

A House Like a Lotus Study Guide

A House Like a Lotus by Madeleine L'Engle

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Plot Summary

A House Like a Lotus is the story of sixteen-year-old Polyhymnia O'Keefe (Polly) and her friendship with her middle-aged friend and mentor, Maximiliana Horne. The relationship between the two begins when Polly's uncle Sandy introduces her to Max and Ursula. Max and Ursula have been lovers for many years. That friendship grows as Polly spends more and more time at Max's mansion, discussing her many shared interests with Max and growing in personal curiosity and emotional maturity. Polly's friendship with Max, as well as her budding but gentle relationship with Renny, a medical resident at the local hospital, are Polly's most fulfilling relationships, as she does not get along well with her classmates in high school. As Polly grows in confidence and develops her interests, she begins to flourish. That flourishing is cut short when a traumatic incident between Max and herself leaves her reeling. All of the action in Greece centers around Polly's attempt to heal and overcome the trauma that this incident has caused.

A House Like a Lotus is an intensely psychological and nuanced novel that is driven more by reflection and contemplation than it is by plot. Nevertheless, its structuring narrative tensions leave the reader wondering just what happened between Max and Polly, and just why Polly's need to forgive Max is so urgent. We learn only toward the end of the novel that Max has made a drunken sexual advance on Polly and that Max is dying of a rare parasitic disease. The conjunction of these two circumstances lend a fraught urgency to the latter half of the book, eventually culminating in Polly's healing through the transformative power of the friendships she forms in Cyprus, where she is working as an aid at a conference at Max's suggestion.

In the end, Polly is able to find forgiveness in her heart and reclaim the genuine love she has for a woman too complex to be categorized as either strictly good or strictly bad.



Pages 1-36

Pages 1-36 Summary

The book opens with 16-year-old Polyhymnia O'Keefe, known as Polly, seated in Constitution Square in Athens. She has come to Athens on a trip arranged by her friend and mentor, Maximiliana Horne, known as Max. Polly's uncle and aunt, Sandy and Rhea, were to meet her in Athens, but were detained by work and will not arrive for three days. As she sits at the square drinking coffee, Polly observes the other American teenagers who have gathered in the area. She overhears a snippet of conversation in which the teenagers agree that their parents have sent them abroad to keep them out of their hair, and that they regularly get large sums of money via wire transfer. Polly notices one young man sitting alone also observing the loud teenagers, and the two exchange a quick glance.

Polly recalls her route to Athens, and we move backward in time. Polly is excited to spend a week in Athens with her aunt and uncle before continuing on her own to a village in Crete called Osia Theola, where she is to work as a gofer at a conference. Polly is burdened with an unrevealed worry, and this tension gives her excitement a note of apprehension.

On the plane to Athens, Polly reflects on her situation. Her family knows that something has gone wrong, but so far they have respected her right to keep things to herself until she is ready to talk. The only family member who knows about the unspoken traumatic event is Polly's uncle Sandy, who was summoned to visit Polly by Max. Polly is glad to find that nobody is seated near her on the plane, and when a stewardess passes by with a tray of champagne, Polly takes a glass. She wonders to herself why she took the champagne when she didn't even want it, and reflects on her reasons for not wanting it. It is not because she does not like champagne, nor because she is underage, but because of an association he has between Max and the excessive imbibing of champagne. We remain in the dark about the incident Polly has been prompted to remember by the champagne.

Polly has a sense of coming home as the plane flies over Europe; we learn that she is the oldest of seven children, that she lived until the age of 13 on a small island off the south coast of Portugal called Gaea, and that her family has been living on Benne Seed Island for the last five years. We also learn that Polly's father is a marine biologist and that her mother helps him with anything involving mathematics. Having been raised on an isolated island, Polly is a misfit at the American public school she now attends.

When Polly lands in Athens, she proceeds through customs and looks around eagerly for her aunt and uncle, but does not see them. After confusing other couples for her relatives twice, she finally proceeds to a board with messages for passengers, and finds one for her from her aunt and uncle telling her that they are delayed and instructing her to go to the hotel and await a call from them.



Polly takes a bus to the King George Hotel, a luxurious hotel that Max has booked for her. We move back in time to the moment that Max first proposed the Greece trip to Polly. Max is friends with an Indian man named Kumar Krhishna Ghose, known as Krhis. Krhis is coordinating a conference in Cyprus for delegates from underdeveloped and developing countries to learn about writing and literature, and he needs a helper to run errands and do paperwork. Max has proposed that Polly be his helper and Polly enthusiastically accepts.

We return to the present. A bellman takes Polly to her room in the hotel and shows her the view of the Acropolis. Polly is struck by the beauty of the view, but is overcome with loneliness. She is drowsy and jetlagged, and recalls Max's advice that she take a short nap upon her arrival and then stay up until going to sleep on Greek time. Polly does not want anything to do with Max or her advice, and if she did not have to wait for her uncle's call, she would wander defiantly into Athens looking for something to do.

Polly's uncle Sandy calls and tells her that he and Rhea will arrive in three days. They decide they will not tell Polly's parents. Sandy checks that Polly has enough money, and encourages her to go on a bus tour and not waste the days before they are reunited. Polly assures him that she will make good use of her time alone in Athens. She bathes, makes a reservation for dinner on the roof of the hotel at 8 p.m., and goes out.

We go back in time. Polly describes Max's house, which is called Beau Allaire and is on the far side of Benne Seed Island from the O'Keefe's house. It is a formal mansion often photographed for design magazines, and is filled with great art. Max lives with Ursula Heschel in the great house, and is quite wealthy. Her father established the island hospital in honor of his daughter, Max's sister Minerva, who died at a young age. Until last Christmas, Polly's family had no relationship with Max and Ursula, but when Sandy came to visit for Christmas, he went to see Max, who was an old friend of his. Sandy proposed that Polly come along with him on his first visit to Beau Allaire, thinking that Polly and Max would hit it off.

At Beau Allaire, Polly meets Max and Ursula. Ursula is a neurosurgeon and a colleague of Polly's uncle Dennys, Sandy's brother. Max shows Polly some of her paintings, and Polly is struck by the beauty and skill of her art. Max asks Polly about her interests, and we learn that Polly is good with languages and is interested in archaeology, anthropology, literature, and the theatre. Polly notices a woodcarving on a pedestal, which Max identifies as a reproduction of the Laughing Christ of Baki, a statue made by the Bakian people of Micronesia.

As Sandy and Polly leave, Max encourages Polly to come visit her again so the two can talk about anthropology. Polly knows she will not come back unless Max calls her, but she ends the section by telling us that Max did, indeed, call her.



Pages 1-36 Analysis

From the outset, L'Engle establishes an unspoken and structuring tension that will not be fully disclosed until almost the end of the novel. We know that Polly has been involved in some kind of traumatic incident with her friend and mentor, Maximiliana Horne, who is an older woman, but we do not know anything about the incident. Some of Polly's observations and reflections are clarifying when reading the novel a second time, but on a first reading, *A House Like a Lotus* reads, in many ways, like a subdued and emotionally complex mystery.

Though L'Engle is depicting a young adult for young adults, she spares no complexity. As Polly sits in a square in Athens she writes in her notebook that she has a new notebook but an old heart. She immediately observes that she is likely to find the line laughable in a few years, but that she cannot help but mean it earnestly now. What we see in this moment, which opens the book, is the depth and psychological complexity of a character that is meant to be relatable to young adults as they really are rather than as they are simplistically conceived by typical mass market young adult books.

One aspect of L'Engle's more realistic and complex depiction of young adult life is the way she portrays Polly's relationship with her parents. She is neither pitted against them nor indifferent to them in the usual manner of young adult fiction, but instead has a mature relationship of mutual respect with them. We learn that Polly's parents have a sense that something has seriously gone wrong in Polly's life, but that they are giving her space to come to terms with whatever has gone wrong and allowing her to decide when to talk about the traumatic incident. The question of whether Polly's parents are right to give her as much freedom and space as they do forms one of the novel's important subthemes. Note in this section that Polly and her Uncle Sandy choose not to tell Polly's parents that Polly will be alone in Athens for three days. That such a decision could be made is indicative of the permissiveness in the O'Keefe family, and while it is this permissiveness that allows Polly to experience the world broadly and independently, it is also this permissiveness that makes Polly vulnerable to the kind of trauma she experienced with Max.

In this section we are first introduced to Max and Ursula. Max is the wealthy daughter of the man who established the world-class hospital at Benne Seed Island. She has a wide range of interests and she has cultivated a talent in painting, through which she adds to her income. The relationship between Max and Ursula is ambiguous. They are friends, not relatives, and they live together at Beau Allaire, Max's mansion. The nature of their relationship will become an important plot element in the novel later, but for now we know only that Ursula is a neurosurgeon, a colleague of Polly's Uncle Dennys, and that she has taken a leave of absence to be at Beau Allaire in the winter.



Pages 36-70

Pages 36-70 Summary

We remain in the past. Max and Ursula accept a Christmas invitation from the O'Keefe's and invite them, in turn, to spend New Year's at Beau Allaire. Both gatherings are successful and filled with good cheer. We learn that Polly's cousin Kate is staying with the family at Benne Seed while Polly's brother Charles goes to stay with Kate's parents, Dennys and Lucy, in order to attend a high school with a better science program. Kate is beautiful and very popular at school; she attends all the dances and always has a trail of boys behind her. She is responsible enough, however, to call her aunt and uncle when she needs a ride, rather than be driven home by someone stoned or intoxicated.

We move back to the present in Athens. Polly finishes two cups of coffee in the square and returns to her room. She reflects on her need to think about Max objectively rather than subjectively if she is to move past her pain and anger, but then she recalls that subjectivity is ineradicable, and that she has erected a barrier between herself and Max in order to avoid being touched by her.

At dinner, Polly explains to her concerned waiter that she will be meeting her aunt and uncle in three days. She savors her dinner and is having desert when the dark haired young man with whom she exchanged a glance in the square earlier approaches her. He asks to take a seat with her and Polly allows him. The two converse for some time before the boy, named Zachary, convinces Polly to give up on the idea of a boring bus tour and come with him to tour Athens and the countryside tomorrow. Polly agrees with some reticence, and the two agree to meet the next morning in the lobby of Polly's hotel.

Back in her room, Polly gets a call from her Uncle Dennys, and she tells him about Zachary. He tells her to be careful but encourages her explorations. Polly is comforted by her uncle's call, but has unsettled sleep. She dreams of Renny, the intern at M.A. Horne hospital that she dated for several months before her trip. Though Renny was at first an antidote to Polly's awkwardness at school, in the last few weeks he has become an antidote to the unspoken trauma with which Polly has been dealing. In the dream, Renny warns Polly about Zachary and tells her to watch out.

Polly is awoken in the morning by a hotel attendant bring her breakfast. She sits on her balcony and enjoys a solitary breakfast, which reminds her of solitary breakfasts during her childhood in Portugal. As she eats, Polly reads a book Sandy has given her about Epidaurus, where ancient Greeks were brought to be healed. She reads that sick people at Epidaurus could not enter the sacred precincts until they prayed to be purged of anger, resentment, and lack of forgiveness. These words prompt Polly to consider her own need for such purgation.



We return to the past and learn that, after Ursula's introduction to the O'Keefe's, she began to come regularly to their home to discuss lab results with Polly's father. Polly recalls that her brother Xan once commented that it was a good thing Ursula is much too old for their father, as they spent so much time together that one might otherwise wonder. Polly responds that they are just friends and that their mother is justified in not being jealous.

In early January, Max calls and asks Polly to tea. She suggests that Polly bring her homework with her and reads some of her writing for English class. Max is impressed with Polly's description of the natives on Gaea and the Indians in Venezuela, where Polly went for a month accompanying her father during a research trip. Polly tells Max that her English teacher gives her B's because she thinks Polly is showing off when she writes about places around the world. Polly and Max talk about poetry and Polly reveals that she likes John Donne and e.e. Cummings. Max affectionately calls Polly a snob and tells her to continue being a snob, if it means she will not walk blindly through life instead of living it fully. Through their conversations about anthropology, poetry, theatre, and literature, Polly and Max form a strong friendship and Polly gains confidence in who she is.

We remain in the time before the trip to Greece, and we learn that Polly began to date Renny through Max, who suggested that Renny call Polly after she met him at the hospital while having blood work done. First, Renny comes to dinner at the O'Keefe's and later, the two go to a Greek restaurant which will become their regular hangout. Over dinner, Renny talks about his interest in South American amoebas and parasites. We learn that Renny has a special interest in Netson's disease, a lethal parasitic illness, and that Dr. Netson himself works at M.A. Horne hospital. We also learn that Renny's interest in South American parasitic diseases originated during a trip to Chile, where he went to be with his former girlfriend Jacinta. Renny tells Polly that he was in love with Jacinta, but that things did not work out between them in part because her family was strictly Roman Catholic. On the way home, Renny stops the motorboat and gives Polly a kiss.

Pages 36-70 Analysis

There is a telling passage in this section, in which Polly reflects on the spectrum of psychological complexity that exists among those she knows. Though she believes her parents to be reasonably complex human beings, they are also moderately consistent. Polly can count on her parents to stay within a certain range of affective behavior, and though her parents can be surprising, they are never truly confounding. In a sense, the thoroughly bad people that Polly has known are similarly dependable, though they are dependably bad rather than dependably good. Max is, for Polly, complex on a scale far beyond any she has ever encountered. We still do not know what Max has done to traumatize Polly and dominate her thoughts in this way, but we can gather that, whatever it was, it fell outside the boundaries that Polly thought existed in her relationship with Max, and that it represented such a transgression of the person Polly believed Max to be that it has completely altered her perception of Max. This passage is



fascinating because it is a self-aware description of the novel's primary theme of intimacy and disappointment.

Also telling is the passage in which Polly reflects on the impossibility of ever eradicating the subjective from one's observations, no matter how coldly scientific one attempts to be. Polly is the intelligent daughter of scientists and has listened and observed them enough to know that observation changes the observed, even the observer believes he or she has done nothing to affect the object of study. It is this insight that allows Polly to understand that she will not be able to assess what happened with Max without also struggling through the emotions that the subjective reflection on the past will unavoidably inspire. When Polly reads in the book about Epidaurus that the supplicant ill had to be purged of negative emotion before they could be healed, Polly seems to realize and suggest to herself that only by a kind of non-rational purgation will she be led to healing. We cannot escape the sense that her trip to Athens promises to be purgative in precisely the way she needs it to be.

When Polly agrees to spend the day with Zachary, we see that, despite her melancholy, she is open to adventure. It is a new experience for Polly to feel herself pursued by an attractive young man. Her dates with Renny have felt, for the most part, like outings with a good friend or brother. The change is welcome for Polly, who, despite her own protestations to the contrary, envies her cousin Kate's social and romantic success. Though Polly is not interested in compromising herself for popularity, she is not inimical to the pleasures that such popularity brings. Garnering the affections of attractive young men is one such pleasure, and she readily accepts it.

From this experience, and from the flashback descriptions of Polly's first encounters with Max, there develops a portrait of a beautiful and bright young woman whose talents and attributes have for some time gone unnoticed. Polly recognizes John Donne when he is quoted. She writes vivid anthropological portrayals of native peoples. She loves e.e. cummings and writes poetry that is evocative in its own right. She is tall and elegant, with beautiful red hair that she herself does not appreciate. She is unpopular at school, we come to suspect, because she is simply too talented and worldly, in her way, to find a place in the mundane social ladder that exists at the school. Max's attentions are, therefore, critical in prompting Polly to come into her own and to develop the talents she has. Her relationship with Renny, too, is an antidote against the unpopularity and neglect to which she is accustomed. We shall see, throughout her trip, that Polly, far from being a mousy and uninteresting person, is a magnetic personality whose earnestness and curiosity draw those of similar temperament or aspiration to her.



pp.70-102

pp.70-102 Summary

Polly takes her time breakfasting and reading, so she has to rush to be ready to meet Zachary at 10 a.m. Zachary pulls up in a taxi and takes Polly to his hotel, the Hilton, so she can see his breathtaking view. He reassures her that he won't try anything in the hotel room. Polly is indeed wowed by his spectacular view, but finds his hotel lacking in charm. The two decide to go to the Acropolis first. Polly asks if they can walk, but Zachary insists they drive in order to save time, since he has plans to drive into the countryside and have a late dinner in Athens. Polly is overwhelmingly pleased to learn he plans to spend the whole day with her.

At the Acropolis, Polly slows Zach down so she can take in the sights carefully. Zachary knows plenty about Greek history and architecture, but Polly shows that she, too, has done her research. She remembers her cousin Kate's advice never to show a boy that you know more than he does, but she disregards it. Zachary tells Polly that she's unlike any girl he's met, and she feels that he means it in a good way. He tells her that she seems at once thirty and twelve, so mature and yet innocent is she. He tells Polly that there is something virginal about her, and then asks if she is, in fact, a virgin. Polly hesitates and he assumes that she is not. She tells him that she never plays around and that his question was inappropriate, and Zachary excuses himself, telling Polly that his curiosity about her got the better of him. The two recover from the awkwardness of the moment and Zachary continues to tell Polly about the history of Greek architecture while Polly takes notes in a notebook she is keeping for school.

Zachary and Polly drive to Delphi, where they have lunch at a Greek inn. Over lunch, Zachary asks Polly why she is sullen and asks who has hurt her. Polly does not divulge anything about her emotional past, but asks Zachary about his own. He confesses that his European tour is less about cultural broadening than it is about recovery; he was dumped by a girl he liked after he treated her poorly, and his trip is an attempt to find out who he is and what he stands for. A large part of his internal crisis has to do with the fact that his father is a lawyer with a major global corporation without ethical grounding. Zachary is poised to follow in his father's footsteps after graduating from college, but his feelings are mixed, and though he is accustomed to a life of ease and luxury, he wonders whether he ought to choose a different path for himself. He reflects that power and money corrupted his father and poisoned his parents' relationship, which was cold and distant. Zachary asks Polly whether her own parents are still intimate, and Polly replies that it is their business. The question, however, reminds her of a moment in which Max, too, talked about her parents in a way that went beyond Polly's usual conception of them.

We return to the past again to witness this moment. Max tells Polly that her mother is restless, and that her intelligence is not being sufficiently utilized. Polly notes that her mother helps her father extensively in the lab and with mathematical models, but Max



says that, while that is something, it is still not her mother's own project. Polly tells Max that her mother intends to finish her Ph.D. as soon as her youngest child, Rosy, is in school. Max notes that this will be difficult when there is so much to be done at home, and the bulk of the work rests with Polly's mother. She goes on, saying that Polly's mother has held herself back in order not to become an unreachable ideal for her children. Polly's mother's own mother was a Nobel prize winner, and the intimidation of having such a mother was always difficult for Polly's mother. Max tells Polly that single-minded scientists like her father often let people down, and Polly replies that her father does not let people down, but Max interrupts to tell her that true maturity comes with the understanding that all human beings betray each other.

We return to the present. Zachary and Polly walk around Delphi before returning to Athens for the light show at the Acropolis which is vulgar but entertaining. Afterward, they go to a small Greek tavern for dinner where the atmosphere is local and vibrant. As they drink their coffee, Zachary tells Polly he hasn't had this good of a time in ages, and asks her to spend the next day with him. Polly agrees, and Zachary kisses her twice in the taxi before they part.

We return to the past with a memory of the day Max revealed to the Polly that she sent some of Polly's descriptions of the natives of Gaea to a travel magazine, and that they were accepted. Max opens a bottle of champagne to celebrate the occasion, and Ursula prepares shrimp. Polly remembers the moment as one of the happiest she has ever experienced.

Still back at Benne Seed Island, we learn that Polly's relationship with Max has become that of a mentor and her student. Polly hates school, but she learns so much from her time with Max and Ursula that she is happy and flowering. Her growing wonder is reflected in her writing, but her English teacher continues to give her mediocre grades. Polly explains to Max that her grades matter, as she will need a scholarship to go to a good school, and Max helps Polly better understand her teacher's psychology in order to understand what she expects from her students. Max surmises that Miss Zeloski, in her loneliness and insecurity, prefers the comforts of obscurity in poetry and literature; Max concludes that she will like a paper that is thoroughly cross-referenced and footnoted, and when Polly produces such a paper, Max's theory is proven correct. Polly now grows to like the English teacher she once loathed, and her writing improves for it.

During dinner at the O'Keefe household, Kate and Xan are talking about the upcoming tryouts for the school production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Kate suggests that Polly could get a male role, and Polly's father tells Kate that Polly need not limit herself to male roles, despite being tall. Miss Zeloski is responsible for casting, and Polly tries out for a lead role and gets the part of Celia. Max is thrilled for Polly and the two recite lines from Shakespeare together while drinking champagne.

When Polly gets home after her celebratory evening with Max, her father calls her into the lab and tells her that Max called, worried that she let Polly drive home after drinking too much champagne. Polly's father tells her to drink in moderation and later it becomes



clear that he has talked to Ursula about the champagne, because Max avoids offering Polly an alcohol henceforth.

Polly's performance in *As You Like It* is a success, and she celebrates over dinner with Max. That weekend, Polly goes to a school dance, where she is actually asked to dance. While there, she has to help clean up a student who has vomited all over herself after becoming intoxicated. The next night, as Kate and Polly are brushing their teeth, Kate tells Polly that she was very good in the play.

We return to the present in Athens. Polly is dreaming of herself as Celia and Renny as Orlando. Polly recalls the way Renny kissed her, giving rather than taking, and realizes that the only reason she was shielded from the intensity of Renny's passion was that she was too young for him. Polly notes that this is one the reasons she so likes Max; there is no question of anyone's being too young or too old.

pp.70-102 Analysis

Perhaps the dominant theme of this section is that of Polly's transitional stage in life; she is only 16 years old, but her interests and sensitivities allow her to converse comfortably with the cultured and experienced Max; Polly dates a medical resident from the hospital though he must be many years her senior, and she has adapted impressively to her solitary stay in Athens. Yet, for all of Polly's maturity, she remains a young teenager whose youth must inevitably impinge upon her experience in various ways.

In this section, we see Polly's father warn her about the dangers of excess drink after Max serves Polly too much celebratory champagne. We also see that Polly's relationship with Renny, though it is romantic, is also tame and subdued as appropriate for Polly's tender age.

Polly's own attitude toward her youth is itself complex; she feels liberated by the absence of age considerations in her relationship with Max. Max never makes her feel either that she is too young or that Max is too old. They are simply people with common interests and a stake in each other's happiness. Her relationship with Renny, however, is marked by their age difference, and Polly is simultaneously irritated and relieved that this is the case. We learn later in the novel that Renny does eventually unleash a greater romantic passion for Polly, and Polly's own sentiments about this passion are mixed. What we see then, is a young woman who is intellectually prepared to spend her time with people much older than she is, but who remains guarded and apprehensive about giving herself over to the greater emotional perils that more mature relationships entail.

Another important development that comes to the fore in this section is the extent to which Polly's personal development is flowering. Under Max's tutelage and companionship, Polly has become more passionate about interests she has had for some time but has never had the opportunity to share with anyone.



Her anthropological writing interests Max to the point of submitting sections to a travel journal, and this sort of encouragement gives Polly the impetus to further her own interests and to gain a new confidence. The reader will gather that Polly is talented and beautiful in an unconventional way. The fact that she attracts the amount of romantic attention that she does throughout the book evinces her beauty, but we also learn that she is considered rather plain by her siblings and classmates, who are used to a less interesting aesthetic.

When Kate suggests that Polly try out for a minor male part in the school's Shakespearean production, Polly says nothing, but, with her new confidence, decides to try out for a primary female part and gets one. Her success on the stage earns her a level of admiration among her classmates that she has never before experienced. Polly goes to a school dance the weekend after her performance in the play and is sought out as a dance partner by a few classmates. Polly's newfound social acceptance is not an overwhelming joy for her; she soon realizes that the world into which she has been accepted is a world that holds little interest for her. She must spend half the night of the dance helping an inebriated student clean herself up, and there is little of true value in this scene of teenage socialization.



pp.102-135

pp.102-135 Summary

Polly has agreed to spend another day with Zachary. She wakes up just before breakfast arrives at her room, and meets Zachary to drive to the museum. They spend only one hour at the museum before Zachary decrees that it is time to go on a trip to an old monastery called Osias Lukas that is tucked away in the hills. Zachary tells Polly that the monastery is named after a monk who was said to be a healer. Zachary expresses the claim with skepticism, and Polly reflects on her annoyance with this skepticism. She contrasts Zachary's facile rejection of the whimsical or supernatural with Max's willingness to take a chance on the inexplicable. Polly prefers Max's openness to Zachary's dogmatic atheism.

After Zachary and Polly admire the chapel at the monastery, they go outside for a picnic. Zachary tries to kiss Polly, but she resists, saying that they barely know each other. Zachary asks her why that is a problem, and reminds her of her tacit admission to not being a virgin. He asks Polly if the person to whom she lost her virginity hurt her, and she replies that he did not. Zachary then talks to Polly about the need to break the hard shell of protection she has built up around herself, and insists that this is the only path toward healing, as Polly fights back tears.

We move to the past, and Polly recalls the way Max taught her that inner beauty is greater than outer beauty, and can even create outer beauty. After Polly's performance as Celia in *As You Like It*, Max insisted on painting Polly's portrait. Polly does not recognize herself in the striking and beautiful image that Max creates, but she is nonetheless flattered by the portrayal. Polly's parents hang the painting over the family piano, where it dominates the room.

One night over dinner at the O'Keefe household, Xan and Kate raise an uncomfortable series of questions. Xan asks Mr. O'Keefe whether it is a good idea for Polly to be spending so much time at Beau Allaire, and Kate admits that there is talk at the school about Polly's friendship with Max. Xan tells everyone at dinner that Max and Ursula are known lesbians and that Polly has become associated with them in school gossip. Mr. O'Keefe chastises Xan and Kate for repeating gossip and tells them that Max and Ursula are good friends who deserve their respect. Xan will not let the issue go, and finally Mr. O'Keefe checks his temperature and finds that he is feverish and is coming down with strep throat.

After dinner, Mr. O'Keefe calls Polly to his lab to talk about the dinner conversation that has left Polly rattled. He tells her that assumptions are always made when two people of the same gender live together, whether those assumptions turn out to be grounded in reality or not. Mr. O'Keefe tries to comfort Polly, but she is shaken by the gossip Xan has related, and the seed of confusion has been planted in her mind.



We learn that the O'Keefes are not permissive parents with their younger children but that they take a hands-off approach once the children grow into their teenage years, allowing them to make their own decisions and determine their own schedules.

The question of whether Max and Ursula are lesbians continues in the back of Polly's mind. She is unable to escape the question that she did not pose to her father when he was comforting her after the awkward dinner conversation. On the Friday after the revelatory dinner conversation, Polly is unable to sleep. She goes to the kitchen in the middle of the night and finds her mother there making herbal tea. They sit together and discuss Max and Ursula. Polly wants her mother to give her a straight answer about whether Max and Ursula are lesbians, but her mother chooses instead to assure her that she and Polly's father completely trust Max and Ursula and that the range of Max's and Polly's shared interests makes questions of sexual proclivities irrelevant. Polly's mother insists that trust is central to any relationship, and that vicious gossip should not be allowed to undermine a relationship that is founded on a real sympathy of character.

Mr. O'Keefe and Ursula go to a neurological conference in Florida, and usual, Max calls Polly to come for a visit while Ursula is away. Polly drives across Benne Seed Island to get to Beau Allaire, but struggles to get there as visibility is drastically reduced by a fog. Mrs. O'Keefe calls Beau Allaire and agrees with Max that Polly ought to spend the night there rather than drive back in the fog. Polly is upset by the idea that she will have to take the bus from Beau Allaire the next morning, thus revealing to her gossiping classmates that she spent the night there. Max notices Polly's discomfort and takes the opportunity to broach the subject of her sexual orientation. She tells Polly that she and Ursula have been lovers for over thirty years. She tells Polly that the love between herself and Ursula has been long and faithful, but Polly says little, as the conversation has made her terribly uncomfortable. The two go downstairs for dinner, which has been set in the formal dining room because of the damp.

Over dinner, Max tells Polly about her father, whose portrait hangs in the formal dining room. Max tells Polly that her father made so much money that he developed a God complex, and that he was always the supreme ruler in their family. The M.A. Horne hospital, Max explains, was her father's guilt offering. As the conversation develops, Max tells Polly more and more about her father's character and actions. Eventually she reveals elliptically that her father sexually assaulted her sister Minerva. Minerva was able to get away from him and she ran into the rain, later dying from pneumonia that she contracted from this episode. Max tells Polly that though she knows hate is a destructive emotion, she hates her father and cannot forgive him.

Max then tells Polly that she is sorry that her classmates have assumed that Polly is like her simply because they are friends. Polly tells her that these classmates are stupid, and that it doesn't matter to her. Max then tells Polly that she loves her like a daughter. Polly goes to bed and wakes up early the next morning, drives back to her house, and takes the boat across to Cowpertown to take the school bus from there.

We return to the present in Greece. Polly has fallen asleep on the grass and wakes up to Zachary stroking her hair. She tells him that she has plans with her aunt and uncle



when they come into town the next day, but agrees to spend the day with Zachary before meeting up with her family. Zachary tries to talk to Polly about the pain she is evidently struggling with, but Polly prefers not to talk about her issues, and asks Zachary about his instead. Zachary tells Polly that she is very lucky to have parents who trust her so much, and Polly wonders if perhaps her parents take trust to an unreasonable extreme. She reflects on the nature of trust and reflects that there is no other way to live; one cannot go around suspecting everyone and everything. At this point, Zachary kisses Polly and comes on to her once again, and Polly resists him, telling him that chemistry is not enough for her. The two have dinner together on the roof of the Hilton in Athens before parting for the night with a kiss.

We return to Benne Seed Island. Xan comes to Polly's room to apologize for having made a scene during dinner a few nights earlier. Xan tells Polly that he hates the gossipers at the high school and that he ought not have listened to them. The two make up and Polly decides that Xan is not so bad.

pp.102-135 Analysis

In this section, Polly must confront the reality of her mentor's sexual orientation. Max is a lesbian, as we learn in this chapter, but she has not explicitly disclosed this fact to her young friend. Polly's parents, we are left to assume, know that Max and Ursula are lesbians but do not think this needs to be discussed or worried about. They trust their friends to reveal what information they feel needs to be revealed to their daughter in an appropriate and sensitive way. When Polly talks to her mother in the kitchen in the middle of the night, note that Polly's mother never gives her a clear answer about Max's sexual orientation. She simply points out to Polly that sexual preferences are not the basis of her friendship with Max, and that both Polly and Max are more interested in their enriching mutual interests of anthropology, history, and poetry than in gossip about sexual preferences.

The overriding theme of this section of the book is that of trust. Polly's parents trust Polly to manage her relationship with Max, just as Polly must trust Max despite the breach of their friendship which we know occurred but about which we know nothing yet. Trust, Polly concludes, is absolutely necessary in life. A distrustful person cannot fully experience or enjoy life because every relationship and, indeed, every encounter, is an occasion for worry and fear. The theme of trust is here very closely tied to that of forgiveness. The test of trust is its recovery after a breach, and it is with such a recovery that Polly is struggling throughout the novel. She feels betrayed by Max, and seems unable to reconcile whatever has happened with her idealized vision of her patroness. We see here the danger of simplification through idealization. Holding a person in too high a regard and willfully ignoring the human shortcomings that every person by necessity possesses is almost as bad as dismissing a person as odious without consideration; both are simplifications of complexity and a reduction of a full human to a flat image. We see then that Polly, full of admiration for the woman who allowed her to flourish in an environment that could not appreciate Polly's talents and beauty, has allowed herself to neglect Max's complexity and thereby to handicap their relationship.



One can forgive a flawed human his flaws, but to forgive a demigod requires a complete reorganization of one's outlook. It is this reorganization that Polly is slowly making as she spends her days with the charming Zachary in and around Athens.

The relationship between the Athens narrative and the narrative of Polly's life at Benne Seed Island is worth exploring. Because the novel moves between two different times and places, there is an added depth and tension in our reading of the Benne Seed Island thread of the narrative. We are privy already to Polly's thoughts and feelings on the past, and though she does not reveal the substance of her conflict with Max until we reach that point in the Benne Seed Island narrative later in the book, we do know that something has gone wrong in the relationship between Max and Polly, and this knowledge keeps the reader in suspense. In a sense, L'Engle has taken what is really a very simple story and through her telling has made the reader hypersensitive to the smallest narrative details. She has heightened the reader's appreciation of every word, every account, and every emotion subtly expressed by the main character.



pp.135-172

pp.135-172 Summary

Polly lies awake in her hotel room in the middle of the night. She thinks about what a relief it will be to see Sandy and Rhea, and to say goodbye to Zachary whose effect on Polly has been powerful and almost overwhelming. Polly remembers Max's reflection on the relationship between human free will and prearranged patterns in the universe. Our freedom, Max speculated, often comes in the way we choose to accept that over which we have no control, like death.

Polly remembers an afternoon at Beau Allaire. Polly and Ursula go swimming and find Max on the verandah with her sketchbooks when they return. Polly begins to look through the sketchbooks, all of which contain drawings from Max's many trips around the world. One of them contains vivid tropical drawings, and when Polly picks it up, Max reacts negatively, saying she doesn't like that sketchbook. Polly asks where she was when she drew the tropical drawings and Max replies that she was in Ecuador. Polly becomes interested, but Max is resistant to talking about the trip. Polly does learn that Max was there a year ago, and soon Polly puts the pieces together and makes a tragic discovery. To confirm her suspicions, she calls Renny as soon as she gets home and asks him if Max is infected with one of the South American parasites in which Renny specializes. Renny tells Polly that he cannot discuss Max's medical record with her, and Polly takes his evasion as an admission that Max does have the deadly parasitic disease called Netson's disease.

Polly and Renny go to their usual hang out to discuss Netson's disease. Renny cannot say anything about Max, but he has tacitly admitted the truth to Polly and fills her in on the details of treatment. The prognosis is bad, and Max's death is imminent. Renny asks Polly if she can keep what she has discovered to herself, and she responds that she will try, but that she is not very good at keeping things from people she cares about. Renny takes Polly home in the boat and kisses her under the stars after they contemplate mortality.

Back in Athens, Polly wakes up with tears on her cheeks. She has been crying about Max in her sleep. Zachary calls while she is having breakfast and they decide to make an early start on their day so Polly can be back in time for dinner with Sandy and Rhea. Zachary has packed a picnic basket for them and brought along fresh lemonade; he tells Polly she will not want to greet her aunt and uncle with wine on her breath and Polly responds that she is not much of a drinker anyway. She tells Zachary that she has seen enough of the consequences of the abuse of alcohol to be wary of it. She is referring to Max. It took Polly some time to realize that Max drank a lot, and Max always told her that it was good for elderly hearts. After Polly discovered that Max had Netson's disease, she asked Renny about the alcohol consumption and he informed Polly that alcohol does dilate the arteries of the heart and is a painkiller.



Polly remembers an evening at Beau Allaire when Max was slightly tipsy from sipping her bourbon and opened up to her about her defunct marriage to Davin Tomassi. She married Tomassi with the best of intentions, desiring as she did a family and children. They had a daughter together, but the baby died after only a few days as it was born with the Allaire weak heart. Soon after, it became apparent that their marriage was untenable, and Max fell apart after their divorce. Eventually they were able to be friends again, and Max tells Polly that she will always love Davin and be grateful to him.

The next time Polly goes to Beau Allaire, she steals a few minutes alone with Ursula in the kitchen to broach the topic of Max's health. Ursula guesses that Polly has discovered the truth and asks her to remain a faithful friend to Max rather than to withdraw in the face of her imminent death. Ursula expresses the worry that Polly's friendship with Max and herself is going to be a destructive experience for her, but Polly reassures her that only good has come of her time with them.

Polly has the opportunity to go to a theater festival with Ursula out of town and she goes. Before they go to the theater, they have their hair styled at an expensive hairdresser. While Ursula goes to the hospital, Polly goes to an art gallery. After they change for the theater, they have dinner at a French restaurant, during which they discuss the inevitability of pain in the human experience and Ursula tells Polly about a brain tumor patient she saw at the hospital. After dinner they go the play, which is a comedy, and laugh heartily.

Back in Athens, Zachary asks Polly who abused alcohol to make her so uptight about it. Polly replies that her high school is filled with people who overdo it with alcohol and that she has been involved in helping them deal with the consequences. Zachary and Polly agree that moderation is superior to abstinence.

Back at Beau Allaire, Polly is visiting Max. Max tells Polly that she knows that Polly has discovered her secret. Max tells Polly that there are worse things than dying, such as losing one's sense of compassion or wonder. She also says that she does not know how long she has left, but that she has been given Polly at the end as a final gift of joy from life. Polly cries, the two hug, and Polly goes to help Ursula in the kitchen. Polly asks Ursula if Max will still be alive when she comes back from the trip to Cyprus that Max has arranged for her, and Ursula tells Polly that she has no answer for her. Ursula then asks Polly to stay overnight with Max while Ursula goes to Charleston for a consultation. Polly agrees.

Back in Athens, Zachary asks Polly if he will ever see her again after this day. They have a picnic and then go see a crumbling ancient temple. They talk about the looming threat of humanity's self-destruction through nuclear weapons. Polly finds Zachary's attitude toward the end times melodramatic and selfish. She recalls Max's much more sensitive and humane attitude.

Zachary says he will come to Cyprus to see Polly but she tells him that she will be there to do a job and will not have time to see him. He tells her that he will meet here at the



airport in Athens instead and she agrees. They say goodbye back at the hotel with a kiss.

Polly meets Sandy and Rhea for dinner on the roof of the hotel. Sandy and Rhea tell Polly that they are proud of her for managing so well on her own in Athens. Zachary appears while they are having coffee after dinner and introduces himself to Polly's aunt and uncle. Afterward Sandy notes that Zachary is clearly wealthy and privileged.

The next day, Polly, Sandy, and Rhea set off to see the countryside around Athens. Polly notes that her aunt and uncle are much more thorough sightseers than Zachary.

pp.135-172 Analysis

The central event of this section is Polly's discovery that Max has Netson's disease, a lethal parasitic infection. Up to this point, Max has occasionally made some cryptic comments about mortality and the fragility of her heart, but Polly had never thought these comments particularly grave. When Polly realizes after looking through a sketchbook of Max's that she was in Ecuador about a year ago, and notices also how negatively Max reacts when Polly looks at the sketches, she puts the pieces together and very nearly concludes that Max has Netson's. A call to Renny confirms her suspicions. When Renny will not give her a clear answer one way or another because of concerns for patient privacy, Polly realizes that he is hiding something and that Max must have Netson's disease.

It is not long before Polly tells Ursula what she knows. Ursula does not immediately tell Max, choosing instead to take the moment to ask Polly to remain a faithful friend to Max. It is several days before Max tells Polly that Ursula has told her, and the two share a tearful moment together.

Several issues are raised by Max's illness and the friendship that has developed between Max and Polly. Max moved to Beau Allaire in order to be near the M.A. Horne hospital with its team of parasitic infection specialists. We know, therefore, that Max already knew she was infected at the time of her entrance into our narrative. She decided to befriend and nurture Polly as intensely as she did knowing full well that her own death was looming on the horizon. This action can be seen as being both deeply selfish and deeply altruistic. In one sense, Max ought to have known better than to involve herself in a friendship with a young girl which would, by necessity, end with her own death. She seems to be inviting tragedy into the life of a young and innocent woman. On the other hand, we have seen in the novel up to this point that Polly, before her friendship with Max developed, was under-stimulated by her environment and unaware of her own talents and strengths. The gift that Max has given her in their friendship is invaluable, even if it must end with Max's death.

This tension between the selfishness and the altruism of Max's decision to befriend Polly highlights one of the novel's most striking aspects, which is its treatment of young and old as equally complex and profound characters. Max's decision to befriend Polly in



a difficult time is founded, we are left to assume, on the conviction that a young woman must not be shielded from death, and that, as Max says in this section, there are things worse than death. Recall that one of Max's examples of a thing worse than death is the loss of wonder, which she equates with a kind of living death. It is from such a living death that Max has rescued Polly, in a sense. Polly's life before Max was mundane. Her interests were underdeveloped and unshared and her day-to-day life at school was difficult at best. Max has decided that a friendship with Polly would be more mutually beneficial for the two than it would be destructive, and by the end of the novel the reader is hard-pressed to disagree.

Again and again, in this section and throughout the novel, we come up against the inevitability of suffering. Polly has to confront physical suffering and mortality in Max's struggle with Netson's disease, but perhaps more importantly, she must confront the emotional suffering of having been betrayed by a close friend. We still have not learned what transpired between Max and Polly to so betray Polly's trust, but we see that even an idyllic trip to Athens alone remains marked by the shadow of that encounter. Note that the dialogue between Polly and Zachary revolves around questions of pain, suffering, and trust. Though they are both young travelers full of life and of prospects, both are weighed down already by their past and their attempts to reconcile themselves with that past. One of L'Engle's most distinguishing features as an author is this willingness to see young adults as already complex adults.



pp.172-204

pp.172-204 Summary

Polly, Sandy, and Rhea stay at a Greek inn at Nauplion. The next morning, they go to the theater at Epidaurus, and Polly performs one of her speeches from *As You Like It* on the stage for her aunt and uncle. They ask her if she has considered acting as a career, and Polly replies that she has but that she doubts she'll ever entertain dreams of really making it big as an actress. The three go to a museum and then for a walk. Rhea stops to rest, leaving Polly and Sandy alone. Sandy asks Polly how she is doing. He knows what happened between Polly and Max, and wonders whether she has forgiven Max. Polly says that she feels as though she has a piece of ice in her heart.

We return to Benne Seed Island. Polly has agreed to stay with Max overnight while Ursula is in Charleston. Over dinner, Max asks Polly if she believes in the soul. Polly replies that she does and then Polly elaborates on just what she means when she refers to the human soul. Max reads to Polly from the Upanishads a section which likens the soul to a house like a lotus flower, and tells Polly that this house can become larger and larger as we absorb more ideas.

Max is suddenly struck with heart pain and Polly runs to get her some whiskey to relieve the pain. After Max has regained her composure, they sit and gaze at the stars together while contemplating the vastness of the universe and the existence of God. Then Max suggests that they get ready for bed and go lounge in her room. Upstairs, Max offers Polly champagne and she accepts it. Polly begins to wonder if Max has had too much to drink, and Max offers a toast to Polly and everything that she has become. Max, clearly drunk, begins to express her fear of death and loneliness. She tells Polly she needs an affirmation of being and, leaning in close, asks her why she is afraid of her. Then she lunges toward her, and Polly runs away down the stairs and out the front door. Outside in the rain, Polly is intercepted by Ursula, who has just arrived home.

We return to Athens. It is the morning that Polly is set to fly to Cyprus. Her uncle Sandy talks to her about Max, encouraging her to forgive Max and telling her that the incident was an aberration not representative of Max's general character. Sandy says he holds Max at fault only for letting Polly idealize her, which was bound to lead to disaster.

Sandy tells Polly that, though Zachary was good for her during her times in Athens, he is a moneyed and spoiled member of the ruling class. Polly protests that he is more complex than that, and Sandy replies that it is curious that Polly is willing to grant Zachary complexity but is not willing to grant the same to Max.

Polly boards the plane to Cyprus and helps two elderly ladies fill out their landing cards. Krhis meets Polly at the airport in Larnaca. They have a pleasant exchange during the car ride to the conference center and Polly falls asleep during the drive. They arrive at the conference center, which is a beautiful converted monastery, and Krhis introduces



Polly to Norine, the young Chinese woman who is the associate director of the conference. Norine shows Polly her room, which she will share with a delegate from Zimbabwe. Norine tells Polly she has been sent flowers, and Polly sees a vase of hothouse flowers on the table with a note from Zachary.

It is Polly's job to make the beds in all the rooms before the delegates arrive a few days later. Norine and Polly both note the intensity of the heat. The island has been hit by a heat wave and they are both overwhelmed. After the two part, Polly make the beds in a few rooms and describes her surroundings in her school notebook.

pp.172-204 Analysis

In this section, we finally learn what it is that Max has done to cause Polly so much pain. L'Engle's description of the incident is sparse and elliptical. We are left to surmise the nature of Max's offense through Polly's reaction and through comments made by Polly and her Uncle Sandy in Greece after the fact, but it is clear that, essentially, Max has come on to Polly sexually in a moment of desperation and drunkenness. This becomes immediately evident when Max stops in the midst of chasing Polly downstairs, looks at the portrait of her own abusive father in the dining room, and cries out sadly that she is just like him. Because we have already learned that her father pursued his daughter M.A., Max's sister, we are left to assume that Max's offense, like her father's, is of an unusual erotic nature.

The trauma to Polly's relationship with Max is obviously severe, and in many ways this novel is about Polly's attempt to reconcile her great admiration for Max with this terrible incident. We know already that Max is a lesbian, and that the revelation of this fact was somewhat difficult for Polly. There is a valence of acceptance of homosexuality in L'Engle's treatment of this issue, though there is also, at the same time, a wariness about it. L'Engle is neither entirely endorsing homosexuality as an equally acceptable lifestyle, nor is she passing judgment on Max. It is a curious theme that she has chosen to adopt in this novel given that her own feelings seem rather ambivalent.

Polly's uncle, Sandy, points out to Polly that she is quick to defend the somewhat arrogant Zachary as a complex person who cannot be reduced to his wealth, while simultaneously choosing to define and reject Max on the basis of a single unsavory incident. Polly takes her uncle's words into consideration but says nothing; it is clear that her conflicted feelings toward Max have not yet reached an internal resolution and that she continues to struggle with the traumatic recent events.

Polly's trip to Greece is rendered particularly poignant by the fact that it is being funded by Max herself. The trip was her idea, and Polly's stay at the lavish King George hotel in Athens was at Max's expense. Polly remains a recipient of Max's benefaction and this fact cannot help but impress itself on her day to day and keep Max in her mind.

The mood changes rather drastically when Polly arrives in Cyprus. No longer the luxuriant vacationer, Polly is a helper with a clear set of tasks to fulfill. The heat in Ossia

Theola is oppressive and the mosquitos are rampant. Polly is not there to sight see, but to help with a conference whose purpose is to assist and educate people from some of the world's poorest countries. Throughout the novel, we have seen Polly move in circles of affluence and privilege. Even her own family, though not particularly wealthy, is privileged; both her parents are scientists. They have a large home. She never wants for clothes or food. And Polly's interactions with Max, too, have given her access to a world of considerable luxury. Max lives in a mansion and pays for Polly's trip to an expensive salon and a theater production. Max and Polly treat themselves to champagne regularly as a matter of course, and during her trip with Ursula, Polly has French food at a fine restaurant.

We know that Max and the O'Keefes are both sensitive to the needs of the world's poorest, but it is only now that we see Polly actually come into contact with a world outside the privilege of her world on Benne Seed Island.



pp.204-226

pp.204-226 Summary

We return to the moments after Max's near-attack on Polly. Polly sits in Ursula's car and falls asleep while Ursula talks to Max. Ursula brings Polly inside, cleans and bandages her foot, which she cut on a shell outside, and gives her a sedative so she can sleep.

Polly wakes up with a scream back in Cyprus. Virginia Porcher, one of the conference organizers and a famous writer, hears her scream and comes to check on her. Virginia is very pleasant with Polly, who is somewhat overwhelmed at meeting one of her favorite writers. Polly will be helping Virginia with the writing workshop, and Virginia invites Polly to her room to go over the workshop schedule. They have a good conversation and Polly learns that Ursula saved Virginia after a brain aneurysm. Virginia offers herself as a resource for Polly to ask questions as she gets her bearings at Ossia Theola.

The first meeting of the conference organizers is that evening. It will be several days before most of the delegates arrive, but one, named Omio, has arrived from Baki. Polly meets a woman named Milcah who is the workshop's storytelling expert and who goes by Millie. Next, she meets a woman named Bashemath, an expert in childhood education from Kenya, and Frank Rowan, a publisher from Istanbul. After discussing the workshop schedule, the meeting ends and Polly goes with Norine to learn how to use the mimeo copy machine.

Norine and Polly rejoin the group for lemonade. Polly meets Omio, who is in his mid-twenties and is strikingly good-looking. He flatters Polly by commenting on the blueness of her eyes. He tells Polly that he is working hard to write down his people's oral stories, and Polly says she would like to see what he has written; he promises to show her some day. The group gathers around the table before dinner and sings a beautiful song of thanksgiving called Saranam.

her

After dinner, the group gathers to teach Virginia and Polly Saranam and to sing other songs. They go around the group singing Silent Night in different languages. Polly sings it in German. As Millie sings, Polly is so overcome with emotion that she steps away and finds a tree in the darkness, where she leans and cries. Omio puts his arm around her and comforts her, telling her that they have all brought wounds with them and must have healing tears. They rejoin the group and then Virginia, Omio, and Polly decide to go for a night swim in the ocean.



pp.204-226 Analysis

In this section, we become acquainted with the characters who will dominate the remainder of Polly's time in Greece. We are struck by the humanity, depth, and interest of these characters, particularly in comparison with the heady, self-involved discourse between Polly and Zachary in Athens. In contradistinction with the relatively unencumbered characters we have met to this point, Virginia, Frank, Norine, Omio, Millie, and Bashemath are people who have suffered immensely. Omio is from Baki, and we learn that he has been severely ostracized and rebuked for his efforts to encourage literacy among native women. Frank is a publisher in Istanbul and limps because he lost a leg in a tragic car accident that killed his wife. In later sections we will learn more about the struggles of each of the conference leaders.

Polly, for her part, is dealing with her own demons. She is so affected by Millie's beautiful singing that she leaves the group to cry privately. When Omio comes to comfort her, it is clear that the rapport they began to establish while drinking lemonade corresponds to a deep resonance and mutual compassion between the two. Omio tells Polly that each of the conference participants has brought his or her own wounds to the conference. Here, again, we see one of L'Engle's predominant themes. Each of the book's characters, no matter what their background, is a complex human being with formidable emotional struggles. No one's life, L'Engle seems to be suggesting, is easily reducible to formulas or pat judgments. Zachary may be the privileged son of an exploitative banker and Omio an impoverished defender of justice, but both are trying to find themselves and make peace with their world in the best way they know how.



pp.226-243

pp.226-243 Summary

We are back at Beau Allaire. It is the morning after Max and Polly's traumatic encounter. Polly wakes early and slips out of the house. She does not want to go home so she walks for some time until a boy from her high school pulls up and offers her a ride to Cowpertown. Polly agrees, but soon regrets it when the boy hits on her and also suggests that she is a lesbian.

We flash forward to Cyprus. Polly, Omio, and Virginia are walking to the beach for a swim. Polly notes that Omio is a superb swimmer. After they cool off, they walk back to the conference center, where Norine is waiting with a phone message for Polly. The message is from Zachary, sending his love. Polly is pleased and goes to her room to read with the mosquito coil on. The coil goes out without her noticing and she is quickly attacked by mosquitos, one of which bites the corner of her eyelid. She is momentarily panicked as she remembers how Netson's is transmitted, but remembers that there is no Netson's outside of the tropical countries of South America.

We flash back to the past. Polly is calling the hospital trying to reach Renny from a payphone. He is unavailable and she leaves a message for him. Polly waits in the phone booth for an hour before limping away. At that moment, she hears the phone ring. Renny agrees to come pick her up and takes her to the hospital, where he cleans and re-bandages her foot. Polly tells him what has happened and he is immediately comforting. He calls a nurse friend and arranges for Polly to stay at her apartment and rest for the day. Polly calls Ursula from the nurse's apartment and tells her she is safe and not to call her parents.

pp.226-243 Analysis

This section, like the last, alternates between the contemplative and restorative atmosphere of Ossia Theola and the turbulence of Polly's encounter with Max and its aftermath. Most striking in the latter is Polly's insistence on avoiding her family in the day after Max's attack. This insistence reveals much about Polly's relationship with her parents, as well as about Polly herself. We have learned already that Polly's relationship with her parents is deeply trusting. They give her and her siblings considerable freedom to determine their own movements and preferences. In some sense, we see Polly taking advantage of this trust and pushing this freedom beyond its normal boundaries; surely, if Polly's parents knew what had happened to Polly, they would insist on tending to her and addressing the situation with Max.

Polly's motives for wanting to avoid this are several. First of all, she is simply not ready to talk about and confront what has happened, and being with her family will force her prematurely to have to face the trauma Max has caused. This is the case both because



she has six nosy siblings and because she is too close to her parents not to seek the comfort of their confidence if she were to see them so soon after the encounter. It is also likely that Polly's avoidance of her family is evidence of her concern both for Max and for her parents. Polly's parents have developed a strong friendship with Max and Ursula and have defended Polly's relationship with Max in the midst of cruel gossip from Polly's classmates. For them to realize that their trust in Max was not fully justified would be grievously painful, and it is likely that Polly is seeking to spare them and Max this pain. The fact that she turns to Renny when she does shows how much her relationship with him has developed, but also how that relationship allows Polly the space she needs to cope on her own terms.



pp.243-264

pp.243-264 Summary

Polly wakes up in Cyprus with her eye nearly swollen closed from the mosquito bite. She meets Virginia as she is leaving her room, and the author is shocked to see Polly's swollen eye. When they run into Norine, they find that she is similarly alarmed. She tells Polly she will bring her witch hazel pads to bring down the swelling. After breakfast, Polly helps Norine in the office with the task of matching delegates as roommates. Their goal is to pair delegates who do not speak the same language so they will be forced to communicate with people from different cultures. As Norine and Polly work, Norine begins to tell Polly more about each delegate. Omio speaks excellent English and is very self-confident. Bashemath is an interesting person and a fine educator who came into some trouble when she left home for the conference the first time, some years ago. When she returned home, her husband had taken a second wife. Millie's family all died during an epidemic. She nursed them and buried them but did not fall ill herself. Norine gossips further, telling Polly about Virginia's insane institutionalized husband.

Over lunch, Millie tells stories and has everyone in stitches. Polly walks back to the dormitory with Mille afterward, and Mille tells her that listening stories is a way of alleviating pain.

During the afternoon break, Polly types something up for Bashemath and then walks to the town church. There, she meets an old man who gathers flowers from the vases in front of the church icons and gives them to Polly. He kindly attempts to communicate with Polly. Polly stays for some time admiring the church and runs back to the conference center when the bells ring. She meets Omio, who shows her his notebook in which he has set down the stories of his people in both Bakian and English. Omio talks to Polly about the good and bad aspects of missionary efforts in Baki. Omio says that he thinks his people had always been Christian, even before the missionaries came, but just hadn't called their religion Christianity. Omio then shows Polly a drawing of a stone carving of a man laughing in delight; it is the same carving that Max had a replica of in her home. Seeing the drawing brings Polly to tears, and Omio asks her why she is crying. Polly cannot answer, but Omio comforts her by kissing both of her eyelids.

We return to the past. Polly wakes up in Renny's nurse friend's bed. Nell, the nurse, is home for a few minutes to get some things and make Polly broth. Nell makes Polly donax soup, a rare ocean delicacy, and Polly very much appreciates it. Nell encourages Polly to make herself at home and leaves after making sure that Polly is not planning to run away.

Polly goes back to sleep and wakes up to Renny coming in. Polly and Renny talk, then kiss. Renny's kiss goes further than usual, and then Polly and Renny make love.



We are back in Cyprus. Omio and Polly join the group after their emotional conversation. Norine tells Polly that Zachary called again. Polly is not sure whether she wants to see Zachary, but she is glad he calls and sent flowers. After confirming that she has done all the work Norine wants her to do that afternoon, Polly agrees to go for a swim with Omio. As they walk to the beach, Omio holds Polly's hand and tells her that it was not only the missionaries who did bad things in Baki, but also the natives.

Omio tells Polly that she is a good swimmer and asks her to race. It is all Polly can do to keep with Omio. Afterward, he asks how she is such a good swimmer and she responds that it is because she has grown up on islands. Omio asks Polly if she is engaged or has a boyfriend. He explains that, in Baki, a woman Polly's age is already promised. Polly explains that in her culture, she is still considered too young.

pp.243-264 Analysis

In the first part of this section, we get some rapid characterization and background for the workshop leaders to whom we have already been introduced. Norine is the vehicle for this information, as she turns out to be a gossip, if a kind-hearted one. We learn, for example, that Bashemath has been wary of traveling ever since the first time she went to a conference and returned to find that her husband had taken a second wife. We also learn that Virginia, now referred to as Vee, has a husband who has been institutionalized but who depends on her for relative mental stability. Though Vee could have divorced him, she refuses to do so.

In this section, we see Polly's relationship with Omio deepening in a somewhat confusing way. Omio has twice comforted Polly in a moment of pain, but he does not know anything about what happened between Polly and Max. They speak in general terms about pain, healing, and forgiveness, but though the content of their interactions is general, it is also intensely intimate. This intimacy immediately prompts the reader to wonder if there is a certain amount of romantic tension between Polly and Omio. Omio holds Polly's hand as they walk to the beach, he put his arms around her the first time he comforted her, he kissed her eyes as she cried after seeing the statue of the laughing Christ, and he asked her if she is engaged. Polly's own feelings for Omio are certainly warm, but so far not explicitly romantic. There is also the question of Zachary, who remains in the background as a romantically interested—and perhaps interesting—friend.

In many ways this section really focuses on Polly's own romantic and sexual feelings in a way that no other section up to this point has. Most pointedly, we learn about the sexual encounter between Renny and Polly that occurred the day after Polly's disastrous encounter with Max. Renny comes back to his friend's apartment to check on Polly and Polly begins to talk about the high school boy who hit on her as he gave her a ride into Cowperton. Polly says that he tried to take what ought to be given, and Renny agrees and begins to kiss Polly. He goes further than he normally would and then retreats, but Polly reaches for him and essentially asks him to keep kissing her.



L'Engle briefly but powerfully describes their sexual encounter, and it is clear that it was a meaningful and pleasurable experience for Polly.

L'Engle shows an interest in semi-religious themes and ideas throughout this novel, as well as in her other novels. This interest is given its most distilled expression in the conversation that occurs between Omio and Polly as they look at Omio's notebook. Omio talks about the missionaries in Baki favorably, for the most part; though they did wish the native people to change and to adopt Christianity, they did not force the natives to abandon their cultural norms immediately. They did not, for example, force them to abandon all their wives but one, preferring instead to make it clear that the next generation would be monogamous. Omio explains to Polly that his culture's practice of polygamy emerged from a gender imbalance that would have left too many women unmarried and uncared for. Omio also discusses the tragic side of missionaries and colonization when he talks about the lashings his father endured at the hands of powerful white overlords. L'Engle is here attempting to open up the theme of the relationship between religion and power, and the way that religion can either aid or inhibit the flourishing of a people.



pp.264-308

pp.264-308 Summary

The staff meeting at the workshop begins after dinner. Each workshop leader talks about their goals for the conference and afterward Millie sings and Omio dances for the group. Then they all sing Saranam again. Polly asks what Saranam means; it means refuge, and a rich blessing, but there is no English equivalent. Omio likens it to a Bakian word that means love does not judge. Vee brings up Shakespeare, and it becomes clear that neither Bashemath nor Millie has ever heard of Shakespeare. After the meeting, Vee, Polly, and Omio walk back to the dormitory, and Omio comments that there is much true kindness at Osia Theola.

Polly falls asleep after writing in her school journal and watering Zachary's flours. She wakes in the middle of the night in a puddle of sweat. The electricity has gone out and her fan is off. She hears Millie snoring in the room next door, and thinks of how nice it would be to be Millie's child and be sung to and comforted by her.

We return to the past and to Benne Seed Island. Renny has brought Polly home. Polly's mother wonders about what has happened, but accepts Polly's obfuscating explanation and does not pry. The next day, Renny comes over to check on Polly's foot. When they are left alone, he asks Polly where she is in her menstrual cycle, and is relieved to learn she was not fertile when they had intercourse.

Renny tells Polly that she should not have sex with anyone, including him, until she is older and ready to make a commitment. He apologizes for what happened, but Polly tells him that she wanted it, and that he needn't apologize. Renny confesses that he finds Polly very attractive and has lusted after her all summer.

That night, Polly's father asks her if there is something wrong between her and Renny or between her and Max. She confesses after some prodding that Max had too much to drink the night Polly was there. She does not reveal anything more specific, and her father encourages her to accept Max's complexity and avoid idealizing her.

We return to the present in Cyprus. Millie knocks on Polly's door, wondering if something is wrong because of the power outage. Polly reassures her, and then realizes that, for Millie, a power outage could be the sign of a bombed power plant or a military coup. She goes outside to check on their surroundings in order to reassure Millie. Polly leads Millie back to bed.

The next morning, Polly wakes up early and makes the rest of the beds. Then she goes to the church, where she finds Vee. Vee tells her that Osia Theola has convinced her that she is stronger than she thinks, and that she is taking an icon of her back with her. She asks Polly what the saint has revealed to her, and Polly says that she is warming the ice in her heart.



While the group is having breakfast, Zachary shows up. He introduces himself and asks if he can steal Polly away for lunch that day. Polly tells Zachary she is busy, but Norine says that she can be free by eleven. Krhis invites Zachary to stay for a cup of coffee, but Zachary says he has things to do and will be back at eleven.

Polly notices that Omio gave Zachary a sharp look, and realizes that Zachary represents all the corrupting power that Omio fights against. After Zachary leaves, the group asks Polly about Zachary and she tells him that they met in Athens. Omio warns Polly not to go out too far if Zachary takes her swimming.

Zachary picks Polly up at eleven in a rented car. They go for a swim in the ocean. Zachary is not a strong swimmer, and he splashes back to shore. Polly joins him and tries to tell him about the conference staff, but it is evident that Zachary is not interested in them.

Zachary has rented a kayak. The kayak attendant says something in Greek that Polly assumes is a warning not to go beyond the white ropes delimiting a safe area in the water. Polly and Zachary head off, and Zachary begins telling Polly what a help she has been to him in his soul searching. Zachary has begun to break free of his father's corrupt and powerful world because of Polly's influence on him and has decided to go back to college. Zachary becomes exuberant as he talks, and Polly notes that they have paddled beyond the white ropes. Zachary is no longer aware of his surroundings as he becomes more and more excited talking about his personal changes. Suddenly, Polly realizes she can no longer see the hotel. The start to paddle back, but Zachary stops to thank Polly and kiss her. As his kiss becomes more intense, Polly begins to doubt his motives and pulls back. He tries to pull her toward him and suddenly they both topple into the water.

Polly grabs the kayak as it begins to slip away. She tells Zachary to tread water and give her a chance to right the overturned kayak. She flips it over and has Zachary hold it while she tries to get in. He loses his grip and she is unable to get in. She tries to get in without Zachary's interference but Zachary grabs at the kayak, causing Polly to lose her balance. She asks him to tread water while she tries again, but he begins to drift away and she has no choice but to let the kayak go and rescue Zachary, even though it almost certainly means death for them both. She cannot let Zachary die to save herself.

Suddenly, Polly hears Omio calling her. He is in a rowboat coming toward Polly and Zachary. Polly and Omio get Zachary into the boat and then Polly climbs in. Omio is furious with Zachary. Omio tells Polly that he was worried and that Vee suspected something dangerous was happening so he came out with the rowboat on Frank's suggestion. Polly changes and goes back to the conference center with Omio, Vee, and Frank, leaving the apologetic Zachary at the hotel.

Back at the conference center, Polly has a bath and Vee, Norine, Millie, and Frank spoil her with soup and tea, letting her rest. After they eat, Millie gives Polly a back rub and sings her to sleep.



We return to the past. Sandy comes to Benne Seed Island to check on Polly after Max calls him and tells him what happened. Sandy tells Polly that he hasn't said anything to her parents. Sandy tells Polly that it was a mistake to idealize Max and that she should allow for Max's complexity. He reminds Polly that Max is dying and there may not be enough time for Polly to overcome the trauma on her own terms.

That night, Polly and Renny go for pizza. Renny tells Polly that she shouldn't make love casually, and Polly assures him that she does not have that attitude. Renny talks again about how he should have shown restraint, and when he takes her home on the boat, he cuts the motor as usual and is about to kiss her, but stops himself. He tells Polly he is not sure if he could hold back.

Polly reflects on the fact that Renny has awakened her body sexually. We return to the present, and find Polly thinking about Omio and how attracted she is to him. He knocks on her door and brings her tea. She thanks him profusely and Omio reminds him that Vee and Frank were as much Polly's rescuers. Omio gives Polly the page from his notebook with the drawing of the Laughing Christ. In return, Omio asks for a picture of Polly and she gives him a school ID card. He shows Polly where he will put it in his wallet, next to a picture of a woman and a baby boy. Polly asks who they are and Omio answers that they are his wife and baby. Polly is overcome with surprise and tells him she didn't know he was married. Omio senses the change in Polly and tells her that he will be faithful to his wife but that she has touched his soul. Polly asks Omio to leave.

Zachary calls while Polly is helping Norine in the office. He is contrite, and Polly agrees to meet him in Athens between her flights. Polly realizes that, though Zachary was good for her in Athens, she is not as affected by him as she has been by Renny or Omio. Krhis comes in while she is working with Norine and asks if they are working her too hard. Polly assures him that they are not, and then Krhis asks if something is wrong with Max. Polly blurts out that she is dying, and asks Krhis to pray for her.

As Polly walks back to the dormitory, she runs into Omio, who comforts her and asks if they are still friends. Polly says that they are and they reconcile. They agree to go for a swim with Vee. They have a good swim and then have dinner with the rest of the group. The next day, the delegates will arrive at the conference center. Omio bids Polly good night and asks her if she regrets having had these days to become friends. She replies that she does not, and this prompts her to reflect on how much she cherishes everything Max has given her in spite of Max's recent transgression.

As Polly writes in her school journal, a thunderstorm breaks out. Millie comes over to see if Polly is scared and needs company. While Millie is there, Frank comes by with candles and a flashlight. Vee and Bashemath are with him. Soon, Norine comes by and is beckoned in. Millie begins to sing and Krhis appears at the door and is pulled in to sit at a desk chair. Then they all sing together. After some time they decide to go to sleep, and they all bid each other goodnight before going to their rooms. Polly feels as though she has entered the sacred precincts of Epidaurus and seen Blessed Theola's vision of love.



The next morning, Polly wakes up refreshed and goes to hear the Byzantine chanting at the church. She senses Krhis behind her as the service is ending, and asks him if it would be possible for her to make an overseas call. They go to the office and Krhis dials several times and speaks to several operators before giving the phone to Polly and leaving her alone. Ursula answers the phone and asks who it is. Polly tells her and asks to speak to Max. Polly tells Max that she loves her and Max asks Polly to forgive her. Polly asks Max to forgive her too, and the line goes dead. As Polly leaves the office, she feels the ice in her heart melting and is overwhelmed with love.

pp.264-308 Analysis

This long final section really works as a whole because it is the section in which the group at Osia Theola comes to the foreground as the collective agent of Polly's healing. Though some of the group members are more significant for Polly—Omio and Vee in particular—each affects her in a unique way and each is part of the group energy that eventually leads Polly to her vision of love and moment of forgiveness at the end of the novel.

It is really this group effect that takes Polly from her hardened and unforgiving state to the almost beatific vision she has at the end; the sum is greater than its parts in this section of the novel. Though Omio and Vee are individually powerful influences on Polly, it is not until the impromptu late-night gathering of the entire group in Polly's room that she feels carried into a realm of love capable of melting the ice in her heart. What is so powerful about the group is that they embody communal love. Each member of the group has his or her personal struggles. Vee's husband is institutionalized, Omio must lead a contentious life because of his efforts to bring female literacy to Baki, Frank's wife died in the accident in which he lost his leg, Millie's entire family died in an outbreak, and Bashemath's husband took a new wife when she went away for her first conference. These characters are certainly not unburdened. And yet, when they come together, there is simultaneously a depth and a buoyancy to their being that allows them to transcend their individual sufferings. They go beyond individual friendships to create a community of love, and the love that they create is so powerful that it undoes the hardness in Polly's heart, and no doubt has an effect on the wounds of the other group members.

Note how L'Engle allows the setting to mingle with her themes. The conference is taking place at Osia Theola in Cyprus, by the church of Blessed Theola. We learn little about Blessed Theola, and there is only one brief description of Polly's first entrance into the church, but the sanctity of the place certainly informs the character of Polly's final moment of forgiveness. Polly feels that her own transformation is a vision of Blessed Theola's love. By setting the workshop where she did and by allowing this setting to bleed thematically into the novel's action, L'Engle has made use of space without getting so involved in setting that she detracts from her plot.

The scene in which Zachary and Polly nearly drown in the ocean is a moment in which we see Zachary's flippancy and Polly's goodness. Zachary has decided, somewhat



dramatically, to cast off the privileged and corrupt world of his international banking father. He sees Polly as the catalyst of this personal change in himself and, combined with the fact that he is so attracted to her, this prompts Zachary to a rapturous admiration that perhaps overstretches the depth and length of his acquaintance with Polly. When they are kayaking on the ocean, Zachary is so overcome with his own rapturous declarations of personal change and devotion to Polly that he loses his bearings and the two find themselves on the open ocean in a tiny kayak. Note that Zachary immediately blames Polly, even as Polly is struggling to fix the problem without any real help from Zachary. Zachary admits that he is not athletic, and any time he attempts to assist Polly, he ends up countering her efforts. In a critical moment, Polly must choose whether to save herself and let Zachary drown or let go of the kayak and almost certainly seal both their fates. She is unable to choose herself over Zachary, and she lets the kayak go and swims over to Zachary. She is keeping him afloat in the open ocean with Omio shows up in a rowboat to rescue them. In this moment we see that Polly is a person of great integrity. In some ways, her decision can be seen as monumentally foolish: Why not save at least one person rather than allowing two to die? Polly does not expect to be rescued, but she knows she will not be able to live with herself if she lets Zachary drown while saving herself. In the end, her act of trust and love is vindicated by Omio's appearance. We see then, that there is an element of faith that must accompany any act of self-sacrifice in order to rescue that act from being entirely irrational.

When Omio rescues Polly and Zachary, he is furious with Zachary. He feels that Zachary foolishly risked Polly's life, and that his flippant, joking responses after their rescue are not sufficiently grave. Omio is someone who knows the value and fragility of life, while Zachary is someone accustomed to privilege and comfort, for whom the fragility of life is a distant, theoretical truth rather than an ever-present sentiment. Zachary has very nearly died, and yet the meaning and gravity of the experience seems to elude him. Polly realizes soon after this incident that her feelings for Zachary are not strong and overwhelming the way her feelings for Renny or Omio have been. When she bids him farewell at the airport in Athens, she knows she will do so without great pain.

We come, finally, to Polly's phone call to Max. After an impromptu gathering of the group in her room during a thunderstorm, Polly is healed and transformed. Her time with the conference leaders has been restorative and transformative. Polly is ready to forgive. After hearing the Byzantine chanting in the church of Osia Theola, she asks Krhis to help her make a phone call. As we would expect at this point, Krhis is helpful but does not pry. Polly has been treated at this conference, as at home, like an adult who deserves respect and privacy. When she has Max on the line, Polly tells her that she loves her and asks her forgiveness. It is a strange moment, because the words the two exchange echo over the line and the call is painfully brief. Polly feels that she has said what she needed to say and the moment, for her, is full and complete despite its brevity. Nonetheless, we can note that it has an almost otherworldly aspect. It is almost as if Max has already died and she is speaking to Polly from beyond the grave. We do not know if Max will be alive when Polly returns to Benne Seed Island, but L'Engle seems to suggest that the point is moot now. As Max herself said, there are things worse than

death. One of those things is hardness of heart, and in this moment, Max's heart and Polly's heart are melted and united.



Characters

Polyhymnia O'Keefe

Polyhymnia, known as Polly, is the book's central character. She is 16 years old, tall, red-headed, intelligent, and the oldest of seven children. Her parents are both scientists. Polly was raised on the island of Gaea off the coast of Portugal, and speaks Gaeian, French, German, and Portuguese. She is an able swimmer and a curious person. She is particularly interested in anthropology and poetry. Polly has a hard time at the high school she attends in Cowperton; she is not popular and is seen as awkward and socially irrelevant. This is brought out particularly in the contrast between Polly and her cousin Kate, who is staying with the O'Keefe's and attending high school in Cowperton. Polly is beautiful, but her beauty is not appreciated by her classmates or siblings, who consider her lanky and strange. Polly begins to come into her own after developing a friendship with Maximiliana Horne, known as Max, a wealthy woman who lives in a mansion called Beau Allaire on Benne Seed Island. Max encourages Polly to develop her interests and gives her the confidence to flourish in many ways. Polly develops greater self-confidence and auditions for a leading part in the school production of *As You Like It*. Polly's performance is a success and she is briefly well-regarded by her classmates. At Max's suggestion and by her arrangement, Polly agrees to travel to Cyprus to assist Max's friend at a conference for delegates from poor countries around the world. The central drama of the novel is Polly's discovery that Max is dying from a rare parasitic disease. One night, when Polly is staying alone with Max at her mansion, Max becomes intoxicated, as she uses alcohol for pain relief, and comes on to Polly. Polly has already learned and accepted that Max is a lesbian. Max lives with Ursula, an old friend of the O'Keefe family and Max's lover of many years. The traumatic erotic encounter between Polly and Max leads Polly to run away and avoid Max until the final pages of the novel, when she calls Max from Cyprus to tell her that she loves and forgives her.

Maximiliana Horne

Maximiliana Horne, known as Max, is a wealthy woman and benefactress. Her father established the M.A. Horne hospital on Benne Seed Island in memory of Max's sister M.A., to whom he owed a debt of guilt. Max is an artist and lives most of the year in New York City, but is in Benne Seed Island because she has been infected with a rare parasitic disease called Netson's and is receiving expert treatment at the M.A. Horne hospital. Because Max's lover Ursula is an old family friend of the O'Keefe's, Polly makes Max's acquaintance when they have a family dinner together. Max asks Polly to visit her and they quickly strike up a friendship based on their shared interests in poetry and anthropology. Max is described throughout the novel as a complex woman; she certainly has many facets. She is a talented artist, a great appreciator of the arts, a curious and intrepid amateur scholar, and a dear friend to many. Because she uses alcohol for pain relief, we see her overstep the bounds of adult responsibility twice in the



novel. Once, she allows Polly to drive home after drinking too much champagne. The second time is more grave. She comes on to Polly one night in a moment of desperation and drunkenness. This latter incident forms the tension of the second half of the book, during which Polly struggles to forgive Max, whom she has idealized, for this act. At the end of the novel, Polly forgives Max and tells her she loves her over the phone. We do not know if Max will be alive when Polly returns from Cyprus to Benne Seed Island.

Zachary Gray

Zachary is a college-age traveler and handsome young man who befriends Polly in Athens. He first spots her when they are both sitting at an outdoor café filled with privileged young American travelers. Zachary is from California and his father is a wealthy international businessman. Zachary is traveling Europe while taking a break from college after a painful breakup that has left him reeling and in need of direction. He is attracted to Polly and finds her interesting, so he proposes that they spend several days together. Polly, who is alone in Athens before the arrival of her Aunt Rhea and Uncle Sandy, welcomes Zachary's flattering attentions but ultimately finds him histrionic and a bit superficial. Zachary repeatedly makes sexual insinuations during his time with Polly, but the two never do more than kiss. Zachary visits Polly at Osia Theola in Cyprus, where he takes her kayaking and, losing his bearings, nearly drowns both of them in the open sea before they are rescued by Omio, one of the conference delegates. Zachary is apologetic, and will meet Polly in Athens during her plane change.

Omio Heno

Omio is a delegate to the Osia Theola conference. He is in his mid-twenties and is from Baki in Micronesia. He is exuberant, an excellent dancer, and a warm person. He immediately befriends Polly and, soon after meeting, goes to comfort her when he notices that she has left the group after Millie's singing brings Polly to tears. Omio shows Polly a notebook in which he is recording the stories and traditions of his people. Included in the notebook is a drawing of a statue of the Laughing Christ, the same statue that Max has a reproduction of in her stairwell. Recognizing the statue makes Polly emotional, and Omio does not fully understand why she reacts the way she does. Omio rescues Polly when she and Zachary are stranded in the open sea, and Polly realizes after this that she is very attracted to Omio. He gives her the drawing of the Laughing Christ and she gives him her school ID so he can have something of hers in return. When he places her ID next to a picture of his wife and child, and shows the picture to Polly, Polly realizes for the first time that he is married. She is hurt, but soon recovers as she realizes that Omio never meant to conceal the fact and was not coming onto her despite his physical warmth toward her. Omio is probably Polly's closest friend during her time in Cyprus.



Virginia Porcher

Virginia Porcher, known as Vee, is a writer and conference workshop leader in Cyprus. Polly is familiar with her writing and admires her greatly. She is intimidated by their intimacy at first, and feels strange calling her Vee, but the two soon become friends. Vee's husband, Polly learns, was institutionalized after a brain infection led him to insanity. Vee remains faithful to him and visits him regularly. Vee is the one who has the intuition of danger when Polly is out with Zachary in the kayak.

Milcah Adah Xenda

Milcah Adah Xenda, known as Millie, is a conference participant and workshop leader from Cameroon. Her entire family was killed in a disease outbreak but she was spared despite nursing each of them. After they died, she spent time in a hospital nursing children, and it was then that she discovered her gifts as a storyteller. She treats the group to some stories during their time together, and will lead a storytelling workshop for the delegates. She tells Polly that when the storytelling part of our brain is on, the part that feels pain is off.

Bashemath Odega

Bashemath is from Kenya. She is a childhood education specialist. She knows Frank Rowan and is working with him to set up small publishing firms in Kenya. Bashemath has been to Krhis's conferences before. During her first conference, her husband took a second wife in her absence.

Frank Rowan

Frank is the publisher of a small educational press in Istanbul. While in a trip to the United States to drop his children off for them to attend school there, his family was in a terrible accident. His wife died and he was left with only one leg. Frank is a workshop leader who will give the delegates tips on starting their own small publishing presses.

Norine Fong Mar

Norine is the conference secretary and she directly oversees Polly's work. Norine shows Polly what to do in the office to assist her. She is something of a gossip, albeit a kindhearted one, and fills Polly in on everyone's background.

Krhis Ghose

Krhis heads the conference in Cyprus. He is an old friend of Max's. He wrote to Max asking if she knew anyone up for the task of assisting at the conference and it was in



this way that Polly came to participate in the conference. Krhis is a paternal and wise presence throughout the latter part of the novel. We do not get much background on Krhis, and what we glean of his character we glean mostly from his actions in the present. He is kind and respectful of everyone's ideas and privacy.

Sandy and Rhea Murry

Sandy and Rhea are Polly's uncle and aunt, respectively. They are lawyers who work internationally to defend the disenfranchised and poor from the corrupting and exploitative efforts of the wealthy and powerful. Zachary tells Polly that his father has heard of Sandy and Rhea, and that they are considered dangerous by people like his father. Sandy comes to Benne Seed Island to see Polly after Max calls him and tells him about the traumatic drunken incident between herself and Polly. Sandy and Rhea are supposed to meet Polly in Athens to spend several days with her before her flight to Cyprus, but are delayed by work, leaving Polly to spend three days alone in Athens. They are thankful that Zachary was there to show Polly a good time, but are wary of his wealthy background.

Ursula Heschel

Ursula is a neurosurgeon and Max's lover of many years. She is a good friend of Polly's uncles Sandy and Dennys. Ursula plays a side role to Max's primary role in the novel. She finds Polly in the driveway after Polly runs out of the house following Max's attack. She bandages Polly's foot and gives her a sedative so she can rest that night. Ursula is always understanding and gentle with Polly. She is the first person Polly speaks to after Renny when she finds out that Max has Netson's disease. Ursula asks Polly to remain a loyal friend to Max in her time of need.

Queron Renier

Queron Renier, known as Renny, is a distant relative of Max's and a resident at the M.A. Horne hospital. He is in his mid-twenties. He calls Polly after Max encourages him to do so and their first meeting is for dinner at the O'Keefe's. After that, they go for regular dates at a Greek pizza place. When Renny takes Polly home in the boat, he always cuts the motor and kisses her gently before saying good night. They are romantically linked but never go very far until after Polly's encounter with Max. When Polly stays at Renny's friend's house for a day to recover, she and Renny make love. Renny is a specialist in South American parasitic diseases and is part of the team treating Max for Netson's disease. He talks to Polly extensively about Netson's disease before Polly finds out about Max, which helps Polly to put the clues together and deduce that Max is infected.



Xan O'Keefe

Xan is Polly's teenage brother. His relationship with Polly is, at times, strained. He and Kate, Polly and Xan's cousin, bring up the question of Max's sexual orientation over dinner one night, suggesting that perhaps Polly ought not spend so much time at Beau Allaire, as her presence there is inciting gossip at the high school. Xan is severely chastised by Mr. O'Keefe and later admits his wrongdoing and apologizes to Polly.

Calvin O'Keefe

Calvin O'Keefe is Polly's father. He is a marine biologist and does his work exclusively on islands. For this reason, Polly grew up on Gaea, a Portuguese island, and is now living on Benne Seed Island in South Carolina. Mr. O'Keefe, like his wife, respects his children's autonomy and allows them to make their own decisions. Polly helps clean out Mr. O'Keefe's laboratory every day.

Meg O'Keefe

Meg O'Keefe is Polly's mother. She has not earned her doctorate but does all the mathematical work for her husband's research. She plans to return to school to finish her doctorate once her seventh and youngest child is school age. Polly turns to her mother when she is troubled by the rumor that Max and Ursula are lesbians. Mrs. O'Keefe never answers Polly's question directly, but instead encourages her to focus on the interests she shares with Max rather than on Max's sexual orientation.



Objects/Places

Benne Seed Island

Benne Seed Island is one of two primary settings in the novel. It is where the O'Keefe's live and it is also the site of Beau Allaire, the mansion where Maximiliana Horne and Ursula Heschel live. It is a beautiful island now undergoing unsightly development, with large buildings tracts. Polly and her family live in a converted hotel, with each member of the family having his or her own room. Polly and her siblings take a boat with their father every morning to Cowpertown, from where they take a bus to their high school.

Athens

The book toggles between the past in Benne Seed Island and the present in Greece for much of the novel. Polly spends three days alone in Athens because her aunt and uncle are delayed and are unable to meet her flight there as planned. It is in Athens that Polly meets Zachary Gray, a college-aged wealthy young man who falls for Polly and takes her around the countryside sightseeing for three days. Polly is awed by the majesty of the ancient ruins in Athens and is very much charmed by the juxtaposition of old and new in the city.

Beau Allaire

Beau Allaire is the mansion that belongs to the Horne family, and which is the residence of Maximiliana Horne and her lover, Ursula Heschel. Beau Allaire is a fine home often photographed for architectural magazines. Polly spends a considerable amount of time there after her friendship with Max deepens.

Laughing Christ

Max has a replica of a Bakian statue called the Laughing Christ. It is an old folk statue of the Bakian people that represents a laughing, joyful god. Max knocks it over as she chases Polly out of the home after coming on to her. Omio, who is from Baki, gives Polly a sketch of the statue as a token of his friendship. The image of the Laughing Christ represents the joy of a god who is not judgmental but pours forth pure love and mirth.

Epidaurus

Epidaurus is the site of an ancient theater that Polly visits with her aunt and uncle after their arrival in Athens. Polly's uncle Sandy gives her a book to read about Epidaurus, and it is from this book that Polly learns that one had to be purged of negative emotions before entering the sacred theater precincts. At the end of the novel, after a beautiful



evening of impromptu singing with the members of the Cyprus convention, Polly feels as though she has been purged of all negativity and has entered the sacred precincts of Epidaurus.

Osia Theola

Osia Theola is the site of the conference in Cyprus. The name means Blessed Theola, and is named after a Greek saint. Polly visits the church of Osia Theola during her time in Cyprus, and finds the Byzantine chanting there beautiful. Polly calls her feeling of love and forgiveness at the end of the novel Osia Theola's vision of love.

School Notebook

Throughout Polly's trip to Greece, she keeps a notebook in which she describes her travels and personal encounters. The notebook will be turned in to Polly's English teacher, Ms. Zeloski, but Polly writes as much to Max as to Ms. Zeloski in the notebook.

King George Hotel

Polly stays at the King George Hotel at Max's expense while she is in Athens. The hotel is luxurious, and on Polly's first day there she receives a basket of fruit from Max. Polly first meets Zachary when he approaches her during her first dinner on the roof of the King George Hotel.

Petros' Greek Restaurant

Polly and Renier regularly go on dates at Petros' Greek Restaurant. It is at this restaurant that they meet to discuss Neston's disease after Polly discovers that Max is infected. It is also at Petros' that Polly and Reny discuss their sexual encounter at length. After their dates here, Reny takes Polly home by boat.

Gaea

Gaea is the Portuguese island where Polly spent the earlier years of her youth because her father, a marine biologist, was doing research there. Because of her time in Gaea, Polly speaks both Gaeian and Portuguese.



Themes

Complexity

The issue of personal complexity arises so often not only in the narrative content of *House Like a Lotus* but also in its characters' dialogue that it imposes itself quite clearly as one of the novel's major themes. Again and again, Polly is advised to stop idealizing Max and to regard her in her full human complexity. Her father, Sandy, and ultimately Polly herself enjoin this lesson upon L'Engle's precocious main character. The fact that Max became intoxicated in a moment of physical pain and existential desperation and, in her intoxication made a sexual advance on Polly seems to be an act entirely attributable to her personal complexity in the eyes of L'Engle's characters and, presumably, in L'Engle's own opinion. This is not to say that L'Engle and her characters do not pass judgment on Max's actions; rather, Max is supposed to be so clearly and palpably a good and kindhearted woman that her transgression must be forgiven by those who understand her fully. Whether L'Engle has done a sufficiently thorough job of ingratiating Max with her readers is an open question and a question left to each reader to answer, but it is clear that we, like Polly, are meant to move from a position of indignation and shock to one of nuanced sympathy for a dying woman who, in a moment of weakness, betrayed her own ideals as much as or more than she betrayed Polly's trust. What, then, is the nature of this complexity that L'Engle somewhat vaguely develops throughout the novel? Based on its use in reference to Max and to Zachary, we can describe this complexity as a person's being more than what they appear to be, whether that appearance is based on momentary actions, appearance, class association, or some other marker of identity that can easily be taken as all-encompassing but which may conceal a more mixed reality. Zachary, for example, belongs to an elite ruling class corrupt to its core but convinced of the righteousness of its exploitative capitalist ends. Does this mean, then, that Zachary is an exploitative capitalist? Certainly not, as Polly is quick to remind her uncle Sandy when he dismisses Zachary as such. Zachary cannot help but be conditioned by the class into which he was born, but at the same time, this conditioning does not fully determine his identity, and it is clear that he is aware enough of alternatives to self-consciously opt out of the international banking career that he is poised to enter on account of his pedigree. The temptation to simplify Max is similarly strong, though it is of a different sort. In Max's case, the simplification would be to judge her on the basis of one night's drunken mistake rather than on the basis of a life compassionately and passionately lived. Polly must come to see Max as a flawed but rich human being whose complexity warrants that she be forgiven her moment of grave weakness.

Trust and Forgiveness

The theme of complexity, as we have seen, is not far from that of trust and forgiveness. It is only in taking account of Max's complexity and accepting her as a flawed human being that Polly is able to heal from the breach of trust that Max has committed and to



forgive her dying mentor. The theme of trust arises early on in the novel, before we even learn of Max's transgression. Human beings are bound to hurt each other and to undermine the trust that they place in each other, we are told. To admit this fact freely is not, L'Engle suggests, to be hopeless but, on the contrary, to be open and forgiving even before one's trust has been violated. There is no friendship and there is no growth without trust, but there is no trust without trust broken. The only way forward from this impasse is forgiveness, and so these two must exist always in a pair in order for either to be fully realized. Correspondingly, a deeper trust that is broken requires a greater act of forgiveness. Compare Polly's attitude toward Max after her transgression with her attitude toward Zachary after his. Polly is quick to forgive Zachary and even to take pity on him after he is nearly responsible for their deaths. Though the consequence would have been extremely grave, Polly is quick to forgive Zachary because his act really more the character of a blunder than of a breach of trust. The friendship between the two youth was not sufficiently deep or sufficiently cemented to warrant the indignation that Max's transgression inspired in Polly.

Age and Maturity

Though there is no doubt that Max is the more seasoned friend in the friendship between Max and Polly, their friendship—which is the central relationship of *House Like a Lotus*—is also an embodiment of the insignificance of age when it comes to a true sympathy of souls. Part of the reason that Polly flourishes so magnificently after developing her friendship with Max is that Max regards Polly's opinion as seriously as she regards the opinion of an adult friend. We see, again and again, that Max is genuinely fascinated with Polly's thoughts. Max asks her, for example, whether she believes in the human soul, and considers her response as she would consider that of a wise person of her own age. There is in this friendship, then, a commentary on the disjunction of age and maturity. These two things are not the same thing; one can be old and immature just as easily as one can be young and mature. Polly begins the novel as a relatively mature young woman and ends it as a remarkably mature one. The chief difference between Polly at the beginning of the novel and at the end is not her worldly experience, nor is it her newly awakened sexual sense. It is rather her suffering and her capacity for forgiveness. What Polly shares with the other members of the conference in Cyprus is a sense of life's fragility and also the experience of deep suffering. Polly's best friend is a dying woman who has betrayed her trust grievously and Polly finds herself forced to grow up and forgive Max before it is too late. In this sense, then, the theme of maturity is very closely linked with the other two themes already discussed: those of complexity and of forgiveness.

Compassion

When Max tells Polly that she knows that Polly has discovered that she has Netson's disease, she tells Polly that there are things worse than death, and that one of them is the loss of compassion. The theme of compassion really comes to the foreground in the latter part of the book, once Polly has left Athens for Cyprus. It is in Cyprus that Polly



comes into contact with people whose lives have been infinitely more difficult, at least in a strictly socio-political and physical sense, than her own, and it is in Cyprus that Polly comes to understand the true meaning of compassion. People like Omio, Millie, and Bashemath, among the other participants, have suffered intensely, and yet they are still focused on giving rather than on taking. They are more concerned with lending their own strengths and internal resources to the common cause of human happiness than they are with furthering their own personal comforts or renown. It is through their healing example and presence that Polly grows sufficiently in compassion to forgive Max her transgression. The penultimate scene of the book, in which Polly calls Max to tell her she loves her, is really an embodiment of Max's own words that there are fates worse than death. L'Engle's decision to end the saga here, rather than with Polly's return to Benne Seed Island is thematically very purposeful. We do not know if Polly ever sees Max again and we are meant to feel that it does not matter. In some sense, the moment of compassion between the two friends transcends the inevitability of death and is ultimately more meaningful than any moment of physical expiration.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written from the point of view of its main character, Polyhymnia O'Keefe. Polly is a remarkably mature young woman and there is little question about her reliability or psychological subtlety as a narrator. Her self-awareness permeates every description and every recollection, so that we are privy to the complexities of her motives and feelings to the degree we would be if we were being given these details by an omniscient third person narrator. This structural feature of the novel prompts questions about L'Engle's understanding of psychology and her conception of Polly as a character. Has L'Engle constructed a character so self-aware as to be unbelievable or unlikeable? Certainly the answer to the question must be subjective and remains the prerogative of each reader, but we can say that on the spectrum of self-awareness among the different characters, Polly ranks very high. Such self-awareness means that Polly gives us a nuanced picture but this picture may come at the cost of making her a less nuanced character, as we never have to doubt her picture of reality or engage her subjectivity in a complex way.

Setting

A House Like a Lotus is set primarily in three places: Benne Seed Island in South Carolina, Athens, and Cyprus. These geographical settings are also essentially temporal settings. When we are in Benne Seed Island, we are in the past, and when we are in Athens and Cyprus, we are in the present. This linking of geography and time simplifies the movement in time that can so often become disorienting for readers. In this novel there is no confusion about when or where the narrative is placed at any given moment. As we have already discussed, the Cypriot setting is particularly noteworthy in its narrative significance. At Osia Theola, an air of healing and sanctity is provided by the ancient significance of the site. Though we learn little about Blessed Theola herself, she remains a simultaneously subtle and powerful presence throughout the latter half of the book. Polly equates her own transformative healing moment with Blessed Theola's vision of love. In this sense, then, L'Engle makes good use of setting to create a mood. Note also how dominant a role the ocean place as a setting throughout the novel. We know that Polly has been raised on islands and that she is a comfortable swimmer. Her swims with Omio and Vee are a meaningful bonding experience during her time in Cyprus, and her traumatic kayak trip with Zachary also places the ocean in the foreground; the ocean can almost be seen as a kind of character throughout the novel, so prominent a role does it play.



Language and Meaning

The language throughout the novel is proper to the sophistication of its characters. There is no lack of elevated language, but it is always presented casually, in the manner of characters who use such words without pretension. Stylistically, L'Engle divides her description about equally between internal monologue, external description, and dialogue. The latter can be faulted for a certain contrived quality that renders its characters, when viewed from afar, as pretentious. Ursula ordering moules marinières at a French restaurant sounds remarkably like a parody of a wealthy snob, but we know better. Whether L'Engle intended that we pose ourselves the question or not, the financial privilege of our central characters, combined with their compassion and sensitivity, prompts to ask whether superficial pretension can belie a deeper and more complex reality. Note the prevalence throughout the novel of what may be called navel-gazing or soul searching. Max is a dying woman and, for the latter half of the novel, Polly is a troubled young woman. Everyone, everywhere in this novel seems to be contending with issues of personal identity and reconciliation. That fact means that the dialogue is dominated by concerns about the nature of the soul, aging, death, and, put bluntly, the meaning of life.

Structure

The novel alternates between past and present with both past and present moving forward in time. That is to say, we begin from a specific point in the past and move forward to a specific point in the past, and we begin from a specific point in the present and move forward to a specific point in the present. Essentially what we have are two parallel narratives with one lagging in time. This may sound perplexing but, as already mentioned, the geographical movement that marks these temporal movements means that we are always very much aware of where we are in time. For much of novel, the time between past and present is marked by the traumatic encounter between Max and Polly that we receive no clear description of until we are well along in the narrative. This is a remarkably effective way of maintaining a sense of tension and suspense in a novel that is quite simply about a girl forgiving her friend for doing wrong by her. The unexplained and silent presence of the traumatic encounter looms in the narrative without being made explicit, and, even when it is finally related, it is almost insinuated rather than related. Like Max's account of her father's attack on her sister, the description of Max's sexual advance on Polly is elliptical and understated. This makes it more powerful, in a way, because the unknown has a monstrous quality that the known cannot have.



Quotes

"Mother tries not to put too much responsibility on me, and everybody has jobs, but if Mother's in the lab helping Daddy work out an equation, then I'm in charge, and believe me, all these brethren and sistren have about decided me on celibacy" (p. 11).

"The Bakians simply assumed, when the missionaries told them about the Son of God, that it was their statue, which had never before had a name" (p. 35).

"Yes, but I'm particularly interested in some parasites which are found largely in South America. They get into the bloodstream, and—to try to simplify a long procedure—eventually invade the heart" (p. 66).

"Zachary insisted on paying the entrance fee for both of us, and I was not happy about this. I didn't want to be beholden to some guy I had just met who came from the world of megabucks" (p. 72).

"It was a good day. Confusing, but good. Zachary made me feel I wasn't just a gawky, backward adolescent who didn't even need a bra till I was fourteen, but that I was mature, and attractive to him" (p. 85).

"The fact that I hated school no longer seemed important. Max was my teacher, as Mother and Daddy had been my teachers on Gaea. And because I was learning, and felt happy about it, I was more patient with the little kids" (p. 88-89).

"I wasn't too young with Max, and that's one reason I loved being with her. Chronology didn't enter into it. Max was as young as I was, and I was as old as Max. And when Ursula was there, I was treated as an equal" (p. 102).

"Max's attitude about theology makes more sense to me than Zachary's dogmatic atheism. Max was always willing to take a metaphysical chance, Sandy said once; she was an eager observer, tolerant of human foible, open to the unexplainable, but nobody's fool" (p. 103).

"Even though my parents didn't know I was in Greece all alone, their trust in me, and in the rest of us, was indeed pretty incredible. And that trust had been betrayed, and I hoped they'd never have to know the extent to which it had been betrayed. Part of growing up, I was discovering, was learning that you did not have to tell your parents everything" (p. 129).

"We do make things happen by what we think, so think positively, Polly, not negatively. When you think you are beautiful, you are beautiful. If you believe in yourself, you will do well in your life's work, whether you choose acting or writing or science" (p. 163).

"Polly, child, I know that you are shocked and horrified by what happened. I am too" (p. 204).

I felt somehow as though at last I had been allowed past the outer gates of Epidaurus, and into the sacred precincts" (p. 304).



Topics for Discussion

Throughout the novel, we see age and maturity affecting characters' behavior with each other. Compare the dynamics of age in the relationship between Polly and Max with the same dynamics in the relationship between Polly and Renny.

Zachary is so influenced by Polly that he decides to forsake the world of power and influence that he is poised to enter. Do you find his about-face convincing? Why or why not?

Ultimately, Zachary leaves Polly cold, particularly when she compares him to Renny and to Omio. What do Renny and Omio share that Zachary lacks in Polly's eyes?

The question of Max's sexuality certainly enters into the thematic content of the novel. How do you interpret L'Engle's rendering of the issue? Is it relevant that Max is a lesbian in the central tension of the novel? Why or why not?

Polly's parents trust her so much that they allow her to decide what she is comfortable telling them and what she would rather keep private. Do you think this is a responsible parenting decision? What might be some of the negative effects of her parents prying more than they do?

Throughout the novel, we move between the past and present and between Benne Seed Island and Greece. Do you think this movement in space and time is effective? What does it add to the novel that would be missing if it were told in a simple linear fashion?

Polly's friendships in Cyprus play a tremendous role in the healing she must go through before she is ready to forgive Max. What are the central lessons that the members of the conference teach her?