



Being Silent About the Truth: Narrative Ethics in Mats Wahl's *I ballong över Stilla havet*

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Abstract

Lying and deceiving are prominent topics in ethical narration. This has to do with an often absolutist stance against lying that shapes a large part of philosophical, religious, and political discourses. At the same time, lying and deceiving are topics in the field of moral education in which moral values such as honesty, sincerity, and truthfulness are propagated. Bringing these issues together, this article demonstrates how reflection about honesty and autonomy is narrated in Mats Wahl's young adult novel *I ballong över Stilla havet* (*In a Balloon over the Pacific Ocean*). This novel shows that, while lying and deceiving undermine trust and can lead to harmful results, there are ways to fight against the moral destruction. This fight involves not only prosocial (versus mendacious) lying but also acknowledging individual motives for the lying behavior of others. Thus, while hating adults' lies and deceptive actions as well as learning to lie himself, the male protagonist matures and takes on responsibility for his actions. We contend that this protagonist may constitute a moral exemplar that invites moral learning.

Keywords Mats Wahl · *I ballong över Stilla havet* · Narrative ethics · Lying and deception · Moral education

Introduction

Moral education, understood as the teaching of moral values, takes place in several institutions; for instance, in the family, kindergarten and school, and in church. Often, these institutions rely on some intuitively felt, common-sense notions of morality; these are notions that are complex in themselves and not easily amenable to more systematic reflection. Sometimes, these notions are backed up by social

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and cultural traditions, or they are supported by religious rules prescribing the right social behavior, as in the ninth commandment of the Decalogue. However, these institutions are not free of error and mistakes. In fact, children's literature is full of stories narrating the manipulation and abuse of children by authoritative parents, brutal teachers, and wicked peers.

A naïve way of teaching moral lessons, based on the idea that after the moral lesson children are on the path to become better humans, should be met with doubts. More advanced moral education engages children in meta-ethical reflection on the goodness or badness of contextualized actions. For instance, actions motivated by jealousy or *schadenfreude* may be evaluated as bad; yet, on closer consideration, they may appear as understandable or even acceptable. A case in point is the picturebook *Fox* (2000) by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks, in which the jealousy of the malicious fox is traced back to his loneliness (Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer, 2015).

As Polycarp Ikuenobe states, when discussing the ethics of lying, “the goal of moral education is to teach children to make adequate moral judgment” which entails “the creative and sensitive application of rules or concepts to a particular set of facts” (2002, p. 59). This suggests that adequate moral education aims at teaching analytical abilities, and that case-based didactics, as in the classic works in ethics, is most promising. Bart Engelen et al. (2018) stress the importance of “exemplars” and “nudges” in moral education. By exemplars, they understand exemplary individuals that are models for moral behavior. Nudges are options of choice that are made salient and integrate rational as well as emotional information (2018, p. 350), as moral stories about moral exemplars do. For instance, in the school novel *Cuore* (*Heart*, 2003/1886) by Edmondo de Amicis, we find a story about the pupil Percossi. His father is the village blacksmith and a heavy drinker, and he beats his son regularly. Despite this, Percossi lies about this to his classmates in order to save his father's honor. For Amicis, Percossi is an exemplar.

That stories, and especially the protagonists in these stories, offer a cornucopia of possibilities for moral reasoning is shown by the recent narrative-ethical analysis of Robert Westall's *The Machine Gunners* (1975), proposed by Vera Veldhuizen (2021). Yet, it might be difficult to identify exemplars because characters can be morally ambiguous. This is evident in Westall's novel where the story is set in World War II. The friendship with a German airman, who is hiding after his plane was shot down by British air defense, shows the empathy of a group of children; however, some of their actions are illegal and thus condemned by members of their social community. In order to contextualize such extraordinary events but also everyday situations and to be able to evaluate them morally, narrative ethics may offer new insights since it seeks to explore the ethical space of a narration, with a close view on moral conflicts.

In the following, we will discuss narrative ethics and moral education with respect to the young adult novel *I ballong över Stilla havet* [*In a Balloon over the Pacific Ocean*] (1994) by the renowned Swedish author Mats Wahl. This novel has lying and deception as its thematic core. There seems to exist a widespread, if not universal assumption that mendacious, antisocial lying is morally bad (Carson, 2019). Lying and deception are well-known topics in literature and film, and appear

quite often in children's and young adult literature (cf. Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2019; Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer, 2011; Mallan, 2013; Ringrose, 2006; Silva-Díaz, 2015). It is not a mere accident that famous literary characters such as Pinocchio (*Le avventure di Pinocchio*, 2008/1883, by Carlo Collodi) and Pippi Longstocking (*Pippi Långstrump*, 2007/1945, by Astrid Lindgren) are liars. One reason for this prominence of lying and deception is that it engages children in reflecting on moral questions.

First, this article will introduce the framework of narrative ethics by focusing on two issues: story ethics and discourse ethics. Second, it will expound different strategies of being silent about the truth. Third, it will investigate the impact of lying and being silent about the truth in Wahl's novel and how this affects the main character's mental and emotional development. Finally, it will discuss the aspect of moral exemplars in Wahl's novel and how this may shape moral education.

Narrative Ethics

Though there is a vast field of research falling under the heading of “ethics and narration”, including the “ethical turn” in literary studies (Eskin, 2004; Korthals Altes, 2005), “narrative ethics” is not a well-developed theoretical approach that can easily be applied to literary texts, yielding robust findings and generalizations. It is more adequate to say that “narrative ethics”, used as an umbrella term for different theoretical approaches, has a common agenda, namely to systematically reconstruct the morality put forward by narrative texts. In the following, we will elaborate on “narrative ethics” as outlined by James Phelan (2014) and Veldhuizen (2021) (see also Korthals Altes, 2014; Roberts, 2012). Phelan defines that “narrative ethics explores the intersections between the domain of stories and storytelling and that of moral values”. More specifically, he distinguishes between “(1) the ethics of the told; (2) the ethics of the telling; (3) the ethics of writing/producing; and (4) the ethics of reading/reception”. In this article, we will focus on the ethics of the told which, according to Phelan, focuses on “characters and events”. Leading questions are: “What are the ethical dimensions of characters' actions, especially the conflicts they face and the choices they make about those conflicts? What are the ethical dimensions of any one character's interactions with other characters? How does a narrative's plot signal its stance on the ethical issue faced by its characters?”. Hence, we will concentrate on the ethical dimensions of “being silent about the truth” and analyze the characters' actions with respect to these ethical dimensions.

With regard to “narrative” ethics, as opposed to “literary ethics”, it is important to relate “formal aspects of narrative” as closely as possible to moral values that figure in the narration. Accordingly, Veldhuizen, in her “holistic approach to narrative ethics”, distinguishes between story ethics (which is content-related) and discourse ethics (which is form-related). With respect to the story level, she focuses on action and dialogue, implementing a subdivision between small actions and large actions. In terms of the discourse level, she mentions several narrative devices “such as grammar, focalisation, tense, and sequential ordering” and sketches focalizer ethics

and the ending of the story.¹ Another narrative device is the embedding of internal stories within the main story which is an outstanding feature of Wahl's novel.

Convincingly, Veldhuizen points out that narrative ethics is intimately connected to the domain of emotions. Therefore, emotional language should be added to the agenda of discourse ethics. What cannot be easily achieved (and therefore points in the direction of a "holistic" approach), is the correlation of story and discourse in a 1:1 fashion. Yet, a close analysis of a narrative text, with a view towards the implied reader, may yield insights into the specific narrative ethics of a text. This is our aim with respect to Mats Wahl's novel.

As for the complex concept of literary character (see also Frow, 2014), we will draw on Jannidis (2009, p. 24) who emphasizes that (a) "sympathy with a character who is similar to the reader", (b) "empathy for a character who is in a particular situation" and (c) "attraction to a character who is a role model for the reader" are important factors that contribute to the identification of a reader with a literary character. Thus, the reader may sympathize with the main protagonist of Wahl's novel, a thirteen-year-old boy, and feel empathy for him since he is in a difficult situation. Therefore, and this is an important aspect regarding moral education, the reader may consider the main protagonist (and potentially other relevant literary characters) as a role model. Since his difficult situation stems from the adults' hypocrisy epitomized in their various strategies to be silent about the truth, we will elaborate on this issue by carving out different possible habits. Taking up the aforementioned narratological distinction between story ethics and discourse ethics, we will concentrate on the relation of ethics and literary characters on the one hand, and on the relation of ethics and narrative levels on the other hand.

Being Silent About the Truth

Lying and deceiving is, on closer inspection, a broad field. Therefore, we want to point out some morally relevant aspects with a view to Wahl's novel. Quite generally, we may speak of being silent about the truth in the sense of revealing only part of the truth or ignoring it altogether. Being silent about the truth is a common way of manipulating the truth. This conception requires that being silent about the truth can be construed as deliberate action. It is important to understand that manipulating the truth is not always bad. Indeed, there may be situations in which manipulating the truth can be regarded as a moral imperative. In this regard, we distinguish four strategies of manipulating the truth.

First of all, lying comes to the fore. The liars say something in which they do not believe with the aim of deceiving their interlocutors with respect to that fact (Bok, 1999; Mahon, 2015; Meibauer, 2018; Williams, 2002). Sometimes, the liars say something that turns out to be true. Nevertheless, if they were untruthful, they

¹ Here, Veldhuizen's argument is similar to Phelan's "the ethics of the telling", as Phelan likewise stresses the significance of the author's deliberately chosen narrative style on the evaluation of the characters.

have lied. Lying is certainly a strategy to avoid saying the truth. In this sense, the liar is silent about the truth while deliberately trying to substitute it by a falsehood.

Second, we find the case of lying by omission (Fallis, 2019). In lying by omission, important information that is relevant to a question under discussion is deliberately left out. Consider the following invented example: When asked where she had been tonight, Doro answers “I visited my girlfriend”. This is true since she visited her girlfriend for ten minutes. However, it is deceptive because it is also true that she spent the rest of the evening in the Pachinko club. Thus, Doro reveals only part of the whole truth (something which is also called a half-truth).

Third, there is the case of keeping someone in the dark or keeping a secret (Bok, 1989; Dynel, 2018; Fallis, 2018). For instance, parents keep their children in the dark about matters of death, illness, sexuality, etc. This is not a case of deception because there is no intention to lead someone into a false belief. Also, people are not obliged to reveal their secrets. Yet keeping someone in the dark aims at preventing addressees from getting a true belief about some state of affairs, thus restricting the knowledge of an addressee. From the perspective of the person who is kept in the dark, one important strategy is to spy on the one who is keeping the secret. Also, eavesdropping is a strategy to get secret information (Locke, 2010). Usually, eavesdropping happens intentionally (in contrast to simply overhearing something). It may be unclear, however, whether a specific information is purposeful, or whether eavesdropping happens in a more global, undirected manner (Mallan, 2013, pp. 93–163).

Finally, we would like to mention gossip and rumor. These actions are not necessarily deceptive since they may contain truthful content (Adler, 2007; Bergmann, 1993). However, often only part of the truth is revealed while relevant aspects of a complex event are omitted or substituted by fabrications. Gossip engages people's fantasy and leads them into reasoning what could be the case instead of contemplating the facts. Some gossipers even keep truthful information to a minimum to enhance the speculative potential of their gossip.

Having elaborated on some specific ways of being silent about the truth, we may ask who exactly is silent about the truth. Arguably, while some authors may lie (e.g., in fake biographies), “novels never lie”, as James Edward Mahon (2019a) puts it, because novels are fictional, i.e., they are not assertions.² Nevertheless, they often contain factual elements in the sense that they may be related to (parts of) reality.

In reality, not only children lie but also adults. A widespread ideology holds that adults are potentially serious and honest, while children, being not yet in the full possession of their moral development, still have to learn to be honest. Hence, recent attempts at experimentally proving that young children can learn moral lessons about lying (Lee et al., 2014; Narvaez et al., 1999; Talwar et al., 2016) are to be taken with a grain of salt. To be sure, moral education is an important undertaking but should potentially involve adults, too.

² For examples of lying authors, see Kümmerling-Meibauer (2019, p. 556). According to Mahon (2019a), their products have to be non-fictional, though. *Mythoi*, in the sense of Plato, are fictions. They may be considered as “false stories” but they are not lies; see Mahon (2019b) for further discussion.

When adults lie to children, this is sometimes called a paternalistic lie (Bok, 1999, pp. 203–219). The latter are conceived as lies that are intended to protect the child by circumventing or misrepresenting the truth. Lies about Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, or the stork bringing the babies (as is usual in Germany), are widespread. Arguably, lying about Santa Claus in a non-fictional-way, although being socio-culturally embedded, is a lie on the same par as other lies (Mahon, 2018). Thus, one may conclude that children's books dealing with Santa Claus in a non-fictional way, presupposing that Santa Claus exists in reality, are lies. Apart from these special cases, "parenting by lying" (Heyman et al., 2009) is an everyday phenomenon (although many parents would deny that they ever lied to their children). Thus, lying about death, war, sexuality, depression, drugs, etc. appears to be a usual behavior of parents. Adults sometimes lie to children in a mendacious (anti-social) manner, and they can rely on the inability of children to detect their lies since they tend to trust adults.

The morality of lying is, as is well known, the object of much ethical reasoning. By and large, we may distinguish between absolutism (e.g., Augustine and Kant represent the opinion that one should never lie, even not to the murderer at the door), act-utilitarianism (whether lying is good or bad depends on the consequences of a particular action), and rule-utilitarianism (whether lying is good or bad does not depend on a particular action but on the compliance to an ideal moral code) (Carson, 2019, pp. 468–478). Beyond these basic ethical positions, we find many mixed approaches.

For the discussion of everyday morality, the distinction between antisocial and prosocial lying is more useful than relying on these theoretical approaches. Antisocial (mendacious) lying is harmful because it undermines trust and limits the scope of actions of the addressee. Prosocial lying, in contrast, can have the effect of establishing trust and protecting one's own or other's privacy. Elaborating on an ethical approach according to which lying is basically morally neutral, Simone Dietz (2019) differentiates between subtypes of prosocial lying, namely self-defending, benevolent, altruistic, and collaborative lies.

Finally, the moral evaluation of lying and being silent about the truth needs to consider the significance of emotions and empathy (Nikolajeva, 2014). Stories of lying and lying characters evoke strong emotions, because readers have to cope with the ambivalent behavior of liars and the reactions and feelings of the characters lied to. From the perspective of moral education, the distinction between the emotional connections within the storyworld and the reader's affection towards the literary characters is paramount. When reading a story about lying characters, readers encounter various emotional reactions triggered by the lies used. These reactions can be very different, encompassing comprehension, pity, rejection, and even disgust. The same reactions can be activated in the readers, depending on whether they utterly reject the lies or are willing to reflect on the individual reasons for the lies told. Regarding this, empathy plays an important role, because this capacity enables people to understand other people's points of view. Scholars distinguish between affective and cognitive empathy. While the former is determined by emotional sympathy, the latter refers to the possibility of performing a change of perspective and putting oneself in another person's position (Hastings et al., 2006, p. 484).

Feeling empathy with lying characters thus poses a challenge, all the more so if they use antisocial lies. Reading literary works which invite readers to reflect on the moral reasons for the characters' conduct may stimulate the further development of the readers' emphatic capacities, an idea strongly advocated by literary scholars Blakey Vermeule (2010) and Lisa Zunshine (2006). This topic as well as the scandal of adults, including parents, concealing the truth or manipulating it, thereby exploiting children's trust, is at the core of *I ballong över Stilla havet*.

Story Ethics in *I ballong över Stilla havet* by Mats Wahl: Literary Characters and the Network of Lying

I ballong över Stilla havet is a first-person narrative told by an adult (possibly the author) who remembers the time when he was a thirteen-year-old boy. The story takes place in a small ordinary Swedish town in 1955.³ In the summer vacation, Olof, the main protagonist and first-person narrator, and his best friend Sverker spy on women at the lido. On this occasion, Olof discovers that his father is having an affair with their neighbor Eivor. Therefore, Olof looks at the family situation with different eyes, when he is now listening to the quarrels of his parents. Apart from that, Olof gets into trouble when he eavesdrops on his headmaster Stenberg, who tells a dirty joke to his friends, among them Olof's father. A few days later, Olof naively retells this joke at school, which ignites a storm of indignation. Olof puts the blame on Stenberg who denies ever having told this joke. Initially, Olof's father backs up his son's testimony but put under pressure by Stenberg, he forces his son to apologize and to implicitly admit that he was lying. Since Olof is a sensitive boy, he is distressed by the adults' indifference towards his sorrows. He is finally rescued from this hopeless situation by Sverker, who reveals himself as another earwitness of the joke and thus exposes Stenberg. While Stenberg cannot cope with the situation and gets drunk, Olof's parents reconcile after his father ended the love affair with Eivor.

What propels the storyline is the dirty joke told by Stenberg:

Den lille gossen kommer in till sin mor. "Mamma", säger spjuvern. "Är mus ett fult ord?" "Ja", säger modern. "Mamma", säger lymmeln. "Det hänger en fladderfitta i vedboden." (Wahl, 1994, p. 7)

This joke relies on verbal ambiguity and cannot be translated literally into English, but its meaning can be rendered as follows: A little boy comes to his mother and asks her slyly, whether *mus* is a bad word (in Swedish, the word *mus* is ambivalent: It means *mouse*, but it is also a four-letter-word for the female genitals). His mother agrees, and the little boy reports that there is a bat in the wood-shed. The Swedish word for English *bat* is *fladdermus*. Since *mus* is a bad word according to his mother, the boy uses another word instead, combining the first constituent *fladder*

³ On the literary concept of ordinariness, see Waller (2020).

(English *flutter*) with the second constituent *fitta* (English *cunt*), an even more vulgar term for the female sexual organs.

It is clear that telling dirty jokes is risky, especially in the context of a prudish small town in which some people are eager to gossip. Dirty jokes are widely considered as being taboo (Crespo-Fernández, 2019). So, when Olof retells this joke during a “funny hour” at school, he upsets his adored teacher Mathilda, even more so when he claims having overheard the joke from Stenberg. The situation becomes even worse when Olof’s father (called Pappa) forces him to lie in order to save face. Starting from this embarrassing situation, Olof gets increasingly entangled in a net of lies and feels helpless vis-à-vis the adults’ indifference. At the center is Stenberg who lies to all the other characters about not having told the dirty joke. Since the group who listened to the joke know that Stenberg is lying, Stenberg can be categorized as a bald-faced liar. By definition, a bald-faced lie is a lie told under the condition that there is mutual knowledge about the act of lying. Because of Stenberg’s reputation and influence, nobody dares to expose his lies, as Olof’s father tells his son in an intimate conversation. He also stresses that Stenberg holds sway over Olof for having vandalized his garden and distributing porn magazines in the school yard. In fact, Olof and Sverker stole fruit together from Stenberg’s garden but it was Sverker who destroyed the glass pavilion and distributed the porn magazines. Moreover, Olof’s father fears that Stenberg would put off his customers of his hair-dressing salon which is why he cannot support his son in this matter.

Apart from that, Olof is faced with the lies told by his parents in relation to the love affair between Eivor and his father. Confronted by his spouse, Olof’s father denies the love relationship, which culminates in permanent quarrels. The affair and the resulting dispute between his parents are alarming signals for Olof who fears an erosion of the family (as happens with Eivor and her husband). Therefore, Olof is rather disappointed when his father—after he has ended the love affair—is eager to downplay it, as if he does not take his son seriously.

Olof’s mother (called Mamma) is potentially truthful. However, she denies having pushed her rival Eivor into the harbor basin. Speaking finally about this event, and not knowing that her son was an eye-witness and knows the true motives of her action, she lies by omitting the true motive for her deed, namely jealousy:

You may wonder how one could do something like what I did the other evening. But I had just found out that Eivor slapped you. I was furious when I saw her there on the quay. I couldn’t control myself. I don’t think I meant to push her into the water. I just wanted to push her over. I wanted to teach her a lesson. I was terrified when she fell into the water. [p. 162, our translation]

A more charitable interpretation is that Olof’s mother is a victim of self-deception and sugarcoats the situation.

By contrast, Olof and Sverker use self-defending lies to avoid trouble, such as Olof lying to his parents about having done his homework when he has not. Both characters tell prosocial or other-protecting altruistic lies to Stenberg. Sverker lies slyly, when he argues that the headmaster should not beat him because he suffers from a heart disease. He omits the truth that, according to the doctors’ information, he is healthy now. Olof lies when he maintains that the porn journals Stenberg found

in his garden house belong to him, not to Sverker. These two prosocial lies can be judged differently from a moral point of view. Sverker uses his prosocial lie as a means of self-defense, while Olof lies to protect Sverker. He puts the blame on himself, although this decision is quite risky given the prudish ethic of the small town community. This comes to light when Olof's mother sternly reprimands him and Olof is not able to explain the true reasons of his action.

These momentous lies serve to buttress the close friendship between Olof and Sverker, but their special relationship is put to the test by the joke and its awesome consequences for Olof. He lies by withdrawing his former true assertion that he originally overheard Stenberg telling the joke. That the truth no longer matters, however, is a shocking conclusion for Olof who struggles for the truth. On the one hand, one might agree that Olof tells a prosocial lie, because his lie serves to protect the public face of Stenberg. However, since Olof is forced to lie, he has no real intention to lie. To be forced to lie is similar to lying under torture or pressure, like in religious confession or Stalinist self-incrimination. Olof feels deeply embarrassed because he is pressured to publicly apologize in front of the class, Mathilda, and Stenberg for having told the joke and falsely claiming to have heard the joke from Stenberg. In light of this, Olof's emotional condition has reached a low point, because he denies himself, which is equivalent to being untrue to oneself. He is saved from this misery by Sverker who correctly points out that Olof is actually lying. Sverker identifies himself as another earwitness and he can also prove his testimony, since he recalls that Stenberg said that his former friend Nyman told him the joke. Shockingly, Sverker reveals that it is Stenberg who is lying and concludes that he should apologize instead.

Throughout the novel, the protagonists use different kinds of lies, ranging from prosocial to antisocial lies, but they also use bald-faced lies and even lying by omission. Another mode of being silent about the truth consists in keeping someone in the dark or keeping a secret. A case in point is Stenberg's behavior after his garden house has been set on fire. Instead of filing a complaint with the police, Stenberg keeps a low profile. While some people muse that Stenberg set fire to the garden house while drunk, the real reason is that Stenberg wants to prevent people from finding out that his daughter Maria, who suffers from her father's brutality, is the arsonist. Although Stenberg attempts to keep this a secret, he is like other characters the object of small-town gossip or rumor. For instance, Eivor tells Bengtsson that Olof is spying on naked women, Bengtsson tells the pastor, the pastor retells Ms. Olsson who finally asks Olof about this. It is clear that such gossip makes Olof feel uncomfortable to the extent that he cannot control what people are saying about him, thus being confronted with the narrowness of a Swedish town in the 1950s:

I could understand how they would whisper, grin, and exchange meaningful glances. The small community loved misfortune, crime, and madness. It made the daily gossip sweet. For those whose secrets were revealed, there was no mercy. [p. 129, our translation]

Olof gains insight into the fragility of the adults' high standards, but he also has to learn to take responsibility for himself. In a more optimistic perspective, Mats Wahl offers the values of friendship and freedom. A true friend like Sverker loves

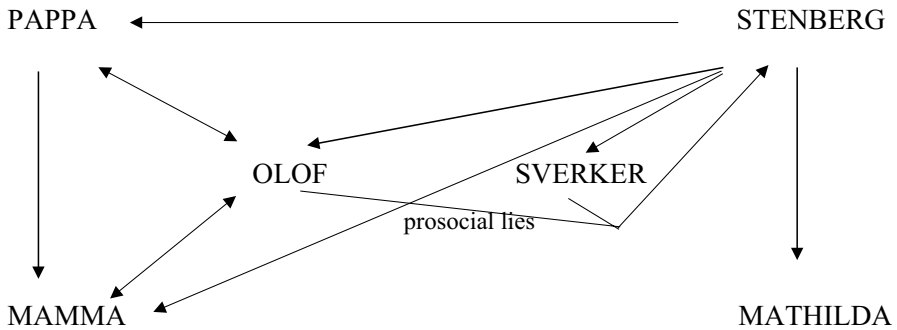


Fig. 1 A network of lying in Mats Wahl's *I ballong över Stilla havet*

the truth even to the extent of telling a prosocial lie, and thereby taking the risk of being blamed. The motive of being a true friend is occasionally taken up in the form of the phrase “What is the meaning of having friends after all, if not ...” (pp. 5, 12, 14, 108). Olof now feels different because he has matured. Maturing, then, has to do with responsibility and liberty, but also with taking a critical stance towards authorities. The novel closes with the adult narrator's interpretation of what he has gained from all the trouble:

I lay there reading and tears ran down my cheeks. And now, long afterwards, I believe to know that it was not grief what I felt then. In reality, it was a different and much more terrible feeling – the relentless feeling of freedom. [p. 205, our translation]

By and large, the development of Olof closely correlates with the insight into mechanisms of lying, keeping secrets, and fighting against rumor. In addition, Olof realizes that one lie may lead to another lie, thus establishing a lying network which gradually involves more and more people. The diagram represents the lying network, where the arrows show the relationships and directions of lying (A lies to B) (Fig. 1).

This diagram reveals that Stenberg occupies a key position in the network, since he lies to all other people. The most truthful character is Mathilda who does not tell a lie at all, while Olof's parents lie to Olof concerning their behavior towards Eivor. Olof lies to his parents about his homework. Finally, Olof and Sverker use prosocial lies to protect themselves or to bail out a friend.

Discourse Ethics in *I ballong över Stilla havet*: Nesting Narrative Levels

On the discourse level, the novel comprises several narratives which are tightly connected to each other. Arguably, this narrative construction happens on the discourse level. The main part of the narrative consists of the first-person narration of an adult narrator whose retrospective view puts his memories into a slightly nostalgic perspective. At several points in the narration, the narrator confesses that he now knows

something he did not when he was thirteen years of age. What exactly he did not know at that age is not overtly expressed but can be inferred when perusing the narrative and drawing conclusions from the moral conflicts that permeate the story. The complexity of the lying network and the characters involved is increased by three narratives that interweave within the main story. The first narrative is the joke told by Stenberg which triggers the ensuing actions and is at the heart of the lying network. Already introduced in the very first chapter, this joke runs like a red thread through the plot since all characters who have heard this joke themselves or are informed about it by rumors keep coming back to it.

This plot is complemented by a fantasy story, “I ballong över Stilla havet”, written by Olof, whose seven parts are interwoven with the main text.⁴ In this meta-narrative story, with intertextual links to Olof's favorite reading, Jules Verne's adventures story *L'île mystérieuse* (The Mysterious Island, 2001/1875), as well as another book by the same author, *Cinq semaines en ballon* (Five Weeks in the Balloon, 2015/1863), Olof and his father crash in a hot air balloon into a jungle near the Pacific Ocean. While Olof fetches some water, cannibals capture his severely injured father. Although Olof manages to rescue his father, they cannot escape their pursuers. When all hope seems lost, Olof's friend Big Jack arrives out of the blue and keeps the pursuers at bay so that they can safely start their journey home.

On closer consideration, Olof's story reflects the boy's emotional turmoil vis-à-vis the troubled situation at home. Moreover, it illustrates Olof's sense of responsibility but also his insight that he needs the help of a friend to get out of the mess. Hence, as in many of Wahl's novels, this fantasy story refers to two key topics: the relationship between father and son and the significant role of friendship. Both issues point to topical aspects that drive the plot forward and impact on Olof's mental and emotional development. By and large, they are also closely connected to the lying network because Olof learns to detach himself from his father and enter into an equal relationship with his peers instead. In the process of realizing that adults lie and that their support cannot always be relied upon, Olof turns to Sverker who is the only one who sides with him and thus exposes the adults' mendacity.

The third embedded narrative is a horror story told by Olof to his new peer group (two girls and two boys). Olof invents a creepy story about a mad scientist who experiments with an ape by cutting off the animal's hand. This hand gains a life of its own and threatens other people with death. By telling this story, Olof proves his prowess as a gifted storyteller, thus paving the way for his later activity as a writer. At the same time, the narrative situation indicates that Olof now trusts his peer group more than his parents. After having listened to the scary story which makes their hair stand on end, they share their secrets, talking openly about the consequences of the lies told by the adults for themselves and others. While the adults

⁴ While the Swedish book title refers to the fantasies and inner feelings of Olof (to be understood against the backdrop of the narrow confines of a small city), the German title, *Die Lüge* (The Lie, 1996), rightly captures the central plot of the novel, namely a reflection on lying and the truth.

seem to prefer to conceal the truth, Olof and his peers have seen through the adults' hypocrisy and try to be honest to each other.

Narrative Ethics and Moral Education: The Case of *I ballong över Stilla havet*

Structured by a multiperspectival view on lying, this novel reveals the moral complexity of categories like falsehood and truth. What seems to be harmless in the beginning, becomes gradually complicated and invites readers to reflect on the moral evaluation of different types of lies. In addition, it is not possible anymore to simply condemn the lying characters, since the book provides an insight into the characters' various motivations and emotional enmeshment.

For instance, Eivor, who threatens the relationship of Olof's parents, feels rejected by her husband Bengtsson and her stepson Ove who is longing for his mother. She is disappointed by Olof's father for whom she is nothing but a little affair, and she is even the victim of Olof's mother. Even brutal Stenberg deserves understanding when it turns out that he is an alcoholic. This becomes clear when Olof's father hits the drunken Stenberg with his new car. Stenberg was riding his bicycle on the wrong side of the road in the dark without lights. Olof's mother crosses a moral line when she decides that Stenberg has himself to blame and does not deserve mercy. She does not even care if he gets run over. In contrast, Olof's father feels sorry for Stenberg, but out of sheer convenience they fail to provide the necessary assistance.

As we have seen, being silent about the truth is a morally charged attitude that can be represented in a lying network. In a way, what is true or false and what is bad or good, is the object of social negotiation, and therefore, of power.⁵ Yet, the story makes clear that prosocial lying may help to establish trust, and that this is a way to gain autonomy, freedom, and responsibility.

Moral education has an intimate relationship with the interpretation of moral stories. It should aim at understanding the moral choices that literary characters have and the decisions they take (Sainsbury 2013, pp. 92–93, 192). We may ask then, whether the protagonists in *I ballong över Stilla havet* are exemplars in the sense of Engelen et al. (2018). The best candidates are, not surprisingly, Olof, Sverker, and Mathilda.

The emotional development of Olof is described in a subtle way. He is characterized as a *thinking* person. He also likes to read adventure stories, write his own story, and tell invented ghost stories to his peers. It is not a growing interest in sex, as is the case with Sverker, that motivates his spying on women but the innocent longing for adventures. Yet, intruding into the private sphere of others or even burgling a house are by no means acceptable.

Emotional development and social maturation mean to be able to cope with these facts and to take responsibility for one's own actions. Olof can be considered as an exemplar because he finally manages to find a way out of his trouble and to

⁵ This ties in with Roberta Seelinger Trites' (2000) view of young adult fiction.

understand that self-denial is wrong. In several situations, Olof is crying. He feels isolated and neglected by his parents who struggle with their own problems.

I ballong över Stilla havet is also a novel about friendship. Friendship has its own “rules and procedures” (Wahl 1994, p. 14) that one is submitted to, but basically, it consists of accepting the other’s individuality. While Sverker is interested in porn journals and spying on naked women, Olof is attracted to books, stories, and, more generally, thinking. It is Sverker who shows the virtue of truth-telling, despite possible disadvantages, when he publicly accuses Stenberg of being a liar. In the winter time, Sverker, Olof, and the girls Pomona and Ingrid Marie form a peer group, who regularly meet and support each other. After the crisis, a new developmental phase seems to start.

Mathilda is immediately loved by the pupils when she first appears on the scene. Most interestingly, she gives an exemplary lesson in moral education when she dictates the beginning of the story “When I was twelve” (ch. 22). This story is about a girl called “podge” who is always the last one chosen in sports. It is the pupils’ task to complete the story. The analogy to Ove (whose nickname is Fatso) is becoming clear to most pupils and accordingly, they change their behavior towards Ove who turns out to be a good sportsman.

Apart from her skilful manoeuvre to better integrate Ove into the class, Mathilda is the only character who does not lie; therefore, she represents a model exemplar for the readers. The case is far more complicated with Olof and Sverker, since both occasionally lie. However, they either tell prosocial lies or rather insignificant lies, such as claiming to have done their homework when they have not. This fact notwithstanding, they can be regarded as exemplars too, because they show concern for each other and even take the risk to question adult authorities. Though Olof is the real model exemplar after Mathilda, because he is going through a maturation process and eventually gains self-confidence as well as developing a sense of freedom and autonomy, which are prerequisites for a fully developed personality.

By contrast, neither Stenberg nor Olof’s parents qualify as exemplars. Stenberg is portrayed as a wicked person, although telling a dirty joke based on word play and beating pupils may have been a widespread and for some persons even acceptable behavior in the 1950s. There are rumors about his beating of his wife and daughters but this is not really proven. Moreover, he uses his social status to blackmail Olof’s parents.

Olof’s parents show some insight into their own wrong-doing. Olof’s father belittles his infidelity and alludes to a possible understanding by his son in the future. He does not seem to be aware that his relationship to Eivor was the trigger of Olof’s sorrows. Olof’s mother is also far from exemplary. She insiduously pushes Eivor into the harbor’s water, risking her death, and shows no empathy for Stenberg when he is in a dangerous situation. In a way, adults avoid telling the truth.

As this analysis has demonstrated, Wahl’s novel elicits complex ethical questions with respect to the moral evaluation of lying versus telling the truth. Lying is just one strategy of being silent about the truth. We also elaborated on three other strategies, namely lying by omission, keeping someone in the dark, and gossip and rumor. These four strategies of manipulating the truth shape the novel from the beginning and eventually lead to the emergence of a lying network into which all major

characters are entangled. In order to save face or to avoid uncomfortable situations, different types of lies are discernible, ranging from prosocial lies to antisocial lies and even bald-faced lies. Apart from that, the characters proceed by telling half-truths, developing fabrications or using gossip to conceal their true intentions. This complicated conduct affects the (often imbalanced) relationships between adults and children as well as the relationship among peers, thus informing the reader about power relations and emotional involvement. Although the events are told from the perspective of Olof, readers gain an insight into the motivations of the other characters too. The adult narrator obviously follows a case-based utilitarianism, since he encourages the reader to contextualize the lies told rather than evaluate them on the basis of a strict catalogue of moral standards.

In sum, then, we may conclude that adolescent readers, who have achieved a certain proficiency in handling multiple perspectives, might be stimulated to grapple with the different intentions of the lying characters in this novel. In reading Wahl's young adult novel, readers will discover that the process of evaluating lies in moral terms is complex and raises questions about behavioral norms, emotional meanings, and ethical conflicts.

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