

OPENING  
DOORS  
to a  
RICHER  
ENGLISH  
CURRICULUM  
for ages 6 to 9

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## Unit 5

# Voices in an Empty Room

## ‘Green Candles’ by Humbert Wolfe

*Opening Doors key strategy: dialogue voices*

Can you understand how a conversation in a poem can be dramatic?

Can you use direct speech in an original way in a poem?

### Access strategies

Humbert Wolfe is an Italian-born British poet who was popular in the 1920s. His poem ‘Green Candles’ is a superb vehicle for teaching direct speech and the effect that the ‘voice’ of each speaker has in a recited poem. We hope you and your pupils will love the spooky atmosphere! A number of teachers have mentioned its associations with Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* and other animations. It is a very imaginative poem and has an ending which reverberates with questions.

Let's start with that ending:

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'She shall come in,' answered the open door,  
'And not,' said the room, 'go out any more.'

---



Organise the class into small groups. Ask them to come up with five reasons why 'she' may not go out any more and jot them down on sticky notes. Their answers won't just be guesses but will be based on all the stories they've read and films they've seen in the past.

Follow this up with a big question on a sheet of sugar paper: what has happened in the room? Ask pupils to note down their ideas. Establish whether at least some of your pupils can reference the story or film which has given them their ideas. Of course, you will get some totally original ones too!

Keep the evidence of thinking and speculating for later when it will support the 'wings to fly' sustained writing.

Now return to Humbert Wolfe's ending. How do the pupils think the lines should be voiced? Consider an emphasis on 'shall' followed by a very definite **imperative** on 'not'. Explain how this makes a huge difference to the reader's understanding. The door and the room are acquiring different personalities!

Now, reveal the first stanza.



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‘There’s someone at the door,’ said gold candlestick:  
‘Let her in quick, let her in quick!’  
‘There is a small hand groping at the handle.  
‘Why don’t you turn it?’ asked green candle.

---

The pupils will have to learn how to respond to dialogue in many kinds of texts – using a phrase like ‘dialogue voices’ may help. They will need to consider what kind of character is created by the direct speech and conversations. It will be a matter of combining the meaning of the vocabulary with the specific context and then understanding any inference or suggestion between the lines. These comprehension journeys are succinctly summarised by Peter Guppy and Margaret Hughes (1999: 134) as ‘reading the lines’, ‘reading between the lines’ and ‘reading beyond the lines’.

Even in the stanza quoted above, there are opportunities to consider the implications of ‘groping’ and then to go ‘beyond the lines’ to explore our associations with candlesticks and the kinds of settings that a reader might expect. Of course, it’s a green candlestick! What does that imply?

A richer English curriculum can be built on access to quality texts for all learners. Fascinating literature often gives the best possible opportunities for scope and depth in learning. A quirky poem with clever dialogue and fantastical elements, like ‘Green Candles’, can take understanding and imagination much further.

A **taster draft** will work well at this point: ask the pupils to write their version of the second stanza. Can they imitate the dramatic dialogue but instead use the chair and the wall as speakers? Give the children advice on how well this has been done as formative assessment.

You could also introduce other examples from the **link reading** section that will support the learning at this stage.

## Reading journeys

It is time to read, enjoy and recite the full poem! It works well if different readers take on the various voices and role play in a large open space, perhaps in the hall or outside.

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### Green Candles



‘There’s someone at the door,’ said gold candlestick:

‘Let her in quick, let her in quick!’

‘There is a small hand groping at the handle.

‘Why don’t you turn it?’ asked green candle.

‘Don’t go, don’t go,’ said the Hepplewhite chair,

‘Lest you find a strange lady there.’

‘Yes, stay where you are,’ whispered the white wall:

‘There is nobody there at all.’

‘I know her little foot,’ grey carpet said:

‘Who but I should know her light tread?’

‘She shall come in,’ answered the open door,  
‘And not,’ said the room, ‘go out any more.’

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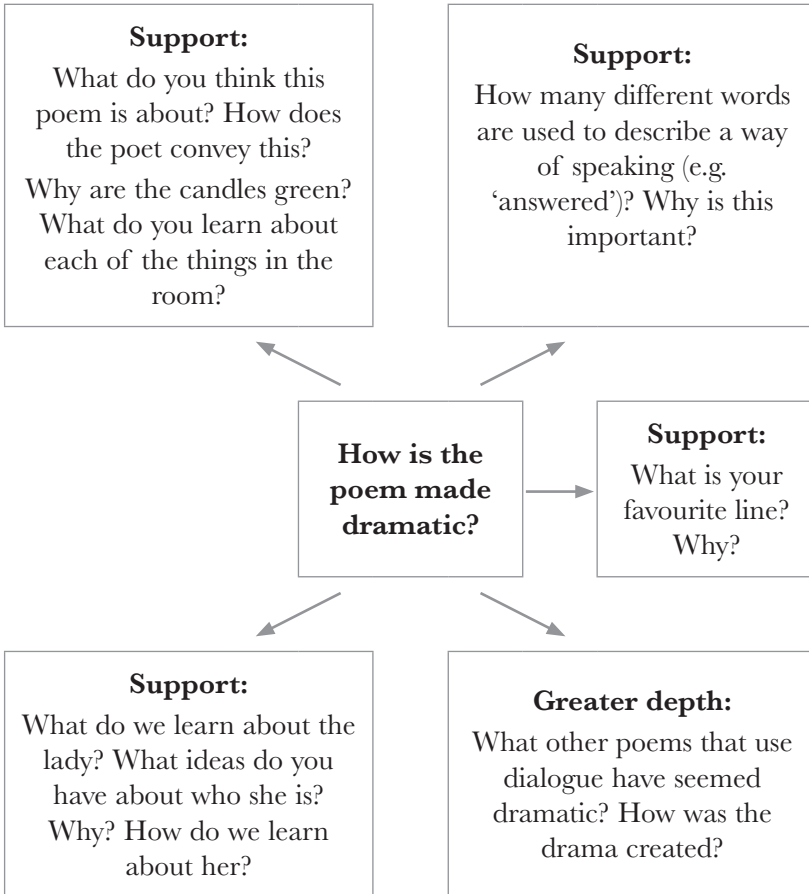
Note: George Hepplewhite gave his name to a distinctive style of light, elegant furniture that was fashionable between around 1775 and 1800. Reproductions of his designs continued to be made through the following centuries – one characteristic of which is a shield-shaped chair back.

Wolfe’s poetry has been set to music by numerous composers, so for a **music moment** you could play Gustav Holst’s *Twelve Humbert Wolfe Settings*, Op. 48. Why not get the children to make their own video of the room, with a minimalist, spooky set-up and haunting voices to complement the music?

A challenging text offers the chance to learn with rigour, but also with lots of fun and playful questioning. An in-depth question – one which involves much learning on the route to mastery – can be useful. See figure on page 80.

The support questions can be set for the class as appropriate.

As we tour schools, we have found that some of them call the central ‘Opening Doors’ question a ‘mastery question’. This does indeed set an in-depth goal for all learners. However, what matters is that all pupils are practising harder questions from an earlier age and sharing content and objectives. One teacher sent us an email saying that her ‘low ability’ pupils no longer felt they were struggling because they had made significant steps towards answering an ‘Opening Doors’ question, rather than being fed discrete and easy questions.





*Bob says ...*

*A rich diet in English is the entitlement of all learners. Why not call them all 'learners' rather than 'high' or 'low' ability?*

Plan from the top and, where necessary, use layered support questions – or any kind of intervention or scaffold – in a flexible way and with direct instruction built in. There are then so many potential teaching points en route.

**Excellent responses will:**

*Key concept: effective dialogue*

- ♥ Explain how each comment shows a new 'personality'.
- ♥ Describe the possible interpretations – and ambiguity – of the ending.
- ♥ Convey how the urgency of the comments builds tension.
- ♥ Explain how recitation of the poem enhances the meaning.
- ♥ Discuss the **personification** of the room and certain objects.
- ♥ Explain how rhyming couplets support the dialogue and meaning.

*Bob says ...*

*Use the excellence criteria to clarify your understanding of why you are teaching the lesson. It is not just about delivering content; it is also a chance to teach aspects of poetry and language use. Sometimes, I've coached teachers*

*in lessons where the literary material has not been mastered prior to the teaching. As a result, the learning can drift towards shallow memorising. Remembering is an important foundation stone, but a mixture of dialogic talk and instruction will take pupils' comprehension much further and much deeper. This can only happen when teachers have a confident knowledge of the text and its potential. This is the kind of understanding that grows each time the text is revisited and with talk across teams about the kinds of criteria used.*

## Beyond the limit – link reading

Make link reading available on desks and in classrooms. It is visible reading which will deepen the children's experiences. Make sure you have regular debates about which poems your class enjoys, both funny and serious, but keep using 'Opening Doors' strategies to ensure that what they learn is transferable. For example, when the class next has an unseen test which includes direct speech, they should be more discerning readers after exploring 'Green Candles', but they will need plenty of practice throughout the primary curriculum.

Here are some poems which include dramatic direct speech:

☛ 'An Off-the-Record Conversation' by John Agard

☛ 'The Night Express' by Frances Cornford

☛ 'The Fruits, the Vegetables, the Flowers and the Trees' by Carol Ann Duffy

- ♥ ‘Overheard on a Saltmarsh’ by Harold Monro (Unit 5 in *Opening Doors to Quality Writing for Ages 6 to 9*)
- ♥ ‘Brian’s Picnic’ by Judith Nicholls
- ♥ ‘Go-Kart’ and ‘Grumble Belly’ by Michael Rosen
- ♥ ‘Who Are We?’ by Benjamin Zephaniah

Here is a picture book with poetic text and a deserted house story to compare with ‘Green Candles’: *A House That Once Was* by Julie Fogliano and Lane Smith.

## Wings to fly

For their taster drafts, your pupils devised a stanza which can now be developed. They can start to apply their fresh awareness of the dramatic possibilities of direct speech to their own poetry. There are many ways to scaffold the process:

- ♥ Try crafting individual lines spoken by a new ‘voice’.
- ♥ Invent a new object for the room (e.g. a broken mirror or a painting with a large frame).
- ♥ Draft a conversation between two objects.
- ♥ Devise an ending first.
- ♥ Craft a line using a specific verb or adjective which makes a difference (refer back to ‘groping’ in the access strategies).

These fragments of writing can then be edited and improved. Many pupils will be ready to compose a complete poem imitating the style of Humbert Wolfe. Here are some possible themes and approaches:

- 🕯️ Continue the poem in the same style.
- 🕯️ Write the lady's reply in three new stanzas.
- 🕯️ Write a poem including an argument between the white wall and the room.
- 🕯️ Invent a new room with voices but no human being.
- 🕯️ Write a poem set in the same room in 100 years' time or 100 years in the past.
- 🕯️ Green Candle Meets White Candle

The most important decision we make in our planning is about the texts we choose to teach. Our biggest debt is to the writers. Humbert Wolfe gives us all the inspiration we need for writing a brief poem which delightfully combines a simple drama with complex themes. Think of all the associations and connotations with dusty, neglected rooms, strange hands on doorknobs and ghostly voices, all of which take comprehension beyond the lines. Parents will love the voices performed in an assembly too!