

CONCEPT/ VOCABULARY  
ANALYSIS for

*A Wrinkle in Time*

Madeleine L'Engle



**ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS**

The book is divided into twelve chapters, each named after the character primarily revealed throughout that chapter. The first three chapters, “Mrs. Whatsit,” “Mrs. Who,” and “Mrs. Which” detail the main characters’ encounters with these highly unusual and eccentric “old ladies.” Each character is more subtly revealed, ending with Mrs. Which’s introduction: “There was a faint gust of wind, the leaves shivered in it, the patterns of moonlight shifted, and in a circle of silver something shimmered, quivered, and the voice said, “I ddo nott think I willl matterrialize commpletely. I ffindd itt verry ttirinngg, andd wee hhave mmuch tooo ddo” (55). The first three chapters are slow, but essential in setting up the more climactic second part of the novel; these chapters are laden with many hints of foreshadowing, and introduce the main protagonists: Meg, Charles and Calvin. Chapters four through seven accelerate the rising action which climaxes in chapter nine with the characters’ meeting with “IT.” Chapters ten through twelve conclude the rescue of Mr. Murry, and results in the cathartic coming-of-age transformation for Meg, who was initially the most backward character.

**ISSUES RELATED TO THE STUDY OF LITERATURE**

**THEMES:**

- ❖ Uniqueness/Individuality/Being different
- ❖ The Inadequacy of Words
- ❖ Power of Love
- ❖ Battle of Good and Evil

**SETTING:**

**Murry Home/Earth**

The events of the first three chapters take place in the Murry’s home and also in Meg’s school. The Murry’s home is set in a small community: big enough for Meg to worry “Nobody lives near enough to hear if we screamed and screamed and screamed” (7), but small enough that the disappearance of Mr. Murry seems to be the focus of the town gossip. Meg notes that even the “postmistress, with a sugary smile, had asked if she’d hear from her father lately” (6).

**Uriel**

Chapter four places the children squarely on a paradisiacal planet called Uriel, the “third planet of the star Malak in the spiral nebula Messier 101” (61). Around them, “the grasses of the field were a tender new green, and scattered about were tiny, multicolored flowers...a mountain reach[ed] so high into the sky that its peak was lost in a crown of puffy white clouds. From the grass at the base of the mountain came a sudden singing of birds. There was an air of such ineffable peace and joy all around...Delicate, multicolored butterflies were fluttering about them, as though in greeting” (60). The fertile fields are left behind as they fly over “granite-like rock shaped into enormous monoliths” and beautiful gardens (66).

### A Star in Orion's Belt/Happy Medium's Planet

Their next journey lands them amidst Orion's belt: "the main thing about the surrounding was exactly that they *were* unnoticeable. They seemed to be standing on some kind of nondescript, flat surface. The air around them was gray. It was not exactly fog, but she could see nothing through it...As they moved through the grayness Meg caught an occasional glimpse of slaglike rocks, but there were no traces of trees or bushes, nothing but flat ground under their feet, no sign of any vegetation at all" (83).

#### Camazotz

As they leave the Happy Medium's cave, they tesser once again to the planet of Camazotz. Camazotz is the setting for the rising action. Camazotz is certainly a strange place, although the children's first impression of the planet is that it could almost be mistaken for earth. "There were the familiar trees she knew so well at home: birches, pines, maples. And though it was warmer than it had been when they...left...there was a faintly autumnal touch to the air; near them were several small trees with reddened leaves very like sumac, and a big patch of goldenrod-like flowers. As she looked down the hill she could see the smokestacks of a town, and it might have been one of any number of familiar towns. There seemed to be nothing strange, or different, or frightening, in the landscape" (99). This scene is almost eerily serene—as Camazotz begins to reveal itself later in the chapter: "Below them the town was laid out in harsh angular patterns. The houses in the outskirts were all exactly alike, small square boxes painted gray. Each had a small, rectangular plot of lawn in front, with a straight line of dull-looking flowers edging the path to the door...In front of all the houses children were playing. Some were skipping rope, some were bouncing balls...As the skipping rope hit the pavement, so did the ball. As the rope curved over the head of the jumping child, the child with the ball caught the ball. Down came the ropes. Down came the balls. Over and over again. Up. Down. All in rhythm. All identical. Like the houses. Like the paths. Like the flowers" (103). The simultaneous rhythm of the planet only mirrors the horror of a deeper rhythm that pulses and controls Camazotz, forcing it into nauseating perfection.

#### Ixchel

After their struggles with IT, Calvin, Mr. Murry and Meg tesser to a planet where Meg experiences "absolute zero." Here, "everything she could see was rusty and gray. There were trees edging the field...and their leaves were the same brown as the grass. There were plants that might have been flowers, except that they were dull and gray. In contrast to the drabness of color...the air was filled with a delicate, springlike fragrance" (170). This planet is filled with soft, gray, furry creatures who take in the three travelers.

### **FORESHADOWING:**

The foreshadowing in this book is subtle, but ample.

1. The "Black Thing" is foreshadowed in the first chapter: "Every few moments the moon ripped through [the clouds], creating wraith-like shadows that raced along the ground" (3). The battle of the "black thing" is later seen more clearly from the planet Uriel, and through the crystal ball of the Happy Medium.

2. Meg remembers that Mrs. Buncombe's sheets had been stolen earlier that day (6). She is afraid that the tramp might seek refuge in their house during the fierce storm (foreshadowing Mrs. Whatsit's visit).
3. Mrs. Murry remarks, "You don't know the meaning of moderation, do you, my darling? A happy medium is something I wonder if you'll ever learn" (12). Meg does actually encounter *the* Happy Medium, an actual jovial crystal-ball type who shows them the fate of their Earth.
4. Mrs. Murry tells Meg that she just needs "to plow through some more time" before things will get easier for her. Meg actually *does* plow through time as she undergoes a literal "wrinkle" in time, or tesseract.
5. As Charles slips his hand "confidingly in Meg's" (29), Meg feels the power of his love loosening her nerves. She notes, "*Charles* loves me at any rate"; this conscious realization will eventually save her when she faces the power of IT.
6. The encounter with the Happy Medium is a foreshadowing of the lesson of moderation and compromise she still has to learn. Her desires must be balanced against her capabilities, and the power of her potential and belief in herself.
7. The description of Meg's hometown, the crushing criticism and disapproval of individuality and nonconformity are disturbingly like the description of Camazotz. Indeed, Camazotz seems to be the nightmarish realization of Meg's initial desire to go unnoticed and to be "normal" like her peers.
8. In Meg's adolescent world, there is no room for emotion and individuality amidst an overwhelming demand for conformity, order, and logical explanation in her classes, the school system, and in the small community. Although Meg does not initially recognize this subtle parallel to the society of Camazotz, her ultimate understanding of the balance of love and logic will enable her to rescue her brother from the clutches of IT.
9. Mr. Jenkins, Meg's high-school principal, asks her if she "enjoys being the most belligerent, uncooperative girl at school" (26). These words are echoed by Charles Wallace as he succumbs to the power of IT; he asks Meg, "Why are you being so belligerent and uncooperative?" (132).
10. Mrs. Whatsit tells Charles that he "*must* stay with Meg and Calvin. You must *not* go off on your own. Beware of pride and arrogance, Charles, for they may betray you" (102). This is a grave foreshadowing of Charles' disobedience to Mrs. Whatsit's command, which allows IT to overtake him.

**POINT OF VIEW/ NARRATIVE VOICE:**

The story is told entirely in third person, but mostly from Meg's point of view. We experience the story through her thoughts and ideas, and in her reactions to the other characters in the book.

**TONE:**

Because Meg dominates the voice of the book, the tone is generally adolescent, but is very scientific and matter-of-fact in its telling. The tone lends to the suspenseful feel of the book, and ably jumps from the ordinary to the fantastic.

**IRONY:**

The dominating irony, which works out to be thematic as well, is that things are not as they appear. The most incapable, dowdy, failure of a girl turns out to be our heroine who rescues her family not only through her intelligence, but through her love and emotions.

Although the town judges the Murrays to be the most unsuccessful, they triumph over all in a battle over good and evil.

Another irony of the plot is that Charles, the most intelligent and sensitive of them all, is sucked into IT's power and becomes relentless and cruel. Similarly, Meg is given her faults as a "gift" from the Mrs. W's, which turn out to be her strengths in discovering her happy medium.

#### **AFFECTIVE ISSUES RELATED TO THE WORK**

- ❖ This is a perfect book for adolescents because everyone can relate to at least one of the characters. Though not the stereotypical teenager, Meg feels the frustrations that every teenager has once expressed. She just can't seem to fit in...anywhere. She is an anomaly in her family because the beauty of her mother seems completely lost on her, and the brilliance of her parents seems to have skipped a generation as well. Her twin brothers, Sandy and Dennys, are popular, good athletes who get along in school just fine. At school, Meg tries to fit in by hiding her intellect, only to be called immature. Have students ever felt that they have been ridiculed because they just couldn't find their niche? Did they have hidden talents that they didn't share because they were afraid of being laughed at? Did they ever feel like their family was the "anomaly" of the neighborhood, and everyone else was normal?
- ❖ Students can find examples of things that are not always as they seem. What did they think about the transformation of Mrs. Whatsit; going from a dowdy old lady to a beautiful, breathtaking creature? How do our perceptions change because of someone's physical appearance? How do we judge people/characters?
- ❖ Students can talk about their experience of being "different." Why do students think that Charles chose to let people think he was stupid, rather than revealing how brilliant he was?
- ❖ Students can talk about how words are inadequate in describing experiences, but in another sense, how words are necessary. Why did emotions have power over words, logic, and math when in the presence of IT?

#### **VOCABULARY ISSUES**

For a book that has been predominantly taught in the fifth and sixth grades, the vocabulary is very difficult. There are three kinds of tough vocabulary encountered in this book:

- 1) Mrs. Who has a continual quirk of speaking in many different languages. Although every sentence is translated (they are usually proverbs or common sayings), the variety of languages can be intimidating, especially when she speaks in Greek or Cyrillic, using unfamiliar alphabets.
- 2) The second kind of vocabulary encountered is scientific jargon. Because Meg's parents are both scientists, unusual words such as "tesseract," "protoplasm," "formaldehyde" or "tesser." Similarly, difficult concepts such as four- and five-dimensional time are discussed, as well as some pretty complex concepts of molecular properties. One of the chapter headings, "Absolute Zero," refers to a scientific term in which all molecular motion ceases at -273 degrees Celsius. This would be a hard allusion for most readers, not just younger ones, to pick up on.
- 3) The third kind is the usual higher-level vocabulary. Charles Wallace, the five-year old is continually teaching himself vocabulary that is unusual for a

fifteen-year old to know, let alone a five-year old. Vocabulary words that may need review might include (page numbers are indicated):

- ❖ Delinquent (4)
- ❖ Prodigious (11)
- ❖ Diction (10)
- ❖ Sparse (17)
- ❖ Belligerent (26)
- ❖ Supine (20)
- ❖ Liniment (20)
- ❖ Decipher (43)
- ❖ Morass (49)
- ❖ Inexorable (58)
- ❖ Corporeal (57)
- ❖ Dissolution (79)
- ❖ Intolerable (80)
- ❖ Reverberated (86)
- ❖ Sonorous (85)
- ❖ Ambrosia (94)
- ❖ Talisman (100)
- ❖ Bilious (115)
- ❖ Obliquely (123)
- ❖ Pinioned (135)
- ❖ Connotations (137)
- ❖ Pedantic (139)
- ❖ Sadist (141)
- ❖ Translucent (151)
- ❖ Myopic (153)
- ❖ Gait (155)
- ❖ Dais (158)
- ❖ Disembodied (158)
- ❖ Illumination (204)
- ❖ Tangible (211)



### **MAJOR CONCEPTS**

**Judgment:** how do we treat others who are different from us?

**Utopian Societies:** what is the motivation that drives societies to envision and attempt a totally unified, perfect, or “utopian” society? Why do they fail? Why doesn’t the “utopian” society of Camazotz work?

**Rational vs. Emotional Enlightenment:** What is (or should be) the balance of our rationality and emotion? Should our brains or hearts rule our decisions? Does it matter? What are the consequences of each?

### **BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE**

It might be helpful to talk about the different notions of time; how time can both be linear and circular. Many anticipatory guides would be needed in order for students to understand the many abstract conceptions such as: traveling through time by means of a “wrinkle,” the abstract struggle of good and evil as symbolized by IT and the planet of Camazotz.

As a teacher, I would also go through and explain the allusions as they came up, to add deeper levels of meaning to the names of places and things. Many of the puns might need to be explained; a mini-lesson on “playing on words” might be helpful.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS OF DIVERSITY**

- ❖ Students may be interested in the exploration of how individuals are discriminated against because of their intelligence, or seeming “lack” of it.
- ❖ Students of diversity may also consider the shifting of preconceived judgments that occurs during Meg’s visit to the planet Ixchel. She discovers that the creatures on this planet are completely blind, and she almost pities them as she realizes that she will never be able to explain the concept of sight to them. As she comes to learn, however, the Beasts have an extraordinary sense of insight and are actually able to “see” better emotionally and intellectually than Meg can with here eyesight. How are others “blinded” by preconceived notions? How do our differences and diversity aid us?

#### **GENDER ISSUES**

There are no particular gender issues in this novel, although Madeleine L’Engle does break a few gender stereotypes: Mrs. Murry is a female, and very proficient, scientist; the mail is handled by a postmistress, rather than a postman, and even the Mrs. W’s transcend traditional gender roles when they transform into creatures with masculine features. Women are thus depicted as strong, independent, and very capable characters with extraordinary talents and abilities; happily, L’Engle accomplishes this without doing harm to the primary male characters. Calvin O’Keefe is sensible and considerate, while Mr. Murry is a caring, concerned father. Interestingly, IT is ostensibly gender-neutral; this may merely be enforcing that IT is the epitome of anonymity and conformity, or that the evil of IT transcends gender (thankfully).

#### **THE CENTRAL QUESTION/ENDURING ISSUE**

The enduring issue of *A Wrinkle in Time* is the role of choice and free will in our lives. The recurring questions are: Upon what do we base our choices? Do we allow logic or emotion to rule our choices? What is the balance of logic and emotion in making choices (and how we successfully marry the two)? What are the effects and consequences of choices? What are the consequences of predeterminism, or lack of free will?

For younger students, you may wish to lead a class discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of controlled choices. Talk about how decision-making can be a painful and difficult process, but discuss what can happen when accountability and choice are taken away.

#### **RESEARCH ISSUES/PROJECT IDEAS**

- ❖ Real Utopian Societies: Research a community or society in history that practiced the ideals of Utopia. Read *Utopia* by Sir Thomas More, and discuss how his ideas have been misinterpreted or attempted in the past. You may also look into religions that look forward to a future Utopian society, or believe to live in a Utopian society now.
- ❖ Transcendentalism: Choose a transcendentalist author or poet and talk about his or her ideas and how they are related to Utopian ideals. (Start with Henry David Thoreau or Ralph Waldo Emerson).
- ❖ Game: Create a board game that uses the plot and characters of *A Wrinkle in Time* as its premise. For example, your game pieces could be Meg, Charles Wallace

and Calvin as they journey through the galaxy, or merely a few events of the book.

- ❖ Research one of the planets in our solar system, and create a habitat for an alien species that live there. What features do these aliens have that allows them to live on that planet? What are they like culturally, traditionally, physically, mentally? How are they similar to or different from the human race? If they had to, how would this alien race get along with the human race?
- ❖ Historical Figures: Research one of the historical figures mentioned in Chapter Five (“The Tesseract”) and find out who they are and why they are important. This list includes Jesus, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Bach, Louis Pasteur, Madame Curie, Einstein, Euclid, Schweitzer, Gandhi, Buddha, Beethoven, Rembrandt, St. Francis, and Copernicus. You may believe there are other historical figures worthy of being the great fighters of evil. Why are they considered to be fighters of the Black Thing? You may consider doing a multigenre report for this project.
- ❖ Proverbs, Quotes and Cliches: Mrs. Who is characterized by her quirk of quoting people, proverbs, plays, and great works of literature—often in different languages. Choose one or two of her quotes and find out where they originate and what their literal meaning is.
- ❖ Cross-Curricular Research in Science: Present research on one of the scientific terms found in *A Wrinkle in Time*; i.e., absolute zero, tesseract, speed of light, uses of the Bunsen burner, etc. What do you know about stars, and about them burning out? What kind of a scientist studies time and physics? What breakthroughs, if any, have been made concerning space and time travel? What is Einstein’s theory of relativity and how does it work in the novel?

### **INFORMATIONAL, FUNCTIONAL, OR LITERARY TEXTS**

*The Phantom Tollbooth* could be used to compare and contrast, as an easier companion book that deals with a lot of the same issues and themes.

An introduction to the science fiction, using short stories by Orson Scott Card (see a list of his short stories at the following site: <http://www.hatrack.com/osc/index.shtml>.)

Any book that deals with Utopian/Dystopian societies, perhaps *Utopia* by Sir Thomas More, *Anthem* by Ayn Rand, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, or *1984* or *Fahrenheit 451*.

*Physics for Dummies* and *Astronomy for Dummies* are helpful resources for the English teacher to read about the scientific context of *A Wrinkle in Time*.

