



In-Depth Author Study and Critical Analysis: Madeleine L'Engle

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Introduction

Madeleine L'Engle was a well-known children's and young adult author. Her contributions to the field of young adult literature were acknowledged when she was named recipient of the American Library Association's Margaret A. Edwards Award in 1998. L'Engle's legacy remains alive and active today as her most famous work, *A Wrinkle in Time*, continues in popularity and celebrates its fiftieth year since publication. The following in-depth study of Madeleine L'Engle examines her life, her writing career and achievements as well as provides a critical analysis of her writing style.

Part One: Personal Life and Career

Personal Life

Madeleine L'Engle was born on November 29, 1918 in New York. Her father was a respected journalist and her mother was a gifted pianist. (Hedblad 2002, 151). During her childhood, L'Engle traveled abroad to the French Alps with her parents where she spent time in an English boarding school (About Madeleine L'engle 2012). Returning to the United States, L'Engle spent her high school years in Charleston, South Carolina (About Madeleine L'engle 2012). Afterward, she attended Smith College, in Massachusetts. She also later attended New School for Social Research, and Columbia University (Hedblad 2002, 148). Although she had studied English at Smith College, L'Engle began a career in theater when she returned to New York afterward. During her time in the theater, she met and soon after married actor Hugh

Franklin on January 26, 1946 (Hedblad 2002, 148). Leaving her career behind, L'Engle devoted herself to raising her family of three children: Josephine, Maria, and Bion (Hedblad 2002, 148).

In the early years of her married life, L'Engle and her husband lived in Connecticut, running a general store. After returning to New York City where her husband "revitalized his professional acting career," L'Engle began "her association with the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, where she was the librarian and maintained an office for more than thirty years" (About Madeleine L'engle 2012). Although she had always written, after the death of her husband in 1986 L'Engle devoted more time to her writing career. L'Engle died September 6, 2007, in Litchfield, Connecticut (Madeleine L'Engle (1918-2007) 2008, 133).

Writing Career

As the saying goes, "Once a writer, always a writer." L'Engle reportedly wrote her first stories at the age of five (Hedblad 2002, 151). Before marrying, L'Engle had published *The Small Rain* (1945) and had been prompted by her publisher to write a children's novel (Commire 1982, 133,135). Throughout her marriage, she continued to write. However, during the 1950's, L'Engle had difficulty getting her works published and reported nearly gave up writing (Commire 1982, 136). In 1960, L'Engle published *Meet the Austins* (Commire 1982, 131) and her writing career picked up significant speed. In her fifty year writing career, L'Engle published over sixty works (Madeleine L'Engle (1918-2007) 2008, 133).

L'Engle did not intend to write children's or young adult novels. She is quoted for saying "You have to write the book that wants to be written. And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you write it for children" (About Madeleine L'engle 2012). Most of

L'Engle's protagonists are young adults, varying in age from around twelve (as in Vicky in *Meet the Austins*) and early twenty's (as in Elizabeth in *The Joys of Love*).

L'Engle is most famous for *A Wrinkle in Time* which was published in 1962 after being rejected twenty-six times over two years (Hedblad 2002, 152). In 1963, *A Wrinkle in Time* won L'Engle the Newbery Medal (Commire 1982, 137). *A Wrinkle in Time* also won the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award in 1965, and was a runner-up for the Hans Christian Andersen Award in 1964 (Hedblad 2002, 152).

L'Engle received numerous awards and honors for her works. Most notably were: the University of Southern Mississippi Silver Medallion for outstanding contribution to the field of children's literature in 1978, the National Council of Teachers of English Adolescent Literature Assembly Award for Outstanding Contribution to Adolescent Literature in 1986, and the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in young adult literature in 1998 (Hedblad 2002, 148-149). The Margaret A. Edwards Award cited the *Austin* Family Series books, *Meet the Austins* and *A Ring of Endless Light*, along with the *Time* Series books, *A Wrinkle in Time* and *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*.

Part Two: Works

L'Engle published her first work as an adult novel reflecting her own experience in boarding school. *The Small Rain* did very well, so much so that her publisher took her second novel, *Ilsa*, and published it as it was written (Commire 1982, 135). At this point, her publisher

suggested she write for children, and she set out writing her third novel, *And Both Were Young* (Commire 1982, 135).

When L'Engle began writing for children, young adult literature was not known to be its own entity. Many of L'Engle's works in this category fall into both, literature for children and literature for young adults. Additionally, many of L'Engle's fiction works were considered series with overlaps and crossovers connecting one series with another.

The *Time* Series

The *Time* series consists of *A Wrinkle in Time*, *A Wind in the Door*, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, *Many Waters*, and *An Acceptable Time*. This series is centered around Meg Murry and her family. In *A Wrinkle in Time*, Meg and her family are introduced as well as Meg's future husband. Meg's father is a physicist who has been missing for two years. Meg's younger brother, Charles Wallace, has met some unusual women who turn out to be celestial beings that help Meg, Charles Wallace, and their friend Calvin go on a galactic adventure to find Meg's father. In *A Wind in the Door*, Charles Wallace becomes very sick and says there are dragons in the garden. Meg and Calvin go on another galactic space journey that saves Charles Wallace's life. Although written in 1986, *Many Waters* takes place next according to plot chronology. In *Many Waters*, Meg's twin brothers Dennys and Sandy find themselves teleported to the desert where they find out that they are with Noah, building the Ark before the Biblical flood. In *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, Meg and Calvin are now married. Calvin is out of the country while Meg returns home for Thanksgiving. After a phone call from the President informs Meg's father that he may be needed in the event of a nuclear war, now fifteen year old Charles Wallace sets out on

a quest traveling back and forth through time to the same location with a unicorn averting events in history to prevent the impending nuclear war. Meg communicates with Charles Wallace telepathically throughout. The final book in the *Time* series is *An Acceptable Time*, written in 1989. Poly O'Keefe, the daughter of Meg and Calvin O'Keefe, is spending the fall with her mother's parents. During her visit, Poly discovers the family's secret of time travel.

The *O'Keefe* Series (also called The Canon Tallis Mysteries)

Connecting her series is not uncommon for Madeleine L'Engle. Poly O'Keefe, the protagonist in the *O'Keefe* Series, is the daughter of Meg Murry and her husband, Calvin O'Keefe of the *Time* Series. L'Engle actually ends the *Time* series with *An Acceptable Time* in which Poly is the main character. The *O'Keefe* Series consists of *The Arm of the Starfish*, *Dragons in the Waters*, and *A House Like a Lotus*. In *Arm of the Starfish*, Poly is kidnapped and a young marine biologist named Adam Eddington, who is working for her, father rescues her. In *Dragons in the Waters*, Polly (changed her spelling) and her brother are traveling when they get somewhat caught up in a murder involving a stolen portrait involving an orphan en route to Venezuela. In *A House Like A Lotus*, sixteen year old Polly is sent to Greece by her friend Maximiliana Horne, meets Zachary Gray, and has a love affair with Renny (the cousin of the orphan, Simon, from *Dragons on the Waters*). The *O'Keefe* series is also called the Canon Tallis Mysteries. Canon Tallis is an episcopal minister who is a friend of the O'Keefe family, described by Polly in *Dragons on the Waters* as “not really a detective, but whenever there's big trouble he gets called in to help” (L'Engle 1976). Tallis' character is integral in solving the mysteries in the first two books of this series.

The *Austin* Series

Meet the Austins was published in 1960, the turning point in L'Engle's writing career. The first in the *Austin* series, L'Engle introduces twelve year old Vicky Austin and her family. A friend of a close family relative is killed and Vicky's parents take in a spoiled, orphaned ten year old named Maggy. The *Austin* series consists of novels and short stories. The novels include *Meet the Austins*, *The Moon by Night*, *The Young Unicorns*, *A Ring of Endless Light*, and *Troubling a Star*. The short stories include *The Twenty-four Days before Christmas*, *A Full House: An Austin Family Christmas*, and *The Anti-Muffins*.

After meeting and getting to know the Austin family in *Meet the Austins*, *The Moon by Night* takes them on a cross-country camping trip. Along the way, Vicky meets Zachary Gray, a wealthy and reckless young man who seems to follow them from camp to camp. In *The Young Unicorns*, the Austins have left their home in Connecticut to stay in New York while Mr. Austin does research. Here they meet a young man named Josiah "Dave" Davidson who helps a young blind pianist get around. Emily, the blind pianist, is studying under Canon Tallis from the *O'Keefe* series. A mystery takes place.

In *A Ring of Endless Light*, Vicky is now almost sixteen, as the family is leaving New York to return to Connecticut. En route, the family spends the summer at her grandfather's home on a small island somewhere off the eastern coast. Zachary Gray arrives once again. This time he has been the cause of the death of a beloved family friend in a boating incident as the result of his characteristic reckless behavior. Vicky's summer is busy. She spends most of her days watching her grandfather's health decline from leukemia. When she is not at home tending to her grandfather or helping her mother, Vicky is being courted by both Zach and Leo, the son

of the family friend who was killed in Zach's boating incident. The best part of Vicky's summer is when she gets to work with Adam Eddington, the marine biologist from *Arm of the Starfish* (*O'Keefe* series) and now co-worker of her brother, who is doing research on dolphins. It is during the research with dolphins that Vicky learns she can communicate with the dolphins through ESP. In *Troubling a Star*, Vicky travels to Antarctica to visit Adam who also travels to Antarctica from Venezuela.

Other Fiction for Children and Young Adults

Many of L'Engle's other works, not connected to a series, are also considered children and/or young adult literature. One example is *Camilla*. L'Engle first wrote and published *Camilla Dickinson* in 1951, then republished it as *Camilla* in 1965. Camilla is a fifteen year old living in New York City. Her parents are having marital difficulty and are both looking to her for loyalty. Camilla knows her mother is seeing another man. Camilla's mother also attempts suicide. During this difficult time, Camilla develops a relationship with Frank, her best friend, Luisa's brother, Frank. In the end, Frank leaves with his father as his parents decide to divorce, Camilla's parents decide to go on a European vacation, and Camilla is sent her off to a boarding school.

Autobiographies

The *Crosswicks Journals* are known as L'Engle's autobiographies. These are *A Circle of Quiet* (1972), *The Summer of the Great Grandmother* (1974), *Two-Part Invention* (1988), and

The Irrational Season (1997). It is assumed that these are adult literature. *Two-Part Invention*, for example, discusses her marriage.

Non-fiction

L'Engle wrote an estimated thirteen non-fictions. These non-fiction works consist mostly of examinations of her faith, art, and family. L'Engle's non-fiction books are said to "explore family relationships as well as religious and metaphysical subjects" (Hedblad 2002, 153). Several were written for children and young adults. For example, *Anytime Prayers* (1994) is L'Engle's collection of children's prayers.

Other Writings

L'Engle was a master writer. In addition to her novels, autobiographies, and non-fiction works, L'Engle also wrote and published other writings. L'Engle published at least four books of poetry along with three plays (Telgen 1994, 116). "As a poet, writing for a much smaller audience, L'Engle felt less pressure to conform to the gender expectations of her age, and allowed herself to be exceptional, embarking on flights of fancy in which the real-life L'Engle, self-consciously grounded in domestic details, would not indulge. With no intention of writing for the professional poetry market, she was free to imagine her critics as Shakespeare, Pope Gregory the Great, and Sir Thomas Browne. Her simplest poems are also her most thought out, as in these lines from the title poem of her last collection." (Avakian 2007, 10). In addition,

L'Engle contributed articles, stories, and poems to periodicals throughout her career (Telgen 1994, 116).

Part Three: Analysis of Writing Style

L'Engle's writing style is multi-faceted. Not only did she write in various formats, L'Engle also wrote with focus on several key elements within her writing, regardless of which genre platform she was using. L'Engle wrote about her own life's reflections and her religious beliefs. In addition, L'Engle connected many of her fiction stories together, often using the same characters or settings.

Life's Reflections

L'Engle wrote often about herself. Her boarding school memories were transformed into *The Small Rain*, her first published novel (Hedblad 2002, 151). In her article following the death of L'Engle, Sandra Jordan states "Most writers ultimately are writing about themselves, and Madeleine was the first to admit she "was" her two female main characters-insecure, geeky Meg Murray and the sensitive aspiring writer, Vicky Austin" (Jordan 2007, 50).

L'Engle also wrote about her family and home life. For example, Jordan discusses "Crosswicks, the rambling pre-Revolutionary War house she and Hugh owned in Goshen, CT. The house was the center, not only of the Crosswicks Journals but also of the Murry family novels. There she [L'Engle] pointed out Meg's attic bedroom, the kitchen table where the Murry

family gathered in times of crisis, the twins' vegetable garden, the star-watching rock, and even the pond where Maddox settled when he came from Wales. It was fascinating, but the picture of the starwatching rock I already had in my mind was not supplanted by the "reality" of the actual rock. Seeing these places, for me, was a little like peeking at her notes and source materials. It was through her imagination that she transformed them from mere fact into a story" (2007, 50). Other events in L'Engle's life that appear in her writings include the theatre (*Joys of Love*) and the adoption of close family friends' daughter after the death of her parents (*Meet the Austins*) (Yunghans 1995).

Personal and family events were not the only thing in which L'Engle drew from her personal life into her novels. Settings were also personal. L'Engle used settings repeatedly that she had spent time in her personal life. New York, where she was born, returned to after college, lived with her husband, and the latter part of her life is central to several of her stories. *Camilla*, *The Severed Wasp*, and *The Young Unicorns* are all set in New York. Likewise, New York is mentioned in conjunction with the plot in *A Ring of Endless Light* and *The Joys of Love*. Connecticut is also repeatedly used in L'Engle's writing. The *Time* series is based out of the rural setting mimicking L'Engle's Connecticut home. Jordan was quoted previously for stating how L'Engle used Crosswicks for the setting of the *Time* series. The Austins actually live in Connecticut in the *Austin* series.

Religious beliefs

L'Engle was a Christian. Her religious beliefs were a large part of her life. L'Engle included elements of her faith throughout her writings. Many of her fiction novels contained

scripture quotes or references to God. Likewise, many of her fiction works also had elements of good versus evil or of light versus darkness. Her non-fiction works contained prayers, memoirs of her relationship with Christ, and explorations into her beliefs (About Madeleine L'engle 2012). In the *Austin* series, Vicky's grandfather is a minister, and has scripture text painted on the walls of his home. The Austins mention scripture and their beliefs within that series. In the *Time* series, Christ is mentioned as the greatest for his work in the fight against evil. It is also said that in the *Time* series L'Engle "further develops the theme of love as a weapon against darkness" (Hedblad 2002, 153). In *Camilla*, Camilla and Frank discuss how they view God despite the fact that Luisa says she does not believe in God at all.

L'Engle's non-fiction works are mostly religious themed in content. Some of her non-fiction works are referred to as L'Engle's bibliography or the Genesis Trilogy (About Madeleine L'engle 2012). The trilogy is made up of *And It Was Good: Reflections on Beginnings* (1983), *A Stone for a Pillow: Journeys with Jacob* (1986), and *Sold Into Egypt: Joseph's Journey into Human Being* (1989). In these, L'Engle "takes us on a new journey" as she relates her own personal reflections along with those she discovers in the Bible accounts discussed (About Madeleine L'engle 2012).

Connectivity

The overlapping of characters from one series to another in her novels is a unique style L'Engle chose to utilize. The *Time* series ends with a bridge into the *O'Keefe* series through the character of Poly O'Keefe, the daughter of *Time* series main character, Meg Murry. One of the characters of the *O'Keefe* series, Tallis, is in the *Austin* series' *The Young Unicorns*. Zachary

Gray who first appears in the *Austin* series in *The Moon by Night* and again in *A Ring of Endless Light* also makes an appearance in the *O'Keefe* series in *A House Like a Lotus*. Like Zachary Gray, Adam Eddington first appears one series then ends in another. Adam is first introduced in the *O'Keefe* series in *The Arm of the Starfish*. Adam's story continues in the *Austin* series *A Ring of Endless Light* and *Troubling a Star*.

Other Traits in L'Engle's Works

L'Engle was known for strong female protagonists, strong family relations, and a flare for fantasy or science fiction in her work. In her three main fiction series: *Time*, *Austins*, and *O'Keefe*, L'Engle mainly uses a female protagonist. *Time*'s Meg is socially ill-fitting and views herself as awkward and unbecoming. *Austin*'s Vicky views herself as plain, and comes across as unsure of herself. L'Engle also uses a strong sense of family surrounding her female protagonists. While not all of her works maintain strong families, such as *Camilla*, L'Engle's three main series are very family oriented. Family unity and relationships are strong. The parental roles are also nurturing, strong, and respected. Sibling behavior, such as jealousy or immaturity of younger siblings, is displayed for authenticity in a family environment.

L'Engle's use of fantasy and science fiction is another trait in her fiction writing. The *Time* series not only had a female protagonist, but it also had a female protagonist who was participating in science fiction themes. In *A Wrinkle in Time*, L'Engle introduces celestial beings who help children "tesseract," a fictitious word penned by L'Engle to explain time travel. Meg, her brother Charles Wallace, and a new friend, Calvin, all travel through time and space on a dangerous mission to find the Murry's missing father. In each of the *Time* series novels,

L'Engle includes a science fiction theme such as time travel or “kything,” another fictitious word L'Engle created to define the mental telepathy and communication Meg has with her brother Charles Wallace. In the time period in which L'Engle began writing *A Wrinkle in Time*, “it was uncommon to have a female protagonist for a science fiction novel” (Cullinan n.d.). Recalling that L'Engle had a difficult time finding a publisher, “some believe it was not only because Meg Murry was a female main character in a science fiction novel, but she was also good at math and science. Both characteristics broke the stereotypic molds for females at the time” (Cullinan n.d.).

Another example of the female protagonist, strong family presence, and science fiction takes place in the *Austin* series. In *A Ring of Endless Light*, Vicky and her family are staying with her dying grandfather for what is expected to be the end of his life. During the stay, Vicky becomes part of a scientific experiment with dolphins that unveils her ability to communicate with only her mind, ESP. Not only can Vicky communicate mentally with the dolphins, but she also attempts to communicate mentally with Adam. Although they do not pursue this form of communication, Vicky is able to do so on occasion.

Literary Criticism of L'Engle

L'Engle received many awards for her literary works, including book awards and writing achievement awards. As part of the justification behind L'Engle receiving the Margaret A. Edwards award for lifetime contribution to young adult literature it is stated, “ ‘L'Engle tells stories that uniquely blend scientific principles and the quest for higher meaning,’ said Jeri Baker, chair of the Edwards Award Committee. ‘Basic to her philosophy of writing is the belief that 'story' helps individuals live courageously and creatively’ ”(Young Adult Library Services

Association 1997). Her writing success was not only confirmed in the recognition she received, but also in the volume of works she created and their publication success. L'Engle reportedly had a fifty year writing career that published over sixty titles (Madeleine L'Engle (1918-2007) 2008, 133).

Despite her success as a writer, L'Engle received a fair amount of scrutiny. The *Time* series, which L'Engle is most known for, won her high acclaim as well as scrutiny. The *Time* series was criticized because it was viewed as being “too convoluted for young readers and some readers have found the Murry family to be a trifle unbelievable and elitist, most critics praise the series for its willingness to take risks” (Hedblad 2002, 153). L'Engle contents that she wrote *A Wrinkle in Time* “in the terms of a modern world in which children know about brainwashing and the corruption of evil. It is based on Einstein’s theory of relativity and Planck’s quantum theory. It’s good, solid science, but it’s also good, solid theology. My rebuttal to the German theologians who attack God with their intellect on the assumption that the finite can comprehend the infinite, and I don’t think that’s possible” (Hedblad 2002, 152). Despite her claim that *A Wrinkle in Time* contained solid theology, another criticism L'Engle received about *A Wrinkle in Time* was the accusation that L'Engle provided an inaccurate portrayal of deity. This accusation has resulted in *A Wrinkle in Time* being named among the list of books most banned (Hedblad 2002, 153).

Conclusion

Margaret L'Engle was considered “one of the foremost American creators of fantasy and science fiction as well as a perceptive writer of realistic family stories” (Young Adult Library

Services Association 1997). Personal experience, religious beliefs, and creative themes were used liberally in her writing. So much so, that it is said that L'Engle “mixes classical theology, contemporary family life, and futuristic science fiction to make a completely convincing tale” (Hedblad 2002, 153).

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