ADVANCED ETHICAL LITERARY INQUIRY

A WRINKLE IN TIME

Historical • Ethical • Cultural Context Packet

CENTRAL IDEA

When something offers to take away your struggle, what exactly is it taking — and why does this book hand the rescue to the character everyone has been telling to fix herself?

Novel: A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle

Setting: A New England town, and several planets reached by folding space, at no stated date

Designed for: Advanced readers in grades 6–8, with adaptable supports

TEXT USE

Use a teacher-approved copy of the complete 12-chapter novel. This resource supplies original prompts and no reproduced passages.

How to Use This Packet

A Wrinkle in Time borrows real vocabulary from mathematics and physics, real quotations from real writers, and a real anxiety about conformity, and it uses all three for purposes of its own. Your task is to establish what the borrowed material actually means in its own field, and then to ask what L'Engle gained by changing it. The most interesting findings in this packet are the places where the novel is not wrong so much as deliberately imprecise.

ACCURACY SAFEGUARD

The Mrs W's, Camazotz, IT, and travel by tessering are entirely invented, and there is no known method of folding space for travel. A tesseract is a real geometric object but not a real vehicle. Conformity research is real, though one of its most famous studies is methodologically and ethically contested. The position of women in American science in 1962, and this book's publication and challenge history, are documented. Keep the invented and the documented in separate columns.

Source Routine

- Identify the authoring institution and its expertise.
- Separate fact, interpretation, and speculation.
- Ask what the source can establish and what it cannot.
- Record access date and exact URL.

1. The Tesseract: Real Geometry, Invented Travel

A tesseract is a real object in geometry: the four-dimensional analogue of a cube, as a cube is to a square. It can be described precisely, and its projection into three dimensions can be drawn. What it is not is a method of transportation. L'Engle borrows the word and attaches it to a fictional way of folding space so that two distant points touch. Physicists do discuss theoretical solutions in general relativity, sometimes called wormholes, that would connect distant regions of spacetime; these are mathematical possibilities, not demonstrated phenomena, and they are not what a tesseract is.

INQUIRY QUESTION

Why borrow a real mathematical term for an invented method? What does the borrowing give the novel that an invented word would not?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

2. Dimensions, and What “Fourth Dimension” Means

The phrase carries two distinct meanings that the novel runs together. In geometry, a fourth dimension is one more spatial direction, perpendicular to the three we can point to. In relativity, time is treated as a fourth coordinate alongside three spatial ones, producing spacetime. These are different claims. The novel’s explanation of tessering slides between them, which is why the ant-and-string demonstration feels clear while explaining nothing testable.

INQUIRY QUESTION

Sort the novel’s explanation: which parts describe real geometry, which describe relativity, and which are neither?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

3. What Research on Conformity Actually Shows

In experiments conducted in the 1950s, Solomon Asch found that a substantial proportion of participants would give an obviously incorrect answer about the length of a line when everyone else in the room had already given that answer, though many did not conform and results varied considerably with the conditions. Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments in the 1960s are more famous still and more contested: later examination of the archived recordings and Milgram's own records has raised substantial questions about how the sessions were conducted and reported, and the studies would not be approved under current research ethics. Both are worth knowing about. Neither supports a simple claim that people automatically obey.

INQUIRY QUESTION

What do these studies establish about conformity, and what would Camazotz require that the evidence does not support?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

4. Women in Science in 1962

When this novel was published, women made up a very small share of American scientists, and married women with several children were rarer still in laboratory careers. Real figures worked under those conditions: Rosalind Franklin's crystallography was essential to determining the structure of DNA, and Barbara McClintock received a Nobel Prize in 1983 for maize genetics work she had done decades earlier and which had been largely dismissed at the time. L'Engle wrote a mother who runs experiments in a lab off her kitchen while raising four children, and she wrote her without remark, as though it required no defense.

INQUIRY QUESTION

What is L'Engle doing by presenting Mrs. Murry as unremarkable? Is a portrayal that refuses to argue more or less persuasive than one that does?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

5. Allusion and Borrowed Authority

Mrs Who almost never speaks in her own words. Her quotations come from identifiable real sources across many centuries and languages, including Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Goethe, and the Bible. Quotation is a real rhetorical instrument: it lends the weight of an established name to a present claim, and it can shut down disagreement precisely because it is difficult to argue with someone who is not present. It also demonstrates nothing on its own — an authority can be quoted accurately and still be wrong.

INQUIRY QUESTION

Take one of Mrs Who's quotations, find its source, and read what surrounds it. Does the original context support the use she makes of it?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

6. Publication, Rejection, and Challenge

L'Engle's manuscript was turned down by many publishers before Farrar, Straus and Giroux accepted it; she gave the figure as around twenty-six rejections, and editors reportedly considered it too difficult for children and hard to categorize. It won the Newbery Medal in 1963. It has since appeared repeatedly on the American Library Association's lists of frequently challenged books, objected to on religious grounds from more than one direction — by some readers for its use of Christian material and by others for including a range of figures alongside it.

INQUIRY QUESTION

A book rejected as unsuitable for children, then given the highest award in children's literature, then repeatedly challenged. Who decided each time, and on what basis?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

Curated Starting Sources

Source	Use	Caution
A university mathematics department page on the hypercube or tesseract	A precise definition and projections of the real object	Mathematical, not physical; says nothing about travel
A physics institution's explainer on spacetime and theoretical wormholes	Accurate framing of what relativity does and does not permit	Speculative solutions are not demonstrated phenomena; watch the hedging
A psychology department or scholarly source on the Asch conformity experiments	The actual design and the actual rates	Results varied by condition; popular summaries overstate them
A scholarly reassessment of the Milgram obedience experiments	Documented concerns about method, reporting, and ethics	The reassessment is itself debated; represent the dispute rather than picking a side
NSF or a university source on women in American science by decade	Documented participation figures over time	Categories and fields changed across decades; date every figure
The American Library Association's records of challenged books	Documented challenges and stated grounds	Records what was reported; many challenges are never reported at all

Source Evaluation & Synthesis

Source / Access Date	Authority & Purpose	Claim Supported	Limit / Corroboration

Fact–Inference–Judgment Check

FACT I can verify:

INFERENCE I draw:

JUDGMENT I defend:

Historical Accuracy & Ethics Audit

- ☐ I treat tessering, Camazotz, IT, and the Mrs W's as entirely invented.
- ☐ I describe a tesseract accurately as a geometric object, not a method of travel.
- ☐ I distinguish a spatial fourth dimension from time as a coordinate in relativity.
- ☐ I report conformity research accurately, including that Asch's rates varied and that Milgram's work is contested.
- ☐ I date any figure about women in science and do not generalize across fields.
- ☐ I attribute Mrs Who's quotations to their real sources and check the original context before using them.
- ☐ I distinguish empirical claims (what happened, what is measurable) from ethical claims (what should be done).
- ☐ I cite exact sources and access dates.

Synthesis Question

Which context lens most changes your view of what this novel is actually claiming about Meg — and at what point does the book stop describing something real and start wishing for it?