

Phantasmagoria of a Fevered Dream

Excerpts from My Early Life

By Winston S. Churchill

AP English Language Lesson by Eileen Bach

British statesman Winston Churchill is remembered as an intellect who won the Nobel Prize for Literature, yet he struggled in school. While he was a whiz at history and he excelled in writing, he suffered studying mathematics. His struggles are detailed below. The passage below is from the book My Early Life by Winston Churchill. Read this excerpt carefully and answer the questions below.

I had a feeling once about Mathematics, that I saw it all – Depth beyond depth was revealed to me – the Byss and the Abyss. I saw, as one might see the transit of Venus – or even the Lord Mayor’s Show, a quantity passing through infinity and changing its sign from plus to minus. I saw exactly how it happened and why the tergiversation was inevitable: and how the one step involved all the others. It was like politics. But it was after dinner and I let it go!

Of course what I call Mathematics is only what the Civil Service Commissioners expected you to know to pass a very rudimentary examination. I suppose that to those who enjoy this peculiar gift, Senior Wranglers and the like, the waters in which I swam must seem only a duck-pond compared to the Atlantic Ocean.

Nevertheless, when I plunged in, I was soon out of my depth. When I look back upon those care-laden months, their prominent features rise from the abyss of memory. Of course I had progressed far beyond Vulgar Fractions and the Decimal System. We were arrived in an ‘Alice-in-Wonderland’ world, at the portals of which stood ‘A Quadratic Equation’. This with a strange grimace pointed the way to the Theory of Indices, which again handed on the intruder to the full rigours of the Binomial Theorem. Further dim chambers lighted by sullen, sulphurous fires were reputed to contain a dragon called the ‘Differential Calculus’. But this monster was beyond the bounds appointed by the Civil Service Commissioners who regulated this

stage of Pilgrim’s heavy journey. We turned aside, not indeed to the uplands of the Delectable Mountains, but into a strange corridor of things like anagrams and acrostics called Sines, Cosines and Tangents. Apparently they were very important, especially when multiplied by each other, or by themselves! They had also this merit – you could learn many of their evolutions off by heart. There was a question in my third and last Examination about these Cosines and Tangents in a highly square-rooted condition which must have been decisive upon the whole of my after life. It was a problem. But luckily I had seen its ugly face only a few days before and recognized it at first sight.

I have never met any of these creatures since. With my third and successful examination they passed away like the phantasmagoria of a fevered dream. I am assured they are most helpful in engineering, astronomy and things like that. It is very important to build bridges and canals and so comprehend all the stresses and potentialities of matter, to say nothing of counting all the stars and even universes and measuring how far off they are, and foretelling eclipses, the arrival of comets and such like. I am very glad there are quite a number of people born with a gift and a liking for all of this; like great chess-players who play sixteen games at once blindfold and die quite soon of epilepsy. Serve them right! I hope the Mathematicians, however, are well rewarded. I promise never to blackleg their profession nor to take the bread out of their mouths.

Questions on “Phantasmagoria of a Fevered Dream,” from *My Early Life* by Winston Churchill

1. The word *rudimentary* most nearly means:
a) difficult b) lengthy c) basic d) bureaucratic
2. The allusion to an ‘Alice-in-Wonderland’ world is intended to convey:
a) the simplicity of the concepts.
b) the inexplicable nature of the discipline.
c) a lack of proportion.
d) the mystery of the correct answers.
3. The penultimate sentence in the second paragraph, “It was a problem” is an example of:
a) Understatement b) hyperbole c) chiasmus d) fragment
4. The sentence, “But luckily I had seen its ugly face only a few days before and recognized it at first sight” is an example of:
a) metaphor, which suggests fear.
b) hyperbole, which suggests control.
c) satire, which provides context.
d) personification, which provides humor.
5. The statement, “I have never met any of these creatures” since implies:
a) They are rare.
b) They are not especially useful in ordinary life.
c) They no longer pose monstrous problems when encountered.
d) They were imaginary to begin with.
6. The word *phantasmagoria* most nearly means:
a) remnants b) bizarre images c) arcane facts d) detritus
7. In this context, the idiom found in the remark, “I promise never to...take the bread out of their mouths” might be paraphrased as:
a) “I promise never to...take their job”
b) “I promise never to...share a meal at the same table”
c) “I promise never to...steal from them”
d) “I promise never to...speak on their behalf”
8. The reader may infer that:
a) Churchill failed two previous examinations.
b) Churchill does not appreciate the value of mathematics.
c) Churchill remains haunted by his weak skills in math.
d) Churchill has no sense of humor.
9. The use of exclamation points indicates:
a) the seriousness of the examination
b) the relative youth of the writer
c) mock horror
d) stylistic maturity
10. The tone of this excerpt is best described as:
a) derogatory
b) humble
c) critical
d) humorous

ANSWER KEY Phantasmagoria of a Fevered Dream

1. c
2. b
3. a
4. d
5. b
6. b
7. a
8. a
9. c
10. d