

## Roald Dahl: 'The Landlady' (published 1959)

*In this extract a teenage boy named Billy Weaver has travelled from London to Bath to begin a new job, working for a bank. He is looking for a cheap hotel or a Bed & Breakfast to stay in until he can find more permanent accommodation.*

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 Head Office were absolutely fantastically brisk all the time. They were amazing.

There were no shops on this wide street that he was walking along, only a line of tall houses on each side, all them identical. They had porches and pillars and four or five steps going up to their front doors, and it was obvious that once upon a time they had been very swanky residences. But now, even in the darkness, he could see that the paint was peeling from the woodwork on their doors and windows, and that the handsome white façades were cracked and blotchy from neglect. Suddenly, in a downstairs window that was brilliantly illuminated by a street-lamp not six yards away, Billy caught sight of a printed notice propped up against the glass in one of the upper panes. It said BED AND BREAKFAST. There was a vase of flowers, tall and beautiful, standing just underneath the notice. He stopped walking. He moved a bit closer.

Green curtains (some sort of velvety material) were hanging down on either side of the window. The flowers looked wonderful beside them. He went right up and peered through the glass into the room, and the first thing he saw was a bright fire burning in the hearth. On the carpet in front of the fire, a pretty little dachshund was curled up asleep with its nose tucked into its belly. The room itself, so far as he could see in the half-darkness, was filled with pleasant furniture. There was a baby-grand piano and a big sofa and several plump armchairs; and in one corner he spotted a large parrot in a cage. Animals were usually a good sign in a place like this, Billy told himself; and all in all, it looked to him as though it would be a pretty decent house to stay in. Certainly it would be more comfortable than The Bell and Dragon pub.

After dithering about like this in the cold for two or three minutes, Billy decided that he would walk on and take a look at The Bell and Dragon pub before making up his mind. He turned to go. And now a strange 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, hypnotising 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 door-bell.

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. Now, normally you ring the door-bell and you have at least a half-minute's wait before the door opens. But this woman was a like a jack-in-a-box. He pressed the bell – and out she popped! It made him jump.

She was about forty-five or fifty years old, and the moment **she** saw **him**, she gave him a warm welcoming smile. "Please come in," she said pleasantly. She stepped aside, holding the door wide open, and Billy found himself automatically starting forward into the house. The compulsion or, more accurately, the desire to follow after her into the house was extraordinarily strong. "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.

**Q1:** Read again the **third** paragraph of the source.

List **four things** Billy sees in the room when he looks through the window.

A

B

C

D

[4 marks]

**Q2:** Read again paragraph **four**. How does the writer use **language** here to make the Bed & Breakfast seem mysterious?

You should write about:

- Words and phrases
- Language features and techniques
- Sentence forms

[8 marks]

**Q3:** Now you need to think about the **whole** of the source.

How has the writer **structured** the text to interest the reader?

You could write about:

- What the writer focuses our attention on at the beginning
- How and why this focus changes as the extract develops
- Any other structural features that interest you

[8 marks]

**Q4:** Focus this part of your answer on paragraphs **4, 5 and 6**. A student said,

“I think it’s clever how the writer makes the Bed & Breakfast – and the Landlady – seem creepy.”

To what extent do you agree?

[20 marks]

In your response you should:

- Write about your impressions of the Bed & Breakfast and the Landlady
- Evaluate how the writer conveys the idea that the setting and the woman are mysterious
- Support your opinions with quotations from the text