Unit 1

Title: The Landlady

Suggested Time: 5 days (45 minutes per day)

Common Core ELA Standards: RL.8.1, RL.8.2, RL.8.3, RL.8.4, RL.8.5, RL.8.6; W.8.1, W.8.4; SL.8.1; L.8.1, L.8.2, L.8.4, L.8.5

Teacher Instructions

**Preparing for Teaching**

1. Read the Big Ideas and Key Understandings and the Synopsis. Please do **not** read this to the students. This is a description for teachers about the big ideas and key understanding that students should take away **after** completing this task.

Big Ideas and Key Understandings

You should trust your instincts when things are not as they seem. When something looks too good to be true, it probably is.

Synopsis

In the short story, *The Landlady*, a boy named Billy Weaver needs to find lodging in Bath, England. He goes to a boardinghouse. The landlady is an odd woman who compels Billy Weaver to stay with her at the boardinghouse. As the story progresses, clues are given as to the whereabouts of previous guests on the fourth floor. The reader deepens his/her understanding of the fate of the other guests, and the possibilities that may lie ahead for Billy.

1. Read the entire selection, keeping in mind the Big Ideas and Key Understandings.
2. Re-read the text while noting the stopping points for the Text Dependent Questions and teaching Tier II/academic vocabulary.

**During Teaching**

1. Students read the entire selection independently.
2. Teacher reads the text aloud while students follow along or students take turns reading aloud to each other. Depending on the text length and student need, the teacher may choose to read the full text or a passage aloud. For a particularly complex text, the teacher may choose to reverse the order of steps 1 and 2.
3. Students and teacher re-read the text while stopping to respond to and discuss the questions, continually returning to the text. A variety of methods can be used to structure the reading and discussion (i.e., whole class discussion, think-pair-share, independent written response, group work, etc.)

Text Dependent Questions

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| **Text-dependent Questions** | **Evidence-based Answers** |
| The author uses the words: brisk, briskly, and briskness in the first full paragraph. Billy states that, "briskness is a common characteristic of all successful businessmen." What does the author mean by this word and what is the significance of being "brisk" in the story? | The author uses brisk four times in all its forms to indicate the kind of quick, efficient, skipping quality of no-nonsense that a young kid trying to fit into the business world would notice. |
| When Billy arrives in the city of Bath, the first thing he needs to do is find lodgings. Why is he debating between staying at pub instead of a boardinghouse? | The Pub would be more fun for him as a young man than the boarding house. At the pub there would be beer and darts in the evenings, lots of people to talk to, and it would probably be a good bit cheaper. But, this boardinghouse however, had pleasant furniture, and animals which were usually a good sign and he thought it would be a pretty decent house to stay in. |
| What words and phrases does the author use to describe the Bed and Breakfast? What inference does Billy make about the Bed and Breakfast based on these observations? | “beautiful, wonderful chrysanthemums,” “bright burning fire in the hearth,” “pretty little dachshund curled up,” “pleasant furniture,” “plump armchairs,” “animals were usually a good sign in a place like this”  “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.” |
| The author says that Billy turns to go, “and now a queer thing happened to him.” Summarize what happens in this scene. How does the author describe the sign and Billy’s reaction? | The author says that “…his eye was caught and held in the most peculiar manner by the small notice. BED AND BREAKFAST in capital letters was repeated four times.” "Each word was like a large black eye staring at him through the glass holding him, compelling him, forcing him to stay...and not to walk away from the house..." The author includes this information to inform the reader that Billy was compelled to choose this location; he seemed to have little control. The reader understands that Billy's original thoughts may be warranted and to hint at possible strangeness and outcomes of the story. |
| Which words suggest that Billy should be on the alert? | Queer, peculiar, black eye, compelling and forcing are words used to alert Billy. |
| The narrator emphasises the speed at which the Landlady answers the door. What might this foreshadow about the landlady, about Billy, and about how the two might interact later in the story? | She is up to something. Is she magical or sinister? She could not have known Billy was coming. Billy senses something strange. |
| What words or phrases does the author use to describe what happens next and how Billy feels about the situation? Should he have been suspicious at this point in the story? Why or why not? Use evidence from the text in your response. | “Billy found himself automatically starting forward. The compulsion or, more accurately, the desire to follow after her into that house was extraordinarily strong.” This strong desire to follow her into “that” house should have alerted him that something might not be quite right. Especially since moments before the sign compelled him to stay. It was also strange that she answered the door before he even took his finger off of the bell, even though he heard the bell ringing far away in a back room. The landlady says the room is “all ready” for him even though he is just “wondering” about a  room. |
| How does the author’s use of irony when describing the landlady make the reader question her? | He uses phrases such as terribly nice, the old girl is slightly dotty, inclined to be a teeny weeny tiny bit particular, slightly of her rocker. |
| Why does the author include the line, "There were no other hats or coats in the hall. There were no umbrellas, no walking sticks-nothing."? | The author supplies the reader with information to hint at why there are no other guests. |
| When Billy is in the living room, what first alerts the reader that something may be wrong? | Billy signs the guest book and sees two names he recognizes, maybe from newspaper headlines. He is almost positive he has heard of them before. There is no evidence in the house of other occupants. The reader wonders, where they are and where they have gone. |
| As Billy is almost remembering the connection between the two boys, what effect did the interruptions from the landlady have on the story? | She interrupts him which builds suspense and distracts him. |
| What can the reader infer, using evidence from the text, about the two boys that are missing? What does this information lead the reader to believe concerning Billy's possible fate? | The landlady describes the boys in detail: “trifle shorter than you, teeth weren’t as white, wasn’t a blemish on his body, skin was like a baby’s.” At this point in the story we have no evidence that Billy suspects his fate, but the reader may be wondering if Billy might be stuffed when she says that, “...I stuff all my little pets myself when they pass away. Will you have another cup of tea?” The landlady also “looked up at him out of the corner of her eyes and gave him another gentle little smile” when she said her only other guests were Billy. |
| What other evidence from the story suggests a possible, fatal demise for Billy? | Some possible examples would be the "stuffed" animals in the living room, the suspicious smell of the tea the landlady served, etc. |

Tier II/Academic Vocabulary

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|  | **These words require less time to learn**  (They are concrete or describe an object/event/  process/characteristic that is familiar to students) | **These words require more time to learn**  (They are abstract, have multiple meanings, are a part  of a word family, or are likely to appear again in future texts) |
| **Meaning can be learned from context** | dotty, illuminated, blotchy, hearth, splendid, facades  earnestly, threshold  blemish, puzzling | applicant  compelling, compulsion  swamped  lingers  trifle |
| **Meaning needs to be provided** | congenial, rapacious, lapsed  queer, peculiar  proceedings  frisky  dainty | conjured  brisk, briskness, briskly  tantalizing  preserved, emanate |

Culminating Writing Task

* Prompt

*The Landlady is a chilling tale that teaches the reader that when something looks too good to be true, it probably is. Provide examples from the text that demonstrate how Roald Dahl creates suspense and a sense of foreboding as he drives the reader to discover the moral of this tale.*

Teacher Instructions

1. Students identify their writing task from the prompt provided.
2. Students complete an evidence chart as a pre-writing activity. Teachers should remind students to use any relevant notes they compiled while reading and answering the text-dependent questions.

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| ***Evidence***  ***Quote or paraphrase*** | ***Elaboration / explanation of how this evidence supports ideas or argument*** |
| “The air was deadly cold and the wind like a flat blade of ice against his cheeks.” | This foreshadowing sets up the reader to be on guard for future peculiar happenings (develops the rising action). |
| A queer thing happened. "Each word was like a large, black eye staring at him through the glass, ... holding him, compelling him, forcing him..." | Something about this sign is ominous. “Forcing him,” alludes to the fact that he doesn't seem to have a choice, but is being driven to the house. |
| The dame was like a jack in the box, she refers to her "nest". | She is ready to pounce on her victim. |
| No other coats or hats in the hall...  I see someone standing there who is just exactly right.  “You see, it isn't very often that I have the pleasure of taking a visitor into my little nest.  She is slightly dotty.  “Everyone has to do that because it's the law of the land and we don't want to go breaking any laws at this stage in the proceedings do we?” | No evidence of any other living person around.  She has a certain profile for her victims.  The words, little nest, compare her to an insect, a wasp or spider.  The author is revealing bits and pieces of her character that assist the reader to become suspicious of the landlady.  This quote suggests that she will be breaking the law at some point. |

1. Once students have completed the evidence chart, they should look back at the writing prompt in order to remind themselves what kind of response they are writing (i.e. expository, analytical, argumentative) and think about the evidence they found. (Depending on the grade level, teachers may want to review students’ evidence charts in some way to ensure accuracy.) From here, students should develop a specific thesis statement. This could be done independently, with a partner, small group, or the entire class. Consider directing students to the following sites to learn more about thesis statements: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/01/ OR http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/ thesis\_statement.shtml.
2. Students compose a rough draft. With regard to grade level and student ability, teachers should decide how much scaffolding they will provide during this process (i.e. modeling, showing example pieces, sharing work as students go).
3. Students complete final draft.

* Sample Answer

In the short story, The Landlady, Roald Dahl creates a masterful example of how to create a story which is filled with suspense and foreboding. At every turn, Dahl places clues which lead the reader further on the path of his twisted tale to the conclusion that the landlady is someone who should not be trusted. His adept descriptions of his characters and setting, his use of language and a well-structured plot all help lead the reader to an unsettling conclusion.

Dahl opens the story with the description of the young, idyllic Billy, traveling to Bath for work. At the onset, he describes Billy as wanting to do everything briskly, like all successful business men. He places us in Billy’s mind as he considers where to take lodgings, a congenial pub or a boarding house that would potentially have peculiar smells. Naïve Billy ignores his intuition and investigates the boarding house, seemingly drawn there. Similarly, Dahl gives clues to the reader about his landlady character as he describes her as “slightly dotty” and states that she springs to open the door when the bell has rung like a “jack in the box.” She is ready to pounce on her victim.

Equally, Dahl creates suspense as he describes the boarding house in various parts of the story. He begins with describing the sign in the window that compels Billy forward towards the house, “Each word was like a large black eye staring at him through the glass, ... holding him, compelling him, forcing him." Something about this sign is ominous. “Forcing him,” alludes to the fact that he doesn't have a choice but to be driven to the house. As Billy looks through the window, he sees a bird and a dog curled up by the warm hearth. Later in the story when Billy enters that room, he finds the animals in the same position… because they have been stuffed, a clue to the whereabouts of previous guests.

Furthermore, Dahl intentionally uses descriptive language throughout the story to also create tension in the reader’s mind. As he begins the story he states, “The air was deadly cold and the wind like a flat blade of ice against his cheeks.” Deadly cold and flat blade cleverly implies death has either happened or will soon occur. Another example, “You see, it isn't very often that I have the pleasure of taking a visitor into my little nest.” The words “little nest” compare her to an insect, a wasp, or spider awaiting her next victim. Additionally, the statement, “Everyone has to do that because it's the law of the land and we don't want to go breaking any laws at this stage in the proceedings do we?” suggests that the Landlady has broken the law before.

Finally, the way in which the plot is structured builds tension for the reader as he gets deeper into the story. Billy, curiously being drawn to the boarding house, the absences of other’s belongings such as hats, coats and umbrellas in the front receiving room, only two names in the guest registry that seem somehow familiar, and the discovery that the charming pets are not live creatures, but stuffed representations of their former selves, are all ways Dahl leads the reader through the story to the conclusion that everything is not as it first appeared, and Billy should definitely be concerned for his life. The odd smell of the tea is Dahl’s final gift to the reader.

Powerfully crafting this story, Dahl through his intentional use of description, interesting language, and plot development compel the reader to interact with his story on an emotional level which heightens the reader’s experience and creates tension in the reader’s mind. Dahl leaves the reader with the feeling that one should always beware of daunting, old boarding houses and sinister old ladies.

Additional Tasks

* Read this passage from *The Twits* by Roald Dahl and compare and contrast the theme, development, word choice, character development, and/or structure, etc. with that of *The Landlady*. *"If a person has ugly thoughts, it begins to show on the face. And when that person has ugly thoughts every day, every week, every year, the face gets uglier and uglier until it looks so ugly you can hardly bear to look at it." How do you outwit a Twit? Mr. and Mrs. Twit are the smelliest, ugliest people in the world. They hate everything -- except playing mean jokes on each other, catching innocent birds to put in their Bird Pies, and making their caged monkeys, the Muggle-Wumps, stand on their heads all day. But the Muggle-Wumps have had enough. They don't just want out, they want revenge.*

Answer: Roald Dahl is a master, a coinsurer of words. When you look at both passages which describe his characters, you notice this element of careful word choice and how it helps to build a picture in the reader’s mind. Both in *The Landlady* and *The Twit*, he describes the characters as eerily peculiar and strange.

If Billy was to live through his visit to the Bed and Breakfast what advice would he give to other young executives? Write a blog post that describes why executives would want to avoid staying at the Bed and Breakfast in Bath, England. Use evidence from the text in your blog post.

Answer

Dear Fellow Travelers,

Beware of deceiving old landladies, especially those found at the Bed and Breakfast in Bath, England! Although they may appear sweet and rather gentile, you never know what lurks behind that archaic smile and glint in their eye. I myself had the misfortune of meeting such a vixen! I was traveling to Bath for work and was searching for lodgings when I came across this seemingly quaint, cozy boarding house. Although, something was telling me to turn and find the nearest pub, I did not listen to my instincts and approached the house. From the second that the landlady jolted open the door I started to feel as though something was just not right with the old dame. She spoke of expecting me, and that I was just the right size? Why, oh why, did I not take those clues under consideration and run the other direction. As the evening unfolded and I saw no evidence of any other house guests about, I considered my options. When I walked into the drawing room and the animals were all stuffed I decided I had better high-tail it out of there. I made some excuse about meeting up with some friends that were expecting me at the pub and narrowly escaped with my life before she could coax me into drinking her queerly, smelling tea.

Friends, you have been warned,

Billy

Name \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**“The Landlady”**

1. The author uses the words: brisk, briskly, and briskness in the first full paragraph. Billy states that, "briskness is a common characteristic of all successful businessmen." What does the author mean by this word and what is the significance of being "brisk" in the story?
2. When Billy arrives in the city of Bath, the first thing he needs to do is find lodgings. Why is he debating between staying at pub instead of a boardinghouse?
3. What words and phrases does the author use to describe the Bed and Breakfast? What inference does Billy make about the Bed and Breakfast based on these observations?
4. The author says that Billy turns to go, “and now a queer thing happened to him.” Summarize what happens in this scene. How does the author describe the sign and Billy’s reaction?
5. Which words suggest that Billy should be on the alert?
6. The narrator emphasises the speed at which the Landlady answers the door. What might this foreshadow about the landlady, about Billy, and about how the two might interact later in the story?
7. What words or phrases does the author use to describe what happens next and how Billy feels about the situation? Should he have been suspicious at this point in the story? Why or why not? Use evidence from the text in your response.
8. How does the author’s use of irony when describing the landlady make the reader question her?
9. Why does the author include the line, "There were no other hats or coats in the hall. There were no umbrellas, no walking sticks-nothing."?
10. When Billy is in the living room, what first alerts the reader that something may be wrong?
11. As Billy is almost remembering the connection between the two boys, what effect did the interruptions from the landlady have on the story?
12. What can the reader infer, using evidence from the text, about the two boys that are missing? What does this information lead the reader to believe concerning Billy's possible fate?
13. What other evidence from the story suggests a possible, fatal demise for Billy?