

**JYX**



**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Heinämaa, Sara; Taipale, Joonas

**Title:** Introduction: Phenomenological approaches to Tove Jansson's fiction

**Year:** 2018

**Version:** Published version

**Copyright:** © 2018 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston.

**Rights:** In Copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

**Please cite the original version:**

Heinämaa, S., & Taipale, J. (2018). Introduction: Phenomenological approaches to Tove Jansson's fiction. *SATS: Northern European Journal of Philosophy*, 19(1), 1-4.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/sats-2017-3000>

Sara Heinämaa\* and Joonas Taipale

## Introduction: Phenomenological approaches to Tove Jansson's fiction

<https://doi.org/10.1515/sats-2017-3000>

This special issue tackles the philosophical depths of Tove Jansson's fiction, analyzing and interpreting Jansson's works by phenomenological, existential and hermeneutic methods. We offer a new research approach to Jansson's oeuvre which in a unique way combines profound existential themes with verbal and pictorial humor and with storylines of adventures, expeditions and memoirs. More concretely, we add a phenomenological viewpoint to the scholarly discussions that deal with Jansson's so-called Moomin suite, a series of novels that narrate about a bohemian family and their highly unusual neighbors, friends and acquaintances. The four articles collected in this special issue focus on Tove Jansson's original fiction: her Moomin suite and the comic strips that she composed with her brother, Lars Jansson.

The Moomin books are usually treated as fairy tale stories and classified among children's fiction, not to be dealt with by serious philosophers. This may be inevitable, as the main characters of the novels are white hippopotamus-like creatures who live in a villa by the sea. But like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (1943), Jansson's novels offer rich materials for philosophical inquiries by picturing a world of logical absurdities, existential paradoxes, social transgressions and natural upheavals (cf. Kivilaakso 2003, 80–83). They thus challenge us to question our habitual ways of thinking about ourselves and our being in the world – a philosophical task *par excellence*.

Thus far, the philosophical discussion on the Moomin books has mainly been building on existential, aesthetic, biographical and psychoanalytic grounds.<sup>1</sup> To the existing research literature, the present issue contributes a set of experiential analyses that draw insights and conceptual tools from phenomenological and hermeneutical classics and from contemporary phenomenology of perception,

---

<sup>1</sup> For precise references, see the enclosed four articles.

---

**\*Corresponding author: Sara Heinämaa**, Academy of Finland, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland, E-mail: [sara.heinamaa@jyu.fi](mailto:sara.heinamaa@jyu.fi)

**Joonas Taipale**, The Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland, E-mail: [joona.h.taipale@jyu.fi](mailto:joona.h.taipale@jyu.fi)

emotion, sociality and historicity. In line with classical phenomenologists, the authors of the essays work to explicate the intentional and temporal structures of human experiencing and to illuminate their stratified and dynamic character. This does not mean, and should not be taken to entail, discussions of any actual sets of experiences. Thus, both reception-theoretical discussions about the experiences of various literary audiences and the biographical-critical examinations of the experiences of the author fall beyond the scope of the inquiries at hand. In line with classical phenomenology, our approach concerns experiences as possibilities.

In its task of illuminating the intentional and temporal structures of possible experiences, phenomenology is assisted by the arts. As the focus of the investigation is not on any actual experiences or sets of actual experiences but on the conditions of the possibility of experiencing, fictional examples prove highly important. They transgress the limits of habitual forms of experiencing and the familiar regions of experienced objects and offer descriptions that urge us to ask if we really have reached the limits of what is experienceable.

The role of the arts is actually double: on the one hand, the arts challenge the power of ordinary forms of imagination and, on the other hand, they illuminate and concretize the distinction between the far-fetched and the impossible. Franz Kafka's short story *Metamorphosis*, for example, illuminates the social, linguistic and bodily conditions of personhood by narrating about a man who turns into an enormous invertebrate: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (1915, 67). Analogously, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927) sheds light on the structures of human memory, clarifying the complex temporality of sensible pleasures and the correlation between motility and spatiality. In general, the arts enable investigations of neglected and dismissed possibilities of experiencing and being. Husserl's words capture this insight in the following manner:

We can draw extraordinarily much profit from what history has to offer us, and in still richer measure from the gifts of art and particularly of poetry. These are indeed fruits of imagination, but in respect of the originality of the new formations, the abundance of detailed features, and the continuity of the motivation, they greatly excel the achievements of our own fancy (...) Hence we can really say, if we like to speak in paradoxical ways, and if we understand the ambiguous meaning well, that the element which makes up the life of phenomenology as of all eidetic sciences is 'fiction,' that fiction is the source whence the knowledge of 'eternal truths' draws its sustenance Husserl (1976, 148).

We have chosen Tove Jansson as our philosophical interlocutor since her books and comic strips about the Moomins use verbal and pictorial

expressions in unique ways to explore several philosophically crucial topics. These include normativity, sociality, mortality, historicity and temporality (cf. Taipale 2016). Framed as tales about the Moomins and their friends, Jansson's explorations focus on the philosophical question concerning the conditions of being a person and living the life of a person. As we see it, Jansson's main insight here is that personhood is not fundamentally established in the light of any ready-made model. Rather, there are endless and mainly unknown possibilities in being a person and leading a life of one's own, and the only way to become what one is, namely oneself, is to proceed by the complex and unique path of trial and error. The varieties of personhood are indefinite, and each newly invented way of living a life of a person opens new possibilities for other persons to come. Each is informed by others, and personhood is thus inseparable from the communicative web in which it develops.

The undertaking of inventing oneself and leading one's own life is not without difficulties and challenges. The existential triangle *self-others-world* that Merleau-Ponty so aptly formulates in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945, 53) helps to identify three types of problems: First, the challenges involved in self-understanding, self-acknowledgement and self-responsibility or, in one word, in authenticity. Second, the difficulties related to the task of living with and among others and of considering and integrating their varying images and conceptions of oneself in one's personal ways of acting and behaving. And third, the task of living in the midst of the world, occupied by resistant things, metamorphosing elements and unexpected events. These all are discussed in the Jansson essays included in this special issue.

The volume comprises four essays on Tove Jansson's fiction. In "Manhattan dynamite and no pancakes: Tradition and normality in the work of Tove Jansson," Dan Zahavi examines the fundamental role of norms and traditions in social life by discussing the comic strips by Tove and Lars Jansson. The second article, "The unseen, the discouraged, and the outcast: Expressivity and the foundations of social recognition," by Joonas Taipale deals with the topics of social recognition and the fear of otherness. In "Strange vegetation: Emotional undercurrents of Tove Jansson's *Moominvalley in November*," Sara Heinämaa examines the problems of dissolution and loss, arguing that Jansson's last verdict is not about departures but is about the conditions of new beginnings. The fourth and last article, "Dancing with Zarathustra: Tove Jansson, Nietzsche, and the poetics of overcoming," by Hans Ruin illuminates problems of freedom and facticity, underlining a Nietzschean thread in Jansson's thinking.

## References

- Carroll, Lewis. 1865. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Macmillan. 1992.
- De Saint-Exupéry, Antoine. 1943. *The Little Prince*. Richard Howard, tr., New York, Harcourt, 2002. Originally published as *Le Petit Prince* (Paris, Gallimard), 1943.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1976. *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologische Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*. (*Husserliana Gesammelte Werke, Band III/1.*) Edited by Karl Schuhmann. Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Kafka, Franz. 1915. *Metamorphosis*. Edwin Muir and Willa Muir, tr., Schocken, 1970. Originally published as *Die Verwandlung* (Leipzig, Kurt Wolff Verlag), 1915.
- Kivilaakso, Katri. 2003. 'Hans berättelse om dalen': Metafiktiiviset piirteet ja fiktiivisen maailman hajottaminen Tove Janssonin teoksessa *Sent in november*. In Viola Parente ČăPková (ed.), *Sanelma, Turun yliopiston kotimaisen kirjallisuuden vuosikirja 2003–2004*, 79–102. Turku: Digipaino-Turun yliopisto.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1945. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Colin Smith, tr., London, Routledge, 1995. Originally published as *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris, Gallimard), 1945.
- Proust, Marcel. 1913–1927. *In Search of Lost Time*. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, tr., William C. Carter, rev., Yale University Press, 2013. Originally published as *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris, Grasset, Gallimard).
- Taipale, Joonas. 2016. Social mirrors: Tove Jansson's *Invisible Child* and the importance of being seen. *Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review* 39(1), 13–25.