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Abstract
Notes similarities between Lewis’s Space Trilogy and L’Engle’s *Wrinkle in Time* trilogy.

Additional Keywords
L’Engle, Madeleine. Time Quartet—Relation to C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S. Space Trilogy—Influence on Madeleine L’Engle; Edith Crowe
The Cosmic Gospel: Lewis & L'Engle

M.L. Carter

The "Phos Hilarion," as translated in the new Book of Common Prayer, proclaims:

You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices, O Son of God, O Giver of life, and to be glorified through all the worlds.

That our Lord is Lord of all worlds and all intelligences, not merely of our own Earth, has, however, not been much emphasized by the mainstream churches. It is left to science fiction writers to explore and illuminate this truth.

Most significant for this purpose, of course, is the interplanetary trilogy of C. S. Lewis. His achievement in demonstrating that "mere Christianity" is fully compatible with 20th-century knowledge of the universe is too familiar to need comment. Lesser known, perhaps, is the similar achievement of children's author Madeleine L'Engle. Like Lewis, she has written a trilogy that conveys a pair of vital messages: (a) Our life on Earth is shaped by a vast struggle between cosmic forces of Good and Evil. (b) Despite the vastness of the conflict, small choices made by seemingly insignificant individuals can have incalculable consequences. L'Engle's trilogy comprises A Wrinkle in Time (1962), A Wind in the Door (1973), and A Swiftly Tilting Planet (1978).1

Like C. S. Lewis, Madeleine L'Engle was born into an Anglican family but broke with the institutional church and lived through several years of atheism. A period of personal crisis (in contrast to Lewis' more cerebral reconversion) brought her back to God and the church. In an interview for Christianity Today (June 8, 1979) she discusses how the 'dry years' when her writing met with complete failure drew her closer to God. During those years she explored mathematics and science. About these studies she comments, "Reading Einstein and Eddington, for example, opened up a world where I could conceive of a loving God who really could note the full of every sparrow. She uses science fantasy to embody "the universe in which I could love and be loved by a creating God." Perhaps, though, "uses" is the wrong word, for her novels are not mere tools for preaching. She avows, "The fantasies are my theology." When she states that "art is always incarnational," she sounds very near to the 'subcreation' of Tolkien and Lewis.

Similarities in detail between her science fantasies and Lewis' are so striking that direct influence seems undeniable. In That Hideous Strength2 Lewis says of the Enemy's power, "The shadow of one dark wing is over all Tellius" (That Hideous Strength, p. 285). The same image is part of the 16th-century poem from which he derives his title, in the phrase, "The shadow of that hideous strength" (ibid., epigraph). A Wrinkle in Time portrays a universe in which the Enemy's creeping conquest is represented by a shadow that blots out the stars. The teenage heroine, Meg, is shown the shadow for the first time by "Mrs. Whatsit," an eccentric old woman who is actually a nonhuman intelligence of dazzling glory:

...Where the shadow was the stars were not visible. What could there be about a shadow that was so terrible that she knew that there had never been before or ever would be again, anything that would chill her with a fear that was beyond shuddering, beyond crying or screaming, beyond the possibility of comfort?

(Wrinkle in Time, p. 69-70)

Our own Earth is besieged by the darkness, though not yet conquered. "It has been there for a great many years," says Mrs. Whatsit. "That is why your planet is such a troubled one" (ibid., p. 82). As Meg's friend Calvin puts it later, "We're shadowed. But we're fighting the shadow" (ibid., p. 161). (L'Engle differs from Lewis in that he envisions Earth as the only fallen world — at least in this solar system — while she presents ours as one of many shadowed planets.)

The creeping darkness isolates Earth from its interplanetary neighbors. Many times in his works Lewis has referred to the vastness of space as "God's quarantine," preventing us from spreading our contamination to unfallen worlds. Indeed, the very title Out of the Silent Planet emphasizes this concept; our planet is "silent" because we are estranged from the rest of the cosmos. L'Engle points out this isolation: "As on our earth, as they call it, they never communicate with other planets. They revolve about all alone in space" (ibid., p. 173).

Yet chinks in our isolation do exist, and the truths of Deep Heaven, according to Lewis, can be known on Earth, even though in distorted form. L'Engle, too, proclaims our role in the cosmic order:

I know it's hard for you to understand about size, how there's very little difference in the size of the tiniest microbe and the greatest galaxy. You think about that, and maybe it can't seem strange to you that some of our very best fighters have come right from your own planet. (ibid., p. 84)

One fighter on the right side is Meg's father, a scientist, accidentally trapped on a planet that has been swallowed by the shadow. Meg's task, along with her friend Calvin and her brilliant five-year-old brother, Charles Wallace, is to rescue her father. L'Engle takes every opportunity to dramatize how the seemingly insignificant can sway titanic events, how the small and weak can be used to win great victories. That God's values are not man's is also one of Lewis' major themes; he portrays this theme, for instance, in Chapter Eleven of Perelandra,3 when Ransom is considering whether to fight the demon-possessed Weston. Ransom knows that if Weston succeeds, Perelandra (Venus) will fall as Earth did. Ransom can hardly believe that God could expect him to play a decisive role in such a drama: "What was the sense of so arranging things that anything really important should finally and absolutely depend upon such a man of straw as himself?" (Perelandra, p. 142) But God answers him with reminders of all the great events that do depend on the actions of individual human beings.

Thus, and not otherwise, the world was made.

Either something or nothing must depend on individual choices. And if something, who could set bounds to it?

(ibid., p. 142)

After long inner debate it comes to Ransom that 'he stood for Maleldil (Christ): but no more than Eve would have stood for Him by simply not eating the apple, or than any man stands for Him in doing any good action' (ibid., p. 150).

Lewis might be thinking of a New Testament passage quoted by a character in A Wrinkle in Time (p. 183): "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty" (I Corinthians 1:27). In L'Engle's fiction the battle takes many forms. One incident in A Wrinkle in Time shows a star giving up its life to annihilate a portion of the darkness. The "old woman" Mrs. Whatsit reveals that she was once a star and sacrificed herself in the same way. The concept is reminiscent of Lewis' Narnian story The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, in which we meet a venerable man named Ramandu who is actually a star "at rest"
in human form. Like Lewis' child characters, L'Engle's are awestruck at the revelation that they are speaking with a star:

The complete, the true Mrs. Whatsit, Meg realized, was beyond human understanding. What she saw was only the game Mrs. Whatsit was playing....the tiniest facet of all the things Mrs. Whatsit could be.

(A Wrinkle in Time, p. 87)

Mrs. Whatsit and her two sisters are, in fact, angels.

A few of their many facets are glimpsed in the course of the novel. At one point they half-materialize as "a quivering of light....colors ran together as in a wet water color painting"; they are "light and not substance" (ibid., p. 176). Earlier Mrs. Whatsit changes her form to

...a marble white body with powerful flanks, something like a horse but at the same time completely unlike a horse, for from the magnificently modeled back sprang a nobly formed torso, arms, and a head resembling a man's, but a man with a perfection of dignity and virtue, an exaltation of joy such as Meg had never before seen....From the shoulders slowly a pair of wings unfolded, wings made of rainbows, of light upon water, of poetry:

(ibid., p. 62)

We are reminded of images of angels, or eidola, in Lewis' trilogy. The eidola's normal shape is a glimmer of light barely visible to human eyes. Yet even in that form they evade awe, as the narrator of Perelandra describes concerning his encounter with an eidola. What he sees is "a very faint rod or pillar of light" (Perelandra, p. 18) of no identifiable color:

It was not at right angles to the floor....What one actually felt at the moment was that the column of light was vertical but the floor was not horizontal — the whole room seemed to have heaved over....I felt sure that the creature was what we call 'good,' but I wasn't sure whether I liked 'goodness' so much as I had supposed.

(ibid., p. 18-19)

The eidola can, however, wear other shapes. At the conclusion of Perelandra the eidola of Mars and Venus seek the proper form in which to honor the King and Queen of Perelandra. They successively appear as multi-eyed geometric figures mingled with flames, rolling concentric wheels, and finally gigantic, godlike human figures.

If L'Engle's angels suggest Lewis', some of her images of evil also resemble his. On the dark planet Camazotz, where Meg's father is imprisoned, Meg, Calvin, and Charles Wallace confront IT, the malevolent intelligence that rules the world. IT is a disembodied brain, a "brain that pulsed and quivered, that seized and commanded" (A Wrinkle in Time, p. 144). IT irresistibly recalls the severed head, animated by devils, in That Hideous Strength. IT rules a society of human automatons. Under the bureaucratic government of Camazotz all the inhabitants must behave in the uniform manner dictated by IT or suffer punishment and reprogramming. This world is amusingly similar to an alternate reality created by Lewis in The Dark Tower, an unfinished novel published posthumously, years after A Wrinkle in Time. In The Dark Tower evil is represented by a man with a sting in his forehead. When he stings a chosen man or woman, the poisons transform the victim into a human robot and deadly enjoying the "higher life." Confronting IT, Charles Wallace is possessed and becomes just such an automaton. He — or the evil intelligence controlling him — avows:

Why do you think people get confused and unhappy? Because they all live their own, separate, individual lives....Camazotz is ONE mind. It's IT. And that's why everybody's so happy and efficient.

(A Wrinkle in Time, p. 130)

After Meg, her father, and Calvin escape from Camazotz, it becomes Meg's mission, armed only with her love, to snatch Charles Wallace away from IT.

In A Wind in the Door we are introduced to the Echthroi, the powers of negation that have spawned the shadow. Here the 'shadow' image is replaced by the image of "rips in the galaxy," but the concept of annihilation still dominates. Charles Wallace, now six years old, is dying of a disease that attacks his fundamental organic core in the mitochondria of his cells, impeding the body's absorption of oxygen. Fanordales are so minute that a mitochondrion is a world to them, a human body a galaxy. Again Meg must fight for her brother, this time by becoming small enough to enter one of his mitochondria and persuade the young fanordale to reject the seductions of the Echthroi. Charles Wallace, she is told, is despite his youth crucial to the fate of the cosmos: "It is not always on the great or the important that the balance of the universe depends" (A Wind in the Door, p. 142).

That "the last shall be first," hinted at in A Wrinkle in Time, is hummed home in A Wind in the Door. The death of the tiniest organism can be a victory for the Echthroi, and even a girl like Meg can make an important contribution to the war in Heaven.

A star or a child or a fanordale — size doesn't matter, Meg. The Echthroi are after Charles Wallace, and the balance of the universe can be altered by the outcome.

(ibid., p. 98)

Lewis also recognizes that "size doesn't matter," remarking in Perelandra, 'He dwells (all of Him dwells) within the seed of the smallest flower and is not cramped' (Perelandra, p. 214-215). Even the hairs of our heads are numbered, for "Never did He make two things the same" (ibid., p. 214).

The unique importance of each created thing is a key concept in Wind in the Door, expressed in the image of "Naming." To "Name" a person or object is to help that individual realize his, her, or its true identity. Each fanordale, person, star, and galaxy is uniquely and eternally itself. As the cherubim Progoineskos says, 'He calls them all by name' (Wind in the Door, p. 148). The chief weapon of the Echthroi is un-Naming, "making people not know who they are" (ibid., p. 98). They X — or extinguish — both living and non-living things and so blight the universe. Some intelligences have the option, in combat with the Enemy, of X-ing themselves instead of letting the Echthroi annihilate/absorb them; this, apparently, is the action taken by the self-sacrificing star in A Wrinkle in Time.

This option not being open to human beings, Meg is tested in other ways. She begins her series of ordeals without knowing their full purpose. Questioning the significance of her tasks, she is admonished, 'We don't have to know everything at once. We just do one thing at a time, as it is given us to do' (ibid., p. 99). Just so, Ransom strikes out for Perelandra with no idea of what he will find or do there. In her mission Meg receives help from strange sources. L'Engle seems to enjoy showing cooperation among members of different species. The recognition of soul or intelligence — what Lewis calls bwa — wherever it may be met is also an important theme of Lewis' trilogy. In Out of the Silent Planet Ransom finds three alien races on Mars. On Venus he meets an Adam and Eve with green skin. In That Hideous Strength he has stocked his household with a variety of animals, including a tame bear. L'Engle shows her interest in this theme in A Wrinkle in Time, not only with the eccentric Mrs. Whatsit and her two sisters, but also with a family of gray-furred, tentacled, but wise and gentle Beasts. The theme is amplified in A Wind in the Door, wherein we meet Blajeny the Teacher, a venerable giant, Spores, a mouse-like fanordale, Louise the Larger, a tame garden snake of preternatural intelligence, and Progoineskos, a cherubim. (Progoineskos, Spores, and Meg are all "classmates," despite their diversity, under the Teacher Blajeny.)

The cherubim deserve special attention, since he further illustrates L'Engle's way of portraying angelic beings. When Calvin objects that "cherubim" is a plural word,
Proginosokes replies, "I am practically plural.... I am certainly not a cherub. I am a singular cherubim" (ibid., p. 56). Meg first sees him as a chaos of eyes and flames, similar to one of the manifestations of the eldila described in Perelandra:

...merry eyes, wise eyes, ferocious eyes, kitten eyes, dragon eyes, opening and closing....And wings, wings in constant motion, covering and uncovering the eyes. When the wings were spread out they had a span of at least ten feet, and when they were all folded in, the creature resembled a misty, feathery sphere.

(ibid., p. 54)

Later we glimpse a suggestion of the "pure, spiritual intellectual love...like barbed lightning" (Perelandra, p. 199) of Lewis' eldila, when the cherubim says, "love isn't feeling. If it were, I wouldn't be able to love. Cherubim don't have feelings" (Wind in the Door, p. 117).

Through Proginosokes and Blajeny Meg meets the farandolae and hears their song of praise, the song they share with all creation: "We are the song of the universe. We sing with the angelic host.... The fame and the stars are the singers" (ibid., p. 180). This anthem suggests the Great Dance in Perelandra (Chapter Seventeen), whose motif is, "There seems no plan because it is all plan: there seems no centre because it is all centre" (Perelandra, p. 218). Proginosokes urges the corollary that "all farandolae are royal. All singers of the song are princes...you have your own unique share in the freedom of creation" (Wind in the Door, p. 193). At the climax Meg joins in "the dance of the star whose birth she had seen, the galaxies, the cherubin and seraphim, wind and fire, the words of the Glory" (ibid., p. 205), just as Ransom is caught up in the Great Dance in Perelandra.

A Swiftly Tilting Planet re-enacts these motifs. In this novel Charles Wallace, now a teenager, must travel through time to alter the ancestry of a South American dictator and thus prevent nuclear catastrophe. This time the nonhuman allies of Meg and Charles Wallace are Gaudior, a unicorn, and Ananda, a large dog who mysteriously appears just when she is needed. Charles and the unicorn travel on the etheric wind to their far-flung destinations in time and space. (In a clear allusion to the third chapter of the Gospel of John, Gaudior explains, "The wind blows where it will!" (A Swiftly Tilting Planet, p. 56):) The Eehthroi are present again, attempting to snatch control of the wind and inventing Projections — unpleasant alternate realities. Again we are shown the critical role of the seemingly unimportant. Charles Wallace is told:

Everything that happens within the created Order, no matter how small, has its effect. If you are angry, that anger is added to all the hate with which the Eehthroi would distort the melody and destroy the ancient harmonies. When you are loving, that lovingness joins the music of the spheres.

(ibid., p. 60)

Though our planet is deeply shadowed, we are not totally estranged from the "ancient harmonies." Some people, like Charles Wallace, still "belong to the Old Music" (ibid., p. 46). The unicorn promises him that "as long as there are even a few who belong to the Old Music, you are still our brothers and sisters" (ibid., p. 47). We are reminded of a truth revealed to Ransom by the eldila:

There is an environment of minds as well as of space. The universe is one — a spider's web wherein each mind lives along every line, a vast whispering gallery where...though no news travels unchanged yet no secret can be rigorously kept.... Nay, in the very matter of our world, the traces of the celestial commonwealth are not quite lost.

(Perelandra, p. 201)

In A Swiftly Tilting Planet L'Engle finally makes explicit her cosmic theology. Charles Wallace is given a vision of the primal glory, the ancient harmony (a phrase, by the way, suggestive of Calvin Miller's The Singer, which the destroyer is always trying to break). Then Gaudior explains:

The Eehthros wanted all the glory for itself, and when that happens the good becomes not good; and others have followed that first Eehthros. Wherever the Eehthroi go, the shadows follow, and try to ride the wind.... But there is always a moment when there is a Night-Have-Been....If so and so had been done, then the light would partner the dark instead of being smudged out.

(Swiftly Tilting Planet, p. 55)

Thus A Swiftly Tilting Planet pulls together the two earlier books. Madeleine L'Engle shares a precious achievement with C. S. Lewis. The great flaw of most fantasies of 'Good vs. Evil' is that the evil force appears more dynamic, more alluring, simply more interesting. Dracula is remembered and Van Helsing forgotten. Milton's Satan deceives generations of critics into proclaiming him a hero. Lewis and L'Engle avoid this pitfall. For them Good is something positive, strong, bright, and Evil a mere negation; moreover, they have the genius to make their readers see this truth.

Notes