

The Landlady

After Reading

One

Check your understanding of the story by answering the following questions.

1. What was Billy Weaver doing in the City of Bath?
2. He was directed to the 'Bell and Dragon' pub for accommodation. Why didn't he stay there?
3. What was strange about the landlady when he rang on the door bell?
4. What was Billy's first impression a) of the house and b) of the landlady?
5. How many other guests were there?
6. Why did the landlady ask him to go to the sitting-room after he'd unpacked his bag?
7. What did Billy find disturbing about the guest book?
8. When had the other guests checked in?
9. What was strange about the animals in the sitting-room?
10. What do you think happened to the other guests whose names Billy had seen?

WRITING

Either write a paragraph (between 70 and 100 words) **as if continuing the story** telling what you think happened next

Or

Write about what you think happened next and what the consequences of that would be, and support what you say by referring to evidence in the story. (About 90 words)

DISCUSSION

Is 'The Landlady' a continuation of the tradition of stories about women as witches, and which teach mistrust and caution?

This word search square contains 20 key words for the story 'The Landlady'. In pairs, how many can you complete in five minutes?

Z	O	E	S	U	O	H	G	N	I	D	R	A	O	B
M	Z	R	J	Z	K	S	E	V	E	N	T	E	E	N
U	R	U	Q	T	V	U	J	R	Q	Y	H	D	Q	P
L	V	H	X	Y	N	H	A	D	L	E	A	N	N	O
H	S	C	O	M	P	E	L	L	I	N	G	U	G	G
O	X	Q	P	U	P	A	I	Z	D	E	T	H	W	V
L	R	C	H	P	N	B	Y	B	J	K	A	S	G	A
L	K	E	A	D	F	H	R	B	O	N	X	H	N	E
A	R	S	L	B	S	E	G	O	D	N	I	C	E	T
N	I	A	L	N	A	N	B	S	O	E	D	A	B	F
D	D	V	K	K	K	T	O	D	T	N	E	D	T	O
Y	L	T	F	U	S	M	H	W	T	O	R	R	A	P
N	T	A	T	E	E	T	H	Y	Y	O	M	Y	C	U
Z	S	M	U	M	E	H	T	N	A	S	Y	R	H	C
T	M	G	N	I	M	O	C	L	E	W	B	Z	M	T

After Reading

Two

In 'The Landlady', Billy Weaver admits that he was a little bit frightened by the thought of staying in a boarding house: "The name itself conjured up images of watery cabbage, rapacious landladies, and a powerful smell of kippers..."

Bill Bryson, an American author, recalls the first time he ever visited Britain, and his first encounter with the landlady of a boarding house. Can you see any similarities with Billy Weaver's fears of boarding houses?

Bill has just got off the ferry boat from France and is looking for somewhere to stay.

Paragraph

1

I didn't know how early one could decently begin asking for a room in England, so I thought I would leave it till mid-morning. With time on my hands I made a thorough search for a guesthouse that looked attractive and quiet, but friendly and not too expensive, and at the stroke of ten o'clock presented myself on the doorstep of the one I had carefully selected, taking care not to discompose the milk bottles. It was a small hotel that was really a guesthouse, indeed was really a boarding house.

2

I don't remember its name, but I well recall the proprietress, a formidable creature of late middle years called Mrs Smegma, who showed me to a room, then gave me a tour of the facilities and outlined the many complicated rules for residing there - when breakfast was served, how to turn on the heater for the bath, which hours of the day I would have to vacate the premises and during which brief period a bath was permitted (these seemed, oddly, to coincide), how much notice I should give if I intended to receive a phone call or remain out after 10 p.m., how to flush the loo and use the loo brush, which materials were permitted in the bedroom wastebasket and which had to be carefully conveyed to the outside dustbin, where and how to wipe my feet at each point of entry, how to operate the three-bar fire in my bedroom and when that would be permitted (essentially, during an Ice Age). This was all bewilderingly new to me. Where I came from, you got a room in a motel, spent ten hours making a lavish and possibly irredeemable mess of it, and left early the next morning. This was like joining the Army.

flush: clean by flow of water
loo: toilet

bewilder: perplex
lavish: extravagant

3

'The minimum stay,' Mrs Smegma went on, 'is five nights at one pound a night, including full English breakfast.'

'Five nights?' I said in a small gasp. I'd only intended to stay the one. What on earth was I going to do with myself in Dover for five days?

Mrs Smegma arched an eyebrow. 'Were you hoping to stay longer?'

'No' I said. 'No. As a matter of:...' '

'Good, because we have a party of Scottish pensioners coming for the weekend and it would have been awkward. Actually, quite impossible.' She surveyed me critically as she might a carpet stain, and considered if there was anything else she could do to make my life wretched. There was. 'I'm going out shortly, so may I ask that you vacate your room within quarter of an hour?'

I was confused again. 'I'm sorry, you want me to leave? I've just got here.'

'As per the house rules. You may return at four.' She made to depart but then turned back. 'Oh, and do be so good; would you, as to remove your counterpane each night. We've had some unfortunate occurrences with stains. If you do damage the counterpane, I will have to charge you. You do understand, of course'

I nodded dumbly. And with that she was gone. I stood there, feeling lost and weary and far from home. I'd spent an hysterically uncomfortable night out of doors. My muscles ached, I was dented all over from sleeping on boltheads, and my skin was lightly oiled with the dirt and grit of two nations. I had sustained myself to this point with the thought that soon I would be immersed in a hot, soothing bath, followed by about fourteen hours of deep, peaceful, wallowing sleep, on plump pillows under a downy comforter.

As I stood there absorbing the realisation that my nightmare, far from drawing to a close, was only just beginning, the door opened and Mrs Smegma was striding across the room to the strip light above the sink. She had shown me the correct method for turning it on - 'There's no need to yank it. A gentle tug is sufficient' - and evidently remembered that she had left it burning. She turned it off now with what seemed to me a sharp yank, then gave me and the room a final suspicious once-over, and departed again.

When I was sure she was quite gone I quietly locked the door, drew shut the curtains and had a pee in the sink. I dug a book from my backpack, then stood for a long minute by the door surveying the tidy, unfamiliar contents of my lonely room.

'And just what the fuck is a counterpane? I wondered in a small, unhappy voice and quietly took my leave.

oo00oo

stain:
discoloration
wretched:
terrible

weary: tired

dented:
imprinted
boltheads: steel
nuts

downy: full of
feathers

yank: pull with
force

pee: urinate

oo00oo

Over the next two days, Mrs Smegma persecuted me mercilessly; while the guests, I suspected, scouted evidence for her. She reproached me for not turning the light off in my room when I went out, for not putting the lid down in the toilet when I'd finished, for taking the colonel's hot water - I'd no idea he had his own until he started rattling the doorknob and making aggrieved noises in the corridor - for ordering the full English breakfast two days running and then leaving the fried tomato both times. 'I see you've left the fried tomato again' she said on the second occasion. I didn't know quite what to say to this as it was incontestably true, so I simply furrowed my brow and joined her in staring at the offending item. I had actually been wondering for two days what it was. 'May I request,' she said in a voice heavy with pain and years of irritation, 'that in future if you don't require a fried tomato with your breakfast that you would be good enough to tell me.'

Abashed, I watched her go. 'I thought it was a blood clot!' I wanted to yell after her, but of course I said nothing and merely skulked from the room to the triumphant beams of my fellow residents.

After that, I stayed out of the house as much as I could. I went to the library and looked up 'counterpane' in a dictionary so that I might at least escape censure on that score. (I was astonished to find out what it was; for three days I'd been fiddling with the window.) Within the house, I tried to remain silent and inconspicuous. I even turned over quietly in my creaking bed. But no matter how hard I tried, I seemed fated to annoy. On the third afternoon as I crept in Mrs Smegma confronted me in the hallway with an empty cigarette packet, and demanded to know if it was I who had thrust it in the privet hedge. I began to understand why innocent people sign extravagant confessions in police stations. That evening, I forgot to turn off the water heater after a quick and stealthy bath and compounded the error by leaving strands of hair in the plughole. The next morning came the final humiliation. Mrs Smegma marched me wordlessly to the toilet and showed me a little turd that had not flushed away. We agreed that I should leave after breakfast.

I caught a fast train to London, and had not been back to Dover since.

scouted:
hunted

rattling:
making a noise

furrowed my brow: looked puzzled

abashed:
confused & ashamed

skulk: sneak out

creaking:
noisy

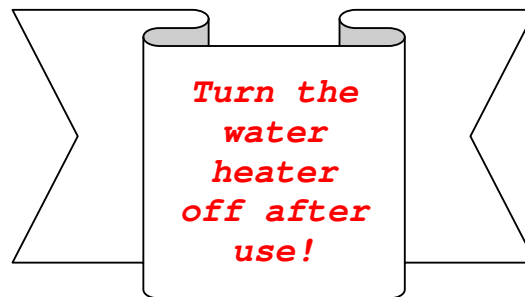
privet hedge:
plants creating wall
stealthy:
secret

turd: faeces

Things to do

1. Answer the following questions by referring to the text
 1. " It was a small hotel that was really a guesthouse, indeed was really a boarding house." (paragraph 1) What, in your opinion, are the Portuguese equivalents of the three kinds of accommodation mentioned?
 2. Why do you think the author uses the word 'proprietress' rather than the more usual 'owner'? (paragraph 2)
 3. What were the difficulties about having a bath (paragraphs 2 & 9)
 4. In what season of the year could the author put on the fire in his room? (para 2)
 5. The author uses the word 'surveyed' instead of 'looked'. What effect does this have on the reader? (para 4)
 6. Where, do you suppose, the author had spent the previous night, and doing what? (para 6)
 7. What thought had kept him going up until that point? (para 6)
 8. How was the author feeling in paragraphs 7 and 8?
 9. What do imagine 'a full English breakfast' might consist of - apart from fried tomatoes? (para 9)
 10. Why does the author talk about people signing confessions in police stations?

2. To your horror, you find you have a small job to do for Mrs Smegma. She wants you to make some 'helpful' signs for her guests, so that they don't do anything wrong. In a flash of inspiration, you remember that imperatives are best used on signs and she reluctantly agrees that the following sign 'will do, under the circumstances'.



1. Using the text as a guide, make some more signs.

2. You're feeling extra generous and so you decide to help Mrs Smegma by inventing some new signs how imaginative can you be?

