

# The Landlady



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ROALD DAHL

Dahl was born in Wales in 1916 to two Norwegian parents. He was their third child, and his father also had two children from his previous marriage. Tragedy struck in the family in 1920 when Dahl's older sister, Astri, died of an infection. Astri had been their father's favorite child, and he was heartbroken by her death. Shortly afterwards, Dahl's father got pneumonia and he too died, leaving Dahl's mother alone—in a foreign country—with six children in her care. Determined to honor her late husband's wish for his children to receive an English education, she sent Dahl to school in Weston-super-Mare, England, in 1925. Dahl later attended a famous boarding school in Derby where he spent the rest of his school education. Dahl has written about his childhood experiences in great detail in his autobiography, *Boy*, in which he describes some of his schoolmasters' cruelty. As a young adult, Dahl worked for Shell Oil, before enlisting in the Royal Air Force (RAF) at the beginning of World War II as a fighter pilot. In 1940 he suffered serious injuries after his plane crashed. After his accident, he could no longer fly, and was posted in Washington D.C., where he published his first piece of paid writing. Dahl spent the next two decades publishing adult fiction, and in 1961 he published his first children's book, *James and the Giant Peach*. Dahl was often accused of having anti-Semitic beliefs, but despite this criticism, he continued to enjoy a successful writing career until his death in 1990.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The post-war period saw a transition towards a new, postmodernist writing style, which often invoked playfulness, ludic, parody, satire, role-reversals, and inversions to critique the modern world. Dahl was born in 1916, in the midst of World War I, and he experienced the horrors of war firsthand when serving in the military as a fighter pilot during World War II. In his second autobiography, *Going Solo*, Dahl describes how only three of the sixteen men in his training group survived. Given the widespread horror of war during the first half of the twentieth century, it is no surprise that Dahl was interested in interrogating violence, cruelty, and power in his literature.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In the aftermath of World War II, many writers began to utilize dark humor as a tool with which to make sense of the modern world, and the global atrocities witnessed during the first half of the twentieth century. Dark humor developed as a genre in its own right in the 1960s, particularly in American literature.

Like Roald Dahl, many writers were exploring dark elements of the human psyche and pushing their portrayal of humanity and modernity to absurd and cartoonish extremes. In Joseph Heller's famous satire, *Catch-22* (1961), for example, the writer invokes dark humor to criticize war and violence. Martin Amis' *London Fields* (1989) is a chilling murder mystery that tackles the threat of moral degradation in modern society. Like *The Landlady*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) is a dark and satirical text, exploring themes of free will, cruelty, and mental health.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** 'The Landlady'
- **When Written:** Around 1960
- **Where Written:** Probably in Great Missenden, England.
- **When Published:** 1960
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Short story, mystery, horror
- **Setting:** Bath, England
- **Climax:** The landlady tells Billy that her two previous guests never left her house.
- **Antagonist:** The Landlady
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Spooky Stories.** In 1983, Roald Dahl selected and published a collection of other writers' ghost stories, explaining in the introduction that "The Landlady" was the closest he ever came to writing his own ghost story.

**Success and Tragedy.** "The Landlady" received great acclaim, and in 1960 it won the prize for "Best Short Story Mystery" at the Edgar Awards. Meanwhile, the 1960s were tragic years for Dahl personally; his son suffered from ill health, and both his mother and his eldest daughter died.



## PLOT SUMMARY

When seventeen-year old Billy Weaver takes the train from London to Bath in search of work, he is excited and optimistic about the opportunities ahead of him. The weather in Bath is miserable and "deadly cold." His first priority is finding lodgings, and after asking the porter at the train station for recommendations, he sets off towards The Bell and Dragon pub. As he walks through the unfamiliar city, Billy notices how decrepit and neglected the neighborhood is. However, he is

stopped in his tracks when—in stark contrast to his gloomy surroundings—he spots a charming and “brilliantly lit” Bed and Breakfast. After a few minutes deliberating whether he should continue his journey to the pub, Billy feels inexplicably drawn toward the Bed and Breakfast. The roaring fire enchants Billy, and he can’t help but notice the inviting furniture, the “pretty little dachshund” curled up by the hearth, and the cheerful **yellow chrysanthemums** in the window.

As Billy lingers outside, in the warm glow from the Bed and Breakfast window, the door swings open and a friendly old woman welcomes him inside. The landlady is terribly kind towards Billy, and offers him a cheap price for lodgings. As he hangs up his coat, Billy notices “there are no other hats or coats in the hall.” It strikes him as a little peculiar that the Bed and Breakfast is not busier, especially because it is so pleasant. As she leads him upstairs, the landlady explains that she is a little “choosy and particular” about the guests she accepts into her home. While showing him around his neat bedroom, the landlady insists that Billy sign the guest book that same night. Billy is amused by the landlady’s odd behavior, but he is not alarmed that she seems “slightly off her rocker.” Instead, Billy decides that she was not only “harmless,” but “also quite obviously a kind and generous soul.”

After unpacking, Billy follows the landlady’s instructions and walks downstairs to sign the visitors’ book, where he finds only two previous guest entries. Both of the names written there feel somehow familiar to Billy and he wracks his brain to establish why he recognizes them. The landlady interrupts Billy’s thought process, carrying a large tray of **tea** and placing it down besides the sofa, where she invites Billy to join her. Billy is curious about the two names in the guest book, and asks the landlady several questions about them. He becomes increasingly certain that he’s heard the names somewhere, perhaps in the newspaper, but every time he gets close to working out how or why, the landlady changes the subject.

Meanwhile, Billy and the landlady share a pot of tea. The landlady makes numerous strange remarks about her previous guests, Mr. Christopher Mulholland and Mr. Gregory W. Temple, commenting on their bodies, their ages, and speaking about them as if they were still living upstairs. Billy is unable to ascertain how long they were guests at the Bed and Breakfast, or when they left. The landlady contradicts herself constantly, but remains insistent that Billy must drink his tea.

During one of the landlady’s long silences, Billy realizes that the caged parrot in the living room is not in fact alive. The landlady explains enthusiastically, “I stuff *all* my little **pets** myself when they pass away,” and points to the dachshund, which is also dead and stuffed. At this exact moment, Billy notices that his “tea tasted faintly of bitter almonds.” He asks the landlady, “haven’t there been *any* other guests here except them in the last two or three years?” She replies, with a smile, that there has not.



## CHARACTERS

**Billy Weaver** – Billy Weaver, the story’s protagonist, is an enthusiastic and innocent seventeen-year-old boy. When Billy arrives in the city of Bath—keen to make his way in the business world—his first task is to find lodgings for the night. He happens upon a charming Bed and Breakfast, and is welcomed inside by the friendly landlady there. Feeling very pleased with himself for finding such comfortable and cheap lodgings, Billy misses important clues and warnings about the landlady’s true nature. Billy is curious but naïve. He finds it strange, for example, that there are no other guests staying at the Bed and Breakfast, but trusts the landlady’s peculiar explanation. He also notices that there have only been two previous entries in the visitors’ book—Christopher Mulholland and Gregory W. Temple—and, curiously, he recognizes both names. Although he is very keen to determine why, he is easily fooled and distracted by the landlady during his search for truth. Ultimately, the sweet-looking landlady is able to take advantage of poor Billy because his innocent and trusting nature prevents him from suspecting that things might not be as they seem. Although the story’s cliffhanger does not explicitly reveal Billy’s fate, it is implied that the landlady poisons his **tea** so that she can kill Billy and stuff him, just as she does to her **pets**.

**The Landlady** – The story’s antagonist is the unnamed landlady who runs the Bed and Breakfast that Billy chooses to stay in. Although she appears to be sweet, friendly, and generous, the story’s plot twist reveals that she is a cruel woman, or insane, capable of horrifying and wicked crimes. Throughout their evening together, Billy is increasingly curious about the landlady’s previous guests, Christopher and Gregory, and it becomes apparent that the landlady is hiding a secret with regard to them, and when they left her Bed and Breakfast. Billy is sure that he has seen their names in the newspaper headlines, and that Christopher went missing in a tragic accident. Although the landlady denies this, she makes several creepy and objectifying comments about the boys’ appearance. When the landlady explains that she has a taxidermy hobby, and shows Billy her **stuffed pets**, the reader realizes that she has killed and stuffed Christopher and Gregory too, and displayed their bodies upstairs. The two young men have never been found, and she has never been caught, presumably because nobody suspects the landlady of such terrifying violence. At this moment, Billy notices that his **tea** “tasted faintly of bitter almonds,” and it becomes clear that the landlady has poisoned him.

**Mr. Greenslade** – Mr. Greenslade, one of the “big shots” from the “Head Office in London,” is the businessman who encourages Billy to move to Bath for work. Although he is only mentioned briefly, he is an important figure in the story, as clearly Billy looks up to him. Because of Mr. Greenslade, and others like him, Billy believes that being successful means being

“brisk” and making money. It is perhaps because of his “briskness” that Billy fails to notice important clues that might have helped him avoid his miserable demise.

**Christopher Mulholland** – Mr. Mulholland was one of the landlady’s previous guests and victims. Throughout the story, it becomes clear that he checked into the landlady’s Bed and Breakfast several years ago and has been missing ever since. The story implies that his disappearance was reported far and wide in the newspapers, which is how Billy became familiar with his name. The landlady describes how both Christopher and Gregory—another one of her victims—never left the Bed and Breakfast, and how they are still “on the fourth floor, both of them together” (implying that she killed and stuffed them, just as she did with her **pets**). This confuses and surprises Billy, because he thought that he was the only guest, but it doesn’t yet cause Billy to suspect that the landlady might have been responsible for their disappearances.

**Gregory W. Temple** – Mr. Temple is the other of the landlady’s previous guests and victims. She describes how Gregory was a little older than Christopher when he arrived at her Bed and Breakfast, but how his skin was still very youthful: “there wasn’t a *blemish* on his body.” It is clear that the landlady targets and grooms a certain kind of victim; she likes tall, innocent, and handsome young men, and their appearance is very important to her, as it’s implied that she kills and stuffs them like her **pets**.

Bath. At first glance, the streets seem grand and elegant, lined with tall, “swanky” houses. Looking closer, however, it is evident that “the handsome white façades were cracked and blotchy from neglect.” The eerie image of Billy walking alone at night through a dilapidated neighborhood sets the tone for the story. It is because of the grim weather and the gloomy setting that Billy is drawn to the warm and “brilliantly illuminated” window of the landlady’s Bed and Breakfast. Billy is misled by illusion once more when he notices “a vase of **yellow chrysanthemums**, tall and beautiful” underneath the Bed and Breakfast sign. In many European countries, yellow chrysanthemums symbolize death and are used as funeral flowers. Here then, the flowers could be read as a warning rather than an invitation, but Billy is too busy trying to be “absolutely fantastically brisk” to notice these clues. Similarly, Billy is pleased to spot a little dog and a parrot through the window and tells himself, “Animals were usually a good sign in a place like this.” Ironically, it later becomes apparent that these **pets** are dead and stuffed—a very bad sign indeed. Although Billy is attracted to the coziness of the Bed and Breakfast, he does admit to himself that “he was a tiny bit frightened” of boarding houses. He is also sure that The Bell and Dragon pub would be a livelier and more “congenial” place to stay. Despite his better judgment, however, Billy is lured towards the Bed and Breakfast by its inviting appearance. The contrast between Billy’s first impressions of the Bed and Breakfast, and the events that follow inside its walls, reveal the dark and sinister power of deception and illusion. Dahl thus illustrates the shallow and superficial nature of appearances, highlighting the danger of first impressions.

The landlady embodies the conflict between appearance and reality herself. While she “seem[s] terribly nice,” it is clear that the landlady intentionally manipulates Billy in order to lure him into her home. The price she charges for the room, for example, is incredibly cheap, and she generously offers Billy “supper” while showing him around his comfortable room. One of the main reasons that the landlady is able to deceive Billy is because he assumes that she is a sweet, harmless, lady. This assumption proves to be a fatal one. Although Billy notices immediately that she is a bit “dotty,” and later that she “appeared to be slightly off her rocker,” his initial perception of her is unflinching. He underestimates her hugely, believing that “she not only was harmless—there was no question about that—but she was also quite obviously a kind and generous soul.” Dahl highlights the power of stereotypes and preconceptions when Billy’s prevent him from picking up on the landlady’s creepiness and oddities. She contradicts herself, for example, when telling Billy first of all that they are alone in the house, and later that her other tenants are upstairs—“But my dear boy, [Mr. Mulholland] never left. He’s still here. Mr. Temple is also here. They’re on the fourth floor, both of them together.” Billy also notices the landlady’s red, painted nails, a detail that is incongruent with her inconspicuous demeanor, and indicates,



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### APPEARANCES AND DECEPTION

Roald Dahl’s “The Landlady” tells the dark story of Billy Weaver, a seventeen-year-old boy who travels from London to Bath on business. When Billy spots a charming looking Bed and Breakfast near the train station, he abandons his plans to find a hotel and decides instead to take a chance on the cozy lodgings—but things aren’t as they seem. Billy meets his fate when his hostess, the titular landlady, deceives and poisons him; she is a taxidermist and intends to display his stuffed body next to those of her last victims. By contrasting appearance and reality, Dahl reminds his readers that first impressions may be deceiving. “The Landlady” is thus a cautionary tale about the danger of stereotypes and prejudice.

The many differences between appearance and reality in the story’s setting deceive Billy and lull him into a false sense of security. The tension between appearance and reality is introduced through an early description of the buildings in

perhaps, her evil and bloody intentions. Furthermore, the landlady openly objectifies and sexualizes young Billy, something that he also doesn't pay much attention to: "her blue eyes travelled slowly all the way down the length of Billy's body, to his feet, and then up again," Dahl writes, and the landlady remarks, "You have the most beautiful teeth, Mr. Weaver, did you know that?" Had the story been one about an older man preying on a much younger girl, the reader would likely be unsurprised when the landlord turned out to be a cruel, evil murderer. Through a simple role reversal, however, Dahl draws attention to the misleading nature of societal prejudices and stereotypes.

Throughout the story, Dahl demonstrates how easily Billy's judgment is clouded and undermined by his positive first impressions of the landlady's Bed and Breakfast. The allegorical message at the heart of "The Landlady" urges readers to look beyond the surface. By contrasting appearance and reality, Dahl illustrates how the truth is often concealed by superficial outward appearances.



### ANONYMITY VS. COMMUNITY

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the city was conceptualized as a negative place.

Home to immorality and corruption, the urban landscape symbolized a loss of tradition and the degradation of community values. Roald Dahl addresses this moral panic in "The Landlady" by exploring the moral repercussions of the anonymity provided by modern city life. Dahl depicts the dangerous consequences of seclusion and isolation, revealing that the moral fabric of society relies upon community and connectedness.

In "The Landlady," Dahl depicts how anonymity is a consequence of the push towards city life. The ease with which Billy Weaver travels between cities—London to Bath—represents the connectedness of modern society. Paradoxically, Billy is decidedly unconnected in Bath; it is his first time in the city and he doesn't "know anyone who live[s] there." Billy embodies anonymity in modern society. Not only is he anonymous in the literal sense—no one in Bath knows who he is—but he is also anonymous in that he lacks a unique identity of his own. Just like the "successful businessmen" he admires, he wears a suit, blends in with the crowd, and does "everything briskly." Furthermore, he unquestioningly followed the instructions of "Mr. Greenslade at the Head Office" when moving to a new city, despite not having a network there. Anonymity is apparent in the cityscape itself when Billy passes "a line of tall houses on each side, all of them identical." Like the buildings, Billy dresses and behaves identically to the "successful businessmen" he emulates. Although Billy's job is not specified, the descriptions surrounding it are distinctly capitalist: "Branch Manager," "Head Office," "successful businessmen," and "The big shots." For Billy, success means

working hard, being busy, and making money. On the one hand, Billy's career promises to connect him with a network of important people and interesting places. On the other, it requires him to be alone in a new city. Indeed, the business world is very individualistic, requiring every aspiring "big shot" to compete against their colleagues; it is likely that there are a multitude of other eager young men like Billy, ready to take his spot on the corporate ladder, should he fail. Thus, Dahl reveals the paradox of modernity and globalization, which simultaneously increase interconnectivity, as well as perpetuating isolation, anonymity and individualism.

The tension between community and anonymity reveals the dangers of such isolation in modern society. While the Bell and Dragon pub represents community, the landlady's Bed and Breakfast represents isolation and anonymity. The narrator traces Billy's decision-making process while he chooses whether to stay in the pub or the Bed and Breakfast. The narrator describes how the pub would be more sociable: "a pub would be more congenial [...] there would be beer and darts in the evenings, and lots of people to talk to." In contrast, the Bed and Breakfast appears to offer comfort, privacy, peace, and quiet. It is Billy's isolation in Bath that makes the latter option more attractive to him, and leads him to choose the landlady's Bed and Breakfast. The tension between community and isolation continues when the landlady welcomes Billy into her home. The description of her looking "exactly like the mother of one's best school-friend welcoming one into the house to stay for the Christmas holidays," evokes feelings of safety, familiarity, and community. However, upon entering the Bed and Breakfast, Billy notices "there were no other hats or coats in the hall. There were no umbrellas, no walking-sticks-nothing." Contrary to spending the holidays with a gathering of loved ones, Billy realizes that he is completely alone in the house with the landlady when she happily declares, "We have it *all* to ourselves." Billy finds this a little peculiar, but innocently puts it down to the landlady being a bit "dotty." Ironically, it seems that isolation and loneliness are both the cause of the landlady's cruelty and madness, and also the reason she continues to get away with her wicked crimes. When she explains, "I stuff *all* my little **pets** myself when they pass away," the landlady indicates her desperate need for company, yet her seclusion from society means that nobody has discovered that she is the murderer of the two missing men. The landlady remains nameless herself throughout the story, representing her anonymity and the danger and isolation that Billy faces within her home. Like Christopher Mulholland and Gregory W. Temple, Billy faces an eternity of isolation once he has been stuffed and displayed by the landlady. When Billy reads the list of the landlady's previous two guests, their names seem familiar, and he later remembers that they had both been in the news after going missing. Here, the newspaper reports serve as a symbol of the connectedness of community and its shared values. By contrast, the landlady lives in a vacuum, detached from the moral fabric of ordinary

society. Ultimately, Dahl juxtaposes community with anonymity, presenting the former as “congenial,” and the latter as dangerous.

“The Landlady” is a cautionary tale about the breakdown of community structures in modern society. In contrast to the pub—which represents tradition and community—the landlady’s lodgings are isolated and disconnected, and the landlady herself is lonely and anonymous. The fact that nobody has discovered that she is responsible for the men reported missing in the papers indicates how easily criminality and corruption can go unnoticed—and unpunished—within the urban environment. Through Billy’s demise, Dahl highlights the importance of shared values, societal cohesiveness, and community.



### ADULTHOOD VS. INNOCENCE

In much of Roald Dahl’s children’s literature, childhood is portrayed as antagonistic to adulthood. Many stories feature cruel adults who inflict their evil ways upon innocent children. Similarly, in “The Landlady,” a wicked lady manipulates Billy Weaver, who is just seventeen years old. Through this generational conflict, Dahl depicts the cruelty of the adult world, highlighting the tragic inevitability of growing up, and the loss of innocence that this transition requires.

Billy—a young man on the cusp of adulthood—represents purity and innocence. Seventeen-year-old Billy is remarkably trusting of the adults in his life. Firstly, he follows his superior’s instructions to travel to Bath, find lodgings, and pursue work there. He looks up to the adults in his life, particularly to the business “big shots,” whom he admires for being “brisk” and “successful.” Later, Billy puts faith in the landlady at the Bed and Breakfast, assuming that she is sweet and generous, and that she has his best interests at heart. She becomes a sort of mother or grandmother figure, indulging and fussing over him: “It’s such a comfort to have a hot water-bottle in a strange bed with clean sheets [...] you may light the gas fire at any time if you feel chilly.” His innocence and naivety prevent him from being suspicious of her unusual behavior, particularly when she explains that she is a “teeny weeny bit choosy” about her guests. Billy kindheartedly puts her strangeness down to loneliness: “He guessed that she had probably lost a son in the war, or something like that, and had never gotten over it.” Dahl’s depiction of Billy illustrates the inherent goodness and trustworthiness in young people because he sees the best in the landlady, despite her peculiarities. On the other hand, Dahl depicts how Billy is naively oblivious to the blaring warnings throughout his evening with the landlady. This suggests that Billy should have been more responsible for his own safety and wellbeing, and that his dreadful demise is partly his own fault for not being more cautious. Indeed, his blind admiration for adults leads him to imitate his role models’ “briskness.” It is this

haste when choosing the Bed and Breakfast that causes him to miss important clues about the landlady’s true nature. Billy’s age places him somewhere between childhood and adulthood and therefore it is never confirmed whether Billy is ultimately punished for his naivety, or whether he remains an innocent victim. In a way, the story demonstrates how people are all victims of adulthood; growing up inevitably requires a loss of innocence.

In contrast to Billy, the landlady represents the cruel and corrupt nature of the adult world. She intentionally uses her age to lull Billy into a false sense of security, betraying the trust he puts in her. She seems harmless, generous, and maternal, a performance that she has carefully constructed in order to ensnare the young men who enter her home. It remains ambivalent whether the landlady is actually “dotty,” or whether this is also part of her performance, although her terrifying wickedness would suggest that she is mad. It is clear, however, that the landlady is capable, precise, and organized. The description of her hands and nails, for example, reveals how agile and put together she is: “she had small, white, quickly moving hands, and red finger-nails.” She wastes no time ensuring that she will be able to poison Billy the very same night he arrives, cunningly asking him to sign the guestbook: “would you be kind enough to pop into the sitting-room on the ground floor and sign the book?” Of course, this is a ruse to get him downstairs where she has an opportunity to serve him some poisoned **tea**. Once Billy is within her clutches, she continues to mislead him by controlling the conversation—dodging his questions, and interrupting when it is convenient for her. Indeed, the landlady is motivated entirely by control. Her interest in Billy stems from a warped and wicked motive to preserve her victims in an eternal state of innocence. She delights in the fact that Billy is seventeen, exclaiming, “Oh, it’s the perfect age.” Similarly, when describing Gregory Temple—another one of her victims—she explains that although he was a bit older, she “never would have guessed” because his “skin was *just* like a baby’s.” The landlady is only interested in young men because, for her, they represent innocence and purity. She takes great pleasure in ensuring that they never grow up, maintaining their youth by killing and preserving their bodies. It is possible that the landlady’s taxidermy project is motivated by a desire to overcome the loneliness that many parents experience when their children leave home. Through ensuring that Billy and the other men can never leave, the landlady maintains her absolute control over them. The fact that the landlady must murder those whom she wants to keep innocent, however, implies that the preservation of innocence is ultimately both impossible and unnatural.

In “The Landlady,” childhood and adulthood are positioned in opposition to one another through the conflict between Billy and the landlady. While the former represents innocence, goodness, hope, and youthfulness, the latter represents power,

control, and cruelty. Billy's adolescence, however, complicates this dichotomy, as his age places him somewhere between childhood and adulthood. Through this tension, Dahl draws attention to the ways in which the young are robbed of their childhood and innocence by an urgent necessity to be prepared for the cruelty of adulthood and the adult world. It's also worth noting how the specter of World War II hangs over "The Landlady": written in a post-war context, Dahl demonstrates how the horror of war robbed society of its innocence, and younger generations of their childhoods. Ultimately, "The Landlady" is a tragic story about growing up in a cruel and dangerous modern world.

and Breakfast "would be a pretty decent house to stay in," and he tells himself that "[a]nimals [are] usually a good sign." The dog and the parrot, then, evoke feelings of safety, love, and care, and convince Billy that whoever owns the pets will probably look after him, too. It is not until much later that Billy realizes that the parrot and the dachshund are old pets that have died and been stuffed. When the landlady reveals that she is the taxidermist, Billy expresses his "admiration" for the landlady's skill and precision, which he considers a surprising but impressive hobby for such a sweet old lady. It is clear to the reader, however, that the landlady has also stuffed the two missing boys, Christopher and Gregory, and intends to do the same to Billy. Ironically, then, the stuffed pets are not "a good sign" at all, and the caged parrot in particular comes to symbolize the trap that Billy is in. Like the seemingly innocent cup of **tea** she serves Billy, the landlady's animals are evidence of how first impressions can be both misleading and dangerous.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### THE YELLOW CHRYSANTHEMUMS

The yellow chrysanthemums (a type of flower) that are perched in the window of the landlady's Bed and Breakfast contain several layers of symbolic significance. First, chrysanthemums are well known in many parts of Europe as symbols of death and are frequently used as funeral flowers. This, of course, points to the grave end that Billy is implied to meet, as he unwittingly accepts lodgings from a murderer who has clearly selected him as her next victim. To Billy, though, the flowers symbolize comfort and safety. As he peers into the window of the Bed and Breakfast, he thinks the lovely blooms "[look] wonderful," which in part convinces him to stay there and scrap his previous plan of going to the Bell and Dragon pub, which a porter had recommended to him. This tension between the chrysanthemums' traditional symbolic significance as markers of death and Billy's association between the flowers and comfort reveals the conflict between appearances and reality, which is one of the story's key themes. The Bed and Breakfast's external façade, with bright and cheerful-looking flowers in the window, deceives Billy and lulls him into a false sense of security. What should have been a warning ends up being the very thing that lures the young and naïve Billy into a deadly situation.



### THE STUFFED PETS

The landlady's stuffed pets—which Billy initially mistakes for living, breathing animals—symbolizes the landlady's immense and surprising skill for deception. As Billy peers through the window of the Bed and Breakfast at the beginning of the story, he notices a "pretty little dachshund" sleeping by the fire, and a "large parrot in a cage." For Billy, the presence of these animals is assurance enough that the Bed



### THE TEA

The tea symbolizes the landlady's horrific deception, cruelty, and criminality, illustrating the sharp contrast between appearances and reality. Despite saying that he is not hungry and that he wants to get an early night, Billy is gently bullied into sharing a pot of tea with his aging hostess. As they sip the tea, Billy is sure that a strange smell is coming from the landlady, who is sat beside him, but it doesn't cross his mind that the peculiar odor might be coming from the tea itself. Later, when the landlady offers Billy a second cup of tea, he declines because "he didn't much care for it," due to the taste of "bitter almonds." Although it is never explicitly revealed, it is likely that the landlady has poisoned Billy's tea with cyanide, which is known to smell of "bitter almonds." The landlady mentioned earlier that her previous guest, Christopher, "was a great one for his tea," suggesting that she also poisoned him. As she intends to stuff and display her victims, just as she has done with her **pets**, she needs to kill the men without leaving a single mark or "blemish" on their bodies, which is why she has chosen to use poison. Her method of killing her victims is evidently premeditated and carefully planned, disguised in a hospitable cup of tea, making it even more dark and sinister.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Best of Roald Dahl* published in 1990.

### The Landlady Quotes

●● But the air was deadly cold and the wind was like a flat blade of ice on his cheeks.

**Related Characters:** Gregory W. Temple, Christopher Mulholland, The Landlady, Billy Weaver

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 164

### Explanation and Analysis

The opening description of the city of Bath creates a negative mood, which foreshadows the darkness of later events in the story. When Billy arrives in his new city, it is nighttime and the weather is miserable. The metaphor “deadly cold” is perhaps intended as an allusion to the cold, dead bodies of the landlady’s previous victims, Christopher and Gregory. Similarly, the simile comparing the wind to “a flat blade of ice” cutting at Billy’s cheeks has connotations of violence, pain and danger. Overall, Dahl’s use of harsh imagery to describe the story’s setting creates a dark and gloomy atmosphere and sets the scene for the events that follow.

☞ 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.

**Related Characters:** Billy Weaver

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 165

### Explanation and Analysis

When Billy peers through the window of the Bed and Breakfast, he has not yet decided whether to stay there or at the Bell and Dragon pub. While the latter offers an opportunity to socialize and meet other people, the charming appearance of the Bed and Breakfast has an allure of its own. This outward appearance of comfort will later turn out to be a key example of how deceiving appearances can be. Additionally, Dahl juxtaposes the pub—which represents community—with the Bed and Breakfast—which represents anonymity and seclusion. The stuffed pets make Billy think that the Bed and Breakfast will be a warm place where guests are well cared for, but the reality turns out to be a horrifying distortion of that idea: the landlady loves her guests so much that she kills them in order to keep them forever. The tragic outcome of Billy’s misperception

suggests that the lack of true community in modern cities can lead people to make unwise—or in the landlady’s case, murderous—choices out of a desire for interpersonal connection.

☞ 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....

**Related Characters:** Billy Weaver

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 165

### Explanation and Analysis

On the one hand, the force that draws Billy towards the Bed and Breakfast could be interpreted as a magical, fantastical and evil spirit, wielded by an unknown actor to corrupt and control Billy. The use of fantasy here is quite incongruent with the writing style used throughout the rest of the text, and it represents Dahl’s broader interest in breaking with literary convention. On the other hand, Dahl casts doubt on the principle of freewill in the modern world, by hinting here that of the power of the Bed and Breakfast comes from its sign and in turn suggesting that advertising profoundly manipulates the public. Either way, Dahl requires his adult readers to enter into an inexplicable world of nonsense, where sensible businessmen are powerless against forces beyond their control. Viewed as simple fantasy, Dahl’s description of the sign adds suspense and mystery to the story. But viewed as social critique, this is a horrifyingly realistic portrayal of how little control individuals possess in the face of authority and society at large.

☞ After all, she not only was harmless—there was no question about that—but she was also quite obviously a kind and generous soul.

**Related Characters:** The Landlady, Billy Weaver

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 168

### Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the story, Dahl uses satire and irony to draw attention to Billy’s innocence and naivety. As a reader, it is

almost impossible not to be wary of the landlady and her peculiarly empty Bed and Breakfast. Despite trying to be prudent, however, Billy seems unable to pick up on the warning signs. He is sure that his host is sweet, caring, and harmless. Dahl's reverses typical gender roles here to reveal how easily people rely on stereotypes and assumptions to make judgments about people. If the story were about an older man and a younger woman, then stereotypes would suggest that the man would be predatory, but the opposite happens here. It is precisely because the landlady is a kind-looking older lady that Billy is so trusting of her. Further, the landlady has carefully created an external appearance that she knows won't provoke suspicion. Here, then, Billy represents the innocence of the younger generation, while the landlady symbolizes the corruption and evil of the adult world.

“Well, you see, both of these names—Mulholland and Temple—I not only seem to remember each one of them separately, so to speak, but somehow or other, in some peculiar way, they both appear to be sort of connected together as well.”

**Related Characters:** Billy Weaver (speaker), Gregory W. Temple, Christopher Mulholland, The Landlady

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 169

### Explanation and Analysis

After reading the guest book and seeing that there have only been two previous guests, Christopher and Gregory, Billy struggles to remember how he knows their names. Though Billy might have interpreted the guest book as a suspicious piece of evidence, his mind turns instead to more innocent explanations; he wonders if he knows the boys from school or because they are famous for playing sports. This bumbling interpretation on Billy's part shows how his innocence hinders his understanding of the world, while also illuminating how thoroughly the landlady's kind appearance has fooled him. Additionally, Billy's remark that Gregory and Christopher are “sort of connected together” adds a dark twist to the thematic tension between community and isolation; it turns out that the Gregory and Christopher are in fact connected, but only by their tragic, isolating fates.

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

**Related Characters:** The Landlady, Billy Weaver

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 170

### Explanation and Analysis

Billy is very observant, and is good at noticing peculiarities and inconsistencies about the landlady. His innocence, however, prevents him from using these reasoning skills to ever become truly suspicious of her. Here, for example, he notices her fast-moving hands and her carefully painted nails, but he doesn't pick up on these factors as reasons to be alarmed. Although she is only about “forty-five or fifty years old,” the landlady has perfected a wonderfully deceiving performance throughout the course of the evening, presenting herself as elderly, dithering and forgetful. Her painted fingernails and agile hands are therefore incongruent with her performance, because they reveal how able and put together she really is. The color red also has connotations of danger and violence, another warning sign that Billy misses altogether.

Now and again, he caught a whiff of a peculiar smell that seemed to emanate directly from her person. It was not in the least unpleasant, and it reminded him—well, he wasn't quite sure what it reminded him of. Pickled walnuts? New leather? Or was it the corridors of a hospital?

**Related Characters:** The Landlady, Billy Weaver

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 170

### Explanation and Analysis

Almost as soon as he sits down with the landlady to drink tea, Billy notices a strange smell. Billy is unable to determine what it is and he incorrectly diagnoses that the origin of the smell, believing that it comes from the landlady (rather than from the tea). The description of walnuts, leather, and hospital corridors works to consolidate Billy's existing perception of the landlady as a harmless, feeble, little old lady, and again prevents him from suspecting that she is up to no good. While Billy sips his tea, the landlady watches him

closely because she wants to make sure he finishes his poisoned drink. The landlady's ability to manipulate and deceive Billy is creepy and controlling, and because of Billy's naivety, he doesn't realize how little power he holds over his situation.

“Left?” she said, arching her brows. “But my dear boy, he never left. He's still here. Mr. Temple is also here. They're on the fourth floor, both of them together.”

**Related Characters:** The Landlady (speaker), Gregory W. Temple, Christopher Mulholland, Billy Weaver

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 171

### Explanation and Analysis

The landlady contradicts herself when telling Billy that Mr. Mulholland and Mr. Temple are upstairs, because she has previously lead Billy to believe that he is the only guest staying at the Bed and Breakfast. Here it is almost like she is playing a wicked game with Billy, giving him clues and exploiting his innocence and confusion. The landlady continues to maintain her kindly appearance even as her behavior gets more and more depraved, and this moment brings the tension between appearance and reality to a head.

Interestingly, however, the landlady seems just as confused as Billy at this point. Her apparent confusion adds nuance to this scene and makes it unclear whether or not the landlady is intentionally manipulating Billy. It seems like the landlady may even be sincere in her efforts to care for Billy and her other victims; in other words, she may believe that what she's doing is best for them. Through this ambiguity, Dahl suggests that even while the landlady represents the cruelty and violence of the adult world, she too may be a victim of a society that over-values youth and purity.

“I stuff *all* my little pets myself when they pass away. Will you have another cup of tea?”

**Related Characters:** The Landlady (speaker), Gregory W. Temple, Christopher Mulholland, Billy Weaver

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 172

### Explanation and Analysis

This moment is the climax of the story. When Billy realizes that the parrot and the little dachshund dog have been stuffed, the reader realizes that the landlady has almost certainly also stuffed Christopher and Gregory, which is why they are still upstairs, unable to leave. The emphasis on the word “*all*” highlights how the landlady also perceives Christopher and Gregory as pets. This revelation illuminates how the landlady's fixation on youth is actually a form of dehumanization and objectification. She is clearly wicked, but at the same time, her rationale for her behavior makes a kind of twisted sense; if the young men are her “pets,” then why shouldn't she care for them as she sees fit? It seems that her impulse to protect the purity of youth at any cost makes sense to her, even as it has disastrous consequences for those she's trying to protect. Given the landlady's motherly role in Billy's life, Dahl may be suggesting that parents and adults more generally tend to harm young people through efforts to protect them and preserve their innocence.

For his part, Billy is so busy admiring the landlady's unexpected skill for taxidermy that he doesn't pick up on what really happened to Christopher and Gregory. The landlady has yet again succeeded in deceiving Billy, relying on his innocence and her status as a seemingly trustworthy adult to snare him in her trap. Dahl seems to suggest that, like Billy, children and adolescents are often unaware of the way that the adult world manipulates them.

“The tea tasted faintly of bitter almonds, and he didn't much care for it. “You did sign the book, didn't you?”

**Related Characters:** The Landlady (speaker), Billy Weaver

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 172

### Explanation and Analysis

Billy tastes bitter almonds in his tea, a taste often associated with the poison cyanide. The revelation that something as simple and comforting as tea might actually be lethal is a final indication that outward appearances can be deeply

deceiving. As Billy finishes drinking, the landlady shows how concerned she is about whether or not he signed the guest book; she's likely aware that he's about to die and won't have another chance to sign it. Her preoccupation seems to reveal an odd kind of fondness for her victims; it isn't just their youthful bodies that she covets, but their individual names as well. This peculiar form of care hints that for the landlady, her victims really are a kind of community, and this

tragic twist underscores Dahl's larger point about how dangerous the modern lack of genuine community can be. The fact that the landlady has a hard time remembering the names without the guest book also shows that anonymity is force with almost supernatural strength—after all, there are only three names in the guest book, so it's odd that the landlady wouldn't know them by heart.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## THE LANDLADY

When Billy Weaver steps off the train—which he has taken from London to Bath—it is nighttime and the weather is harsh: “The air was deadly cold and the wind was like a flat blade of ice on his cheeks.” Billy doesn’t know anybody in Bath so he asks the train porter for directions to a nearby hotel. The porter recommends a pub called “the Bell and Dragon,” which is within walking distance.

Mr. Greenslade, from “the Head Office in London,” had told seventeen-year-old Billy that Bath was “a splendid town.” Billy looks up to “successful businessmen” like Mr. Greenslade, whom he admires for being “absolutely fantastically brisk all the time.” Having followed Mr. Greenslade’s advice, Billy plans to “report to the Branch Manager” as soon as he has found a place to stay.

As he walks towards the Bell and Dragon, Billy notices that the once-“swanky” houses that line each side of the street are a little old and decrepit. Even though it is dark, he can see that “the handsome white facades [are] cracked and blotchy from neglect.”

In contrast, Billy notices a “brilliantly illuminated” window that has a sign inside advertising a Bed and Breakfast. Billy sees a “**vase of yellow chrysanthemums**, tall and beautiful,” and he walks a little closer to inspect the Bed and Breakfast. Through the window, Billy sees a wonderful picture of domesticity: he spots an inviting fire, comfortable furniture, “**a pretty little dog, a parrot**,” and a piano. He thinks to himself: “Animals were usually a good sign in a place like this.”

*The description of the harsh weather in Bath creates a tense atmosphere. The imagery used to describe the cold wind foreshadows later events in the story, as “flat blade” and “deadly cold” evoke ideas of danger and violence. The precariousness of Billy’s situation is also emphasized through the fact that he is alone in an unfamiliar city, which hints at Dahl’s larger point about the dangers of urban anonymity.*



*Billy is enthusiastic and ambitious, but naïve. He trusts the adults in his life without question, and he assumes that briskness is admirable, simply because he has seen businessmen rushing around. Billy doesn’t pause to consider that briskness might be a negative quality, and instead, he blindly sets about imitating those he perceives to be successful. This moment also suggests a paradox of modern capitalism; Billy’s job makes him feel mature and connected to others, while in practice it puts him in an isolating situation that reveals his innocence.*



*Here, Dahl reveals a conflict between appearance and reality. The setting becomes even more gloomy when, even through the darkness and miserable weather, Billy detects how rundown the neighborhood is.*



*Through the juxtaposition between the melancholy evening and the well-lit Bed and Breakfast, Dahl emphasizes the superficial charm and appeal of the landlady’s residence. It’s likely that she has intentionally curated the pleasing appearance of the Bed and Breakfast in order to entice her visitors, an act that will later be revealed as an example of her deceptive nature. Additionally, this scene contains a number of hints at death that Billy blithely misses: yellow chrysanthemums are used as funeral flowers in parts of Europe, while the dog and parrot turn out to look so perfect because they are actually dead and stuffed.*



Billy acknowledges that although the Bed and Breakfast “would be more comfortable than the Bell and Dragon,” he is “a tiny bit frightened” of the terrible food and “rapacious landladies” who usually run Bed and Breakfasts. He also wonders whether he might prefer getting to socialize with other people at the pub. Billy decides that he should at least go and look at the pub, in order to compare his options and make an informed decision.

As Billy turns to leave, the Bed and Breakfast sign seems to grip him and look back towards him “like a large black eye.” Billy feels a strange energy keeping him there, “forcing him to stay where he was and not to walk away from that house.”

Before he knows what’s happening, Billy finds himself moving towards the Bed and Breakfast and ringing the doorbell. Suddenly, the door swings open, and the landlady, “about forty-five or fifty years old,” appears with a bright smile. She “popped” up out of nowhere, making Billy jump in surprise.

The kind-looking landlady invites Billy inside, and he finds “the desire to follow after her [...] extraordinarily strong.” The landlady offers him a very reasonable price for a room and discusses his breakfast options for the morning. Billy’s first impressions of her are positive, and he thinks to himself: “She looked exactly like the mother of one’s best school-friend welcoming one into the house to stay for the Christmas holidays.”

*While the Bell and Dragon pub represents community, the Bed and Breakfast represents privacy and anonymity. Billy’s desire to make an informed decision presents him as mature and sensible despite his youth, because he is mindful about being taken advantage of in his new city. His fear of “rapacious landladies” is also a subtle allusion to later events in the story.*



*Billy’s logical and prudent decision is defeated by an overwhelming and seemingly mystical force, which draws him to the Bed and Breakfast. It is not clear whether Billy is under the spell of some dark magic, or whether his curiosity has just got the better of him, but either way, it’s notable that the sign is the deciding factor that gets Billy to go inside. Here, Dahl seems to suggest that advertising (which could symbolize urban capitalism) poses a very real threat to innocent people.*



*Here, Billy’s compulsion to enter the house is a metaphor for curiosity and humanity’s dark, macabre desire to experience frightening things. Note that Billy chooses the Bed and Breakfast despite being frightened of it and knowing that the choice isn’t wise, which shows how he embodies both the naivety of childhood and the “briskness” of adulthood.*



*The landlady intentionally deceives Billy here, creating an outward appearance that makes him feel at home, when in fact he is in grave danger. Although he fears “rapacious landladies,” Billy follows his host anyway, noticing how motherly she looks. In this context, the landlady stands in as a mother figure, and seventeen-year-old Billy succumbs to his desires to be guided by a nurturing adult. Dahl seems to suggest that environments of anonymity are especially dangerous to innocents like Billy, who are so desperate for personal connection that they rely on untrustworthy people.*



Billy notices that there are no other hats or coats in the hallway, and the landlady explains that she is a fussy host and chooses her guests carefully. It strikes Billy that she is “slightly dotty” but he decides that her cheap prices are well worth it. As they climb the stairs towards Billy’s new bedroom, the landlady looks his body up and down and tells him that he is “exactly right.”

The landlady shows Billy around the “small but charming front bedroom.” On the way, she inexplicably calls him Mr. Perkins, and he corrects her that he’s actually Mr. Weaver. She has gone to great lengths to make it cozy and comfortable and offers Billy some supper. When he declines, explaining that he needs an early night, she asks him to sign the guest book. She leaves the room hurriedly, before Billy has a chance to refuse.

To make sense of the landlady’s strange behavior, Billy hypothesizes: “She had probably lost a son in the war [...] and had never gotten over it.” Billy believes that she is a “kind and generous soul” and he feels very pleased with himself for finding such wonderful lodgings.

As he signs the visitor’s book, Billy notices that there have only been two previous entries. The first name—Christopher Mulholland—“rings a bell,” and Billy begins to wonder where he has heard it, thinking maybe he saw it in the newspaper. While he racks his brain, it occurs to Billy that he is also familiar with the other name written there: Gregory W. Temple.

*Once Billy is inside of the Bed and Breakfast, there are numerous warning signs to suggest that things might not be as good as they seem. The lack of other guests and the way that the landlady objectifies and sexualizes Billy when inspecting his body are clear indications that this isn’t a safe place to stay. However, although Billy notices several oddities about the landlady and her home, he is too innocent to fear that he might be in genuine danger, and the landlady’s “dotty” appearance gives him false confidence in her.*



*At this point in the story, it is obvious to the reader that there is something suspicious about the landlady, even though she goes out of her way to seem kind. She insists that Billy head downstairs that night to sign the guest book, even though he could just do it in the morning.*



*Billy is very trusting and quick to give the landlady the benefit of the doubt, to the point of irony; it’s very clear to the reader that something is wrong, but Billy persists in believing that someone so gentle could never cause him harm. Dahl also makes reference to the communities and generations traumatized in the aftermath of the World Wars when Billy assumes that the landlady has “lost a son in the war.” This presents her as a lonely or grief-stricken older lady, thus creating sympathy for her even though her behavior appears sinister (and also offers a potential motive for her behavior when it is revealed — that the loss of a son drives her to prize innocence and youth in an unhealthy way). Additionally, it hints at a loss of innocence that goes far beyond Billy himself, as it brings to mind the traumatic way that war can force young people into sudden maturity.*



*The guest book highlights exactly how isolated Billy is at this point; not only are there no other current guests, but there aren’t even any recent guests who have shared this same experience. That Billy isn’t at all suspicious of this fact also reinforces how naïve he is.*



At this moment, the landlady appears with “a large silver **tea-tray** in her hands.” Billy asks her if Christopher and Gregory were famous athletes, which would explain why their names sound familiar. She says no, but tells Billy that both boys were “tall and young and handsome,” and she seems very fond of them.

Billy begins asking the landlady questions about her Christopher Mulholland and Gregory Temple in order to try and work out why he recognizes their names. He realizes that for some reason, he keeps associating the names with one another, “[a]s though they were both famous for the same sort of thing,” citing Churchill and Roosevelt as an example. As he gets closer and closer to determining the answer, he realizes with surprise that Christopher’s visit was two years previously, and Gregory’s happened three years ago. Meanwhile, the landlady continues preparing **the tea** and biscuits, interrupting Billy and evading his enquires. As she sets the tray down, Billy notices her “small, white, quickly moving hands, and red finger-nails.” Oddly, she also calls him by the wrong name again.

Billy is sure that he has heard the boys’ names in the newspapers, and he is determined to find out why. He begins to remember the name “Christopher Mulholland” in the context of a news story he read about a schoolboy who went missing during a walking tour. The landlady denies the link, explaining “Oh no, my dear, that can’t possibly be right because my Mr. Mulholland was certainly not an Eton schoolboy.” Changing the subject and diverting Billy’s attention away from Christopher, the landlady invites Billy to sit with her by the “lovely fire” and hands him a cup of **tea**.

While sipping their tea in silence, Billy is aware of a “peculiar smell that seemed to emanate directly” from the landlady. Billy was sure that the smell reminded him of something, but isn’t sure what: “Pickled walnuts? New leather? Or was it the corridors of a hospital?” As he sips his **tea**, Billy becomes increasingly certain that he had read the two boys’ names not just in the newspaper, but in the newspaper headlines.

*The reader learns that the previous guests were both young, just like Billy. Bearing in mind that the landlady previously explained that she was fussy when selecting her guests, it seems that perhaps she only accepts guests who are “tall and young and handsome.” It seems, then, that Billy’s youthful innocence will be a liability, while the landlady’s maturity may be more predatory than nurturing.*



*The mystery surrounding the boys’ names becomes more and more tantalizing, and it is suspicious that the landlady seems uninterested in helping Billy determine how he knows of her previous guests. Mysteriously, the description of her “quickly moving hands” is incongruent with previous descriptions that have portrayed the landlady as “potty” and dithering.*



*The reference to the newspapers brings the thematic conflict between community and isolation into focus. The newspaper stories about Christopher Mulholland represent society, community, and shared values, particularly because there seems to have been a collective effort to search for and find the missing schoolboy. The Bed and Breakfast, in contrast, represents isolation and anonymity. Billy is vulnerable within the Bed and Breakfast because he is alone in an unfamiliar city, and nobody knows he is there.*



*The description of the smell, which Billy believes is coming from the landlady, contributes to the depiction of her as old and dithering. He associates her with “the corridors of a hospital,” which immediately positions her as elderly and fragile. Rather than suspect malice from the landlady, then, the peculiar smell only serves to reinforce his perception of her as harmless—a perception which will soon prove to be false.*



As the landlady speaks fondly about Mr. Mulholland, Billy asks if the guest checked out only recently. Confused, the landlady answers that Mr. Mulholland never left. In fact, both he and Mr. Temple are “on the fourth floor, both of them together.”

*The landlady's assertion that Mr. Mulholland and Mr. Temple are upstairs contradicts the appearance that Billy is the only guest staying at this Bed and Breakfast. This new information is confusing and strange, and if this Mr. Mulholland is the same as the Christopher Mulholland who Billy read about in the newspapers, it suggests that the landlady is somehow responsible for his mysterious disappearance. This moment also introduces a new tension between isolation and shared experience; Mr. Mulholland and Mr. Temple are technically together, but they still seem to be isolated from the rest of the world.*



As Billy sets his **teacup** down gingerly, the landlady asks him how old he is. She seems very pleased when he tells her that he is seventeen, and she cries out, saying: “Oh, it’s the perfect age!” She explains that Christopher was the same age when she met him, and that Gregory was a little older. She also comments that Billy has lovely teeth, though he says that they’re actually not as nice as they look; he has lots of fillings. Billy is a little confused and surprised when the landlady explains how “there wasn’t a *blemish* on [Gregory’s] body” and that “his skin was just like a baby’s.”

*Billy's comment that his teeth aren't actually as nice as they look is a subtle reminder that appearances often mask incongruous realities. Meanwhile, the landlady's apparent preoccupation with youth becomes even more bizarre when she celebrates the fact that Gregory had smooth and baby-like skin. Her remark is not only eerie, but puzzlingly, she describes Gregory using the past tense. Given that the landlady has just explained that Gregory is still in the Bed and Breakfast, it seems like it would be more appropriate to continue describing him in the present tense.*



Changing the subject, Billy comments that **the stuffed parrot** had “completely fooled” him when he first arrived, saying: “I could have sworn it was alive.” The landlady then reveals that **the dachshund** is also dead. Billy is amazed by how life-like the creatures are, and upon learning that the landlady had stuffed them herself, he feels a “deep admiration at the little woman beside him on the sofa.” Billy is very impressed with the landlady’s skill for such a difficult hobby, but she modestly ignores his compliment, saying: “I stuff *all* my little pets myself when they pass away.”

*When Billy first spotted the parrot and dog through the window of the Bed and Breakfast, he was sure that the pets were “a good sign” and meant that he would be in safe hands. Ironically, here he learns that both the animals are dead and had deceived him completely. Meanwhile, it becomes clear to the reader that the landlady has most likely stuffed Christopher and Gregory as well, which explains why they are still upstairs even as she refers to them in the past tense. This revelation indicates that the landlady has killed the young men for the express purpose of preserving their innocence. Through this horrific strategy, Dahl suggests that all attempts to preserve purity are similarly unnatural and misguided; everyone has to grow up, even though doing so is painful.*



Billy realizes that **the tea** tastes “faintly of bitter almonds,” and his curiosity about the landlady’s previous guests returns. The landlady checks with Billy that he has signed the guest book. When he affirms that he has, she says it will be helpful for her “later on,” explaining that if she ever forgets his name, she can just look in the book, as she frequently does with “Mr. Mulholland and Mr. ... Mr. ...” She trails off, and Billy reminds her that the guest was Gregory Temple. When Billy asks her if there have “been *any* other guests here except them in the last two or three years,” she replies: “No, my dear...Only you.”

*It becomes apparent that Billy is in grave danger. The smell that he previously believed was coming from the landlady is actually coming from his tea, which she has poisoned—probably with cyanide—which would explain the almond-like smell. It is unclear whether the landlady is intentionally performing the role of a “forgetful old lady, or whether she genuinely can’t remember Gregory’s name. Either way, the landlady has selected Billy carefully as her latest victim, and presumably plans to stuff him too. This final turn of events underscores how even something completely normal and comforting, like tea, can mask a terrifying reality.*





## HOW TO CITE

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