

Cold-Read Task

Read the following excerpt from “*Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics*” by J.R.R. Tolkien. Then answer the questions.

SIR ISRAEL GOLLANCZ LECTURE 1936

BEOWULF: THE MONSTERS AND THE CRITICS

J. R. R. TOLKIEN

Read 25 November 1936

1 IN 1864 the Reverend Oswald Cockayne wrote of the Reverend Doctor Joseph Bosworth, Rawlinsonian Professor of Anglo-Saxon: 'I have tried to lend to others the conviction I have long entertained that Dr. Bosworth is not a man so diligent in his special walk as duly to read the books . . . which have been printed in our old English, or so-called Anglosaxon tongue. He may do very well for a professor.'¹ These words were inspired by dissatisfaction with Bosworth's dictionary, and were doubtless unfair. If Bosworth were still alive, a modern Cockayne would probably accuse him of not reading the 'literature' of his subject, the books written about the books in the so-called Anglo-Saxon tongue. The original books are nearly buried.

2 Of none is this so true as of *The Beowulf*, as it used to be called. I have, of course, read *The Beowulf*, as have most (but not all) of those who have criticized it. But I fear that, unworthy successor and beneficiary of Joseph Bosworth, I have not been a man so diligent in my special walk as duly to read all that has been printed on, or touching on, this poem. But I have read enough, I think, to venture the opinion that *Beowulfiana* is, while rich in many departments, specially poor in one. It is poor in criticism, criticism that is directed to the understanding of a poem as a poem. It has been said of *Beowulf* itself that its weakness lies in placing the unimportant things at the centre and the important on the outer edges. This is one of the opinions that I wish specially to consider. I think it profoundly untrue of the poem, but strikingly true of the literature about it. *Beowulf* has been used as a quarry of fact and fancy far more assiduously than it has been studied as a work of art.

3 It is of *Beowulf*, then, as a poem that I wish to speak; and though it may seem presumption that I should try with *swich a lewed mannes wit to pace the wisdom of an heap of lerned men*, in this department there is at least more chance for the *lewed man*. But there is so much that might still be said even under these limitations that I shall confine myself mainly to the *monsters*—Grendel and the Dragon, as they appear in what seems to me the best and most authoritative general criticism in English—and to certain considerations of the structure and conduct of the poem that arise from this theme.

4 There is an historical explanation of the state of *Beowulfiana* that I have referred to. And that explanation is important, if one would venture to criticize the critics. A sketch of the history of the subject is required. But I will

¹ *The Shrine*, p. 4

here only attempt, for brevity's sake, to present my view of it allegorically. As it set out upon its adventures among the modern scholars, *Beowulf* was christened by Wanley Poesis—*Poeseos Anglo-Saxonicae egregium exemplum*. But the fairy godmother later invited to superintend its fortunes was Historia. And she brought with her Philologia, Mythologia, Archaeologia, and Laographia.² Excellent ladies. But where was the child's name-sake? Poesis was usually forgotten; occasionally admitted by a side-door; sometimes dismissed upon the door-step. '*The Beowulf*', they said, 'is hardly an affair of yours, and not in any case a protégé that you could be proud of. It is an historical document. Only as such does it interest the superior culture of to-day.' And it is as an historical document that it has mainly been examined and dissected. Though ideas as to the nature and quality of the history and information embedded in it have changed much since Thorkelin called it *De Danorum Rebus Gesfis*, this has remained steadily true. In still recent pronouncements this view is explicit. In 1925 Professor Archibald Strong translated *Beowulf* into verse;³ but in 1921 he had declared: '*Beowulf* is the picture of a whole civilization, of the Germania which Tacitus describes. The main interest which the poem has for us is thus not a purely literary interest. *Beowulf* is an important historical document.'⁴

5 I make this preliminary point, because it seems to me that the air has been clouded not only for Strong, but for other more authoritative critics, by the dust of the quarrying researchers. It may well be asked: why should we approach this, or indeed any other poem, mainly as an historical document? Such an attitude is defensible: firstly, if one is not concerned with poetry at all, but seeking information wherever it may be found; secondly, if the so-called poem contains in fact no poetry. I am not concerned with the first case. The historian's search is, of course, perfectly legitimate, even if it does not assist criticism in general at all (for that is not its object), so long as it is not mistaken for criticism. To Professor Birger Nerman as an historian of Swedish origins *Beowulf* is doubtless an important document, but he is not writing a history of English poetry. Of the second case it may be said that to rate a poem, a thing at the least in metrical form, as mainly of historical interest should in a literary survey be equivalent to saying that it has no literary merits, and little more need in such a survey then be said about it. But such a judgement on *Beowulf* is false. So far from being a poem so poor that only its accidental historical interest can still recommend it, *Beowulf* is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content, and is largely independent even of the most important facts (such as the date and identity of Hygelac) that research has discovered. It is indeed a curious fact that it is one of the peculiar poetic virtues of *Beowulf* that has contributed to its own critical misfortunes. The illusion of historical truth and

² Thus in Professor Chambers's great bibliography (in his *Beowulf: An Introduction*) we find a section, § 8. Questions of Literary History, Date, and Authorship; *Beowulf* in the Light of History, Archaeology, Heroic Legend, Mythology, and Folklore. It is impressive, but there is no section that names Poetry. As certain of the items included show such consideration as Poetry is accorded at all is buried unnamed in § 8.

³ *Beowulf* translated into modern English rhyming verse, Constable, 1925

⁴ *A Short History of English Literature*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1921, pp. 2-3. I choose this example, because it is precisely to general literary histories that we must usually turn for literary judgements on *Beowulf*. The experts in *Beowulfiana* are seldom concerned with such judgements. And it is in the highly compressed histories, such as this, that we discover what the process of digestion makes of the special 'literature' of the experts. Here is the distilled product of Research. This compendium, moreover, is competent, and written by a man who had (unlike some other authors of similar things) read the poem itself with attention.

perspective, that has made *Beowulf* seem such an attractive quarry, is largely a product of art. The author has used an instinctive historical sense—a part indeed of the ancient English temper (and not unconnected with its reputed melancholy), of which *Beowulf* is a supreme expression; but he has used it with a poetical and not an historical object. The lovers of poetry can safely study the art, but the seekers after history must beware lest the glamour of Poesis overcome them.

6 Nearly all the censure, and most of the praise, that has been bestowed on *The Beowulf* has been due either to the belief that it was something that it was not—for example, primitive, pagan, Teutonic, an allegory (political or mythical), or most often, an epic; or to disappointment at the discovery that it was itself and not something that the scholar would have liked better—for example, a heathen heroic lay, a history of Sweden, a manual of Germanic antiquities, or a Nordic *Summa Theologica*.

7 I would express the whole industry in yet another allegory. A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: 'He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.' But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.

8 I hope I shall show that that allegory is just—even when we consider the more recent and more perceptive critics (whose concern is in intention with literature). To reach these we must pass in rapid flight over the heads of many decades of critics. As we do so a conflicting babel mounts up to us, which I can report as something after this fashion.⁵ 'Beowulf is a half-baked native epic the development of which was killed by Latin learning; it was inspired by emulation of Virgil, and is a product of the education that came in with Christianity; it is feeble and incompetent as a narrative; the rules of narrative are cleverly observed in the manner of the learned epic; it is the confused product of a committee of muddle-headed and probably beer-bemused Anglo-Saxons (this is a Gallic voice); it is a string of pagan lays edited by monks; it is the work of a learned but inaccurate Christian antiquarian; it is a work of genius, rare and surprising in the period, though the genius seems to have been shown principally in doing something much better left undone (this is a very recent voice); it is a wild folk-tale (general chorus); it is a poem of an aristocratic and courtly tradition (same voices); it is a hotchpotch; it is a sociological, anthropological,

⁵ I include nothing that has not somewhere been said by some one, if not in my exact words; but I do not, of course, attempt to represent all the *dicta*, wise or otherwise, that have been uttered.

archaeological document; it is a mythical allegory (very old voices these and generally shouted down, but not so far out as some of the newer cries); it is rude and rough; it is a masterpiece of metrical art; it has no shape at all; it is singularly weak in construction; it is a clever allegory of contemporary politics (old John Earle with some slight support from Mr. Girvan, only they look to different periods); its architecture is solid; it is thin and cheap (a solemn voice); it is undeniably weighty (the same voice); it is a national epic; it is a translation from the Danish; it was imported by Frisian traders; it is a burden to English syllabuses; and (final universal chorus of all voices) it is worth studying.'

9 It is not surprising that it should now be felt that a view, a decision, a conviction are imperatively needed. But it is plainly only in the consideration of *Beowulf* as a poem, with an inherent poetic significance, that any view or conviction can be reached or steadily held. For it is of their nature that the jabberwocks of historical and antiquarian research burble in the tulgy wood of conjecture, flitting from one tum-tum tree to another. Noble animals, whose burbling is on occasion good to hear; but though their eyes of flame may sometimes prove searchlights, their range is short.

10 None the less, paths of a sort have been opened in the wood. Slowly with the rolling years the obvious (so often the last revelation of analytic study) has been discovered: that we have to deal with a poem by an Englishman using afresh ancient and largely traditional material. At last then, after inquiring so long whence this material came, and what its original or aboriginal nature was (questions that cannot ever be decisively answered), we might also now again inquire what the poet did with it. If we ask that question, then there is still, perhaps, something lacking even in the major critics, the learned and revered masters from whom we humbly derive.

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1. Read the sentence from paragraph 2.

“But I have read enough, I think, to venture the opinion that *Beowulfiana* is, while rich in many departments, specially poor in one.”

Part A

Which phrase **best** explains the meaning of the word *Beowulfiana*?

- a. all of the literary critics who teach *Beowulf*
- b. all those who have studied Bosworth’s analyses of *Beowulf*
- c. the whole body of work written or published about *Beowulf*
- d. the wealth of information for sale on *Beowulf*

Part B

Which phrase from the text **best** supports the answer to Part A?

- a. “as have most (but not all) of those who have criticized it”
- b. “unworthy successor and beneficiary of Joseph Bosworth”
- c. “all that has been printed on, or touching on, this poem”
- d. “while rich in many departments”

2. Read the following sentence from paragraph 2.

“It is poor in criticism, criticism that is directed to the understanding of a poem as a poem.”

Which statement **best** paraphrases the line?

- a. The existing criticism written about *Beowulf* neglects to evaluate the poem’s philological importance.
- b. The existing criticism written about *Beowulf* neglects to evaluate the poem’s literary importance.
- c. The existing criticism written about *Beowulf* evaluates only the poem’s folkloric importance.
- d. The existing criticism written about *Beowulf* evaluates only the poem’s historical importance.

3. Read the following sentence from paragraph 3.

“It is of *Beowulf*, then, as a poem that I wish to speak; and though it may seem presumption that I should try with swich a lewed mannes wit to pace the wisdom of an heep of lerned men.”

What is the impact of the author’s use of a Middle English allusion to *The Canterbury Tales* in this paragraph?

- a. Tolkien’s attempt at self-deprecation only reinforces his expertise on the English language and his qualifications to analyze *Beowulf*.
- b. The use of an antiquated language represents the confusing aspects of much of the research into the historical significance of *Beowulf*.
- c. Tolkien’s seamless integration of Middle English into his argument signifies the reliability of *Beowulf* as an Anglo-Saxon poem.
- d. The use of a light-hearted Middle English allusion reinforces Tolkien’s established frivolous tone.

4. Read the following excerpt from paragraph 4.

But the fairy godmother later invited to superintend its fortunes was Historia. And she brought with her Philologia, Mythologia, Archaeologia, and Laographia. Excellent ladies. But where was the child’s name-sake? Poesis was usually forgotten; occasionally admitted by a side-door; sometimes dismissed upon the door-step. ‘*The Beowulf*’, they said, ‘is hardly an affair of yours, and not in any case a protégé that you could be proud of. It is an historical document. Only as such does it interest the superior culture of to-day.’

Which statement **best** explains how Tolkien uses figurative language to render his point clear and engaging?

- a. The depiction of the various fields of study as “godmothers” to *Beowulf* emphasizes that one field (Poesis) has been mostly excluded from *Beowuflania*.
- b. The depiction of the various fields of study as “godmothers” to *Beowulf* contrasts the bulk of the work attributed to Poesis in *Beowuflania*.
- c. The depiction of the various fields of study as “godmothers” to *Beowulf* exaggerates the point that Historia has been the main concern of *Beowuflania*.
- d. The depiction of the various fields of study as “godmothers” to *Beowulf* proposes that Historia is not connected to the other disciplines that comprise *Beowuflania*.

5. Read the following sentence from paragraph 5.

“I make this preliminary point, because it seems to me that the air has been clouded not only for Strong, but for other more authoritative critics, by the dust of the quarrying researchers.”

Part A

What is the overall meaning of this sentence?

- a. Respected critics struggle to see *Beowulf* for its cultural merits since the bulk of criticism published about the poem has excluded folkloric analysis in favor of literary analysis.

- b. Respected critics struggle to see *Beowulf* for its literary merits since the bulk of criticism published about the poem has excluded literary analysis in favor of historical analysis.
- c. Many critics struggle to see *Beowulf* for its literary merits because the bulk of critics cannot agree on *Beowulf's* historical significance and often contradict each other.
- d. Many critics struggle to see *Beowulf* for its literary cultural because the bulk of critics cannot agree on *Beowulf's* folkloric significance and often contradict each other.

Part B

Which example from Paragraph 4 **best** illustrates this point?

- a. Strong translated *Beowulf* in verse, but he also stated that it is primarily a historical document.
- b. Wanley declared that *Beowulf* is an example of Anglo-Saxon poetry and gave it a title.
- c. Thorkelin's ideas have remained unchallenged.
- d. Professor Chambers did not include a section on literary history in his work.

6. How does the author structure paragraph 5 so that his point is clear and convincing?

- a. He establishes two claims as to why one would not evaluate the historical merit of a poem and then proves both claims true for *Beowulf*.
- b. He establishes two claims as to why one would approach a poem mainly as a historical document then refutes the second argument on *Beowulf* to diminish the other.
- c. He introduces two claims against evaluating the literary merit of a poem and then proves both claims false for *Beowulf*.
- d. He introduces two claims as to why one would not evaluate the historical merit of a poem and uses the weakness of one argument on *Beowulf* to support the other.

7. Read the following excerpt from paragraph 7.

A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old

house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to Murmur: 'He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.' But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.

Part A

What key message is Tolkien communicating through this allegory?

- a. In due time, the hidden will be exposed for all to see.
- b. The obvious is often overlooked because of one's perception.
- c. When seeking to build anew, one must always consider where the materials began.
- d. Man must keep in mind the legacy he carries from his forefathers and the legacy he leaves for his descendants.

Part B

What evidence from the excerpt **best** supports the

answer to Part A?

- a. "They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!'"
- b. "Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones."
- c. "He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion."
- d. "But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea."

8. Read the following excerpt from paragraph 7.

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Part A

What does the tower represent?

- a. The author attempted to use myths and history to create *Beowulf*, and the critics dismiss the author's attempt.
- b. The author refused to use mythology to create *Beowulf*, and the critics agree that the author's refusal resulted in a better poem.
- c. The author neglected to refer to history when writing *Beowulf*, and the critics acknowledge that this resulted in a poorly written poem.

- d. The author misunderstood history when writing *Beowulf*, and the critics highlight how that the author's misunderstanding affected the poem.

Part B

Which sentence **best** explains how the idea of the tower

is related to the construction of the poem *Beowulf*?

- a. "So they pushed the tower over..."
- b. "Why did not he restore the old house?"
- c. "Imagine his using these old stones to build a nonsensical tower!"
- d. "This tower is most interesting...What a muddle it is."

9. Reread paragraph 8.

Part A

Which sentence **best** explains how Tolkien's style adds to the persuasiveness of paragraph 8?

- a. Tolkien delineates critical interpretations of *Beowulf* in order to support his claim that literary criticism has been sufficient with thorough evidence.
- b. Tolkien uses unexpected and relatable diction ("Babel," "muddle-headed," "beer-bemused," "hotchpotch") to serve as inclusive language and engage the reader in his main points.
- c. Tolkien introduces critical interpretations of *Beowulf* with a metaphor in order describe the seriousness in which readers should regard the critics' conclusions.
- d. Tolkien includes parenthetical asides to provide an ongoing commentary on the vast and contradictory critical assertions about *Beowulf*.

Part B

Which other sentence from the passage creates the

same affect?

- a. "If Bosworth were still alive, a modern Cockayne would probably accuse him of not reading the 'literature' of his subject, the books written about the books in the so-called Anglo-Saxon tongue."
- b. "Of none is this so true as of *The Beowulf*, as it used to be called. I have, of course, read *The Beowulf*, as have most (but not all) of those who have criticized it."
- c. "As it set out upon its adventures among the modern scholars, *Beowulf* was christened by Wanley Poesis—*Poesios Anglo'Saxonicæ egregium exemplum*."

- d. "Noble animals, whose burbling is on occasion good to hear; but though their eyes of flame may sometimes prove searchlights, their range is short."

10. In "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien asserts that the Anglo-Saxon work must be analyzed as a poem, not just as a historical document. How does Tolkien introduce this argument in "Beowulf The Monsters and the Critics"?

Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the style and structure Tolkien uses in his exposition, including whether his style and structure make points clear, convincing, and engaging. Write a literary analysis to support your claims in answer to the question. Be sure to use appropriate transitions and varied syntax, grade-appropriate language and a formal style, including proper grammar, conventions, and spelling. Provide strong and thorough textual evidence that is integrated while maintaining the flow of ideas.