Muminalism: Tove Jansson’s Art of the Miniature

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Miniature is one of the refuges of greatness
Gaston Bachelard

Introduction

Tove Jansson’s Moominland is large. There are deep seas, high mountains, and endless forests. It is a place of momentous catastrophes and long journeys. But Moominland’s dimensions are also relative, and the apparent grandeur of the setting is constituted on the diminutive size of most of the creatures that inhabit it, such as Little My and the “little creature” Sniff. The Moomintrolls themselves are small too – an artist’s signature to begin with and tiny trolls in the first book of the series. In fact, size matters in Moominland and is indicated throughout the Moomin narratives in various ways. In this article I will analyze and discuss a few of these examples of Jansson’s art of the miniature, or “muminalism” to use a Jansson-related neologism. The main aim, however, is to show that Jansson’s predilection for the small, the diminutive, and the decorative goes beyond creating contrast, even if it is that too, and is essentially about small-scale world-building. Moominvalley itself, comes across as a miniature re-imagining of her grandfather’s island paradise as described in the first chapter of the autobiographical Sculptor’s Daughter, and is at the center of this minimizing project. The maps of Moominvalley, as well as her comic strips and use of vignettes, elaborate initial letters, doll-houses – all of these represent condensations of – or points of entry to – her created world. We also witness how Jansson’s created characters, in turn, engage in acts and make use of things that relate in different ways to the aesthetics of the miniature: Moominmamma’s bark boat, Moominpappa’s crystal ball and lighthouse model, the Fillyjonk’s shadow-play, the Hemulen’s magnifying glass and so on. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard’s seminal essay on the miniature in The Poetics of Space, I claim that Jansson’s “muminalism” is a particularly apt example of the miniaturizing imagination.
Worldbuilding and Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*

2 Fictional “worldbuilding” is often associated with fantasy writing, Science Fiction, and other fictional “secondary worlds,” to use J. R. R. Tolkien’s term. Worldbuilding in such genres is associated with the creation of a plausible geography, ecology, history, social customs, language, and technology. Yet all fiction and art – realistic or otherwise – are fruits of the imagination and (re)create an imaginary space (world) for the reader. In that sense, all authors and artists (and readers!), engage in world-building. Gaston Bachelard does not use the concept “worldbuilding”, but his “poetics of space” is primarily concerned with how different literary devices can open up “an entire world” to the “dreamer” – that is, to the reader who is able and willing to take part in acts of imagination, expressed in term of space. Moreover, Bachelard calls these spaces/worlds “realities of the imagination”. For Bachelard the spaces that are particularly apt to attract and concentrate the poetic imagination are representations of objects like houses, drawers, chests, wardrobes, forests, nests, shells, closets, corners, and houses – keywords gleaned from the table of contents of *The Poetics of Space*. But they can also be conceptual in nature, like “immensity,” “roundness” or “miniature.” In both cases, the keywords are associated with fantasies of home and dwelling, or with Bachelard’s formulation “nests of solitude in which he [the reader] dreams of living”.

3 In this article, I mainly seek inspiration from Bachelard’s meditations on the miniature. Bachelard writes that the “macrocosm and microcosm are correlated”, and that the miniature works as an imagined center: “a nucleus, a spore, a dynamized center”, and show how when we observe the miniature we tend to use imagery and metaphors from the macrocosm in order to describe it: a tuft of grass becomes a forest, ants are seen as marching battalions and so on. Thus, “large is contained in small” as Bachelard writes. Bachelard proceeds to alternate between the metaphor of the miniature as a “nucleus” or “a world in itself” and that of the gate: “Thus, the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The details of a thing can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness”. The creative work of the miniaturist is an act of love: “One must love space to describe it as minutely as though there were world molecules, to enclose an entire spectacle in a molecule of drawing.” Further, the artist/writer can be likened to “the man with the magnifying glass”. For “[t]he botanist’s magnifying glass is youth recaptured. It gives back the enlarging gaze of a child”. The magnifying glass is also important to Bachelard since it serves to bar “the everyday world” and makes the reader focus his attention on the miniature.

4 Bachelard does not discuss children’s literature – even if he (as we can see above) recognizes children’s “enlarging gaze” and also mentions fairy tales such as *Petit Poucet* – but as Lisa Sainsbury has shown in *Ethics in British Children’s Literature*, Bachelard’s theoretical framework provides a particularly good fit to children’s literature – from fairy tale examples such as Tom Thumb andThumbelina (H. C. Andersen) to Nils Holgersson (Selma Lagerlöf), *The Borrowers* (Mary Norton) up to *Toy Story*. According to Sainsbury, the child reader is uniquely positioned to “engage with the issues raised by miniature life” (190). In another study, *The Child that Haunts Us: Symbols and Images in Fairytale and Miniature Literature*, Susan Hancock brings together Jungian psychology and bachelardian concepts in her analyses of “Fairytale
mannikins,” “Nineteenth century female miniatures,” “Suffering children,” and more. The focus, however, in both Sainsbury and Hancock is on the child reader and fictional child character, rather than on other aspects of the miniature. Elina Druker, also drawing on Bachelard, has written specifically on Tove Jansson’s use of the miniature in *Moominpappa at Sea*. She recognizes that “the tension between the gigantic and the microscopic in size and scale is something that Tove Jansson employs consistently in her picture books and novels.” This observation clearly relates to Bachelard’s idea about the reciprocal relationship between the microscopic and macroscopic. In another article, focusing on Jansson’s illustrations to *Nalleresan* [Teddy’s Journey] by Solveig von Schoultz, Druker discusses how flight and exile (and homelessness) often relate to size in children’s literature. In my own previous work on Tove Jansson’s maps as well as her comic strip art I have also touched on how Jansson simultaneously details and compresses narrative content through her chronotopic maps, and in her use of sequentiality in the Moomin comic strips. I would argue that the comic strips in their deceptive simplicity is an extremely demanding form of miniaturist art (Jansson has even written a short story on the topic), but at the same time congenial to Jansson’s temperament and artistic project. Finally, Ida Moen Johnson approaches the subject from a different vantage point in her analysis of the “absent picture” – something that could be said to represent a “degree zero” miniature, perhaps. Her observations on the nature of small and insignificant details or just hinted at (but invisible) visual elements has a bearing on the present discussion.

**Tove Jansson and the miniature**

Tove Jansson herself was uniquely suited for the “miniature life,” with artist parents who gravitated between the monumental and the minimal – her father’s sculptures and monuments, and her mother’s book illustrations and stamp engravings. One can also refer to Jansson’s early investment in Moomin merchandise, specifically the handmade trolls (see cover of Westin’s biography), on which she placed strict requirements, or her work on the Moomin house with Tuulikki Pietilä (the book, *Skurken i muminhuset*, co-written with her brother Per Olov Jansson). These two latter examples show that Jansson’s miniaturist art was not restricted to words and pictures, but to artifacts and architecture as well. It is not surprising therefore that in almost every aspect of Tove Jansson’s work – with words as well as picture – we see the miniaturist in action.

Interestingly, the making of doll houses – like her own work on the Moomin house – crops up in her writing several times: the miniature lighthouse in *Moominpappa at Sea* (analyzed below), and in the short story “The Doll House” in the collection *Art in Nature*, a story in which a doll-house project becomes an all-consuming passion, threatening to undermine the friendship between two partners. In *Moominpappa at Sea* the model lighthouse and the map of the valley, including the lighthouse island, serve as “apple seeds” to use a wonderful bachelardian metaphor. These are the objects that will take hold of your imagination, grow, and become real. We can see this exemplified in the following quotation which starts as a description of a lighthouse model only to gradually assume more and more reality, indicated by the identification of Moominpappa and Moomintroll with the place, and the use of the present tense:

> “Look at these iron clamps,” he said. “They’re buried in the rock, and this is how you climb up to the lighthouse. You have to be very careful if the weather’s rough. Your boat is carried in toward the rock on the crest of a wave – then you jump off,”
get a firm grip, and scramble up while the boat is flung back... when the next wave comes, you're safe. Then you fight your way against the wind, holding on to this railing. Then you open the door, but it's heavy. Now it slams behind you. You're inside the lighthouse. You can hear the roar of the sea in the distance through the thick walls. Outside it's roaring all round, and the boat is already a long way off."

"Are we inside, too?" asked Moomintroll.

"Of course," said Moominpappa. "You're right up here in the tower."

Druker identifies this as a key scene in *Moominpappa at Sea*, one in which artifacts are "imagined to exist", and where the microscopic imaginary points to something macroscopic ("gigantic") real. Moomintroll is transported to a seemingly real lighthouse by the help of the model and Moominpappa's storytelling.

A similar epiphany occurs when Moomintroll focuses on the flyspeck-small dot on "the big map hanging on the wall, the one showing Moominvalley with the coast and its islands". Moominnmamma has just pointed it out to him, and he starts thinking about it: "And suddenly he saw the sea around the island begin to rise and fall. The island itself was green, with red cliffs. It was the island he had seen in picture books, a desert island, inhabited by pirates." Again, a miniature transforms into imagined, large-scale reality.

Indeed, the world is big and dangerous in Jansson’s fictional universe, and its inhabitants small. Originally, they were even smaller, which is not surprising since Moomintroll started out as part of Tove’s signature in her artwork and illustrations. Being small can either be good, or dangerous. On the first page of *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, when Moomintroll is feeling anxious, his mother comforts him, saying: "I hope we’re so small that we won’t be noticed if something dangerous should come along." In this first Moomin book, the trolls are only a few inches tall. A snake appears as a "Giant Serpent," and Moominnmamma is almost devoured by a sand lion. They ride on the back of a Marabou stork, sail on a “big round water-lily leaf," and are able to light their way with “big glowing flowers.” The Moomintrolls may be small, but in relation to “the little creature” (Sniff), who they befriend on their quest, Moomintroll and Moominnmamma appear large. Sniff, too small to have a name in this first Moomin book, returns with a name, more personality, and bigger somehow, in the next Moomin book, *Comet in Moominland*. His situation is slightly similar to that of the Creep in “Spring Tune” in *Tales from Moominvalley* who is "so small that [he hasn't] got a name" (14), but whose personality and attitude grows significantly after Snufkin gives the Creep the name “Teety-woo.”

The contrast between the big and threatening world and the smallness of all living things is borne out in another short story from *Tales from Moominvalley*. Here is the Fillyjonk, in “The Fillyjonk Who Believed in Disasters”: “Dear Gaffsie, believe me, we are so very small and insignificant, and so are our tea cakes and carpets and all those things, you know, and still they’re so important, but always they’re threatened by mercilessness”. The Fillyjonk may be small and insignificant, yet it is interesting that she names the small things that she surrounds her with and calls them important. Maybe it is because she is a Fillyjonk, but there is more to it than that, I believe. Jansson recognizes that the naming and identifying of all these little things are acts of world-building. Things and details can clutter our lives and imaginings – that is the Fillyjonk-streak in all of us – and we need to be able to let go, Snufkin-like to the things that bind us and grow out of hand. But the small things are important too, something we are
reminded about, in this story, where nothing remains of the Fillyjonk’s old home at the end except a smiling chipped China kitten and her carpets.

World molecules and the love of space

Decoration and detail can serve to conjure up an imaginative space. The cover of the original Swedish edition of *The Memoirs of Moominpappa* with its wreath made up of the *dramatis personae* of Moominpappa’s early life interfoliated with meticulously rendered flowers and leaves can serve as one example. But the love of detail and condensation is also present in the vignettes, the elaborate first letters, and chapter summaries of the same book. An example of the latter can be found in chapter two “Introducing the Muddler and the Joxter in my Memoirs, presenting Edward the Booble, and giving a spirited account of the Oshun Oxtra and its matchless launching”.

This has a bearing on what Bachelard writes about medieval illuminated manuscripts and the “patience that brings peace to one’s fingers” in filling a single letter with as many details and beauty as possible. The miniaturist master, he says, “must love space to describe it as minutely as though there were world molecules, to enclose an entire spectacle in a molecule of drawing”. Jansson is such a master, and not only in her decorative pieces, but of course, just as much or more, in her time-consuming and detailed full-page illustrations, for example in her endpaper maps. I have elsewhere analyzed Jansson’s maps and shown how they stimulate the imagination and condense the time and place of the book’s story-world. Another way of expressing it is to say that these maps display a “love of space” and “spectacle” and are made up entirely of “world molecules.”

The miniature is associated with the imagination and world-building. Yet, what is often overlooked is that it is also about taking control of one’s (or someone else’s) creation. The miniature allows for control, or “domination,” to use the bachelardian term. For this purpose, the crystal ball is perfect. Bachelard writes: “[t]he dreamer can renew his own world, merely by moving his face. From the miniature of the glass cyst, he can call forth an entire world and oblige it to make ‘the most unwonted contortions’”. This example points to another instance from *Moominpappa at Sea*, where the first chapter is called “The Family in the Crystal Ball,” and where Moominpappa uses his crystal for this exact purpose: to control and conjure forth his private family fantasy.

Their reflections made them seem incredibly small, and the crystal ball made all their movements seem forlorn and aimless. Moominpappa liked this. It was his evening game. It made him feel that they all needed protection, that they were at the bottom of a deep sea that only he knew about.

Moominpappa’s need to miniaturize and control his family indicates that he is not in harmony, that he is in crisis. Rather than be with his family, he prefers to see them like this, mute and minute, and in need of him.

However, the ability to control and contain the creative impulses is not only negative; in some situations, it can be necessary, as when the crystal ball reappears in the final book the Moomin series, *Moominvalley in November*, where it is given a salutary function. In *Moominvalley in November* the little creature Toft fantasizes about Moominvalley and the Moomin family, but after he has gone to the now moomin-less valley he finds it harder and harder to see them in his imagination. Instead, he finds comfort in a large book on natural history, “a very big book which had no beginning.
and no end and the pages were all faded and had been nibbled by rats at the edges." In it, he reads about a sea-creature, a minuscule “Nummulite”. Gradually, the developing story-reality of the Nummulite takes over. Toft “tried to describe the Happy Family, but he couldn’t. Then he told himself all about the solitary creature instead, the little Nummulite who had something of Noctiluca about him and liked electricity.” The Nummulite was “evidently very tiny and became even tinier when he was frightened.” But after a while when Toft imagines it, electric thunderstorms are let loose over Moominvalley, and the Nummulite starts growing. It also affects Toft’s temperament, making him angry. Eventually, the Nummulite becomes a threatening presence and prowls around the house, groke-like, until Toft confronts it, and it is finally absorbed by Moominpappa’s crystal ball. Boel Westin has pointed out the similarity between the names Toft and Tove; it is a likeness that extends to Toft’s and Tove’s outward appearance as well. Westin has also noted the anagrammatic likeness between the Swedish “Mumin” and “Nummulit”. But it is of course as creators that the similarity between Toft and Tove becomes most apparent and significant. They both create from scratch, from the miniature; they begin with a mysterious word, a name, and from there, a character takes form, becomes real. But eventually, the created Moomin/Nummulite outgrows the fantasy, becomes a threat to itself and to its creator, and needs to be contained. Toft uses the crystal ball – a device made for showing and minimizing – to help the Nummulite, and himself.

“It’s no good,” said Toft. “We can’t hit back. Neither of us will ever learn to hit back. You must believe me.” ---

“Make yourself tiny and hide yourself! You’ll never get through this!”
And suddenly the crystal ball became overshadowed. A dizzy vortex opened in the heavy blue swell and then closed itself again, the Creature of the Protozoa group had made itself tiny and returned to its proper element. Moominpappa’s crystal ball, which gathered everything and took care of everything, had opened up for the bewildered nummulite.

16 If the crystal ball is a metaphor or symbol for the creative faculty, out of whose depths the merest flicker can grow and be transformed into an entire world, peopled by wonderful creatures, it can also serve as a container and refuge for those fictional realities, which otherwise may grow too large, and can threaten the well-being of its creator. We see here that the process apparently can be reversed. But if Toft can use the crystal ball for this purpose, Tove Jansson uses her art. Moominvalley in November is such a crystal ball, for Jansson – and for us. The Moomins disappear into its blue swell, containing them, helping them hide. We see Moominvalley, we see refractions of the family, but eventually the book gathers them up and “takes care of everything.”

17 Finally, let us turn to Moominmamma as miniaturist. What comes to mind first is perhaps her Moominvalley fresco landscape in Moominpappa at Sea, the one where she mysteriously enters the painting she has made herself on the wall in the Lighthouse. However, I would like to bring up another example. In the first chapter of Moominsummer Madness, Moominmamma is making a model bark boat, a schooner. In a foreshadowing of what is to come a “big, black flake of soot” lands “amidships on the deck” of the schooner, interrupting Moominmamma’s work. She rises and goes to Moomintroll. He has been lying by a pond all the time. He knows that she is making a bark boat for him, and wonders if it will come with a “dinghy so small that you hardly dare take it in your paw”. It is an exquisite model ship, but Moominmamma has forgotten to make the dinghy. However, “it balanced beautifully over its own reflection
and started away in the port tack as if manned by old salts”. Thus, the miniature ship is already imbued with potential. In the very last chapter, the ship is miraculously found again: “The back stay had gotten entangled in a bush, but it was undamaged. Even the little hatch was in its place over the hold”. In a sense the lucky fate of the seaworthy bark ship replicates that of the Moomintrolls through their tsunami adventure. “It was as if nothing had ever happened and as if no danger could ever threaten them again”. Yet something – adventure – has happened. And Moominmamma in a final act perfects the ship and the story by giving Moomintroll the dinghy. It is as if the entire story had been played out to arrive at this point – where the model schooner and its dinghy can sail away immaculate.

In closing

In this article I have exemplified and analyzed Tove Jansson’s art of the miniature, something that is recognized as a defining trait of her work as a whole: the art, the comics, the picturebooks, her dolls and doll-houses. Tove Jansson’s predilection for the miniature is not unique, of course. All art is in some measure Kleinkunst in that it provides a smaller, but more graspable world than the real. However, drawing on Gaston Bachelard’s essay on the miniature, the claim put forth in this article is that Jansson’s muminalism is a particularly apt example of what Bachelard calls the miniaturizing imagination. Bachelard argues that the miniature, instead of implying reduction, is a condensation and enrichment. He goes on to compare the “minuscule” with “a narrow gate” that “opens up an entire world.” Tove Jansson’s muminalism provides that gate, opening up the fictional world of the Moomintrolls. The focus in this article is on the nine books in the Moomin series, but could be applied more generally to her work. The analysis has dwelt both on the visual and verbal aspects (the illustrations as well as the writing) of her Moomin novels. The miniature is manifest both in chapter summaries, in elaborate initial letters and decorative details, as well as in the themes and descriptions of smallness: the small trolls, the miniaturizing crystal ball, the model lighthouse, the minuscule bark boat, and the Nummulite protozoa.

NOTES

1. As Elina Druker points out, “My” is Greek (µ) for “micro” (“a millionth”). Moreover, when Little My is introduced, it is with a magnifying glass. Elina Druker, ”Miniatyren i barnlitteraturen” in I litteraturens underland, Eds. Maria Andersson, Elina Druker, Kristin Hallberg, Stockholm, Makadam, 2011, p. 24.
2. In this article, the focus is on the Moomin book series, not on the Moomin picturebooks, but a similar reading as the one pursued here could of course also be applied to the picturebooks.
3. I do not propose “muminalism” as a critical term but employ it here as a figure of speech for rhetorical and stylistic purposes.
8. Gaston Bachelard, op. cit., p. 158, his emphasis.
9. Ibid., p. 172.
10. Ibid., p. 170.
11. Ibid., p. 155.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
15. Jansson readers are of course reminded of the many instances of microscopes and telescopes in the Moomin books. The telescope is interesting too since it is used to observe a macrocosm in miniature: “Distance, too, creates miniatures at all points on the horizon”: Gaston Bachelard, op. cit., p. 172.
20. Ibid.
32. Ibid., p. 16-17.
36. Ibid., p. 46.
38. Ibid., p. 46.
ABSTRACTS

In this article I analyze Tove Jansson’s art of the miniature. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard’s conceptualization of the miniature and adapting it to the critical discourse of children’s literature and the miniature, I argue that Jansson’s verbal and visual art in general, and in the Moomin series in particular, can be understood in terms of a “miniaturizing imagination”. Thus, the miniature in Tove Jansson’s work – verbal, visual, artifactual – typically achieves condensation and enrichment rather than reduction, a “poetic space” to use Bachelard’s term. Tove Jansson’s “muminalism” serves to open up the fictional world of the Moomintrolls in an act of fictional world-building.

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Mots-clés: Jansson (Tove), Moomin, Moumine, miniature, microcosme, Bachelard (Gaston), poétique de l’espace, construction de monde

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AUTHOR

BJÖRN SUNDMARK

Björn Sundmark is professor of English Literature at Malmö University, Sweden. His PhD thesis, Alice in the Oral-Literary Continuum, was published by Lund University Press in 1999. Sundmark has published extensively in the research field of Children’s literature.