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"Where doesn't make any difference":

The Utopian State of Love in L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* and *A Wind in the Door*

It took two years and forty rejection slips before Madeleine L'Engle published her Newbery Award winning novel, *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962). The novel revolves around the Murry family and the unusual and, often, terrifying adventures of Meg Murry, her five-year old brother, Charles Wallace, and Meg's schoolmate, Calvin O'Keefe. Publishers felt the novel too radical for children, particularly in its treatment of traditional parental roles and the forces of good and evil. Fortunately, *Wrinkle* eventually found a home, and L'Engle followed with two "companion" novels, *A Wind in the Door* (1973) and *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (1978), completing what is now called the Time Trilogy. While scholars such as Rebecca Lukens, William Blackburn, and even L'Engle herself, profess that these novels could be classified as both high fantasy and science fiction, I would argue that the novels of the Time Trilogy fall into the utopian genre as well.

These stories blur the lines between fantasy and utopia, terms which, at their most lucid moments, elude concrete definitions. L'Engle says, "Fantasy is indeed a multifaceted word. . . . It is not escapism. It is, rather, a search for a deeper reality, for the truth that will make us more free" ("Fantasy" 129-30). The same could be argued of utopia. Lyman Tower Sargent maintains that "at its

base utopianism is social dreaming, and includes elements of fantasy . . ." (4). In these novels, the two concepts merge together in order to resolve conflict and bring happiness to the novels' characters.

The utopian aspects of the novels work in tandem with the didactic conventions of children's literature to weave interesting and compelling stories. These conventions traditionally include a moral lesson but contemporary children's literature calls for more creative and less overt instruction. John Rowe Townsend asserts, "Years ago we threw the old didacticism (dowdy morality) out of the window; it has come back in at the door wearing modern dress (smart values) and we do not even recognize it" (56). Sheila Egoff argues that today's children's fiction genres:

all share qualities that reflect a new approach to writing for children: stylist and thematic maturity, seriousness, psychological probing, and highly individualized characters. . . . [M]any authors today engage their characters in intense struggles for emotional and psychological survival: stripped of every traditional stereotype of childhood, the protagonists stand forlorn, in an environment controlled by adults, amid crisis situations that will change their lives. (429-30)

L'Engle develops the conflicts in her novels using these guidelines and integrates utopian experiences into the psychological development of her characters. L'Engle does not make any pretense of offering "blueprints" for a new and perfect utopian world; instead, she works under an alternative definition of utopian.

Utopia literally means *no* or *not place* (Sargent 5) but the vagueness of this explanation allows for its definition to move beyond being just a socially- or environmentally-specific place. Ruth Levitas explains that while utopia is often depicted in literature as a perfect place or society, "the definition goes beyond that of an alternative world, possible or otherwise." She explains:

[T]he pursuit of a better way of being does not always involve the alteration of external conditions, but may mean the pursuance of spiritual or psychological states; and again,

the question of what governs such changes is an interesting one. The pursuit of individual psychological and physical "fitness" in contemporary society can be seen as one aspect of a withdrawal of utopia from the social to the personal. (191-92)

L'Engle's utopian objectives, then, include jarring static notions of reality by presenting unpleasant alternatives, and showing the significance of individual perception transformations. In *A Wrinkle in Time* and *A Wind in the Door*, L'Engle focuses on Meg Murry's internal transformation. By carefully and thoughtfully blending elements of utopia, fantasy, and science fiction together, she produces two novels that convey a moral lesson in a manner that engages young readers.

Interestingly, L'Engle begins by shattering a traditional utopian image, the myth of the mid-twentieth-century, happy and "perfect" family. *A Wrinkle in Time* opens with the adolescent heroine, Meg Murry, lamenting about her poor grades, trouble with her fellow students, and a missing father. The Murry household is a far cry from the "typical" family. Mrs. Murry is a scientist who often cooks dinner over a Bunsen burner in her lab and Mr. Murry, a physicist, has been away on a "secret and dangerous mission" and his family has not heard from him in some time (52). The family's uniqueness spawns rumors among the townspeople who gossip about Mr. Murry's absence and call young Charles Wallace, who is exceptionally brilliant and articulate, a "moron" because, fearing resentment, he hides his intelligence from all but his family.

Meg still finds utopian images in her home despite the problems confronting her family. The novel opens with a "dark and stormy night" that sends Meg scurrying down from her attic bedroom:

The warmth and light of the kitchen had relaxed her so that her attic fears were gone.

The cocoa steamed fragrantly in the saucepan; geraniums bloomed on the window sills and there was bouquet of tiny yellow chrysanthemums in the center of the table. (11)

Meg's fears were "subdued by the familiar comfort of the kitchen" (11). Charles Wallace, who has the mental capacity to pick up on Meg's thoughts, has anticipated her needs and awaits her downstairs with hot cocoa and his company.

L'Engle gradually introduces the fantastic into her novel, beginning, as utopias and children's fantasy often do, with identifiable images that draw the reader into the experience. L'Engle contends:

Stories of fantasy almost always start in the familiar world of the five senses, with what the reader can recognize; with kitchens, liverwurst sandwiches, stormy nights. Fantasy is rooted in and springs from the real. It is the real taken to that deeper reality that is beyond ordinary human perception. ("Fantasy" 130)

Meg's world, unfortunately, goes beyond her home. She is a character with whom many readers could identify; she views herself as physically unattractive (especially when compared to her beautiful mother), stupid, and socially inept. One reason for Meg's anticipation of her father's return is that she believes that he will solve all of the family's, and her, problems. Meg has a false utopian vision of how life will be when he returns. She unconsciously sees his disappearance as the sole source of her insecurity.

With the help of three unusual entities--Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Who, and Mrs. Which--Meg, Charles Wallace, and Calvin O'Keefe embark on their own mission to find Mr. Murry. The three children travel through space and time via a mental/physical phenomenon called "tessering" or "wrinkling," a fifth-dimensional means of moving quickly between places that, as Mrs. Whatsit explains, is like folding two sections of a skirt together (75-76). In this new dimension, form becomes as manipulatable as time and place. Mrs. Whatsit, who was originally a star, changes from an old woman persona into a winged creature that transports the children around the planet, Uriel. But while external shells may be changing, the story emphasizes content, or the internal self.

Meg's internal journey results from her displacement during time and space traveling. Donald Hettinga asserts, "She [Meg] wants to understand reality; like most young people, she want to find her place in the world" (25). Ironically, in order to find a place in *her* world, Meg must first explore other worlds, a plot feature common in utopian novels. She needs to see the alternatives that jar her from her familiar perceptions of reality and give her a more positive perspective of life when she returns to earth. Meg, Charles Wallace, and Calvin travel to the planet Camazotz to save, not only Mr. Murry, but the earth as well. Mrs. Whatsit has shown them a black shadow covering their planet, the "Dark Thing" representing "evil" and "the powers of darkness" that threatens human existence (88).

Frequently, utopian novels present a dystopian world or element as a warning to the reader of what *could* happen if preventative action is not taken (Sargent 5). Camazotz is this dystopia, or "bad place." While the planet resembles earth with its houses and people, this dystopian world, dominated by a disembodied brain called IT, presents an unnatural world of harsh control. As Meg, Calvin, and Charles Wallace walk down the street, they notice every house is the same and the children playing out front, whether skipping rope or bouncing balls, do so in the exact same rhythm. A lone boy bounces his ball out of synch and they later see him being tortured into conforming.

The trip to Camazotz becomes an important lesson for Meg who has, prior to this journey, been obsessed with conforming. She has wanted to "fit in" with her fellow classmates and have the townspeople accept her family. Camazotz stands as a "warning" against such conformity. IT tells them, "We have conquered all illness, all deformity," but the children discover, to their horror, that the sick are simply "annihilated" (139). Meg's fixation on sameness starts deteriorating when IT, speaking through a hypnotized Charles Wallace, says, "On Camazotz we are all happy because we are all alike. Differences create problems" (140). Meg makes a step towards self-reconciliation when she counters, "Maybe I don't like being different . . . but I don't want to be like everybody else, either" (141).

Ultimately, Meg's dystopian experience on Camazotz makes her appreciate her life back home. Meg yells at her brother, still possessed by Camazotz's IT, "I know our world isn't perfect, Charles, but it's better than this. This isn't the only alternative! It can't be!" (142). Despite this revelation, she must re-examine her life and her expectations. In an interesting plot twist, Meg must rescue her father instead of her father rescuing them. She has a lapse of faith in her world when, upon first finding Mr. Murry, she notices "her adored father was bearded and thin and white and not omnipotent after all" (158).

Meg is put to the most significant test of faith when she must rescue Charles Wallace from IT. Mr. Murry "tessers" or "wrinkles" Calvin and Meg away to the planet Ixchel, but they leave Charles Wallace behind. Meg struggles between loving her father for who he is and hating him for leaving her brother with IT. In a moment of selflessness, Meg realizes that she must be the one to return to Camazotz to save Charles Wallace since they have the strongest emotional and mental bond. Before she departs, the three entities--Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Which, and Mrs. Who--present "gifts" (an important tradition in fantasy and myth) to carry with her; they give her love and tell her the strongest weapon she has is something IT hasn't got. In a climatic struggle, Meg saves Charles from IT when she realizes that she has love. Meg can love and be loved, something that empowers her and separates her world from the dystopian alternative, Camazotz. Hettinga observes that "[p]hysically, she ends the novel where she begins--the place is the same and the time is even the same. . . . Yet, psychologically, she is a very different person, someone who no longer sees the world as she did at the outset of the narrative" (24-25). Meg realizes her self worth and is empowered by her ability to love and be loved. She now appreciates a family and home which typically taken for granted.

In *A Wrinkle in Time*, Meg heeds the dystopian warning and returns to earth seeing her world differently, an experience which performs an important utopian function. Meg's internal revelation is a utopian tradition and parallels similar experiences in adult utopian novels such as Bellamy's *Looking*

Backward and Piercy's *Women on the Edge of Time*. Traveling through space and/or time colors the way in which the protagonists see their original reality. Like Meg, they change their perceptions when they see an alternative world. Kenneth Roemer explains:

. . . encouraging the reader to experience utopia facilitates the dual psychological (actually perceptual) function of utopian literature: to disengage him from present reality so that he can see and feel better alternatives to the present and see and feel the present in new ways. Utopia is a seeing experience. (Roemer 5)

This theme recurs in the second novel of the Time Trilogy, *A Wind in the Door*. Both novels imply that humans rely too heavily on "seeing" visually instead of spiritually. As one of the beasts on the planet Ixchel remarked, "It must be a very limiting thing, this seeing" referring to human reliance on physical vision (*Wrinkle* 181). L'Engle stresses the importance of learning to see and understand with your heart and soul instead of just your eyes.

A Wind in the Door involves another thrilling and frightening adventure where the characters learn to appreciate their world through internal revelations. Meg must, once again, rescue Charles Wallace, this time enlisting the help of not only Calvin O'Keefe, but also her former principal, Mr. Jenkins, whom she dislikes. As in the first novel, Meg wants her life and her family's life to be better because, she feels, nothing is going right: Charles Wallace has entered school and gets bullied by his classmates constantly, she feels alienated from her brother because of his declining health and he tells her he is seeing dragons; and the Murrays are still socially ostracized because of their unconventionalness. Levitas asserts that "the essential element in utopia is not hope, but desire--the desire for a better way of being" (Levitas 191). Meg fulfills this desire in *A Wind in the Door* just as she did in *A Wrinkle in Time*, that is, through love.

Meg's adventure/quest for utopia begins when she learns that Charles Wallace's mitochondria, "tiny organisms living in our cells," are sick and their destruction could lead to her brother's death. She

must battle the Echthroi, evil forces that threaten the mitochondria and the universe, to save him. While the enterprise involves others--her ex-principal, Mr. Jenkins, Calvin, a cherubim, and an unusual space-traveling "teacher" called Blajeny--the psychological journey is primarily Meg's.

The trip into one of Charles' dying mitochondria turns into a lesson in spiritual vision. Ironically, Meg must be blinded in order to see her "present" more clearly and positively. She panics when she moves to "the other side of feeling" where she was "below light, below sound" (152). Meg *feels*, instead of sees, her way through saving the mitochondrion and, as in *Wrinkle*, uses love to battle the evil forces threatening them. She even learns to love Mr. Jenkins and accept his faults just as she learns to accept her own.

Again, Charles is rescued because of self-sacrifice and love, humanistic characteristics that, the text suggests, exist in everyone but occasionally need motivation in order to surface. Levitas observes that "most utopians do . . . make implicit or explicit claims about human nature" (184). L'Engle implies that humans are inherently good and the experience (fantasy) only acts as a catalyst for revealing this good. William Blackburn observes that "the novel as a whole insists on depicting evil as foreign to human nature" (130).

In some ways, the novels possess an Oz-like "there's-no-place-like-home" aspect in that Meg must travel across universes and centuries in order to understand qualities and concepts that were with her all along. But these journeys are a necessary part of utopian constructs. Meg takes a big step towards personal happiness and peace when she discovers, through her time and space travel, that geographical place does not matter. At one point in *A Wind in the Door*, Blajeny, the teacher who guides them through their mission, tells Calvin, Meg, and Mr. Jenkins, that they have traveled to "an idea, a postulatium" (125). With all of the movement beyond the spacio-temporal, this comment sits at the core of both novels. The utopian world is as geographically unfixed as an idea.

L'Engle wraps important, universal utopian themes in a didactic, but palatable, package. Her stories conform to the conventions of contemporary children's literature: they teach a lesson about the self while simultaneously empowering children to at least change *their*, if not *the* world. Utopia is Meg's self-discovery and self-satisfaction; it is having family and friends that love you, and appreciating the ultimate human pleasure of "simply being" (*Wind* 203). For L'Engle, utopia and love are inseparable and exist in any place, time, or entity (human or otherwise). Through carefully woven fantasy, L'Engle disengages utopia from the physical and societal and places it in the spiritual and individual, in the being. As Calvin tells Meg, "*Where* doesn't make any difference. It's why. And how. And who" (*Wind* 152).

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