



The Door in the Wall (Learn English with a Short Story) [962]

Hello listeners,

In this episode it is story time again. I'm going to tell you a short story and use it to help you learn English.

Introduction notes

Today's story is another one by HG Wells, called *The Door in the Wall* (considered to be one of Well's best short stories, first published 1906).

Text updated into modern English for English learners (still literary in style but not old-fashioned).

Structure of the episode:

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2

- The story (20–30 minutes) - normal for a story of this length
- Clear summary of the story in my own words (so you can check you understood it)
- Discussion of the story's meaning (rambling about what I think of it all)
- Vocabulary teaching/explanation (I will pick out various words and phrases which I think are worth learning)

Vocabulary explanations in the second half might take a long time (there are plenty of things to learn from this), so I will probably continue doing that in a premium episode for premium subscribers.

If you want to get those episodes too, just sign up to my premium subscription - all the details here:

www.teacherluke.co.uk/premium

There is a PDF for this episode. It contains the text of the story and all notes I am reading from. That PDF is available free - you will find a link in description.

We are going to start the story now.

Reminder: Water break

Questions for you to consider (this will help to prepare you to understand the story)

- What does the title suggest? "The Door in the Wall"
- As you listen, what do you think of the main character, Lionel Wallace? What kind of person is he? What do you learn about his life?
- Is Wallace telling the truth, is he lying, or is he mistaken?
- What really happens to Wallace at the end?

- Which words/phrases do you think I might explain to you later, in the vocabulary teaching section?
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The Door in the Wall by HG Wells

One quiet evening, just under three months ago, Lionel Wallace told me the story of the Door in the Wall. At the time, I believed he was telling the truth — at least, as far as he believed it himself.

He told it in such a sincere, straightforward way that I couldn't help but believe him. But the next morning, as I lay in bed in my flat, thinking about what he'd said, it felt different.

Without his slow, serious voice, without the dim lighting and the calm atmosphere that had surrounded us the night before —

and without the cosy comfort of dessert, wine glasses, and the elegant dinner we'd just had – the whole thing suddenly seemed completely unbelievable.

“He was trying to be mysterious,” I thought. “And he did it really well. But I wouldn't have expected something like that from him, of all people.”

Later, as I sat in bed drinking my tea, I started wondering why his strange story had felt so real. Maybe, I thought, it somehow expressed feelings or experiences that we all have but which are impossible to describe in any other way. Surely it was just a tall tale, or perhaps a metaphor for something, but it wasn't actually true.

Well, I don't think that anymore. My doubts have faded. I believe now, as I believed when he first told me, that Wallace did his best to tell me the truth about his secret. But whether he actually *saw* the things he described, or whether he only *thought* he did, whether he really had access to something special or was just the victim of a strange dream – I don't know.

Even the circumstances of his death, which finally put an end to all doubt, don't make things any clearer.

That is something you will have to decide for yourself.

I can't remember what I said that made Wallace – usually such a private man – open up to me. I think I had criticised him for being unreliable during an important public campaign. He'd

disappointed me. But then, very suddenly, he said, “Look, I’ve had something on my mind...”

“I know,” he continued after a pause, “I’ve been careless. But the truth is—it’s not ghosts or anything like that—but it’s strange, Redmond. I feel haunted. Haunted by something that seems to drain the joy out of everything, something that fills me with a deep longing...”

He stopped, caught by that typical English shyness that often stops us from talking about anything emotional, serious, or beautiful.

“You were at Saint Athelstan’s the whole time,” he said, suddenly changing the subject—or so I thought.

Then, hesitantly at first, but more easily as he went on, he started to tell me about the thing he had kept hidden all his life. It was a powerful memory of beauty and happiness that had stayed with him since childhood—so strong, in fact, that it made the ordinary world seem boring and pointless by comparison.

Now that I know about it, I can almost see it in his face. I even have a photograph of him where that distant, dreamy expression has been captured perfectly. It reminds me of something a woman once said about him—a woman who had loved him deeply: “Sometimes, all of a sudden, he just stops paying attention. He forgets you. It’s like you don’t exist anymore—even when you’re standing right in front of him.”

But Wallace wasn’t always detached like that. When he *did* focus on something, he could be very successful. In fact, his life was full of accomplishments. He’d left me behind a long time ago,

risen far above me, and achieved things I never could. He was still under forty, and people were saying he would soon be in the Cabinet, and I believe he would have — if he had lived.

At school, he always beat me—without even trying. We were both at Saint Athelstan's College in West Kensington for most of our school years. We started at the same level, but he finished way ahead of me, winning scholarships and awards with ease. I did all right too, but nowhere near his level.

It was at school that I first heard about the "Door in the Wall." And then, only a month before his death, I heard about it again.

To Wallace, at least, the Door in the Wall was a real door, set in a real wall, leading to something eternal and wonderful. I believe that now.

And it entered his life when he was very young—about five or six. I remember how serious he looked as he tried to work out exactly when it happened.

"There was a red Virginia creeper growing on the wall," he said. "The whole thing was bright red in the sunshine, with a white wall behind it. That stuck in my memory, though I'm not sure why. There were horse-chestnut leaves on the pavement outside the green door. Yellow and green, not brown, so they must've just fallen. That would make it October, I think. I should know - I always look at chestnut leaves in autumn. If I'm right, I was about five years and four months old."

He said he was a clever little boy—talked early, thought clearly, and was so mature for his age that he was allowed to do more than most children. His mother had died when he was two, so he was raised mostly by a nurse, who wasn't too strict. His father, a serious and busy lawyer, didn't pay much attention to him, though he expected a lot. Even though Wallace was bright, I think he found life dull.

And then, one day, he wandered off.

He couldn't remember exactly how he got away or which streets he took in West Kensington, but he remembered the white wall and the green door very clearly.

Even as a child, the moment he saw the door, he felt something strange—an attraction, a desire to open it and go inside. But at the same time, he felt it might be wrong or dangerous. Still, he knew—he was sure—that the door wasn't locked, and that he could go in if he wanted to.

I can picture the little boy, drawn to the door but afraid. For some reason, he also felt sure that his father would be very angry if he went through it.

Wallace described every moment of hesitation. He walked past the door with his hands in his pockets, trying to whistle, pretending to be casual. He passed a row of shabby shops, especially one belonging to a plumber and decorator, filled with dusty pipes, pattern books, and cans of enamel paint.

He stood there, pretending to look at everything, but in his heart, he wanted desperately to turn back and go through that green door.

Then, all of a sudden, the feeling overwhelmed him. He ran, stretched out his hand, and pushed the door open. It closed behind him with a bang—and just like that, he was inside the garden that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Wallace had a hard time describing what the garden was really like.

“There was something in the air,” he said, “something that made you feel light, happy, and full of joy. The colours were perfect—so vivid, so clean—and everything just felt right. The moment I stepped into the garden, I felt a kind of happiness I’ve only ever felt a few rare times in life—when you’re young and full of wonder. And everything around me was beautiful...”

He paused to think before continuing.

“You see,” he said slowly, like someone unsure whether people would believe him, “there were two big panthers there... Yes, real, spotted panthers. But I wasn’t scared at all. There was a wide path with marble edges and flowerbeds along both sides, and these two big, soft-looking panthers were playing with a ball. One of them looked up and walked over to me, curious. It rubbed its ear gently against my hand and purred.”

“It was an enchanted garden,” he said firmly. “I know it sounds unbelievable, but I *know* it was.”

“And the size of the place? It stretched out as far as I could see, in every direction. I think there were hills in the distance. Who

knows where West Kensington had gone? It was like I had come home.”

“As soon as the door closed behind me, I forgot everything—the road outside, the leaves, the passing cabs, the pull of home, the rules and discipline. I forgot my fears. I forgot to be careful. I forgot real life completely. I became, in that moment, a very happy little boy in another world.”

“It was a different kind of world—warmer, softer, more golden. The sky was blue with little wisps of cloud touched by sunlight. And the path stretched out ahead of me, inviting me forward, with beautiful flowers in beds on either side, and the two panthers welcoming me like old friends. I stroked their soft fur, rubbed behind their ears, and they seemed to enjoy it. It felt like they were happy to see me. It all felt like coming home.”

“Then a tall, blonde girl appeared. She smiled at me, came over, picked me up, kissed me, put me down, and took my hand. There was no shock or confusion—just a wonderful feeling that everything was exactly as it should be, like I was being reminded of something happy I’d forgotten.”

“We walked up some wide red steps that led between tall spikes of delphiniums. At the top, we came to a long avenue lined with ancient shady trees. Between their trunks were marble seats and statues. White doves flew around, tame and friendly.”

“She led me along this cool path. I remember looking up at her kind, beautiful face and her gentle smile. She asked me questions in a soft voice and told me things—nice things, I think—but I can’t remember what they were.”

“Then a small Capuchin monkey came down from a tree and ran alongside me. It had reddish-brown fur and friendly hazel eyes. It grinned up at me, then climbed onto my shoulder. And that’s how we continued—me, the girl, and the monkey—so happy together.”

He stopped for a moment.

“Go on,” I said.

“I remember more little things. We passed an old man lost in thought among some laurels, and a place filled with colourful parakeets. Then we went through a cool, shaded colonnade into a wide, peaceful palace full of fountains, beautiful objects, and a feeling of pure joy. There were lots of people—some I remember clearly, others not so much—but all of them were kind and lovely. Somehow, without words, they made me feel completely welcome, completely loved. The way they touched my hand, the way they looked at me—it filled me with happiness.”

He paused again.

“I found playmates there,” he said. “That meant a lot to me. I’d always been a lonely child. We played wonderful games in a grassy courtyard with a sundial surrounded by flowers. And while we played, I felt so much love...”

“But it’s strange,” he continued, “I don’t remember the games themselves. I never could. Even as a child, I spent hours trying to remember exactly how we played, crying sometimes with frustration. I just wanted to play those games again, alone in my nursery. But all I can remember is the feeling of joy, and two special playmates who were always with me.”

“Then a serious-looking woman appeared. She was wearing a soft, long, pale purple robe and carrying a book. She called me over, and though my playmates didn’t want me to leave, she took me gently away. They stopped their game and watched us go. ‘Come back soon!’ they called. But the woman didn’t respond.”

“Her face was calm and kind. She took me up to a gallery above a hall, and we sat down together. She opened the book on her lap and showed me the pages.”

“They weren’t pictures, you understand—they were real. Living scenes.”

He looked at me carefully, as if unsure I’d believe him.

“Go on,” I said. “I get it.”

“They were real, yes. People moved and spoke in them. I saw my mother—my dear mother who I’d nearly forgotten. Then I saw my father, strict and serious. The servants, the nursery, all the things from home. Then the front door and the busy streets. I watched, amazed, turning pages quickly, wanting to see more.”

“And then—I came to the page where I stood outside the green door, hesitating. I remembered the conflict and the fear.”

“‘What happens next?’ I asked. I wanted to keep reading. But the woman’s cool hand stopped me.”

“‘Next?’ I repeated, pulling gently at her fingers, trying to turn the page. As she let me do it, she bent down and kissed my forehead...”

“But the next page didn’t show the garden. It didn’t show the panthers or the kind girl or my playmates. It showed a grey street in West Kensington, late in the day before the streetlamps were lit. I was standing there, crying. I was crying because I couldn’t go back to the garden. I couldn’t see my friends again. They had called after me, ‘Come back soon!’ But now they were gone. The garden was gone. The woman was gone.”

He stared into the fire.

“Oh, how awful it was to come back,” he whispered.

“Well?” I asked, after a moment.

“I was just a miserable little kid again—back in the dull world. When I realised what I’d lost, I couldn’t stop crying. And crying in public was so humiliating. That shame, that grief—it’s never left me.”

“I remember an old man with gold glasses prodding me with his umbrella and saying, ‘Poor little chap—are you lost?’ And there I was, a London boy of five! A young policeman came and a crowd gathered around me, and I was marched home, sobbing and scared.”

“That was the end of my visit to the garden—the garden that still haunts me. I can’t explain that strange, dreamlike feeling it had. But that’s what happened. If it *was* a dream, it was the most vivid daytime dream I’ve ever had...”

“Of course, there was a lot of trouble after that. Everyone questioned me—my aunt, my father, the nurse, the governess. I

tried to tell them what I'd seen. My father beat me for 'lying.' When I told my aunt again, she punished me for 'making things up.' Eventually, everyone was forbidden from listening to me. They even took away my fairy tale books—for being too imaginative!"

"Yes, they really did that. My father was very old-fashioned. And so, my story was locked inside me. I whispered it into my pillow, crying softly. I always added a secret prayer to the end of my bedtime prayers: 'Please God, let me dream of the garden again. Please take me back to the garden.'"

"I *did* dream about it—often. I may have added things, or changed parts of it, I'm not sure. I'm just trying to piece together the memories of a very early experience."

"There's a gap between that and the rest of my childhood memories. A time came when it felt impossible to speak of it again."

Wallace paused. I asked him an obvious question.

"No," he said, "I don't think I ever tried to find my way back to the garden during those early years. It seems strange now, but I suppose they kept a closer watch on me after that, to make sure I didn't wander off again. No, I didn't try again until much later—after you and I had already met. And I think there was even a time when I completely forgot about the garden. Maybe when I was eight or nine. Do you remember me back then at Saint Athelstan's?"

"Of course I do," I said.

"Did I seem like a boy with a secret dream?"

He smiled suddenly. "Did you ever play 'North-West Passage' with me? Probably not. It was a game I played on my way to school. The regular route was boring, so the game was to find a new way—an unexpected route through unfamiliar streets that still got me to school on time. One day, I took a wrong turn and ended up in some rather rough-looking streets on the far side of Campden Hill. I started to worry I'd be late, so I tried a street that looked like a dead end. But at the end, I found a narrow passage. I ran through it, full of hope, and suddenly—I recognised the street. I saw a row of old, scruffy shops, and then there it was: the long white wall and the green door to the enchanted garden.

"It hit me so suddenly. The garden wasn't just a dream! It was real!"

He stopped for a moment.

"But that second time, I didn't go in. I was older—a schoolboy now, not a carefree little kid. I was thinking about getting to school on time. I had a perfect record for punctuality and didn't want to break it. I remember feeling the pull of the door, but also thinking, 'I've got to get to school.' So I just ran past it. I even checked my watch. I still had ten minutes left, but I kept going. I made it to school, just in time, out of breath and sweating.

"Looking back, it seems strange that I didn't go in. But I think I just assumed the door would always be there, that I could come back to it anytime. I probably saw it as a fun little secret I could

explore later—something to return to when school wasn't getting in the way.

"The next day was a half-holiday, and maybe I planned to go then. Or maybe I got in trouble at school and didn't have the time. I can't remember. What I do remember is that I couldn't keep it to myself. I told someone—Hopkins. Do you remember him? We called him Squiff."

"Yes, I remember Hopkins," I said.

"I didn't want to tell him. It felt wrong somehow, like breaking the rules. But he was chatty, and I couldn't think about anything else. So I told him. And of course, he told everyone.

"The next day during break, I was surrounded by a bunch of older boys, all teasing me and demanding I tell them more about the garden. There was Fawcett, Carnaby, Morley Reynolds—do you remember them? And Crawshaw, the composer's son. He actually said it was the best lie he'd ever heard. I was embarrassed but also a little proud that they were paying attention to me.

"But then Carnaby started calling me a liar. I told them I could show them the green door, take them there in ten minutes. Carnaby insisted I prove it. He twisted my arm until I agreed. So off we went—me leading a group of six loud, mocking schoolboys. My cheeks were red, my ears were hot, my eyes stinging with tears. I was full of shame.

"And I couldn't find the door. We never found it. I would've shown them if I could. But it was gone. After that, even when I

was alone, I couldn't find it again. I searched for it many times during my school years, but it never appeared.

"The boys mocked me. Carnaby held some kind of trial and called me a liar. I sneaked home that day, trying to hide how much I'd been crying. But I wasn't crying because of Carnaby. I was crying for the garden. I had hoped for a beautiful afternoon there, to see those kind faces, to play that forgotten game again. And I believed—truly—that if I hadn't told anyone, I would have found it."

He sighed. "I had a rough time after that. I cried at night and drifted through the days. My schoolwork suffered. You might remember—I started getting bad reports. It was you, actually, beating me in mathematics, that snapped me out of it. Got me working hard again."

He paused, staring into the fire.

"I didn't see the door again until I was seventeen. I was on my way to Oxford, having just won a scholarship. I was in a cab heading to Paddington, smoking a cigarette and feeling very grown up. Then suddenly—I saw it. The white wall. The green door. That feeling came rushing back.

"I was so surprised I didn't act fast enough. The cab had already turned a corner. I nearly shouted to the driver to stop. I tapped on the roof but then changed my mind. I said, 'It's nothing. Just a mistake.' And we went on.

"That night, after hearing I'd won the scholarship, I sat in my room with my father's rare praise ringing in my ears. I thought about the door. 'If I had gone through it,' I thought, 'I would've

missed all of this—Oxford, my future career.' I told myself I had made the right choice.

"And I threw myself into that career. I worked hard. I achieved things. But I've dreamed about that garden so many times since then.

I've seen the door four times since.

"For a while, life was so exciting and full that the memory of the garden faded. What did I need with magical panthers when I had fancy dinners, beautiful women, and important friends? But disappointments came, as they always do.

"Twice, I've been in love—I won't go into that. But once, I was on my way to see someone I cared about deeply. I took a shortcut through a quiet street near Earl's Court. Suddenly, there it was—the white wall, the green door. I thought, 'Strange, I thought this was in Campden Hill.'

"I didn't stop. I was too focused on my appointment. I regret that now. I wish I had just taken a quick look inside. Waved to the panthers. But I knew enough by then: if you hesitate, it's gone. That time really hurt."

He grew quiet for a moment.

"Years passed. No sign of the door. And then recently, it came back. But by then, something had changed in me. I felt tired. Life had lost some of its colour. Maybe it was overwork. Maybe just middle age. But I found myself longing for the garden again. And I saw the door three times in one year.

"The first time was during that rushed vote on the Tenants' Redemption Bill. Remember that night? The government survived by only three votes. Hotchkiss and I had to rush back from Brentford in his cousin's car. On the way, I saw the door again. It was lit by moonlight and our car's headlights. I shouted, 'My God!' Hotchkiss asked what was wrong. I said, 'Nothing.' And the moment passed.

"The second time was on the way to my father's deathbed. I couldn't stop then either.

"The third time was just a week ago. I was walking with Gurker and Ralphs after dinner. We were talking politics—my role in the new Cabinet. It was important. I couldn't just walk away mid-conversation. And then, there it was again. The green door.

"I walked right past it. I was so close. If I had stepped aside and opened it, who knows what might have happened? But I didn't. I kept walking, thinking of what people would say if I vanished. 'A Cabinet Minister disappears mysteriously!' I couldn't take that risk."

Then he looked at me, with deep sadness in his voice.

"So here I am," he said. "Three times in one year I saw that door—the way out of all this dust and stress, out of this noisy, empty life. And I didn't go in. If I ever see it again, I swear I'll go in and never come back. But I don't think I'll get another chance.

"And now this regret is destroying me. I haven't done any real work in weeks. At night, when no one will recognise me, I

wander the streets alone. Yes, people would be shocked if they knew—a Cabinet Minister, grieving over a door."

I can still picture his pale face and the strange, serious light in his eyes. I'm thinking of him now, as I look at yesterday's *Westminster Gazette* on my sofa. It has the notice of his death. At the club today, everyone was talking about him and the strange way he died.

They found his body early yesterday near East Kensington Station. He had fallen into a deep construction pit—one of two large shafts being dug for a railway extension. The area was blocked off with fencing, but someone had left a small door in the barrier unlocked by mistake. He must have walked through it...

I imagine him walking home from Parliament late at night, as he often did. Maybe the bright lights near the station made that rough wooden door look like it was set into a white wall. Maybe something stirred in his memory. Maybe he really believed he had found the Door in the Wall.

Was it ever real?

I don't know. I've told the story just as he told it to me. Some people will say Wallace was just hallucinating, and that it was all a tragic coincidence. Maybe. But honestly, that's not what I believe.

Maybe you'll think I'm superstitious or foolish. But I'm almost certain he had a special gift—some strange ability to sense another world. The door was real, in its own way. Maybe it

offered him a way out. Maybe it really did lead to peace, beauty, and joy.

Yes, he died. Maybe, in a way, the door betrayed him in the end.

Or was it his final escape?

What do you think?

- What are your immediate thoughts, after listening to that?
 - Did you manage to understand everything?
 - How do you feel about Wallace and his life?
 - What do you think of Wallace's story about the door and the incredible garden on the other side of it?
 - Is he lying, telling the truth, or somehow mistaken?
 - What happened to Wallace at the end?
 - Which bits of English (words & phrases) do you think I will explain later?
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SUMMARY OF THE STORY - To help you check your understanding

The Door in the Wall is a rich, symbolic short story full of psychological, philosophical, and social themes.

We'll explore some of those themes in a moment. But first let me just retell the story in my own words, to make sure you understood the basics.

What happens

- The main details of this story are retold by Redmond (the narrator), but the main character is his friend Lionel Wallace.
- The story starts with the narrator (Redmond) at home in his flat, thinking about his friend Lionel Wallace, the things that he told him, and the way that Wallace died.
- Apparently, Redmond and Wallace had dinner a month before, and during that dinner Wallace told Redmond about a secret which he had kept his entire life.
- Redmond first thought Wallace's story could not be true, but later he decides that it is true, or at least for Wallace it is true.
- Redmond is still not sure if Wallace dreamed it all, somehow. But he is sure that Wallace was being sincere and honest about what he said.
- Also, we learn at the start that Wallace is now dead.
- Here are the main details of the incredible and sad things that Wallace told Redmond during the dinner.
- First we learn that Lionel Wallace was a serious, thoughtful and very intelligent man who worked as a successful politician.
- He had a successful career, but he was never really happy.
- He was born into a hard working and successful family, but he had a sad childhood.
- His mother died when he was very young.
- His father was very strict and serious. He didn't show him love, just had very high expectations of him.

- Wallace was raised by his father and a nurse and was educated to a very high level.
- But all through his life he was *haunted* by a specific and very vivid memory from his childhood - a time when he was about 5 years old and he walked away from his home on his own.
- He wandered through the nearby streets in Kensington and discovered a mysterious green door in a white wall.
- For some reason, he was intensely fascinated by this door. He knew there was something very special about it and he really wanted to open it, but also knew that if he did open it he would somehow be in big trouble with his father.
- He tried to resist the temptation of the door, but in the end he could not resist it. He opened the door and walked through it.
- On the other side he saw something incredible.
- It was an amazing garden, full of beautiful things, and a wonderful, joyful and loving atmosphere.
- He felt very happy there.
- There were two large cats (panthers), which were tame. They came over and let him stroke their fur.
- There were beautiful flowers and trees, statues, a friendly monkey that sat on his shoulder, and beautiful doves flying.
- A pretty girl came and led him through the garden.
- He met friendly children who played a wonderful game with him.

- The garden was huge, with different areas and he could even see hills in the distance, even though he was actually in the middle of West London.
- Then a serious-looking woman arrived and took him away to another part of the garden. She showed him a book about his life.
- The book showed him (in living pictures - videos?) different stages of his life so far.
- Wallace was amazed by the book and wanted to see the next page and the next.
- But when they arrived at the page which showed him at the door in the wall, Wallace suddenly found himself outside the garden again, and was alone in the street.
- The garden melted away and he was on his own on the pavement again.
- He was extremely sad to be away from the garden, lost in the street.
- He cried and felt very ashamed.
- Strangers gathered around, curious about this young boy crying alone in the street.
- He was taken home by a police officer and then he was in very big trouble with his father who was angry with him.
- In fact, all the adults in his life were angry with him.
- Nobody believed what he said about the garden. They accused him of lying, and punished him.

- Wallace was desperately sad, not just because he was being punished, but because he missed the garden and the friends he met there, and their game.
- Wallace's childhood was sad, lonely and unhappy, and he always wished to go back and find the garden again, where he could be with his friends.
- He always tried to remember it. Before going to bed he always hoped and prayed that he would dream about it, just in order to be able to go back in some way.
- As time passed and as he grew up, he had to focus on his studies and his career.
- As a schoolboy he was a high-achiever, and also in his career he was successful, becoming a famous politician (a member of the cabinet, involved in very important work in the government).
- But despite being a very bright person, his personal life was always dull and unhappy, because compared to the memory of that garden, everything seemed lifeless.
- People who knew Wallace said that he could be quite distant, and detached - not emotionally engaged.
- A woman who loved him (a fiancée maybe) said that sometimes he would just seem lost in his thoughts and very far away. Presumably, this was during moments when he was dreaming about being back in that garden, where he had finally found peace and contentment.
- He always hoped to find the garden again one day, where he could be happy, but he couldn't quite remember where the door was.

- Throughout his life, he tried to find that wall with its characteristic green door but was unable to locate it, but sometimes, by chance, he saw the door again but he never went in.
- Each time he saw the door - just by chance - he had to prioritise other important responsibilities in his life, including his school work, his love life, his career and the death of his father.
- Even though he saw the door sometimes, he was never able to take the time to go through it again, and revisit the garden.
- At various times in his life he doubted his own experience in the garden as a small boy.
- He thought he had just dreamed it, or imagined it, and yet at other times he was certain that it was real and that if he could just go through the door again, he would definitely find himself back in the paradise of that garden once more, and he could find his friends again.
- But he never had the chance to go through the door again, and he never found fulfilment in his normal life, always knowing that the garden was where he truly felt love and happiness.
- He regrets focusing on his career and never choosing to return to the garden when he had those few chances to do it.
- Near the end of his life, at dinner with the narrator of this story (Redmond), Wallace is certain that the door is real and has decided that if he has the chance to go through it again, he definitely will.

- The story ends ambiguously. Redmond reads in the newspaper that Wallace died in an accident.
- How did Wallace die? He fell into a deep hole in the ground. The hole had been dug as part of a project to build a new underground train line. I think he fell into a deep shaft - perhaps one that was going to be for a lift (elevator).
- The construction site where the accident happened was blocked from the street by a temporary wooden wall, which had a door in it. Behind the door was the construction site, and the deep hole (maybe a lift shaft) and someone had accidentally left that door unlocked.
- Perhaps Wallace saw the door while he was walking home that night. In that poor light it might have looked like his “door in the wall”, and going through it he fell to his death.
- The narrator of the story wonders what happened. Did Wallace think he had found his “door in the wall”? Did he go back to his garden, or just die in a tragic accident?

TALKING POINTS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Here are some questions for you to consider or discuss. I will give my answers afterwards.

1. **Did the garden really exist, or did Wallace somehow imagine it or dream it?**
2. **If he did dream it, why did that happen? And how?**

- 3. What does the door represent in this story and in Wallace's life - freedom, death, paradise, madness, escape?**
- 4. Why did Wallace not go through the door again, when he had the chance - when he saw it at other times in his life?**
- 5. Does Wallace's final 'entry' into the door mean he finally found peace and re-entered the garden, or did he simply fall to his death, because he was fooled by a delusion?**
- 6. Is the story tragic? If so, what exactly makes it tragic? Or does it somehow have a happy ending?**
- 7. Can success be fulfilling if it comes at the cost of personal joy or authenticity?**
- 8. Do you think we all have a "door in the wall" in our lives—some moment or choice we wish we'd made? Or an alternative life that we wished we could be living?**
- 9. What would have happened if Wallace had chosen to revisit the garden earlier? Would it have lived up to the memory? How would it have affected his life?**
- 10. Have you ever had a dream that felt so real, and was so wonderful, that you were desperate to return to it somehow?**

Rambling about the story's meaning and interpretations

I am now going to ramble about all of this, and discuss the meaning of the story, what the garden represents and other thoughts.

I would love to know what you think about all of this too - so feel free to write something in the comment section - and practise your English a little bit in the process.

This story captures a certain mysterious feeling. I wonder if you know what I mean.

I love this story because although it is definitely sad, there is something wonderful in it too because it somehow captures a very specific feeling which I have definitely experienced, but which is very hard for me to put my finger on.

Maybe you know what I am talking about. I hope so.

Let me attempt to explain myself.

This feeling is something like the sense that at some point in your past you might have experienced something absolutely amazing and delightful but you can't quite remember if it was a dream or real, and yet you are desperate to go back there and revisit it.

That is that feeling of "longing" that Wallace describes. A feeling of longing for some perfect moment in the past, which might not have even been real.

Have you ever felt like that?

I know that is quite a specific feeling.

It is a bit like the opposite of another feeling, which is this:

When you are having a horrible nightmare. The nightmare feels completely real, you have no idea you are in a dream, and then you suddenly wake up.

In the dream you were living a horrible, terrible experience - perhaps you were lost, you lost your children, everyone was in danger and something awful had happened - and then you wake up and it takes a minute for you to slowly realise that it was just a dream, but the feeling sinks in slowly.

It was a dream. None of that was real, but are you sure? Yes, you're in bed. The kids are fine. The awful thing didn't happen. But it felt so real. Was that really just a nightmare? The feeling stays with you, sometimes for hours.

In the same way, maybe is possible to have the reverse experience.

You wake up from a truly wonderful dream, where everything felt just right, and so real, and you can't wait to dive straight back into that dream and revisit that perfect situation again.

It has happened to me. Has it happened to you?

You wake from the dream and desperately want to fall asleep again, to go back into that thing you were experiencing.

The way HG Wells describes Wallace's desire to return to his garden feels like that, to me.

Or here is perhaps another example of the kind of feeling which I think this story illustrates.

It is when you have a distant memory of a wonderful thing that happened to you - falling in love perhaps, or being in a place where everyone loved you - but you can't quite remember if it was real or not.

So, this is not waking up from a dream, but just remembering something from quite a long time ago, which you realise you had forgotten about for some reason.

The memory comes to you in a hazy moment, perhaps when your mind is not occupied, such as when you are forced to stay in bed and rest because you have flu, or you are without your phone or the internet and so you have nothing to distract you, and your mind is free to wander, and perhaps remember things that you thought you had forgotten or that you had suppressed for some reason.

Wait, didn't I fall in love that time, many years ago? Was that real? What happened to that girl? Which city was that? Was that just one night? What happened to that life I had?

Maybe this just happens when you're getting old! Ha.

My point is - I think this story somehow captures weird nostalgic feelings - feelings of the loss of something wonderful but you can't even be sure it was real. The story uses the medium of fantasy to express a certain emotion.

I am still trying to put my finger on the feeling this story evokes by the way.

Maybe it is the loss of the innocence of childhood. You remember it as a distant feeling - a kind of perfect belonging and innocent happy time. You vaguely remember how it felt, but it also feels like it could be something you imagined.

I suppose we all experience that - distant memories from childhood which are locked away somewhere, but traces of it come back to you in distorted ways.

I, personally, have a few memories like that, buried deep inside me.

One of my earliest memories is of being on the floor of my parents' bedroom or maybe lying on the bed and I seem to remember seeing the reflections of headlights from cars crossing the ceiling - like bars of light crossing the ceiling - as the cars passed outside, with their headlights on. It's a very happy, cosy feeling. If I think really hard, I can almost go back to that moment and feel the space of the room around me, and the fact that someone was with me. But it's very hazy and might never have happened.

Another one, when I was about 9 years old - I remember standing on a window ledge and looking at a short wall in the garden, and wondering if I could jump from the ledge to the wall, but the distance was always slightly too far, and that feeling has stayed with me my entire life, as if it is significant somehow. Can I make this leap? Can I achieve this thing? Is it just beyond my reach, or am I actually capable of doing it? Could I really do it?

I remember perpetually being stuck on that ledge, looking down at this wall, just on the verge of jumping - between self belief and doubt.

Maybe I am just a simulant and those are memories which were implanted in my brain to make me believe I am actually a human, and in fact all of reality is a simulation and in the real world I am lying in a plasma filled pod, while AI robots feed on my bio-electric energy.

But hopefully not.

Seriously though, I do have weird distant memories like that and I wonder if you have too.

It feels a bit mad saying these things, like maybe I am the only person on earth to know what I am talking about now, but I suspect that everyone feels that way sometimes, but certainly this is what this story captures - a certain feeling, and this is why I think it is great.

What do you think? Am I making any sense?

I'll get more specific in my story analysis in a moment. I have other things to discuss and ramble about in relation to this story, so I hope you're ready to listen to me for a little while more, before I get into the language analysis bit, where I am going to look at some vocabulary and grammar from this story.

Themes, Meanings, Interpretations

Here are some more notes with my own thoughts and also a few comments from

<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-door-in-the-wall/symbols/the-door-in-the-wall>

and

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Door_in_the_Wall_\(short_story\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Door_in_the_Wall_(short_story))

Let me give my answers to some of the questions I posed earlier. They were something like this:

- **Was the garden real, imagined, or symbolic?**
- **What does the door represent in this story?**

- **What happened at the end - when he fell through the door?**

Obviously, this is a work of fiction and so we can never know the real truth because it's not real - it's a made up story. There is not one single correct answer. We can only speculate about it, discuss what the author was trying to say, or at least what it all means to you.

This story is a work of fiction, but let me speculate about it anyway.

Is Wallace's garden real?

Surely the garden in Wallace's story is not real. It can't be real, because it defies all the laws of physics, and things like that - magic gardens - they don't really exist, do they?

The garden is huge and even has hills in the distance (if I remember correctly) and that's not possible in West Kensington, in London.

But maybe "miracles" are real. And by miracles I mean apparently supernatural events that we can't explain.

Who really knows? Our reality is a strange thing and us humans are only aware of a very small fraction of everything that is around us.

Maybe there are portals into other worlds, that we are not normally aware of.

But, I doubt it.

It must be Wallace's highly-active imagination, from his brilliant mind, even at 5 years old. I feel like a brilliant mind like his, and the

growing mind of a child, must have the potential to just invent experiences - hallucinations, perhaps. Waking daytime dreams.

Maybe his mind hallucinated the whole experience as a way to escape reality. He was suffering from cruel treatment at home (mental and physical abuse from his father, who beat him), a lot of pressure and demanding school work, and a lot of unprocessed grief over the loss of his beloved mother.

So perhaps in the midst of all this - one day his mind invented this entire experience as a way to escape from everything, as a way to protect itself, and as a way to experience what he really wanted and needed - unconditional love - while he was standing alone on a street in Kensington, perhaps staring at an ordinary door in a wall.

The power of the mind

Can the brain actually do that? This does make me wonder what the brain can do.

While preparing this episode, I did have this thought.

Can the brain go into a hallucination, inventing an entire experience as a way of protecting itself, creating a new reality in which to escape, allowing a person to heal and survive an otherwise miserable reality?

And yes, I did ask AI that question - for what it's worth, I chose Google Gemini for this one because, well I get a bit tired of ChatGPT sometimes. It just has this tone, which, annoys me these days. It's too... keen? A bit in your face? Gemini is a bit more chill. Anyway, so I asked it that question.

Can the brain go into a hallucination, inventing an entire experience as a way of protecting itself, creating a new reality in which to escape, allowing a person to heal and survive an otherwise miserable reality?

And this is what it said.

*Yes, the brain can create a new reality as a defense mechanism to cope with a miserable or traumatic reality. This phenomenon is known as **dissociation**, and in its most severe forms, it can manifest as the creation of entirely new identities or a loss of personal memory, a state where a person's brain can quite literally construct a new reality to escape an unbearable one.*

Dissociation is a psychological defense mechanism where a person mentally disconnects from their thoughts, feelings, memories, or sense of identity. It's a way for the mind to protect itself from overwhelming emotional pain. The brain essentially "tunes out" or "checks out" from a stressful or traumatic situation. This can happen during a single, severe event (like a car accident) or over a long period of chronic trauma, like childhood abuse.

So, there you go, I suppose I was right, if what Google Gemini says is worth anything, although I am not sure Wallace's specific experience is typical of dissociation, which appears more to be a loss of memory or a change of identity, rather than a full on mind-bending hallucination involving walking through a door into a never-ending garden with two panthers that purr and let you rub their ears.

But still, in the story, perhaps the door in the wall is meant to illustrate that Wallace's life is devoid of love and care, full of

pressure, career-focused and ultimately unhappy/discontented. The garden is his escape from all of this.

Either it is a hallucination caused by some kind of mental-breakdown, or somehow he really does have access to a magical power or portal, in which he can find peace.

This makes me wonder again, but about more supernatural possibilities, rather than psychological ones. Is it possible that a person can have access to a supernatural power, which allows them to travel through portals and into alternative universes, defying the laws of physics as we know them, and entering new dimensions in which life is naturally more peaceful, loving, rewarding and fulfilling and where all your dreams come true - a kind of heaven, let's call it? Is that possible?

So, I asked Google Gemini that question as well, because, why not?

I asked it:

Is it possible that a person can have access to a sort of supernatural power, which allows them to travel through portals and into alternative universes, defying the laws of physics as we know them, and entering new dimensions in which life is naturally more fulfilling, peaceful, loving, rewarding and fulfilling and where all your dreams come true - a kind of heaven, let's call it? Is that possible?

And Google Gemini said:

No, it's not possible for a person to access a sort of supernatural power that allows them to travel through portals into an alternative, utopian universe, as this would violate the fundamental laws of

physics as we currently understand them. While such concepts are popular in science fiction and fantasy, they fall outside the realm of what is scientifically plausible.

Ok, so that's that then.

But again this is just a story, and of course the rules are different.

Science + Fantasy as a vehicle to explore complex philosophical and psychological themes

HG Wells was known as one of the innovators of what was a new kind of writing which is now known as Science Fiction (although Wells used the term "Scientific Romance"), which took scientific ideas and ran with them, creating adventure stories that blended the extraordinary possibilities of a world opened up by the scientific world view, and a sort of romantic sense of emotional expression and even fantasy - all as a way to express deeper truths about the human experience.

This story is a great example of that. It's a mix of the magical and the scientific - and you can choose how you interpret it. Can Wallace's experience be explained by science as a psychological disassociation, or is something more magical happening?

I think I prefer not too choose but to leave it open, which I find gives me a sense of wonder. Also, it's just a made up story, so it doesn't really matter does it?

Anyway...

What does Wallace's story mean? - loss of innocence, unconditional love, the choices we make in life

That first time Wallace encounters the door, according to his memory, he is able to step through it and experience an alternative childhood of love, play, time, freedom and collaboration different from his father's rules and expectations of success.

It is interesting to note that in the garden Wallace experiences a kind of unconditional love that is sadly missing in his real life. The presence of several lovely female characters suggests to me that the garden represents maternal love that he misses so much.

When he is even just a bit older, in his school days, his obligations and aspirations prevent him from taking the alternative path to the garden of peace and contentment.

Instead, he chooses to ignore the door in favor of getting to school on time, the demands of his academic life, and the pressures of competing with his classmates.

This seems to suggest that these external pressures: academic success, competition, career progression (all his father's impositions), material wealth - they all seem to be in contrast with what the garden represents: love, friendship, play, mystery, joy, peace, contentment.

This could even be a criticism of the society that Wallace, and we, live in.

It prioritises things which do not lead to happiness, and it traps us in misery. Think of soul destroying jobs, being in the rat race, having to live up to the expectations of your parents and society at large, the value of status, money and career. Maybe we've got it all wrong and there are more spiritual, ethereal and emotional paths we should be taking.

The door appears to Wallace multiple times during important career moments in his life, offering him a choice between the path he is on and another path which leads him away from material success but into happiness and contentment. But it seems that Wallace is not able to leave his path, until the end of the story.

For me, HG Wells uses this image of the door and the garden as a way of showing us Wallace's strong feelings of loss, longing, and sadness - of being unable to access love and beauty because of the conditions of his life. I think it's a very powerful way of illustrating how our emotions are tied to things like memories, places, and unexplainable experiences that we have.

Wallace knows, when the door appears to him, that it is unlocked and that the people in the garden are waiting for him and glad to see him.

The possibility of that alternative life haunts him throughout his scholastic and political career, but he never chooses to take the final step and open the door that would cut him off from his career.

By not taking that risk, he loses something. But maybe the door and garden are not real, and if he chose to ignore his responsibilities and step inside again, he would find nothing and it would be a waste of time. We can never know.

Wallace feels drawn to the door, but he is also drawn by responsibility, expectations, and his own ambition towards his political career.

In this way, the door also comes to symbolize the incompatibility of life in this world—a life of striving for success—and the life of

perfect contentment beyond the door. The two things can't exist at the same time in the same life.

One or the other may be possible, the story seems to say, but no one can have both at once.

Can you relate to that?

Have you ever felt a sense that you have serious obligations to your career, studies or expectations from parents, but what would really make you happy is a completely different life?

Have you ever had to balance these things in your life - serious responsibilities vs what your heart really wants to do? And do you doubt that choosing to do those things that your heart really wants would be a wise move?

But is it realistic to “drop out” and just do whatever you want? Isn't it too risky? How would you get money? How would you manage everything?

I mean, maybe it would be foolish to just drop out and do whatever pleases you? How would you earn money? How would you keep afloat in society? How would you keep other people around you happy? Can we just walk away from the pressures and responsibilities in our lives?

When he reaches middle age, Wallace feels that he has always made the wrong choice and taken the wrong path in his life. He feels that he should have gone through the door when he had the chance.

What happens at the end of the story?

At the end of the story, we learn that he died. How? There was a construction site where a train line was being extended. There was a large hole in the ground and this was blocked from the street by a fence. The fence had a door in it and one night someone left the door unlocked. When Wallace was walking home that night, he saw the door and walked through it, and then fell to his death.

The story never answers the ultimate question of what really happened.

Did Wallace really make a mistake, and think the door was his special green door? Was this a tragic accident?

Or did Wallace really see the green door there, and when he went through he finally got back to the garden where he could be at peace?

Or did the door betray him in the end? Did it trick him and lead him to his death, when he expected it to bring him back to heaven?

By not giving us that answer, the story turns the door into a symbol for the unknowability of whether some kind of heaven exists - an acknowledgement that the only way to learn that answer is to die.

So, what do you think?

Did Wallace get back to the garden, or not?

I am inclined to believe that yes, he did. Why not give it a happy ending, of sorts?

Here are some other interpretations and responses to the story, which I took from the story's Wikipedia page.

What did the critics say?

"The Door in the Wall" was acclaimed from the first. Writing in *Le Temps* in 1911, Henry Durand-Davray [fr] said that it was "Wells at his best".[5]

Geoffrey West (a Biographer of HG Wells) noted in 1926 that it was often considered Wells's best short story,[7] and in 1930 added his own judgement that it was one of the works which "will carry his name even beyond our own century into that literary immortality he seems so anxious to avoid".[8]

Critics in the late 20th century and the 21st century have likewise evaluated it as one of Wells's finest short works.[9][10][11] Adam Roberts has written that:

*The tone of this piece is **exquisitely handled**, and it remains one of the most **affecting portraits** of that **palpable** but **indefinable** sense of loss **entailed** by growing up... the way the **petty business of living** repeatedly get[s] in the way of recovering that childhood numinosity [Luke: sense of awe, amazement, fascination, even terror - experienced in childhood].*

*And although it is a sad story (it is, indeed, one of the saddest I know) it is not a depressing story, because Wells understands that life is the **myriad gettings-in-the-way** that define our days, and the desire to get past that is actually the desire to stop living. [10]*

It has been seen as a nostalgic look back to the simplicity, continuity and easier pace of the Victorian age,[12] or, more personally, to idyllic scenes in Wells's childhood.[13]

John R. Reed took from the story the lesson that life is like a book, never reaching an ordered state until its composition has been finished.[14]

Alfred Borrello believed it showed that our "very aspirations...can be the sources of self-delusion and ultimately doom if man understands them only as the means whereby he might escape from his duties to himself and to his race" - basically this means Alfred Borrello thought the story showed that a person's dreams and goals (the desire to return to the garden) could be harmful and lead to their downfall.

This happens if they use their aspirations (desire to go back the garden) as a way to avoid their personal responsibilities and duties to humanity. So - the desire to leave reality can be harmful for you and for society.

W. Warren Wagar wrote that "Wells was advising his readers not to give way, like Wallace, to the seductions of unreason." [17] (Keep it real)

The garden can be taken as a metaphor for the imagination which dramatizes for us the choice between the aesthetic and the practical sides of life, especially perhaps the choice between imaginative writing and political action faced by Wells himself in 1906.[18][19]

- an interesting insight into Wells' life and career. Later in his life he moved towards political action and away from writing fiction.

Perhaps there was a period in which he couldn't decide which path to take - focus on solving society's problems in the real world, or escaping into a world of fantasy and imagination through his work.

But perhaps, as Sabine Coelsch-Foisner has written, Wells makes the meaning of the supernatural garden motif a mystery to which there can be no final answer. "Was it a daydream, a lie, a sign of the boy's vivid imagination, or a token of a hidden dimension accessible only to a 'visionary' like Wallace?"[20]

The original text of this story is wonderful

It could be an interesting exercise for you to read it to compare this new version with the original.

You can find it here at [classicshorts.com](https://www.classicshorts.com). The original story was written and published in 1906.

Original text here 

<https://www.classicshorts.com/stories/tditw.html>

Language Analysis

This is where we focus specifically on learning English with this story.

We've focused on the overall meaning of the story, and interpretations of its meaning.

But now here is the story again, this time broken down into parts, with a summary and vocabulary review for each part.

I will start this here in this free episode, but I will finish it in LEP Premium.

For each section, I'll deal with these questions:

- What happened?
- What do the highlighted words mean?

At the end there's a summary of some grammar in the story too, including things like past conditionals, narrative tenses, relative clauses and more.

Vocabulary

Let me now go through the story again and point out various bits of vocabulary and other language. There's also a full vocabulary list at the end of each section.

I will start this here in this free episode, but will continue in a premium series - available straight away after this is published, or if not straight away - very soon.

The Door in the Wall by HG Wells

Part 1

One quiet evening, just under three months ago, Lionel Wallace told me the story of the Door in the Wall. At the time, I believed he was telling the truth—at least, as far as he believed it himself.

He told it in such a **sincere**, **straightforward** way that I **couldn't help but** believe him. But the next morning, as I lay in bed in my flat, thinking about what he'd said, it felt different.

Without his slow, serious voice, without the **dim** lighting and the calm atmosphere that had surrounded us the night before—and without the cosy comfort of dessert, wine glasses,

and the elegant dinner we'd just had—the whole thing suddenly seemed completely unbelievable.

“He was trying to be mysterious,” I thought. “And he did it really well. But I wouldn't have expected something like that from him, of all people.”

Later, as I sat in bed drinking my tea, I started wondering why his strange story had felt so real. Maybe, I thought, it somehow expressed feelings or experiences that are impossible to describe in any other way. Surely it was just a tall tale, or perhaps a metaphor for something, but it wasn't actually true.

Well, I don't think that anymore. My doubts have faded. I believe now, as I believed when he first told me, that Wallace did his best to tell me the truth about his secret. But whether he actually *saw* the things he described, or whether he only *thought* he did, whether he really had access to something special or was just the victim of a strange dream—I don't know.

Even the circumstances of his death, which finally put an end to all doubt, don't make things any clearer.

That is something you will have to decide for yourself.

What happened?

- The narrator is describing a conversation he had with a friend, Lionel Wallace.
- At the time, the narrator believed that Wallace was telling the truth.
- But the next day, without the atmosphere of their dinner, the narrator can't believe it was true.

- But now, three months later, he has decided that it is true, or at least Wallace believed it was true.
- What is the story that Wallace told him?
- It seems that it was some kind of secret. We are not sure if it was true, a lie, or just a dream or something.
- That is something you, the reader, will have to decide. So, what do you think? Did this really happen to Wallace? Was it a dream? Was it a lie? Was it something else?
- Also, we learn that since then, Wallace has died. We don't yet know how.

What do we learn about the characters?

Wallace speaks with a slow, serious voice and he doesn't seem to be the kind of person to lie or make something up. He seems serious, sincere and honest in what he says. Not the kind of person who would deliberately try to be mysterious.

The characters might be quite rich or maybe upper-class. They had an elegant dinner.

Vocabulary worth noticing

Sincere

Straightforward

I couldn't help but do sth / couldn't help doing sth

He told it in such a **sincere**, **straightforward** way that I **couldn't help but** believe him.

Dim

Lighting (vs **lightning**)

without the **dim lighting** and the calm atmosphere that had surrounded us the night before—

(not) him **of all people**

I wouldn't have expected something like that from him, **of all people**."

**To put an end to something
doubt**

Even the circumstances of his death, which finally **put an end** to all **doubt**, don't make things any clearer.

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