

### **Plot Summary of 'The Door in the Wall'**

Confiding to his friend Redmond who narrates "The Door in the Wall," Lionel Wallace relates that a preoccupation is gradually coming to dominate his life, one that is even affecting his career as a successful politician. Long ago as a lonely child of five he had wandered out of his home into the streets of West Kensington in London, where he noticed a green door set in a white wall. It was very attractive to him, and he wanted to open it, but at the same time he felt that his father would be very angry if he did. Wallace's father is described as "a stern preoccupied lawyer, who gave him little attention and expected great things of him." Wallace's mother was dead, and he was being raised by a governess. Nevertheless, the young Wallace gives in to the temptation and finds himself in an enchanted garden. Wallace describes the garden as a children's paradise with an inspiring atmosphere. The garden's colors are clean and bright, and the child is filled with happiness. There are various animals, including two tame panthers, beautiful flowers, and shady trees. Wallace meets a tall, fair girl who "came to meet me, smiling, and said 'Well?' to me, and lifted me and kissed me, and put me down and led me by the hand." He meets other children and they play games together, although he cannot remember the games, a fact which later causes him much distress.

A woman begins to read a book to the boy, and soon it becomes apparent that the story she is telling is that of his own life. When the book reaches the point in his life at which Wallace finds himself outside the green door, the enchanted world vanishes, and the boy finds himself once more on the dismal West Kensington street in London.

Wallace tells his father about the garden—and is punished for telling what his father assumes is a lie. In time, and as a result of this punishment, Wallace succeeds in suppressing the memory. But he can never quite forget it completely and often dreams of revisiting the garden. Throughout his life he unexpectedly comes upon the door in the wall in different parts of London, but each time he is rushing to an important commitment of one sort or another and does not stop to open it.

Wallace tells his friend Redmond that three times in the past year he has seen the door, and on each occasion he has passed it by: once because he was on his way to a vital division in the House of Commons; once, significantly, because he was hurrying to his father's deathbed and once because he wished, for reasons of personal ambition, to continue a discussion with a colleague. Now his soul "is full of unappeasable regrets," and he is barely capable of working. One morning a few months later, Wallace is found dead, having apparently mistaken a door at a dangerous construction sight for the elusive door in the wall.

### **Characters**

**Redmond** ....Redmond, the narrator of "The Door in the Wall," meets his old friend Wallace for a dinner one night. Wallace tells Redmond the story of the door in the wall. At first, Redmond does not know if he should or should not believe his friend's wild tale: *"But whether he himself saw, or only thought he saw, whether he himself was the possessor of an inestimable privilege, or the victim of a fantastic dream, I cannot pretend to guess."* This unwillingness to judge his friend displays his sense of sympathy.

Redmond represents the voice of reason, making Wallace's story more believable because it is told by what readers assume is a reliable narrator. Furthermore, because Redmond is relating the tale, readers also learn of Wallace's strange death, which seems to verify the tale Wallace tells him at dinner. Redmond's account of the story also lends it a tragic tone because it is related after Wallace's death—a feat not possible if Wallace himself was the narrator.

### Lionel Wallace

Politician Lionel Wallace is the protagonist of "The Door in the Wall." As a child living in a joyless home, he discovers a door to a visionary garden of happiness. His cautious nature is shown by his trepidation upon encountering the door, because he knows his father will be angry if he opens it. A child of a strict, Victorian upbringing, Wallace has been conditioned to deny his imagination and put all his effort into becoming successful. Nevertheless, the young Wallace gives in to the temptation—not yet having mastered self-control—and opens the door in the wall, and finds himself in an enchanted garden filled with beautiful flowers, tamed panthers, and friendly children. When Wallace tells his father about the garden, his father punishes him for lying, causing Wallace to suppress the memory of the garden. Throughout his life, Wallace sees a similar door a few times, but he is too driven by his ambition for worldly success to stop and open it. Now, at age 39 and very successful, Wallace regrets passing up the garden and vows to stop the next time he sees the door. This regret illustrates his desire to give in to imagination and to break free from his rational life. Wallace's inability to distinguish between reality and fantasy, however, is demonstrated at the story's end when he is found dead at a construction site, having apparently mistaken a workmen's door for the door to his garden.

### Themes

#### Alienation and Loneliness

Whether Wallace's fantastic tale about the garden is true is of less significance than the fact that it is a metaphor for his alienation and loneliness. Wallace's mother died when he was born, and his father was stern and expected great things of him. The treatment Wallace received as a child forced him to retreat into a private world of imagination. The only place where he could find love and attention was through the door in the wall. Wallace was forced as a child to repress his imagination: "*I tried to tell them, and my father gave me my first thrashing for telling lies. When afterwards I tried to tell my aunt, she punished me again for my wicked persistence. Then . . . everyone was forbidden to listen to me, to hear a word about it.*" Because he had to retreat into a private, alienated and lonely world, alienation and loneliness became familiar feelings for Wallace. These feelings persist throughout his life and make it difficult for him to connect with other people.

#### Sanity and Insanity

At first, Redmond does not know if he should believe his friend's wild tale: "But whether he himself saw, or only thought he saw, whether he himself was the possessor of an inestimable privilege, or the victim of a fantastic dream, I cannot pretend to guess." The reader is more willing to believe Wallace's fantastic story because it is filtered through the sensible voice of the narrator. Redmond seems to have a normal and healthy mind, makes sound and rational judgments, and shows good sense. Wallace seems just as sane at first; he does not fit the stereotype of an insane person because he holds a prestigious job and seems successful. Wells' intention was not to develop an insane character but to show the consequences of splitting apart the various components of one's personality. As a child, Wallace is forced to suppress his imagination, and he carries this into adulthood. He has been made to think that imagination is a terrible thing. Therefore, Wallace begins to view his childhood experience not as imaginary but as real, and this is the only way Wallace can accept this part of himself. In a Freudian interpretation, he no longer has the ability to differentiate between real and imaginary, since the imaginary is off limits to him. In the end, it may seem that Wallace has gone insane—mistaking a door at a railway construction site for the magical door in the wall—but he is merely trying to return to that brief time in the garden when he was allowed to be himself.

### Symbols in the "The Door in the Wall"

"The Door in the Wall" relies heavily on symbols. A symbol is something that is used to represent or refer to something else. Many of Wells' symbols are dreamlike and represent masculine and feminine forces: *"There was," he said, "a crimson Virginia creeper—all one bright uniform crimson, in a clear amber outside the green door. They were blotched yellow and green; you know, not brown nor dirty, so that they must have been new fallen."*

The white wall is a feminine symbol representing Wallace's desire for nurturing, which he has repressed since the death of his mother. The white wall is contrasted with the "clear amber sunshine," a symbol for the masculine ego—for the dominant and logical as opposed to the passive and emotional. The symbolic colors in this passage reinforce the contrasting masculine/feminine symbols on which so much of the story hinges. The amber sunshine and red creeper is juxtaposed with the whiteness of the wall. The green door symbolizes fertility; it is the color associated with the Roman and Greek goddesses of love, Venus and Aphrodite. In opening the door and entering the world beyond his father's domain, Wallace passes into the feminine realm of imagination and sympathy. The door itself is a common literary symbol that represents the passageway between the conscious and the unconscious.

Psychologists who study dreams note that leaves are a symbol of happiness. The leaves Wallace describes are "*blotched yellow and green*," suggesting that his happiness is short-lived. Although Wallace is exceptionally happy inside the garden, he never regains his sense of delight outside of it, and for the rest of his life he is tormented with "*the haunting memory of a beauty and happiness that filled his heart with insatiable longings, that made all the interests and spectacle of worldly life seem full and tedious and vain to him*."

### Fantasy Elements in "The Door in the Wall"

Fantasy literature is intended to leave the reader in a state of uncertainty as to whether events are due to natural or supernatural forces. This is the case in "The Door in the Wall," in which five-year-old Wallace visits an enchanted garden. He has utmost confidence in his story's truth. His friend Redmond is not so sure. Fantasy literature usually begins in an unremarkable, everyday setting. In Wells' story, the men meet for dinner and conversation. Readers are slowly pulled into the fantastic story. By gradually easing them into it, readers are more apt to believe the fantasy. In "The Door in the Wall," readers are never quite sure if Wallace really did visit the magical garden or if it was purely a fantasy invented by his imagination.

## Critical discussions “The Door in the Wall”

*Q: Psychoanalytic interpretations of Wells's “The Door in the Wall,” suggest that Wells warns of the dangers of ignoring the value of imagination. Comment.*

In “The Door in the Wall,” H. G. Wells explores the relationship between imagination and reason, or between the aesthetic and the practical. The politician Lionel Wallace is, in the eyes of the world, a successful man; but, as he confides to his friend, he has a ‘preoccupation’ that is gradually dominating his life and even affecting his efficiency. Long ago as a lonely child of five, he had wandered out of his home and through the streets of West Kensington, where he had noticed a green door set in a white wall. It was immensely attractive to him, and he had a very strong desire to open it and pass through, but at the same time he felt an equally strong conviction that this would be wrong or unwise: in particular he felt his father would be very angry if he did so. Nevertheless, he yields to the temptation and finds himself in a beautiful garden. It has a rare and exhilarating atmosphere, its colours are clean and bright, and the child is filled with joy. He sees the green door several more times during his life, but always at times when stopping to enter the garden would mean sacrificing worldly success.

The symbolic garden at the center of this difficult story has been read differently by critics throughout the years. Early in this century, critics such as Alfred C. Ward saw the garden simply as an emblem of “any one of those fine aspirations by which men are moved and from which they are debarred by worldly preoccupations.” In other words, this is a story about the many beautiful dreams we neglect because of our mundane preoccupation with our jobs. Later psychoanalytical critics, such as the Freudian critic Bernard Bergonzi and the Jungian critic J. R. Hammond, read the garden and its imagery and symbolism as part of a complex psychological drama enacted between the conscious and unconscious elements of Wallace’s psyche.

Bergonzi argued that the green door through which Wallace enters the garden is “*an obvious womb symbol*” and that Wallace’s trip to the garden is “a return in fantasy to a prenatal state.” Wallace never knew his mother, so the tall fair girl and the somber woman in the garden are, according to Bergonzi, stand for his real mother. Wallace’s trip to the garden and his long-cherished wish to return are aspects of a revolt against his father and his father’s authority.

Hammond reads the garden as a symbol for the unconscious, and argues that the door is a “*familiar psychological metaphor for the threshold between conscious and unconscious.*” Wallace’s conflict is between the masculine, rational world represented by his father and his career and the feminine, imaginative realm represented by the garden. To achieve psychic wholeness, Wallace needs to integrate the two. Because he cannot, he becomes miserable. Whether or not Wallace finally succeeds in integrating these two warring aspects of his psyche is a matter still open to the interpretation of the individual reader. He does come to recognize and value the world the garden represents; but we never really know for sure if he succeeds in returning to the garden.

The conflict between aesthetic and practical or scientific concerns was one that Wells knew from firsthand experience. Throughout his life, he felt the pull of competing interests. Wells escaped the lower-middle-class life of his parents by winning a scholarship to the London University, where he studied biology. Wells returned to the conflict between imagination and reason repeatedly in his writing. On the one hand, Wells had a profound faith in scientific progress to create an ever-better society. On the other, he was well-aware of the dangers of divorcing progress from social responsibility. His famous novel, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, published in 1896, depicts a misguided exponent of scientific progress who tries to turn beasts into humans. In *The Invisible Man*, Wells again raises the question of whether science and humane interests are compatible. An outcast scientist discovers a way to make himself invisible and plans to use the knowledge to terrorize the world.

Of course, Wells was neither the first nor the only writer to take up the conflict between the aesthetic/imaginative side of human nature and the rational/scientific side. These are age-old concerns. In his *Republic* (upon which Wells based his *A Modern Utopia*), Plato derided all artists, especially writers,

because he thought they served no purpose other than to inflame emotions and make people unreasonable. What is remarkable about the different ways writers have approached this conflict, from Plato to Wells, is that they all see these two "worlds" as irreconcilable opposites. There seems to be no possibility to have both worlds. There was no chance that Wallace might leave the garden door ajar and mix the two worlds together. This is odd because in our everyday lives we mix the two, just as Wells himself most certainly did in his life.

Wallace must choose one world or the other; he cannot have both. In the end he has either escaped the rational, practical world of his father and politics by returning to the garden, or he has been killed by the dream of it.

So what are we to make of this story? Lionel Wallace has worked hard, has done good things, and has tried to serve his country honorably. At least twice when he turns away from the green door it is in service to others; and he has frequently sacrificed his own desires to please his father and others. The work of people like Wallace is indispensable; it builds societies. And yet the garden appears in his life because it is something Wallace needs. Whether we read it as Freudian manifestation of a desire to rebel against his father or Jungian need to integrate the masculine and feminine aspects of his psyche, it seems clear that the garden represents something necessary to Wallace, even if the value of the garden can never be measured by the standards of the practical world. And perhaps that is the point. Plato banished the artists out of his ideal Republic; perhaps Wells warns us that we do so at our own peril.

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→ H.G. Wells : died in 1946, novelist and short story writer.  
• also wrote on politics, history, science, satire, biography  
• best known for his science fiction novels,  
called the father of science fiction  
Famous works : The Time Machine, The Invisible Man,  
The War of the Worlds, The Island of Dr. Moreau

- The Door in the wall

  - conflict between imagination and reason, idealism and reality, aesthetic and the practical
  - idealism and reality, aesthetic and the practical
  - Plato criticised imagination in favour of reason, fine arts against useful arts
  - Reconciliation between the imagination and reality, ideal and rational.

Individual                          Society

  - As a child, imaginative, creative, idealist,