



TRANS-

Revue de littérature générale et comparée

15 | 2013

Terrorismes

Inventing Contemporary Meaning of a Lived Life: Edith Wharton, Biography with the Young Reader in Mind

Maria Sträaf



Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/trans/766>

DOI : 10.4000/trans.766

ISSN : 1778-3887

Éditeur

Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle

Référence électronique

Maria Sträaf, « Inventing Contemporary Meaning of a Lived Life: Edith Wharton, Biography with the Young Reader in Mind », *TRANS-* [En ligne], 15 | 2013, mis en ligne le 03 mars 2013, consulté le 13 mai 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/trans/766> ; DOI : 10.4000/trans.766

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 13 mai 2019.

Tous droits réservés

Inventing Contemporary Meaning of a Lived Life: Edith Wharton, Biography with the Young Reader in Mind

Maria Sträaf

- 1 A biography on the writer Edith Wharton, written for children, was published in 2010. The publisher, Clarion Books, classifies it as “juvenile literature” in the sleeve text, and on the webpage as a “young adult biography”, its “reading level” stipulated to 9-12 years.¹ Non fictive, it resembles a critical biography with its list of references accounting for quotations and illustrations, although its focus is on Wharton’s life and historical context, rather than her work.
- 2 My particular interest is how the author Edith Wharton (1862-1937) is introduced to an entirely *new* audience; she was never before a subject of a biography for children. Over the years many such as R.W.B. Lewis, Shari Benstock and Hermione Lee have written her biography. But most recently by Connie Nordhielm Wooldridge, who is the author of the current biography for young readers, *The Brave Escape of Edith Wharton: A Biography* (2010).² This is particularly interesting since Wharton is known as a writer who did not write *about*, or *for* children. In her work, on the contrary, children have been described as ‘absent’.³
- 3 When addressing young readers a certain ‘translation’ across time and experience is made. The narrative discourse orientates the telling of Edith Wharton’s lifespan to a contemporary young reader particularly in how the biographic account is organized in a sequence, emphasizing a thematic ‘message’. In the adaptation, the biographic material and Wharton’s entire lifespan is translated or reframed for young readers. It is my contention to discuss how in the telling, a contemporary, or modern tale about the meaning of the author’s life and work is invented. What story is formed, and what taken for granted norms and values does it hold? How does her lifespan, 1862-1937, signify meaning in a contemporary children’s biography?

- 4 The autobiographical and the biographical act ⁴ share the way the past is reconstructed in the present on the level of enunciation. An autobiography's setting is contemporary with the life of the author/narrator, but a biography might be written any time during, as well as after the protagonist's life. Since the story time often covers the protagonist's lifespan, the young reader does not share the knowledge or the experience of the adult world of the protagonist. It therefore becomes important to consider the dimensions of the narrator, author and protagonist, as well as the young reader, particularly in what the age difference between them entails.
- 5 Children's literature is in fact literature written by adults for children.⁵ All narratives have thematic purposes and functions and none is void of societal and ideological marking⁶, overt or passive, as Peter Hollindale noted.⁷ So in order to infer what (knowledge, experience and) values the text also establishes as taken for granted, it is necessary to evaluate the ideological tenor of the text, and as proposed by Mieke Bal and John Stevens we need to regard these argumentative, descriptive and narrative parts, as well as the relationship between these textual forms within the whole text.⁸
- 6 In the present biography, the narrator's voice emerges from the narrative discourse in a number of ways: to communicate attitudes to the told; to pose and answer rhetorical questions; to manage coherence by the taking of a narrative license imbuing meaning in gaps present in the biographic material.⁹ What might be called a didactic address informs expressly about what the narrator preconceived ideas on young readers competence, knowledge and experience. So by supplying the missing context, explaining or making temporal translation between "then and now", we notice how are shaped a contemporary story and morals.
- 7 This paper is organized in three parts. The first one will describe briefly how the contemporary tale about the writer is created as Other; the second will discuss how the contemporary tale later is contradicted in the afterword. I will further support the idea of the contradicting tales by exemplifying how values from Edith's childhood adhere to the modern story. Lastly, I will discuss how in effect two tales are created: one surface story and another one beneath.

I

- 8 It is part of the author's "contract" with the reader that all "speculations" in the biography are based on "reliable evidence".¹⁰ The narrator has the prerogative to organize the trustworthy biographic background sources into a coherent story with a logical plot line that supports the version of the unified life story that the biographer wants to put forward to the readers. In the telling, a certain contemporary significance, message or "moral of the story" is invented. As experiences from Wharton's life are re-framed, they are also refurbished into a contemporary valid moral that makes sense in the reader's context. In other words, the narrative discourse yields up both the story and its significance, the latter coinciding with the text's meaning or "message" in the same usage as Stephens'.¹¹
- 9 In this biography, the image of Edith, the budding writer, is created as Other by signalling early that Edith is unlike other children – she is different. Not fitting in, she is alienated and lonely as a child. Her difference is constructed as based on three overpowering needs, which come to dominate both her life and work. Firstly, it is her keen eye; her

intelligence and perceptiveness of mind; secondly, her creative drive that she must follow and invent her own stories, as well as her interest in reading and writing which are related to, as she calls it in her memoirs, her urge to “make up”. Her third need is the desire to tell the truth whatever the cost may be. Altogether, these three needs qualify her as a writer; they also become the structuring main idea of the biography. The three traits emphasized in the narrative discourse are the very same traits essential to an author discerning suitable subject matter from everyday experience.

10 *First trait: Intelligence*

11 The construction begins immediately the first chapter entitled “Different”, and below the title the epigraph is a quote from her 1896 short story collection: “There once was a little girl so intelligent that her parents feared she would die” (1).¹² Immediately, the idea is planted, that Edith is different, and that difference is dangerous. The dramatic lines capture how her parents negotiate the opposing forces between conformity and individuality, which will be a theme throughout her life.

12 The narrative discourse keeps this dread of difference alive, and examples show that the parents’ realize that their daughter’s sensitivity and vivid imagination might even jeopardize her chances of marrying well. Her mother Lucretia interprets Edith’s choice of reading the classics as a sign for possible intelligence: “nothing was harder than to marry off an intelligent daughter” (7). The narrator connects Lucretia’s fear of difference, to Edith’s early social debut. Rather than cultivating an unsettling, odd interest in books and ideas, Lucretia wanted her daughter to find a husband. The family’s diminishing fortune motivated her planning Edith’s coming out party a year earlier than what was customary (24-5). Her mother’s fears were realized when Edith’s first engagement was broken due to “an alleged preponderance of intellectuality on the part of the intended bride” (32). The narrator emphasizes that despite the humiliation to have this published in *The Newport Daily*, Edith “[i]n the scrupulously honest depths of her soul [...] knew that each charge was absolutely true” (32).

13 *Second trait: Creativity*

14 The second trait, which makes Wharton different, especially emphasized by the narrative discourse, is her creative drive as a child. The ritual of how she learned to read and write by herself; how she made up stories, pretending to read aloud “pouring forth undisturbed”, and her struggle with her juvenilia are described in detail (9). Having found her artistic expression, her steady output of stories in itself is evidence of her creativity – so what made her different as a child, ultimately turns her into a writer as an adult.

15 *Third trait: The Truth Teller*

16 The third trait the biography equips Wharton with is the urge and courage to tell the truth. Together with her intelligence and uncontrollable creative drive it accounts for her predisposition to become a writer. An early example is when Edith whispered behind a teacher’s back, later to regret her impoliteness. She confessed her words in front of the class, and was scolded in return (8). The narrator proleptically points out that this “wasn’t the last time Edith felt compelled to speak a truth no one thought should be told, nor would it be the last time she would be rebuked for it”(8).

17 The narrator further foregrounds how Edith observed the on-going social war between new and old New York, and how this was to become one of her main subject matters. She saw the upstarts trying to make their way into established society, no detail of which “escaped Edith’s young eyes”. And years later, she would portray the class struggle,

equally critical to both groups; “[i]t was the truth that mattered to her”(13). In a later chapter the narrator frames her novel *The Reef* as her comment on her troubled love affair with Morton Fullerton, noting that Wharton “always [is] the truth teller” (107).

- 18 The two last examples show how prolepsis¹³ functions to foreground the modern story about Wharton shaped in the telling. The anachronistic reference outside of the narrated present, into future time, yet not narrated and beyond intradiegetic characters’ possible knowledge at the time of telling, calls attention to the narrator’s omniscience, and deliberate construction of a modern narrative. The examples establish a causal chain of events between a present and insignificant narrated event, with future important outcomes, thus raising the current one also to significance, and establishing the pattern of difference in the modern story.¹⁴

II

- 19 Now, what is the end result and contemporary actual message invented in the telling of Wharton’s life? How does the deliberate organization of biographic material also produce that general sense that the young reader is encouraged to make? The modern significance instilled in the biography is straightforward: it is important to stand up for one’s convictions. Being different is OK – different is what geniuses are – but it sometimes implies loneliness.

- 20 But having read the Afterword, there seems to be a hedge built in. The logic seems to be: different, yes – but only as long as you remain *proper*. I shall try to unravel this impression. From Chapter 1 to 10 the repetition of *proper* gives the word a global, thematic significance; it signals society’s restrictions on women. The values related to being *proper* are embodied by her mother Lucretia, and imposed on the daughter. They come to represent that which Edith is destined to break loose from. The narrator praises her courage to resist social pressures of propriety since childhood. Therefore in the last chapter (Ch. 10) the narrator logically questions Wharton’s own effort to suppress inappropriate detail in her memoirs (separation from her mother and one older brother, and the naming of her lover, inferred in the below quote).

[f]or a woman who had spent her life exposing the truth in her novels, it is surprising that her autobiography left significant truths about her own life untold. In it she says nothing about her failed marriage, or her divorce, or the broken relationships with her mother and brothers. Morton Fullerton [her lover] is never mentioned. (145)

- 21 But last in the Afterword (the page long summary of the narrator’s view of Wharton’s literary legacy) we see a turn in this narrative attitude, when the narrator suddenly inverts the negative charge *proper* has carried over ten chapters, to a positive one. In the last sentence of the Afterword, the narrator commends Wharton’s for deliberately hiding the identity of her Love Diary’s addressee¹⁵ – all for the sake of propriety.

In her lifetime, Edith Wharton managed to live properly in a society while escaping from the restrictions that might have kept her from writing. Thirty years after her death, she made another escape: from her stiff, passionless society image to the “gist of me”. And because the years had softened scandal into history, she had, once again, made her escape properly. (152)

- 22 The effect is Wharton’s final submission to social expectation by “escaping properly”. The question that comes to mind is if *properly* should be understood as irony. But since the

presumed reader is a child, the biography must be read at face value, which fits in with the rest of the discussion.

- 23 Evidently, the contradiction between these two narrative stances punctures the force of the contemporary moral of the story (that Wharton is brave to be different). And the script the readers are now presented with appears really problematic. Before discussing the final effect it is relevant to consider some other conservative values that contradict the contemporary significance of the surface story.
- 24 We see such contradictions in a few cases when the translation of historical and adult subject matter to the contemporary child reader presents difficulties. First this is apparent in Wharton's autobiography from 1933 (*A Backward Glance*). Here we meet a Victorian view of children in the adult narrator Wharton's aetionormative description of herself as a child learning to read; making comic points to the reader above the head of the child protagonist. In the biography's¹⁶ episodes of Edith's childhood, four perspectives meet: the 71-year-old Wharton; Edith as a child, the young reader, and the contemporary adult narrator of the juvenile biography. In the biography for young readers, this incident is given a very different slant; the adult narrator invites the young reader to share the narrator's position by establishing a certain closeness or 'confidence' between them – Barbara Wall¹⁷ calls this "single address", orientating the telling to the reader.
- 25 However, the close distance between the young reader and the adult narrator widens as their respective knowledge about the world gradually becomes more relevant. My last example deals with Victorian sexual taboos and how they are maintained. Already in the biography's second chapter, the narrator prepares the young reader for the cultural conspiracy¹⁸ in which Edith was raised by didactically stating: "[t]here was no such thing as sex education in the 1870s" (20).¹⁹ The following excerpt is quoted from the 2010 biography and portrays a particularly charged episode between Edith and Lucretia. The quotations within it, however, are from Wharton's autobiographical fragment "Life and I".²⁰

A few days before her marriage, Edith was "seized with such a dread of the whole dark mystery" that she begged her mother to tell her what "being married was like". Lucretia thought the question ridiculous and told Edith so. But Edith was desperate, so she persisted. "I'm afraid, Mamma – I want to know what will happen to me! There was a silence. A long dreadful silence. Lucretia's expression turned icy cold. You've seen enough pictures & statutes in your life" she said finally. "Haven't you noticed that men are – made differently from women?" Yes, Edith had noticed. Edith noticed everything. Well, then – ?" Lucretia demanded. Edith had no idea where her mother was going with this business of pictures and statues, so she politely waited for more explanation. "For heaven's sake don't ask me anymore silly questions," Lucretia exploded. "You can't be as stupid as you pretend!" Edith was stunned. She was being scolded for not knowing the very thing she had always been forbidden to ask.

Years later Edith would write of a new bride's "startled puzzled surrender to...the young man whom one had at most yielded a rosy cheek in return for an engagement ring"; she would write of "the large double-bed" and the "terror" the new bride felt at seeing her new husband shaving. She would write of "resigned smiles ... a week or a month of flushed distress, confusion, embarrassed pleasure." For Edith the "flushed distress" never turned into "embarrassed pleasure." The sexual side of her marriage to Teddy was a failure. (My emphasis of the narrative comments in the last paragraph, 40-41)

- 26 I will begin to comment the first paragraph of the excerpt in which Edith, now twenty-three, pressures her mother to speak about sex, but Lucretia answers evasively. The narrative discourse does not address Edith's sexual fears and how they stem from her

ignorance, it rather illustrates – efficiently so – the ways in which taboos are passed on between generations. By recycling the Victorian diction when re-telling this episode the biography's contemporary narrator is conspicuously absent from the narrative discourse. The same indirect explanations that were used in 1884 are re-cycled to enlighten the contemporary reader. Or rather the same wording Wharton as the narrator of her autobiography in 1937, claims were used in 1884. The tension found in the original biographic material is not resolved in the contemporary biography, it is simply transferred into it. Therefore, there are few traces that the *telling* of this episode is at all positioned in the present. The main orientation of the text to the young reader is made on language level: the syntax and the wording are unproblematic. But no narrative intervention, no translation between *now* and *then* can be seen, and meaning therefore hinges on adult experience alone (shared by Lucretia, the adult narrator of "Life and I" and the adult narrator of the biography), which excludes the young reader. The second paragraph of the example expands on the subject of "married life" and presents a collection of fragments from Wharton's short fiction *The Old Maid*. But in this case the result is a more complex textual structure: in two sentences the narrative discourse stitches together six quotations (as the most semantically meaningful units), but still does not actually address the double standard it sets out to clarify. Rather than problemizing in contemporary terms women's sexual fears in the 1880s as product of female physical and mental subordination to patriarchal control, the recycling of Wharton's phrases transfers a cluster of disturbing images suggestive of male sexual violence against women without agency ("large double-bed", "terror" at seeing husband shaving) to the present day biography. The narrative discourse does not explain, but rather transfers – that which is unsaid in 1885 Edith's particular time and culture – to present time. In the next paragraph, the adult narrator suddenly reappears closing the charged issue by pragmatically concluding: "If they weren't a passionate couple, however, Edith and Teddy were at least god companions. Teddy's kindness softened the rough edges of Edith's personality, and he was clearly in love with her no matter what was lacking in the bedroom"(41). Next, still within the same paragraph, a detailed account of the couple's economy follows. The awkwardness of these abrupt topic switches in the narrative discourse suggests difficulties in bridging the adult growing sexual awareness of the main character, and the absent adult experience of young readers.

III

- 27 The biography as a genre calls for the scope of an entire life, but an adult life resists any straightforward translation into a young reader's context. This leaves traces in the text as contradictions in the narrated biographic story. The scope of an entire life is translated or reframed to the young reader, and in the telling a contemporary story of the writer's life and work is invented. It is here possible to see that the biography forms two conflicting stories, based on two sets of values. The most evident one is the surface story intentionally planned and organized in a deliberate manner. The contemporary narrator, present in the text, tells it. This story constructs Edith as different, who becomes an author destined by her perceptiveness of mind, her irrepressible creative drive urging her to "make up" and her desire to tell the truth. The contemporary moral held by this story is that it is important and commendable to stand up for one's beliefs – even if it makes one different and if loneliness might be the price to pay. This is the surface moral, but there are also implicit values to discover.

- 28 The second and implicit story emerges only after the surface story is read against the grain. To begin with, the contemporary narrator points out a contradiction in Wharton's own memoirs; that she silenced her love affair and her broken relationships with her mother and one of her brothers, despite her wish to always tell the truth. But there is nothing strange in this – people's real lives are full of contradictions. What is noteworthy is the new direction the narrative discourse takes after the ending of the biography proper, more precisely on the last page of the afterword. Because here the contemporary narrative comment contradicts the contemporary surface story by unexpectedly praising Wharton's social caution (acting proper) when suppressing revealing information about her life. In chapters 1 to 10 *proper* stands for something negatively charged, but in the afterword describing Wharton's act of planning and succeeding with a proper escape, its charge becomes positive. This undermines the methodical thematic logic of structuring Edith as different, strong and as potentially improper in the eyes of society. The last paragraph in the afterword merges the modern moral (standing up for what you believe in) so painstakingly wrought over 152 pages, with the Victorian proviso (– as long as it is not controversial). Collapsing the modern worldview with the Victorian one cancels out the force of the modern. These values, the modern – it is alright to stand up for what you believe in – modified by the Victorian proviso – as long as it is not controversial, seemingly continue an earlier pattern where conservative attitudes are transferred into the contemporary narrative discourse when recycling Victorian evasive phrases, but without any narrative explanations situated in the present. In the absence of the narrator's comment, any "understanding" relies on the reader's ability to infer meaning by drawing on familiar experience. Nevertheless, in my most problematic example (the fragmented quotations from *The Old Maid*), the young reader is confronted with a cluster of threatening images from fiction, suggestive of sexual violence, but with no contemporary narrative assistance to translate its historical context or to demystify the imagery. The fear of the unknown with its embedded image of female sexual vulnerability, passivity without any recourse to agency, stands unchallenged.
- 29 In sum, the narrator's intended legacy of Wharton's nineteenth-century life (1862-1939) as seen in the twenty-first century's children's biography coincides with the surface contemporary tale. The title, *The Brave Escape of Edith Wharton*, promises the modern surface story, which values female independent thought, the courage to stand up against confining rules of society and the will to take charge of one's own life. But strangely undermined by the second (thematically conventional story of socialization into adulthood) the modern surface story is thwarted, leaving it up to the young reader to reconcile the two conflicting opposing scripts of femininity and what it means to be a woman.

NOTES

1. Several classifications circulate: "juvenile literature" in the actual hard cover edition; "young adult biography" occurs on the webpage where it can be ordered,

on the same page as where its “reading level” is stipulated to 9-12 years. <http://www.author-illustr-source.com/conniewooldridge.htm> (October 10, 2011)

2. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the main body of the text. Connie Nordhielm Wooldridge. *The Brave Escape of Edith Wharton: A Biography*. New York: Clarion Books, 2010.

3. Wharton’s portrayals of children are distanced and often about “neglected and solitary child [ren]”. (See Edith Wharton, *Valley of Decision*, New York: Scribner’s 1902, 4.) The rare child’s perspective is illustrated in young Paul Marvell, as the focalizer of the last chapter of *The Custom of the Country*. In an article entitled “The Absent Children in Edith Wharton’s Fiction” Jean Franz Blackall finds that Wharton uses the idea of the child in her writing rather than any realistic depiction of a child (e.g. Paul Marvell). Absent children refer to the “children who are not there, who do not speak, who are not seen, who exist as ideas rather than characters”, that are “imaginary creature[s]”. They include the unborn, the dead, the lost children, the unacknowledged children, hidden away; and those who appear only silently and fleetingly in fictions over which they nonetheless exert an influence.” By allowing the child to become an “unseen presence”, but yet a “motivating force” or “pawn in adult games” Wharton often avoids the problem of a truthful representation of children in her fiction. See Jean Franz Blackall, “The Absent Children in Edith Wharton’s Fiction”. *Edith Wharton Review* 12.1 (1995): 3-6.

4. Philippe Lejeune stipulates (when distinguishing between fictional and factual modes of discourse in his “Autobiographical Pact”) that the shared identity of the proper name by author, narrator and protagonist is what constitutes an autobiography. John Paul Eakin. “Foreword”. Philippe Lejeune. *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis: Minneapolis UP, 1989.

5. Nikolajeva discusses aetionormative implications of children’s literature as a “refined instrument used for centuries to educate, socialize and oppress a particular social group” and recognizes children’s literature as a “unique art and communication form, deliberately created by those in power for the powerless” (13). Maria Nikolajeva. “Theory, Post-Theory, and Aetionormative Theory”. *Neohelicon*, XXXVI (2009) 1, 13-24. Zohar Shavit writes that the most characteristic feature of children’s literature is its “double attribution”. By this she means that “children’s literature addresses children, but always and without exception, children’s literature has an additional addressee – the adult, who functions as either a passive or an active addressee, of texts written for children” (83). Children’s literature must cater for adult approval in order to secure its existence. “Adults not only write books for children, they publish, evaluate, interpret and distribute them” (84). Zohar Shavit. “The Double Attribution of Texts for Children”. Sandra Beckett, ed. *Transcending Boundaries: Writing for a Dual Audience of Children and Adults*. Garland: New York. 1999, 84 (pp 83-97).

6. John Stephens. *Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction*. London & New York: Longman, 1992, 14.

7. Peter Hollindale uses the categories overt or explicit as opposed to passive, which I call covert here for the sake of reciprocity between overt and covert. Peter Hollindale. “Ideology and the Children’s Book” *Signal* 55: 3-22.

8. Mieke Bal. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 1997. Toronto: Toronto UP, 2004, 34. See also John Stephens. *Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction*. London and New York, 1992, 18.

9. Parallels between work and life can be drawn to fill gaps in the biographic material, in order to explain the author’s behavior from an inside perspective. The quote capturing the fictional Lizzie West’s infatuation for the man she loves, “[t]o talk with him was to soar up into the azure on outspread wings...” from the short story “The Letters” is used to illustrate the attraction Edith felt for Walter Berry (35). The narrative comment “it was just how she felt about Walter Berry” to the above quote in effect collapses Wharton’s fiction with her life, with the purpose of explaining the author’s emotions, offering the young reader a vivid and intimate

dimension of the writer's life (for which there are no biographic evidence as such) (36, my emphasis). Wharton's fictive character's emotions are interpreted by the narrator as though they were the author's own responses to a situation in her own life.

10. Diane Middlebrook. "The Role of the Narrator in Literary Biography" *South Central Review*, Volume 23, Number 3, Fall 2006, pp. 5-18, 14. Johns Hopkins University Press.

11. John Stephens. *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*. London & New York: Longman, 1992, 3. He writes that "significance is deduced from the text – its theme, moral, insight into behavior" as well as how the narrative sequence or character interrelations imply ideas and "assumptions about the forms of human existence" (3). Significance is something that the text itself produces without intent, whereas the generally used "meaning" sometime refers to the idea of authorial intent. I use *significance* in Stephen's sense.

12. Cited in the biography from the short story entitled "The Valley of Childish Things", 1896.

13. Genette defines the prolepsis as "any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later" (40). See, Gerard Genette. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cornell University press, 1980.

14. Descriptions of Wharton's difference are most frequent in the chapters accounting for her childhood and teenage years; in chapter four this abates. Hereafter the focus of the narration is redirected to her courtship, engagement and later to her new status as married woman – all her mother's concerns alleviated. The narrator thereafter begins to account for her writing, her travel and her houses – which in part can be seen as her creative expressions of adulthood.

15. The diary was addressed to her anonymous lover, for the sake of propriety. Much later, his name became known, Morton Fullerton.

16. The biography here referred to is the 2010 biography written for children.

17. Barbara Wall has written about the narrator's attitude to the child reader and protagonist, and has noted double and single address in children's literature. Double address is the Victorian conventional narrative stance in children's literature, where the child and the adult reader are addressed at the same time, and when the narrator smiles over the head of the child-reader and/or protagonist, at the adult reader. This example resembles double address, although it is not, simply because *A Backward Glance* was not written for children, but for adults. Wall distinguishes between literature written to children or to adults: "If a story is written to children, then it is for children, even though it may also be for adults" (2). Her main idea is that literature for children has changed over the past one hundred and fifty years especially in regards to "writing down" to children. She continues: "The child centered novel might be for adults or it might be for children. The way the narrator addresses the narratee determines which it shall be" (245). What qualifies a text as one for children is not if it is about children, but the marker of children's literature, for Wall, is if the text is addressed to children. See Barbara Wall. *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1991.

18. The cultural conspiracy refers to the practice of denying women any sexual knowledge, before marriage,

19. Edith was "convinced there was something people weren't telling her" (20). The biography explains this as the creative impetus for her first novella, although Wharton will return to the subject in *The Age of Innocence* where she criticizes her society's preference for manufactured female innocence.

20. The biographical source for this long quotation, from which the writer of the contemporary biography in turn quotes, is Wharton's autobiographical fragment called "Life and I", in *Wharton, Novellas and Other Writings*. "Life and I" is an uncompleted autobiographical fragment, covering her first years. Cynthia Griffin

Wolff writes that she “may have begun them” before February 1923. See Wharton, *Novellas and other Writings* etc publication info (1136). Wharton, Edith. “Life and I”. Ed Cynthia Griffin Woolf. *Wharton. Novellas and Other Writings*. New York: The Library of America, 1990. 1076-1091.

RÉSUMÉS

The Brave Escape of Edith Wharton: A Biography (2010), écrit par Connie Nordhielm Wooldridge est une biographie récente d'Edith Wharton (1862-1937), s'adressant à de jeunes lecteurs. Wharton, connue comme écrivain n'écrivant ni sur ni pour les enfants, est de ce fait présentée à un public entièrement nouveau. Cet article cherche à discuter des interventions dans le discours narratif de la biographie qui orientent le récit de la vie d'Edith Wharton vers un jeune lectorat contemporain. En ajustant le texte à son public, les éléments biographiques et la vie entière de Wharton sont traduits pour une époque et adaptés en des expériences convenables pour le jeune lecteur. A travers le récit, un conte contemporain sur la signification de la vie et de l'œuvre d'un auteur est inventé. Quelle est cette histoire créée et quelles normes et valeurs données comme évidentes véhicule-t-elle ? Comment une vie entière, de 1862 à 1937, est-elle rendue intéressante pour de jeunes lecteurs de 2010 ?

The Brave Escape of Edith Wharton: A Biography (2010), by Connie Nordhielm Wooldridge is a recent biography of Edith Wharton (1862-1937) written for young readers. Wharton, known as a writer who neither wrote about, or for children, is here introduced to an entirely new audience. This article sets out to discuss the interventions made in the biography's narrative discourse that orientates the telling of Edith Wharton's lifespan to a contemporary young reader. In adjusting the text to the audience, the biographic material and Wharton's entire lifespan is translated across time and adapted to suit the young reader. The telling of a contemporary tale about the meaning of the author's life and work is invented. What story is formed, and what taken for granted norms and values does it hold? In what way an entire lifespan, 1862 to 1937, is made relevant for young readers in 2010?

AUTEUR

MARIA STRÄÄF

Maria Strääf has a Master's degree in English (2000), and a Ph.D. in Language and Culture, with a specialization in English Literature, from the Department of Culture and Communication at Linköping University, Sweden. Her doctoral thesis *In Between Cultures: Franco-American Encounters In The Work Of Edith Wharton* (Linköping, 2008) is a study of how American author Edith Wharton (1862-1937) in a number of novels and short stories between 1876 and 1937 depicts cultural encounters between Americans and Europeans, mostly Frenchmen. Most recently her research interests also include Caribbean literature.