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Critical Reading: “Most Nearly Means” Questions

These questions usually involve the meaning of a word or phrase in the passage. The easiest way to solve these problems is to simply substitute the answer choices into the sentence in question to see which one makes the most sense, given the context. For tougher questions, remember that the correct answer will always be directly related to the **denotative meaning** (dictionary definition), even as it fits the context. Consider the following schematic:

Denotative meaning———**Correct Answer**———Context

Consider the following passage and question:

(1)That culturally derived meanings dwell beneath the surface of conscious awareness has been variously indicated throughout the trajectory of anthropological musings. Stocking recounts Boas’ (5)observation, for instance, that our beliefs and behaviors are unconscious genuflections to “the general conditions of life” (1968). Levi-Strauss (1978), Bourdieu (1977), Sapir (1981), Csordas (1990, 1994) and Crapanzano (2004) also (10)observe that much of the culturally determined material of cognition eludes conscious awareness. Many of these thinkers suggest that it is the hiddenness of this material that makes it that much more compelling of human thought and behavior.

The word “genuflections” in line 6 most nearly means:

- (a) Reflections
- (b) Lack of consciousness
- (c) Physical reflexes
- (d) Reactions
- (e) Thoughts

First, we must discern the **main idea** of the passage. The author makes the point that the part of our culture that escapes our awareness influences us the most. Armed with this insight, we know that the correct answer choice has to have a direct relation to this idea. Let’s substitute them all in, beginning with (e). “Thoughts” is way **too broad**. In addition, one does not have a thought “to” something. “Reactions”, choice (d), seems to work, but let us continue. For choice (c) notice that a “physical reflex” is one possible definition of genuflection, so the choice meets the denotative part of the **above schema**. But, does this choice fit the context? We know from our paraphrase of the main idea that we are dealing with the mind, not anything



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physical. Thus, we can eliminate (c). Choice (b) would plunge the statement into absurdity: “unconscious lack of consciousness”. Choice (a) also is nonsensical once inserted. Choice (d) is our answer.

Practice Set

(1)In New York City the physical architecture of a school is barely distinguishable from that of any other building. The school building is connected, indissociably, to all the other (5)edifices on a city block: apartment complexes, bodegas, business offices, restaurants, and the like. You know that you have arrived at a school building by one of a few different physical indicators. You (10)may stumble upon a playground that is completely embroidered with a tall metal fence. The equipment will almost always communicate the grand abstraction “color”—lots of color. Each color will achieve its (15) cathexis with a particular object and stand in blaring contrast to the other color-enveloped objects in the quad—a profusion of reds, greens, yellows and blues. One would never encounter the mere insinuation of (20)color—pastels, beiges, sky blues—the absence of color—white—and certainly, one would never see color in its most grotesque, saturated form: black. One would only see something reminiscent of what we assume to (25)be the Technicolor universe of a child’s imagination. Yet, you would only see this universe if you happened to peer through the near opacity of the fence that occupies only about 20 seconds of a typical city block. (30)Otherwise, you would never know that a playground or a school were present.



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1. “Embroidered” in line 11 most nearly refers to
 - (a) An intricate sewing pattern
 - (b) An elaborate decoration
 - (c) Something that surrounds something else
 - (d) Something that hides something else
 - (e) A general distraction

2. In line 15, the word “cathexis” most nearly means
 - (a) A magical spell
 - (b) Consistency
 - (c) Individuality
 - (d) Connection
 - (e) Appearance

3. The word “profusion” in line 17 most nearly means
 - (a) Occupation
 - (b) Explosion
 - (c) Harvesting
 - (d) Indication
 - (e) Array

4. “Insinuation” in line 19 most nearly means
 - (a) A sly suggestion
 - (b) Absence
 - (c) A subtle presence
 - (d) An awkward recommendation
 - (e) Intuition

5. In line 25, “Technicolor” most nearly refers to
 - (a) A child’s imagination
 - (b) The colors one would find on a playground
 - (c) The bright, neon signs characteristic of New York City
 - (d) The colorful nature of a child’s mind
 - (e) A child’s innate creativity



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Answers

1. B
2. D
3. E
4. C
5. D

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