K. Korhonen
professor of literature, University of Oulu

GLAZAMI MORPY: TUBE YANSSON I ETIKA FOKALIZACIIO

В то время как первые сказки про Муммия-Троллей имели более-менее истную каж- 
девую природу (приключеческих повестей) с традиционным эпическим пове-
ствователем, то в последних книгах из этой серии Туве Янссон часто использовала 
модернистский приём фокализации, распространённый, скорее, в современной 
ей «литературе для взрослых», а не в детских книжках. Благодаря этому приёму 
её рассказчик мог раскрыть мысли героев и за счёть этого придать их характерам 
большую психологическую глубину. Более того: как я показал в докладе, использо-
вание фокализации (то есть изображение вещей с точки зрения некого Другого) было 
tесно связано с центральными для творчества Янссон (как книг о Муммии-Троллях 
tак и более поздних произведений для взрослых) темами тождества и идентичности, 
atакже стакими философскими вопросами, как: где проходит граница между свобо-
dой и безразличием? между эмпатией и чрезмерным отождествлением с другим? 
Возможно ли увидеть мир глазами радикально иного существа — Моры? Янссон 
непредлагает простых ответов на эти вопросы, но позволяет героям самостоятельно 
исказать свой собственный путь, в то время как повествователь читает в их сердцах, 
a они пытаются читать в сердцах друг друга.

Ключевые слова: Туве Янссон, Муми-Тролли, Морра, Литература Финляндии, одноно-
чественно, гомосексуализм.

K. Korhonen
Professor of Literature, University of Oulu

LOOKING THROUGH THE EYES OF THE GROKE

Whereas the first Moomin novels were more or less straight adventure books with a tradi-
tional epic narrator, in the last Moomin books Tove Jansson often used modernist fo-
calization technique, familiar rather from the “adult literature” of the time than from 
children’s books. Thanks to this technique, her narrator could reveal the inner thoughts 
of her characters and thus portray them with more psychological depth. Moreover, as I 
will show in my presentation, the use of focalization — seeing things from the view-
point of some other — was deeply linked to the themes of identity and otherness that 
were central in Jansson’s fiction (both in Moomin-novels and her late “adult” oeuvre), and
to philosophical questions like: Where goes the limit between freedom and indifference? Where goes the limit between empathy and over identification? Is it possible to see the world through the eyes of the abject other — the Groke? Jansson does not offer easy answers to these questions, but lets her characters to find their own way, her narrative voice reading the minds of her characters, and her characters trying to read each other’s minds.

Key words: Jansson, Moomins, Groke, Finnish literature, loneliness, homosexuality.

In this paper, I will analyze the Groke in Tove Jansson’s Moomin novels¹. Who is the Groke — or Mårran, as she is called in the original Swedish, or Mörkä as she is called in Finnish? I will limit my approach here to the so called “Moomin suite” — a series of eight Moomin books as they were published, many of them thoroughly revised by Tove Jansson, in their final form between 1968 and 1970. The Groke does appear also in picture books and comic strips of Tove Jansson, and in many animations and other cultural products, but in this article I must leave them out.

The Groke is, without a doubt, one of the most terrifying creatures in all children’s literature: grey, cold, formless mass with big nose, yellow piercing eyes, and long line of white teeth. She is so cold that earth and plants freeze under her. In a way, she is, as Alison Lurie [12, p. 88] puts it, “a walking manifestation of Scandinavian gloom”. Although in Trollkarlens hatt (1948/1956, Finn Family Moomintroll) she utters two recognizable words, otherwise she just howls or growls, or what is worse, just stands silent, without a sound. Her original name Mårran seems to bear some resemblance to the Swedish verb morr — to snarl or growl, so the English translation the Groke, seems to be well on line with the original [1, p. 119-121; 14, p. 125].

The appearances of the Groke in Moomin books have arguably caused more childhood traumas than any American horror spectacle ever. I myself could not read Moomin-books when I was small, not after I saw the image of the Groke in a picture book Vem ska trösta knyttele (1960, Who Will Comfort Toffle).

Before she makes her first appearance in Trollkarlens hatt, she is described by two little girls, Tofslan and Vifslan (translated, for some odd

¹ About the “Moomin suite” and the revisions that Tove Jansson made, see Rehak-Johansson [16].
reason, as “Thingumy and Bob” in English versions\(^2\): “Tig and brim and gerrible! Lock the door against her” [7, p. 108]. The girls had come to the door of the Moominhouse with a big suitcase, and the Moomin family has welcomed them to their house. When the Groke is seen in front of the house, she is described as follows, from the collective viewpoint of the family: “She was not particularly big and didn’t look dangerous either, but you felt that she was terribly evil and would wait forever. And that was awful” [7, p. 109–110].

Here seems to go the limit for the legendary hospitality of Moomin family. Everyone is welcome to the Moomin house, except the Groke. It turns out that the Groke is trying to get back the Contents of the suitcase that Tofslan and Vifslan have stolen from her. In the parodic trial that follows, the Groke has clearly all judicial rights on her side — Tofslan and Vifslan admit that they really have stolen the still mysterious Contents. As Janina Orlov [15, p. 81] notes, the argument of Hemulen, who acts as a defence council for Tofslan och Vifslan, “parodies the whole concept of juris prudentia”: “The question is not who is the owner of the Contents, but who has the greatest right to the Contents” [7, p. 115]. Snork Maiden, who acts as the witness for Moomin family, states firmly: “We disapproved of the Groke from the beginning. It’s a pity if she must have her Contents back” [7, p.115]. From the viewpoint of justice, this is scandalous. The Groke is treated only as an external threat, as an absolute other who is given no rights whatsoever — like prisoners in Guantanamo. In the trial, however, Sniff does, in the role of prosecutor for Tofslan and Vifslan, say few words to defend her: “think how lonely the Groke is because nobody likes her, and she hates everybody. The Contents is perhaps the only thing she has” [7, p. 115].

The Groke makes a short appearance also in *Muminpappas memoarier* (1950/1968, *The Exploits of Moominpappa*). There she is described as a frightening monster, living in Lonely Mountains, chasing aunt Hemulen, who is saved only by the bravery of Moominpappa. However, here we have only the word of Moominpappa, who is not a very reliable narrator — perhaps he is exaggerating the dangerousness of the Groke for his young audience in order to make himself look braver.

\(^2\) in this case, I will rather use the original names, although I otherwise refer to the English translations. My readings are, however, based on the original texts in Swedish.
In *Trollwinter* (1957, *Moominland midwinter*) the Groke returns again. Again, she is spoken about before she actually makes her appearance. When Moomintroll first time in his life sees the snowy landscape, he thinks that everything is dead, and the landscape belongs to someone else, “perhaps to the Groke” [6, p. 11]. A bit later, he meets Too-ticki who also mentions the Groke, and Moomintroll wonders “whether winter itself weren’t something that ten thousand Grokes had made by squatting on the ground” [6, p. 20]. Too-ticki then makes a great fire for the people of the forest, but everyone escape when the Groke comes, sits on the fire, and the fire goes off. This time there is Tuu-ticki who explains her fate to Moomintroll: “She didn’t come to extinguish the fire, you see, she came to warm herself, poor creature. But everything that’s warm goes cold when she sits down on it. Now she’s disappointed once more” [6, p. 58].

In *Pappa och havet* (1965, *Moominpappa at sea*), we finally have a chance to learn how the Groke sees the world. In the beginning of the book, the family is on the verandah of their house. The summer is over, and for the first time the lamp is lit, creating a circle of light to the night. Outside the circle, however, is the Groke, watching the lamp. And, for the first time in Moomin books, the narrator focalizes the scene through the Groke’s eyes:

The Groke shuffles a little nearer. She stared at the lamp and softly shook her big, clumsy head. A freezing white mist hung around her feet as she started to glide toward the light, an enormous, lonely grey shadow. The windows rattled a little as if there were distant thunder, and the whole garden seemed to be holding its breath. The Groke came close to the verandah and stood quite still just outside the circle of light that shone on the darkened ground.

Then she took a quick stride up to the window and the lamplight fell right on her face.

Indeed, the quiet room was suddenly filled with screams and panic-stricken movement, chairs fell over, and someone carried the lamp away. In a few seconds the verandah lay in darkness. Everyone had rushed inside the house, right inside where it was safe, and hidden themselves, and their lamp [8, p. 13–14].

The narration here resembles more a modernist novel with a clearly located focalizer than the kind of omniscient, non-localized epic narration that Jansson uses in the first Moomin novels. However, perhaps even more important here is that not only the narrator shows things as the Groke sees them, but also Moomintroll tries, next day, to imagine her point of view:
Moomintroll imagined he was the Groke. He shuffled along slowly, all hunched up, through a pile of dead leaves. He stood still, waiting, while he spread the mist round him. He sighed and stared longingly toward the window. He was the loneliest creature in the world.

But without the lamp it wasn’t very convincing. Instead, only nice thoughts came into his head, thoughts of islands in the sea, and great changes taking place in all their lives [8, p. 17–18].

In other words, Moomintroll practices what today the cognitive science calls “theory of mind” — tries to imagine what takes place in another consciousness. This ability — to shift the point of view from one’s own mind to that of another — is arguably one of the basic conditions for ethics, and it certainly is one of the basic conditions for modernist novel, if not for literature in general.

This scene prepares Moomintroll for events that take place after the family has moved to the lonely island with a lighthouse. The Groke follows the family to the island, and comes to see Moomintroll when he is with his lamp on the beach. Night after night, Moomintroll feels that he must go to the beach and show the lamp to the Groke, otherwise she will be very angry. In spite of that, the Groke is coming farther and farther up to the island, and even the plants and stones try to escape her freezing presence. Until one night there is no more lamp oil left, and Moomintroll has to go to the beach without the lamp. However, to his surprise, the Groke is not angry even though she is deprived of her private lamp show: “Suddenly the Groke started to sing. Her skirts fluttered as she swayed to and fro, stamping on the sand and doing her best to show him that she was pleased to see him” [8, p. 208]. The Groke was just happy to see Moomintroll. The earth was no longer frozen under her, and the island and its plants and stones were no longer afraid of her. The Groke had become warm. As Glyn-Jones [9, p. 16] notes, this happy encounter takes place at the same time when Moominpappa has come to terms with the sea and the family has finally made a contact with the mysterious fisherman (former lighthouse keeper): “a case of kindness conquering coldness,” he concludes.

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1 About fiction and theory of mind, see Lisa Zunshine [20].
Who or what is the Groke? An antagonist, an outsider, a cold and lonely creature who longs for the light — yes, but what else?

In these days of political turmoil, we could perhaps begin with some political interpretation. As Heraclite said, war is the mother of everything, and war certainly was the mother of Moomins. Tove Jansson began to write her first Moomin tale as a reaction to Stalin’s attack to Finland, the so called Winter War. As she later told, in the first days of the war she was so afraid that she had an atavistic need to search, as she did when she was a child, shelter from some childhood dream of safety, and the safest place on earth for her was “muumin maha” — Finnish word meaning “grandmother’s belly.” She even mused that the names “Mumin” and “Muumimmammi” probably came from this association.\(^4\) But as Freud has told us, the things we try to escape by fleeing to dreams or fantasies always return in some form inside those dreams or fantasies. The first two Moomin books, Småtrollen och den stora översvämningen (1945) and Kometen kommer (1946) both tell about the end of the world, and it is today a truism to see the great flood and the comet as figures of, if not of the Soviet Union, then at least of the Great War that threatened not only Finland but the whole world as it was known.

Is the Groke, then, simply the enemy? At least Muuminpappan seems to think so, as he welcomes the Groke with a gun in his hand when he sees her for the first time. Muuminpappan might resemble a right wing nationalist, like Tove Jansson’s father Victor — Muuminpappan is, after all, a “staunch royalist” as he says himself in his memoirs. Muuminpappan is thoroughly upset when Muumimmammi says, after the Groke’s visit in Pappan och

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\(^4\) In her conversation with Margareta Strömstedt, Tove Jansson recalled: “Muuminmama, det betyder mormors mage och det är det tryggaste ställe som finns. Kanske var det därför jag kallade honom Mumin. Mmmm... det är en mjuk och varm bokstav. Mmmmmumin... mmmammi... jo, kanske var det så...” (“Muuminmama, it means grandmother’s belly and it is the safest place that exists. Perhaps it was for this I called him Moomin. Mmmm... it is a soft and warm letter. Mmmmmomin... mmmamani... yes, perhaps it was so...” (Strömstedt 1996, 21) Here one may note that the normal Finnish expression for grandmother’s belly is “muumin maha” — perhaps Strömstedt did not hear correctly. One may here note that in other occasions Tove Jansson had another explanation for the origin of the name “Mumin” — namely that her Swedish uncle Einar had told her not to steal jam or otherwise the “cold Muumintroll” comes and makes her freeze [18, p. 167].
havet, that “it’s quite unnecessary to barricade ourselves in and stay awake all night <...> she isn’t dangerous” [8, p. 14]. Moominpappa shouts “Of course she’s dangerous!” and goes in bad mood to the night to guard his family against the enemy. Is the Groke for the Moomin family like Stalin’s Soviet Union was for Finland, coming nearer and nearer, conquering new areas, threatening its very existence? Perhaps Russia feels lonely among the European nations, craving for the warmth of Enlightenment but, as it tries to reach towards that light, it just extinguishes it? First frightening, but finally not as dangerous as it looked like — like the cartoon about Stalin that Janson made to journal Garm right after the Winter War. And if, then, a peace treaty is finally made between Moomintroll and the Groke, does that not make Moomintroll a kind of Paasikivi or Kekkonen, a wise statesman who tames the Groke and begins thus the happy era of friendship and peaceful co-operation between these two neighbours?

I must confess that, in the end, I am not totally happy with this political interpretation. It turns Moomins into a nationalist text in a way that is certainly not in line with Jansson’s well-known radical cosmopolitanism. Moominpappa perhaps sees the Groke simply as an enemy, but not other characters, and certainly not Moomintroll. Perhaps we should look elsewhere, rather to psychological than political level.

Janina Orlov [15, p. 88] sees the Groke as a kind of mirror to the family and their uneasiness: “The Groke also reflects our inner selves, which explains why she shadows the family. As long as they are not at ease with themselves, the Groke will follow.” And perhaps the Groke is, for Moomintroll, a kind of “dark side” of Moominmamma, as Ebba Witt-Brattström has suggested; or her “dark shadow,” as Maria Nikolajeva [13, p. 246–248] put it in her Jungian reading. The negativity of the Groke represent the repressed aggressions of Moominmamma towards “her selfish man and infantile son” — or, as Agneta ReHAL-Johansson [16, p. 166–167] has suggested, the Groke embodies the fears that Moomintroll has about the hidden, melancholy moods of her seemingly warm and caring mother. When

1 Cartoon that was not, however, published, as the editors of Garm did not want to disturb the fragile peace.

2 On this interpretative line, see also Österlund [21, p. 60]. Referring to Nikolajeva and ReHAL-Johansson, Lindberg and Sebastian [11] suggest in their thesis a reading of the Groke as a Kristevan “abject” — also tied, in Kristeva’s theory, to the ambiguous relation between the subject and his or her mother.
Moominmamma decides to accept the foolish idea of Moominpappa, to leave the Valley and go to the island, the Groke who is left behind is, according to Nikolajeva, “the lonely, oppressed and unhappy Mamma” who feels that her needs have not been seen or heard. Perhaps therefore Moominmamma seems to have more knowledge of and patience towards the Groke than her husband has, although ultimately she too refuses to encounter her. When Moomintroll asks his mother, on their way to the island in Pappa och havet, what has made the Groke so awful, she says: “It was probably because nobody did anything at all. Nobody bothered about her, I mean. I don’t suppose she remembers anyway, and I don’t suppose she goes around thinking about it either. She’s like the rain or the darkness, or a stone you have to walk around if you want to get past” [8, p. 26]. And when Moomintroll asks her if the Groke can speak, she answers: “No one talks to her, or about her either, otherwise she gets bigger and starts to chase one. And you mustn’t feel sorry for her. You seem to imagine that she longs for everything that’s alight, but all she really wants to do is to sit on it so that it’ll go out and never burn again. And now I think I might go to sleep for a while” [8, p. 27]. This dialogue is, I think, one of the first instances where the image of Moominmamma as all powerful, all understanding, and all empathic super mother is beginning to crumble. Moominmamma can only understand the loneliness of the Groke, but not her desire for light and warmth. Instead, she goes to sleep, clearly avoiding the topic — or, as Orlov [15, p. 88] suggests, estranging “herself from the threatening image of personified darkness and cold.” So Moomintroll has to solve things alone in the night, and the narrator focalizes (in a fine example of modernist free indirect discourse) right into Moomintroll’s most intimate thoughts:

If she [the Groke] 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. Perhaps... [8, p. 27].

As we know, Moomintroll becomes later in the book himself a kind of “mirror” for the Groke. And perhaps the hall of mirrors, all reflecting each other, is a metatextual figure for the novel itself, or a figure for literary fiction in general: a virtual space full of characters who make each other visible and existing, although in the end they all are just reflections that the reader constructs from the written signs.
If not the dark shadow of Moominmamma herself, the Groke can still be seen at least somehow the dark shadow of femininity. Here, we might take a hint in solving the puzzle of the Groke from her biographer Bo Westin. From Tove’s letters she found out that Tove and her first lesbian lover, the theatre director Vivica Bandler signed, in the late forties, their letters to each other as “Tofslan” and “Vifslan”7. Those two little girls, Tofslan and Vifslan, Thingumy and Bob, who first introduce the Groke to the reader, are in fact figures for Tove and her first female lover. In the days when homosexuality was a crime, lesbians used coded language, just as Tofslan and Vifslan speak their own special language, understood only by Hemulen — but then again, Hemulen himself may be seen as a genderblending figure with his long dress, a “cross dresser”, so perhaps he is naturally in good position to interpret the hidden meanings of homosexual discourse. The Contents of their suitcase, stolen from the Groke, is actually a big red King’s Ruby: “A soft red light lit up the whole place, and before him lay a ruby as big as a panther’s head, glowing like the sunset, like living fire” [7, p. 124]. King’s Ruby is like the essence of love, envied by everyone else near them. The Groke, chasing these two little girls and trying to claim back their treasure, is then like an embodiment of all the fears that people have against homosexuality — a caricature of homophobic, distorted vision of lesbianity. From her hands Tofslan and Vifslan must steal their love, even against the law. The ghost-like figure of the Groke also brings in mind the expression that Tove Jansson used in one of her letters, where she told her friend about her decision to move to the “spökidan” — the “ghost-side” — that was one of the code names for lesbianism at the time.

Also the appearance of the Groke in Trollvinter can be seen as linked to Tove Jansson’s homosexuality. A radical change has taken place in the world. Just as Tove Jansson had to learn to live, after her lesbian awakening, as a homosexual in a homophobic society, Moomintroll has to learn to live in a totally transformed landscape that seems to belong to someone else, “per-

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7 Tove Jansson had several heterosexual relations before she met Vivica Bandler in 1946, for example with Atos Virtanen, who encouraged her to publish the first Moominbook and who is believed to be the model for Snufkin. Although the romance between Vivica and Tove was short, they stayed close friends for the rest of her lives. After the love affair, Tove Jansson considered her as a bisexual, but it seems that after having met Tuulikki Pietilä in 1955 she had no more heterosexual relations.
haps to the Groke”. It is Too-ticki who teaches Moomintroll how to survive in winter and how not to fear the Groke, the embodiment of homophobia — and as well known, the character Tuu-ticki is a portrait of Tove Jansson’s companion Tuulikki Pietilä, with whom Tove Jansson shared the last decades of her life, a graphic artist, a bit butch-femme styled woman with lots of practical wisdom. This time, the Groke puts down the great fire — another fire of love — that Too-ticki has lit, but otherwise she is not as dangerous as she looks like.

As Maria Laakso [10] has showed, *Pappan och havet* is a book saturated with gender thematic and sexual symbolism. For Moominpappa, the idea of conquering the island with its phallic lighthouse is clearly a project of regaining masculinity. However, the lighthouse is surrounded by the feminine sea, the incomprehensible but still fascinating world of deep, wet darkness. Moomintroll, on the other hand, is in the book facing his puberty, as Moominmamma seems to realize when she explain his son’s strange behavior to Moominpappa after Moomintroll has suddenly left the table and went out: “It’s growing pains […] He doesn’t understand what’s wrong with him either. You never seem to realize that he’s growing up. You seem to think he’s still a little boy” [8, p. 208]. Earlier, Moomintroll has confessed that he had tried to gain the attention of two flirting, frivolous and ultrafeminine sea horses who, however, have galloped away, laughing at him. Moominmamma seems to think that Moomintroll just wants to see those sea horses again. What she does not know, however, that Moomintroll has instead changed his attention toward the Groke, the dark shadow coming from the sea. And if anything, the Groke seems to be first something unnatural — something that makes the whole nature of the island mad out of fear.

Why does Moomintroll choose the Groke and forget the sea horses? Agneta Rehal-Johansson [16] suggests that he not only chooses the Groke but, as the Groke in her reading represents Moominmamma’s melancholy and loneliness, he chooses Moominmamma. However, we could also see here a choice between heterosexuality and homosexuality. If that is the case, it would mean that *Pappan och havet* is not only a tale about Moomintroll’s puberty but a tale of him coming out of the closet. Before we reject this interpretation as absurd, we may remember that there is no sign of Snork Maiden in *Pappan och havet* — somehow she has completely disappeared from the family after the previous book, without any explanation. What was, after all, the initiation that Moomintroll went through with Too-ticki in
Trollvinter, initiation that, as Moomintroll thinks in the end of the book, he could perhaps never share with Snork Maiden? Perhaps both Trollvinter and Pappan och havet represent the awakening of Moomintroll, Tove Jansson’s alter ego, to a new world where nothing is like before, where one must not only break the unjust laws but risk the ultimate loneliness — the censorship of one’s own emotions and desires — before one can find one’s true self.

Again, I am afraid that my interpretative desire has took me a bit too far. As I am offering this essay to be published in a country where new law has recently been made against the distribution of “harmful information” about “non-traditional sexual relations” for minors, it would certainly be tempting to show that Moomin books are, indeed, homosexual propaganda for children. That would necessitate the authorities, if they really would be determined to fulfill the strictest letter of the law they have made, to ban one of the most beloved children’s book series of all times. That would make quite wonderful headlines around the world — and prove the sheer absurdity of the new law. However, unfortunately I must say: no, Moomin books can in no way be reduced to homosexual propaganda. The interpretative possibilities that I have described are certainly for real, but the Groke is not a neat allegorical figure — she is not just Stalin, nor the dark side of Moominmamma, nor the embodiment of homophobia. Moreover, the origins of the Groke in the mind and life of Tove Jansson is one thing, and the way we as readers interpret her from the horizon of our own living world is another thing. We all have our own Groke, Mårran or Mörkō, dark shadow that we are afraid of. If we should learn anything from our encounters with the Groke, it could perhaps be that we will never get to know her completely — but not knowing her, not being in a position to analyze her, should not prevent us from encountering her. In a way, she is like the archetype of the Other that Emmanuel Levinas describes in his philosophy — the Other that we cannot appropriate with our conceptual power.

Tove Jansson’s works are, indeed, like the sea that Moominpappa tries desperately to interpret and understand by using his “scientific” approach to it — until he learns to accept that one can live also with things without interpreting them, just loving them: “the sea is sometimes in a good temper and sometimes in a bad temper, and nobody can possibly understand why. We can only see the surface of the water. But if we like the sea, it doesn’t matter” [8, p. 190–191]. In Tove Jansson’s Moomin suite, one can open new interpretative possibilities, again and again, see visions that one did not see
before, but none of those visions are final or make a neat allegorical truth. One can say about Tove Jansson’s tales the same that the wise Too-ticki says in *Trollvinter*, a sentence that could be from Montaigne’s *Essays*, or from *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* of Sextus Empiricus, a sentence that seems to carry all the wisdom of the ancient skeptical philosophy and its search for *ataraxia*, peace of mind: “All things are so very uncertain. And that’s exactly what makes me feel reassured” [6, p. 19].

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