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To cite this article: Joona Taipale (2016) Social mirrors. Tove Jansson’s *Invisible Child* and the importance of being seen, The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review, 39:1, 13-25, DOI: 10.1080/01062301.2016.1227195

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01062301.2016.1227195

Published online: 12 Sep 2016.

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Social mirrors. Tove Jansson’s *Invisible Child* and the importance of being seen
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**ABSTRACT**
This article examines the experience of being seen and analyzes its central role in the formation of a coherent sense of self. Tove Jansson’s short story from 1962, *The Invisible Child*, serves as the red thread of the article, and the story is analyzed in the light of Donald Winnicott’s work on social mirroring. The analysis is enriched by the psychoanalytic insights of Veikko Tähkä and Heinz Kohut, and complemented by Axel Honneth’s philosophical elaborations as well as by recent developmental findings as presented by Vasudevi Reddy. The article is divided into an introduction and three sections. After summarizing Jansson’s story in the introduction, the first section elaborates and examines different senses of social invisibility. The second section assesses developmental factors that promote social invisibility and highlights the importance of being seen. The third and final section interprets Jansson’s story as an analogy to an intensive therapeutic process, while pinpointing those elements that facilitate the restructuring of a disturbed sense of self. As a whole, the article thus discusses an issue that is often simply taken for granted in discussions of empathy and interpersonal experience: social visibility.

**Introduction: the vignette of The Invisible Child**
Tove Jansson’s (1914–2001) Moomin books are well known by their psychological and psychotherapeutic clarity as well as by their rich philosophical content. This article focuses on the story of the ‘Invisible Child’ (Jansson, 1963), and uses it to highlight the connection between a coherent sense of self and the experience of being seen. Jansson’s story takes place in the Moominvalley, where life centers on the extended family of the Moomins. Of the characters, Moominmamma is a warm and empathetic character, whereas Moominpappa is a determined and adventurous but loyal figure. Their son, Moomintroll, is both sensitive and heroic character. Little My is a tempered, straightforward, and yet benevolent creature, and Too-ticky is a practical character who lives nearby.

In the story, Too-ticky brings an invisible girl to the Moominhouse. As TTtoo-ticky explains, the child has gradually turned invisible since her caregiver has continuously maltreated her. This would be the girl’s aunt, a ‘horrid lady’ who has taken care of her only by obligation, not by will and devotion. The lady has abused her not physically but psychologically: she has been emotionally cold and reacted to all her doings with crushing irony. ¹ Too-ticky goes on to explain that if people are ‘scared’ (skrämma) often enough, they might ultimately turn invisible. The girl does not talk either. The only perceivable part of her is the small silver bell that the aunt had hung around her small neck ‘to hear where she was’. Ultimately, the aunt had given the girl away, as she thought she could not be expected to take care of relatives whom she could not see. Too-ticky brings the girl to the Moomins so that they could ‘make her visible again’.² The girl’s name is Ninny, she tells them before leaving, and introduces the Moomins to Ninny as her ‘new family’.

The Moomins are naturally stunned and perplexed by the unexpected situation, but do not for one second hesitate to warmly welcoming the child to their house. Moominpappa at once begins to wonder how they could actually make Ninny visible again. Moominmamma refuses the suggestion by her scientifically oriented husband that visiting a medical doctor could help her: the girl is shy for a reason, Moominmamma replies, ‘I believe she wants to be invisible for a while’. Moominmamma prepares a guest room for Ninny upstairs, does her best in making her feel welcome and safe, and then wishes her good night. After that, she goes downstairs and seeks guidance from her grandmother’s notebook *Infallible House Remedies* (Ofeibara hukuser). She finds what is said to be a ‘complicated recipe’ that her grandmother had written down in extreme old age and begins to work on that.
The next morning, Ninny’s paws have become visible – a sight that Moomintroll finds awkward or uncanny (hemsk). A bit later, when Moomintroll carelessly mentions Ninny’s horrid aunt at one point, her paws at once fade away, but when the subject is dropped from the discussion, her paws slowly become visible again. A bit later, Ninny accidentally drops a can of apple jar, and when everyone’s eyes turn onto her, her paws again lose their visibility. But as Moominmamma makes her feel that there is nothing to worry about, Ninny’s paws once more regain visibility and now her legs and the lower part of her dress become visible as well. In the evening, Moominmamma sews a new dress for Ninny, and the next morning Ninny utters her first words, even if only in a hardly audible voice: ‘thank you.’ Moominmamma expresses their delight vis-à-vis this development by saying that the more we see of you, the happier we become.

Ninny is a child who does everything in good order: after breakfast, she obediently washes her cup, without being asked to do so, and puts it in its right place in the cupboard. The downside of this rigidly obedient compliance is that she is unable to play. When asked whether she knows any good games, Ninny replies that she does not: she has only ‘heard of’ playing. When Moomintroll tries to teach her games, Ninny quickly learns the rules, does more or less as she is expected to do, and even says that she is enjoying the game, but all the time she seems to be playing out of politeness or courtesy, rather than for fun. She never laughs either. Little My, in her straightforward way, gets nervous and asks: ‘don’t you have any life in you? Do you a want a biff on the nose?’ Ninny just beeps humbly, ‘I’d rather not’. Little My replies: ‘You’ll never have a face of your own until you’ve learned to fight. Believe me’. Little My is on the right track, as the story teaches us later on. However, at this point, Ninny just complies: ‘Yes, of course’ and backs off.

The others get frustrated at Ninny’s halted development and, after a while, she is left to herself. Day after day, Ninny keeps following Moominmamma everywhere. She still lacks a face, and no change for the better is in sight. In the closing act, they all go to the beach to meet Too-ticky. Ninny looks at the sea and seems troubled: she has not seen the sea before and thinks that it is ‘too big’. What is to become the game-changer event is set forth as Moominmamma gently pushes Moomintroll a wink, and starts to steal up on Moominmamma who is standing on the pier facing the sea, as if about to push her into the water to amuse the children (he is not really planning to do it, we are told, but this is how it looks like). The rest is better to quote:

‘But before he reached her, a sharp cry was heard, a pink streak of lighting shot over the landing-stage, and Moominmamma let out a scream and dropped his hat into the water. Ninny had sunk her small invisible teeth in Moominmappa’s tail and they were sharp. “Good work”, cried My, “I couldn’t have done it better myself!” Ninny was standing on the landing stage. She had a small, snub-nosed, angry face below a red tangle of hair. She was hissing at Moominmappa like a cat. “Don’t you dare push her into the big horrible sea!” she cried. “I see her, I see her!” shouted Moomintroll, “She’s sweet!”’.

Moominmamma gets angry but while trying to fish his hat from the water, he manages to tip himself over and tumble in on his head. Ninny begins to laugh for the first time – and she laughs so much that the whole landing stage ’shook with her laughter’. The surprised Too-ticky notes: ‘You seem to have changed her; she’s even worse than Little My. But the main thing is that one can see her, of course’. The story ends with Moominmamma’s humble words: ‘It’s all thanks to Granny’.

The story problematizes something that is usually taken for granted, namely the fact of being visible to others. As I see it, in all its brevity, the 15-paged story is a layered complex that deals with the diagnostics of social invisibility, with its etiology, and with the therapeutic recovery from it, and I have arranged my article accordingly. I will first examine the senses in which one can be invisible to others. Second, building on Winnicott’s theory of the mirror-function of the caregiver, I will analyze how one may turn invisible to others. Third, I will read the story as an analogy of a therapy process, investigate how social visibility may be regained, and elaborate a variety of possible psychoanalytic interpretations of the story.

**Diagnostics – relative and fundamental invisibility**

When it comes to the question of what exactly is invisible in Ninny’s case, one seemingly obvious answer is that surely it is her body. Yet, several issues seem to speak against this interpretation. For one, even if Ninny’s bodily outlook is not visible, her bodily actions and her bodily presence are. After all, when she prepares mushrooms in the kitchen, for instance, everyone can see her ‘invisible paws’ pick them clean of needles and earth; they can see her activity of drinking coffee; in the garden, she carries and drops a can of jar; and the silver bell on her neck jingles whenever she moves.
‘Even the ghost necessarily has its ghostly body’ (Husserl, 1952, p. 94; cf.; Mattens, 2006), but Ninny is more than just a spatial phantom: she clearly has an effect in and on the physical world, and others are able to track her physical whereabouts. Therefore, it would be misleading to simply say that it is her ‘body’ that is invisible.5

On the other hand, Ninny does not appear as a mindless being either. Before entering the Moominhouse, her way of moving reveals hesitation; she clearly reacts with embarrassment when dropping the can of jar; she understands language. What is invisible in her, then? What do others not see of her? Conspicuously, until the very final act of the story, Ninny never asks for anything; she never expresses a wish, desire, aggression, or opinion. She always does as she is told or expected, she never disagrees with anyone else, and she never improvises or manifests creativity. As I see it, Little My hits right on the spot when confronting Ninny in her straightforward way: ‘don’t you have any life in you?’ Even if there is no doubt that Ninny is alive in the biological sense, she does not properly feel alive and real.6 It is as if she was not fully in touch with her life, and therefore when she perceives others, she cannot grasp herself as being seen by them with such an internal reservoir. And while this vital element of her is absent, others are unable to recognize her as someone in particular: she is like a ghostly incarnation of ‘anyone’, an anonymous X without any individualizing content. Ninny always complies with norms and expectations that are bestowed upon her from the outside7: she is not active but passive in relation to the social environment, altogether driven and conditioned by it like a zombie, and her actions are fittingly described by Jansson in the passive form (e.g., ‘the plates were carried by invisible hands’). What accordingly remains concealed of Ninny until the final act is her spontaneity, her creativity. In short, Ninny’s literal invisibility is a symbol of the deficient intersubjective presence of her self.

Moreover, Ninny’s selfhood is not just unnoticed but invisible. That is to say, it is not just that she does not reveal herself to others; it rather seems that there is nothing to be revealed. If anyone, the Moomins would recognize her creativity and spontaneity if that was possible – they would want to see her. But Ninny cannot be seen. This enables us to distinguish between relative and fundamental forms of social invisibility and examine the relationship between them.

In everyday life, people may remain invisible and blend into the scenery in various ways. Here, I am not referring to cases where someone does not stand out in the perceptual space – as, for example, in the case of trying, in vain, to perceptually locate a particular person in a huge crowd. What I am rather considering is the phenomenon that, even when perceptual standing out is enabled, a particular individual does not stand out in the social space. Such experiences are in fact frequent, and the ways that we ‘overlook’ others (and groups of others) are multifarious. Just consider the way in which we absorb mindedly forget to greet a friend or a colleague at a party; think of the habituated ignorance with which we pass by beggars in the street or the skillful denial by which we overlook the presence of the cleaning personnel in a public toilet; and consider the way in which we may emphatically ‘look through’ our companion in the middle of a quarrel, thus overtly signaling our contempt, reminiscent to the way in which a racist, as a form of explicit demonstration, emphatically ‘neglects’ someone of other ethnicity. As Axel Honneth puts it, insofar as other persons are ‘distinct, easily identifiable objects in the perceptual field of the subject in question’, their ‘invisibility’ must be understood as a ‘social state of affairs’, and it is important to emphasize that the affected persons are not ‘invisible’ only in a metaphorical sense: they may actually feel absent (see Honneth, 2001, p. 112–113).

To distinguish Ninny’s case from certain other cases, let us consider the following example. Think of your experience of the waiter while having a nice dinner with your friends at a fine restaurant. During the dinner, the waiter’s functional and bodily presence is minimally noted – you tend to lean back and perhaps nod in passing as you are served – but otherwise she may remain invisible to you. And indeed: the more so, the smoother shall be your dining experience. In an ideal case, it is almost as if ‘invisible hands’ prepare and serve food for you, while you go on enjoying an uninterrupted dialogue with your friends. Likewise, in the Moominland midwinter Moomintroll is served by a group of ‘invisible shrews’ at the bathing house: they take his coat, serve food, and bring extra socks when it gets cold; and when Moomintroll asks about these invisible servants, Too-ticky replies that one should not ask too many questions about them, since they ‘like to keep their secrets to themselves’. At the restaurant, the shared social space is not disturbed by the presence of the waiter, because as a social peer, she is not there – even if she, like the invisible shrews, has her own community behind the curtains, as it were. In fact, the presence of the waiter comes close to that of a ‘functional object’, as described by Veikko Tähtä: ‘Experientially the object is not yet an individual person but a group of functions, and this makes its affective color entirely dependent on the gratifying or
frustrating nature of the object’s respective function’ (Tähkä, 1993, p. 76).

However, the waiter’s social invisibility is of the relative kind: it is owing to her occupational role, because of which she temporarily and voluntarily conceals both her spontaneous impulses and other social potentialities. Relativity makes her condition psychologically bearable. To be sure, when overhearing the table discussion, the waiter does not usually ‘jump in’, she holds back her personal opinions, and usually ‘keeps her cool’ even if the customers speak of matters that are in conflict with her personal worldview. In this manner, the waiter does not reveal her self and remains socially invisible. Yet, even if she is not socially visible to her customers, she is socially visible to her family, to her friends, and to her colleagues. And, importantly, this social self-awareness accompanies her not only outside the restaurant but also while she is waitering; it figures in the background as something she may constantly rely upon. For example, if her function as a waiter becomes challenged (‘I am not good in this job’), she does not fade into social nothingness; insofar as her occupational function is not all that she is, by finding herself worthless as a waiter she does not find herself worthless altogether. Her sense of social potentiality is something she may constantly rely on; it is what supports her social existence and carries it through times of trouble.

More generally put, we normally experience ourselves as being actually and potentially seen in a multitude of ways, despite the fact that only a few of these ways are actualized in each moment. In this light, what happens to Ninny in the story when she accidentally drops the can of apple jar is revealing. Understandably, she realizes that in the eyes of others she fails in her current function. But unlike the waiter, she has no underlying social existence, no sense of potentiality that she could lean on whenever she fails in something or feels threatened. In her fragile condition, Ninny is unable to trust that others can view her also in a favorable lighting. She is the cleaner of mushrooms, the carrier of jars, drinker of coffee, etc., but when she is engaged in one of these functions she does not seem to be in touch with her possible other functions, as it were. And so, instead of landing safely and retaining her social visibility, failure in a present function makes her fall infinitely, as it were, and fade away from the social world altogether. To put it differently, unlike the waiter’s, Ninny’s invisibility is not an exception but the rule. She is not invisible due to a particular social role or situation that would temporarily conceal her underlying social potentialities. Whereas, the waiter is invisible only temporarily and relatively, Ninny is visible only temporarily and relatively, according to her current function.

Etiology – the distortive mirror

In the social world, other people normally function as mirrors for us. As Honneth eloquently describes, the experience of having worth in the eyes of others is signaled in the others’ body language, ranging from explicit greetings, hugs, and handshakes, to discrete, barely noticeable gestures, and ‘gleam in the eye’ (Honneth, 2001, p. 122; cf.; Kohut, 1971, p. 116). Likewise, the experience of having no worth in the eyes of others is expressed both by negative gestures and by the lack of gestures. The difference between the two latter ought to be underlined. We do not always like what we see in the mirror: besides appreciation and neutral acceptance, we may also discern blame and even contempt on the face of others, whereby we are revealed to ourselves in a negative lighting (see Taipale, 2016b). That is to say, even when we do not like what we see in the mirror, we nonetheless normally see ourselves: being blamed by others, for instance, already serves as tacit a proof for the fact that we are recognized by them as blameworthy – after all, it would not make sense to blame someone without thinking that this someone could do, or could have done, things in a more acceptable manner. In other words, our actions can be socially disapproved only insofar as our potentialities (i.e., what we could be) is acknowledged. It is one thing to be negatively assessed and another thing to be ignored, and as I see it, Ninny’s troubles are owing to both.

While people may be insecure over particular social roles and functions because of singular traumatic experiences, to lack in the basic sense of social existence altogether is usually preceded by a more long-standing abuse or maltreatment. And this, as we are told, has been the case with Ninny as well. Etiologically, in terms outlined above, Ninny’s condition can be traced back to the fact that she has grown up with a distortive mirror. With her sadistic and castrating aunt, her basic sense of self, her vital core, has not been strengthened and socially validated by her caregiver. Ninny’s caregiver is characterized with the following words:

You know, don’t you, that if people are frightened often enough, they sometimes become invisible. (…) Ninny was frightened in the wrong way by a lady who had taken care of her without really liking her. I’ve met this lady and she was horrid. Not the angry sort, you know, which would have been understandable. No, she was ice-cold and ironic. (…) She was ironic all day long
every day, and finally the kid started to turn pale and fade around the edges, and less and less was seen of her (my emphasis).

For the horrid aunt, Ninny was something unwanted, and she has been emotionally unresponsive to her (‘ice-cold’), thus suffocating the girl’s spontaneity. By continual frightening, discouragement, and overt ignorance (‘ironic’), she has gradually forced Ninny to flee into social invisibility. In order to pinpoint the exact sense in which Ninny’s development has gone awry, let us take a look at how social self-validation is normally established.

From the moment infants are born, they are imbued with various vital needs that they possibly cannot fulfill on their own. Development begins from the state of ‘absolute dependency’, as Winnicott puts it, meaning that survival is contingent on sufficient care. In favorable cases, the caregiver responds to the infant’s needs, and via repetition the infant gradually comes to realize that her needs and her spontaneity matter socially. The development of the sense of self accordingly sets out from a rather vulnerable state: whether one’s spontaneously expressed self (e.g., oneself as hungry) experimentally achieves social validation, social existence, depends solely on others, who serve as mirrors for the infant. Normally, the infant gradually, via repetition, solidifies or habituates the experience that her body language, the infant thus learns that what she currently feels is perceived by the caregiver.

Yet, the target of dyadic joint attention may be identified in various ways, and it is possible that the infant is mirrored only partially. The caregiver can signal the infant that the infant is seen and heard (i.e., that there is joint attention), but the infant’s experience of what is seen of her (i.e., the target of joint attention) largely depends on the quality of the caregiver’s signal. As an example, just consider a baby who is hungry and crying. Whenever the caregiver is annoyed at the crying, he or she can come to signal the infant with his or her body language that the infant’s crying is noticed, yet without signaling that the infant’s feeling of hunger is noticed. In this case, the infant experiences the intersubjective affirmation of his external bodily appearance. When the caregiver remains open to the infant’s feelings and needs, and hence sees beyond the material expression, in the perceived gestures and actions, the infant comes to experience an intersubjective affirmation of his spontaneous

subjective experiences. That is to say, in one case, social existence is granted to the infant’s audible crying; whereas in the other case, social existence is granted (also) to her felt hunger.

To be sure, the infant does not initially distinguish between these two sides of her expression; and in favorable cases, the two ‘recognitions’ by the caregiver likewise go hand in hand: that is, the good-enough caregiver signals the infant that he or she sees not just a crying baby, but a hungry baby. In normal cases, therefore, sufficiently continuous and balanced ‘mirroring’ allows for the integral developmental of the child’s mind and body: the child grows into understanding that her subjective feelings and impulses can be safely made visible to others, and that her self is accordingly equipped with social potential. However, as already indicated, integration in this respect is not necessary; parental mirroring may be insufficient which tends to promote unbalanced development in the child’s self-experience. In general, if the inner is not given room to grow, the outer tends to become emphasized; and if the outer is not socially credited, one tends to withdraw, to retreat inwards. Ninny’s case is particularly tragic since both ways have been blocked by the horrid caregiver.

As the quote above suggests, Ninny’s traumatization is owing to two main factors. The first factor has been the aunt’s emotional unresponsiveness, which has led to the weakening of her basic sense of self. Ninny’s spontaneous impulses and reactions have found no visible resonance or felt attunement in the caregiver. As a very concrete illustration of the consequences of this, just consider what happens to children in the so-called still-face experiment (Tronick, Adamson, Als, & Brazelton, 1975): when the caregiver is engaged in interaction, the infant naturally brings out her spontaneity, but when the caregiver suddenly ceases to engage and to respond, and only coldly stares at the infant without any emotional expression, the infant immediately gets puzzled, tries to invite the caregiver to reengage, and when she fails to do so, the infant too disengages and withdraws; and when the caregiver then reengages and becomes responsive again, the infant is utterly delighted and immediately reengages too. Just consider that a still face was all that you ever saw, and you learn something about the horror of Ninny’s condition. ’If the mother’s face is unresponsive, then a mirror is a thing to be looked at but not to be looked into’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 152); and while searching for a proof of her social existence, Ninny has been looking at mirror that only reflects back a cold and lifeless thing. The face of the
emotionally unresponsive caregiver is not really a mirror: in it, the child does not manage to see herself (Winnicott, 1971, p. 151). Growing up with the horrid, ‘ice-cold’ lady, Ninny’s sense of self has gradually faded or died out, and as a consequence, she does not seem to ‘have any life’ in her, as Little My notices.

Moreover, Ninny’s case is even more tragic since also her external appearance and her external doings have been repeatedly discredited. If Ninny had grown up with an unresponsive person, but received sufficient appreciation for her external doings, her development would most likely have taken a very different path – who knows, she might have grown into a successful narcissist while secretly feeling hollow inside (see Winnicott, 1965, p. 143). Instead, Ninny is something like the opposite of a narcissist, and this brings us to the second factor in her condition: the aunt’s crushing irony, by which she has continuously labeled Ninny’s external appearance worthless and shameful. With the repeated experience of shame that the aunt has inflicted upon her, Ninny has – quite literally – lost her face (see Lantz, 2012).

As both her spontaneity and her external appearance have been discredited by the horrid lady, Ninny has had nowhere to go. In a tragic way, the aunt’s wish that Ninny did not exist in her life has thus been self-fulfilling: the wish has been discernible both in the aunt’s explicit evaluations, in her implicit body language, and in her emotional coldness; and while Ninny has been building her identity by staring at such a distortive mirror, she has eventually turned invisible altogether.

At this point, one might ask: why ‘only’ social invisibility? Why not schizophrenic falling apart? Why not psychotic depression, or something else? Much depends on the age in which the damage is done, and here, we are left with speculations: in the story, nothing is said of Ninny’s parents, and the reader is not informed about the age in which the horrid lady has taken charge of her. We may infer, however, that Ninny has gone through something like a reversed adoption process, insofar as she has entered from better environmental circumstances into worse ones. This, we may infer both from the fact that Ninny had previously been visible (as we can read, Ninny has turned invisible with the horrid lady) and from the fact that she recovers so well (and relatively easily): she must have received care and affection for some time, perhaps for a year or two, before the horrid lady has taken over her.

With the aunt, invisibility has been Ninny’s best available ‘alternative’. Moominmamma touches upon this issue by speculating that perhaps Ninny wants to be invisible. Even if her invisibility is hardly owing to an actual ‘decision’, it is nonetheless something motivated, and hence something understandable: a defensive move. Here, we can come back to what was already said earlier: in early infancy, there is no gap or break between what one feels and what one reveals externally; and in this sense, infants are initially ‘loyal’ or ‘true’ to their feelings and sensations – they do not hold back, or feel shame over, their spontaneously arising feelings, but without any censorship or delay they express forthwith, ‘honestly’ (see Winnicott, 1989, p. 21–23). To be sure, also normally, children gradually learn to wait, to endure the pressing needs while holding back their expression for a short while, and this capacity becomes increasingly important in adult social life. In normal cases, however, children (and adults) are well aware of the feelings that they thus hold back, and one of the main functions of parental mirroring is to enable infants to stay ‘loyal’ or ‘true’ to their feelings, even when they do not get what they want or when have to postpone the fulfillment of their needs. When emotional response from the caregiver is remarkably insufficient – like in cases of postnatal depression as well as in some cases of the caregiver’s bipolar disorder – infants are known to develop deliberative strategies. Children may learn to ‘predict’ the caregiver like the weather: knowing that the caregiver will break down or get angry, or simply not respond, if this or that kind of emotion is now expressed forthwith or spontaneously, they learn to hold back the emotion and wait for the right moment when revealing oneself once again feels safe (Winnicott, 1971, p. 151–152). In the meantime, the child holds back her impulses, which really means that she, for the time being, fakes or pretends: she gives a false impression of how she currently feels. If such models of behavior have to be repeatedly operative, the child’s sense of her external appearance and outlook may become overtly emphasized in her sense of self: what really is crucial is not how I happen to feel but how I appear from the outside – seeming becomes more important than being, as Kierkegaard would put it.

Winnicott uses the concepts of ‘true’ and ‘false’ self to describe the discrepancy between what is felt and what is externally shown. The ‘false self’ amounts to one’s social façade, to what I am in the eyes of others (see Stern, 1985, p. 227–228). Despite the normative and even pathological connotations of the term, the ‘false self’ is also a normal phenomenon (Winnicott, 1965, p. 141–142): after all, we all project a social façade, which does not always perfectly coincide with how we feel, and it is indeed an important capacity to be able to psychologically hide oneself from others whenever the situation thus requires. What we thereby safeguard is the area of our spontaneous
impulses, feelings, and emotions, which is distilled by what Winnicott calls the ‘true self’. The false self arises as a ‘defense against the exploitation of the true self, which would result in its annihilation’; ‘the False Self has one positive and very important function: to hide the True Self, which it does by compliance with environmental demands’ (Winnicott, 1965, p. 146). Narcissists comply with the social environment and seek social validation by ‘tooting their own horn’, by projecting a forceful outer image – a false self – that they then safeguard fiercely, if not even identify with it. By contrast, Ninny’s way to comply with the environmental demands is to silently yield to the prevalent circumstances. This is rather understandable considering that in Ninny’s early interpersonal environment, self-expression has been synonymous to self-annihilation. Invisibility is thus her (understandable) way to comply, to blend in – the ‘lesser evil’ that protects her from psychological insult. Indeed, paradoxically, in her invisibility, Ninny is rather ‘visible’ to the Moomins – even ‘interesting’ and ‘popular’. In Winnicott’s terms, therefore, invisibility comes closest to what would amount to Ninny’s false self or social façade.⁷ On the other hand, while showing nothing Ninny is in a way true to her inner void.

For good reasons, one might ask at this point: why is Ninny invisible in the presence of everyone – why not just in the presence of the horrid aunt? The reply is that in Ninny’s life, the horrid lady has had the status of the other. On this point, we can in fact criticize Honneth: what he suggests is that the child’s relationship with the caregiver is one where social recognition (or lack thereof) is ‘especially clear’ (Honneth, 2001, p. 118), but what he thereby overlooks is that the relationship with the caregiver is also the archetypal relationship, in the sense that it serves as the basic model for our expectation of what social relationships in general are like. The caregiver is not just one social mirror among others but also the ‘precursor of the mirror’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 149) – that is, something that sets, arranges, focuses, or directs mirrors.⁸ In Freudian terms, the experience of the caregiver provides the ‘printing plate’ (Klischee) for the child’s subsequent interpersonal experiences; it is with the caregiver that the child begins to learn how ‘people’ are, and hence every new person is initially bound to unfold either as a ‘reprint’ or as a ‘revised edition’ of the first other (see Taipale, 2015a). In a related context, Kohut talks about ‘mirror transference’: just as in transference, in general, our earlier significant object-relations outline the anticipatory horizon for our new object-relations, so too, more specifically, our previous experiences of how we have been seen by others (i.e., mirrored) casts an anticipatory horizon on our experiences of how other people will view us in the future, how we will be judged by them, etc. (cf. Kohut, 1971, p. 143ff.). In other words, the patterns of how we are seen by others become internalized (see Abram, 1996, p. 239).⁹

This explains why it does not immediately help Ninny that the Moomins are kind, welcoming, and friendly to her: her sedimented, unconscious expectation that revealing herself to others entails self-annihilation is rooted deep, and ‘revising’ such habituated expectation takes a considerable amount of time.¹⁰ What is needed is the institution of a new anticipatory horizon – and this process is initiated when Too-ticky tells Ninny: ‘here’s your new family’.¹¹

**Therapy – the supporting ground and self-expression**

It is not a coincidence that it is precisely Too-ticky who brings Ninny to the Moomins and inaugurates her identity (re)formation. In the Moomin books, Too-ticky often plays a mediating role between the ‘inside’ of the Moominvalley and the outside ‘world’: she is a kind of ‘transitional’ figure that enables a contact between the familiar and the strange. Too-ticky even lives at the bathing house at the end of the pier – hence, neither on land nor in the sea, but between the firm soil of the Moominvalley and infirm abyss of the outside ‘world’. In the Moominvalley midwinter, when Moomintroll unexpectedly wakes up from his hibernation in the middle of winter, it is Too-ticky who serves as his guide in a world that has been there all the time, but never before viewed by him in such a manner. Too-ticky is known to represent Tove Jansson’s female lover and spouse Tuulikki Pietilä, with whom Jansson herself has familiarized herself with a world which had been there all the time, but previously unseen.¹² In the *Invisible Child*, Too-ticky again sets forth a process where something invisible gradually becomes visible – Ninny.

Ninny’s stay at the Moominhouse can be read as analogy of an intensive therapy process, with its ups and downs: Ninny enters the Moominhouse with apparent hesitation, trust is gradually established, and after certain immediate improvements in her condition, a long and frustrating period follows, which finally leads to a culmination point in the process of Ninny’s separation and individuation (see Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975, p. 4). Without taking a stand on whether Jansson herself saw the story in this manner, I find it rewarding to read the story from this angle, and not only because this enables saying
something more about social invisibility. In Ninny’s recovery process, I will focus on three revealing moments: first, on Ninny’s initial arrival at the Moominhouse; second, on the realization that Ninny is unable to play; and finally, on the scene whereby her face regains visibility.

Ninny enters the Moominhouse in a similar manner that someone enters the counseling room for the first time. Before entering, the intermediary figure, Too-ticky, orally provides the Moomins with a sort of ‘referral’: ‘A shy young girl psychologically maltreated by her caregiver; needs to be made visible’. And when Ninny herself then enters the Moominhouse, it is Too-ticky’s second-hand report that initially outlines their grasp of Ninny. The preliminary ‘diagnosis’ they are offered is that Ninny is timid, and the ‘treatment’ is organized accordingly: ‘I believe she wants to be invisible for a while. Too-ticky said she’s shy. Better just let the child be until we figure something out’. As Ninny has no visible external appearance in the eyes of others, she is initially individuated exclusively via second-hand reports: the Moomins would have no way of knowing even her age and sex, if Too-ticky was not there to tell this to them. Too-ticky, in this sense, makes the first contribution in making Ninny visible.

Interestingly, while pondering on how to deal with Ninny, Moominmamma repeatedly turns to her grandmother. In the brief story, Granny is mentioned exceptionally many times – and each time with appreciation or paws – as she knew a thing or two indeed. But it is a child seeking guidance from Granny acknowledged. In the first evening, Moominmamma tells Ninny in the first evening: ‘you are scared or need anything, just come down to me, you are scared or need anything, just come down to me’. Ninny first of all needs a mothering, Moominmamma intuitively knows that Ninny of the physical mixture that Moominmamma prepares in fact appears: ‘Ninny is timid, and the ‘treatment’ is organized accordingly: ‘I believe she wants to be invisible for a while. Too-ticky said she’s shy. Better just let the child be until we figure something out’. As Ninny has no visible external appearance in the eyes of others, she is initially individuated exclusively via second-hand reports: the Moomins would have no way of knowing even her age and sex, if Too-ticky was not there to tell this to them. Too-ticky, in this sense, makes the first contribution in making Ninny visible.

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Interestingly, while pondering on how to deal with Ninny, Moominmamma repeatedly turns to her grandmother. In the brief story, Granny is mentioned exceptionally many times – and each time with appreciation or acknowledgment. In the first evening, Moominmamma seeks guidance from Granny’s ‘recipe book’, which really means that she is considering how her own internalized mother figure would have dealt with the issue. Every time progress unfolds in Ninny’s condition, Granny is credited, and even the whole story ends with the words: ‘It’s all thanks to Granny’. Repeatedly acknowledging her grandmother, Moominmamma is shown to be well aware that her ability to be a good-enough mother figure to Ninny is made possible by the fact that also she herself has experienced good mothering, which she will now pass on. What Freud writes in his Introductory lectures on psychoanalysis about the genealogy of the superego – ‘a child’s superego is in fact constructed on the model not of its parents but of its parents’ superego’ (Freud, 1969, p. 505) – fits here rather nicely: Moominmamma realizes that what Ninny will begin to internalize (as her superego) is not primarily the figure of the Moominmamma, but Moominmamma’s superego, her internalized maternal ideal: Granny.

Relatedly, Granny’s ‘recipe book’, which Moominmamma begins to consult right from first evening, is called in Swedish hus-kur – literally, ‘home-treatment’ or ‘home-cure’. Here, the word, ‘home’, should not be read merely as a qualitative specification of the physical mixture; it rather refers to the effective substance itself. Just as in Freud’s famous claim that psychoanalysis is ‘speech-cure’ (Sprach-Kur) ‘speech’ itself serves as the healing substance, here home likewise serves as the cure. Reading the story carefully, the physical mixture that Moominmamma prepares in fact appears: ‘Ninny is timid, and the ‘treatment’ is organized accordingly: ‘I believe she wants to be invisible for a while. Too-ticky said she’s shy. Better just let the child be until we figure something out’. As Ninny has no visible external appearance in the eyes of others, she is initially individuated exclusively via second-hand reports: the Moomins would have no way of knowing even her age and sex, if Too-ticky was not there to tell this to them. Too-ticky, in this sense, makes the first contribution in making Ninny visible.

Ninny is gradually assured that she can feel safe with her ‘new family’, and she is encouraged to freely express her needs and negative feelings – as Moominmamma tells Ninny in the first evening: ‘if you are scared or need anything, just come down and tinkle’. Having herself experienced good-enough mothering, Moominmamma intuitively knows that Ninny first of all needs a ‘supporting’ or ‘holding’ environment, a secure ground upon which she can build her identity. It is hardly just a coincidence that what first turn visible of her during her stay at the Moomins are her paws, that is, that part of her that stands against, and is in touch with, the ground. And when Ninny is frightened at one point, we are told that her paws can no longer be distinguished (differentiated) from the grass. In classical Mahlerian terms, Ninny is on the way from undifferentiation to separation and individuation, but her sense of self is still extremely dependent, weak, and vulnerable, and she easily regresses and melts into the supporting ground. Psychologically, she is nothing without Moominmamma, and her main developmental task is to grow out of this undifferentiation. The more reliably she feels the ground underneath her feet, the more she begins to feel her feet against the ground.

Corresponding to the two factors in her condition (i.e., the caregiver’s emotional coldness and the caregiver’s crushing putdown of her external appearance), Ninny becomes visible in two steps, as it were. In this respect, the issue with Ninny’s inability to play designates a significant turning point in the story. While Ninny is already largely visible and even speaks, the others are forced to revise their initial ‘diagnosis’: they had assumed that with the increase of Ninny’s external visibility, her spontaneity, that is, her true self, would naturally become more visible as
well. Yet, when they are trying to play with her, they realize that Ninny’s ‘interior’ is damaged as well. Ninny not only fears showing her true self publically; there does not seem to be anything inside: ‘don’t you have any life in you?’ As Winnicott puts it, ‘playing has to be spontaneous, and not compliant or acquiescent, if psychotherapy is to be done’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 68), and for the time being Ninny is not ready for that. Her recovery seems to come to a halt. Realizing the depth of Ninny’s condition is frustrating and the ‘treatment plan’ is revised. Moominmamma ceases to give Ninny her Granny’s medicine, as if realizing that actively trying to make her visible does not seem to work: what is needed is time and patience. ‘Playing implies trust’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 69) and the latter still needs to be further solidified.

However, things had already changed: Ninny was no longer alone. She clung to Moominmamma and followed her everywhere so intimately that she seemed to be one with her:

Days went by, and Ninny was still without a face. They became accustomed to seeing her pink dress marching along behind Moominmamma. As soon as Moominmamma stopped, the silver bell also stopped, and when she continued her way, the bell begun tinkling again.

Winnicott’s famous phrase – ‘there is no such thing as a baby’ – fits here nicely: ‘if you show me a baby you certainly show me also someone caring for the baby, or at least a pram with someone’s eyes and ears glued to it’ (Winnicott 1984, p. 99). Reformulating Winnicott’s phrase, we could claim that, presently, ‘there is no such thing as Ninny’, meaning that considering her separately from Moominmamma would be an abstraction. The two were fused together to the extent that the presence of one implied the presence of the other – from the tinkling bell, others immediately knew that (not only Ninny but also) Moominmamma was somewhere close. Ninny’s relationship with Moominmamma had developed into a symbiotic one: her identity was slowly strengthening, but she remained in the shadow of Moominmamma, undifferentiated from her as it were.

This finally leads us to the beach. Ninny faces the sea ‘for the first time’ and displays an awkward reaction. She walks to the water’s edge and is standing in the ‘wetsand’, when she notices that Moominpappa is about to push Moominmamma into the sea. She reacts aggressively and cries: ‘Don’t you dare push her into the big horrible (hemska) sea!’ And finally, when Moominpappa himself falls to the sea, she bursts into laughter.

The motives of Ninny’s decisive reaction to Moominpappa’s apparent intention allow several possible interpretations. For one, one might recognize a nascent oedipal setting in the final act: the father figure interferes with the child’s intimate relationship with the mother figure. The father’s seeming intention to push the mother into the sea (into the external world) introduces Ninny with the troubling idea that her nascent love-object, with whom she forms an intimate dyad, is someone else’s love-object as well. Following this line of thinking, one could further interpret the final scene where Ninny witnesses the father’s ‘intention to push’ the mother as a representation of jealousy, possibly also with sexual connotations: what the child realizes is that the father is about to have something aggressive and thrilling going on with the mother, privately, without her, and hence reacts with aggression.

One might object here that an obvious limitation to this interpretation lies in the fact that, unlike in Freud, here the daughter’s object-love would be directed at the mother, and not at the father. On the other hand, this modification seems to fit nicely with Jansson’s own homosexuality: perhaps, Ninny too is a homosexual girl. Be that as it may, it might be more fitting to discuss the setting in terms of a triad, leaving questions of sexual difference aside for the time being. As already alluded to, in the other Moomin books the sea represents the unfamiliar and uncontrollable external world: the realm beyond the familiarity and safety of the Moominvalley. Accordingly, the fact that Ninny is encountering the sea for the first time and ‘whinges and whines’ (gnälla) because ‘the sea is too big’, this could be taken to represent the fact that she feels anxious while facing the independent external world for the first time. When witnessing Moominpappa’s intention to push Moominmamma into the sea, Ninny actually awakens to the idea that Moominmamma might also have an existence in the external world, independently of her. Accordingly, what could be taken to give rise to aggression is the idea that Moominmamma might be something more than a ‘self-object’ (Kohut), ‘subjective object’ (Winnicott), or ‘functional object’ (Tåhkä) – something that she could also lose. That is to say, Moominpappa’s intention could be taken to reveal to Ninny that her primary object, whom she had no idea of existing outside their intimate dyad, exists separately of her. And while the dyadic mother is revealed as a triadic other, as something separate from oneself, Ninny is at once thinking herself as a separate entity, which gives rise to resistance and aggression.

Alternative interpretations are of course possible, and the story indeed allows a lot of them. Perhaps,
Ninny’s reaction is owing to transference: Moominpappa’s playful intention to ‘tease’ might be painfully experienced because it resembles Ninny’s past experiences of her ironic and teasing aunt (see Taipale, 2015a). Another interesting possibility might be to view the Moomins as different sides or dimensions of one therapist or caregiver: in trying to facilitate Ninny’s indiavation, the therapist/caregiver is reluctant to uphold forever the patient’s/child’s ‘good mother’ projection, whereby the seeming intention to push a particular character into the sea – or at least play with the idea – would represent the therapist’s/caregiver’s attempt to detach herself from the idealized maternal projection. This interpretation could perhaps be complementary to the preceding ones: here, too, the patient’s/child’s reaction could be interpreted issuing from her nascent realization that the therapist/caregiver is not an ‘all-good object’. Ninny’s aggressive attack would thus represent her attempt to annihilate the playfully introduced ‘bad’ sides of the therapist/caregiver – to ‘destroy’ the object, as Winnicott would perhaps put it (see Winnicott, 1989, p. 227).

Regardless of which of these interpretations one will favor (if any), Ninny’s aggression seems to relate to her realization that something is about to happen that she would not want to happen. And, crucially, this ‘wanting’ is something unprecedented in her: the holding environment of the Moomins has solidified her sense of the continuity of being, whereby anything presenting itself as an obstacle to this familiar continuity will be greeted with aggression. In a way, then, what externally appears as protection of someone else is at once a form of self-protection: Ninny’s aggression thus might not be owing to an altruistic and unselfish concern over someone else, but to a concern over someone insofar as this someone has a significant role in her life. In this sense, therefore, it is at once the continuity of her own life that she stands to defend when reacting aggressively to Moominpappa’s playful intention to push Moominmamma into the unfamiliar and unpredictable abyss of the external world. She has now learned to ‘fight’ and Little My is cheering.

Finally, Ninny’s laughter can be interpreted regressively or progressively. The regressive interpretation suggests that she laughs because her wish is fulfilled – after all, when Moominpappa himself drops into the sea, the element threatening her nearly symbiotic dyad with, or her love relation to, Moominmamma is expelled. A more progressive interpretation could be sketched by saying that Ninny’s laughter manifests a novel capacity that was paved way by aggression: the capacity to play. Interestingly, at first Ninny is unable to recognize the playfulness in Moominpappa’s seeming intention to push Moominmamma to the sea; in a rather humorless manner, she foresees only a dramatic event with unpredictable consequences, and cannot bear the insecurity. But by reacting aggressively, she does something with unpredictable consequences. ‘Spontaneous gesture is true self in action,’ writes Winnicott (1965, p. 147), and Ninny’s act is undoubtedly spontaneous: she bites Moominpappa not for external but for internal reasons, and others thus see a glimpse of her true self. Crucially, unlike with the aunt, nothing bad follows from this moment of honesty. By contrast, her spontaneous aggressive act is explicitly credited by Little My (‘Good work!’) and her external appearance is appraised by Moomintroll (‘She’s sweet!’). The object is not destroyed. She is not destroyed. By showing herself fully in the presence of others, by actively taking her place in the social world, she has made a significant developmental step:

The most aggressive (…) words in the languages of the world are to be found in the assertion I AM. (…) Only those who have reached a stage at which they can make this assertion are really qualified as adult members of society (Winnicott, 1986, p. 141).

As I see it, Ninny’s laughter is anything but mocking or sarcastic: she does not laugh at Moominpappa. Her laughter rather expresses openness to the possible: playfulness. By aggressively showing her ‘I am’, she paves way for her ‘I can be’ – and what she can be, she already potentially is. If Winnicott is right in saying that psychotherapy aims at enabling and supporting the patient’s capacity to play (Winnicott, 1971, p. 51, 56), then in this sense too Ninny’s process culminates at the ‘intermediate playground’ of the beach (see Winnicott, 1971, p. 63).

**Concluding words**

To conclude briefly, Tove Jansson’s Invisible Child manages to raise several issues vis-à-vis self-experience and interpersonal life that we normally tend to take for granted. It is obvious to us that we have a core self, a stream of spontaneous motivations and impulses, even if we often have to hold back, modify, and postpone our reactions. It is likewise obvious to us that we experience ourselves socially visible at least to certain others. What Ninny’s story eloquently manages to highlight is that neither of these is a necessity. In all its brevity, the story examines these issues in a playful manner, thus leaving open several possible paths that one can follow.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the Kone Foundation.
Notes

1. As an exemplification, Too-ticky notes that if the girl would, for instance, accidentally slip and stumble down on a basketful of fresh mushrooms, the aunt would react with emotional coldness, bitterly retorting something like the following: ‘I understand that’s your idea of a graceful dance, but I’d thank you not doing it in people’s food’.

2. As warm and sympathetic as Too-ticky is, she says that she herself has something else to do. In the story, Too-ticky’s motives in this respect are not elaborated; it remains an open question whether she is just unwilling or also unable to provide Ninny with good-enough care.

3. The word *hensk* also translates the Freudian term *Unheimlich*. On the Freudian concept, see Svenaeus (1999).

4. As the subsequent scene tells us, in this phase, Ninny is merely doing things out of politeness and one could therefore think that she is also thanking others because she feels that this is something *one is supposed to do* in such circumstances. What Winnicott writes of a patient in his text on ‘Early disillusion’ fits here nicely: ‘She can at least say “thank you”. She can at least believe she is grateful, but she cannot feel certain that I (her analyst) can accept her gratitude fully’ (Winnicott, 1989, 22).

5. It may be noted here that, when it comes to *physiological* or *material outlook*, the other’s body remains more or less ‘transparent’ to us also in normal cases. Recognizing a smile, for instance, is not the same as paying attention to the distorted material surface of the other’s face; just as recognizing an intention in someone’s words is not the same as focusing at the audible properties of the audible utterance. When social interaction goes more or less smoothly, our focus lies in what is expressed, and not in the material vehicle of expression (see Taipale, 2015b, 2014, 87ff., 87ff.). Clearly, in Ninny’s case, something else is at stake.


9. It is worth noting here that, even if the setting is not symmetrical, the claim naturally holds both ways: for the waiter, customers are empathetically present as (relatively anonymous) customers.

10. Although ‘castration’ fits here as a *structural description*, Ninny’s trauma is most likely owing, not to the developmental phase usually associated with this notion, but to an earlier ‘soul murder’ (on this notion, see Shengold, 1989).

11. *Social invisibility* is linked with both *coldness* and *mirroring* also in another Moomin character, the Groke (*Mårran*), who occasionally turns up, and every time gives rise to feelings of horror and anxiety in the others. The Groke is considered to be a terrifying creature even if she never hurts anyone; she seeks warmth, but everything she touches freezes – for example, in the *Moominland Midwinter*, she sits on the bonfire but the fire only goes out. The Groke’s ghostly condition is suspected to be owing to developmental issues in the *Moominpappa and the Sea*: ‘Mamma’, whispered Moomintroll. ‘What happened to her to make her like that?’ – ‘Who?’ – ‘The Groke. Did somebody do something to her to make her so awful?’ – ‘No one knows’, said Moominmamma, drawing her tail out of the water. ‘It was probably because nobody did anything at all. Nobody bothered about her, I mean. I don’t suppose she remembers anyway (…).’ Moomintroll lay on his back looking at the hurricane lamp, but he was thinking about the Groke. If she was someone you mustn’t talk to or about, then she would gradually vanish and not even dare to believe in her own existence. He wondered whether a mirror might help. With lots and lots of mirrors one could be any number of people, seen from the front and from the back, and perhaps these people might even talk to each other’. In another scene of the same book, the ice-cold Groke is overtly delighted and no longer ice cold, when she is shown friendliness by Moomintroll.

12. See Taipale, Forthcoming.

13. Unlike in the English translation, in the Swedish original Ninny’s aunt is told to be, not ‘icyly ironical’, but ‘ice-cold and ironical’.

14. Kohut’s description of one of his patients comes remarkably close to the case of Ninny: ‘Patient B., for example, remembered from his childhood the following destructive reaction of his mother. And he would tell her about some achievement or experience she seemed not only to be cold and inattentive but instead of responding to him at the event that he was describing would suddenly remind critically about the details of his appearance of current behavior ("Don’t move your hands while you are talking!” etc.). This reaction must have been experienced by him not only as a rejection of the particular display for which needed a confirming response but also as an active destruction of the cohesiveness of his self experience (by shifting attention to a *part* of his body) just at the most vulnerable moment when he was offering his total self for approval’ (Kohut, 1971, 121).

15. ‘Everyone who when before himself is not more ashamed than he is before all others will, if he is placed in a difficult position and is sorely tried in life, end up becoming a slave of people in one way or another. What is it to be more ashamed before others than before oneself but to be more ashamed of seeming than of being?’ (Kierkegaard, 1847/1993, 53; see also Zahavi, 2014, 235ff.).

16. Von Buchholtz quotes a study of the evolutionary role of shyness, according to which the latter is not a social deficiency but a survival tool (see Von Buchholtz, 2011).

17. To be sure, one might ask whether the organizing principle in Ninny is such positive narcissism any longer, or whether one ought to speak here of
Recently, Lareya and colleagues have argued that bullying in childhood may in certain respects perhaps be thematized by reading what Klein (1997, 176–235) writes about ‘envy’ that interferes the child’s relation to a good object (see Klein, 1997). Lareya and colleagues have argued that peer bullying in childhood may in certain respects be even more harmful than being maltreated by adults (see Lereya, Copeland, Costello, and Wolke 2015).

Another factor slowing things down in this respect could perhaps be thematized by reading what Klein writes about ‘envy’ that interferes the child’s relation to a good object (see Klein, 1997, 176–235).

After saying to Ninny, ‘Here’s your new family’, Too-ticky in fact continues: ‘They’re a bit silly at times, but rather decent, largely speaking’ – as if she was telling Ninny that what she should expect from the Moomins is ‘good-enough’ care.

Jansson smuggles in her close ones through other Moomin figures as well. For instance, the characters ‘Tofslan’ and ‘Vifslan’, two small creatures with a ‘valuable secret’ inside a locked bag, introduced in the book The Magic Hat, are said to represent ‘Tove’ and ‘Vivica’: in the 1940s, Jansson had a relationship with Vivica Bandler and the ‘hidden valuable secret’ is naturally their secret love.

Lantz interestingly reads the story as an exemplification of different therapeutic styles (see Lantz, 2012). This insight, unfortunately, remains invisible in the English translation.

The importance of feeling at home is a prevalent topic also in the Moominpappa and the sea. Being a long way from home, Moominmamma feels homesick and disappears into a painting of a garden created by herself. In my view, this represents psychotic withdrawal into a subjective world. Being temporarily lost, undiscoverable by others, Moomintroll speculates: ‘Mamma’s vanished. (…) She was so lonely, she just disappeared’. Later on, in the story, when things start to get better and the surrounding environment appears less alien and threatening, Moominmamma realizes that she can no longer access the garden in the painting since she is no longer ‘homesick’.

Besides Winnicott, the link between psychological health and playing has been emphasized by a fairly recent study by Stuart Brown who highlights the correlation between the absence of play in early childhood with criminality in later life (see Brown 2009, 43, 117).

Acknowledgments

While writing the article, I have learned a lot from discussions with various colleagues. In particular, I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to Rudolf Bernet, Henrik Enckell, Jussi Kotkavirta, Gunnar Karlsson, Jurassic Laajarinne, Pirjo Lantz, Johannes Lehtonen, Petra Nyman-Salonen, Gry Årdal Pritzlau, Helena Päivinen, Vasudevi Reddy, and Dan Zahavi. I have had the chance to present and discuss earlier versions of the article at the Research Consortium of the Finnish Psychoanalytic Society, the phenomenological research seminar at the University of Helsinki, and at Aretai Ltd. As for the lastly mentioned, I am especially obliged to Kai Alhanen, with whom I had the privilege to discuss Ninny’s story on daily bases. Lastly, I should extend my thanks to my daughters Pihla and Veera who, during the process of writing this article, have become extremely familiar with the story: they are the reason why I ended up carefully reading the story in the first place.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Kone Foundation.

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