An Analysis of "A Winkle in Time" by Madeleine L'Engle

Introduction

"A Wrinkle in Time" is a sci-fi fantasy novel written by Madeleine L'Engle that follows the journey a young girl named Meg takes to save her father from an intergalactic evil called the Black Thing. Along the way she receives help from a group of other-worldly entities: Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Who, and Mrs. Which, in addition to her brother Charles and an acquaintance, Calvin. Along the way she faces challenges, both from those seeking to stop her and from her own internal struggles as she comes to terms with her limitations and develops a better understanding of who she is. "A Wrinkle in Time" has hints of time travel weaved into the plot, but most of the story takes place across a multitude of planets and follows a fairly linear progression. The inspiration it draws from science and its unique take on a cosmic-scale epic makes it a notable entry in the science fiction genre.

Plot Synopsis

"A Wrinkle in Time" opens with a 13-year-old girl named Margaret Murry—who goes by Meg and acts as the novels lead protagonist—sitting in her room in the attic during a "dark and stormy night." In this opening scene of the book, she laments over her poor performance in school and how she is struggling to adjust to life without her father, Dr Alex Murray, who had been working as a physicist on a top-secret project for the government and had disappeared over a year ago. Meg retreats down to the kitchen where her youngest brother, Charles Wallace, is waiting for her with hot cocoa. She also has two additional brothers, twins named Sandy and Denny. Charles Wallace is framed as being a peculiar and precocious child, displaying remarkable empathy and sporting an impressive vocabulary for a six-year-old. Despite his abilities, he is widely regarded as being Meg's "dumb baby brother" as he prefers to remain mute in public. Meg's Mother, Dr. Kate Murray, soon joins them in the kitchen as well. It is during this scene that a strange visitor, going by the name Mrs. Whatsit appears out of the storm who Charles has already met. Mrs. Whatsit makes an offhand comment about something called a "tesseract" during this encounter, causing Mrs. Murray to be visibly affected by the word; why she reacts so strongly is left a mystery. The next day, Charles takes Meg to meet Mrs. Whatsit, along with two other characters name Mrs. Who and Mrs. Which, who are residing in an abandoned house in the woods. Along the way they run into an older boy named Calvin O'Keefe, a popular athlete at their school who is initially suspicious of the two wandering around the woods but is quick to befriend them. Together they find Mrs. Whatsit and Mrs. Who, who have the appearance of older women shrouded in many layers of clothing, while Mrs. Which assumes a discorporate voice.

The Mrs. Ws quickly get on with whisking the children away to a planet called Uriel via a process called "tessering" which allows them to travel through space and time at remarkable

speeds. It is on this planet that the Dark Thing is first introduced, which is described as being like a living shadow that envelopes planets and acts as a source of evil. A battle rages across the cosmos against this dark force, attempting to prevent it from taking control of new planets. It is the Dark Thing that has captured Mr. Murray and the children are tasked with infiltrating a planet called Camazotz to free their father. Prior to tessering to Camazotz, the Mrs. Ws take the children to the Happy Medium, a creature on another planet who is capable of seeing anywhere in the universe through the use of a crystal ball. Here the Happy Medium shows them that Earth is slowly being captured by the Dark Thing, which scares the children, but it is also in this scene that the Happy Medium shows the children that it is possible to defeat the Dark Thing. The children are invigorated by this, and so the Mrs. Ws tesser them to Camazotz to save their father. On this planet they find that free will has been stripped from its inhabitants by a creature called IT. Charles sacrifices himself and lets IT take control of his mind. IT-controlled Charles leads Meg and Calvin to where Mr. Murray is, whom they are then able to save. They then attempt to defeat IT, which is revealed to be a disembodied brain. In this scene IT tries to take control of Meg, Calvin, and Mr. Murray. Mr. Murray resorts to tessering them off the planet to avoid being hypnotized, leaving Charles behind.

Meg comes to on a planet called Ixchel and is furious with her father, primarily for leaving Charles behind, but also for his inexperienced attempt at tessering which proved painful for her and forced her into a catatonic state. They meet another group of lifeforms described as being tall and humanoid, but with an additional pair of arms that terminate in a set of tentacles. These creatures end up taking care of them until Meg is in good health. The Mrs. Ws are able to find them, and the group resolves to send Meg back to save Charles. She is ultimately successful, using her love for Charles to overcome the mind-control of IT. Mrs. Whatsit then reappears, tessering the two out of danger and back to Earth with Mr. Murray and Calvin where they are reunited with the rest of the Murray family. The novel ends with Mrs. Whatsit attempting to tell them something, but she is cut off as a gust of wind severs the connection between Earth and the Mrs. Ws.

Themes

Throughout the book, L'Engle makes references to conformal pressures. These pressures present themselves in a number of ways, one of which is in school. The protagonist Meg feels out of place among her peers, being singled out for her rough-housing behavior: "After all Meg, we aren't grammar-school kids anymore. Why do you always act like such a baby?"[1] These repeated criticisms alienate Meg from her classmates and makes her feel unwelcomed and isolated. Furthermore, her teachers berate her for her poor academic. In wallowing over her academics, Meg narrates, "School. School was all wrong. She'd been dropped down to the lowest section in her grade … one her teachers had said crossly, 'Really Meg, I don't understand

[1] Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*, 1st Square Fish mass market ed (New York: Square Fish, 2007), 5.

how a child with parents as brilliant as yours are supposed to be can be such a poor student.'"[2] These societal and peer pressures to fit in antagonize Meg throughout the text, causing her to doubt her own abilities and diminish her self-confidence. This manifests physically in tessering, the process used throughout the book to travel through time and space, as Meg is often shown to be the most affected by the journey. At one point Meg nearly dies as she is tessered through the Black Thing, which appears to have a strong influence on her alone. She commonly wishes that she were more "normal," at one point early in the story remarking how her twin brothers, Sandy and Dennys, were particularly average, getting As and Bs in their classes, good at games, and decent athletes. It is clear how she yearns to be like them.

This theme of conformity becomes increasingly apparent as the plot progresses, appearing most acutely on the planet Camazotz. Camazotz is a planet that has been captured by the Black Thing, where the population, though at first seemingly normal, is dominated by the mind control of an entity referred to as IT. This is made clear by a scene where the children of this planet are playing outside and every one of them is either bouncing a ball or skipping rope in time with one another. In observing this event Charles remarks, "They're skipping and bouncing in rhythm! Everyone's doing it at exactly the same moment."[3] Furthermore, every house is an identical shape and painted a drab grey and the people of this society are presented as being almost thoughtless and robotic, walking unison or in highly organized patterns. There is evidence that they do have some independence from IT, but the idea of betraying its directives is met with seemingly irrational fear. The three protagonists meet a woman whose son struggles to conform with the rest of the children, dropping his ball while playing out of unison with his peers. The three attempt to return the ball, but upon encountering her she states, "'Oh, no! The children in our section never drop balls! They're all perfectly trained. We haven't had an Aberration for three years …' The woman went very white, opened her mouth as though to say something, then slammed the door in their faces instead."[4] Later IT reveals that the boy in question ends up going through a process called "reprocessing," which appears to be a form of Pavlovian conditioning that trains the boy to conform with the rest of his peers.

This struggle against conformity reflects a need for identity and self-confidence, reminiscent of the struggle many adolescents go through as they figure out their place in the world. The young age of the main characters in this book and the topics it addresses makes it clear that the novel, at least in part, appeals to a coming-of-age trope. Indeed, throughout the story there are instances where Meg comes to certain understandings with her identity and develops an acceptance of her faults. This is put most bluntly in one scene where the Mrs. Ws are bestowing tools and guidance for the young three protagonists to use in their infiltration of Camazotz. Here Mrs. Whatsit says "Calvin, your great gift is your ability to communicate, to communicate with all kinds of people. So, for you I will strengthen this gift. Meg, I give you

[2] L'Engle, "A Wrinkle in Time," 2.
[3] L'Engle, "A Wrinkle in Time," 99.
[4] L'Engle, "A Wrinkle in Time," 101-102.

your faults."[5] Meg is initially incredulous and states, "But I'm always trying to get rid of my faults!"[6] It isn't initially apparent why Mrs. Whatsit does this, but later in their struggle against IT she finds that resorting to her anger, impatience, and stubbornness allow her to resist IT's mind control. This overwhelming pressure to fit in and the journey Meg takes in coming to understand herself fits into the broader framework of adolescence and the search for identity.

A Wrinkle in Time also presents religious undertones. This is most blatant in the naming of locations throughout the book. A few examples are Ixchel, the Mayan moon goddess, Camazotz, the Mayan bat god, Uriel, an archangel from Judaism and Christianity, and Malak, which means "angel" in Hebrew. Furthermore, the overarching plot of the book is framed as a battle between darkness and light, choosing to make the main antagonist a corporeal shadow labeled as the "Black Thing" while our protagonists are assisted by other worldly beings who can take a take the form of white winged centaurs, being the Mrs. Ws. It is revealed in the book that Mrs. Whatsit was once a star.[7] The death of a star is framed as being a sacrifice, made on the star's part as though it were a living and thinking entity, in order to defeat the darkness. This juxtaposition of light and darkness in an endless struggle across the cosmos neatly ties up the broader context the novel is taking place in in a visceral and tangible manner. This takes a step beyond the matter of religion, but the inclusion of seemingly angelic characters that divinely intervene in the story to save our heroes reflects an almost religiously inspired origin of these entities. This is most notable in the last scene on Camazotz in the text where Mrs. Whatsits effectively swoops in and pulls Charles and Meg out of danger and tessers them back to Earth.

Another notable instance of religious influences would be in a discussion regarding the cosmic battle against darkness. It is here that the Mrs. Ws reveal that mankind has already been battling this evil influence and hint to the children that they've had many fighters. The children realize that famous philosophers, writers, and scientists, such as Leonardo Da Vinci and Shakespeare, were fighting the darkness. Among these names, Jesus is listed: "'Jesus!' Charles Wallace said. 'Why of course, Jesus!'"[8] Buddha is also mentioned.

It is evident that even in the personal life of the author, faith and the universe are seemingly intertwined. L'Engle, in another work titled "Walking on Water," states, "When my faith falters, when I feel God's absence, when I am moving through the night of the soul, if I can see a sky full of stars my heart always lifts."[9] The details listed above reflect the influences of her world view, and how they are uniquely woven into the plot of the story.

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[5] L'Engle, "A Wrinkle in Time," 96.
[6] L'Engle, "A Wrinkle in Time," 96.
[7] L'Engle, "A Wrinkle in Time," 88.
[8] L'Engle, "A Wrinkle in Time," 86.
[9] Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 1980), 191.

Internal Logic

Tessering

Throughout the novel, a process called "tessering" is utilized to move the characters across large distances and even through time. Only once is it detailed explicitly in the story. The Mrs. Ws begin by introducing the three cartesian coordinates to describe space, and then go on to describe time as being equally orthogonal to all three. The fifth dimension, the dimension beyond time, is the one utilized by the Mrs. Ws and Mr. Murry to travel through space and time. This is quaintly illustrated by Mrs. Who, using the folds of her skirt to represent the fabric of space. By wrinkling her skirt, she represents a "wrinkle" in time and space. By performing this wrinkle, they can quickly hop from two points on her skirt without having to travel along her skirt in its full length. This "hop" would be through the fifth dimension. Mrs. Whatsit specifically touches upon how this method of travel does not violate the speed of light and serves as a sort of "shortcut" across reality.

The discussion of Euclidian geometry presented in the book starts by "squaring" a line, which produces a square. Squaring this square produces a cube. Squaring a cube gives you time and squaring time gives you a tesseract. Calling the fifth dimension a tesseract gives the process of moving through the fifth dimension the name "tessering". The modern definition of a tesseract is a hypercube in $\mathbb{R}^4$, which conflicts with the definition given in the book.[10] This can be reconciled by disregarding time as being a dimension in which the tesseract is defined and limiting it to the other four spatial dimensions.

The ideas presented here reflect the geometric interpretations of Einstein's theory of relativity and his ideas on the "metric" of spacetime. In "Understanding Space-Time," Robert Disalle highlights how Einstein revolutionized the Newton's conception of gravitation, writing, "Newton's theory of gravitation, within a space-time framework defined by absolute simultaneity and Euclidean spatial geometry, can be formulated as a theory in which falling bodies follow the geodesics of a curved affine structure."[11] This notion of a "curved" spacetime which constitutes the coordinate system of our reality is used by L'Engle, and this is exceedingly evident in the skirt fabric demonstration given by Mrs. Who.

What is unique about this conception of time travel is that it has no physical manifestation—at least one that is never introduced in the book. It appears that moving through the extra fifth dimension is done out of sheer will. It has also been shown that it takes experience to tesser effectively. Mr. Murry is shown to be a novice in this craft, in regard to which Mrs. Whatsit states "Your father is singularly inexperienced … though a fine man, and worth

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[10] Eric W. Weisstein, "Tesseract," Text, Wolfram MathWorld (Wolfram Research, Inc.), accessed April 6, 2023, https://mathworld.wolfram.com/.

[11] Robert DiSalle, *Understanding Space-Time: The Philosophical Development of Physics from Newton to Einstein* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 135.

teaching. At the moment he still treats tessering as though he were working with a machine."[12] Mrs. Which performs tessering the most throughout the book, and she is alluded to as being the oldest of the three Mrs. Ws. Despite her seniority, she does err once in the book by accidentally traveling to a two-dimensional planet.

Implementation of Tessering

L'Engle details both the experience of tessering and its appearance in the novel. Every tesser that does occur is experienced through Meg's point of view. It is often described as initially being pushed and then suddenly losing all sensation of her body, as though being immersed in complete nothingness: "This was more than silence. A deaf person can feel vibrations. Here there was nothing to feel."[13] This brief period of sensory deprivation is followed by feeling slowly returning to her limbs, often starting with her heartbeat and a tingling in her arms and legs. Eventually she can see again and is back to normal, though it is apparent that Meg suffers the worst repercussions from tessering relative to the other characters in the novel.

Meg's difficulties in tessering appear a few times in the text. This is evident early on in the novel when Meg appears to be the last person to come out of tessering the first time it is performed. This is brought to a point when Mr. Murry, who is inexperienced in tessering, attempts to do it on Meg. He later reflects how "She was almost killed by the Black Thing" in his attempt to escape Camazotz.[14] Here Meg was rendered comatose by the experience and had to be nursed back to health over an extended period of time before she had fully recovered. This instance reveals that the Black Thing has a hand in her sufferings, indicating that her negative emotions give the Black Thing an advantage over her as she tessers through it. This adds another layer to tessering, where there is a physical presence, either of Meg in the three common spatial dimensions when in transit, or of the Black Thing in the added fifth dimension. The latter seems more plausible in light of the demonstration given by the Mrs. Ws.

Reconciling Paradoxes and Philosophical Musings

The story doesn't go into too much detail on the potential paradoxes introduced with time travel, and this is because the story only ever alters the linearity of events once. L'Engle makes it so that the main protagonists return home just before they left in the novel; this is done more as an afterthought so that the events of the book take place in a very short time span back home, allowing the characters to easily return to their normal lives. Furthermore, L'Engle has removed the possibility of their return from possibly affecting the characters at the start of the novel by placing them in different locations during this overlap in time, sidestepping a potential causal loop.

[12] L'Engle, "A Wrinkle in Time," 192.
[13] L'Engle, "A Wrinkle in Time," 56.
[14] L'Engle, "A Wrinkle in Time," 188.

The novel does touch upon some philosophical implications with regards to determinism vs. free will. When the protagonists were debating how they should save Charles from Camazotz, Calvin asks if the Happy Medium already knew what was going to happen. Mrs. Whatsit replies, “If we knew ahead of time what was going to happen we’d be—we’d be like the people on Camazotz, with no lives of our own, with everything all planned and done for us.”[15] She goes on to liken the structure of cause and effect to that of a sonnet, stating that, although each sonnet has a regulated form, the exact content is entirely up to the writer. This suggests that the progression of events in this form of time travel is, broadly speaking, maintained despite the intervention of the time travelers; it does not necessarily restrict their actions. This closely resembles classical compatibilism, in which free will and determinism are reconcilable. In section 2.1 of an article titled “Compatibilism” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the author states in regards to classical compatibilism that “It is therefore plausible to conclude that the truth of determinism does not entail that agents lack free will since it does not entail that agents never do what they wish to do, nor that agents are necessarily encumbered in acting.”[16] This argument holds that despite having an individuals decisions predetermined, their act of choosing to perform that action is an exercise of free will. A key difference in the philosophy proposed here and that presented in the book is that this article strictly takes every action to be predetermined, while the story gives the interpretation that only some actions are predetermined.

Legacy

“A Wrinkle in Time” has had a remarkable impact, spurring the development of a number of film adaptations, plays, and a comic book remake. Being written for young adults has undoubtedly allowed it to reach a wide and impressionable audience. Furthermore, its themes of overcoming conformal pressures and discovering oneself are universal struggles that allow the novel to remain relevant, even today. Although it’s been over 60 years since it was first published, it maintains a timeless appeal and continues to inspire the imaginations of a new generation of readers.

[15] L’Engle, "A Wrinkle in Time," 189.
[16] Michael McKenna and D. Justin Coates, “Compatibilism,” April 26, 2004, https://seop.illc.uva.nl/entries/compatibilism/#ClasComp.

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