1.37 Comprehension: Mixed-Genre Set 1: 1-hour Pack

GL ASSESSMENT / CSSE 11+ Entrance English (GL Assessment / CSSE style) · about 60 minutes

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions.

Reading texts

Text 1: Under the Starling Sky

Original short fiction written for Revision Library.

Priya sat on the damp wooden bench inside the hide, her knees pulled up to her chest, and tried very hard not to fidget. Her uncle Devraj had promised her this would be worth the cold, but so far all she had seen through the narrow viewing slot was a flat grey sky sinking slowly towards a flatter grey marsh.

"They won't come if you keep shuffling about," he whispered, not unkindly, passing her a flask of tea she was too nervous to drink. "Starlings don't like being watched by someone who can't sit still."

Priya tried. She counted the reeds swaying at the edge of the water, silver-tipped where the last of the light caught them. She counted her own breaths. She was halfway through counting the peeling patches of paint on the hide's window frame when Devraj touched her arm and pointed, without a word, towards the horizon.

At first it looked like smoke: a thin, dark smudge rising from somewhere beyond the willows. Then the smudge thickened, and thinned, and thickened again, twisting like a ribbon caught in wind that nobody else could feel. More birds joined from every direction, streaming in from the fields until the smudge became a cloud, and the cloud became something that had no name Priya knew.

It poured itself into shapes: a whale, a spinning top, a hand opening and closing against the darkening sky. Thousands of starlings, tens of thousands, wheeling together so closely that not one of them seemed to touch another, and not one of them seemed to be flying alone. The sound reached the hide a moment later, a vast rushing hush, like the sea folding over itself somewhere far off.

"How do they know where to go?" Priya breathed, forgetting to whisper.

"Nobody's really sure," said Devraj. "Each bird is only watching its closest neighbours, they reckon. No leader. No plan. Just thousands of small decisions, made so fast they look like one big one."

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Priya watched the shape roll and fold above the reed beds until, all at once, as though someone had switched off a light, the whole flock dropped from the sky into the reeds and vanished, leaving only their calls, murmuring somewhere below the darkness. Priya realised she had been holding her breath the whole time and let it out slowly, her tea gone cold and forgotten in her hands. She understood, finally, what her uncle had meant: you could not rush a thing like this. You could only wait, and watch, and be ready when it came.

Text 2: The Mystery of the Murmuration

Original non-fiction text written for Revision Library.

Every autumn and winter, in a handful of wetland reserves across Britain, an extraordinary spectacle takes place at dusk. As the light fades, starlings that have spent the day feeding on farmland gather into vast, swirling flocks before dropping down to roost together in reed beds, safe from predators for the night. This behaviour, in which thousands or even hundreds of thousands of birds move as a single shifting shape, is known as a murmuration, a name thought to come from the low, murmuring sound made by so many wingbeats and calls together.

Murmurations can be seen at several well-known sites in the UK, including the Somerset Levels, Gretna Green in Scotland, and Brighton's West Pier, where flocks estimated at over a million birds have occasionally been recorded. The largest gatherings tend to happen in the coldest months, when starlings from as far away as Scandinavia and Eastern Europe fly to Britain to escape harsher winters further east, joining the resident UK population at shared roosting sites.

For a long time, nobody could fully explain how such enormous flocks move together with no apparent leader and no collisions. Early theories suggested some form of telepathy, or that a single bird at the front was somehow directing the others. It was not until scientists in Rome used stereo photography to track individual starlings within a flock, in a series of studies published from 2008 onwards, that a clearer picture began to emerge. Each starling, the researchers found, pays attention to roughly its seven closest neighbours, adjusting its speed and direction to match them almost instantly. When one bird moves, its neighbours respond, and their neighbours respond in turn, so that a single small movement can ripple through an entire flock of thousands within seconds, without any bird needing to see or respond to the whole group at once.

Scientists believe murmurations may help protect starlings from birds of prey such as peregrine falcons, since a shifting, densely packed flock is harder for a predator to target than a single bird flying alone. Despite these dramatic winter displays, however, the UK's breeding starling population has fallen by more than 80 per cent since the 1970s, and the species is now red-listed as a bird of the highest conservation concern. For all their apparent abundance at a winter roost, the starlings gathering above the reed beds each evening are, in fact, a species in trouble.

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1 In which city did scientists use stereo photography to study starling flocks, and from which year were their findings published?

(2)

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2 Give the meaning of each of the following words as they are used in Text 2.

(a) 'spectacle' (paragraph 1) **(1)**

(b) 'roost' (paragraph 1) **(1)**

(c) 'ripple' (paragraph 3) **(1)**

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3 Why might murmurations make it harder for a predator such as a peregrine falcon to catch a single starling? Use evidence from the text to explain your answer.

(2)

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4 Give two facts from Text 2 that explain why UK starling numbers are higher in winter.

(2)

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5 What does the final sentence of Text 2 suggest about the relationship between the dramatic winter displays and the true state of the starling population?

(3)

6 Explain how the writer structures the final paragraph of Text 2 to build up to a surprising final point.

(3)

7 According to Text 2, roughly how many neighbouring birds does each individual starling pay attention to when adjusting its flight?

(1)

8 Both texts describe the murmuration as appearing to be a single connected thing, rather than many separate birds. Find one phrase from Text 1 and one phrase from Text 2 that show this idea.

(2)

9 Text 1 is fiction and Text 2 is non-fiction. Give one feature of Text 2 that shows it is a non-fiction, informative text, and one feature of Text 1 that shows it is fiction.

(2)

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10 In Text 1, Devraj describes how starlings move together without a leader. In Text 2, scientists describe the same thing. Using evidence from both texts, explain what each suggests about how this happens.

(4)

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11 Text 1 ends with Priya reflecting on what she has learned, and Text 2 ends with a statistic about the decline in starling numbers. What is similar about the way both texts end on a thoughtful or surprising final point?

(2)

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12 Explain what the description 'a flat grey sky sinking slowly towards a flatter grey marsh' suggests about the mood at the start of the extract, and how this mood changes once the murmuration appears.

(2)

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13 How does the writer use the description of the smudge growing and changing in paragraph 4 to build a sense of anticipation before the murmuration fully forms?

(3)

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14 According to Devraj, how do the starlings know where to go as they fly together?

(1)

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15 What does the final paragraph of Text 1 suggest Priya has learned from watching the murmuration? Explain your answer, using evidence from the text.

(3)

16 Name one of the UK locations mentioned in Text 2 where murmurations can be seen.

(1)

17 Look at the opening paragraph of Text 1. Where is Priya when the story begins, and who is she with?

(1)

18 Find and copy one word from the first paragraph of Text 1 that shows the sky and marsh looked dull.

(1)

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19 Give the meaning of each of the following words as they are used in Text 1.

(a) 'shuffling' (paragraph 2) **(1)**

(b) 'smudge' (paragraph 4) **(1)**

(c) 'wheeling' (paragraph 5) **(1)**

(d) 'hush' (paragraph 5) **(1)**

20 Devraj says, "They won't come if you keep shuffling about... Starlings don't like being watched by someone who can't sit still." Explain what this suggests about what is needed to watch a murmuration successfully.

(2)

21 Compare how the writers of Text 1 and Text 2 each convey a sense of wonder at the scale of a starling murmuration. Refer to both texts in your answer.

(6)

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22 Text 1 describes the flock as looking like 'a whale, a spinning top, a hand opening and closing'. Text 2 describes flocks 'estimated at over a million birds'. Explain the effect of each of these descriptions.

(3)

23 Using details from both texts, explain two ways in which watching or studying a murmuration is difficult or demanding.

(4)

24 Which text do you think gives a more powerful sense of the scale of a starling murmuration, Text 1 or Text 2? Support your answer with evidence and language analysis from at least one text.

(6)

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Mark scheme · 1.37 Comprehension: Mixed-Genre Set 1: 1-hour Pack

Question 1

Rome **B1**

2008 (accept 'from 2008 onwards') **B1**

Answer: Rome; the findings were published from 2008 onwards.

Question 2

(a) Meaning close to 'an impressive or dramatic sight/display' **B1**

(a) Answer: an impressive or dramatic sight

(b) Meaning close to 'to settle down to rest or sleep (of birds)', or as a noun, 'the place where birds rest' **B1**

(b) Answer: to settle down to rest/sleep together (as birds do), or the place where they rest

(c) Meaning close to 'to spread gradually outward/through something, like a wave' **B1**

(c) Answer: to spread outward gradually, like a wave passing through something

Question 3

Identifies that the flock is described as 'shifting' and 'densely packed' **B1**

Explains that this makes it harder for a predator to target/focus on any single bird, compared with a bird flying alone **B1**

Answer: Because the flock is shifting and densely packed, it is much harder for a predator to target a single bird within it than it would be if that bird were flying alone.

Question 4

Starlings arrive from Scandinavia and Eastern Europe (to escape harsher winters there) **B1**

These migrating birds join the resident UK population at shared roosting sites **B1**

Answer: Starlings arrive from Scandinavia and Eastern Europe to escape harsher winters, and these migrating birds join the resident UK population at shared roosting sites.

Question 5

Identifies the contrast between the flock's 'apparent abundance' and the reality that starlings are 'in fact, a species in trouble' **B1**

Explains that the huge, impressive winter displays can be misleading, making it look as though starlings are thriving **B1**

Comments that the sentence works as an ironic or surprising twist, undercutting the sense of wonder built up earlier in the text **B1**

Answer: The sentence suggests that the huge, impressive winter displays can be misleading, since despite this apparent abundance the species is actually declining severely - an ironic twist that undercuts the earlier sense of wonder.

Question 6

Identifies that the paragraph opens with a positive point (murmurations protecting starlings from predators) **B1**

Identifies the shift signalled by 'Despite these dramatic winter displays, however' into a statistic about decline (more than 80 per cent since the 1970s) **B1**

Comments on the effect of ending on the phrase 'a species in trouble', which delivers a surprising, sobering final point after the earlier positive and impressive information **B1**

Answer: The paragraph opens positively, discussing how murmurations protect starlings, before the word 'however' signals a shift into a startling decline statistic, ending on the sobering final phrase 'a species in trouble'.

Question 7

Roughly seven (its closest neighbours) **B1**

Answer: Roughly seven of its closest neighbours.

Question 8

Valid phrase from Text 1, e.g. 'not one of them seemed to be flying alone' **B1**

Valid phrase from Text 2, e.g. 'move as a single shifting shape' **B1**

Answer: Text 1: 'not one of them seemed to be flying alone'. Text 2: 'move as a single shifting shape'.

Question 9

Valid non-fiction feature of Text 2, e.g. specific dates/statistics (2008, more than 80 per cent), named real places (Somerset Levels, Rome), an explanatory tone **B1**

Valid fiction feature of Text 1, e.g. named characters (Priya, Devraj), dialogue in speech marks, descriptive narrative language **B1**

Answer: Text 2 (non-fiction): uses specific dates and statistics (e.g. 2008, more than 80 per cent) and names real places such as the Somerset Levels and Rome. Text 1 (fiction): has named characters, Priya and Devraj, and includes dialogue and descriptive narrative language.

Question 10

Identifies Devraj's explanation in Text 1, with reference (e.g. 'Each bird is only watching its closest neighbours... No leader. No plan.') **B1**

Develops/explains this point (e.g. thousands of small decisions made so fast they look like one big one) **B1**

Identifies the scientists' explanation in Text 2, with reference (e.g. each starling pays attention to roughly its seven closest neighbours) **B1**

Develops/explains this point (e.g. a single small movement can ripple through the entire flock within seconds) **B1**

Answer: Devraj explains that each bird only watches its closest neighbours, with no leader and no plan, just thousands of fast decisions. Text 2 confirms this scientifically: each starling pays attention to roughly its seven closest neighbours, so that a small movement ripples through the whole flock within seconds.

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Question 11

Identifies that both endings shift from the dramatic spectacle just described to a quieter, more reflective or serious final idea **B1**

Identifies that both endings create a contrast between the impressive display and a deeper truth (Text 1: the lesson of patience; Text 2: the species being 'in trouble') **B1**

Answer: Both endings move from the dramatic spectacle just described to a quieter, more thoughtful final idea, contrasting the impressive display with a deeper truth: patience in Text 1, and the species' decline in Text 2.

Question 12

Identifies that the flat, repeated 'grey' creates a dull, uneventful, slightly disappointing mood at the start **B1**

Explains the contrast with the vivid, dramatic imagery once the murmuration appears (e.g. shapes, sound, colour of the darkening sky), showing a shift from dullness to wonder **B1**

Answer: The repeated word 'grey' creates a flat, dull, uneventful mood at the start, which contrasts sharply with the vivid, dramatic imagery once the murmuration appears, shifting the mood from dullness to wonder.

Question 13

Identifies the gradual, repeated change of the smudge ('thickened, and thinned, and thickened again') as a technique that delays the full reveal **B1**

Comments that more birds are described as continually joining ('from every direction'), building a sense of growing scale **B1**

Comments on the effect of the final phrase 'something that had no name Priya knew', which builds anticipation by suggesting the shape is becoming impossible to describe, right before it is finally revealed in paragraph 5 **B1**

Answer: The writer repeatedly describes the smudge changing shape and growing as more birds join, delaying the full reveal and building anticipation, culminating in the phrase 'something that had no name Priya knew' just before the murmuration is fully described.

Question 14

Each bird only watches its closest neighbours (accept 'no leader, no plan') **B1**

Answer: Each bird is only watching its closest neighbours; there is no leader and no plan.

Question 15

Identifies that Priya has learned the value of patience, that 'you could not rush a thing like this' **B1**

Identifies that she now understands what Devraj meant earlier, connecting back to his advice about sitting still **B1**

Comments on how the physical detail of her holding her breath, and her tea going cold and forgotten, shows how completely absorbed and changed by the experience she has become **B1**

Answer: Priya learns the value of patience, finally understanding what her uncle meant earlier; the detail of her holding her breath and letting her tea go cold shows how completely absorbed she became in waiting and watching.

Question 16

Accept any one of: the Somerset Levels; Gretna Green (in Scotland); Brighton's West Pier **B1**

Answer: Any one of: the Somerset Levels, Gretna Green in Scotland, or Brighton's West Pier.

Question 17

Identifies that Priya is inside a (bird) hide, with her uncle Devraj (accept 'by a marsh/reed bed' as additional detail) **B1**

Answer: Priya is inside a bird hide overlooking a marsh, with her uncle Devraj.

Question 18

grey (accept either instance: 'flat grey sky' or 'flatter grey marsh') **B1**

Answer: grey

Question 19

(a) Meaning close to 'moving restlessly with small, awkward movements' **B1**

(a) Answer: moving about restlessly with small, fidgety movements

(b) Meaning close to 'a small, unclear, blurred mark or shape' **B1**

(b) Answer: a small, unclear, blurred mark or shape

(c) Meaning close to 'turning or circling together in flight' **B1**

(c) Answer: turning or circling together in the air

(d) Meaning close to 'a soft, hushed sound; a quiet murmuring noise' **B1**

(d) Answer: a soft, quiet, murmuring sound

Question 20

Identifies that watching successfully requires stillness / patience / not fidgeting **B1**

Explains that Devraj is teaching/warning Priya (as someone experienced), suggesting this is a lesson learned from past visits, and that carelessness could spoil the chance of seeing the birds **B1**

Answer: It suggests that watching a murmuration requires patience and stillness, and that Devraj, from experience, is warning Priya that restlessness could ruin her chance of seeing the birds.

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Question 21

Level 1 Simple, general comment(s) about wonder or scale in one or both texts, with little or no textual reference; limited or no comparison.	**1-2**
Level 2 Clear explanation with relevant reference or quotation from at least one text; some attempt to compare the two texts' approaches, though this may be one-sided or underdeveloped.	**3-4**
Level 3 Detailed, well-supported comparison using precise references or quotations from both texts; clearly explains how each writer's methods convey the sense of wonder, with insightful comparative comment.	**5-6**

Indicative content:

- Text 1 conveys wonder through imaginative imagery, e.g. 'It poured itself into shapes: a whale, a spinning top, a hand opening and closing', and the simile 'like the sea folding over itself'
- Text 1 also conveys wonder through Priya's personal, physical reaction, e.g. 'Priya realised she had been holding her breath the whole time'
- Text 2 conveys wonder through precise statistics and formal descriptive vocabulary, e.g. 'an extraordinary spectacle' and 'flocks estimated at over a million birds'
- Comparative point: Text 1 conveys wonder through figurative language and a character's emotional response, while Text 2 conveys wonder through factual scale and exact numbers, appealing to the reader's sense of scale differently
- Any other valid, well-supported comparative point using precise textual evidence

Question 22

Identifies the list of varied images in Text 1 and explains its effect, e.g. suggests the flock's shape is constantly shifting and hard to pin down to just one comparison, mirroring its unpredictable real movement	**B1**
Explains the effect of the precise statistic in Text 2, e.g. the huge, exact-sounding number emphasises the sheer scale of the phenomenon in a striking, factual way	**B1**
Makes a valid comparative/overall point, e.g. both descriptions help the reader appreciate the scale and strangeness of a murmuration, one imaginatively, one factually	**B1**

Answer: The varied images in Text 1 suggest the flock's shape is constantly changing and hard to describe with just one comparison, while the precise statistic in Text 2 emphasises its huge scale in a striking, factual way. Both help the reader appreciate the scale of a murmuration, one imaginatively and one factually.

Question 23

Identifies a valid difficulty with reference to Text 1, e.g. the cold, damp waiting with no guarantee of seeing anything ('so far all she had seen... was a flat grey sky')	**B1**
Explains/develops this first difficulty (e.g. it requires sitting still and being patient for an uncertain length of time)	**B1**
Identifies a valid difficulty with reference to Text 2, e.g. scientists could not explain the behaviour for a long time and needed specialised technology (stereo photography) and years of study (from 2008 onwards)	**B1**
Explains/develops this second difficulty (e.g. understanding the science required careful, patient research rather than simple observation)	**B1**

Answer: In Text 1, watching requires enduring cold, damp waiting with no guarantee of seeing anything, needing patience and stillness. In Text 2, studying murmurations was difficult because scientists could not explain the behaviour for a long time and needed specialised technology and years of research to understand it.

Question 24

Level 1 States a preference with little or no justification; minimal or no textual reference.	**1-2**
Level 2 Gives a clear opinion supported by relevant reference or quotation from at least one text, with some comment on effect.	**3-4**
Level 3 Gives a well-reasoned, developed opinion supported by precise, well-chosen references from at least one text (ideally both), with perceptive analysis of language or structure and its effect on the reader's sense of scale.	**5-6**

Indicative content:

- Text 1: imaginative imagery and character response, e.g. 'the smudge became a cloud, and the cloud became something that had no name Priya knew', 'thousands of starlings, tens of thousands, wheeling together', and Priya holding her breath
- Text 2: precise statistics and factual detail, e.g. 'flocks estimated at over a million birds', 'roughly its seven closest neighbours', 'fallen by more than 80 per cent', and named real locations
- Either viewpoint is acceptable if well supported by precise textual evidence
- Credit comparative analysis of how narrative technique (Text 1: imagery, character, emotion) versus factual exposition (Text 2: statistics, direct statement) creates a sense of scale differently
- Reward a genuine personal response with clear textual justification and understanding of the writer's craft

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