The Story of Silk

“As soft as silk” we say, and with good reason, for silk is among the softest and finest of all fabrics. But where does silk come from? The silkworms that produce it come mainly from China, where they have been domesticated for thousands of years by silk farmers. According to legend, a Chinese empress known as the lady of Si-ling began the cultivation of silkworms in 2640 B.C.E. The practice then spread from China to other regions. Silk-producing areas today include Japan, Korea, India, Thailand, and Brazil.

The story of silk begins when the female moth lays its eggs, up to 500 of them at a time; they are minute, each smaller than the head of a pin. The eggs are stored in a cool place to inhibit their growth until the silk farmer is ready to use them. At that time they are transferred to a heated container called an incubator. Twenty days later, tiny silkworms start to hatch.

At this stage of its life, a silkworm does just one thing: it eats. And it eats just one thing—the leaves of the mulberry tree. A silkworm eats continuously. It grows bigger and bigger until it seems ready to burst out of its skin. Then it stops eating and remains motionless for about a day. This is a sign that it will soon shed its old skin and replace it with a new one. The shedding occurs four times altogether. When fully grown, at about six weeks, the silkworm has increased its size seventyfold. It now stops eating and prepares to enter the next stage of its life.

To accomplish this, the silkworm first sheathes itself in a cocoon. The cocoon is a kind of protective shell made from silk thread that the silkworm produces from a part of its body called the spinneret. During the three weeks it spends inside the cocoon, the silkworm turns into a fully-grown moth. It has no teeth, so it cannot eat its way out; instead, it produces a liquid that dissolves the silk, making a hole in the cocoon. Then it slowly pulls itself through the hole. Once it has emerged from the cocoon, it is free to stretch its wings although they serve no useful function. Centuries of careful breeding have resulted in the silk moth’s wings being so feeble that it cannot fly.

Most silkworms, however, do not survive to become moths. The few that do are used for breeding. The farmer takes the rest while still in their cocoons and heats them in an oven to kill them. The silk, which is up to a mile long, is then carefully unwound from the cocoon by machines. It can then be spun
and woven into cloth. The silk cloth is used to make men’s and women’s apparel, as well as upholstery, sheets, curtain materials, and even carpets.

Silk is the strongest of all natural fibers. It is also light in weight, warmer than cotton, rayon, or linen, and wrinkle resistant. These qualities, together with its incredible softness, make it highly desirable to those who appreciate the finer things in life.

Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson’s word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. What is the meaning of hatch as it is used in the passage?

2. What are blouses, dresses, scarves, and shirts?

3. What is the meaning of emerge as it is used in the passage?

4. Why is a cocoon that produces a live silk moth useless for making silk cloth?

5. What is the meaning of function as it is used in the passage?

6. Why does the incubator used by the silk farmer not need to be large?

7. Why do you think the silkworm’s size increases so rapidly?
8. What is the meaning of **shed** as it is used in the passage?
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9. What is the Chinese empress known as the lady of Si-ling known for?
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10. How does the silkworm protect itself while it changes into a moth?
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11. What does the silk farmer do with cocoons not needed for breeding purposes?
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12. What effect does a cool temperature have on the growth of the silk moth’s eggs?
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13. How can one tell that a silkworm has outgrown its old skin and will shed it?
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14. What is the meaning of **appreciate** as it is used in the passage?
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15. What do silk, rayon, and wool have in common?
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Continuous means “going on without stopping.” Continual means “happening over and over again.” When a telephone rings continuously, it does so without stopping, perhaps because no one answers and the person calling does not hang up. When a telephone rings continually, it starts to ring again as soon as one call ends, and this goes on repeatedly for some time.

To sheathe something is to cover it for protection. A sheath is a case that fits over something, such as the blade of a knife. Note that sheathe rhymes with breathe and sheath rhymes with teeth.

The adjective minute is pronounced mī̀ noun’t. A minute amount is one that is very small. The noun minute is pronounced min’it. (There are sixty minutes in an hour.)