

The Landlady

Pre-reading

Characterisation

Before reading the story, answer these questions about it. Work in pairs and devise what you think would be the likely or interesting answers to the questions. Then try to turn your answers into a spoken narrative and share this with the class.

1. What was Billy doing in Bath, arriving for the first time, in Bath one cold evening?
2. What did he ask the porter at the railway station?
3. What attracted Billy to look in the window of the house along the street?
4. What made him ring the doorbell of the house?
5. Why was the owner of the house expecting him?
6. What was strange about the names in the guest book?
7. What did the two pets – a dog and a parrot – do when he entered the sitting room?
8. How did the landlady treat Billy?



Characterisation

There are two principal characters in the story 'The Landlady' - the landlady herself, and Billy Weaver, a young man arriving in an unfamiliar city and looking for accommodation. Billy is 17 years old, optimistic and innocent. The landlady is middle aged with a friendly and welcoming manner; but does she have a sinister motive?

The story draws on similarities with certain European folk tales which start with young children being taken in by apparently well-meaning adults ('Hansel and Gretel' or 'Babes in the Wood' being a prime example). Is the house where Billy sees the sign 'Bed and Breakfast' enchanted? Does the landlady have magical, witch-like powers? Or is it all in the imagination?

Billy Weaver

Billy Weaver is introduced right at the beginning of the story, and we learn the following about him immediately:

"Billy was seventeen years old. He was wearing a new navy-blue overcoat, a new brown trilby hat, and a new brown suit, and he was feeling fine. He walked briskly down the street. He was trying to do everything briskly these days. Briskness, he had decided, was *the* one common characteristic of all successful businessmen. The big shots up at the Head Office were absolutely fantastically brisk all the time. They were amazing."

"He had never been to Bath before. He didn't know anyone who lived there. But Mr Greenslade at the Head Office in London had told him it was a splendid town. 'Find your own lodgings,' he had said, 'and then go along and report to the Branch Manager as soon as you've got yourself settled.'"

brisk: active; lively

big shots: important, successful colleagues

Bath: City of Roman origins in the west of England

From the information given above, try to answer these questions by choosing the best answer, A, B, C or D

1. The weather was most likely
A rainy B hot C cold D foggy
2. The work Billy did was probably
A on the assembly line of a factory B on a building site C in a government department D in an office
3. The important people at the Head Office
A intimidated Billy B admired Billy C inspired Billy D bored Billy
4. Billy was
A starting a new job B moving to a new post with the same company C running away from his old job D starting a new branch for his company

5. The Head Office had
A expected him to find his own accommodation **B suggested some alternative accommodation** **C not been able to find accommodation**
D arranged a place for him to stay

QUESTION: If you were seventeen years old and being sent to do some work for a company in an unfamiliar town, would you expect the company to organise accommodation for you in advance or not?

So far we know that Billy is 17 years old, is wearing a brown suit under his overcoat, and is also wearing a hat. The next extracts from the story tells us a little bit more about what Billy looked like, according to the landlady.

"It is such a pleasure to open the door and see someone standing there who is *exactly* right.....Like you"

"I don't think they were famous. But they were incredibly handsome, both of them. They were tall and young and handsome, my dear, just exactly like you."

"Seventeen is the perfect age! Mr Mulholland was also seventeen. But I think he was a trifle shorter than you are: in fact, I'm sure he was, and his teeth weren't quite so white. You have the most beautiful teeth, Mr Weaver, did you know that?"

"They're not as good as they look," Billy said, "They've got simply masses of fillings in them at the back."

Old fashioned clothes? ".a new brown trilby hat .." - trilby: soft felt hat with lengthwise dent in crown and narrow brim

Which hat is being described?

A

B

C

D



E

F

G

To summarise, it seems that Billy Weaver is a tall, handsome young man with beautiful looking teeth, but who dresses in a rather old-

fashioned way, and who has been sent by his employers to find his own lodgings in an unfamiliar city before starting to work in a branch of the company.

What Billy is doing and how he behaves is better understood if we understand that the story was written in 1959, when, presumably, it is set.

The Landlady

The landlady herself - we never discover her name - is clearly described in the story. The physical description paints a fairly detailed picture. However, there is another character that is hinted at throughout the text. This is not an obvious or overt description but relies on hints and suggestions, and the reader's knowledge of some traditional folk tales.

The physical description

"She was about forty-five or fifty years old, and the moment she saw him she gave him a warm welcoming smile."

"She had a round pink face and very gentle blue eyes."

"She seemed terribly nice. She looked exactly like the mother of one's best school-friend welcoming her into the house to stay for the Christmas holidays."

"He noticed that she had small, white, quickly moving hands and red finger-nails."

Make a list of the adjectives used above which give us a positive feeling for the landlady.

Can you find any adjectives that give us a negative feeling about her?

An observation by Billy Weaver

Billy gets an immediate impression that, nice as she is, the landlady is also a little bit strange. This is how he thinks of her after two minor incidents:

"The old girl is slightly dotty, Billy told himself. But at five and sixpence a night, who gives a damn about that?"

"Now, the fact that his landlady appeared to be slightly off her rocker didn't worry Billy in the least. After all, she was not only harmless - there was no question about that - but she was obviously a kind a generous soul."

In the passages above, which two expressions mean that the landlady is a little bit crazy, according to Billy?

1 _____ 2 _____

Incidentally, Billy goes on to surmise that his landlady was a little bit mad because of something that might have happened to her in the past, such as losing a son 'in the war', a reference to the Second World War.

Reading between the lines

'Reading between the lines' means that there is a message contained in the words on the page beyond the literal meaning. On a number of occasions there is a hint that some magic is being used.

"And now a queer thing happened to him. He was in the act of stepping back and turning away from the window when all at once his eye was caught and held in the most peculiar manner by the small notice that was there. BED AND BREAKFAST, it said. BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST. Each word was like a large black eye staring at him through the glass, holding him, compelling him, forcing him to stay where he was and not to walk away from that house, and the next thing he knew, he was actually moving across from the window to the front door of the house, climbing the steps that led up to it, and reaching for the bell."

This feeling that something beyond his control is happening continues when we discover that the landlady seem to have been expecting him, though this chances of this being true might seem impossible.

- "He pressed the bell. Far away in a back room he heard it ringing, and then at once – it must have been at once because he hadn't even had time to take his finger from the bell-button – the door swung open and a woman was standing there."
- "I saw the notice in the window," he said, holding himself back.
"Yes, I know."
"I was wondering about a room."
"It's all ready for you, my dear," she said. She had a round pink face and very gentle blue eyes.
- "Thank you," Billy said. "Thank you ever so much." He noticed that the bedspread had been taken off the bed, and that the bedclothes had been neatly turned back on one side, all ready for someone to get in.
"I'm so glad you appeared," she said, looking earnestly into his face. "I was beginning to get worried."

Make a list of the things that seemed to indicate that Billy was expected in the house.

What reasons can you think of for this?
