Read the biography about a famous dancer. Then answer the questions that follow.

Martha Graham: Modern Dance Innovator

by Eva Milner

1 In the world of dance, Martha Graham is a giant. A true innovator, it was she who led the way into the brave new world of modern dance, leaving behind the constraints of classical ballet. Through her work as a dancer, choreographer, and teacher, Martha has inspired both audiences and generations of dance students. Her institute, the Martha Graham Dance Company, has produced some of the finest dancers in the world today.

2 Martha Graham was born in 1894 in a small town near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her father was a doctor who specialized in nervous disorders. He was interested in how illnesses and disorders could be revealed through the way a patient’s body moved. Martha also believed in the body’s ability to express what is inside. She would channel this belief through dance, not medicine, however.

3 Martha was an athletic child, but it wasn’t until after seeing the ballet dancer Ruth St. Denis in her teens that she became interested in dance. Martha was so inspired by the performance that she enrolled at an arts college where she studied theater and dance. After graduating in 1916, she joined the Denishawn School, a dance company founded by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn to teach both American dance and world dance.

4 Though Martha began her eight years at Denishawn as a student, it wasn’t long before she became a teacher and one of the school’s best-known performers. It was during this time that Martha costarred with Ted Shawn in “Xochital,” a duet that Ted created specifically for Martha. In this ballet, Martha played the role of an Aztec maiden attacked by an Aztec emperor. Her wildly emotional performance brought her critical acclaim.

5 By 1923, however, Martha felt ready to try new things. She took a job dancing in a vaudeville show in New York City. Here Martha had the opportunity to create her own dances. While there was some room for creativity, she still had to please the audience. Soon she longed for someplace she could take her experimental dance techniques even further. Her search led her to a job teaching at the Eastman School of Music, where she had complete control over her classes and the dance program. This was her chance to truly experiment.

6 Martha felt that classical ballet focused too much on fluidity and grace and ignored deeper, darker emotions and themes. At Eastman, Martha began to use jerky, trembling movements and falls to express ideas and feelings. She developed a fresh, new method of muscle control she called “contraction and release.” Through this method, a dancer creates movement by first contracting a muscle and then allowing the movement to flow as the muscle relaxes. This method of muscle control gives the dancer’s motions a hard, angular look. This was a big change from the dance style found in classical ballet.

7 Audiences did not always appreciate Martha’s style. They were used to the more graceful, flowing motions of ballet dancers, and Martha’s choppy, angular style was shocking to them. Many reviewers criticized her for dancing in an “ugly” way. During her first performance in Paris, she and her dancers were booed by the audience.

8 In 1926, Martha formed her own dance company, the now-famous Martha Graham School for Contemporary Dance. She brought in several of her students from the Eastman school and also began
working with Louis Horst, the musical director from her days at Denishawn. Under Horst’s influence, Martha began to use music by modern composers, rather than music from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was yet another way in which Martha’s work departed from classical ballet.

9 Many of Martha’s dances explored emotional and psychological themes. One example is her solo piece “Lamentation.” In this dance, a grieving figure sits alone on a bench and moves to a mournful piano score. The dancer wears a tube of stretchy, purple fabric. Only the dancer’s head, hands, and feet show. The movements of the dancer’s body within the fabric create a sort of moving sculpture. The dancer represents the raw emotions of grief.

10 Martha was also interested in exploring social issues and political themes. Her dance “Deep Song” was a statement about the Civil War in Spain, and “Chronicle” looked at the menace of fascism and war in Europe. This second dance was created the same year Martha had turned down an invitation to the 1936 Olympic Games being held in Germany. Both the dance itself and her refusal to attend the games expressed Martha’s integrity and desire to highlight important political issues.

11 Martha Graham’s career spanned her entire life. Health issues forced her to quit dancing at the age of 76, but she continued teaching and creating works until her death in 1991. In her lifetime, she created 181 masterpieces of dance, which continue to inspire dancers and audiences alike.

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**Answer the questions. Mark your answers to questions 1–3 on the Answer Form to the right.**

**Answer Form**

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**Number Correct** 3

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1 Study the idea web below.

**Central Idea**

?  

**Supporting Detail**

- Used music by modern composers

**Supporting Detail**

- Incorporated jerky, angular movements

Which sentence completes the idea web?

A Classical ballet focused on flowing, graceful movements.

B Martha’s dance style was very different from classical ballet.

C Martha was one of the best dancers in America.

D Louis Horst was the musical director at Denishawn.
Part 5: Independent Practice

Lesson 1

2. Which sentence best supports the central idea that Martha Graham was an innovator?
   A. “While there was some room for creativity, she still had to please the audience.”
   B. “Her search led her to a job teaching at the Eastman School of Music, where she had complete control over her classes and the dance program.”
   C. “She developed a fresh, new method of muscle control she called ‘contraction and release.’”
   D. “In 1926, Martha formed her own dance company, the now-famous Martha Graham School for Contemporary Dance.”

3. Which sentence could be added to best support the idea that Graham was an innovator?
   A. By 1927, Graham was working full-time as a dancer and choreographer.
   B. Graham was the first choreographer to fully collaborate with other modern artists.
   C. During the Depression in the 1930s, Graham sewed her dance costumes herself.
   D. Graham was given the title “Dancer of the Century” by Time magazine in 1998.

4. Describe the central idea of paragraphs 9 and 10. Identify at least two details the author used to develop that central idea.

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Self Check: Go back and see what you can check off on the Self Check on page 2.