a double or even multiple address has emerged, revealing that children's books often implicitly speak to adult audiences as well (see Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2016: 58). This idea is particularly relevant in bibliotherapy, where the interaction between the reader, text, and writer becomes a central dynamic. Moomin stories offer therapeutic potential, capturing moments of solitude, loneliness, and the feeling of not being heard, issues that resonate with both children and adults.

Tolkien (2012) argues that fairy tales are not mere escapism but a deeper engagement with reality through three key elements: recovery, escape, and consolation. Recovery allows readers to see the world anew, stripping away the dullness of the familiar, and renewing their sense of wonder. Escape, rather than avoidance, serves as a form of liberation akin to a prisoner breaking free, rather than a coward-fleeing responsibility. Consolation, central to fairy stories, manifesting a sudden, joyful turn that reinforces hope and the belief that goodness can prevail, even in darkness. These elements highlight the power of storytelling to inspire imagination, reveal deeper truths, and address fundamental human longing — the concepts alluding to bibliotherapeutic approach (see Suvilehto 2024) in reading literature.

In an era of increasing concern for environmental issues and post-humanist perspectives, literature offers a crucial space for reflection and a bibliotherapeutic approach to engagement. Educational research, didactics, and pedagogy emphasize the importance of imagination in shaping knowledge and innovative thinking. Ecocritical approaches, for instance, focus on the exhaustion that arises when the suffering of humans, animals, and ecosystems reaches overwhelming levels (Gaard 2020). In response, the arts, literature, music, theatre, and dance, offer ways to navigate these complex dilemmas, sometimes providing cathartic insight that momentarily saves us from the weight of the world.

Jansson's MM offers a striking example of this dynamic, with its floating theater house symbolizing change, adaptation, and salvation. This adaptability underscores the richness of Jansson's storytelling, which continues to inspire diverse artistic and academic exploration across multiple disciplines, also musical and theatrical performances. This expansion across media echoes Benjamin's notion of estrangement

through montage breaking apart and the reassembly of narrative elements in different contexts to create new meanings. Just as Benjamin saw the fragmented nature of film and photography disrupting the aura of traditional art, Jansson's Moomin universe, re-configured through diverse media, resists fixity and singular interpretation. Whether in comics, theatre, or digital spaces, her stories are reassembled in ways that invite readers and audiences to experience them anew, fostering a critical awareness of how narratives shift and transform through different cultural and technological lenses.

Statements and declarations

Ethical approval was not required for this research, as it involved a critical analysis of existing literature and secondary sources. The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. AI tools were used only for minor language editing; all substantive arguments and interpretations remain the authors' own. The authors are grateful for the suggestions provided by the anonymous reviewers, a native speaker of English, and the editors.

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